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**Socio-Cultural Theory and Colonial
Encounters: The Discourse on Indigenizing
Anthropology in India**

Vineeta Sinha

Department of Sociology
National University of Singapore
11Arts link
Singapore 117570

Fax: 777-9579
e-mail: socvs@leonis.nus.edu.sg

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Socio-Cultural Theory and Colonial Encounters: The Discourse on Indigenizing Anthropology in India

Vineeta Sinha

Colonialism, Anthropology and the "Native"

The 17th and 18th centuries saw increased contact between a rapidly expanding "West" and "non-Western" societies, manifested especially in the form of colonial encounters. However, the narrative of "European" interaction with the "Orient" did not begin with colonialism. A significant body of research (Kabbani:1988, Schwaab:1984, Lach:1968, Raychaudhuri:1962, Glamann:1958, Chaudhuri:1965, Alvares:1991, Kaul:1989) suggests evidence of pre-colonial and non-hegemonic (J. Abu-Lughod:1989) interaction between the "Occident" and the "Orient."

This paper explores an aspect of these multifaceted encounters through detailed analysis of a single empirical case. In attempting to reconstruct "European" or "Western" images of India I examine how pre-colonial interaction, colonialism and the discipline of anthropology crystallized both a geographical space (i.e., India as a legitimate culture area) and an intellectual space ("Indians" as exotic human others) for subsequent social scientific investigation.

The terms "India," "Africa" and "America"² and the images they conjured in the minds of Christian "Europeans" were as much constructions as was Europe itself. Such

¹ Much of this interaction is traceable to travellers' accounts of overland voyages, maritime contact and European missionary activities (Kaul:1989). The movement was not just from the "Occident" to the "Orient." We have overwhelming evidence of Arab, Chinese and "Indian" travellers and traders to "other" parts of the world (Alvares:1991, Kabbani:1988).

² The choice of "India," "Africa" and "America" is not arbitrary. Granting heterogeneity in colonial experiences some commonality can nonetheless be abstracted. Any discussion of India without reference to Africa, and vice-versa, is necessarily incomplete. A comparative perspective enables the following mode of inquiry which cannot be undertaken in the present paper: what images of the "other/native" emerged out of British experiences in two non-European, non-Christian contexts? For example, why is Africa associated with "tribes" and India with "castes?" The inclusion of America further complicates the comparative dimension. The Spanish conquest of America stands in stark contrast to the European colonization of India and Africa. What were the lines of confluence and divergence in

imaginings rose out of lengthy colonial interactions between the representations of European imperial power and local wielders of power, in pluralistic, plurinational regions. Just as the meanings attached to the label "Negro" changed dramatically after Atlantic slavery, just as there were no "Indians" in the Americas before Hispanic conquest, so also the "Hindoostan" and "Hindoos" that emerged after the British encounter were unlike their imagination by other Europeans prior to this episode.

An analysis of the intellectual heritage of anthropology must be grounded in pre-existing "European" knowledge and debates about the "Orient." Anthropology has not invented but inherited the "savage slot" with its various "others," including natives and primitives (Trouillot:1991). In appropriating this slot as the epistemological and methodological foundation of their discipline, anthropologists have reconstituted and transformed it in critical ways. It was never a monolithic whole in the first place. Anthropology has added new variants to this category.³

My argument about India and Indian anthropology is explicated in two steps. First, I demonstrate that the constitution of India's "otherness" predates anthropological attempts to categorize India and Indians as relevant objects of anthropological inquiry. Ideas about India (as a part of the "Orient") were in currency before both the colonial and the anthropological encounters between Europe with the Indian subcontinent. Second, I draw connections between these pre-existing images and the development of anthropological studies in India. I also try to articulate the discourse surrounding efforts to create an "Indian" anthropology in India. These discussions reveal the complex and problematic ways in which native anthropologists have tried and continue to claim a separate agenda for "Indian" anthropology, premised upon a different, non-Western image of India. The construction of India as an exotic "other," holds true for "Western" anthropology; the dialectics of constituting India as an "other" as well as a "self" characterizes indigenous anthropology in India today.

This, and other attempts to indigenize anthropology highlight the need to gauge the epistemological and methodological status of the category "native" within anthropology. The primacy and potency of the "native" category is apparent in the conceptualizations of

European discoveries and representations of the various encountered others and why? See also Footnote 7.

³A particular expression of this slot that I would very much like to pursue but lack space for here, is the colonial and anthropological encounters with the category of gender, a subject that is now receiving much needed attention (Chaudhuri & Strobel: 1992, Etienne & Leacock:1988, Mohanty:1984, Sangari & Vaid:1989, Trinh:1988).

anthropology both in Europe and the United States of America **and** in the "Third World." In the final part of the paper, I conjoin debates about indigenizing anthropology in India with my own conceptualization of "indigenization."

Constitution of India's Otherness

The constitution of India's otherness was a complex historical process to which my brief treatment does not do full justice. Clearly, images and evaluations of India, the land, the peoples and their customs, changed greatly between the 16th and 20th centuries. Neither is the process purely a concern with the "past." The discovering and labeling of the other still goes on. Also, there were clearly a multitude of responses to encounters with the natives. Such transformations in ideas and attitudes require a systematic and thorough handling of historical material. My purpose here is far less ambitious: to demonstrate that (a) European⁴ discussions of India have focussed on its religion, language, law, state, political economy and social structure (Inden 1990); (b) such foci have led to selection of specific traits that were, and continue to be perceived as "Indian"--Sanskrit, caste, Hinduism, rural and socially rigid and (c) the association of these traits with India are perpetuated in scholarly accounts of India, including among other disciplines, anthropology.

The lead taken by Greek geographers, historians, philosophers and warriors is notable in reconstructing early contact between India and "Greece." The travels and accounts of such figures as Scylax (6th century B.C), Alexander the Great (326 B.C.) and Megasthenes (302 B.C), among others are used to piece together early European knowledge of India. These contacts may have been facilitated by the development of land routes to India along its north-eastern and particularly north-western borders (Kaul:1989). The Portuguese "discovery" of the route around the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean (the Greeks' Erythraean Sea) and to India heralded a new phase in sea travel, maritime trade and sustained interaction between Europeans and Indians. Merchants and traders (both Arabs and Europeans) attested to the presence of valued commodities, such as spices, silk and jewels in Indian lands. Knowledge about Indian religions, languages (particularly Sanskrit), customs such as sati, caste, garb, eating habits (Thapar 1979:19) and royal courts translated India as a land of "the fantastic and the fabulous." Ptolemy's geography and the *Periplus* of the Erythraean Sea provided significant geographical data on "India" to primarily Christian audiences up to the

⁴In using the term "European" I am aware that Europe was itself not a pre-existing entity before the 16th century. I focus primarily on British and to some extent German contributions which culminated in constructions of India in highly specific terms.

1500s (Thapar 1979:6). During the 16th century increased Portuguese, Dutch, Italian and English presence redefined existing European images of India's territorial boundaries (Lach 1968:340-341).

Clearly, the places described in these varied accounts as "India"⁵ is not the same as the geographical and socio-political entity known as "India" today. There does not seem to be a single territorial "indigenous" label used to designate what is today called "India." Denotations such as Aryavarta (the country of the Aryans) and Bharat, the name of a mythic ancient King, have sometimes been applied by inhabitants of India to this geographical entity. In medieval, renaissance and colonial accounts the words "Hindoostan" and "Indostan" are frequently used interchangeably with "India." Thus, the very boundaries of territories within present-day Indian subcontinent (not to mention the labeling of these as territories as "India") was as much a construction by outsiders⁶ as the social, cultural, religious and political descriptions of this land and its peoples.

Significantly a Europe that imagined India was not itself a pre-existing entity but was constructed simultaneously while "inventing" India and other such groupings as an "other." (Inden:1990, 3) makes this point elegantly:

I will argue that Euro-American Selves and Indian Others have not simply interacted as entities that remain fundamentally the same. They have dialectically constituted one another.

The mould in which India was cast reflected European preoccupations in the 17th and 18th centuries more than it reflected an empirical reality. The concern in Europe with emerging industrial capitalism and the growth of cities, the rise of bureaucracies, debates on reason and rationality, the romantic imagination, Christianity and religion, individualism, politics and

⁵Interestingly, the designation of the lands beyond the Indus River as "India" is attributed to Alexander, whose contacts were confined to areas in the north-west of the subcontinent. The totality of India, stretching from northern Kashmir to southern Kanyakumari was not implied in European accounts of "India." Other territorial descriptions referred to India's coastal areas and ports. Knowledge of interior regions was fairly limited.

⁶The word "Hindu" can be traced to its origins in the Old Persian and Avestic languages. According to Steingass's A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary, the word "Hindu" means "an Indian," "black," "slave," "servant" and "infidel" (1947:14-15). The Aryans first used the word **Sindhus** to refer to the modern Indus river. In Vedic literature **Sindhu** was used as an appellative noun for "river" in general. Persians in the 8th century referred to the river as "Hindu" (al Faruqi and Sopher:1974, 73) and by extension used the same word to describe those who lived beyond the Sind or the Indus Valley (Ling:1985, 142).

statehood and equality profoundly influenced the foci of European debates about Asia and the East.

In the 16th century the Portuguese took the lead in trading with India and their accounts of India abound from this time period (Lach:1968). The decline of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and in the Indo-Portuguese trade signalled the growing dominance of the Dutch and a growing English presence sustained by commercial links. Notwithstanding the existence of published material on India in Europe through the 16th and 17th⁷ centuries Marshall (1970:2-3) argues that "widespread European discussion of India took place mostly in the second half of the 18th century," primarily from British perspectives. Much of this discussion centered on Indian religion and specifically on Hinduism and its relationship to caste and the Sanskrit language.⁸

The Indian debate in British circles engaged missionaries, travelers, traders and intellectual elites starting from about 18th century. The change in dealings with India from commercial East India Company to administration as a colony of the Crown in 1858 further created a need to make sense of India's location within the British empire. Romantic renderings of India are captured in the imagination of a group of English civil servants who arrived in India around 1780, under the governorship of Warren Hastings. The most notable among these was Sir William Jones.

William Jones's interests in India included law, religion, language and literature, just to mention a few. He arrived in India to serve as a Supreme Court judge in 1783. He learned

⁷By the 16th century Indians were of course not the first, or the only "other" known to Europeans. The Spanish encounters with Indians in the Americas predates Spanish, Portuguese and British experiences of Indians in Asia. To what extent and in what ways could Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas in 1492 have influenced subsequent European discourses about the Indian subcontinent and its inhabitants? With specific reference to the English, what did the existence of British colonies in the Caribbean for almost 2 centuries, prior to the British colonization of India do to British encounters with Indians? This latter question was posed to me by Prof. Trouillot (personal communication).

⁸By Indian religion European scholars meant primarily Hinduism and neglected Buddhism and Islam in such discussions (Marshall, 1970 & Inden, 1990). British designation of "Hinduism" as the religion of India and Sanskrit as the sacred language of India reveal the sources of European knowledge about India. English civil servants like Jones and Halhed relied on Brahmin priests to learn Sanskrit from and for selection and translations of Indian texts. Scholars (Mukherji:1985) have argued that "too little attention has been paid to the Indian contribution.." (Mukherji in Rocher:1989, 627) in the project of British Orientalism. In 18th century India, numerous pandits (Hindu Brahmin priests) and maulavis (Muslim religious experts) entered British service, particularly in British courts as interpreters of Hindu and Muslim law (Rocher:1989).

Sanskrit and, in 1785, he asserted that Greek, Latin and Sanskrit had common origins.⁹ In his portrayal of Hinduism he noted that "the omnipresence, wisdom and goodness of God" was "the basis of Indian philosophy" (Marshall 1970:40). The apparent eroticism of the *Bhagvat Purana* and *Gita Govinda*¹⁰ was "no proof of depravity in their morals" (ibid. 41). He founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The 1788 publication of *Asiatic Researches: Transactions of the Society*¹¹ carried articles on Indian classical language, art, literature, religion and architecture. Other English writers in the second half of the 18th century who portrayed Hinduism in a positive and favorable light include John Zephaniah Holwell, a surgeon, who served in the East India Company in Bengal. Holwell described Hinduism as belief in "one God, eternal, omnific, omnipotent and omniscient"; the apparent polytheism was "to be taken only in a figurative sense" (Marshall 1970:27). Charles Wilkins, who translated the *Bhagvad Gita*,¹² described Hindu commentators in highly positive terms. The later work of German Indologist Friedrich Schlegel further exemplifies such romantic interpretations of India. According to Schlegel (1890:160):

this philosophy contains a multitude of the sublimest reflections on the separation from all earthly things, and on the union with the God-head; and there is no high conception in this department of metaphysics, unknown to the Hindoos.

Mysticism and imagination pervade descriptions of Indian philosophy, mentality and religion in these accounts. The work of missionaries and romantic Indologists¹³ led to the definition of

⁹ Jones, however was not the first European to read Sanskrit or translate Indian texts. The French scholar Anquetil-Duperron went to India in 1754 and made translations of the *Upanishads* (Schwaab:1984).

¹⁰ Surmised to have been composed in South India in early 10th century A.D. It is by far the most popular of all the Puranas. The latter literally mean "ancient stories or lores." As part of Hindu sacred literature, they contain popular encyclopedic collections of myth, legend and genealogy, varying greatly as to date and origin.

¹¹ Also translated into French and German.

¹² Literally "The Lord's Song." A part of the Indian epic poem Mahabharata, it is a dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and his friend and charioteer Lord Krishna. It has been dated to the 1st or 2nd century A.D.

¹³ Indology as a study of Indian civilization was not of course a homogeneous or monolithic set of ideas. Besides German, French and English variety of Indology, individualistic interpretations lent further heterogeneity to Indological discourses.

India as a society marked by extreme religiosity, structured hierarchically by caste, and a "land of imagination." Other related features attributed to India were its "otherworldly" and non-rational orientation, an idea systematically emphasized by Max Muller,¹⁴

This myth of the absolutist nature of Indian philosophy was repeated so often everybody came to accept it as gospel truth: the average Hindu was turned into a dreamy visionary and his philosophy into a world-and-life denying dogma

who published his Sacred Books of the East in 1875 and What India Can Teach Us in 1883. These particular endeavors to understand India reflect a process whereby the self also encounters and constructs itself through a discovery of an other. Interestingly William Jones had planned to undertake the writing of Britain Discovered,¹⁵ a plan that never materialized. This anticipated project serves to underscore the point that the discovery of India involved an effort "...to define both an Indian and a British identity" (Majeed:1990, 219).

Despite positive evaluations of Hinduism and Indian philosophy, towards the end of the 18th century "... (British) opinion was beginning to harden against Hinduism" (Marshall:1970, 41). This attack against Hinduism was led in England, among others, by Evangelical Christians and social reformers. Charles Grant, writing from India about Hindus in 1785, says, "It is hardly possible to conceive any people more completely enchained than they are by their superstition." William Wilberforce, the abolitionist hero, "...inferred that the natives of India, and more particularly the Brahmins, were sunk into the most abject ignorance and vice" (In Marshall 1970:42). In the British imagination, Hindus (and Indians) were presented as superstitious, primitive and idol-worshippers, and the British presence rationalized as one of "civilizing the natives."

James Mill, a British philosopher and historian, published his work on India, the History of British India in 1858. In this voluminous work Mill embarks on analysis of Indian society, about which William Thomas (in the Introduction to the 1975 edition of the History) states:

¹⁴According to Alvares (1991:47):

¹⁵In Majeed 1990, quoted from Lord Teignmouth's Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of Sir William Jones, 1804.

India became a field in which the philosopher's ethical theories and legal schemes could be put to the test.

It is feasible to propose that, Mill's concern in the History was less with constructing an image of India as such, and more with demonstrating what he considered to be universal philosophical truths¹⁶. He explicitly criticized Jones's romanticization of India and his celebration of the "Indian imagination", through a serious study of Indian religion, art, literature and language. Mill associated the "imagination" with conservatism and argued instead in favor of instrumental rationality as a rhetoric of reform in India (Majeed:1990).

Indological accounts of caste in India refer to the varna system, a classificatory scheme found in Vedic texts. The four-fold occupational division in the Laws of Manu has been described by Indologists as a scheme of elaborate and rigid social classification. This interpretation reveals European reliance upon Vedic textual sources and Brahmins as the religious authority in India.

However, Indian scholars have questioned such a presentation of caste. Srinivas (1951) has argued that the real unit of the "caste system" is not varna but jati, which he defines as "a very small endogamous group practising a traditional occupation and enjoying a certain amount of cultural, ritual and juridical autonomy" (ibid. 24). He further questions the rigidity of the caste system in Indological accounts (ibid 30).

From James Mill to Hegel, accounts of caste,¹⁷ based on travellers' tales and missionaries' and administrators' reports, have made "caste into the central pillar of their constructs" (Inden:1990, 82-84). In these treatises all aspects of Indian social life were linked to castes. Caste was seen as a marker of social, religious, cultural, economic and racial aspects of Indian identity. The existence of castes was further invoked by British and German scholars to explain India's intellectual degradation, vulnerability to conquest, the presence of a rigid social order, absence of individualism and her static, unchanging nature. According to Hegel (1956:144) in India,

¹⁶A similar argument can be made about Marx's, Hegel's and Weber's writings on India. Their agendas were larger than a particular concern with India. In European philosophical, political, religious and economical debates, India was used both as data and as a testing ground for theories. Regardless of their explicit motivations for focussing on India, it is nonetheless crucial that their pronouncements have critically shaped imaginings and discourses of India, including the anthropological.

¹⁷The word "caste" is not one of Indian origin and is not traceable to any Indian language. The Indian application of the word caste comes from the Portuguese casta which means "race, breed or lineage."

independent members ramify from the unity of despotic power. Yet the distinctions which these imply are referred to Nature. Instead of stimulating the activity of a soul as their center of union, and spontaneously realizing that soul-as is the case in organic life-they petrify and become rigid, and by their stereotyped character condemn the Indian people to the most degrading spiritual serfdom. The distinctions in question are the *castes*. (*italics original*)

The social institution of caste was defined as being peculiarly Indian and tied inextricably to Hinduism.¹⁸ The view that India could not be studied apart from caste and Hinduism and that these elements were integral to understanding Indian civilization were inherent in many 19th century British descriptions, which presented both caste and Hinduism in largely negative terms. The need for respecting native Indian customs, as articulated by Warren Hastings in 1773, had undergone dramatic change by the middle of the 19th century, particularly after the Indian Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. By the turn of the twentieth century India as constituted by the British, was perceived as predominantly "Hindu"--a distinct, backward, primitive cultural region, defined in opposition to European civilization.

The discourse on caste was further elaborated through German and British debates on the political economy Europe and Asia. Scholars like Sir Henry Maine and Monier-Williams characterized India as a land of villages epitomized by rural India. Monier-Williams (1891:455) writes,

And here I may observe that no circumstance in the history of India is more worthy of investigation than the antiquity and permanence of her village and municipal institutions. The importance of the study lies in the light thereby thrown on the parcelling out of rural society into autonomous divisions, like those of our own English parishes, wherever Aryan races have occupied the soil in Asia or in Europe.

Marx and Engels in their discussions of the Asiatic mode of production contributed indirectly to the discourse about Indian villages. Asiatic villages were depicted by Marx as self-contained communities, lacking a free market, a state, private property and a competitive spirit (Ghosh:1984). The Indian village was perceived to be static and changeless. Each village was portrayed as an independent, self-sufficient and isolated unit. Most significantly,

¹⁸An identical relationship between caste and Hinduism has been assumed by scholars from Max Weber to Monier-Williams to Louis Dumont. Weber (1958:29), relying on written sources concluded "Before anything else, without caste there is no Hindu." Srinivas, however, sees caste as the "structural basis of Hinduism...(which) occasionally even survives conversion to Christianity and Islam."

this idealized village lacked capitalist class divisions and was caste-based. The reason for the backwardness of Asiatic society as a whole and of Indian villages by extrapolation was attributed to the institution of caste (see Hegel above).

Collectively these European discourses on India have led to a particularly essentialist construction of India, whose otherness was achieved through an equally essentialist definition of Europe or the West as the "self." A complex of uniquely defining features culminated into an exclusive definition: the existence of castes, varieties of Hinduism, an agrarian and "primitive" economy, patterns of kinship and social organization and the absence of distinctive national unity. India was what the West was not: rural, mystical and irrational, intensely religious, egalitarian, oriented toward the collective rather than the individual, traditional, technologically backward and stateless.

It has been critical to expound the pre-anthropological British focus on India at some length to enable a transition to the next phase of the argument. The emergence of anthropology in India has not taken place in an intellectual vacuum. The boundaries of British discourse preceding institutionalization of the discipline in India have shaped anthropological studies about India in definite ways. Why for instance does talk about India even today, inevitably bring to mind labels like "Hindu," "caste," "villages" to mention just a few? At least part of the answer lies in this specific construction of India up to the late 19th century and its accompanying discourse which form the background against which non-Indian scholars initiated anthropology in India. Native Indian anthropologists share this intellectual history in defining Indian anthropology today. But this enterprise itself is fundamentally linked to the history of anthropology in India. I will now turn to that history.

Anthropology in India

Anthropological research in India in the late 19th century came on the heels of the imaginings and discourses described above. Studies of caste and social stratification, kinship, family and social organization, religious rituals, beliefs & institutions, customs and folklore, Indian music, dance and painting, village communities and tribes preoccupied both non-Indian and Indian scholars well into the 20th century.

A review of the Indian anthropological literature reveals a relatively "straightforward" and unproblematic account of the importation of the discipline to India and its subsequent development therein. This history also recognizes and articulates colonial and imperialist

links with anthropology. Surajit Sinha's (1971)¹⁹ historical sketch of anthropology in India leads to a three-part periodization: the British colonial period (1774-1919), the pre-independence period (1920-1949) and the post-independence era (1950-todate).

During the first phase, the colonial roots of Indian anthropology are evident in studies undertaken by British colonial administrators and missionaries. These documentaries of native social and cultural life were undertaken first and foremost to facilitate effective colonial administration. The same exercise also generated detailed ethnographic monographs about aspects of caste, village life and religiosity.²⁰ The foundations of Indian anthropology were laid between 1891 and 1931, when with the launching of the Census of India (under the direction of J.B. Hutton), the empirical study of caste and tribes came into existence. At the same time Indian scholars²¹ conducted researches on Indian tribes producing ethnographic monographs in the tradition of British social anthropology.

The formalization of the discipline in India was secured with the establishment of the first Indian department of anthropology at the University of Calcutta in 1920. The following year saw the publication of "the first full-fledged Indian Journal of Anthropology, *Man in India*" (S.Sinha:1971).²² This period is considered by Indian scholars to be crucial to the development of Indian anthropology. At this time, more Indian anthropologists were still

¹⁹In contrast to Surajit Sinha's dating of the origins of Indian anthropology to 1774 which coincides with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Sarana and Dharni Sinha (1976:210) attribute the birth of Indian anthropology to the late 19th century.

²⁰H.H. Risley's documentation of castes and tribes in Bengal resulted in an 1891 publication. Other members of the Indian Civil Service who also functioned as administrator-anthropologists include Crooke, Thurston, Grierson, Blunt, Mills, Dalton, O'Malley, Russel and Hutton.

²¹In early twentieth century Indian scholars like S.C. Roy & L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer undertook studies of Indian castes and tribes in the tradition of administrator-anthropologists. This focus on tribal populations such as the Oraon, the Munda, the Birhor, among others, continued well into the 1940s. In these studies, the tribal populations were constructed as the "other" by pioneering Indian anthropologists.

²²The first department of Sociology in India was set up in Bombay in 1919. The boundaries between sociology and anthropology in India, both historically and today, are not as rigid as in parts of Europe and North America. Practitioners of both disciplines acknowledge great areas of overlap. The only point of distinction may be that Indian sociologists do not claim the study of tribes and "primitives" as their domain. It is quite common for anthropologists and sociologists in India to cross over disciplinary boundaries, both in their research and teaching. The best known example of this is the Indian scholar, M.N. Srinivas who is appropriated by both disciplines.

trained in Britain, the USA and Germany. The influence of the British anthropological traditions is largely apparent in the works of this period.

In the final phase, nationalistic ("Swarajist") and independence movements inspired debates in Indian anthropology. At this time there was also increasing patronage from the Indian government to teaching and research in anthropology (S.Sinha 1971:3). Although the model of British anthropology prevailed, the input of American scholars in Indian studies increased at this time.²³ This last influence further shifted the anthropological focus from "tribe" to "caste" and "village," from "tribals" to "peasants," and spurred an interest in culture and personality studies and in the interactions of "little communities" with "great traditions" (Singer:1972). Most significantly, following the nationalist call for political independence, Indian anthropologists made a strong case for "indigenizing" the social sciences in India. Indian social scientists were not unique in this regard, as is evident from the following discussion.

Indigenizing the Social Sciences

The call for indigenizing the social sciences has been made quite deliberately and self-consciously in various parts of the non-Western world over the past forty to fifty years. The need to "purge" the social sciences of Eurocentrism and thus register a crucial break from the hegemony of a colonial past is a call made by Third World (largely non-Western) scholars who perceive the rationale of this project to be self-evident. Implicit in the call for "indigenizing" the social sciences is a desire to claim agency so as to redefine the "self," the "other," more importantly the relations between "self and other" as well as an effort to craft a different agenda for the present and the future of the disciplines in question. Evidently none of these projects can be accomplished unproblematically, as my discussion of anthropology in India will clearly illustrate. However, the bid for "indigenization" continues to be made.

²³Efforts to create an anthropology or sociology peculiar to India or South Asia has not occupied only Indian scholars. In 1957 the combined efforts of Louis Dumont and David Pocock "for a sociology of India" led to the establishment of the most prestigious social science Indian journal today, Contributions to Indian Sociology. They argued that Indian sociology should lie at "the confluence of sociology and indology." This has proved to be a highly controversial proposition, generating tremendous debates among both Indian and non-Indian scholars. In recent years Mckim Marriott's (1989, 1990) call for an "Indian ethnosociology", in addition to being highly controversial has led to lively debates about both the need for an "Indian" social science and its content. The fact that both these debates spanning the last 30 years have been made by "non-Indians" has not gone un-noticed by Indian scholars, which gives the latter greater cause to insist on independence from Western intellectual influences.

The challenge now is to find meaningful ways of theorising these numerous, long-standing, sustained efforts to “indigenize” the social sciences.

As is obvious, the call for indigenizing the social sciences is not a new one. In fact some would suggest that it is a rather dated theme, whose heyday has come and gone. Yet, in some ways this latter suggestion is fairly easy to counter. The evidence is provided by the continued scholarly interest (at least on the part of Third World scholars) in scrutinising the relationship between the multiplicity of colonial encounters and their intersections with the social sciences. It would be a challenge to argue against the position that the history of the social sciences (as manifested in the varied disciplines) and its association with colonial and imperial activities is a legitimate field, growing rapidly in inventive directions and showing tremendous intellectual activity. Certainly, I would locate the “indigenization discourse” in this broader realm of social scientific inquiry. It has sometimes also been proposed that despite its “datedness,” (4 to 5 decades) the scholarship of this discourse has failed to produce any meaningful conceptual, epistemological or methodological coherence or consensus that its proponents can adhere to. Rather than view the “lack of consensus” and “incoherence” as markers of intellectual failure, for me these are signs that the field is a dynamic one with a creative process of theorising at work. Being a relative latecomer on the scene, I am encouraged that the issue of “indigenization” has not been settled once and for all by my predecessors and that there is space for those like me to add a voice to this on-going discussion.

This perhaps is my greatest motivation for engaging the indigenization discourse. An additional appeal is the notice by scholars working in this field that, the indigenization discourse is a “liberating discourse” (Alatas, F: 1993). I would argue that a common political statement is discernible in the call for indigenizing the social sciences, despite its varied substantive contemporary expressions. Historically, the calls for “academic independence” and overcoming the “servitude of the mind” closely paralleled the calls for political liberation from colonial rule carried in Third World nationalist movements. In my assessment the discourse of indigenization signals a conceptual, epistemological, methodological and above all a political critique of dominant concepts, categories and dichotomies of investigation used in mainstream social science. Scholars working in this tradition have highlighted the essentialist, homogeneous, reductionist, totalising and monolithic renderings of “other” peoples, places and cultures by social scientists. Such a discourse has in a significant way served to question and problematize the taken-for-grantedness of “mainstream” notions about theorising. The beneficiaries of such a critique

have been more than those scholars who are substantively interested in the issue of “indigenizing” their various social science disciplines. I suggest that the by now commonplace critique of essentialist tendencies in “European”/ “Western” orientalist discourses about “other” peoples and places, launched by feminist, post-colonialist, post-orientalist and deconstructionist theorists, was in a very serious way already anticipated/prefaced/embedded in the discourse about “decolonising” the social sciences. Presumably, the various proponents of indigenization intended at least theoretically to produce/generate a social science that avoids the essentialism, problematic re-ification and stereotypical tendencies inherent in “mainstream” social science. As a stated/intended goal this is indeed laudable, the important question here being the extent to which specific indigenization projects succeed in this regard.

In this paper I use the example of anthropology in India to contextualize my theoretical arguments. The choice of the Indian material reflects my familiarity with the field. The Indian scenario is not particularly problem-ridden or unique in its experience of attempting to “indigenise” anthropology. Rather, I use the data to accomplish these aims:

- (1) To abstract and identify elements that typify indigenization efforts in Indian anthropology.
- (2) To underscore the problematics inherent in indigenization agendas that are rooted in weak conceptual frameworks.
- (3) To offer my own tentative and preliminary conceptualisation of “indigenization.”

A Case for an “Indian” Anthropology

Anthropological research in India over the last three decades have undoubtedly been redefined in dramatic ways. For example the categories of caste and Hinduism have been deconstructed in recent analyses of contemporary Indian social life (Srinivas:1951, Das: 1977). Notwithstanding this redefinition, studies of India today by Indian and non-Indian scholars still reproduce the image of India as an exotic “other,” and through the particular project of indigenizing anthropology, the image of India as an “exotic” self. To be sure, this orientalist image of India has been contested vigorously in recent years, particularly by Indian scholars (Thapan:1988, Ahmad:1972). The same Indian social scientists point to the blatant neglect of “non-Hindu,” “non-tribal,” non-caste,” dimensions of Indian life, or to the dearth of urban and political studies in the anthropological literature. Indian anthropologists have further emphasized India's cultural, socio-economic, religious and political heterogeneity. They have questioned the British presentation of India as a homogeneous, monolithic whole.

However it would be erroneous to suggest that there is anything resembling a unified homogeneous voice in Indian anthropological discourse. The contestations are many and the following pages show where these are located and how they are articulated.

(1) Contemporary Situation in Indian Anthropology²⁴

Local evaluations of Indian anthropology point to an "intellectual crisis" that Indian anthropologists express in various terms (Pathy:1988). These include a perceived "lack of enthusiasm and creativity" (Misra:1972), the inability to generate "new" theory and methods, a stifled growth of the discipline because of limited resources, a lack of coherence and proper direction, irrelevance of anthropological researches to India, the mindless imitation of "western" anthropological models (Sharma:1990) and, contradictorily, the fact that Indian anthropology is "lagging" in comparison to "Western" research.²⁵ Cultural anthropology, like other branches of Anthropology, has been imported from the West. Therefore, it is expected there will be a lag in catching up with the latest trend in the field in the west.

This self-reflexivity leads to such questions as "Is Indian anthropology dead/dying?" (Basu & Biswas:1980) and "And why an Indian Sociology?" (Ray:1990).

There are, however, voices that claim greater achievements for Indian anthropology and argue that the discipline has "come of age" (Atal:1976, Hasnain:1988). However, the predominant view since the late 1960s supports the urgency of re-evaluating and redefining the content and priorities of Indian anthropology.²⁶

Local anthropologists consistently emphasize the need to carve out a suitable niche for the discipline both in an Indian and a global context. This new image for Indian anthropology is articulated largely in terms of a call for a unique and distinct anthropology

²⁴My discussion of Indian anthropology is confined to what is labelled cultural anthropology in North America. Physical anthropology and archaeology are included in the teaching curriculum of Indian anthropology. Linguistics is only just beginning to make inroads in anthropology curriculum in India.

²⁵D. Sen (1974:57) phrases the problem thus:

²⁶In 1963 the publication of *Anthropology on the March* aimed to "...arouse the interest of many, and in particular, of those who are interested in the welfare of tribes and backward communities". In a different but related vein, in 1968, Indian social scientists organised a conference on the subject of "Urgent Research in Social Anthropology." In the introductory address N. Ray stated, "We have assembled here for one brief week to consider and define in theoretical and practical terms, the priorities of research problems in the field of social anthropology in India in the near future, and to suggest and plan, as precisely as possible, practicable ways and means by which scarce resources can be brought to bear on selected problem-areas and geographic regions."

relevant to the particularities of the Indian situation. However, the designing of an Indian anthropology has turned out to be more problematic than envisaged. "Indian-ness" is not a pre-existing agreed upon entity, but instead has to be constructed. In wanting to present their profession as particularly "Indian," Indian anthropologists struggle to chart a unique course for their discipline.

Yet the fact that they must craft their profession against the background of epistemological, methodological and historical commonality with Euro-American anthropology exacerbates their problems. In a sense Indian anthropologists are trapped within their own history as anthropologists. A crucial question that arises then is: How do Indian anthropologists claim "uniqueness" while acknowledging a common history with "western" anthropology?

One way out of this predicament, and one which has been alluded to by some Indian anthropologists (Roy:1937, Khare:1990) is to invoke a new and different beginning for Indian anthropology, which temporally precedes colonialism and the birth of anthropology in the West. This invention of indigenous roots attributes anthropological insight to ancient Indian texts such as the Laws of Manu as well as to teachings of Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and other Indian humanists. Inherent in these sojourns into an Indian past is an attempt to redefine not just the history of Indian anthropology but its very epistemology and methodology. For example, Vidyarthi (1980:20) has this to say about the "Indian-ness" of anthropology:

But it does not mean that social anthropology in India should overlook what may be termed "Indianness" of its science. Perhaps to some extent it has not done so, as it has not progressed under the spell of unthinking imitation...Then, we have had our own sets of social thinkers who have given thought to the social problems from time to time and who have also given direction to them...Also, with the series of thinkers, ancient scriptures like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Smritis*, *Puranas* and *epics* etc. are full of social facts and they need to be studied carefully to develop "Indianness" in the social anthropology of India, which should be specially used in the study of cultural process and civilizational history of India.

However, this search for "Indian-ness" has led to a range of difficulties in practice. Not surprisingly, "Indian-ness" is not a pre-existing agreed upon entity, but instead has to be constructed and negotiated through a maze of diverging perspectives.

(2)"Indian-ness" of Anthropology in India

The category "Indian anthropology"²⁷ is widely used by Indian anthropologists; they further invoke the label "native anthropologist"²⁸ to denote their professional identity. However there is no consensus on the content of either of these categories, whose boundaries are contested. The call for an "Indian anthropology" has been made quite deliberately and self-consciously over the last fifty years. This project of nativizing anthropology combines the following elements: study of India and privileging relevance of anthropological research to Indian problems, which is to be undertaken in a different way by Indians, but not closed to non-Indian scholars; and using Indian rationale thus producing Indian theories.

However, this call for a "national" anthropology does not amount to a total rejection of western anthropological models. In their constructions of anthropology peculiar to India, Indian anthropologists retain selected elements from the anthropology of the West. These include the definition of anthropology as a scientific discipline, the methodology of fieldwork and participant observation, the distinction between pure and applied research, and the definition of India as the subject of anthropological discourse. What is rejected is the specific orientalist presentation of India and the perceived dominance of western ideas in Indian social scientific research. The rejection of such "academic colonialism" is thus expressed in the need for the relevance of anthropological research to the Indian context. Misra (1972:92) expresses a view that is shared by a majority of contemporary Indian scholars:

that Indian social scientists have not been able to establish their own traditions but instead play a role which is subservient to the foreign 'masters.'

²⁷Some Indian theorists have queried the need for an Indian anthropology or sociology (Atal:1976, Ray:1989). While they legitimate theorizing in particular contexts, they argue that anthropology's status as a "universal" science makes it difficult to propose its national variants. The reasons for this are not entirely clear to me. The invocation of national varieties in anthropology is not a new idea. Anthropologists in Great Britain and the U.S.A have claimed national differences in their profession. More recently anthropologists in parts of the Arab world (L. Abu-Lughod:1989), Italy (Saunders:1984) and Japan (Kelly:1991) have similarly claimed regional and nationalist specificities in their practice of anthropology.

²⁸Anthropologists from other Third World countries also use this label, synonymously with the phrase "Third World Anthropologist" (Bennoune:1985). Both these labels are used variously to signify a differential identity from First World anthropologists. Interestingly, anthropologists in the West are now using the label "native anthropologist" as a means of self-identification, particularly in the context of doing fieldwork at "home" (i.e in Europe or North America).

Attention is drawn to "academic colonialism" (K.S.Singh:1984) and the "servitude of the mind of Indian academics" (Misra:1972, Saberwal:1983). The explicit invocation of the term "swaraj" (From Hindi: literally "self-rule") in a discussion of Indian social sciences (Uberoi:1968) conflates the desire for self-rule and political liberation with the need for "decolonizing" anthropology in India (S.Sinha 1971:1).

Given the common historical, epistemological and methodological commonalities between anthropology in India and its Western counterparts, how "native/indigenous" can "Indian" anthropology be? Can one attempt to craft an anthropology peculiar to an "indigenous" Indian context? The rhetoric of indigenization has effectively opened a Pandora's box in Indian anthropological circles.

The attempts to nativize anthropology lead to the contestation of such categories as "India," "Hindu," "Indian-ness," "indigenous" and "Indian anthropology." Consensus on the content of these categories and the nature of Indian "roots" (Jairath:1984) has turned out to be impossible. A number of inherent difficulties impede accomplishment of the project to indigenize anthropology. How is the notion of "Indian-ness" to be translated? What constitutes "Indian-ness? Who defines it? Given the tremendous ethnic, religious, political, ideological and socio-economic diversity that characterizes Indian society, how is the proposed "indigenization of anthropology" from an "Indian" perspective to be accomplished? (Ahmad:1972, Bailey:1959, Thapan:1988). Indian anthropologists are conscious of these problems, as exemplified by Pathy (1988:18):

But it must be acknowledged that there are *multiple versions* of indigenization, including those popularized by the multinational foundations as well as ruling classes. The tragedy of indigenization is its failure to take account of the country's socio-cultural diversity and multiple centers of culture and history. (italics added).

Ironically, the debates reveal that the very heterogeneity of Indian social life that is used to contest and "correct" Western perceptions of India, now itself becomes an obstacle. This problem has to be overcome in order to even contemplate a consensus about conceptualising the categories "Indian" and "indigenous."

The indigenization of anthropology is further expressed as follows: the need to conduct research that is "substantively Indian" and to generate methods and theory that are specifically "Indian" (Thapan:1988). The need for an Indian viewpoint has been reiterated by

many scholars (Roy: 1937, S. Sinha:1971, Y.Singh:1970, Sahay:1979, Madan:1966, Uberoi:1968 & 1974, Vidyarthi:1980). Attempts made by Indian anthropologists to articulate an Indian viewpoint culminate in such rhetorical questions as "Is there an Indian way of thinking?" (Ramanujan: 1989) and "Is there an Indian tradition in social/cultural anthropology?" (S.Sinha:1971).

(3) Applied Anthropology and Development

One more maneuver with which Indian anthropology attempts to create its own space is the emphasis on India constructed in opposition to "Western" nations. India is what the West is not to Indian anthropologists: third world, non-Western, under-developed, with specificities such as extreme poverty, problems of nation-building and rural development, social and economic inequality, tribal groups unevenly integrated and overpopulated. In so defining their object of study Indian anthropologists claim a fundamentally different agenda for their anthropology. They attest that from the earliest days of Indian independence Indian anthropology was set up in direct opposition to western anthropology, itself crystallized as a monolith. Binary oppositions such as "applied" versus "pure" research, "practice" versus "theory" and "abstract theorizing" versus "application of knowledge" have been, and continue to be, invoked to sustain the claimed incompatibilities.

The emphasis in Indian anthropology²⁹ since the independence of India has indeed been on development and on the applied aspects of the discipline. This emphasis reflects the context of a newly independent Third World country where economic development and the restructuring of societal domains become urgent priorities. The explicit engagement of anthropologists in India with the British colonial government, particularly in relation to the welfare of tribes, meant that anthropologists continued to perceive themselves as affiliated with administrators and policy-makers in independent India. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a great deal of enthusiasm and hope for the contributions that anthropological knowledge could make toward a "better India." Anthropology in India then presented itself not only as able to diagnose social problems but also as qualified to provide solutions (Roy Burman:1982, Sachidananda 1980:16). This enthusiasm has waned somewhat since the 1970s. The reality of the tensions between administrators and anthropologists has come forcefully to the fore (Dang:1982, Mathur:1980).

²⁹Anthropologists in newly independent India were joined by sociologists, political scientists and economists similarly in redefining their disciplines vis-a-vis the nationalist project of rebuilding India.

This desire to be seen as an "applied science"³⁰ strongly marks Indian anthropology today. This is not to suggest that Indian anthropologists see themselves as engaging exclusively with the applied components of their discipline. Many insist on a need to engage in anthropological research with the aim of consolidating the theoretical framework of the discipline (Y.Singh:1970, Saberwal:1983), renewing a call for theorizing that cuts through all periods of Indian anthropology. The crucial difference today is that the future of Indian anthropology is perceived by its practitioners to lie in its ability to demonstrate its social relevance to problems within the Indian context (Srivastava:1991, Misra:1991, K.S.Singh:1991, Guha:1989, Mathur:1989, Pathy:1987, Hasnain:1988).³¹ It is high time that the anthropologists also feel this urge and feel themselves concerned with the burning and practical problems, which not only face any particular cross section of society, but the country or its people as a whole. With their specialized knowledge of culture, they should come forward to suggest solutions of the problems like unemployment, population-explosion, crisis of conscience disintegration, lack of national character, and be of real help in successful implementation of some national programmes of our... Prime Minister (Indira Gandhi), and the like.

Despite the noted crises in Indian anthropology, its practitioners do hold a vision of the future for their discipline. Sarana and D. Sinha (1976:216) invoke the phrase "anthropological self-study" to describe Indian anthropology in India. The juxtaposition of anthropology with analysis of the self might seem to be a contradiction in terms. But these two anthropologists theorize self-study by Indians as follows:

One of our greatest drawbacks is the lack of other-culture studies by Indian anthropologists. It is high time that we did develop expertise in this field because research among other cultures has been the forte of

³⁰I am not proposing a dichotomy between "applied" and "theoretical" research. I do not see these two aspects of social scientific research as separate and mutually exclusive. It is clear that one dimension engages the other. In the Indian context this discourse about "applied" and "theoretical" research underscores the view that "research as an end in itself" is not relevant to India. Instead it is socially committed and useful research that is of value, and this kind of research may well be theoretically sound.

³¹The point is made forcefully by Sahay (1976:17):

anthropology...However, what has until now been our weakness will prove to be a source of strength in the very near future. We do not think there is any other country in the world where anthropological self-study has been conducted by native-born anthropologists for almost seven decades. Before long, anthropologists of all countries, particularly the developing countries, will have to start studying their own culture. We cannot anticipate the kinds of problems these native anthropologists will face. This new aspect of anthropology in almost every country will encounter growing pains. The only exception will be India, which has long passed that stage (ibid. 217).

(4) Production of Knowledge and its Utilization.

A significant number of anthropologists in India in recent years have stated their research agenda as one where the production of knowledge is aimed directly at the solution of social problems. However there are real differences in stating what anthropologists should do, what they can do, what they actually do and what is done with the knowledge produced. Does the actual use of knowledge generated conform to the stated intent of anthropologists? The inclination of Indian anthropologists to advocate applied aspects of the discipline have a much to do with the structural frameworks within which anthropology has operated in the past, and continues to do so.

The patronage accorded to anthropological organizations in India from as early as the 1880s by governments have created a dependence upon the state. The bulk of anthropological research is funded by government. Funding from "private" organizations or philanthropists is practically non-existent. Resources are scarce and what little is available provokes intense competition from other social sciences such as economics and political science, not to mention the "real" scientific disciplines. In such a context, it perhaps makes sense that Indian anthropologists feel the need to demonstrate the relevance of their research to administrators and policy-makers. In order to legitimate their cause Indian anthropologists have to present themselves as committed to "planning" and social change. They already suffer from the stereotype of "living in an ivory tower," engaging in useless abstract research. They need to show their "usefulness." The issue of intent versus use remains open, however. Is the anthropological knowledge produced actually used in policy formulation or in any program for societal change?

The one domain of Indian society where Indian anthropologists have always exercised their leadership role is in the administration of tribal affairs.³² Although Indian

³²Verrier Elwin, an English missionary turned anthropologist, served as an advisor on tribal affairs to Jawaharlal Nehru. Upon the advise of the former, Nehru devised a plan for the

anthropologists have in recent years tried to expand their repertoire by carrying their research to such areas as education, housing, population studies, rural planning, structures in the workplace and urban contexts, tribal welfare and the concern with scheduled castes and tribes have remained their expertise. In a sense the administrator-anthropologist's preoccupation with "primitives" and "tribes" and the early engagement of Indian scholars with the same issues continue to haunt Indian anthropologists today. The perceived existence of the "tribes" in India and efforts to properly locate them in Indian society continues to legitimate Indian anthropologists.

Given such "minuscule" accomplishments in the real world, the continuing rhetoric of "relevance of anthropology" to address urgent social problems of *today* would appear to be futile. This futility is underscored when one sees that the same, if not similar rhetoric of "relevance" has been in currency for about four decades, and apparently without many satisfactory results. Why then is the practical orientation of anthropology in India so forcefully emphasized? Why are alternatives not proposed with as much force?

Another way of getting at the same point is to pose other questions: What are the structural constraints under which Indian anthropologists function? What can anthropologists in India do? What options do they have in terms of real bread and butter issues such as getting jobs? What avenues are open to anthropologists in India, apart from research and teaching in academia?³³

Tribal research institutes in various parts of India, the Anthropological Survey of India, and the Indian Council of Social Science Research, in addition to the universities absorb the bulk of graduating anthropologists. A large number of anthropologists, however unwillingly, have to look elsewhere. The various government departments can and do potentially utilize such individuals. It would thus seem that Indian anthropologists can find

appropriate administration of tribes in India. Elwin's contributions have taken on the proportion of a "myth"/"legend" in Indian anthropological circles, but were at the time vehemently opposed by some Indian anthropologists. Amongst them was G. S. Ghurye who argued that the best solution to the tribal "problem" was to assimilate them into mainstream Hindu society. Keeping them in isolated "national parks," he elaborated would lead to accusations that anthropologists were trying to keep the tribes "primitive" to facilitate their discipline's interests.

³³Of course "outside" funding for research in India is available. Furthermore, many Indian anthropologists get out of India altogether. Their training as anthropologists in North America or Europe and/or their desire to establish their careers outside of India have led a growing number of "Indian specialists" in such places.

avenues for making themselves heard and applying their knowledge to practical problems. However, by the admission of Indian anthropologists themselves, a great deal of distrust, mistrust, skepticism and suspicion characterizes their relationship with "the government" (Sachidananda 1980:17-18). Many anthropologists argue that the tensions between themselves and "the government" make it difficult for the potential utilization of anthropological knowledge for solving real problems.

Clearly these directions in contemporary Indian anthropology cannot be explained by structural factors in isolation from others. However, the material and economic considerations, compounded by political factors, profoundly influence how the discipline in India is conceptualised and presented by its practitioners. This is not to argue that this situation is either unique or specific³⁴ to the Indian scene, but to underscore that the reality of limited institutional resources greatly affects the survival of the anthropological profession in India. The last observation may provide a partial explanation for at least the explicitly stated anthropological agenda of Indian anthropologists couched in terms of "applied research" and not "abstract theorizing," while also raising the issue of audiences and intentions in the discourse on indigenization. Who is one engaging with in discussions about indigenization and for what purpose? Several possibilities exist: local government bodies, research institutes, local and international funding agencies or a community of scholars and intellectuals -- local and international. The group/s one is addressing would surely shape the ensuing discourse about indigenizing anthropology and its translation into practice.

Reconceptualising "Indigenization"

While I find great affinity, empathy and attraction with the political position articulated by participants of the indigenization discourse as well as the achievements accruing from this, I have some serious problems with its existing conceptual machinery. The English word "indigenization" was itself not popularly in use until the late 1970s and 1980s in the literature, whereas such descriptions as "decolonializing," "disengaging," "delinking," and "decentring" and "swarajist" (meaning "self-rule" from Hindi) were in currency from a much earlier period.³⁵ By now the term "indigenization" is used by a number of different parties in

³⁴ The varied attempts to indigenize sociology in Taiwan (Chan: 1993, Sun: 1993, Yeh: 1994) provide interesting comparative material vis-a-vis the Indian case.

³⁵ Interestingly, the label sinicization is replaced by the Mandarin phrase *ben-tu-hua* (meaning "indigenization,") and is now used by social scientists in Taiwan to reflect current political relations between Mainland China and Taiwan (Alatas: forthcoming)

varied settings: laypersons, development planners, politicians, government authorities, funding agencies and academics (those working in the social sciences and in other disciplines). Even a cursory examination of the history³⁶ of its usage suggests that varying interpretations of the label exist, some more problematic than others. The term is now used freely in social scientific discussions. Very often it is employed unquestioningly and invoked loosely as a short-hand description that is deemed to be self-explanatory. The widespread but unproblematic usage of the word has meant that the label “indigenization” remains ambiguous, obscure, mystified and inadequately conceptualised even by its advocates in the social sciences. A poor understanding of the concept largely, though not exclusively, contributes to the various epistemological, methodological and political difficulties that continuously surface in attempts to translate the indigenization project into practice. The case of anthropology in India illustrates well some of these challenges. To the end that the label is conceptualised, it is defined as a descriptive and residual category rather than as a theoretical tool. Instead of stating positively what the term signifies, the meaning of “indigenization” is located negatively by pointing out what it is not or should not be, rather than positively by suggesting what it could be.

Thus I start with the notice that it is possible to identify a discourse on “indigenization” in the social sciences. This discourse is both multi-faceted and complex. Given this complexity, its various strands need to be sorted out in order to address this discourse meaningfully. Often these strands are left enmeshed and not adequately teased out analytically. This adds some level of obscurity to the field and evokes a wide range of mixed responses, from rave reviews to outright dismissals. As I see it, the coherence of the indigenization discourse is constituted by at least these two central components: concepts in use and the practice of indigenization. While at the level of practice, participants in the field show tremendous energy and industry, the conceptual components receive far less attention. This has meant that the categories in use in this field remain inadequately conceptualised. I suggest that the empirical translation of an indigenization agenda that is rooted in weak conceptual foundations is thwarted both by theoretical and political difficulties. Such a programme is open to charges of parochialism and chauvinism, and critiques on these grounds even by proponents of indigenization.

³⁶ See Benjamin (1995) for an excellent account of the semantic and etymological transformations of the category “indigeny.”

This attempt to conceptualize “indigenization” reflects my long-term interest in the subject but as a first step, I note that it is imperative to tease out several strands in the indigenization discourse. Most proponents of indigenization either spend little energy conceptualising “indigenization,” or bypass the conceptual dimension altogether in favour of the mechanics of “how to indigenize” a particular discipline.

Despite conceptual weaknesses, or perhaps because of them, the indigenization discourse is one that I think is eminently suited for intellectual engagement. I propose that the call for indigenization is one that cannot be dismissed and must be taken seriously, by scholars working in non-Western and Western settings. The discourse on indigenization is one that I want to engage because it is a liberating and empowering discourse. Specifically, I want to enter the existing discourse through attention to its epistemological and methodological foundations and I seek to offer a meaningful conceptualization of “indigenization.” The latter is necessarily shaped by what I hold to be the essence of social science research, i.e., good theorising -- questioning and critiquing all our concepts and categories in use.

The concept of “indigenization” is clearly open to multiple and complex interpretations, which is one of its strengths. Yet, it is also evident that a weak conceptualisation of the term sometimes leads to a problematic and perhaps unworkable indigenisation project in practice. In closing I offer these following elements in my conceptualisation of indigenization:

(a) To problematize and question the epistemological and methodological status of all social science categories, including of course “indigenous” and “native.”

To illustrate one element in the indigenisation of anthropology of India is an effort to identify “Indian-ness” of the discipline. I suggest that this equation of indigenisation with “Indianization” with a search for the essence of what it means to be “Indian” is both conceptually and politically problematic, and runs the risk of being labelled parochial, chauvanistic and exclusionary. In my attempt to provide a meaningful conceptualisation of “indigenisation” a first necessary step would be to problematize what is meant by categories “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” (sometimes the “native/non-native” dichotomy is used interchangeably with this).. It could be argued that attempts to rewrite Third World history from an “indigenous” perspective are also essentialist and culminate in reproducing the category “indigenous.” Notwithstanding the essentialism of projects such as these, their

discourse must compel social scientists to address the status of the "indigenous"/non-indigenous dichotomy. Their meanings are by no means given and self-evident, although treated in this fashion by many social scientists, including anthropologists. In an ideal world one may even entertain the possibility of retaining the category "indigenous/native" and radically redefining it. It could be presented as a universalizing and not a marginalizing social identity, such that "everyone is a native/indigene of some place." But the present and past political economy of the world we inhabit makes this difficult if not inconceivable. Already terms such as "race," "culture," and "ethnicity" are firmly associated with non-Western, Third World communities. The words "native" and "indigenous" can be added to the list. My efforts to find a way of rendering a critique that could potentially reposition/refocus mainstream social scientific theorising discourse are premised on problematizing the epistemological and political status of the categories "native" and "indigenous."

(b) To embed social theorising in the socio-cultural and political particularities of a region or locale, without rejecting all Western input and contribution.

A version of indigenisation that does not adequately theorise a shared common history (through colonial and imperial encounters) with Western social science is also wanting. In claiming a distinct historical, epistemological, methodological and political space for their discipline, Indian anthropologists cannot start as if from a clean slate. The 18th and 19th century images of the "Indian Subcontinent" that informed early anthropological researches in India constitute their intellectual inheritance. In this sense the latter's claims for "nativity" do not, and cannot, justify a complete break with Western anthropological traditions. The challenge is to find meaningful ways of theorising this link. Also in my view, a sound conceptualisation of "indigenisation" is neither a categorical rejection of all "Western" input in theorising nor does it seek to replace "Eurocentrism" with "nativism" or any other dogmatic position.

Scholars who define indigenisation through attention to an applied dimension are caught in something of a double bind, as is seen in the Indian case through the opposition between applied and pure research. At a philosophical level I acknowledge that an applied dimension is a legitimate mode of envisioning indigenisation. At a practical level, given the structural constraints under which many Third World social scientists operate, there are tensions between the demands of a "pragmatic" nature (satisfying regional/localized interest) and the exigencies of engagement with a wider global community of scholars and

intellectuals. These questions then surface: Is it possible to be simultaneously attentive to “internal” and “external” factors; How does one remain relevant to local/regional particularities and yet engage with larger theoretical and substantive issues?

(c) To articulate and theorise global politics of academia and its complex role in perpetuating the traditional intellectual division of labour: non-Western scholars as gatherers of empirical material, which forms the grounding for theoretical arguments advanced by Western scholars.

Unfortunately, by defining their agenda as “applied,” Indian anthropologists are further marginalized from the concerns of Western anthropology. Furthermore, the explicit particularizing of Indian anthropology leads to a disengagement (perhaps unintentional) of Indian scholars from current issues deemed relevant in Euro-American anthropology. But such distancing is mutual. The lack of attention to “native” scholarly discourses in anthropology in the West is evident. At the same time the need to pay attention to, and conceptualize “indigenous” discourses and accord voices to native informants is fashionably reiterated in current anthropological writings. Are the agendas set by Indian and Western anthropologists so mutually incongruent to warrant this double silence? I submit that in these times of acknowledged crises in anthropology it is crucial to *theorize* the silence of anthropologists both in the “core” and in the “periphery.”

Although many groups defined as “native/other/indigenous” have embraced the label and attempt to redefine it in dramatically different ways, it is equally crucial to ask what are the consequences of being labelled “indigenous” and/or “native.” The example of Indian anthropologists is a case in point. Assuming that “indigenous” discourses can be isolated and packaged, are “native” voices heard and by whom? This series of as yet unanswered questions raises the broader issue of the use of power in the definition of categories, including the “indigenous” category. How are indigenous discourses addressed, if at all, by Western social scientists? What space, if any, is there for “indigenous” (read non-Western) theorising in Western social science and how important is this anyway?

Although the “core-periphery” dichotomy needs to be problematized, realistically speaking this does exist and more importantly structures the global academic and intellectual arena. Associated with this division is a specialisation or division of labour vis-a-vis social scientific research (Pletsch 1981). Without intending to sound naive and simplistic, it is reasonable to state that while the “West” is perceived as the locus of theoretical and

conceptual endeavours, by and large the “non-Western” world is seen to provide the empirical grounding on which these theoretical advances are made. In my specific effort to “indigenise” the social sciences, I would like to see this traditional intellectual specialisation questioned, challenged, subverted and rendered a part of remote history. In a larger context, the issue is an important one of what is to be the nature of relationship between the kind of social science research that is done by “Western” scholars and their “non-Western”³⁷ counterparts. In my view good social theorising need not be defined and identified through its place of origin.

(d) To recognise multiple centres (non-Western and Western) of socio-cultural theorising and hence to eliminate the intellectual specialisation.

Closely related to the status of “indigenous” discourse in mainstream social science is the recognition of multiple centres (Western or non-Western) of theorising and hence a questioning of the monopoly of the existing centre on generating theories. Non-Western sources and scholars have in the past, and can today contribute to meaningful socio-cultural theorising. Granted that historically, sociology, anthropology, history etc., were formalised and institutionalised as disciplines in “Western” settings. Their labelling therefore as “Western” disciplines is politically interesting as this designation suggests more than just their regional origins. I hold the position that non-Western thinkers and schools of thought do have contributions to make towards theorising society - non-Western or Western, both today and in the past. I conclude that a literal reading of “indigenization” leads to a search for “indigenous” roots and the “essence” of Indian-ness, Chinese-ness or African-ness etc., as defining features of an indigenised discipline. To me this is problematic. For me “indigenization” is rather an idiom or a metaphor for attempting to level the playing field in which good social science theorising can be undertaken.

³⁷ Both these categories and identities “Western” and “non-Western” are obviously problematic and complex and need to be theorised.

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