

R S Khare

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and
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discontent

anthropological studies
on
contemporary India

**Cultural Diversity
and
Social Discontent**



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Contemporary India**



R.S. Khare



WALNUT CREEK • LONDON • NEW DELHI

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◀ India's 50th year of Independence ▶

...*sarvabbhutabiteū ratāḥ*

(The Gita, XII, 4)

*pokbra khoday kavan phal, more sabab
ganvan piyey jura pani, tabai phal hoiybain*

(From an Avadhi folk song)

The self-hood of Indians is so capacious, so elastic, that it
accommodates 1 billion kinds of difference.

(Salman Rushdie, *Time*, 11 August 1997, pp. 18–20)

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Acknowledgments



At the center of this book stand the people I had the privilege to know and study during my several field trips in the Lucknow–Kanpur region in India, during the last 15 years. This was also the period when perhaps some of the most socially significant post-independence events occurred as caste disputes, regional politics, industrial disasters, religious nationalism and state power contended against one another. Simultaneously, anthropology engaged in a critical evaluation of its own dominant assumptions about the non-Western cultural other. All these strands intertwined as I started to work on the book in the spring of 1990, when I was a visiting fellow of the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia. The four themes that increasingly claimed my attention over time were: daily lives of ‘ordinary’ Indians drawn from discordant castes and communities, the challenged (and challenging) contemporary Hindu world, the role of the modern Indian nation-state, and recent anthropological/sociological analyses of contemporary India. Between 1990 and 1997, my academic colleagues, students and friends in Charlottesville, and at the universities of London, Oxford, Toronto, Wisconsin–Madison, Uppsala (Sweden), Lucknow, Harvard, Delhi, Berlin, and Heidelberg heard me present aspects of the studies collected in this volume.

Complementing (and even superseding) my debts to professional colleagues are those that I accumulated as I studied the people of my own culture and cultural region in Uttar Pradesh for many years. I thus feel obligated to acknowledge them in appropriate Indian cultural terms. Foremost, I pay respect to those elders who, representing several major religious and caste groups, became, over time, my 'field guides' (even gurus), genuine critics, collaborators, skeptic observers, unhesitating helpers, and friends in the Lucknow–Kanpur region. If my firm anchor and intellectual challenger for various upper-caste Hindu issues was Pandit D.S. Misra and a cluster of residents at Khurshed Bagh in Lucknow, I also had the privilege of critical collaboration and discussion, during the 1990s, from several Dalit leaders, particularly Shri Chedi Lal Sathi, Shri Badlu Ram Rasik, Shri Darapuri and Shri Bhagwan Das (New Delhi). Included in this group are also my 'field assistants', who actively helped me by discussing issues and selecting sites of work. In this regard I am particularly indebted to Pradeep Kumar, Miss U. Bajpai, B. Prasad, and Miss Ratna for their support during the last several years. They maintained close contact with me as my long-term collaborators in the field. They veritably became my 'eyes' and 'ears' in absentia, responding to my numerous queries while also collecting documentary data and nurturing my old contacts and scouting out new ones.

The crucial role of this circle of collaborators remains incomplete and rootless until I also refer to that even more significant layer of 'ordinary' Indians, representing local religious and social diversity, who most often gave me their unreserved and sustained cooperation. Most others are recognized in my accounts by context. Although too many to list here individually, and while already contextually recognized in my accounts, I must record my special debt of gratitude to all these men and women (of different religions, castes, occupations, and economic positions) in the Indian way—by recognizing their relationship to me by age, gender, and self-image. To those older to me (whether men, women, upper castes or Dalits), I express my respectful gratitude for freely sharing their knowledge, learning, and life experiences, alongside personal concerns, anxieties, and self-doubts. Those of my age similarly earn my profound thanks as they generously contributed their time, effort, and criticism while organizing different 'discussion groups'. The younger ones, deferential yet forthright,

helped me see the world from their location and viewpoint. In retrospect, I am particularly beholden to all these ‘ordinary’ people who, in life, showed how they try to maintain and convey their *sense of moral and social balance* under conflict and discord. These people also showed how they normally, often without an explicit idea of nationalism, try to view themselves in local, regional and the larger—Indian—terms.

My many urban Brahman and Dalit discussants, thus, showed much more than a simple polarization, alienation and antagonism. They moved, depending on the context, all over the spectrum of cultural consensus and conflict, and they spurned any simple high and low, center and periphery, or dominant and dependent pigeon holes. To do so today also makes good practical and political sense to both sides. But how this really happens is best shown, as we see in the book, around concrete life situations on the one hand, and in the way ‘facts’, ‘data’, ‘people’, ‘history’, ‘religious faith’, and social conflict and discontent are *contextually* interrelated and approached, on the other. This underlying practical and cultural sensibility is ethnographically precious to capture, since it perhaps best shows those elusive yet vital (and often sociologically underreported) ‘connecting switches’ and cultural sensibilities that still shape pan-Indian culture and communication. But such discussions would have been impossible in the field without an open, keen, and honest discussion by upper castes and Dalits themselves, including their certainties, claims, self-doubts, and sorrows.

My ‘field community’ thus figures in my acknowledgments in yet another way. It grapples with the perpetually unfinished issue of ‘unity-in-diversity’, especially as India celebrates its 50th anniversary of independence. For, in a critical scholarly view, the overall contemporary Indian picture cannot but reflect increasing cultural waywardness, social discord and discontent, and political instability. Though traditionally age-old, India still remains unsure of itself in many ways, popularly evoking a sense of accomplishment in some areas and concern in many others. This continuing profile and quandary of Indian culture, religion, history, and philosophy prompts (and amply justifies) the book’s dedication at the end of this century.

My acknowledgments to specific professional colleagues, friends, and students must open with that obligatory caveat: While

I appreciate the generous comments and suggestions of all those mentioned below (and even those inadvertently omitted), including the anonymous sparing reader. I alone am solely responsible for all the material presented between these covers.

Chapter 1 gained from the comments of the late Richard Burghart, along with those of Professors Karl Potter, Audrey Cantlie, Adrian Mayer, David Parkin, T.N. Madan, N.J. Allen, and the late Edwin Ardener. Chapter 2 was written (and subsequently updated) for the M.N. Srinivas festschrift volume, essentially as a result of my seminars on contemporary anthropological theory at the University of Virginia. Written at the invitation of *Reviews in Anthropology*, Chapter 3 could not have been completed without library and word-processing help from two research assistants at the time, Raphael Alvarado and Bruce Koplin. Chapter 4 was the product of a seminar series on 'Cultural Distance', sponsored by the Commonwealth Center in spring 1990, and it received helpful comments during the seminar from Professors Wendy Doniger, Ashis Nandy, Anthony Easthope, Stephen Bann, and Steven Lukes. Besides Virginia Commonwealth Center's seminar series on 'Remembering and Forgetting' (for Chapter 5), the second part of the book owes most to an international conference on law, justice, and human rights, sponsored by the University of London (Chapter 6), and to the Wissenschaftskolleg (Introduction and Chapters 7 and 8).

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Introduction: Cultural Diversity, Discontent, and Anthropology



The ruling order, whatever it may be, is repressive: it is the order of domination. Social criticism frequently takes the form of a joke aimed at the pedantry of the educated and the ridiculous results of 'good upbringing'. It is an implicit—and at times explicit—tribute to the wisdom of the ignorant.

Octavio Paz (1982: 19)

I India's Multiplying Others and Anthropology

India, a land of enormous cultural diversity and of the dominant and the oppressed, continues to test the naiveté of anthropology.¹ If anthropology studied Indian castes, villages and traditional culture in descriptive, taxonomic and structural–functional terms during most of this century, then the discipline has recently given more attention to social conflicts and their cultural consequences, with more studies of the socially marginal, the contested dominant, and the confronted state. The challenges for anthropology increase as Indian social reality changes, especially when cultural certainties are questioned and self-asserting oppressed groups and violent religious politics unsettle long-standing Indian caste

and customary traditions, on the one hand, and the forces of 'law and order' in the modern state, on the other.

Within such inquiries, contemporary India, historical change, and anthropology face one another, commenting as much on each other as each on their own identity problems. As India presents a complicated cultural otherness to anthropology and history, these modern disciplines, with their distinct modern assumptions and discourse viewpoints, in turn, present otherness to India. To recognize such a cultural dialectic in contemporary India is not only unavoidable, it is also a sound research strategy for developing a fair, interdependent discursive practice. Anthropology already shows such a movement by successively redefining its subject matter in ways that would bring it closer to the world of the people studied, while explicating some implicit assumptions of its own discourse.

Not restricted to proposing parsimonious scientific typologies, holistic functional descriptions, or grand theories for an ordered, certain social reality, anthropologists now seek understanding of a people and culture by pursuing them 'as they are', as they and the anthropologist establish their collaboration under mutual trust and responsibility. Any 'thick' interpretation is thus a product of such responsible collaboration, often reflecting people's (and the anthropologist's) imperfect, conflicted and contested social reality. The descriptions, 'structures', and meanings concern more than symmetrical aesthetic or literary elegance; they concern 'the way things really are' for the people, including counter-meanings. The discipline has indeed moved slowly but surely in such a direction, as even a cursory look at some representative books over time may show.² Given global human sharing, anthropology cannot objectivize the people it studies any more. Here its best renewable resources are found in intensive fieldwork and ethnography. They are crucial since they best expose the people's and the ethnographer's worlds in all their strengths as well as weaknesses, uncertainties, dilemmas, and unresolved 'loose ends'.³

Ethnography and ethnographers have always retained a higher profile in anthropological research in India for describing and conceptualizing cultural ideas and social processes and explanations during this century. Attention to narratives, dialogues, and human experiences only strengthen their role. They seem to have increasingly better captured Indian society and its culture in their

diversity, social texture and openness, in the place of an acquired (and constraining) theoretical stance, terminology and taste. Such a locus also helps keep that general India–West discourse axis generally toned down. As an individual scholar, perhaps Professor M.N. Srinivas has most consistently maintained, over the decades, a well-nuanced ethnographic stance on Indian society and culture. Controlled, understated and observant of what socially endured (and what did not), he characterized the continuing as well as emerging social directions in Indian society, and in sociological studies (on the latter, see Srinivas and Panini 1973; see also Chapter 2).⁴ Most recently, he (Srinivas 1996: xi) remarked,

It is my plea that the movement from studying one's own culture or a niche in it, to studying oneself as an ethnographic field, is a natural one.... 'Sociology of Self' should be a rich field given the diversities and unities which the members of Indian civilization, are heirs to.⁵

My exercises in this book concern an anthropology of contemporary India in the midst of some crucial social changes and in the presence of the quotidian Indian. With the help of interrelated ethnographic research on widely different social groups and their experiences, mostly in Lucknow, a north Indian city, and against the background of a review of some recent anthropological approaches, debates and issues, I explore a series of interdependent issues that the cultural otherness among Indians today produces from within. The issues I focus on center around status and gender inequalities, social violence and suffering, injustice and human rights, and new challenges to Hindu cultural reasoning.

In sociological terms, such multiple Indian others appear within a network of unresolved religious tensions, moral dilemmas, social conflicts and political control and exploitation. They generate and support that distinctly inward-growing (or involuted) cultural otherness that gives today's India a distinct cultural and historical profile. In practice, Indians (i.e., Hindus and all others) in such a self-alienating ethos begin to find even those near and familiar, a little strange. 'We do not know today who to believe. Even our own children sometimes look so unfamiliar.' This was repeatedly the comment of my urban, educated informants, men and women. They thought that the reason for such a condition was selfish

competition and conflict for the same practical goals in life (education, work, money, and a secure family). 'Even those close sometimes exude otherness [*parayapan* in Hindi].'⁶ And accordingly, they must also be always ready to draw a line ever more clearly around the 'self', 'ours' (*apne*), and 'all the others' (*ajnabi* or *paraye*). Under such thinking, besides hierarchical ranking, various social and psychological borders, fences, boundaries, screens, and 'walls' multiply, and these become more prominent in role and meaning in everyday life. These in turn increase the potential of more conflicts within and between individual persons and communities. Religious traditions either dilute or become rigid to avoid losing uncontested authority, while the modern liberal state seldom delivers as much as it promises. Exposing each other's weaknesses, the two sides confront and conflict, while also seeking compromise if the context is appropriate.

Yet the conflicts alone would give only a one-sided picture of a country like India if the countervailing cultural forces are left out. These concern the ordinary Indian's instinctive tendency to relate the existence of human physical, cultural, and religious diversity at both local and cosmic levels. Those educated, detect here the shaping by some of those inclusive and continuing forces of Indian culture and civilization. Some among them elaborated the ways the civilization secured continuity by 'adapting', 'neutralizing with worship', 'assimilating', or 'ignoring' the opposed or threatening forces. Such a cultural strategy, as my ethnography repeatedly corroborated, is part of people's practical cultural sensibility. They employ it to avoid seeing either too much or too little in power conflicts and resistance (for an initial echo, see Brown 1996: 729–35). Ordinary rural and urban Indians (often called the 'Indian masses'), whose sole interest is daily survival, thus muster a major consensual social presence against extremes and extremists.⁷

Still, however, Indian social conflicts cannot be wished away. The forces of conflict repeatedly seem poised for an ever bigger, more violent showdown. Thus the recent major religious conflicts centered on Sikh extremism, the Amritsar temple assault (1984), and the Ayodhya temple–mosque dispute (1992) should be sufficient to convey how, on any major issue, social divisions, political polarization and religious nationalism line up in India, on the one hand, and how cultural ambiguities, exploitative politics, broken social trust, and moral dilemmas further complicate conflict reso-