THE PASTS OF AN INDIAN VILLAGE

Events of the last two hundred years have led many scholars to divide the societies of the world into contrasting pairs, such as developed—underdeveloped, advanced—backward, traditional—modern. Central to these concepts are not only ideas about the level of technological development, but the very character of the societies and cultures which are compared and contrasted as well. Professor Edward Shils has recently remarked that the traditional society is one in which, among other things, there is a strong attachment to the past, by which behavior is determined and validated. Solutions to problems old and new are determined by the past of the society, and modernization quickens when ties to the past begin to be cut and new criteria for determining and validating behavior are invoked.

Rural India would appear to be a typical traditional society; most behavior observed today has its roots deep in the past in customary behavior. The technology, the social structure, and the ideology of the Indian peasant seem to epitomize attachments to the past. It is the argument of this paper that, although the attachment to the past is undoubtedly there in the life of the Indian peasant, unless we ask what past or pasts does a given peasant refer to and unless we fully understand the potential complexities of the pasts of a traditional society, the dichotomy of traditional and modern may prove illusory.

Senapur, a large village in the Gangetic valley has been described extensively in the anthropological literature. It is a Thakur-dominated, agricultural village with over 2,000 residents and 23 different caste groups. It lies

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1 Shils' views were presented at a seminar of the Committee on the Comparative Study of New Nations at the University of Chicago. These remarks stimulated me to re-examine some field data that I had collected in a north Indian village in 1952-53, to try to determine what pasts were to be found in this village. My thinking about the problem was furthered by discussions of an earlier draft of the paper with Professors Milton Singer, Sylvia Thrupp, and Eric Wolf.

in a heavily populated region 25 miles north of the city of Benares. It is not
directly within the orbit of an urban-industrial center, but over the past
fifty years members of the village have had a considerable degree of urban
contact, and although this contact and the general changes which have af-
fected northern India have affected the village, the basic structure and culture
of the village remains.

When the questions “What is the past of this village?”, “What is the past
to which people refer to determine and validate behavior?”, are asked, it
becomes apparent that these questions cannot be answered in the singular,
but must be answered in the plural. There is not one past of the village but
many; the following paper is an exploration of these pasts. I find it con-
venient to talk about two types of pasts: a traditional past, which grows out
of the mythology and sacred traditions of north India, and a historic past,
which is a set of ideas about the remembered experiences of a group of
people in a local region. The traditional past usually refers to matters religious
and cultural, and the historic past to matters social and political.

In general terms, the varieties of pasts, traditional and historic, function
in the same way for different groups (in this case, castes) in the village; but
their content varies widely. The traditional past functions to validate a
present social position and to provide a charter for the maintenance of that
position or the attempt to improve it. It provides a much wider framework
than do the local historic pasts. The traditional past relates particular groups
to an extensive social network, in some cases stretching over most of north
India. The historic past explains, supports, or provides a basis for action
in the local social system. Analytically, the contents of the various pasts
can be treated under these two rubrics, but the complexities of the differing
contents are important in understanding the process of modernization in the
society. They should not all be subsumed under one “attachment to the
past”. The student of the society must be able to include in his analysis the
multiplicity of the pasts of the society and be prepared to understand how
modernization affects not one past but all the pasts.

THE CONTENTS OF THE PASTS: THAKUR

The traditional past of the Thakur explicitly goes back to the Ramayana and
the Mahabharata. Rama and Sita, principals of the epic, are more than

S. Cohn, “The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste”, in McKim Marriott (ed.), Village
India (Chicago, 1955), pp. 53-77; “Some Notes on Law and Social Change in North India”,
semi-divine folk heroes to the Thakurs of Senapur; they are their ancestors. The values and moral imperatives of the Ramayana are formally maintained for the Thakurs of the village by the annual presentation of the Ram Lila. The Ram Lila, which in Senapur lasts for six days, is the acting out by the Thakurs of the village of events in the Ramayana. The form is that the younger Thakurs of the village take the dramatic roles of the principal characters while the older Thakur males chant the verses which describe and comment on the acted-out portions of the story. As presented in the village, the Ram Lila is not a fixed traditional past, although the story is an old one and was originally reduced to writing over 2,000 years ago by Valmiki. The version which is known in Senapur is the Ramacaritamanasa of Tulsi Das, and dates from the 16th century. The Ram Lila is flexible enough to continue to incorporate the recent past. In some sections it may be used by some as a vehicle for comments on current behavior.

One of the first scenes acted out is the winning of Sita, daughter of Janaka king of Videha, by Rama. Janaka has a contest to which all the leading Rajas are invited. The prize is the hand of Sita. The feat of strength and skill required is the drawing of Siva’s bow. In the current Senapur version of this contest, the Raja of Manchester appears. He is dressed in a caricature of Western dress, with an ill-fitting white suit and a large pith helmet. He looks much like a railway official and speaks in an English gibberish which sounds like announcements in an Indian railway station.

The maintenance of the legendary past of the Thakur is found not only in formal presentation of this past. The stories, incidents, and characters of the Ramayana are referred to frequently in daily life. Many of the names and nicknames of villagers come from this work. Events in the village are discussed on the basis of their similarities to events in the Ramayana, and the explicit moral judgments made by many Thakurs derive from the values of the traditional past. In addition, the traditional Thakur past includes the Thakur heroes of the 11th and 12th centuries, particularly Prithviraj, who battled the Muslim invaders of the time.

It might seem that this would be enough of a past for a “simple peasant people”. But the Thakurs frequently invoke another past, which I label the historic past. This past relates to the period from the 16th century to the middle of the 19th century, and focuses on known ancestors and events involving these ancestors. The Thakurs of Senapur (with the exception of two families out of 56 who are related affinally) are all descendants of Ganesh Rai, a Raghubanshi Rajput who in the 16th century migrated to the present Jaunpur district from what is today central Uttar Pradesh. With his two sons he established suzerainty over the existing population in a region of about seventy square miles, containing today a little over a hundred villages. In the Thakur version of the historic past, this population was led by the Soeris, a semi-aboriginal people. Today there are well over 20,000 de-
scendants of Ganesh Rai in this local area (taluka). Ganesh Rai and the genealogical connections of the Thakurs in the village and lineage mates out of the village are a constant reference. The seemingly simple question of “Whose land is this?”, is almost invariably met with the reply “Ganesh Rai had two sons”, and then the land is traced through fifteen or sixteen generations. All the lands in the village and the land throughout the taluka follow the descent line from Ganesh Rai. Every adult male Thakur can trace his descent from this ancestor. Two Dobhi Thakurs meeting for the first time will sit down and compare their formal relationship and appropriate behavior to each other. Not only is the formal kin history of the Thakurs discussed, but events in the lives of ancestors are talked about. Traditional enemies, such as the Raja of Benares, who in the 18th century tried to dislodge the hold of the Dobhi Thakurs on their land, continue to be castigated.

The historic past is not only a unifying factor but carries a divisive component as well. Feuding relationships in the village and in the taluka are constantly revived by reference to the historic past. Often I would be told a tale of one Thakur household burning out another in a dispute over land ownership or following an assumed insult. I would suppose that the event had taken place within the last ten years, but after careful checking I would discover that it had taken place three generations ago. So far as the families are concerned, however, it did take place in the recent past.

The two pasts described for the Thakurs can also be found in almost every caste group in the village. Since the other twenty-two castes represented in the village all have at least mythological origins of their castes, one can talk about the twenty-three legendary pasts of the village. Until 1952 the other castes were the tenants and followers of the Thakurs, and their historic pasts are tied to the historic past of the Thakurs. I will illustrate these differing pasts with four groups: the Chamars, the Brahmans, the Telis, and the Muslims.

THE CONTENT OF THE PASTS: CHAMAR

The Thakurs are the top of the village and taluka stratification system. The Chamars—traditionally the agricultural workers of the Thakurs, whose ascribed occupation is skinning and tanning—are one of the lowest groups in the system. The Chamar traditional past has two elements. The first is seen in their origin myths, in which through trickery or accident they lost their previous high status, either as Thakur cultivators or as Brahmans, and were reduced to their present low status. There are several widely differing myths about this, the specifics of which are not important for my purposes here. The other element of the traditional past refers to a series of Chamar
holy men of the 15th and 16th centuries. The most famous of these was Raidas, who achieved great spiritual power as a follower of the Ramuanja sect, which taught that emancipation could be attained through devotion (bhakti). Raidas and the Bhakti traditional past provide a way out of the present degrading position of the Chamars. I have suggested elsewhere that this part of the traditions of the Chamars has been brought to the rural Chamar largely through those Chamars who have become educated or who have had urban experience in recent years. Thus the diffusion of this traditional past is a function of modern conditions, if not of modernization itself.

The historical past of the Chamars is a shallow one. At best Chamars can give their genealogies for only three ascending generations. I had to get information about Chamars' ancestors from their Thakur landlords. Some of the older Thakurs had knowledge going back farther than that of the Chamars themselves. There are three aspects to the Chamar historic past. There is a generalized feeling that things were much better fifty years ago, when their Thakur landlords were richer than they are today because there were fewer of them and fewer Chamars. The landlords left their Chamar workers pretty much alone to carry on the agricultural operations in the village, while the Thakur was content to sit on the veranda of his men's house and smoke his hukka (water pipe). Today, on the other hand, the Thakur landlord is out in the field with the Chamar, directing his every move and in some cases working side by side with him. The Chamar's view of the past also includes the major events in the Thakur household to which he and his father had been attached. A Chamar describes with as much detail as would the landlord himself a wedding party or a fight in his landlord's house. Until very recently, part of the status of the Chamar within the Chamar caste in Senapur was determined by the status of the Thakur house to which he was attached. A rich house could afford to let more land to its tenants than could a poor one.

Until very recently, the Chamars of Senapur had no corporate historic past such as the Thakur have. One of the effects of recent social and economic changes in the society at large has been the beginning of a corporate past for the Chamars. In Senapur this results from a movement in 1948 and 1949 by the Chamars and other low-caste groups in which they contended for political power within the village. The dramatic events of this contest are now part of the historic past of the Chamars and provide a guide for current action.

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4 Details of this contest in Cohn, "The Changing Status of a Depressed Caste", see n. 2 above.
Most scholars, when they think of Indian traditions, evoke certain aspects of what might loosely be called the Brahman tradition. Elements of this tradition may be characterized as follows: knowledge of and respect for the Vedas and Shastrás, emphasis on spiritual activities, extensive ritual competence, concern for ritual purity, and otherworldliness. There are no resident Brahmans in Senapur today, although about thirty years ago there was a Brahman family. For most of the normal ritual services that Brahmans perform, the Thakurs and other castes of the village depend on a village of Brahmans about a mile away from Senapur. Theoretically, their legendary past should be very different from that of the Thakurs and should emphasize the themes noted above. In practice their legendary and historic pasts are much linked with the Thakurs’ pasts, since they acknowledge ties to the Thakurs, who settled them in their village to provide themselves with ritual guides. The Brahmans around Senapur are much involved in the Ram Lila. Several of the younger Brahman men are leading exponents of a typical Thakur sport—wrestling. Brahmans derive most of their income not from their priestly functions but from their lands, as do their Thakur employers.

The Brahman tradition in Senapur is further complicated by the fact that some Thakurs in the village are ardent followers of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform movement of the late 19th century. The Arya Samaj emphasized the purification of Hinduism and attempted to base the revitalized Hinduism on its interpretations of the Vedas. The Arya Samaj was strong enough in the period before the First World War to make most of the Thakurs vegetarians and non-smokers. Vegetarianism and non-smoking are distinctly non-Thakur traits and are closely associated with the Brahmanic tradition. The dilapidation and eventual collapse of the village temple also date from the Arya Samaj period in the village. There is one interesting result of the Arya Samaj in Senapur: one meets individuals who seem to be bearers of the great Brahmanic tradition, because they quote the Vedas and talk in the way that textbooks on Hinduism or Indian philosophy lead one to expect Brahmans would talk; however, these people are Samajists, whose immediate tradition is a result of modernization.

The Brahmans’ historic past, since they were brought into the region by the Thakurs, is tied to the Thakur historic past. They too refer to Ganesh Rai and his descendants, and the fights of the 18th and 19th centuries. But, in addition, one type of historic past which Brahmans in surrounding villages recognize, refers to their land grants, which were obtained as maintenance for their performing ritual functions, or special grants from particular Thakur households or lineages on particular auspicious occasions for the Thakurs concerned.
THE CONTENT OF THE PASTS: THE TELIS

The Telis are a low caste, whose traditional occupation is oil pressing, but who for many generations in Senapur and the surrounding region have been petty shopkeepers and traders as well. They are literate, and because of their occupations probably have been literate for many generations. During the last one hundred years they have been trying to raise their social status. They have been successful to some degree: fifty years ago Brahmans and Thakurs would not take water from them, but now they do. Their social mobility is important in the Telis' structuring of their traditional and historic pasts. Today their traditional past includes major emphasis on the Brahmanic tradition. Like the Chamar traditional past, it includes an explanation for their low social status; however, the Teli fall from grace was not the result of trickery or accident but of the Telis' militant defense of Hinduism in the face of the Muslims.

The Telis have also been affected by the Arya Samaj. There are several Teli Samajists in the village. The Arya Samaj in Jaunpur district is generally looked upon now as being in the hands of Telis.

The historic past of the Telis centers around two periods. One began about seventy-five years ago and lasted until about 1910. This was a period of great prosperity derived from the manufacture and sale of sugar. The grandfathers of the present Telis in Senapur built and managed several sugar factories in Senapur. These were not large-scale industrial operations, but small-scale local industries. When they were running they might employ fifteen or twenty people in their operation. In addition to manufacturing sugar from cane, some of the Telis carried on extensive middle-man functions in the sugar trade. This period of prosperity is the "good old days" for the Telis. At that time they had large houses, many servants, good clothes and good food. They could entertain the village and pay for religious rituals, and they had in their debt many of the Thakur landlords. Around 1910, with the spread of large-scale industrial sugar refineries in western Uttar Pradesh, the demand for the locally produced sugar diminished and Teli prosperity decreased. Some Teli families who had been wealthy during this period turned to urban pursuits in business and the professions. The Telis left in the village reverted to their roles as oil pressers and traders and once again came into the hands of their Thakur landlords.

The other aspect of the historical past is the Teli identification with Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist movement. Many of the leading figures in the Nationalist struggle in Jaunpur district were Thakurs and in several cases they came from Dobhi taluka. But except for personal identification with particular Thakur leaders, the Thakurs in Senapur appear to have been largely untouched intellectually by the Nationalist movement. The only group which continually refers to Gandhi and Gandhian symbols and ideas
are the Telis. Gandhi is viewed as a validation of the Teli identification with the Brahmanic tradition. Some of Gandhi's social ideas fit in with Teli attempts to enhance their social status. The Teli identification may be the result of Teli urban ties; their occupation takes them to the local bazaars and to Benares and Jaunpur; they have many relatives who live in urban centers. This aspect of Teli historic past has an urban as well as a local referent and support.

THE CONTENT OF THE PASTS: THE MUSLIMS

The Muslims of village Senapur, who form roughly five per cent of the village population (50 out of a little over 2,000 people), have traditional and historic pasts radically differing from those of the other residents of the village. The pasts are connected to events and ideas which have their roots in the eighth century Arabian Peninsula and in the rise and spread of Islam in the subsequent centuries. Unlike any other group in the village, they have a traditional past which ties them to peoples outside of India. Their religious leaders read and comment on the Koran and interpret Koranic law for them. Their rituals, life cycle ceremonies, and festivals are markedly different from those of their Hindu neighbors. There are some village religious activities in which the rituals of the Hindus and Muslims are merged: Hindus worship at some of the Muslim shrines and graves in the area, and fifty years ago there was a sect, the Pancho Pir, which had Hindu and Muslim followers. Part of the effect of the Arya Samaj was to end Hindu participation in this syncretic religious sect.

The historic past of the Muslims is also different. The history of Senapur which the Muslim relates is significantly different from the one related by the Thakur. The Muslims believe that the village was wrested by the Thakurs not from the semi-aboriginal Soeris, but from four Muslim landlords who had subdued the Soeris previously. Although they do not claim direct kinship with these ancient landlords, it is still a matter of pride among them that Muslims held the village before the Thakurs did.

MODERNIZATION AND THE ATTACHMENTS TO PASTS

I have been documenting one point, which is that if we characterize India as a traditional society we must be prepared to analyze not one tradition and one past, but many traditions and many pasts. Similarly, in thinking about modernization of such a traditional society, we must think in the plural—about effects on multiple segments, each attached to its own peculiar past, within one traditional society. In a changing social situation we expect to
find a transitory attachment to the past, often in the irrational form of a
nativistic movement. It is significant that the anthropological literature on
this sort of attachment to or revitalization of the past has focused on the
more spectacular messianic cults such as the Ghost Dance, the cargo cults,
and the Mau Mau. But we have not yet analyzed the complex inter-action
of modernization and traditionalization, such as is found in the Arya Samaj,
or the traditionalization of Chamar religious life as a result of literacy and
urban experience. The apparent conflicting values, institutions, and behavior
found in India seem to our minds rationally incompatible. We cannot build
their coexistence into our theories of change; we can only describe them.
Perhaps it is characteristic of members of modern societies to believe that
consistency in social and intellectual life is a prerequisite to efficient func-
tioning of either a social system or a theory.

The description of the multiple pasts of one Indian village does not
invalidate categorization of societies into traditional and modern, but it may
point to another dimension necessary in the categorization. All Americans
share a past created by our educational system and media of mass com-
munication. We can invoke this past and have it be meaningful across
regional and class lines. Indians do not as yet share such a past. An appeal
for action on the part of the central government, based on what is thought
to be a universal identification with a traditional or historic past, is mean-
ingless or leads to antagonistic reactions of major parts of the population.
The Brahmanic past can be an anathema to non-Brahmans in Maharashtra
or south India. Evoking the “First War of Indian Independence” (the Sepoy
Mutiny of 1857) means nothing outside of the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar
and a few parts of western India, except to the urban educated classes. The
evocation of Mahatma Gandhi is sometimes viewed by Thakurs in north
India as symbolizing not the new India, but their being dominated by socially
inferior merchant castes.

I would speculate that a society is modern when it does have a past, when
this past is shared by the vast majority of the society, and when it can be
used on a national basis to determine and validate behavior.

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