

CAUSALITY, MEANING AND CULTURE

In what follows, I wish to present a critical analysis of Pitirim Sorokin's views on culture and society. Further, in this connection, I will examine the methodological doctrine that he advocates to study the same. To begin with, it is necessary to present in detail, Sorokin's views on culture. He maintains :

"In the broadest sense it (culture) may mean the sum total of everything which is created or modified by the conscious or unconscious activity of two or more individuals interacting with one another or conditioning one another's behaviour."¹

From the above mentioned quotation it is clear that culture is an artificial object opposed to a natural one. That is to say, culture has not grown and developed like a natural object.

Let us reflect on this aspect of culture. What does it mean to say that culture is an artificial product? On behalf of Sorokin, it can be said that culture is peculiar to human beings only. That is to say, other non-human creatures cannot be said to have any culture at all. A further question may be raised in this connection. It is this: Why is it that other creatures cannot be said to have any culture at all? Birds prepare nests, honey bees construct hives and spiders weave a kind of net. How is it that we treat a piece of painting as an art or culture object but not the bee hive? What could be the possible answer on behalf of Sorokin for not treating the bird's nest as an object of art? If Odissi and the Kathak dance are regarded as cultural products, what does compel us to exclude the dance of the peacock and the queen bee from the domain of culture and cultural products? Further, it may be added in this connection that the dividing line between an art object and say for instance, a bee hive is purely arbitrary. One way of answering these questions is to distinguish between various types of the so called artificial objects. Though both a bird's nest and a piece of painting are artificial yet there is a great deal of

difference between the two. A bird prepares a nest only at a fixed period of the year. But a painter can paint a picture at any time of the year. This clearly shows that there is an element of decision involved in the case of human action and it is absent in case of other non-human creatures. Decision is a conscious activity. A person who takes a decision can be said to be conscious of what he does. It is linguistically odd to say that one has taken decision but one is not aware of what one has done. Again, self-awareness manifests in other forms of action. That is to say, self-awareness and amenability to correction go together. If one knows what one is doing, then one knows what is correct or incorrect, right or wrong in that connection. Consequently there is a possibility that one might change the course of one's action in the light of further information and knowledge. This sort of change usually takes place in case of human action. But such changes have not yet taken place in the non-human world. Therefore, it is not appropriate to characterise the nest of the birds and the hive of the bees as pieces of culture objects. A culture object is one which has been made or built consciously with a purpose. Seen in this light, only human beings can be said to have cultures. In short, only objects made by human beings can be treated as culture objects.

Sorokin maintains that a culture object sometimes gets modified and affected by unconscious activity of men. But now the question is : How to understand this statement? What does it mean to say that a culture object gets modified by the unconscious activity of men? The answers to these questions depend upon what we mean by 'unconscious activity'. If by 'unconscious activity' is meant that which is not at all intended or known by anybody at all, there cannot be any such activity at all. In fact, unconscious activity is a contradiction in terms. An act *per se* is bound to be conscious phenomenon for the simple reason that the agent must recognise it, otherwise it is not an action at all. This is precisely what distinguishes an action from an event. But there is another meaning of the term 'unconscious activity'. It might mean unintended consequence. Sometimes human beings perform certain actions, the consequences of which they are not aware of. These consequences affect other aspects of human life. Further, these unintended consequences sometimes prove very significant in that they affect already existing cultures. This process has been taking place incessantly and this is one of the major factors of cultural change. But what does actually happen in case of cultural change? Is cultural change a kind of juxtaposition of objects or items from two separate cultures?

Effective and fruitful cultural change results in a kind of assimilation and enrichment of meanings. 'Unconscious modification' can be understood only in this sense.

If this interpretation is accepted, it will lead altogether to a different view of culture. Culture turns out to be a concatenation of meanings in this context. This way of viewing culture makes it ideational nature. Further, this view of culture may not be acceptable to a realist. To a realist, culture includes, among other things, what is known as the culture objects, and such objects are empirical in nature. As for example, a piece of painting or sculpture is primarily an empirical object for the simple reason that painting is done either on a piece of paper and carving is done on a slab of stone. Further, even if the art objects most of the time happen to be material in nature yet they undergo transformation in the hands of the artist. The so called dead and inert material does not remain in its original stage. The artist, in a way, recreates the objects. But in spite of being recreated the material object remains as an object, as an entity. It gets remodelled and reshaped. But at the same time, no material object becomes a piece of art unless it enters into what is known as the nexus of intelligibility. That is to say, an art object has to be meaningful and significant. It has to be recognised as an art object and to do this is to treat an art object or cultural object as a concatenation of meanings. If one is not acquainted with the 'meanings' one cannot be said to appreciate or understand a particular art object. Further, not only the art object but for that matter no object can be known and recognised without coming under a concept or meanings, to use a Kantian idiom. To be known or understood means to enter into the sphere of meaning and intelligibility. Besides, art and cultural objects have added meanings. It is these meanings that make an object an art object. So, it can be said that in the case of art or culture objects there is what is known as double application of concepts or meanings. The fact that sometimes we fail to understand and appreciate a piece of art, music or even the cultural tradition of other people goes to prove that we fail to grasp the meanings. Therefore, in a crucial sense, to understand the culture of other people is not merely to be acquainted with the physical activities of those people but to understand the meanings that underlie those activities. Cultures can be said to be understood and appreciated when meanings are understood. The culture idealists surely have a point when they argue that cultures are concatenations of meanings. But the expression 'meaning' is likely to create confusions. It might be taken to

mean subjective intentions and thereby might give rise to the suggestion that cultures are subjective phenomena. I wish to point out in this connection that the fact that inter subjective communication and understanding are possible, shows that meanings cannot be subjective at all. Meanings in this sense are neither the denizens of the world of things nor the world of mind. They belong to a third realm. Each use an expression or a sentence express a meaning. Further, meanings are so inextricably mixed up with culture and human society that it is in a way impossible to separate the two. That is to say, in the context of culture, it is not possible to detach the meanings from facts.

It may not be out of place to point out in this connection that the so called social facts are really the institutional facts, to use a term of Searl's. Let us take the examples of marriage, prayer, procession and etc. These social phenomena cannot be understood purely in physical terms. That is to say, the act of marriage cannot be described as two human persons just coming and living together. It is much more than that. Similarly, the act of prayer cannot be understood in terms of individual human beings just walking to the places of worship and bending their heads. The belief system, the social norms, attitudes and ideas and above all, the world view associated with it that turn out the so called physical facts into a social act. The so called brute fact is really an abstraction . It is a myth. Even the so called natural facts cannot be treated as brute facts *per se* for the simple reason that nothing can be characterised as a fact unless it comes within the ambit of intelligibility. Further, to be intelligible means to be conceptualized and to be coloured by meanings. Therefore, the concept of raw and brute fact is unintelligible. If this argument is accepted, then the so called social facts turn out to be doubly coloured by meanings. First, as an object and second, as an object of social reality.

Now the question is : what does constitute the subject matter of anthropological study of culture? Do anthropologists study artifacts in the name of culture? In other words, can culture be exhaustively defined in terms of artifacts which in a way are made up of dead and inert matter? In answer to these questions it can be said that culture primarily consists of a set of meanings whether descriptive or evaluative and in the absence of these meanings, an object is not at all a culture object. The richer the meaning aspect, the richer is the culture of the group or society. If the distinction between material and non-material

culture has been made to highlight the point that there are cultures which are material and there are cultures which are purely abstract or non-material then it is not acceptable for the following reasons : The material object cannot be treated as standing for culture. What makes a material object an object of culture is the meaning associated with it. If meanings are absent, an object is not a culture object at all. A culture object cannot be identified only with reference to meanings without any reference to the material in which it gets incarnated. Therefore, the anthropological distinction between material and non-material culture breaks down for the simple reason that no culture can be defined in terms of material elements; culture has to be defined in terms of meanings and meanings are non-material. So, cultures have to be non-material in nature.

Sorokinian Taxonomy

Sorokin classifies societies and cultures into three main types : (1) Ideational, (2) Idealistic, and (3) Sensate. Sometimes, he makes subdivisions of the main categories. In fact, according to Sorokin, societies, culture, politics, knowledge, science, music, art and everything what man creates can be classified into these three major types. This type of broad classification of reality into three types corresponds to the classification-schema advanced by the Sāṃkhya philosophers of ancient India. It is not being argued out here that Sorokin has been influenced by the Sāṃkhya system of thought. What is being pointed out is that there is a conceptual affinity between Sorokin and the Sāṃkhya system of philosophy with the only difference that the former seeks to classify social world whereas the Sāṃkhya thinkers seek to classify the whole world in terms of *Sattva, Rajas and Tamas*.

The ideational, idealistic and sensate culture mentalities stand for three different world views. They are as follows : The ascetic, the sensuous and the mixed one. The question now arises : Does Sorokin arrive at these world views through empirical studies of different social groups? In answer to this question it can be said that Sorokin is presenting a macro-social theory. Ideational, idealistic and sensate are logical or ideal types in terms of which he seeks to explain all social groups. But what could be the justification for accepting such ideal types? Sorokin does not give any reason in support of his thesis. Rather, he goes on citing illustrations from philosophy, science, religion, moral codes and other forms of social institutions in support of his apriori doctrine.

He treats enjoyment and renunciation as the extreme poles of the measuring rod of civilizations and cultures. Renunciation, asceticism and other ancillary forms of values, including the relevant world view are put together in one side and enjoyment, perception, sensibility and the relevant world view are put together on another side. Further, a mixture between the two has also been visualised. The ascetic renouncing culture mentally has been termed as ideational, the mentality of enjoyment has been termed as sensate, and the mixed one has been termed as idealistic.

The nature of the schema of classification is such that it is unalterable and in a way fixed for all time to come. Further, such a classificatory schema has its own inherent difficulties. It is not clear what Sorokin wants to prove with the help of these categories. Does he mean to say that there are civilizational and cultural areas which are exclusively ideational, idealistic or sensate? Or does he mean to say the these trends are present almost in every culture in certain form? As a matter of fact, there is no culture which can be exclusively characterized as ideational, idealistic or sensate. Further, while characterising cultures, Sorokin does not seem to have taken into account the actual practice of people in general. In fact, he bases his findings and characterisation purely on textual analysis of different aspects of culture. In short, Sorokin does not try to bridge the gap that continues to be there between the so called text and context of cultures. But at the same time, he treats culture as a growing phenomenon. Cultures grow and alternate with different shifts. In fact, no culture remains static and constant. Ideational, idealistic and sensate periods may alternate with one another even within the same culture. This type of view about culture shift has ultimately led Sorokin to advocate cyclical theory of social change as against the linear one. As a matter fact, he advocates what is known as crisis - catharsis - charisma - resurrection model. According to Sorokin, the European society has reached the climax in its sensate culture. Not only man but values have been atomized. He smells catharsis and is convinced that in near future the European society will be regenerated and rejuvenated. This type of social prophecy is not peculiar to Sorokin; many philosophically inclined social scientists like Toynbee and others have gone in the same line. In this respect, Sorokin's views come very close to the Hindu conception of time consisting of four distinct aeons such as *Satya, Tretā Dvāpara and Kali*. But, then, the question is : are there social and cultural cycles? This question cannot be answered unless an answer to the question what is social cycle is found out. As a matter of fact, the

historical development of various societies exhibit different trends, sometimes very simple and at certain period very complex. The same type of development has taken place at the same time in all societies throughout the world. But perhaps the urge to discover an order, a rhythm in everything including human societies and cultures is as old as mankind. The religious instinct has coloured historical and social enquiries. But, then, the fact remains that any theory building activity about human society and culture is bound to be very general and philosophical in nature, for the simple reason that to build a theory is not just to put together or join discrete and atomized particulars. To the extent to which a theory is logical or conceptual construct, to that extent there is bound to be extrapolations in it and more so in the case of social theories. Further, certain type of social theorists in their attempt to comprehend both past, present and future of man have tried to make prophecies about future. Sorokin is one such theorist. As an individual cannot be understood without reference to his past, present and future so is the case with human society. All the grand social theories in this sense are attempts to understand society on the model of individual man, his past and his aspirations. Seen in this light, Sorokin's attempt to understand human society in crisis - catharsis - charisma - resurrection model, appears meaningful and intelligible. Though he is neither an individualist nor an atomist, yet he visualises society after the nature of individual human being.

Understanding Culture

Positivistically inclined social scientists seek to understand society primarily in causal terms. That is to say, they treat society and culture almost on par with material objects. Sorokin, on the other hand, treats causal understanding of culture as an inadequate mode of understanding. For him, to understand a particular culture is to understand the meaning underlying various so called culture objects. It is the meaning that defines a culture and meanings cannot be causally explained. Different parts of meanings are not related in the manner of cause and effect. They form a configuration which is either coherent or incoherent, consistent or inconsistent. Coherence and incoherence, consistency and inconsistency are not causal concepts. So, that which is characterised by consistency and etc. cannot be adequately explained in causal terms.

Sorokin visualises four different ways in which various

culture objects happen to come together. (1) Spatial or mechanical adjacency, (2) Indirect association through a common external factor, (3) Causal or functional integration, and (4) Logico-meaningful integration. To present a list of culture objects in any culture area or civilizational zone is not to study culture. In short, presentation of a mere list of various objects that happen to be there in any physical space at a particular period of time does not amount to the study of a society or culture. Different items have to be correlated and presented as an integral whole or unity. It may so happen that in somebody's drawing room culture objects from various culture areas might have been collected and kept but that does not mean that those objects form or constitute a coherent meaningful unit.

Further, different culture objects might be existing side by side because of some of the external causal factor, say, for instance, a particular type of food, clothing and shelter might be prevalent in a particular area because of certain climatic conditions. Sorokin argues that to trace out the external factor that brings the discrete objects together is not to make a study of culture at all. Neither spatial adjacency nor external factor create any meaningful unit of culture.

Causal-functional analysis may be treated as something inclusive and very broad in nature for the simple reason that by adopting this method one might present different culture objects as integral parts of a causal nexus. But the view is not acceptable to Sorokin. Causal analysis of culture cannot be adequate and comprehensive. So, a more comprehensive method has to take its place. It is the method of discovering the logico-meaningful unity in any culture object or culture area. Now the question is : What is this logico-meaningful method? How is it different from causal functional approach? How is it that the causal functional approach is not suitable and adequate in study of culture? Let us first concentrate on the nature of logico-meaningful method. Sorokin uses the term 'logico-meaningful' in two different senses: (1) As a criterion of measuring the degree of cultural integration, and (ii) As a method of studying culture and society. The logico-meaningful integration has been treated by Sorokin as the supreme form of integration. Further, consistency, deducibility and non-contradictoriness have been advanced as additional criteria for measuring the degree of culture integration. But these are the logical or semantic criteria and they cannot be applied in study of things or material objects. These criteria suggest that culture is basically non-material. Further, it suggests that culture is a system of

meanings or ideas, for the simple reason that only meanings or ideas can be said to be either consistent or inconsistent, self-validating or self-contradictory. It is this presupposition about the nature of culture that makes Sorokin characterise integration in logico-meaningful terms. Seen in this light, Sorokin can be characterised as a culture idealist. For him, culture is a system of ideas or meanings and not a congeries or conglomeration of things or objects.

This view of culture and culture integration has led Sorokin to advance logico-meaningful method as a genuine or proper method of studying culture and society in general. Now the question is : Is causality inoperative in any study and analysis of culture? In answer to this question, the following remarks can be made. Causality has a very loose kind of application in study of human society in general. Predictability is closely associated with causality. That is to say, given a particular cause the effect can be predicted. This shows that there is some kind of necessity between cause and effect and this kind of necessity can be characterised as causal necessity. But among social phenomena this kind of necessity is absent. The same set of phenomena present in two different societies may not give rise to the same effect. Further, even the same set of causes present in the same society at two different periods of time may not give rise to similar effect. In short, this type of anomalous condition prevails because of the presence of restraining and triggering factors and these factors cannot be ruled out from any social group at all.

But does it mean that no causal analysis of culture can be made at all? As a matter of fact, one can distinguish between different aspects of a culture and can trace out the historical process that has gone into its making. But, for Sorokin, to understand or study a particular culture is not to find out its historical roots but to spell out the hidden meanings behind it. Causal or historical explanation of culture presents a particular culture in its historical perspective. It traces out various currents and tributaries that have joined and enriched a particular culture. But this type of exercise does not present different aspects of a culture as forming a synthetic and consistent unit. Logico-meaningful analysis of culture seeks to discover the logical tissues that bind different aspects of a culture. Causal understanding is one kind of understanding. Non-causal understanding is another. Sorokin characterises the non-causal understanding as logico-meaningful. He seems to be visualizing

culture as an organic unit, the different parts of which are logically connected. But is this acceptable? Only in an artificially constructed system, different elements can be said to be logically or necessarily connected. But in a culture system, one element does not necessarily follow from another element, though a kind of congruence can always be discovered in it. It may so happen that at a particular time instant the philosophy, music, literature, dance and other art forms of a particular social group are so much well knit and integrated that each one of them expresses the same or common spirit. This type of thinking has very often prompted some social thinkers to visualize what is known as the spirit or soul of culture. Even if it is provisionally accepted that there is something known as the spirit or the soul of culture, yet this thesis cannot explain different orders of cultures. As for example, there is a sense in which it can be said that there are Islamic, Hindu and Christian cultures along side what are known as Asian, European and Indian cultures. When we talk of cultures in religious context, a monistic idea might emerge. As for example, the Islamic Koranic culture or world view is one that is in consonance with the sacred text. But when we talk of cultures in geographical and national terms something else emerges. Is Indian culture the same as the so called Hindu culture? In fact, certain items of Hindu culture might come in conflict with the so called Indian or Asian culture or *vice versa*. Some sort of monism might be discovered in case of religious culture but in the political or national context, one always comes across what is known as cultural pluralism. Now the question is : Does Sorokin take note of cultural pluralism? Is cultural pluralism consistent with the thesis that culture is a unified system of ideas or meanings? Cultural pluralism advocates that there are different systems of meanings and the acceptance of this view will militate against Sorokin's thesis. In fact, cultural pluralism appears antagonistic to cultural monism. But Sorokin's view on culture-integration keeps the room open for cultural monism. In short, the possibility of different meaning system coming together and forming a unitary whole cannot be ruled out at all. To the extent different meaning systems come together and coalesce, to that extent they can be said to have been integrated. Hinduism and Indian culture exhibit such a kind of meaning synthesis to a very high degree. As a matter of fact, Hinduism has acquired practices and beliefs from various sources but in due course of time, has synthesized these discrete elements into a meaningful unity. The intense the degree of integration, the nearer is the approach towards cultural equilibrium. For Sorokin, the equilibrium takes place at the level of

meanings. There are certain cultures which are highly integrated and there are certain others, where the degree of integration is relatively low.

To conclude, according to Sorokin, culture is a system of meanings or ideas. Meanings and ideas are non-material in nature. They are a kind of Platonic entities. If this view of culture is accepted then it (culture) cannot be adequately explained in terms of causality. By saying this, we do not imply that causal explanation has no scope at all in any study of culture. What we wish to suggest is this : Culture being non-material, its nature is symbolic and symbols can be adequately understood only through non-causal analysis and the non-causal analysis consists of discovering the central meaning of the culture-universe.

To study a culture means to grasp the meanings that permeate its different parts and not to break it into various causal and functional items. To itemise and atomise a culture is to miss the meaning and significance which is its soul. In this sense, understanding a culture is akin to the understanding a piece of art, or a musical concert. In short, a kind of holistic understanding is required to appreciate and understand a culture and it is bound to be non-causal in nature.

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