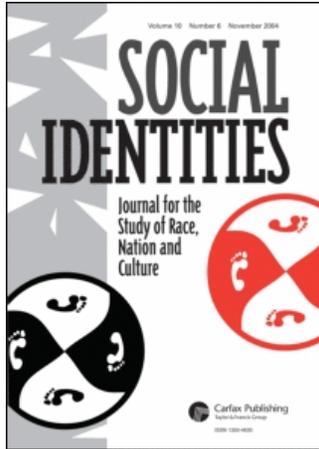


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## **Approaching Cultural Change in the Era of Globalisation: An Interview with T.K. Oommen**

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### **Introduction**

T.K. Oommen has contributed towards the understanding of culture and society through his writings in the last four decades by highlighting the processual aspects of society, analysing its cultural diversity and advocating a pluralist paradigm. While one group of contemporary theorists sees modernity predominantly in the light of functional differentiation (e.g. Jeffrey Alexander, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Niklas Luhmann), and another is focusing its unstable balances between subjectivisation and rationalisation (e.g. Zygmunt Bauman, Alain Touraine), Oommen is reinforcing the historical dimension of our contemporary world emphasising the perspective on multiple modernities in the era of globalisation.

This is an interview about his approach towards the current transformations around the process of globalisation. The interview has been part of an endeavour to present the perspectives of the most engaged sociologists from different parts of the world about culture and society in the era of globalisation (see Kumar and Welz, 2001).

It has a uniqueness because Oommen asks the social analysts to focus on multiple modernities and ethnicisation, and not only globality and globalisation, for a comprehensive understanding of the pattern of relationship between culture, society and globalisation. He insists on an historical approach to the dynamics of modernisation for locating the roots of the project which divided the world between a variety of 'us' and the 'others' for the colonisers. He considers it important to bring in the role of international politics in contextualising the experiences of humanity in the era of Cold War as well as in the contemporary times of a unipolar world. His analysis starts with a discussion about culture and cultural globalisation and moves towards the impact of colonialism and post-Second World War global power blocks upon cultural constructions and projects. Oommen relates himself with the classical sociologists — Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel — with his own unique

prescription about the relevance of classical sociological theories in making sense of the world today. It finally focuses upon some of the sociological processes which are growing with the globality in the modern world system and which are responsible for simultaneous growth of ethnification and cultural globalisation.

He also provides an outline about the tasks for sociology and sociologists in the twenty-first century. His reflections about his journey and approach as a sociologist are revealing about somebody who earned the unique distinction of initiating studies in several sub-fields of sociology in India, including social movement (1972; 1990), sociology of professions (1978), ethnicity and citizenship (1997) as well as contributing towards institutionalising of professional bodies of sociologists in India and the world (Oommen and Mukherji, eds, 1986).

### **Cultural Globalisation**

*In the discourse on globalisation most often a distinctly economic conception of globalisation is supposed. In your work you are emphasising the role of culture and cultural conditions for social processes. Is there such a thing as a cultural globalisation, which leads to a world-culture?*

One has to, first of all, specify, the contents of culture. To begin with, culture is a multilayered phenomenon. And conventionally sociologists have distinguished between material culture and non-material culture, or if you like, the symbolic dimension of culture. The usual argument is that material culture has a high propensity to spread and the non-material or the symbolic dimension of the culture gradually follows. So much so that the notion of the cultural-lag hypothesis did exist in sociology for quite some time.<sup>1</sup> To put it very simply, the argument is that material things like food, dress, etc. would spread quite quickly, but non-material phenomena like democracy or value systems will not be spreading so quickly. But even here one has to make a distinction. For example, we find some items of material culture would spread much more quickly: McDonald or Kentucky Chicken or even Italian pizza, as compared with several other food items. What I am trying to suggest is that, accessibility does not lead to acceptability. Something is accessible, something is available, and that does not mean that it has become acceptable. Now it is also true in regard to non-material dimensions of culture, for example Jazz. And the propensity of some kind of music to spread quite fast is very well known, consider MTV. But the point is in each of these we find local adaptations.

And it is these local adaptations which incorporate the specificity of culture in particular nations, in particular regions etc. And this in turn would give birth to numerous permutations and combinations. Therefore, the important thing to my mind is not to speak about the world culture in singular but to look at the plurality of world cultures and to understand how it has come about, what is the historical process involved.

Could you please explain your historical approach in this regard of the globalisation of culture?

When I am talking about the historical perspective in understanding the globalisation of culture, I am not having in mind a narration of events but something like a conceptual history of cultural globalisation. I think it is useful to begin with colonialism, go on to Cold War and then come to globality or the global age.

Generally speaking historians and sociologists are agreed that the sixteenth century was the beginning of what we now call the global age. In the sense it started with the sixteenth century geographical explorations and colonialism which followed it. Before that people were in contact but usually this contact was confined to the immediate regions or under the auspices of empires between the empire-state rulers and their subjects. It did not go beyond that. Whereas with colonialism the world has come to be recognised in a different way and I would argue that the colonisers tended to perceive the cultures of the colonised people in different ways. One can think in terms of the division between modern culture and the traditional culture, or the culture of the old world and the new world etc. But broadly speaking, I would argue that there were three constructions of culture during colonial period.

### **The Cultural Discourse of Colonialism and the Three 'Others'**

*What were the three constructions of culture during the colonial era?*

Let me elaborate on these colonial constructions because unless we do it in some detail, we will not really understand the issue of modernity. There were two elements which facilitated the colonial construction.

First was the sustained contact between Europe and the rest of the world, e.g. Europe and Americas, Europe and Asia, Europe and Africa. Secondly the geo-cognitive revolution and the rupture of mentalities it brought about. For example in social sciences two important texts made a big difference in my view: the first of this was the book by Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law*, published in 1861, and then Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* in 1877. The great rupture between the modern and the primitive started there and all social scientists, irrespective of their ideological positions, accepted that. Which is to say Durkheim, Weber and Marx, in spite of their ideological predilections, endorsed the rupture between the primitive and the modern.

I think we must get back to the conceptual history which I indicated above. Colonialism produced three others: 'the savage other', 'the black other', and the 'oriental other'. Now it is very interesting to note that each of these 'others' had a primary locus.

*Please explain your idea of the 'savage other', the 'black other' and the 'oriental other'*

The savage other: although the 'savage other' did exist in the European periphery in the form of the Albanian Muslim, or the Scandinavian Lapps, the epicentre where the savage other was located was the Americas, Australia etc.

The savage other was conceptualised in a manner that the required justification was provided for his being civilised. I am talking about the rationale behind the civilising mission launched by the colonial rulers. Now, there are those who argued (e.g. Thomas Jefferson, 1830) that the savage is as intellectually endowed as a white man was. Please remember that the savage was not black. He was red, he could be white also, but I am talking about his intellectual endowment. However, there are some others who argued that the savage just did not have had the necessary intellectual capacity. And the most important thing was he had a society, which was nasty, brutish, and short. It was necessary to change that society. It was necessary to provide him with the necessary equipment to govern him well and therefore the need to civilise.

The black other: the primary centre where the 'black other' was located was certainly the 'Dark Continent': Africa. And the problem of black Africa was that it did not have, according to the European perception, history. They were people without history. And if there were people without history obviously they cannot be in the business of making nations. No history, no nations. Therefore, it was necessary to civilise them also.

There is a very important distinction to be made here. In the New World, the Americas, Australia etc. the Europeans replicated their society. The new world has become 'our world', it was replicative colonialism. However, in the case of Africa, and later I will talk about Asia, colonialism was retreatist in tenor. They went there, ruled for some centuries, and then had to retreat because of the anti-imperialist struggle. However, what is important from our point of view of cultural globalisation is that in the case of the new world a new cultural system, predominantly European, was transplanted. In the case of Africa and Asia, they left some cultural deposits but did not change everything completely.

Now let us take a moment off, to look at the empirical situation. Look at Africa. There are about fifty or so states in Africa and a large number of them have one of the European languages as the dominant or the official language — English, French, Portuguese etc. Therefore, you can talk in terms of an English Africa, a French Africa, and a Portuguese Africa etc. Similarly religion: about fifty per cent of the people in the African continent are today Christians. The vast majority of the rest are Muslims. In addition, of course because of the Islamic influence the Arabic language is there. Therefore, both conquest and colonialism did bring about changes in the cultural context.

The point is, unlike in the New World, what comes to obtain in Africa is a curious mixture. It is a mixture in terms of European culture, Islamic culture, and local culture. In many places, it is a syncretic culture. I am trying to hammer out the point that you cannot really think in terms of world culture as one slice; there are various permutations and combinations.

*How do these things stand in regard of 'the third other' — 'the oriental other'?*

If you pass on to Asia from Africa we get a different picture. This brings me to the third 'other', the oriental other. This is much more complicating, because there is not one, but three orients.

First, the Near Orient: it was roughly equivalent to the Egyptian civilisational region. What is fascinating about this region is that Islam is its dominant religion, which is one of the trio of the Semitic religions. You know Semitic religions are Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Therefore, the people of the Egyptian civilisational region, the people of the Near Orient, are the people of the book. Today the biggest conflict is between Christianity and Islam, which figure in the talk about clash of civilisations (Huntington, 1996). Now, what was the problem with the people of Near Orient according to the West? First of all, it was a civilisation which fostered slavery, which oppressed women, and for these and other reasons, it was necessary, to civilise them.

Then we come to the Middle Orient. I do not think that anybody else has used this term but I am trying to introduce it. The Middle Orient I am referring to is the Indian civilisational region. Unlike the African situation, one could not have said that the oriental people had no civilisation or history. In fact, the Middle Orient has probably the longest history known so far, 5000 years or more. Therefore, one could not have dismissed them as a people without history and therefore having no nations. The rationale for civilising them had to be different. Here the problem was the caste hierarchy and, of course, the oppression of women. This combination was a lethal one. For democracy to be institutionalised it was necessary to civilise them.

However, when it comes to the Far Orient, the region roughly co-terminus with the Chinese civilisation, the story is quite different. I think it is no accident that this region was not colonised. Right from the beginning, the Europeans had the feeling that the people of Far Orient are a civilised people. There are records to suggest that. Therefore, you will find that the Far Orient was physically distant but respectable. In addition, the religions of the region were quite acceptable — Buddhism and Confucianism. They did not have had the liabilities of Islam or Hinduism. Therefore, the West looked at the Far Orient differently.

*Is this analysis of the 'oriental other' in disagreement with the thesis of 'orientalism'?<sup>2</sup>*

Yes. These three 'orients' had three different trajectories and thrusts. I make this point because there is tall talk about orientalism in social science as if the orient was one and the Europeans treated the orient as one. It is wrong. One has to look at the different narratives within the grand narrative of orientalism in order to understand and situate historically and authentically the understanding the Europeans had about the orient. Now, over a period of time the Savage Other has been conceptually liquidated. Today, nobody talks about it in Europe or any other part of the world. The Black Other exists, particularly as the victim of racial discrimination. Moreover, the Black Other is juxtaposed with the white people. Look at the condition of the Afro-Americans in the Americas, particularly in the USA, the most successful democracy in the world, as it is claimed. When it comes to the Oriental Other, the problem is the greatest with the Near Orient, the least with Far Orient, and somewhat ambiguous with the Middle Orient. India, for example, comes for a lot of praise, for a variety of things but also for a lot of cultural bashing.

### **Dynamics of Modernisation: From Cold War to the Unipolar World**

*Which further processes shaped the construction of the culture or cultural identities of the contemporary world?*

One cannot really speak of one culture. When I think about cultural globalisation, I cannot ignore the different historical processes to which different parts of the world have been subjected to in the perception and the treatment by the colonisers.<sup>3</sup> When a new element interacts with that which already existed, it produces something different. If savage culture, the oriental culture and the black culture differed to that extent, there will be different combinations when they interact with modern culture.

We need to get back to the issue of modernity in this context. I think, to understand this we have to continue our journey with the conceptual history of globalisation. As I indicated, the first thing to talk about was colonialism. The second is Cold War.

*How did the Cold War period affect the dynamics of modernisation?*

Just as the civilising mission was the motor of colonialism, the motive of the Cold War was project modernisation. Before the Cold War, one rarely heard about modernity and modernisation. Project modernisation was launched after World War II and one can say, if one is fond of putting a time limit, it went up to the end of the 1980s. During this period, for the first time, two contending modernities arose. This in turn is based on a new perception of world culture. I told you about the three 'others' constructed by colonialism, to repeat: the savage, the black and the oriental other. In that place, Cold War produced a trichotomy of the three worlds: the first, the second and the third world. Each of these is, as you know very well, a product of different revolutions. The First World was produced by the bourgeois revolution; the Second World by a proletarian revolution and the Third World was produced by the anti-colonial revolution.

Now I want to suggest that the Cold War was about modernising the Third World and annexing it into one of the modernities. The people of the First World thought that theirs is a gradual, evolutionary modernity — the natural modernity. The Second World spokespersons reasoned that as their modernity is produced by revolution it is an enlightened modernity. So these two camps were competing between them to annex the Third World into one of these modernities. Now what is interesting for us to note here is that the Second World was rarely viewed as very non-modern. Second World was technologically modern even if it was politically un-modern. Because political modernisation meant multi-party system and all that went with it. The party-state occupied the commanding position, the market was absorbed into it and the civil society was sponsored by it. The differentiation between state, market, and civil society was not on the agenda of the Second World. Therefore, theorists from the First World were somewhat ambiguous and ambivalent about the nature of modernity of the Second World. As I told you, the Second World was technologically very advanced. So one could say that the modernity of the

Second World was a segmental modernity, as contrasted with the modernity of the First World, which was a total modernity. It was modern politically, economically, technologically, and it was certainly modern culturally.

It is against this background that we have to look at the importance of modernity and the contestations about modernity and the situation of the Third World in this contestation. If one goes back little in history, as I have already indicated, colonial Europe was the sole civilising agency during the colonial period, but both the Second World and the First World were contending civilising agencies or modernising agencies, if you like, during the Cold War period. However, in the Third World we come across a very mixed situation: we have had socialist states and capitalist states in the Third World and we had those who opted for what was called the third way, like India, where planned economic development and multi-party democracy co-existed.<sup>4</sup>

*However, what is happening now in the domain of culture with emergence of unipolar world?*

By the late 1980s the Second World has practically disappeared and the Cold War ended. The unipolar world emerged; the world has become one. I am talking about the intellectual and political origins of 'one world'. We have, it is argued, a world society now and therefore a global culture. Suddenly the talk about numerous 'endisms' has appeared: the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), end of ideology (Bell, 1960), end of nature, end of ecology and so on (e.g., Prigogine, 1997). It is in this context, that we have to situate global culture and world society. I am very reluctant to endorse the idea of one world culture or world society, although, one can certainly speak of a shared segment of world culture and world society.

*What is your perspective about it?*

I think we must remind ourselves about multiple modernities at this juncture. There are several reasons for it. To begin with some empirical reasons.

First of all, the tradition-modernity dichotomy postulated many traditions; nobody ever talked about one tradition. Many traditions and one modernity was the refrain. This is empirically unsustainable because if there were multiple traditions the interaction between them and modernity should have produced different permutations and combinations. To ignore this possibility is to reduce traditions to the receiving end, to deny their creative potential.

Second, I have already indicated that there were at least two modernities. This is accepted and acknowledged in the conceptualisations of modernity, the so-called 'natural' modernity of the First World and the 'enlightened' modernity of the Second World.

Third, with the rise of the Asian tigers, particularly Japan becoming the development topper, analysts started acknowledging that while so far it was the European monopoly to be modern and to be developed, the Asian situation threw up a new set of actors. So one has to account for what may be called 'Asian modernity'.

Fourthly, I would like to refer to the 'dependent modernity' of Latin America, which is different from European modernity. This dependent modernity is different in terms of economy and some times polity, but culturally the same as that of Europe. One finds, in the Latin American context, the reproduction of the cultural periphery of Europe.

Similarly, one can speak of an Indian modernity. Colonialism did not disturb Indian culture substantially. After 200 years of colonial regime the percentage of Christians is only 2.3, the percentage of people who can speak English is about five. So one finds that Indian culture remains largely intact excepting in the case of the small English speaking elite.

Finally, one can speak of an African modernity, where there seems to be substantial cultural modernisation, but very little of economic modernisation.

The point I am making is that to speak of a single modernity is to ignore these specificities. To emphasise multiple modernities is to realise and recognise the peculiarity of modernities of different civilisations and different regions, in the world.

### **Classical Sociologists and the Modernities**

*You are recalling multiple modernities to us while the classical sociologists talked about modernity in the singular. Therefore, are the contributions of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel still meaningful? What is the relevance of the classical sociological theories in understanding modernity or modernities?*

I find the founding fathers have emphasised only one or other dimension of modernity and none has exhausted all aspects of modernity. To the extent they have emphasised one or other aspect of modernity, one can legitimately speak of multiple modernities. Let me pursue the arguments with reference to four founding fathers of sociology: Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Simmel. Incidentally, excepting the first the other three are Germans. Durkheim (1984 [1893]) located the source of modernity in structural differentiation, Weber (1991 [1922]) in rationalisation, Marx (1965) in the history making project, and Simmel (1964) in modern life. I need to elaborate each of these a little.

The notion of modernity proposed by Durkheim around structural differentiation visualised social transformation as a movement from simple to complex, from tradition to modernity, an idea well celebrated in sociology. Sociology was in fact a discipline of dichotomies—*Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Toennies, 2001 [1887]), simple to complex, rural to urban and so on. This structural differentiation according to Durkheim's argument had gone through:

- (a) occupational differentiation and division of labour;
- (b) diversification and heterogeneity of society;
- (c) plurality and the gradual evolving of a complex social network and interdependence.

In the end, each society becomes different from the other. Less and less self-sufficient, more and more specialised, and consequently increased interdependence and complementarity between them. This is the process at work.

According to Weber, rationalisation is a process, which is bound up with the disenchantment of the world, the demystification of the world. Understandably, unforeseeable forces no longer interfere in social affairs. Everything is defined less and less in relation to god, and more and more in relation to society. In such a situation, reason and reality are isomorphic. Understandably, the rationalisation process results in an increasing fit between means and ends. Science and technology rather than religion and magic become crucial. Capitalism is the embodiment of rationality and modern capitalism has its essence in modernity. This is Weber's argument.

*Why are you starting your explanation with Durkheim and Weber and not with the eldest classics, Marx?*

A few points may be made clear by taking Weber and Durkheim together. First, structural differentiation between state, market, and civil society was not a feature of socialist societies, the Second World. Therefore, we have some difficulty to invoke the Durkheimian understanding in order to explain the modernity of the Second World. Please note that I am gradually working towards the rationale behind the notion of multiple modernities.

Second, while rationality did increase in modern societies, there is no evidence whatsoever to show that irrationality or a-rationality has completely disappeared. It is not a displacement syndrome, which is at work. Consider the kind of violence which is happening in Bosnia or in the Kashmir valley. We cannot rationally explain them. Third, what is common to both Durkheim and Weber, i.e., to their modernities is that they assumed that traditional collectivism would be displaced with modern individualism. Certainly, the conscious individual is a creator of history who interrogates and/or establishes social relationships. However, this cannot remain an individual project.

*And this leads us to the contribution of Marx?*

Exactly, the voluntarism of individuals should find its expression in collective modernity — it is a mobilisation process, manifesting in the crystallisation of working class movements, eventuating in revolution giving birth to a new society. This is the Marxian project of making history, which is a project of modernisation. Nevertheless, gradually, as we know by now, it was unfolded that modern collectivism has non-class antagonisms too: gender, race, nation, generations or whatever. The confrontations among these categories are usually referred to as post-class and often called new social movements today. Let us also remind ourselves that the Marxian project of modernity gave birth to socialist societies and the party-state became very powerful, so much so it became undemocratic and authoritarian, hence not simply non-modern but anti-modern too. So some theorists have characterised the Second World as the very antithesis of modernity.

Further, non-class collectivism of all varieties for all practical purposes have been delegitimised in the socialist world. They are dismissed as resultants of false consciousness, leading to disastrous consequences. For example, the national movements in multinational socialist states have never been officially

recognised as a people's voice, ultimately leading to the very break up of the Second World. Witness what has happened in the Soviet Union, in Yugoslavia, in Czechoslovakia.

Simmel's understanding of modernity is somewhat different. He looked at modern life styles and to him modernity implies changes in perceptions of space and time and the speed of exchange. According to Simmel, this happens mainly in cities. Money assumes great significance as a symbol of movement, circulation and transactions. Now, with credit cards even the disadvantages of different state currencies are done away with. It is very important and interesting to note that of the four modernities I talked about, Simmel's notion of modernity comes very close to the notion of modernity in the context of globalisation. In other words, that brand of modernity is very close to cultural globalisation, because globality is defined as shrinkage of space and time.

*Beside the insights the classics have offered to explain the modern world, are there not limits of their theories with regard to explaining the multiple modernities, which are defining our contemporary world according to your approach?*

Of course, there are also problems with the four modernities we have talked about. Let me touch upon them briefly. The first of these, namely the idea of structural differentiation initiated by Durkheim, ignored the role of human agency. He thought of the movement from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity as an inherent tendency. Therefore, the human agency was absent from his conceptualisation. In his conceptualisation of the role of rationality, Weber ignored the irrational and emotional dimensions. To that extent reality is segmentalised and some of the human concerns do not get the kind of attention they ought to get. When it comes to the history-making project of Marx, it gave centrality to proletarian collectivism, but ignored other collectivities, e.g. those of gender or races. However, one cannot exhaust and analyse all the problems in class terms. Patriarchy is very important, so is racism. Finally, Simmel has overemphasised the role of the cities. Certainly, cities did play a very important role, but muting the rural-urban differences is a real possibility today. The possibility of assigning a very creative role to the rural community exists if one believes in the proposition 'small is beautiful' or subscribe to the position that the 'Greens' are taking.<sup>5</sup> The rural-urban variations can be done away with, with the help of information technology that we are having now. The overemphasis that Simmel has placed on urban communities will have to be moderated.

#### **Four Sociological Processes of Cultural Interaction and the New World Society**

*This leads us back to our question of the possibility of a global culture in the contemporary era of multiple modernities as characterised by you. Which recent processes of cultural interaction are at work in making or preventing what is called cultural globalisation?*

If you remember, I have talked about the birth of a new world society, but I

am insisting that there is no possibility of a global culture. Apparently, there is a contradiction in this position and I think it is necessary to clarify that. There is a world society in that there is a common communication system. I am coming here very close to Luhmann's position (1997), but not quite. What I am suggesting is that whatever happens in one part of the world can be instantly communicated to the rest of the world, if the mass media is active and authentic. In this sense, it is quite possible to conceptualise a world wherein the communication flows are fairly easy, quick and reliable and therefore one can think in terms of a world society. However, a world culture is a different proposition, because as I see it there are four interrelated processes involved in the creation of what is called the global culture: these I shall call 1) homogenisation, 2) pluralisation, 3) traditionalisation, and 4) hybridisation. I should elaborate each of these in turn.

The fact that world society is a communication system would necessarily imply some possibility of homogenisation. If we are communicating all the time, if we come to know what is happening in different parts of the world, it will certainly leave an impact. May be things like blue jeans or pop music on the one hand, and democracy on the other have become global. So one cannot but think in terms of one layer of culture, of ideas (and ideas are part of culture) being homogenised.

However, underlying this is a process of pluralisation. In India young people, particularly the urban youth, use jeans. But on many occasions jeans are not allowed, not used or not preferred. It is one thing to say that one has adopted an item from the package of global culture; it is another that one is using it on a regular basis. Alternatively, consider Indian democracy, with its numerous parties some of which are anchored to religions, others to caste groups and still others to regions, it is quite a different phenomenon when compared with the democracies in the First World. For example, in the USA it is a two-party system which is in operation. Understandingly, there is a lot of difference in the working of these democracies. Now, why is it that pluralisation of culture is required? It is required precisely because what is being practised should carry convictions with people. It is necessary to adapt to the needs and aspirations of the local/national situation, which brings in the process of pluralisation.

It is also important to remember here, that homogenisation often means hegemonisation, which means assimilation of the minority and weaker groups into the mainstream dominant culture. This hegemonising tendency is often countered by a search for roots, particularly by the weaker and the smaller ones. And this search for roots results in revivalism, leading to traditionalisation. It is not that traditionalisation is an autonomous process in itself. It is a reactive process to the process of homogenisation and hegemonisation that it implies.

Here we must distinguish between two types of traditions: little traditions and great traditions. When one talks about clash of civilisations, obviously one is talking about great traditions — the clash between the Western or the Islamic or the Hindu traditions. However, within each of these traditions, there are little traditions. Within the Christian world, certainly we know the contesta-

tions between the Catholic, the Protestant and the Orthodox traditions. Within the Hindu fold, we know the contestations between the Buddhist, the Jain and the Sikh traditions. Even if one excludes these latter religions from the Hindu fold, the caste hierarchy creates problems. Therefore, there are clashes between great traditions and little traditions within great traditions. Therefore, the tendency to homogenise great traditions will be countered by traditionalisation by little traditions. Nevertheless, it may not be always a simple going back to tradition or revivalism.

In the process of adaptation we often try to mutate. We retain some of the traditional aspects. We also take some of the modern aspects and then try to mutate the two together, and this is a process usually referred to as hybridisation. Sometime this could retain the form but change the content. Burgers are now available with McDonald's in India. But it is certainly not the one which is prepared with beef or pork. On the other hand, think of MTV. The local adaptation is very fascinating to see.

The point is the world society accommodates different possibilities, to repeat: homogenisation, pluralisation, traditionalisation, and hybridisation. All exist side by side. There is an enormous amount of naivety in talking about world culture as monoculture.

*What do you mean by cultural globalisation if you rule out the possibility of a global culture due to the four sociological processes — homogenisation, pluralisation, traditionalisation, and hybridisation?*

By cultural globalisation, we mean spread of cultural elements. It has been happening all along particularly since colonialism. Look at the colonial period, which brought railways all over the world. Through telephones, and telegraphs, certainly it is possible to think in terms of communicating instantly. If one travels by ship, that is one thing, if one goes by air it is quite different. So this compression of time and space has really been made possible through technology. What I am trying to suggest is that the Western agenda of civilising mission during the colonial period was possible precisely because of superior technology. During the Cold War era the tremendous improvements that have occurred in transport and communication have further shrunk space and time. In understanding the role of technology we must therefore view it historically.

There was a time when we listened to radio, heard only the voice of the person. We recognised the persons in terms of their voices. Now we look at the TV, the visuals are important and the TV personality is a person who is recognised everywhere. The meaning of listening and the meaning of listening and watching together are different. In the context of the internet, communication is instant, it is quick. In addition, in the not too distant future we may have a possibility of telephoning and seeing the person while talking or doing internet communication with somebody and seeing his or her visuals.

*So we have to take into account information technology as a main force when thinking about future cultural change?*

I would like to add a caution here. While the impact of communication increases, the need for physical face-to-face interaction may diminish. This reminds one of the role that primary groups play in human civilisation. Several theorists have argued that if there are no primary groups in a civilisation it cannot be sustained for too long. If one takes that view, then one will find that the glamour of modern technology is greatly reduced. What I am trying to argue is that while there are great advantages of modern technology, particularly the internet technology, we should not lose sight of its latent function, if I may recall a term introduced by Merton (1957). I have one more point to add here: if one looks at the Human Development Report 1999, one will find that the countries are compared in terms of the availability and accessibility of modern technology, the great instrument of globalisation. On the one hand there is North America, i.e. USA and Canada, and on the other hand, Africa and Asia. The disparity in the spread of modern technology between them is great, in fact, it is upsetting. In addition, the cost that is involved in acquiring, it is such that the disparity will persist. For a computer an average citizen of Bangladesh will have to spend 8 months of his salary whereas the US citizen has to spend only 14 days wages. The point is, on the one hand, advancement is happening but on the other hand, it is also distancing human beings. In any society, including the global society, where disparity is so deep, the possibility of a common humanity is diminished.

### **Ethnicity and Nationality in a Globalising World**

*In your recent book (1997) you discussed two other important factors in the processes of making and unmaking cultural identities in the contemporary world — ethnicity and nationality. What is their significance in today's globalising world?*

My views about ethnies and ethnicities are quite different from the prevailing ones and I do not see anybody, as of now, endorsing it. Let me restate that.

Ethnicity, as a concept, is very widely used and yet remains one of the most ambiguous notions. The ambiguity can be located in two sources, as I see it. First, the tendency to encapsulate race into ethnicity, and second, the tendency to conflate nationality and ethnicity. Race is a biological category and ethnies is a cultural category. To encapsulate race into ethnicity is to conceal the far more debilitating and stigmatising racism as compared with ethnicism, that is discrimination based on culture. Ethnies is a cultural group, ethnicity is a positive identity marker of those who are identified with the ethnies, and ethnicism is the negative dimension in that it is invoked to discriminate people. Which is to say, ethnicity and ethnicism are respectively positive and negative aspects of ethnies. If ethnies is a cultural community, so is nation. Then how do you distinguish between the two, what is the *differentia specifica* between ethnies and nation? A nation is a common homeland of a people and this homeland could be ancestral or adopted (see Oommen, 1999).

Many migrants from Western Europe went to North America and adopted

the new territory as their homeland. In order to sustain a people as a community they should communicate with each other, they should have a language. Again, it could be ancestral or adopted. Some of the colonising people could continue with their language: the Portuguese people in Brazil, the Spanish people in the rest of Latin America. Nevertheless, the Germans did not persist with their mother tongue. I do not know of any German settlement outside Europe. The English and the French, too, persisted with their respective languages. Therefore, the language of a nation could be either ancestral or adopted. Thus, we can speak of an intense and high nationness, where both the homeland and the language are ancestral. On the other end of the continuum, we can think in terms of a nation just emerging because it has adopted a homeland and it has just started cultivating a language. One can situate nationness on a continuum, not on a fixed point, as a static element but as a dynamic process. If one accepts this possibility, nationness can increase or decrease. A community with a high level of nationness may lose it over a period of time. Another community with a low level of nationness can intensify it.

The point to be emphasised therefore is that a nation is a community in communication in its homeland; a nation is a felt community, not a built community. Everybody talks about nation building, but actually, we do not have to build a nation. Most scholars most of the time, when they speak of nation building are actually talking about state building, that is, they slip into conflation between state and nation. Nation is a community, where two things coexist, a common homeland, i.e. territory, and a culture of which the most important element is language. In contrast an *ethnie* is a cultural community, but pursues its ancestral life style, outside its homeland, and therefore I consider ethnicity as a product of dissociation between territory and culture. Nationalism is the positive collective sentiment that the people of a nation acquire by identifying with the nation. National identity is a product of this identification. Just as one can distinguish between ethnicity and ethnicism one can also differentiate between nationalism, which is a positive identification with one's nation, and chauvinism, which is a negative identification with it. We have had classical examples of national chauvinism in West Europe in the crystallisation of Fascism and Nazism. Thus ethnicism and chauvinism are the negative, and ethnicity and nationalism are the positive dimensions of *ethnie* and nation respectively.

*In recent years, you have written extensively about ethnicity and ethnification while the others have been focussing upon globality and globalisation. Where do you locate ethnification in the context of our theme?*

What is crucial to distinguish between a nation and an *ethnie* is territory. This is very important in the context of the theme we are talking about, namely cultural globalisation. We can think in terms of nationalisation and ethnification as two polar points. I talked about high nationness and low nationness. So nationalisation is a process through which a people come to identify with the territory as its homeland and adopt the local language as

its mother tongue. When the old nationals in that territory accept the neo-nationals as co-nationals, the process of nationalisation is complete. In contrast, ethnification results from the attenuation, the weakening, of the link between territory and culture.

*Which types of ethnification are there?*

There are several. I shall mention some of these. First, a nation could be ethnified even when the people of the nation live in their ancestral territory; there are at least three variants of this:

- (a) when a people is subjected to *culturocide*, i.e. systematic liquidation of their culture, as happened to the indigenous people in the New World — the Americas, Australia, and to a certain extent in Latin America. The original settlers, some social scientists refer to them as First Nations, are treated as strangers in their own homeland;
- (b) the tendency to treat a people as non-nationals or outsiders, even when they live in their ancestral homeland as in the case of Bosnian Muslims. There are Croatians, Serbs and Bosnians. If Muslim is a designation to be used in the case of Bosnians, others should be called Catholics and Orthodox, based on their religious identity, but by designating Bosnians as Muslims, they are deterritorialised, denationalised and thereby ethnified;
- (c) those whose ancestral homeland is vivisected between states. There are numerous examples in this category. Poland was once ethnified by being divided between different states. The classic example now is the Kurds. They are over 25 million people, divided between 5 different states and they do not have a national state. Or consider the Basque people who are either French or Spanish. There is no Basque state. The Nagas are divided between India and Burma (Mynamar).

The second variety of ethnification occurs when citizenship entitlements are not fully conceded to a people even after their adopting the territory into which they migrated as their homeland. Immigrants adopt the land to which they migrate as their homeland but even after doing that they are not really accepted as insiders i.e. nationals. The cases of indentured Indian or Chinese labourers settled in many foreign countries fit this description. The classic case, which comes to one's mind, now is the situation of Fiji Indians.

Thirdly, the tendency on the part of a settler collectivity to continue to identify with their original homeland produces what may be called sojourner ethnicity leading to ethnification. The Afro-Americans, Asian-Australians etc. are examples of this type. The classic case of course is that of the Jews. Even after spending hundreds of years outside Israel the Zionist movement could pull them home.

Fourthly, ethnification also occurs when a state or a cultural mainstream tries to assimilate the weaker and minority cultural groups, which leads to the eclipse of identity of that people. Thus, what is 'integration' from the perspective of the state and the mainstream cultural collectivity, is ethnification from

the perspective of the weak and minority cultural groups because their identity is endangered.

Fifthly, if those who migrate to prosperous foreign countries are denied citizenship even when they become entitled to it, they remain ethnified. The case of guest workers in West Europe is an example: 33 per cent of residents in Switzerland are guest workers but they do not have citizenship rights. There was a time when Germany has actually enticed millions of guest workers but when the demand was over, they were treated differently. That is another case of ethnification.

Finally, even when immigrants are granted citizenship, they may return home. There was a time when Italy was a sending country, but when Italy became prosperous, Italians went back, not necessarily because they were discriminated in Britain, France or in Germany. They felt that, it is much better to be at 'home'. When one remains outside one's homeland one experiences ethnification.

*What is the relevance of ethnification with reference to cultural globalisation?*

In a fast globalising world, movement and co-mingling of racial and cultural groups are perennial possibilities. Today globalisation largely means the movement of capital. We cannot hold back the movement of human beings too long; it is bound to come into being. Therefore, the mode of conceptualising ethnicity I have attempted will help us to understand the process of cultural globalisation. The processes of cultural pluralisation, hybridisation and even traditionalisation become relevant because many of the immigrant communities create their own cultural enclaves. The argument of territory being eclipsed is correct to a certain extent, when we consider the process of ethnification, as ethnies are vehicles or carriers of their culture. However, I do not think that the importance of territory will disappear, so long as nations exist. I am not talking about nation-states, but nations. If the nation is to exist the union between territory and culture is a pre-requisite. Therefore, within the world society there will be territorially anchored nations. Some of them will have their own states, while others will be in multi-national states. Most of them will have ethnies within them; some of whom will be citizens and others non-citizens. Globalisation will thus produce a culturally complex situation, which results in the co-existence of national citizens, ethnic citizens and ethnic non-citizens.

*Earlier you said your view on ethnicity is quite different to the view others are holding. What is the difference?*

Most theorists view ethnicity as an attributional concept i.e. defining an ethnic group in terms of a set of characteristics. I am not doing that. I am looking at ethnicity as a process.

Ethnie is a group, which has exactly the same cultural characteristics as the nation group. However, what distinguishes the two is a process: the deterritorialised nation is an ethnie, an ethnie that has found its own homeland is

a nation. That is, I do not bring the category of ethnic communities as such into the system of stratification.

Again, one cannot really explain the kind of discrimination to which the black bourgeoisie in the US is subjected to by invoking ethnicity. Even a rich black man will find it very difficult to find a house in a predominantly or exclusively white neighbourhood. He may have purchasing power, but does not have racial acceptability and therefore cannot purchase a house. Therefore, I do not think that an explanation in terms of ethnification is suitable in the case of racial groups. The ethnic category will have to be dealt with differently because it is a cultural category. Nobody can be in an ethnic group and a national group in the same locality. If one is a national individual in Germany, she will have to be an ethnic individual in France or Turkey. One's characteristics remain the same: white, catholic or protestant, German speaking. However, the fact that one has shifted to a different cultural context makes the difference. The individual's attributes have not changed, only the property of the situation has. In the context of globalisation, which implies constant re-location of individuals and communities in differing cultural regions, this way of conceptualising ethnicity, to my mind, will be more meaningful.

### **Consequences for Sociology and Sociologists**

*Now we talked about the ongoing processes and recent changes in our world of the twenty-first century. Are there any specific consequences in regard to our work as sociologists today? What are the tasks of sociology and sociologists?*

As I see it, sociology and sociologists have two major tasks: one, the scientific task, the other, an ideological task.

Following one of the leading Indian sociologists, Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1979), I would say, as scientists sociologists should ask and answer four questions relating to the phenomenon studied. What are these questions? First, what is it? Second, how is it? Third, why is it? And fourth, what will it be?

The answer to the first two questions is expected to provide a description, including the historicity, of the phenomenon. For example, what is cultural globalisation? How did it come about, what is its history? In a way, I was trying to do it when I was talking about the conceptual history of globalisation.

The third question — why is it? — is an attempt to provide an explanation of the phenomenon. How do we explain the phenomenon of cultural globalisation? I started by talking about sixteenth century geographical explorations followed by colonialism, followed by the Cold War. All this meant, directly and indirectly, movement of people from one part of the world to another. Now we have reached a situation, through modern technology, particularly the internet, that we can also exchange ideas instantly. Thus, sociologists can explain cultural globalisation by identifying the importance of some factors as against some other factors.

Finally, the fourth question — what will it be? — is predictive in its orientation. By answering this question, sociologists should be in a position to indicate the future trends and tendencies of cultural globalisation.

*What is the other task, which you called the ideological task?*

Answering the first four questions I have already mentioned is the scientific task of sociologists, which is necessary, but not sufficient. It is here that a fifth question will arise, and this question is: what it ought to be? It is prescriptive and normative and hence I consider it ideological in orientation.

The task in the present context should have three objects. First, oppose cultural homogenisation. The world has witnessed political and economic hegemonisation and consequently cultural subordination during the colonial period and the Cold War era. However, given increasing salience of equality, this is no more admissible and hence the need for opposing cultural, economic and political hegemony.

Second, to resist the temptation of 'cultural relativism'. Cultural relativism is the tendency to believe that one's culture is superior to that of other cultures and therefore it should be maintained in its pristine purity. Confronted by cultural hegemonisation the smaller and weaker cultures may fall into this trap. Therefore, it is necessary to reject the idea of cultural relativism. No culture is pure and no culture can really be maintained in its pristine purity.

If cultural hegemonisation is to be resisted, and if cultural relativism is to be rejected, what is the mechanism of coping with the situation? This is the third ideological task that I am assigning to sociologists: that is, nurturing cultural pluralism, by which I mean dignified coexistence of different cultural groups in the same polity. Cultural diversity or heterogeneity is a social fact and cultural pluralism is an attitude, is a value orientation, to this fact. Note, my position is to be different is not to be inferior or superior. It is this recognition that would prompt sociologists to be advocates of cultural pluralism.

Therefore, sociology and sociologists have two divergent tasks with regard to cultural globalisation. One is the scientific task of understanding the phenomenon called cultural globalisation in all its ramifications. The other is an ideological task so that the tyranny of cultural hegemonisation and the project of cultural homogenisation are resisted with all their intellectual might, so that what we have is a real humanism.

### **Intellectual Biography**

*Bringing in your personal position as a sociologist gives us the chance following Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant's invitation to pursue a 'reflexive' sociology (1992), i.e. applying to your personal intellectual journey what you are suggesting for sociologists in general when approaching cultural struggles and cultural change: relating cultural constructions and identities to their social roots and historical origins. Therefore, when and how did you personally become interested in sociology?*

Let me begin by confessing that I have nothing much to report about my intellectual biography. Perhaps it is useful to tell you the circumstances in which my development as a sociologist occurred. First of all a small anecdote. I became a student of sociology by a sheer accident. Literally, I was flooded into sociology. I was going for an interview to Bombay, the biggest industrial

town in India, from my home state of Kerala. The interview was at the Tata Institute for Social Science for a diploma in social service administration. But the train could not go beyond Poona (Pune), a town about 200 km before Bombay (Mumbai), because of a terrible flood. I got off, went to the Poona University, and luckily found the possibility of admission in sociology M.A. course, and I started to study sociology.

*What has been your intellectual orientation as a sociologist?*

After this anecdote, let me tell you my intellectual trajectory. Frankly, I cannot think of an Indian sociologist, who developed a fully-fledged theory, like Weber or Parsons, or founded a school of thought. Nevertheless, most Indian sociologists were seized of the empirical realities of their society, the Indian society, which is incidentally too vast and complex, and even staggering. The first generation of scientific sociologists of India were involved in analysing the particularities of Indian social institutions: the caste system and religion, family and kinship in settings such as village and town.

When I started my career in the 1960s, there were a large number of themes left untouched. Thus, when I published my Ph.D. thesis, entitled *Charisma, Stability, and Change: An Analysis of Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement in India* in 1972, it was the first book by an Indian sociologist on social movements. That will give you some idea that in terms of themes Indian sociologists were not looking very much ahead of conventional topics. Similarly, my work on *Doctors and Nurses: A Study in Occupational Role Structures*, published in 1978, was the first book-length study of modern occupation or profession in India. It is evident from this, that I can stake some claim to have initiated what may be called the 'new themes' in Indian sociology (Oommen and Mukherji, 1986).

*How would you situate your approach among the orientations in Indian sociology?*

Indeed, the second aspect of my intellectual biography should be situated in the wider context of academic and ideological climate in India. Broadly speaking three orientations inform the work of Indian sociologists so far. The first set I shall call the 'traditionists', those who look at India's past with great pride and wanting to perpetuate it and if possible purify it of its wrong accretions — Islam and to a certain extent of the Western influences. Although these were only a small number, they were a very distinct category. In a way, they are cultural relativists, a notion that I have invoked a moment ago. Cultural revivalism is their goal.

The second set may be called nationalists, who looked upon the anti-colonial struggle as the great Indian renaissance, which pursued not only political but also cultural goals. In this rendition, an Indian version of modernity, which takes into account India's traditional specificity, should be accommodated. Their avowed goal is to use sociology for 'nation building'.

The third orientation may be designated as cosmopolitanism. These who follow this orientation believe that Indian society is the same as other societies

in terms of its basic structural features, although there are some cultural specificities. For them sociology is a nomothetic science and its theories, concepts and methodologies should be applied to India to develop a general theory of society.

I find it difficult to accept any of these orientations in their totality. While recognising the cosmopolitan elements of sociology as a discipline, one cannot ignore the historicity and specificity of the society one investigates. I am inclined to designate my orientation as pluralist paradigm.

*What are the essential elements of 'pluralist paradigm', which has been the basis of your contributions as a sociologist for the last three decades?*

First, it rejects the conventional dichotomisation prevalent in Western sociology anchored to epistemological dualism and the displacement syndrome implicated in it. Focusing on the processual dimension, the pluralist paradigm emphasises accretion and reconciliation.

Second, it highlights simultaneity as an important feature of social processes in the South Asian civilisational region as against sequentiality of social processes in the West.

Third, it does not advocate unqualified commitment to nationalism and/or statism but endorses national values and state policy only if they are congruent with basic humanist values and interests.

Fourth, it does not reject any cultural item be it religion or technology, because of the locus of geographical origin but opts for creative dialogue and cautious synthesis of 'the alien' and 'the indigenous'. As it is, it advocates the philosophy of selective retention and selective rejection of traditional and modern values depending upon whether they are assets or liabilities from the perspective of particular societies.

Fifth, it advocates disciplined eclecticism in theoretical orientation and contextualisation as the cardinal principle of sociological method.

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## Notes

1. The theory of cultural lag was proposed by Ogburn (1964).
2. The thesis of 'orientalism' has been propounded by Edward Said in the 1980s in *Orientalism* (1978).
3. See Irving Louis Horowitz' (1966) *Three Worlds of Development* for more discussion about it.
4. The Indian trajectory of modernisation has been discussed in detail by a number of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. See, for example, Rudolph and Rudolph (1967); Singer (1972), and Singh (1974).
5. The Green movement started in the late 1970s in Germany and became basis for a political party which has been a coalition partner of the government in Germany since 1998. It emphasises the need to be sensitive about ecological imperatives in modern life-style. It has been in the frontline for protection of environment and promotion of eco-friendly orientation.

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