

NINTH MN SRINIVAS MEMORIAL LECTURE

Sociology and Ideology

André Béteille



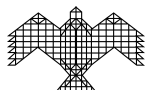
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES
Bangalore

NINTH MN SRINIVAS MEMORIAL LECTURE

Sociology and Ideology

André Béteille

14th November 2008



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore 560012

I would like to use this occasion to discuss the relationship between sociology and ideology. My view of the subject, which has been much influenced by the work of M N Srinivas, is that it is desirable to keep the two apart, although it has proved difficult, particularly in India, to insulate the practice of sociology from the demands of ideology. In what follows I will have something to say both about the justification for keeping the two apart and the difficulty of doing so in a clear and consistent way.

Those who wish to keep the two apart are obliged to explain, no matter how briefly, what they mean by sociology and by ideology. This is not an easy thing to do. Sociologists are by no means in complete agreement about the nature and scope of their discipline as an intellectual pursuit; and, moreover, their conception of the aims and objectives of sociology as a discipline may not correspond very well with their practices as sociologists. The concept of ideology has, if anything, an even wider range of connotations, and those who use it generally avoid giving it a clear or definite meaning.

Sociology, as I understand it, is an empirical and comparative discipline devoted to the systematic study of society through the application of a distinctive body of concepts and methods, and here I would like to treat sociology as being inclusive of social anthropology. What I would like to stress at the outset is that sociology is an empirical rather than a normative discipline, although, as I will point out later, the relationship between value judgements and judgements of reality is a difficult subject on which there are considerable differences of opinion. The

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

primary aim of an ideology is not to understand or interpret society, but to change it by acting politically on it. Sociology as an intellectual discipline does not have any definite or specific political agenda, but an ideology that did not have one would hardly deserve that name.

An ideology is normative, and not merely descriptive or analytical in its orientation. It is based on a particular vision of society, its past and its future, and it seeks to articulate that vision through a set of arguments about what is desirable and what needs to be done to bring it into effect. An ideology cannot be understood only in terms of its argument or its vision, however appealing or persuasive these might be. Ideologies seek to connect the universe of values with the realm of power, and make demands on the intellectual that are different from those made by science and scholarship (Béteille 1980).

The commitment of an intellectual to an ideology may take a weak or a strong form. In the case of most persons it takes a weak rather than a strong form, although there are intellectuals who have a natural inclination for expressing even a diffuse commitment strongly and forcefully, if not always cogently. Those who maintain or express strong commitment to an ideology tend to be drawn towards partisanship in the cause of a particular political platform or a particular political movement. Many believe, and I share that belief, that scholarship and partisanship make uneasy bedfellows (Bendix and Roth 1971).



*I*t is not my argument that commitment to a particular ideology or even a particular political cause is in itself a bad thing. There are some who believe that ideological commitment in the cause of, say, nationalism or the class struggle, or feminism, provides an additional impetus to science and scholarship. I have known many natural scientists – physicists, geneticists, and others – who have maintained a lifelong commitment to one or another ideology or political cause while producing work of high quality as scientists. But the case is somewhat different with those whose scholarly work is in the human sciences. Ideological commitment does not impinge in the same way or to the same extent on the two types of intellectual activity.

The distinction between value judgements and judgements of reality presents itself very differently in physics and in sociology. In physics we do not ask what values objects in motion or at rest assign to their own actions. In sociology we can hardly avoid asking what values a person assigns to his own conduct and to the conduct of others in a given social situation. Where it comes to the study of fundamental particles or the genetic code, it does not matter very much whether the scientist is a radical or a conservative, a pacifist or a militarist. No special care is required to insulate the course of his research from his political commitments. It is a somewhat different matter when a Marxist studies disputes in an industrial plant, or a feminist studies conflict within the family

We must take note of the ways in which sociology is like any other science and the ways in which it differs from the

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

natural sciences. It is like any other science because it aims to arrive at a systematic body of knowledge whose validity can be tested by standardized procedures. It has its own concepts and methods, and its own body of data. A large part of sociological enquiry and analysis consists of the accumulation of new data to examine, criticise and reformulate existing knowledge about society and its structures and processes. It cannot be equated with common sense which is limited, narrow and often resistant to unfamiliar facts and conclusions (Béteille 2002: 13-27).

Sociology is different from the natural sciences because it deals with facts of a different order. These facts are not easily amenable to the kinds of tests to which the natural scientist is able to submit the facts with which he deals. Moreover, the concepts used in sociological enquiry and analysis are fluid and ambiguous. It has proved very difficult to eliminate preconceptions from the study of society and to replace them with concepts on whose meanings there is general agreement. This is partly because such concepts as family, class and community carry strongly evaluative connotations for those who use them.

A book by a well-known German scholar on the origin and development of sociology is entitled *Between Science and Literature* (Lepénies 1988). It captures nicely the conflicting aims and tendencies through which the systematic study of society emerged in France, England and Germany. The sensibility of the writer played an important part in this development. But this sensibility was regulated and channelled by the disciplined and methodical study of an increasing body of facts. We must never forget the part

played by the controlled accumulation of facts in reaching a broader and deeper understanding of social life. Sociology would not be what it is without the development of new methods and techniques for the collection and scrutiny of facts. To be sure, the facts with which the sociologist has to deal have their own distinctive features, but he cannot take with those facts the kind of liberty that is allowed to the story teller.

Fidelity to facts imposes on the sociologist restraints of a kind by which neither the author of fiction nor the proponent of ideologies is generally bound. The ideologist is concerned less with society as it is than with society as it ought to be. His orientation, as I have said, is normative rather than empirical, and where different ideologies coexist in the same society, disagreements among their proponents cannot be easily settled by an appeal to facts, for the same facts acquire different colours when they pass through the prisms of divergent ideologies.

The conflicting aims and tendencies which shaped the development of sociology left their mark on the thought and work of M N Srinivas. On the one hand, he was a strong advocate of the 'field view' which placed the sociologist under obligation to observe and record life as it was actually lived, without embellishment. In what he wrote on village, caste and family, he was untiring in his effort to penetrate the myths that had grown around these institutions in order to reveal their actual structure and operation. He shared the scepticism of the scientist about all forms of received wisdom, and was acutely aware that the received wisdom about society, and that too one's own

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

society, was much more difficult to dislodge than the received wisdom about nature.

While Srinivas was greatly attracted by the detached and dispassionate study of reality, he also realized that that kind of study could not be pursued beyond certain limits. He often spoke about the need for empathy in fieldwork, and the value of participation and not just observation for the collection of data. But while he recognized all of this, he also maintained that a line had to be drawn between sociological enquiry and social advocacy. For all his scepticism about the possibility for any individual sociologist to achieve complete detachment in his work, he was on the side of detachment as against advocacy.



*T*he observation and description of facts does not complete the work of the sociologist. Another important part of it is to connect together the facts that he and other sociologists have collected. For this to be done effectively, the facts have to be collected according to certain accepted procedures, and the concepts used in describing and analysing them must have some general acceptance. All sociologists operate, explicitly or implicitly, with the notion of society as some kind of a system. But there is disagreement about the nature of that system, and, hence, about the approach best suited to its study.

The disagreement is clearly in evidence in the work of Srinivas's two great teachers at Oxford, A R Radcliffe-

Brown and E E Evans-Pritchard. Although Srinivas's early training as a sociologist had been under G S Ghurye, his stay at Oxford between 1945 and 1952 had a great influence of his work (Béteille 2003). There he started his work under Radcliffe-Brown and completed it under Evans-Pritchard. Although he remained loyal to Radcliffe-Brown, I believe that in the end he found the work of Evans-Pritchard more congenial.

Radcliffe-Brown believed that a social system was a kind of natural system and that it was possible to create a natural science of society. That is the case he had made in his famous seminar at Chicago of which the text was published posthumously (Radcliffe-Brown 1957). The same argument was made by him in the essays brought together by Srinivas and also published posthumously (Radcliffe-Brown 1962). If you regard the study of society as a natural science, you will find it difficult to accommodate any kind of ideology in its approach and method. While Srinivas never really warmed to the idea of a natural science of society, he was at one with Radcliffe-Brown in regarding ideology as an unwanted intrusion into the study of society.

Evans-Pritchard, who was Srinivas's other teacher at Oxford, gradually distanced himself from the view that social systems could be studied as natural systems or that there could be a natural science of society. His view of the subject was expressed in his Marrett lecture at Oxford at which Srinivas was present. In that lecture Evans-Pritchard (1962: 26) argued that social anthropology 'studies societies as moral systems and not as natural systems, that it is interested in design rather than in process, and that it

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

therefore seeks patterns and not scientific laws, and interprets rather than explains'. Needless to say there are echoes here of Max Weber's conception of sociology as a science of the interpretation of meaningful action (Sinnverstehendesozioologie).

The rejection of the view that sociology is a natural science does not mean that social facts cannot be studied systematically or that agreed procedures cannot be devised for their systematic study. Evans-Pritchard would maintain that ideology is an impediment to the study of society whether one views it as a natural system or a moral system. The student of society seeks to interpret the meanings that others give to their actions and not advocate his own values for adoption by them. Only, insulation from ideology poses additional challenges for those who regard societies as moral rather than natural systems.

Srinivas's two teachers at Oxford, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, both used the concept of social structure in their analyses, although each formulated it in his own way. Srinivas used it extensively in his study of village, caste and kinship. He felt that most prevalent accounts of these institutions lacked a proper framework for the presentation and analysis of facts. As a result, facts of different kinds were jumbled together, and value judgements and judgements of reality presented without discrimination.



Let me now return to the point that sociology is an empirical and not a normative science. As an empirical science, it is concerned with the observation, description, analysis, interpretation and explanation of facts. It deals with a specific body of facts which we characterise as social facts. They are social by virtue of being general and collective. Explanations of social facts by an appeal to universal principles of individual psychology run into serious difficulties sooner or later. But the distinction between psychology and sociology, or individual representations and collective representations, is a complex and difficult topic into which I do not wish to enter here.

Speculation about the nature and forms of social life is as old as society itself. India has a rich and ancient civilization in whose intellectual tradition speculation and introspection occupied a central place. When we look back on India's intellectual achievements in ancient and medieval times, we are struck as much by its strength as by its one-sidedness. This is manifested in the continuous emphasis on formal intellectual disciplines and a corresponding neglect of empirical knowledge. There are great, not to say spectacular achievements in mathematics, grammar, logic and metaphysics, but hardly any contribution to or even interest in such subjects as history and geography, if we leave aside what came with the Arabs.

This peculiar emphasis on formal as against empirical knowledge might have something to do with the social framework of the cultivation and transmission of knowledge in past times. The Hindu intellectual tradition

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

was exclusive in more than one sense and to an unusual degree. Its bearers belonged to a particular caste, the Brahmins, and other members had a small part to play in the cultivation and transmission of systematic knowledge. Obviously, others also pursued knowledge and contributed to its growth in one way or another. But the traditional Hindu literati, who were the repositories of systematic theoretical knowledge, were by all accounts socially far more exclusive than their European or Chinese or even Islamic counterparts.

A tightly-closed intellectual stratum, acutely conscious of the continuity of its own tradition, develops its own intellectual style. What is described as scholasticism had a luxuriant growth in India. Observers through the ages commented on the inward-looking character of the bearers of the Indian intellectual tradition and on their overweening conceit. The Arab scholar, al-Biruni who was in India in the early part of the eleventh century, was baffled by his encounter with the local pundits. They were supremely self-confident and treated him with great condescension. When he tried to bring some of his own knowledge to their attention, they refused to believe that he could have acquired that knowledge on his own or from anyone but a Brahmin pundit.

The overvaluation of theoretical knowledge or knowledge acquired through ratiocination, above empirical knowledge, or knowledge acquired through observation remains a feature of brahminical culture to this day. This may be illustrated with an example from my own fieldwork in a village in Thanjavur district with a community of Brahmins.

After spending some months recording observations on the domestic rituals of the Brahmins, I decided to shift my attention to the non-Brahmins in the village. I mentioned the matter to an influential Brahmin resident who had been of much help to me and whose counsel I valued. He told me calmly that I need not seek out any non-Brahmin informants for he would himself tell me whatever I wanted to know about their religious observances; and if that did not satisfy me, he would ask the most knowledgeable Brahmin in the village to answer whatever questions remained. I explained to him that what I wanted was to make my observations and secure my information at first hand. He said that he knew all that very well, but the non-Brahmins, being peasants, not only did not understand their own rituals but would lack the capacity to describe them to me in a coherent way. Not only that, he took the same view of the facts relating to agriculture. The non-Brahmins might practise agriculture, but the Brahmins alone knew the theory of it, and it was the theory that counted rather than the practice.

It is in this context that we have to understand Srinivas's tireless advocacy of the 'field view' as against the 'book view' of Indian society. For him, the field view of society represented the reality on the ground and constituted the core of the sociological approach. The book view, on the other hand was based on readings of the classical and medieval texts which provided representations of social institutions from which the reality on the ground often diverged considerably. Srinivas was acutely conscious of the fact that the adoption of the field view in place of the

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

book view meant a departure from the intellectual tradition he had inherited from the past.

Appreciation of the importance of facts for the systematic and comparative study of societies has led to the development and expansion of exact and reliable methods of data collection. The sociologist or social anthropologist who sets out to study any aspect of Indian society now has at his disposal a much larger body of facts than was available to earlier generations of scholars. Arguments about the nature and operation of social institutions no longer have to rest on introspection and speculation alone; they can be tested either by an appeal to the available facts or by the collection of new facts. The movement away from introspection and speculation towards observation, description and analysis has been a movement from sociology as an amateur pursuit to sociology as a profession.

Attitudes towards the reliability and accuracy of data began to change as sociology began to grow as a profession. The change was more dramatic in social anthropology or the study of simple societies than in sociology or the study of complex societies. But sociologists and social anthropologists alike became more demanding about the quality and quantity of the data on which the analysis of social life was based. By the end of World War II, training in the collection of data became a requirement for entry into the profession. It is not that sociologists ceased to use official statistics or historical records; but they began to rely more and more on data collected by procedures they themselves devised and refined.

To the extent that sociology is both a discipline and a profession, the data collected by individual sociologists become a collective resource. The sociologist does not collect data only for his own use, but also for use by others. For this to be possible and effective, a certain amount of standardization of methods and procedures is required. Standardization is easier to achieve in survey research than in participant-observation, but this does not mean that those who collect data through intensive fieldwork or through case studies are free to do as they please (Srivastava 2004).

Whether they study their own society or some other society, sociologists, like human beings in general, have their own preconceptions, not to say biases and prejudices. It is difficult not to have any preconceptions on such matters as family, religion and class. Ideological biases tend to creep in when one is not sufficiently alert to the demands of empirical enquiry. The shift from introspection and speculation to observation and description has been a significant step forward in creating awareness among students of society of the difference between value judgements and judgements of reality.

While it is desirable to exclude preconceptions from the systematic study of society, it is doubtful that they can be eliminated altogether. Observation and description are no doubt important in the study of society as it actually exists. But no systematic study of facts on the ground can get very far without the use of concepts. The question that arises then is about the extent to which we can formulate clear and rigorous concepts of, let us say, family, class and

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

community without allowing our preconceptions to enter into the very definitions we use of these phenomena. Here I would only say that as an intellectual discipline sociology requires a certain disposition of the mind among its practitioners. The sociologist has to keep an open mind about his concepts and be prepared to revise and reformulate them in the light of new data and of alternative formulations of the same concept by others engaged in the study of the same subject, irrespective of ideological predilections.



I do not wish to give the impression that sociologists themselves are in complete agreement on the relationship between value judgements and judgements of reality. There are disagreements both about accepting the distinction in principle and making it operational in practice. These questions have agitated the best minds among students of society for a hundred years, and nobody really expects to find clear answers to them that will be to the satisfaction of all. What I would like to do here is to indicate some of the basic issues by taking as my example the sociological study of religion. That would be an appropriate example here because the first major work by Srinivas (1952), *Religion and Society among the Coorgs*, has a direct bearing on these questions.

Is there a distinctive sociological approach to the study of religion? Religion itself has been a subject of study and reflection for a very long time. The sociology of religion is

by contrast a relatively young subject. The oldest branch of study devoted to religion, and, at least in the western tradition, by far the most important one for centuries is theology. Then there is the philosophy of religion which now occupies some of the ground held by theology in the past. The philosophy of religion looks to theology on one side and the psychology of religion on the other. We have also the very broad and assorted body of work that goes by the name of the history of religions. We finally come to sociology and social anthropology which have also made religion a subject of their study.

The different approaches to the study of religion combine empirical and normative components in very different ways. The distinction between the normative and the empirical approaches is seen most clearly in the contrast between the theological and the sociological approaches to the study of religion. The theologian is concerned primarily with questions of the truth and efficacy of religious beliefs and practices. Such questions do not concern the sociologist in the same way. His primary aim is to observe, describe, interpret and explain the ways in which religious beliefs and practices actually operate. He does not seek to determine whether the beliefs he studies are true or false, or whether the practices he observes do or do not have the effects the believer desires or expects them to have.

Religion and Society among the Coorgs is the first significant sociological study of Hinduism made by an Indian; unfortunately, few such studies have been made since then. It derives its sociological significance from the fact that the description and analysis are presented from the standpoint

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

of the religious sceptic rather than the religious believer. It is empirical rather than normative in its orientation.

Srinivas's approach to religion was very different from that of the philosopher, Dr S Radhakrishnan with whose work he was familiar. He did not seek to expound the essence of Hinduism. As a sociologist, he did not treat religion as either completely autonomous, or as being eternal, invariant and unchanging. Religious beliefs and practices vary and change, and this has to be viewed in the light of variation and change in the structure of society. No religion operates independently of specific social arrangements, and Srinivas set out to examine the two-way relationship between religion and social structure. He spoke of local Hinduism, regional Hinduism, peninsular Hinduism and all-India Hinduism. He also showed how religious beliefs and practices were refracted by the structures of joint family, caste and village. This kind of approach does not always find favour with the religious believer who is inclined to regard religion as pure, and society as corrupt.

The study of Coorg religion is sociological to the extent that it steers clear of any attempt to either extol or condemn Hinduism or any of its beliefs and practices. In my recollection of Srinivas in my early years with him in Delhi, he was inclined to poke fun at those who glorified Hinduism on the basis of some idealized conception of it, saying that they did not know what Hinduism really was. But then, he would not put up with any wholesale condemnation of Hinduism either. He once returned from a seminar, infuriated by a participant who had described Hindu beliefs and practices as 'mumbo-jumbo'. It is no

easy matter to remain detached, objective and value-neutral in the study of religion, and particularly of one's own religion.

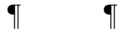
There are two aspects of the sociological approach to which I would like to briefly draw attention. The sociologist does not study religion as a thing in itself but in relation to society and its other institutions. He acknowledges the great importance of religion but does not assign pre-eminence to it over all other aspects of society. He does not dismiss religion as 'false consciousness', but at the same time does not subscribe to the religious interpretation of the world as a whole.

The second aspect of the sociological approach is that it is comparative in its aims. This means that it addresses all religions and not just one's own religion, and tries to treat all of them even-handedly. This is difficult, if not impossible, if the sociologist is committed to the values of a single religion and seeks to carry those values into the study of all religions. He is likely to do this unconsciously in any case, but must try consciously and methodically to restrain his natural inclination arising from his socialization within a particular tradition when he undertakes a sociological study of religion or, for that matter, any sociological study.

The sociologist's obligation to be even-handed and value neutral in the study of religion is particularly important in a country like India where different religions with different world views and ideologies co-exist and are allowed and encouraged to grow and flourish. The comparative study of religion becomes difficult where studies of religious

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

beliefs and practices become divided among sociologists according to their religious identities so that Hinduism is studied only by Hindus, Islam only by Muslims and Christianity only by Christians.



I would now like to examine very briefly whether the argument that I have made in favour of detachment, objectivity and value-neutrality can be extended from the field of religion to other fields of sociological enquiry and analysis. In my experience, many of those who are prepared to go along with the insulation of the study of religion from value judgements are not prepared to do so in the case of politics. These are mainly secular intellectuals who believe in the primacy of politics over religion, a belief to which, as a sociologist, I find it difficult to subscribe.

The most sustained and penetrating opposition to the separation of facts and values may be found in the Marxist tradition of social enquiry and analysis. Although that tradition has lost many of its adherents in the west, partly as a result of the failure of the Soviet experiment, it continues to have an appeal in India and other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In countries marked by acute economic and social problems, many continue to find inspiration in the ringing words of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it'. Those who have a definite agenda for such change are generally inclined

towards the use of political power for bringing it about. This is known in philosophical parlance as the dialectical unit of theory and practice.

The work of Marx provided a great inspiration for the sociological study of economic life. Marx sought to develop a distinctive approach in which social structure, social conflict and social change were interlinked in such a way that they could be understood only in terms of their mutual relations. A central place is occupied in it by social class; hence it is often described as the 'class approach'. The Marxian approach, as developed by Lenin and others among his followers, adopts a distinct conception of class which in its turn cannot be understood except in terms of a distinctive social theory and a distinctive political practice.

The approach indicated above has been described as a dialectical approach, by which is meant an approach based on the movement towards unity of subject and object. The working class begins as the object of history, but in course of time becomes its subject or principal agent. This is the process whereby the proletariat, from being a class in itself, becomes a class for itself. The study of class is also a study of class consciousness, and class and class consciousness can be understood best by those who participate in their formation. The political practice through which this has to take place is not a distraction from the understanding of class but an essential part of it. In the view of Marx and his followers, only those who engage consciously and actively in the process of class formation can understand the real nature and significance of class.

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

The 'class approach' is not the only approach that follows the path of commitment and engagement for the understanding and analysis of social and political reality. The nationalist approach, which puts nation above class, has a family resemblance with Marxism in the demands it makes from students of society and history. The nationalist too seeks to understand the nation and its identity and unity, but the understanding he seeks is not that of the detached or disinterested bystander. Nation building is a continuous process that is never completed, and the nationalist intellectual believes that only he who contributes to the process from the inside can expect to understand its true nature and significance. In a country such as India, there are many forms of sub-nationalism that make similar demands on their protagonist; needless to say such demands sometimes act against each other and against those of nationalism itself.

Several new branches of social enquiry and analysis have emerged that also question the justification for separating value judgements from judgements of reality. They include gender studies, Dalit studies and minority studies. These studies have sought to introduce new forms of discourse that are different in many ways from the discourse of academic social science. They impinge on one or more of the established academic disciplines, but also cut across them. Although they have emerged relatively recently, they have found accommodation in the universities and have begun to influence teaching and research in such subjects as sociology and social anthropology.

Among the fields that I have just mentioned, gender studies is perhaps the oldest and the most widely recognized. It has grown in response to women's movements in the different parts of the world. It is not that the position of women did not receive any attention in the past. Evans-Pritchard (1965) published a collection of essays with the title *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays* more than 40 years ago, and Srinivas (2002: 279-300) himself chose the subject of 'The Changing Position of Indian Women' for his Huxley Memorial Lecture in the mid-seventies. But the emergence of women's movements has given the subject a new intellectual focus and new political energy.

The conditions of their origin and growth have been such that gender studies are largely in the care of women, Dalit studies in the care of Dalits and minority studies in the care of minorities. In this respect the class approach is different. Although the proletariat is at the centre of its attention, it has been created and developed, from Marx's time down to our own by members of the middle class and not the working class. However, that approach has provided political as well as intellectual inspiration to all emancipationist movements, whether of women or of Dalits or of the minorities. In that sense, the work of Marx has been 'equivocal and inexhaustible' (Aron 1970: 355-77).



SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

I have tried to explain the nature of sociology as an empirical discipline which aims at the systematic and comparative study of societies, and to distinguish sociology defined in that way from ideologies that are systems of idea driven by more or less definite political objectives. I have also indicated how the practice of sociology is influenced by ideologies whose aims are different from those of the former. Those whose objective is to develop sociology as an intellectual discipline in India today cannot wish out of existence the strong ideological currents to which many students of the subject are drawn.

I would like to return in the end to the question of the relationship between value judgements and judgements of reality. As I have emphasized, this is a difficult question on which serious, and perhaps irremovable, disagreements continue to exist among students of society.

Positivists, who view the systematic study of society in the image of the natural sciences, believe that the separation of facts and values is not only essential but can be successfully accomplished through the formulation of standardized methods and procedures. I believe that such standardized methods and procedures are very useful, but that they have their limitations and can carry us forward for some distance in the human sciences, but not nearly the same distance as in the natural sciences. An obsession with 'scientific method' has sometimes had a stultifying effect on the understanding of society and its institutions.

As against the positivists, there are those who advocate the dialectical unity of theory and practice. They maintain that

the separation of facts and values is neither possible nor desirable, and that bringing the two together does not distort but enriches the understanding of society. This course of action has many attractions, but I have found it prudent to maintain a distance from it because I believe that sooner or later it leads to the subordination of sociology in the service of ideology.

It is the third view about the relationship between facts and values that I find the most attractive. This view was elaborated in a series of writings by Max Weber about a hundred years ago. It acknowledges both the necessity and the difficulty of consistently maintaining a separation between facts and values in the interpretation of human action. As Weber put it, 'When the normatively valid is the object of empirical investigation, its normative validity is disregarded. Its "existence" and not its "validity" is what concerns the investigator' (Weber 1949: 39). But then he had also said: 'Nor need I discuss further whether the distinction between empirical statements of fact and value-judgements is "difficult" to make. It is' (Ibid.: 9).

Because the study of society and its institutions requires close attention to the values of other persons of which one may approve or disapprove, implicitly if not explicitly, it is important to recognize that the standpoint from which a sociologist makes his study affects the course of that study. No single sociologist can study society from every possible standpoint. Experience shows that two persons who examine the same social facts from two different standpoints tend to reach somewhat different conclusions. These different conclusions need not be contradictory; they

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

may be complementary. It requires a special effort of will and of sympathy to reach a kind of reflective equilibrium between such conclusions when they are divergent. To repeat what I have said in another context, 'Where the same subject is being studied, and must be studied, by persons in different existential situations, very little progress can be made without candour about one's own views and consideration for the views of others' (Béteille 1987: 676).

The problem of reconciling studies from different if not divergent standpoints comes up again and again in sociology. I will end with one particular example because it is important in itself and because Srinivas gave much thought to it. This is the problem of the insider versus the outsider in the study of society. Srinivas acknowledged that the insider, or the person who studies his own society, enjoys certain advantages, but insisted that the outsider, or the person who studies a society other than his own, also has his share of advantages. He said, 'I must hasten to add that I am not only not against studies of a culture by outsiders but on the contrary *I am positively for them ...* There cannot be a single correct or all-embracing view. One view ought to be that of the insider and various views can be complementary even when – or specially when they differ from each other' (Srinivas 2002: 560, italics in original).

The practice of sociology and social anthropology in India has taught us that keeping an open mind is of the highest importance, and it is this that is threatened by a zealous commitment to an ideology. It has taught us that there is no one unique or privileged standpoint in the study of

society and culture. Even within the same society there generally is a plurality of standpoints, varying with religion, class, gender or moral and intellectual predilection, and, besides, different outsiders may view the same society from different standpoints. Sociology and social anthropology cannot move forward unless the plurality of standpoints is accepted as a fundamental condition for the systematic and comparative study of society and culture. But it is one thing to acknowledge the value of, say, studying marriage from the standpoint of a woman, or discrimination from that of a Dalit, and quite another to have the standpoint itself defined by a particular political agenda.

REFERENCES

- Aron, Raymond. 1970. *Marximes imaginaires*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bendix, Reinhard and Guenther Roth. 1971. *Scholarship and Partisanship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Béteille, André. 1980. *Ideologies and Intellectuals*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Béteille, André. 1987. 'On Individualism and Equality', *Current Anthropology* 28(5): 672-6.
- Béteille, André. 2002. *Sociology*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

SOCIOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

Béteille, André. 2003. 'Introduction to the New Impression' in M N Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. xvii-xxix.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1962. *Essays in Social Anthropology*. London: Faber & Faber.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1965. *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays*. London: Faber & Faber.

Lepenies, Wolf. 1988. *Between Science and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1957. *A Natural Science of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1962. *Method in Social Anthropology*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Srinivas, M.N. 1952. *Religion and Society among the Coorgs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Srinivas, M. N. 2002. *Collected Essays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Srivastava, Vinay Kumar (ed). 2004. *Methodology and Fieldwork*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Weber, Max. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. New York: Free Press.

MN Srinivas Memorial Lectures are supported by
Syndicate Bank