

**SOME THEORETICAL COMMENTS ON
D. D. KOSAMBI'S
THE CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION OF ANCIENT INDIA**

D. D. Kosambi's '*The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India*'¹ is a many faceted work, which invites a similar multi-levelled approach. The most immediate and perhaps the most natural response to it would be to focus attention upon its new and stimulatingly fresh reconstructions of some aspects of the past of India. For example, Kosambi's description of the Indus Valley Culture and his discussion of the early Aryan settlements are likely to provoke the interest and comment of the professional historian, while his analysis of the historical functions of the Brahmin caste as the stabilizing agent of the Hindu society would be of interest to the sociologist. Similarly, his account of the structures and forms of Indian tribal life as well as its persistence into the historical Hindu society would, I am sure, be welcomed by the anthropologist; indeed, it appears to me that this is one of the most interesting and important of Kosambi's contributions 'the little cultures' as Lannoy² calls them, of the Indian tribes and their impact upon the culture of the larger society has too often been lamentably ignored by historians and hence Kosambi's work in this area of historical studies needs particularly to be welcomed. The only other work in which such tribal influence is stressed that I know of is Richard Lannoy's '*The Speaking Tree*'. Comparing Kosambi and Lannoy, for the moment, one finds that while Kosambi, in the main, sees this influence as an inhibiting and retarding factor, in Lannoy, we have an emphasis placed upon the fact that at certain historical junctures tribal life has provided a counter culture to the greater culture of the larger society and how this availability of an alternative model of life has been culturally significant. Lannoy's discussion of the influence of tribal customs and values upon Ajanta art is a fine example of this.

But at a more abstract and theoretical level, Kosambi is also concerned with the question of the formation of the Hindu psychological type and temperament; he, at various places in his narrative, seeks to reveal the forces that have shaped the social

character of the Hindu and in two places particularly this interest in what may be called historical social anthropology, comes to the force. The first is his discussion of the two contrasting psychological types of Buddha and Krishna, 'the dark hero of the Yadus', as two contrasting psychological responses to social reality and the second context in which this anthropological interest becomes manifest is the concluding discussion of the influence of Sanskrit literature in shaping the Hindu character. However one might disagree with the details of this character forming process the task itself is of undeniably great importance. As Erich Fromm has recently remarked, this is a much needed complement to Marxist sociological analysis of culture history for in the shaping of the social character, psychological, sociological and historical investigations have to be properly balanced. And indeed for the culture historian of India, this is specially important for, as Kosambi remarks, the most emphatic feature of Indian cultural history is its enormous stability and I suggest that this stability, in the final analysis, is to be based upon the stability of the social personality of the Hindu. If so, it would appear that an account and explanation of the formation of such a personality—type would be one of the prime tasks of the culture historian and hence Kosambi's book deserves to be welcomed in this respect also.

But precisely a recognition of the importance of the psychological dimension makes one somewhat unhappy with the details of the portrait as emphasized by Kosambi. For example, consider his explanation of the historical attitude of the Hindu mentality. "Not only caste but the emphasis upon religion and the total lack of historical sense have to be explained. The last is rather simple and is bound up with rural production and 'the idiocy of village life'. The four yugas, periodic ages of mankind that remain in Indian myth, reflect the four major changes of season accurately. They are supposed to end with a universal deluge, after which the cycle begins again. This is what happens in the country side after every monsoon".³ Again, he constantly under-estimates the psychological impact of philosophical and abstract speculation. While one may not take seriously the naive, popular view that the Hindu temperament and character has been shaped by religion and high philosophy, yet a cultural historian can hardly ignore the latent functions of these religious and philosophical ideologies.

In a country where ideological productions have had such an immense vogue (consider for example, the great prestige attached to Vedic and Sanskrit studies), the subtle influence of even the structure of language upon the psychological structure of the people becomes crucial. The psychological valence of Vedic, Dharmic and Vedantic traditions, the way such concepts have structured the typical Hindu character and its stability—these are some of the interesting tasks yet to be done, but Kosambi's general marxist orientation makes him somewhat impatient with ideological analysis. This is a pity and a misfortune for the task of the analysis of the Hindu character must, in the main, be in terms of such an ideological analysis. I would even suggest that the very structure of the language be considered as crucial determinant of the structure of the Hindu type and in this connection, the neglect to probe the dharma śāstras and philosophic treatise from such a structuralist view point is a serious lacuna in Kosambi's work.

But even more important than the historical analysis of the generation of the Hindu personality is the task of giving a socio-cultural analysis of historical change. Kosambi, as he himself tells us, does not seek to write a history of India in the sense of a chronicle of political events and vicissitudes. His reasons for this are both methodological and substantive. He notes, as a technical historian that even the minimum necessary equipment for this in the form of authentic annals and records are lacking in the case of India. Whether this is so or not is a matter for the professional historian to decide. But Kosambi has other substantive reasons also for this neglect of episodic history, namely that such a merely political narrative of kings and their exploits and conquests hardly illumines the processes of socio-cultural change and in this, no doubt, he is right. If a socio-cultural history of India is at all possible, it must be in terms of cultural and social rather than 'political' forces and tendencies.

But is such a cultural history of India possible? To this, Kosambi seems to have two kinds of answer. Regarding the necessary data for such a socio-cultural history of India, he writes 'the country has a tremendous advantage that was not utilised until recently by the historians: the survival within different social layers of many forms that allow the reconstruction of totally diverse earlier stages'.⁴ In other words, Kosambi holds that one can

reconstruct the social and cultural past of the country from the present social structure of rural and tribal India, and that in this sense, the data of such a history are the contemporary facts themselves, regarded as survivals of earlier forms. I am afraid this claim is likely to make a sensitive sociologist or anthropologist shudder for even in the case of simple preliterate tribes, such a procedure of conjectural history has long since been abandoned as unreliable. If even a simple, non-literate tribe as it lives at present is no reliable clue to its earlier forms of existence, then the task of reconstructing the complex socio-cultural past of an ideologically highly sophisticated country on the basis of rural and tribal survivals is not likely to succeed.

But Kosambi has really another and better justification and warrant for his task, and it is here that his theoretical framework enters into the picture. Kosambi's history is no mere chronicle or narrative, he does not tell everything as it actually happened. Rather, his history is an interpreted history, an account of social and cultural change seen in terms of a theory. Unlike a mere political or military chronicle, social history cannot be unfolded in the form of a mere narrative, for socio-cultural phenomena are too complex to be readily described in terms of a mere narrative sequence. Even to describe the forms and structures of social groupings we require theoretical typologies and to describe their change and development, we need some theoretical model which would enable us to identify the dynamic factors responsible for such a change and Kosambi's work indeed has such a theoretical perspective; he himself recognises the need for such a theoretical sub-structure when he remarks that he hopes that his history would illustrate not merely India's past, but also her present. Quoting E. H. Carr, Kosambi writes; 'The function of the historian is neither to love the past, nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present. Great history is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illuminated by insight into the problems of the present. Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past also means to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through this inter-relation between them.'⁵

It is precisely this 'inter relation between past and present' that is lacking in any merely sequential narrative and which a theory can give. So, if history is to have this function of reciprocal illumination of the past by the present and of the present by the past, then such a history must be mediated by a theory; all the more so, if the history claims to be a cultural history as well. Hence, the question whether a socio-cultural history of India is possible is transformed into the question whether we have, according to him, a viable theory of socio-cultural change.

But before I take up the question as thus formulated, I wish to comment briefly upon the very idea of a theory in history for there is likely to be some resistance to the notion of a historical theory itself. To start with, I do not mean by a theory in history such speculative philosophies of history as we find in Spengler, Toynbee or even in Vulgar Marxism. Such speculative constructions of the historical imagination, I would prefer to call historical eschatologies rather than historical theory. It is evident that Kosambi also has no use for such eschatological schemes. For example, while talking of the specific complexities and peculiarities of Indian history, he remarks, 'our position has also to be very far from a mechanical determinism, particularly in dealing with India, where form is given the utmost importance, while content is ignored. Economic determinism will not do'.⁶ In passing, I think there is a serious misunderstanding of a genuinely marxist understanding of history here, as well as some confusion about the concept of historical determinism. To hold that a marxist analysis is not possible where apparently formal considerations prevail over material factors is seriously to restrict the thrust of the marxist theory, which the mere existence of a number of marxist studies of form in aesthetics is enough to refute. Furthermore, the determinism of such a theory is wrongly understood if it is to be taken as a simple fatalistic pre-determination. But what is interesting about the above remark is that Kosambi here implicitly rejects any simple minded marxist eschatology which holds the coming of socialism and the class-less society to be the mysterious indwelling telos of the whole historical process. If by historical theory we do not mean such speculative philosophical schemes, neither do we mean by 'theory', any general law-like proposition or set of

propositions from which predictions of future events can be deduced; in other words, a theory in history does not function like a theory in the natural sciences. There is currently going on a huge debate among philosophers of history whether historical explanation is *sui generis* and distinctive or whether it can be brought under a general theory or model of explanation which would be applicable to the natural sciences as well. Hempel has held that historical explanation has basically the same structure and function as explanation in the other sciences, while Dray, Scriven and Danto have urged the peculiarities of historical explanation. But even if historical explanation in the Hempelian manner should be possible, it must be obvious that the premises or laws from which predictions would be derived would not be historical laws; so, even if historical explanations are of the Hempelian type, there would be theories involved in such explanations, but these need not be historical theories. I do not think there are historical laws; there might be statements of historical trends, but as Popper remarks, a trend is not a law. So, by theory in history, I do not mean a set of propositions of law-like form, which would serve as a basis for predictions. A theory in history, as I see it, functions more as a model or a conceptual scheme of orientation which serves to identify the type and form of a social grouping and which also allows us to distinguish between factors which initiate change and those which transmit or adapt to such changes. A theory, in short, functions as a model and hence the question about the possibility of a social and cultural history is, at bottom, a question as to which model is most useful in the analytical study of socio-cultural phenomena.

But, unfortunately, too often the logical function of a model is misunderstood and it is treated as if it is a description of socio-cultural facts. Understood in this way, of course, a model is too poor, too gross in its over simplifications and hence an attempt is made to pile on facts and descriptions of events to the model in a vain attempt to overcome its factual poverty. But this strategy, I feel, is wrong in principle and can only result in conceptual chaos. For the model and an empirical account belong to logically different types; a model does not aim to be an approximation to a narrative account; rather, it serves to organise such accounts in terms of a conceptual theme. Hence any attempt to add new facts to a given

model with the idea of thereby making that model more realistic and life-like will only succeed in destroying whatever powers of theoretical illumination the model originally possessed. But, then, it may be asked, seeing that every model is partial and selective, how do we improve our models if not by adding facts to the theoretical scheme? One way would be to use complementary models. Consider for example, the analysis and theoretical understanding of a historical event. Since the event or action in question is a response to certain objective situations and allignments of forces and in turn itself leads to further consequences of an objective sort, we might use a scheme which would be cast in terms of such objective factors, forces and trends. At the same time, since historical action is the manifestation of a human agent's cognitive identifications, purposes and plans, we might also consider the agent's conceptualization of the situation as an explanatory model. In short, we might use outsider and insider models as two complementary ways of making sense of the situation; but in so using a dual model we should take care not to reduce the one to the other. Thus, while working out the logic of the situation, we cannot treat the agents' desires and purposes as mere epiphenomena reducible to objective factors. A cognitive identification is a selection and hence cannot be explained away on the basis of merely objective factors. To do so would be to court the fallacy of naive determinism which Kosambi rightly rejects.

But the method of complementarity leaves us with the question of irreducible duality. Seeing that the one cannot be reduced to the other, should we, in fact, be condemned to shifting back and forth between the two, with no hope of a unifying focus? Is there no possibility of integration of the objective and subjective models of historical understanding? Before we come to this, let me remark that Kosambi does use both types of historical understanding. As an example of the first type of objective or 'ethic' explanation, I might mention his analysis of the sociocultural facts responsible for the rise of Buddhism and as an example of the second or 'emic' type of analysis might be mentioned his analysis of the changes in social and cultural life brought about by Asoka's conversion. But there is a danger in the method of complementary models: either one falls victim to the temptation of naive reductionism or one merely juxtaposes the two points of view shifting

suddenly from the one to the other. As an example of naive reductionism, I have already cited Kosambi's suggestion that the historical temperament of the Hindu could be explained in terms of the Indian climate. A second but less gross example of an attempt to reduce subjective ideology to objective social conditions is his claim that the Eight fold path of the Buddha is the most social of all religions. Now, I am not denying that Buddhism has had a complex social content, but, as recent scholars like Melford Spiro have shown, the relations between Buddhism and society is a complex issue of many types of factors and any attempt to view the ideology of the Buddha as merely a response to a social crisis, is, to say the least, simplistic. Here again one regrets the absence of ideological analysis in Kosambi's work. In order to make any progress at all in the understanding of the relationship between an ideology and the social reality, a simple model of stimulus and response will not do; rather, one must use Merton's concept of 'latent functions'; one must be sensitive to the many subtle ways in which an ideology reflects as well as distorts social reality and for this again, one must be sensitive to the structure of the ideology itself. This means, as I said earlier, a preparedness to work out the sociology of knowledge concerning the particular religious or philosophical doctrine. Such a sociology of religion is far removed from any mere socialization of religion; by the latter, I mean the attempt to view religion as a kind of mere ideological response to a social crisis. This lack of a sociology of religion in Kosambi's work is more seriously felt in his treatment of Vedantic philosophies, especially that of Sankara. In the few lines that he devotes to Sankara, one gets the impression that the philosophic edifice is a mere reflection of social decay. But this diagnosis violates the autonomy of thought and ultimately ruins the social analysis itself, for, unless one is prepared to work out the actual structure of a philosophy in its own turn, unless one first undertakes a conceptual and philosophical analysis of a system of thought, one cannot eventually answer the question as to how the system has actually functioned. In ideological analysis, one cannot understand form without understanding meaning and it is precisely this distaste for a conceptual analysis of the super structures that spoils Kosambi's attempt. Of course, in a way Kosambi himself is aware of the importance of ideological or super-structural elements in Indian history. His remarks upon the importance of

form over content is an oblique way of recognising this, while his concluding discussion of Sanskrit poetics is a more direct recognition of it. But if ideological elements are so important, as they obviously are in the case of Indian history then the proper course would be to undertake an analysis of such superstructural elements. Such an analysis would have to focus upon the structure, meaning and logical form of the philosophies concerned; it will have to probe the manifest and latent contents of the doctrine and the resulting tensions as well as the gross and subtle ways in which such structures have shaped the cognitive worlds of man. But owing to a personal distaste perhaps for such super-structural analysis, Kosambi does not embark upon any such procedure, with the result that the realism of the picture as well as the viability of the theoretical ground plan is endangered. Regarding the first danger of loss of realism, it is surprising to find that Kosambi has almost next to nothing to say regarding the impact of Manu's dharma shastra upon the formation of the Hindu society; at a more abstract level, there is hardly any attempt at tracing out the manifold ways in which the philosophical and theological traditions of India have shaped Hindu character and temperament. As just one instance of this lack of sensitivity in ideological analysis, I might mention his view that the rival interpretations of the Gita had hardly anything to do with social reality. But the lack of realism consequent upon a neglect of super-structural analysis is only a minor result of it; a more serious danger is the invalidation of the theory itself. A recognition of the importance of ideological elements coupled with a neglect of their analysis develops a certain tension between the demands of the theory and the actualities of the situation. In this tension, a historian is particularly likely, because of his basic commitment to actualities, to introduce empirical flesh to the outlines of the theory, hoping thereby to overcome the inadequacies of the latter. But, as we have seen, this only makes matters worse. Or alternatively, he might begin to invoke other models and other theories, hoping that such theoretical pluralism would suffice. But as our discussion of the method of complementary models suggests, the question of unifying the different perspectives, of integrating the various models, still remains. Theoretical pluralism may be the immediate response but it cannot be the final stand of the culture historian. By this, I am not suggesting that the historian must opt for a single theory

and ignore the others; I am rather saying that there is need for a general theory which could take into account the different perspectives of the different models.

But for the immediate context, I want to show the presence and operation of a diverse set of models in Kosambi's work. The model or theory in the foreground of his work seems to be a loose variant of the Marxist scheme. His very definition of history suggests this, for he defines history as, 'the presentation in chronological order of successive changes in the means and relations of production.'⁷ In passing, it may be remarked that if taken literally, such a definition would reduce history to merely the history of technology, but it is only fair to add that history also deals with forms and changes in other spheres of culture insofar as they are consequent upon changes in the means and relations of production. Indeed, such an addition or enlargement is necessary for there is very little of purely technological detail in Kosambi's history. Throughout he is dealing with forms of social life dependent upon certain modes of productive relationships. I said that the dominant model in Kosambi's work is a loose variant of the Marxian scheme; that it is Marxist is obvious at more than one place. I shall content myself with only indicating two such contexts. First of all his definition of commodity production and secondly and more importantly Kosambi uses the Marxist typology of forms of society and especially that of Asiatic or oriental despotism. His picturization of the social form of the Artha shastra is a particularly fine example of this society, where the state functions as the biggest producer of commodity. But I also suggest that this seems to be a loose variant of the marxist scheme. First of all, to take up relatively less important details; consider the definition of history given by him. 'History is the presentation in chronological order of successive changes in the means and relations of production.' This definition seems to identify the means of production with the relations of production, but in another context, he seems to identify the relations of production with the 'forms of society'. He writes, 'surplus production depends upon the techniques and instruments used—the means of production., The method by which the surplus passes into the hands of the ultimate consumer is determined by and in turn determines the form of society— 'the relations of production'.⁸ I must confess that I find this very

confusing. The techniques and instruments of production are identified with the 'means of production', for which there is warrant in Marxist usage, but the relations of production seems to be identified with the form of society. I suppose this refers to social structure and cultural context. If so, I do not think that this accords with marxist usage. In fact, Kosambi's 'relations of production' would be a super structural element in the Marxian model. But in between the means of production and the relations of production, there occurs an unidentified element 'the method by which the surplus passes into the hands of the ultimate consumer.' I suggest that this appropriation of the surplus by the ultimate consumer is what Marx meant by the economic organisation of the society, which he called 'relations of production'. The difference between Kosambi's model and that of Marx can easily be seen if we set it by the side of Marx's own words : 'In the social production which men carry on, they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will : these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of the material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society the real foundation on which raises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the social political and intellectual life processes in general. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relations. Then begins the epoch of social revolutions. With the change in the economic foundation, the entire immense super structure is more or less rapidly transformed'.⁹

From the above, it appears that Kosambi's model differs from that of Marx regarding the crucial role of the relations of production. If 'relations of production' are identified with the form of society, then, in Kosambi, relations of production belong to the super structure, whereas in Marx, they form part of the economic sub-structure of society. This is no mere theoretical quibbling for the above passage from Kosambi goes on to suggest that the method by which the surplus is appropriated by the consumer is determined by the form of the society. If now, the method of

appropriation is what is meant by the economic structure of society, this would mean that economic structure is determined by ideology. Of course Marx and Engels themselves admit a reciprocal determination between basis and super-structure, but in their writings, these two kinds of determination are clearly distinguished, whereas in Kosambi, there is no such analytical distinction between the various senses of 'determination'. If 'determination' were to be taken in a univocal sense, it would appear that what Kosambi says would amount to an actual subversion of the marxist model.

Furthermore in the passage from Marx, there is struck the note of class conflict as the prime mover of structural transformation. Conflict is the main spring of Marxian social dynamics, whereas in Kosambi, there is no such clear identification of a dynamic factor; he merely speaks of successive changes in the means and relations of production. But if we wish to identify the dynamic factor in Kosambi's model of change, we have to look to another context and surprisingly enough, it turns out to be population growth. He thus writes, 'Any important advance in the means of production immediately leads to a great increase in population which necessarily means different relations of production'.¹⁰ Remembering that Kosambi identified relations of production with the form of society, several remarks about this have to be made. It is first of all, doubtful whether increase in technological efficiency necessarily leads to an increase in population. Similarly the claim that increases in population necessarily lead to different social forms may be questioned. In terms of his own study, it is hardly possible to have a greater contrast between pre-Asokan and Asokan forms of socio-political organisation, but, to say the least, it is hardly possible that the population of India underwent any drastic transformation in the brief period of Asoka's Kalinga campaign. Anyway, the theoretically important point is that Kosambi's dynamic factor, namely population differentials, hardly emphasizes the predominance of conflict, whereas Marx's model is a paradigm of conflict theory. Perhaps, this is the deeper reason why conflict figures so little in Kosambi's account of socio-cultural change.

If the demographic factor is the first addition to the marxist ground plan, Kosambi also adds a second one in the form of political control and domination. In his extremely interesting

account of society of the Artha sastra period, he brings out the supremacy of the political factor very well, as well as in his account of the Asokan reforms. The third practical addition is the psychological factor as exemplified by his portrayal of the rise of Buddhism, and Asoka's gentle humanism and the psychological rise to power of the Krishna cult. In all these discussions, he is emphasizing the importance and dynamic relevance of psychic states of feeling, new desires and attitudes. Other additions to the model follow swiftly and it is enough to merely record them. There is the ecological emphasis upon adaptation to the environment, the influence of foreign acculturation especially regarding contemporary India and the 'lethargy and idiocy of village life'. At a pinch Kosambi even throws tribal survivals into the bag, with the result that the firm-out-lines of a promising theory of socio-cultural change get blurred as further and further empirical phenomena from disparate contexts are heaped on. This is a pity and a misfortune for we finally are left with astonishingly sensitive book in search of a theory.

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NOTES

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