

# A Sociological Interpretation of the Significance of the Little and the Great Traditions in India in the Context of Faith in Sai Baba

## Abstract

Rural sociology is a special branch of Sociology which confines itself to the study of the rural society which is characterized by a typical culture replete with simplicity of living, strong and unshakable faith in religion and traditions, ignorance of the people, agrarian social system, parochialization etc. Rural Sociology has several conspicuous concepts and theories to serve the scholars with in order to lead them to research. Robert Redfield is a popular name in Rural Sociology. His theory of little and great traditions is a landmark. Much has been written about it, much is being written and much is left to be written in future about it. What he says through this concept is that in the villages the great and the little traditions go side-by-side. The great traditions are the ones that have their roots in the ancient Hindu scriptures, such as, Vedas, vedangs, puranas, epics, smritis etc., while the little traditions are those that are generated by the ignorant village folk out of ignorance.

Both the great and the little traditions lead the rural folk to develop faith in religion, and thus, to enjoy a particular mode of living having the element of Durkheim's 'sacred', and to keep away from 'profane' mentioned in his theory of religion.

Based on both the primary and the secondary data, the paper is an empirical study of Shirdi in Maharashtra, now famous for the Sai Baba Temple. Despite much controversy, Sai Baba is worshipped in every house in Shirdi. Robert Redfield's theory of little and great traditions is quite applicable to it.

Based on Robert Redfield's theory of little and great traditions, the paper highlights the generation of the faith in Sai Baba in the selected village. The investigator's chief concern is to explore the causes and the effects of this generation of this little tradition which seems to have reached every corner of India, and which seems to have been imbibed by almost everyone irrespective of caste, class, creed, religion etc.

**Keywords:** Little Traditions, Great Traditions, Generation of Traditions, Prochialization, Universalization, Worship of Local Deity.

### Introduction

Society, religion, social change, social control and sanskritization are internally linked with one another. A society successfully and ethically exists only when religion governs it, and religion always leads to morality, social change and sanskritization. Religion ideally serves several functions. It gives meaning and purpose to life, reinforces social unity and stability, serves as an agent of social control, promotes psychological and physical well-being, motivates people to work for positive social change through sanskritization, promotes traditional views about gender roles, and engender intolerance towards people whose religious faith differs from one's own. The relationship between religion and social change is not fixed or cast in stone. It can vary depending on the nature of particular religions, the culture in which they are located, and the type of social structures at any particular time and place. Giddens's idea of reflexivity can be instructive. It suggests that while religion is a social construct, it also becomes a structure and influences society in many, often unanticipated ways. Religion essentially brings about social change in society and it provides the people of different sections of the society a platform to imbibe what sacred is and to give up what profane is.

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India is a country where more than two-thirds of its population lives in villages and where the people are governed by their religious faith in the local deities most which, probably do not find any place in any of the epics that form the basis of the Indian Hindu social system.

#### **The Little and the Great Traditions**

The origin of little and great traditions is from Robert Redfield, who conducted his studies in Mexican communities. It was Redfield who talked about little community. For him little community was a village that had smaller size, self-sufficient and relatively isolated. Redfield did not mention anything about traditions or great traditions. Singer and Marriott who were influenced by studies made by Redfield conducted their intensive study in Indian villages. They elaborated the original model of Redfield in the light of data generated from India villages. Yogendra Singh has commented upon the construction of little and great traditions in Indian villages by these two anthropologists. The Indian social structure, in a broader way, is stratified into two divisions: (1) the folks or the unlettered peasantry, and (2) the elites.

The folks and peasantry follow the little tradition, i.e., the village tradition. The second division of elites follows the great tradition. The great tradition consists of the traditions contained in epics, Puranas, Brahmanas and other classical Sanskrit works. The roles and statuses of Sita and Draupadi constitute the parts of great tradition. The little tradition, on the other hand, is local tradition of great tradition tailored according to the regional and village conditions. The great tradition is found clearly in twice-born castes, specially, priests, and ritual leaders of one kind or other. Some of these corporate groups follow the traits of civilisation and the great tradition. The carriers of little tradition include folk artists, medicine men, tellers of riddles, proverbs and stories, poets and dancers, etc. Little and great traditions help to analyse social change in rural India. The nature of this change is basically cultural. There is a constant interaction between great tradition and little tradition. The interaction between the two traditions brings about change in rural society.

In other words, the little tradition witnesses changes due to its own internal growth. Second, the little tradition also undergoes change due to its contact with great tradition and other parts of the wider civilisation. "The direction of this change presumably is from folk or peasant to urban cultural structure and social organisation." The great tradition, i.e., the epic tradition also witnesses universalised pattern of culture resulting from its interaction with the village or little tradition. Redfield's later study of the civilizations of China and India, which he visited, suggested his concept of civilizations as cultural systems of interdependent, coexisting "great" and "little" traditions. According to Redfield, the little and the great traditions are interdependent. They have long affected each other and continue to do so. It was his idea that the great traditions are cultivated in schools or reputed temples of popular gods and goddesses that find room in Sanskrit literature while the little traditions work themselves out and keep

themselves going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities.

#### **Overview of Literature**

Bowie's work "The Anthropology of Religion- An Introduction" (2000) aimed to introduce the central theoretical ideas in the anthropology of religion and to illustrate them with specific case studies. Links were also made between the works of nineteenth and twentieth century scholars.

In the "The Scheduled Tribes" (2001) series, Singh presented a brief descriptive anthropological profile of all communities of India; dealt with the impact of change and the development processes on these communities; and highlighted the linkages that bring them together. This study covered the whole country bringing within its ambit parts that had either not been ethnographically surveyed earlier, or the survey had been done in a perfunctory manner.

Dawar's book "Cultural Identity of Tribes of North-East India (Movement for Cultural Identity among the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh)" (2003) is the revised version of the 83 Project entitled "Movements for Cultural Identity among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh since 1950's: A Case study of the Adis". In this book the author has dealt with the discourse of integration of NEFA with the Indian nationalist 'mainstream'. Another aspect of the movement for cultural identity among the Adis has been the movement for religious identity. The Adis intellectuals in their writing have constructed the belief system, religious ethics and philosophy of this religion based on tribal traditions, which has been called by them "Donyi Poloism".

Xaxa, Virginuis (2004) in the article "Women and Gender in the Study of Tribes in India" affirmed that the value system governing larger Indian society has been in the process of change. With this there has been a shift in the image of tribal women who are thus invariably portrayed as enjoying a better social status than their counterparts in the larger Indian society. The unprecedented change in respect of culture, modes of making a living and social differentiation changed the women's status and gender relations in the tribal society.

Channa in "The Descent of the Pandavas" (2005) has shown how a small mountain community is using a possession ritual to assert their identity, not only within the local society but also in the context of the national arena.

In the article "Gender and the Khasi Family Structure" (2005), the inheritance rules, reproductive ideology and gender roles, structural tension, and social change among the matrilineal Khasis of Meghalaya has been discussed by Tiplut Nongbri. In the matrilineal society which favor women regarding the right to inherit the property where sons are considered only in rare cases (when there is no daughter in the family), the ideas and norms regarding kinship and gender roles are not so in fact. The youngest 84 daughter's position in the religious domain is similar to her position in the economic domain. Women are regarded as trustee's of family rites and traditions as well. The Khasi say 'the woman holds the religion'. But they have to seek assistance

of their male matrilien to actually perform the rituals. Priesthood is a male vocation among the Khasi.

*Nanda, A. R. (2011).* After 1910, Sai Baba's fame began to spread in Mumbai numerous people started visiting him, because they regarded him as a saint with the power of performing miracles or even as an avatar.

Dr. Somenath Bhattacharjee et al (2016). Society can be looked upon as a process, a series of interaction between human being. The whole human society and each group in the society can be viewed as the manifestation of the social processes between the interacting members. These interactions ultimately form the social structure and the norms, values and customs related with these social relationships determines the cultural aspects of human being. In Indian context, the term culture has been derived from the Sanskrit word Sanskriti. The term civilization is regarded as a changed or developed stage of culture. This was marked by the organisation of complexities, heterogeneities and certainties. In the context of Indian civilization there are two distinctive but interring related cultural traditions namely great tradition and little tradition. The great traditional parts primarily include the Sanskrit Vedic Hindu literature and the little tradition is prevailed in the life of village communities including the tribal societies.

A dictionary of Urdu, classical Hindi, and English (2017) of evidence and no definitive information exists to prove it. Sai Baba's real name remains unknown. The name 'Sai' was given to him by Mhalsapati when he arrived at Shirdi, a town now in the west Indian state of Maharashtra. The word 'Sai' refers to a religious mendicant but can also mean 'God'. In several Indian and Middle Eastern languages the term 'Baba' is an honorific signifying grandfather, father, old man or sir. Thus Sai Baba denotes Holy Father, saintly father or (venerable) poor old man.

#### **Aims of The Study**

1. To be familiar with the social environment of the peasant society in India and particularly in the specified study area
2. To study the emerging trends in rural sociology
3. To study minutely Robert Redfield's views on the little and the great traditions and to interpret them in the context of the little traditions prevailing in the Indian peasant society
4. To study the views of McKim Marriott, Milton Singer and Yogendra Singh on the little and the great traditions
5. To study and explore the little and the great traditions prevailing in the specified study area
6. To observe the faith of the localites resident of the specified area in the little traditions and the great traditions
7. To observe, study and interpret the prevailing little and the great traditions in the specified study area in the context of their moulding impact on the localites
8. To examine and test Robert Redfield's concept of the little traditions and the great traditions in the context of the prevailing little traditions in India, and especially in the specified study area

9. To interpret the cause and effect relationship of the prevalence of the little and the great traditions in the specified study area.
10. To study the generation of the little traditions alongwith the prevalence of the great traditions in Shirdi in Maharashtra.

#### **Research Questions or Hypothesis**

1. The people in the Indian villages are divided in the name of caste, creed and education
2. The educated in the Indian villages join civilization through the learning from the Vedas that form the basis of the Indian Hindu social system
3. The educated or say the lettered in India reveal their faith in those deities whose reference is there in the Vedas
4. The unlettered in the Indian villages have unshaken faith in the local deities
5. Their performance of the rituals and worship in order to please the local deities forms their specific culture
6. The lettered and the unlettered in the Indian villages are interdependent
7. Both the little and the great traditions prevail in the Indian society side by side
8. The Sai Baba Temple at Shirdi in Maharashtra is the best example of the prevalence of the little and the great traditions in India.

#### **Research Methodology**

The study was made casually during the course of the investigator's visit to Sai Temple in Shirdi.

#### **Coverage**

Based on the observation method and in accordance with the steps of scientific method essentially to be observed by the researchers as prescribed by the eminent social scientists, the study was particularly made on the randomly selected 50 units of information from the specified study area. The units of information includes the pilgrims, visitors, localites, concerned authorities and everyone who proved himself to be ready to supply the required information for the study through a short interview conducted for the purpose.

#### **Data Collection**

In order to keep up the scientific spirit of the work, the primary data were collected from the selected units through the individual and group interview with sufficient number of questions covering all the aspects that reflect evidently tremendous glimpses of observance of the little and the great traditions, social control, sanskritization and social change at the specified temple of Sai Baba at Shirdi in Maharashtra. The secondary data were collected from the literature available in various books, research journals, magazines, and last but not least from the internet sites.

#### **Data Analysis**

All the steps of scientific method prescribed and suggested by the various eminent social scientists were strictly observed. The Principal Investigator designed the work on the observation method, collection, classification, analysis, interpretation etc. of the primary data, and finally the

generalization was made that ignorance breeds little traditions, and that the little and the great traditions work side by side in rural India.

#### Implications

1. The nature of research is scientific and hence it must be an empirical study.
2. Objectivity is the soul of research; hence, the researcher must be careful and absolutely objective while collecting the data.
3. Scientific analysis of the data imparts validity to research.
4. In order to save time and make the work presentable tables are of utmost use in the research work.
5. Generalization must be made on the basis of the study of the cause and effect relationship of the problem.

#### Conclusion

Throughout history, religion has continued to be a central part of societies and human experience, shaping how individuals react to the environments in which they live. Similarly, the peasant society has always been governed by the local deities in whom the people reveal their unshakable faith. Since religion is such an important part of societies around the world, sociologists are very interested in studying it. Sociologists study religion as both a belief system and a social institution. As a belief system, religion shapes what people think and how they see the world. As a social institution, religion is a pattern of social action organized around the beliefs and practices that people develop to answer questions about the meaning of existence. As an institution, religion persists over time and has an organizational structure into which members are socialized. Robert Redfield, Milton Singer, Marriott and Yogendra Singh etc. are some of the popular names relating to the little and the great traditions. They have concentrated on the emergence and prevalence of the little and the great traditions in India and their binding impact on the peasant society.

Each major sociological framework has its perspective on religion. For instance, from the functionalist perspective of sociological theory, religion is an integrative force in society because it has the power to shape collective beliefs. It provides cohesion in the social order by promoting a sense of belonging and collective consciousness. Redfield concentrated on the relationship of the little and the great traditions with the civilization. He employs two important concepts- the great traditions and the little traditions. According to him, in any civilization, there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and a little tradition of the largely unreflective many. McKim Marriott too demonstrated the connection between the culture of a peasant society and the larger civilization in which it is contained. Each of them attempts to prove that the peasant society is governed by the little traditions.

To conclude: India is a country where more than two-thirds of its population lives in villages. Religion is a great power and has a vital force to lead the people in a community towards sacred.

Religion, society, social change and sanskritization are complementary to and internally linked with one another. The educated or say the lettered in India reveal their faith in those deities whose reference is there in the Vedas and the other ancient Hindu scriptures, while the unlettered in the Indian villages have unshaken faith in the local deities. Both the little and the great traditions prevail in the Indian society side by side.

The Sai Baba Temple at Shirdi in Maharashtra is the best example of the prevalence of the little and the great traditions together in India. In Shirdi, the little tradition began with certain specific rituals and modes of worship performed by the local people irrespective of caste or religion in order to please Sai Baba as a local deity. The collective consciousness works incredibly among the people at the time of worship. This little tradition which seems to have developed in the form of the great tradition has brought about a tremendous social change as a result of the prevalence of the little traditions in the specified study area. In a word, the worship of Sai Baba in Shirdi is a little tradition in its roots, as no ancient Hindu scripture has any reference to Sai Baba, and that probably in the twentieth century, being influenced by the miracles performed by Sai Baba, the people in Shirdi and the surrounding area started worshipping him as a god.

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