Ravindra S. Khare

Matters of Cultural Diversity and Discontent: Anthropological Studies in/of Contemporary India

Born in 1936, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Virginia since 1971. Earlier teaching at Kanya-Kubja College, Lucknow University, India, and at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay (1966-71). Visiting lecturer, University of Chicago (Spring 1970); Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (1972); Fellow, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1974-75); Visiting Fellow, Wolfson College, University of Oxford (two terms 1980, one term 1986); Chairman, Committee for the Study of Individual and Society, Center for Advanced Study, University of Virginia (1975-90); Co-chair (with Mary Douglas), International Commission on Anthropology of Food and Food Problems (1978-83; Chair until 1992); Visiting Professor, Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change, University of Virginia (Spring 1990). Senior Fellow, American Institute of Indian Studies, University of Chicago (several times; latest short-term grant, 1993). Publications include *The Changing Brahmans* (University of Chicago Press, 1970); *The Hindu Hearth and Home* (Vikas, Delhi, 1976); *Culture and Reality* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1976); *The Untouchable as Himself* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *Culture and Democracy* (University Press of America, 1985); editor (with M.S.A. Rao), *Food, Society and Culture* (Carolina Academic Press, 1986); editor, *The Eternal Food* (State University Press of New York, 1992). — Address: Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, 303 Brooks Hall, Charlottesville, VA 22903, USA.

Well-organized and congenial surroundings at the Wissenschaftskolleg allowed me to start work immediately on a project announced in the "Fellows' Projects" handbook. Besides some new writing, I was busy

organizing, revising, and rewriting several chapters of my book, Cultural Diversity and Social Discontent (Sage Publications, in press), during the first four months of my stay. Fortunately, this phase also became the ground for several new and different questions on the way contemporary urban Indians (Hindus and others) questioned both traditional and modern forces in matters of self-identity, social conflicts, practical problems, and unresolved moral doubts and quandaries. However, as I finished these accounts, interweaving religious, political and nationalist forces within everyday life and during critical conflicts, they also raised the related question of disciplinary review — how (and how adequately) anthropologists had approached, described and analysed the situations the increasingly conflicted India of the eighties and the nineties presented. The book tried to address both of these issues, devoting one segment to recent cultural conflicts and social problems, and another to a review of some major anthropological approaches for their assumptions, strengths and weaknesses.

With completion of the book in February, my stay at the Kolleg entered second phase, with a sort of interregnum in March. One welcome pay-off of the first phase was to form a better idea of the "ordinary", quotidian Indians' cultural role in managing politicized religious conflicts and persistent social inequality amidst practical problems of everyday life. The second phase, beginning in late March, started me off on the related yet distinct subject of Indian (mainly Hindu) cultural and religious orthodoxy. The main instigation for this new inquiry came from the insightful writings of a major Indian political leader (Ram Manohar Lohia), and from some of my previous published and unpublished studies. The topic related to a distinct body of my field data, along with collected documentary evidence and some historical, political and popular writings. But the needed crucial conceptual argument and the book outline became clearer as I was preparing for the Tuesday colloquium and for my lectures and meetings scheduled for March in India.

In general, at the center of my work on Indian cultural and religious orthodoxy is the cumulative long-term field work, examined against some historically significant social events, conflicts and changes in India over the last fifty years. The field work was conducted over several years in the Lucknow-Kanpur region, not only among the Kanyakubja Brahmans and Untouchables but also among several other middle castes and main religious communities, including Sikhs, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. Thus, dealing with multiple faces of both Hindus and non-Hindus, my ethnographic studies tried to capture a multi-sided cultural tug-of-war, but with particular attention to "ordinary" Indians' divergent social experiences and pressing practical needs on the one

hand, and capacious cultural expressions and accommodating overall cultural sensibilities, on the other. I wanted to know how they reconciled their immediate personal and social interests with local and regional concerns, and these two with their idea — and reality — of India. With increasing social inequalities, discord, violent conflicts and moral self-doubts, many Indians today get caught between a hardening and tumultuous traditional world and a powerful yet alien and unresponsive modern democratic state. Still, however, it was evident that, despite provocations, a majority of these ordinary Indians did not lose their sense of social accommodation, justness and balance. A series of national critical events in the eighties and early nineties (e.g. from the rise of Sikh militancy, Indira Gandhi's assassination and the Bhopal gas disaster of 1984 to the 1992 Ayodhya mosque-temple conflict) not only variously tested this general profile, but they also showed how ordinary Indians today, despite the divisions of caste, religion and regional politics, collectively pursue moderation via democratic elections. When national elites and self-seeking political leaders either practice favoritism or lose their nerve, the common Indian masses (Hindu and non-Hindu alike) have tended to set an overall course for the country through the ballot box.

But such a picture of India faces new challenges and even more glaring contradictions, especially as dominant castes and community interests lean towards "open markets" and their economic forces, and strong religious loyalties and social repulsions encounter the social redistribution of power under democratic adult franchise. Simultaneously, these "contradictions" challenge Indians to create and exploit new social opportunities that the changing times offer. For example, if Brahmans and Untouchables, rich and poor, Hindus and Muslims, and the dominant and the subservient now more violently confront one another than perhaps ever before, these same people, equally surely, try hard to locate new (shifting and fragile) plateaus of religious tolerance, economic opportunity and cultural accommodation and reasonableness for very pressing practical reasons. Another important result is that it keeps India together. But, given India's fractious social history, as my field studies stressed, this configuration cannot last forever, and the majority of ordinary Indians' intuitive rejection of religious and political extremism needs careful recognition and cultivation, by the Indian elite and political leaders. Unfortunately, despite all the claims, they often tend to remain either too distant or read too much or too little into Indian people and their social capabilities.

These (and other such) issues engaged me as I reviewed and rewrote my unpublished typescripts on Untouchable or Dalit reformers, writers

and leaders from Lucknow (and Delhi). But, curiously, the gathering-yet-bleeding current D alit movement, despite its enhanced political clout, seemed to me to face a new social resistance and challenge at the same time when upper-caste interests turned from government services to private companies and open markets, and when the political influence of the Hindu right peaked or stalled. It was clear that, if during the last fifty years Untouchables could not become effective "non-Hindus," Marxists or Dalit Panthers, upper-caste Hindus also lacked a sufficiently cohesive and strong political force to run their writ socially unchallenged. A cultural and political stalemate was all too evident. This situation, I felt, demanded an anthropological study. It particularly made me reflect on what the two social antipodes (Brahman and Dalit) still culturally shared, almost so routinely as to pass unspoken and unseen. Here that slippery "Hindu religiosity" and its cultural ways, again so ideologically diverse, diffuse and contentious, were found crucial and persistent. More generally, it still touches one way or another the whole Indian social and political spectrum. Being more diffuse than institutionalized castes, antagonistic political movements and specific radical religious reforms, Hindu religiosity and its surrounding orthodox cultural ways, I found, formed a crucial subject of study in India at the turn of the century. With a spate of recent discussions on "religious fundamentalisms", I preferred to call the subject "Hindu religious and cultural orthodoxy" and examined its role among the Dalits, who, despite all the religious reform and political activism, could not "annihilate" the Hindu ways, and among upper-caste Hindus, who, despite their religious revivalism and politics of the religious right, also could neither maintain all their social privileges nor exclusively corner state power. Ranging from a totally institutionalized traditional ritual face to the highly politicized (even extremist), to the culturally diffuse, Hindu orthodoxy offered me a large and crucial cultural canvas to study, where some major prevailing traditional and modern social, political and historical paradoxes converged - and freely clashed. But it is such a relative, elastic and powerful corpus of lived (i.e. active or passive and rigid or flexible) religiosity (dharma-karma) and culture that it still as easily unites as divides (and redivides) Dalits, middle ranks and upper castes in contemporary India.

  As I pursued the subject, it also became clear that "Hindu orthodoxy," as proposed here, was a subject largely downgraded and neglected by Indologists (for being textually unsupported and less authoritative), while modern leaders and scholars often sidelined, derided, or even ignored it (to cultivate the modern Indian secular ethos). However, the subject intrigued me all the more as I had the good luck of locating some pithy writings (often in Hindi, with a smattering of Sanskrit

and/or English) from both inside and outside the academy. As I read recent Indian thinkers, social leaders, reformers, editors and critics on the subject, I also re-read M. K. Gandhi, Madan Mohan Malaviya and Ram Manohar Lohia (a socialist leader, who, incidentally, studied in Berlin). Among the leaders of independent India, I found Lohia particularly striking in his analysis of caste and Hinduism for building the modern Indian state. Since Lohia's commentaries also variously related to my recent unpublished writing on upper castes and Dalits, I decided to write a book-length essay, tentatively called "Locating Hindu Orthodoxy in Contemporary India". Fortunately, the project developed quite rapidly after March, especially with the help from Kolleg's efficient library and secretarial staff. With a complete draft of this book already with me (along with another publisher's interest in the project), I look forward to completing it on my return to the University of Virginia.

In addition, I am also taking with me several written portions of another book. This writing project was mentioned in my original statement as a study of Hindu cultural reasoning. However, it has undergone significant modifications during the year, especially as the two preceding projects took priority and I deleted some discussions from this volume and added others. Most recently, I reorganized the volume in early June, after I discussed its subject and argument at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and University of Warwick. For example, instead of devoting the whole volume to upper-caste Hindus, I now discuss distinct Brahman critics, middle-caste householders, educators and Dalit leaders, who, separately and together, show how they socially redefine and "re-locate" themselves and their community in an India of their struggles, discontents, hopes and imagination. Among other issues, I hope to show the depth and range of social sharing or separation that Indians, high and low, men and women, and young and old, today reveal as they pursue practical goals, demand rights with justice, and controvert or reject social dominance. In such portraits, people construct (or reconstruct) their "India" — a land, a people, a nationality and a nation-state. This multi-layered India is sometimes found impossibly fractured, clearly alien, chaotic, exploitative and unjust, and sometimes "[it is] that ample lap of an ever-forgiving mother" (an informant's expression). But his separation and sharing, people increasingly know, is a matter of deep social concern. The ethnographic portraits assembled in the book explore how leaders, writers, reformers and ordinary Indians engage in dialogue with, redo and re-present such concerns around the self, the community and the country, with the whole world watching. However, an account of my Berlin sojourn cannot be complete without mentioning the joys of both structured and

unstructured conversations, often around the rites of commensality that the Kolleg so carefully arranges throughout the session for its Fellows. Such occasions were particularly rewarding when a new idea, thought-line or project clicked in our conversations. Several friends come to mind but I must mention Bettina Dennerlein and Mona Abaza. We discussed our interests in the context of a volume of papers I was assembling on Islamic law, justice and society. It was also a happy way to remember the Berliner Seminar on Islam. Conversations on structuralism, linguistics, and continental and German philosophy were similarly exciting. I recall my occasional "chats" with Fritz Kramer on landscapes, and Ron Inden's ingenious "show-and-tell" sessions on Indian films led to discussions on Indian popular culture. On Indian studies, besides the ever-creative Shalini Randeria, I had several happy visits, meetings and discussions with colleagues and friends at the Berlin Academy of Science, the University of Heidelberg and the Freie University in Berlin.

  Equally surely, Berlin, as a historic city and a center of learning, music, theater, exhibitions and shows, uniquely added to the stay. The city was all the more enjoyable when my wife and I, as Indians, discovered other compatriots, both inside and outside the academy, and as we "remapped" Berlin our way together. I cannot but recall that as the year 1997 marked the 50th year of independence of India and Pakistan, the Wissenschaftskolleg and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt sponsored a highly rewarding conference, and the Indian consulate kept us informed of its rich and diverse cultural activities, including a symposium on the Indian patriot, Subhas Chandra Bose. Again, if we saw enactment of the "Jagannath Rath Yatra" (the famous Indian Chariot Festival) one fine, bright noon in May at the Europa Center, we also could go to see a huge rally at the Tiergarten, or slip into a cinema to view rare art films during the Berlin international film festival.