

ORAL TRADITION AND THE STUDY OF PEASANT SOCIETY

This article attempts to bring out the value of oral tradition as a source of data regarding peasant society and culture. Many subtle aspects of social interaction and attitudes that may be left out or distorted by the more formal and expensive techniques of data collection can be made accessible through a careful analysis of oral tradition. This useful source has scarcely been tapped so far. Its proper utilization for scientific purposes would, however, require the development of adequate techniques of analysis and interpretation. Methodological problems involved in the analysis of oral sources as found in peasant societies have also been raised, therefore, in this paper. Analysis of oral tradition is especially valuable for the study of peasant society. Its large volume and pervasive proximity to all aspects of peasant life makes it specially valuable as a source of data about peasant social structure and culture.

The value of the analysis of oral tradition is further brought out when we consider the extremely limited attention that peasant society has so far received from social science. In fact no social science is devoted primarily to the study of this important form of social organization and culture. The social anthropologists have usually studied the tribal cultures and the sociologists have been concerned chiefly with the study of modern industrial societies.

Peasant societies which have contained the bulk of humanity throughout the historical times, and which even now contain the vast majority of human population, have thus been largely neglected.

Inadequacy of scientific knowledge about peasant society is a great handicap both from the practical and theoretical angles. The most sensitive regions of the contemporary world, like south and south-east Asia, have a predominance of the peasant form of social organization. Basic solutions to the problems of the countries in such regions require reliable knowledge about the essential attributes of their social structure and culture. This would be true whether we think of the inter-cultural relations, response to modern science and technology, or problems of political and economic development.

From the viewpoint of the development of social science itself, enhanced knowledge of the peasant form of social organization will be highly desirable. Data from peasant societies is sure to benefit social science as a whole. The long span of life of the peasant civilizations has enabled them to develop a great deal of integration in their institutional and valuational patterns. In the two or three thousand years of their existence they were able to develop (perhaps through a process of trial and error) structural and cultural elements which go to form highly coherent and stable sociocultural systems. A close study of these is sure to improve immensely our basic knowledge of human society and culture.

Though there has been some shift of interest towards the study of peasant society after the second World War, social scientists are still groping for an adequate conceptual and methodological framework for its study. Very often tools and techniques developed in the course of the study of other forms of society and culture are sought to be employed. This is quite natural; but it may not yield the best results. Thus the village studies based on the concepts of "little community" and "folk society"² as propounded by Robert Redfield in his earlier writings, are seriously inadequate for the study of peasant sociocultural

¹ Robert Redfield, *The Little Community*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955.

² Robert Redfield, "The Folk Society," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 52, 1947, pp. 293-308.

reality. As Redfield himself emphasized in his last major work on peasant society and culture, these earlier concepts are based on the model of isolated, self-contained communities. But peasant villages do not fit in with this model. They cannot be regarded as socio-cultural wholes. They are essentially parts of larger peasant civilizations which contain other villages as well as non-industrial urban centres. Peasant sociocultural processes cannot be properly understood without this context. But formal scientific techniques adequate to this task are yet to be developed. The tools of data collection employed by sociologists also have serious limitations in the context of peasant society. While the effort to refine these tools and make them more suited to the study of peasantry should go on, we must also utilize the rich material provided by oral tradition.

ORAL TRADITION AS A SOURCE OF DATA

Before making an attempt to assess the value of oral tradition as an aid to the study of peasant society, let us consider briefly the nature of oral tradition in peasant societies and the place it occupies in their life. What is said here is based on first hand research work in extensive regions of northern and central India, but it is likely to hold good broadly for other peasant societies as well.

Crystallized forms of oral composition accompany almost all sections of the peasantry in their work, worship, ritual and leisure. A large part of this tradition is also known among scholars as oral literature, folk literature and folklore. It may be noted that the use of the term "folk" in these expressions is more in line with the sense in which George M. Foster has used it³ than the meaning given to it by Robert Redfield in his earlier writings on folk society. However, in his later work on peasant society and culture Redfield clearly recognises that "Foster's 'folk societies' are much the same as those I here call 'peasant societies'".⁴ Our

³ George M. Foster, "What is Folk Culture," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 55, 1953, pp. 159-73.

⁴ Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956, third impression 1960, p. 85.

use of the terms folk literature or folk tradition in this essay refers to the oral tradition of the peasantry (the sense in which Foster has used the term folk) and has nothing to do with the conceptual model of the folk as isolated, self-contained communities.

The oral tradition of the peasants is indeed rich in its variety and content. It consists of lyrical folksongs of numerous types; ballads; heroic poems and epic lays; folk opera; prose narratives such as marchen, legends, and myths; proverbs and mnemonic formulae; riddles; and a variety of magical formulae and incantations.

The elements of oral tradition are closely related to specific sections of the social structure and to particular aspects of social life. Thus there are different types of songs sung with various kinds of work such as weeding, transplantation of paddy, and grinding corn with the hand-mill; different types are attached to specific ceremonies of various rites de passage, and calendaric festivals; and numerous other varieties specially belonging to particular age, sex, occupational and caste groups which may be sung and enjoyed whenever they feel like it. These are only some broad categories. Of marriage songs alone I collected more than twenty major types, each accompanying a specific occasion. In fact a ceremony would not be regarded as complete without the singing of appropriate songs. There are numerous varieties also of the narrative poems and the prose narrative. The telling of some folk myths forms an integral part of peasant ritual. Various kinds of proverbial expressions are profusely used while elucidating a point, characterising a relation or a neighbour, settling a dispute, or striking a bargain. Mnemonic formulae come to the aid of the farmer when he goes to purchase a bullock or a cow in a village fair, makes decisions about agricultural operations, or deals with diseases of men and his livestock. Charms and incantations are frequently employed for curing a bite by a snake, a scorpion or a wasp, and in dealing with one's enemy.

Oral tradition is in close proximity to myriad facets of peasant life and it can therefore tell us a good deal about intimate aspects and imponderables of peasant culture when approached properly. Its wide sharing by all sections of the peasantry makes it all the more suited for this task.

In several ways the analysis of the oral tradition promises to

be even more rewarding as a source of sociocultural data than the study of the literary or classical literature is for the understanding of a people or an age. Sophisticated literature usually belongs only to the elite who form a small section of the total population; and it can be expected to reveal primarily their attitudes, norms and relationships. In most societies women hardly have a share in the making of the literary sources. In this respect the oral tradition of the peasants provides a marked contrast. The share of women in its composition, propagation and performance is perhaps much greater than that of men. The control of women over the use of traditional proverbial idiomatic phrases, and the telling effect with which they employ them to hit an adversary, seem to be matters of envy for menfolk. An exact estimate is difficult to make, but there is little doubt that of all the songs and tales in the oral tradition of peasantry in north India, the major part belongs to women in every sense. The *genres* of folksongs connected with *rites de passage* seem to contain more than one half of all the current songs in a region, and these are sung almost exclusively by women. If a man sings a song belonging to any of these *genres* (which, incidentally, is sometimes done by an effeminate person or by someone jokingly) he becomes an object of ridicule. Folksongs are continually reworked in the process of singing itself. There is no reason to doubt that the songs sung by women, as we find them in the oral tradition at any point of time, are largely their own compositions. This is also shown by the stylistic traditions of these *genres* as reflected in the selection of themes and their treatment.

Many intimate aspects of a woman's life, for example her hopes and anxieties during pregnancy, and the feelings of a barren woman, find vivid expression in these songs. In the peasant society built around the values of male dominance, woman is discriminated against in many ways. Contrary to what one might expect, we find in these traditional songs some strong expression of protest against such discrimination. For example, in many songs connected with the ceremony of the departure of a bride from her parents' house to the house of her husband, the departing bride tells her mother how she disliked the discriminating treatment given to her as compared to that received by her brother. She says to her mother: "You gave breakfast to my brother happily, but you gave it to me with a frown; now you can save the money

spent on my food and purchase a cow from these savings.”

The expression of such feelings in the folksongs is specially remarkable because due to the normative pattern of the society there is little chance of their expression in real life even among close relatives. (The expression of these before an investigator is, of course, unimaginable.) Similarly, the woman in the folksongs protests vigorously against the injustices done to her by the husband. In the folk versions of the myth of banishment of Sita, her disapproval of her husband's (Ram's) conduct in sending her to the jungle even though she was chaste, is far more strong and uncompromising than that found in any literary version. Ram is considered a god in Indian tradition and his conduct is regarded as the model. Most literary works, including the classical Sanskrit epic *Raghuvansa* by Kalidasa, praise Ram for forsaking his wife even though she was guiltless. Kalidasa says that glorious persons save their glory from blemish even at the cost of their life, needless to speak of woman who is meant for sensual pleasure. This is a typical example of male attitude which predominates classical literary tradition. Elite literature in peasant civilizations seldom gives expression to the woman's point of view. Even when some exceptional woman manages to contribute something to the written literature, she still follows the male-ridden norms of literary tradition. On the contrary, through the oral tradition woman has expressed herself amply and vigorously.

Similarly, the vast multitudes of common people in peasant civilizations have little chance of expression through written literature which is largely a preserve of the elite belonging to the aristocratic and priestly estates or castes. In fact the womenfolk even of these upper classes are left out. Thus the bulk of the population in peasant civilizations belongs to the oral tradition. In India men and woman of the low and untouchable castes also are active bearers of some parts of the oral tradition. Many of these have some favourite *genres* which are particularly associated with their names. The analysis of oral tradition can be of immense help in bringing out their sensibilities and experiences. For example, the attitudes of the lower caste people towards the upper castes, which are otherwise concealed for fear of disapproval and reprisals, are very well revealed in the proverbs and short tales about particular upper castes told among the lower caste people.

Oral tradition of the peasants is carried on by ordinary folk.

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Most pieces are anonymous. There are few professionals and there is no separate literary class. A few types may be performed by some particular groups and they may be rewarded for it, but the bulk of the oral tradition is widely shared by persons engaged in different walks of life. Thus there is lesser likelihood of the stream of folk literature becoming alienated from the mainstream of life. It has often been pointed out that poets and literary men are prone to become ingrown and thus their works may fail to represent the more common feelings present in their society. This limitation would be far less applicable in the case of oral tradition.

The fact that folk literature in peasant societies depends for its survival and growth on oral transmission makes it all the more valuable as a source of sociocultural data. A piece which appeals to the folk no more is sure to fall into disuse and die out. There are no critics or publishers who can artificially prop up certain kinds of material and suppress others. No government can proscribe the pieces in the popular oral tradition. The material is continually reworked knowingly and unknowingly in the course of performance and new themes with an appeal to the people are constantly being added in a living oral tradition. This flexibility of the oral tradition must be a great help in keeping it in tune with the feelings of the people.

It would be wrong to think that oral tradition and folklore have died out or are on the verge of collapse in countries like India. They have certainly been influenced by the modern forces, but they have not yet lost their vigour. While some genres of folklore show signs of decline, the stream as a whole seems to have enough vitality not only to sustain itself but also to imbibe new elements. References to modern objects, events and experiences find their way in oral tradition by the customary process of reworking of traditional items, by composition of new pieces, and even through the emergence of new types.

The existing oral tradition of the folk has signs both of continuity and growth. No celebration of a child birth or marriage is conceivable without the singing of folksongs appropriate to the particular ceremony. Calendaric festivals too are celebrated with the telling of particular types of tales and the singing of special songs traditionally attached to them. In fact without these the ritual will not be taken as complete. Market place conversation

and bargaining, and gossip and quarrels particularly among women, are even now replete with traditional proverbs. Putting riddles to each other is still a favourite pastime. Large crowds assemble to listen to the singing of epic lays. And one can even now find singers of epic lays who instantaneously compose in the true style of heroic poetry.

The countryside is as yet far from being industrialized. But the rural folk have not remained unaffected by the forces of industrialism and modernism. The change in the character of the urban centres has brought about a transformation in the nature of the rural-urban nexus⁵ and this has exposed even the remote villages to modern influences. Oral literature has amply responded to these influences⁶ though different *genres* show considerable variation in the degree and quality of their response to the new forces.⁷ On the whole, however, it will not be correct to say that the folk tradition itself is on the verge of extinction. If some of the traditional types are declining, certain other folk forms like the Bidesia opera, which are more relevant to the contemporary experience of the folk, are coming up. The stream of peasant culture still has enough vitality to absorb and integrate new elements. It has not become a vestige or a mere survival.

The question of the relationship between any kind of literature and society is a very difficult one, and needs exploration. However, the value of literature for giving us an idea of the culture of which it is a part, is generally recognized. Literature has been widely used as a source of information for constructing the social and cultural history of bygone ages; and our impressions of contemporary foreign societies are chiefly derived from their novels and short stories. Indeed, G. A. Lundberg, one of the strongest supporters of the use of natural science method in sociology, says "Scientifically derived generalizations have not

⁵ For a more elaborate treatment of the significance of the rural-urban nexus in the study of social change, see Indra Deva, "The Changing Pattern of Rural Society and Culture: Significance of the Rural-Urban Nexus," in *Trends of Socio-economic Change in India*, Simla, Institute of Advanced Study, 1969, pp. 162-75.

⁶ For some examples see, Indra Deva, "Modern Social Forces in Indian Folk Songs," *Diogenes*, no. 15, 1956, pp. 48-64.

⁷ Cf. Indra Deva, "Folklore Studies: A Trend Report" in *A Survey of Research in Social Sciences*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1972, pp. 197-239.

yet supplanted to any great degree the accepted conclusions from novels and voluminous but unsystematically generalized case histories.”⁸

It would be wrong, however, to approach literary creations as simple social documents. We cannot accept at face value all statements about social life in literature, including oral literature. Pieces of literature are not scientific monographs, and description of social facts is not their chief purpose. To derive information useful from the sociological view point, therefore, they must be interpreted in the light of the literary tradition to which they belong. The stylistic requirements of the various *genres* should be taken into account and figurative statements should be recognized as such.

It would also be wrong to assume that the picture of social life of a people derived from its literature is exhaustive and proportionate. Every literature, and even every *genre*, has certain favourite themes with which it deals to the relative exclusion of other aspects of life. Again, these selected themes are dealt with in conventional ways and through stereotyped phrases and expressions. In folk literature, stock situations and descriptions are perhaps even more important than they are in written or “literary” literature. One who has been in contact with a living folk tradition cannot fail to mark how quickly stories based on real happenings get modified in the course of oral transmission so as to conform to the stereotyped pattern of popular legends. We cannot, therefore, rely upon facts provided by a legend, a ballad or an epic poem, even if it is about a historical person or incident. We come across a number of different stories accounting for the origin of the same caste. Obviously, all these cannot be true to facts. But they do tell us a good deal about the place and qualities assigned by people to that caste. As A. M. Hocart has pointed out in connection with a story of this kind: “Whether the story related a true incident or not does not concern us. We are not here trying to establish incidents but customs. Fiction is good evidence of custom, because it tells us how people think things ought to happen.”⁹

The real value of folk literature as a source of sociological

⁸ G. A. Lundberg, *Social Research*, Longman, 1942, p. 382.

⁹ A. M. Hocart, *Caste: A Comparative Study*, London, Methuen, 1950.

data lies not in its concern with particular persons or incidents but in its typical portrayals of situations, relationships and attitudes. Folk literature in India provides us certain typical pictures of the familial relationships like those of husband-wife, mother-son, brother-sister, a man's mother and his wife, a man's sister and his wife, and a man's wife and his younger brother. It also provides through numerous stories and proverbs, typical pictures of people belonging to a caste. We get several such pictures about a particular relationship or a caste. These often disagree with each other. However, this is not necessarily a disadvantage. These pictures when synthesized should provide a more balanced and comprehensive view of the situations with which they deal. The differences in these pictures often stem from the differences in perspective of various groups. This is often the case in the proverbs and tales which various castes employ to characterize each other.

It is in many ways advantageous to consider simultaneously the evidence of all the important branches of oral literature. This not only makes available more material for analysis, but it also helps us in understanding and making allowances for the part played by stylization in the various branches. When the evidence of these branches is combined, the picture of social life becomes more complete and the effects of stylization in the evidence of each of them are neutralized to some extent. For example, while the folksong in India provides a lot of material about family life, it tells us little about caste attitudes. But the proverbs and tales throw much interesting light on this important aspect of social relationships. In the sphere of family life also, the folksong leaves out certain facts which are illuminated by other branches. For instance, the relationship between the younger brother and the wife of a man is found to be cordial in most of the folksongs. The songs remain concerned chiefly with the mirthful aspects of this joking relationship. But the tales frequently emphasize the frictions which arise in it due to economic reasons. To take another example, we would be greatly misled about a woman's attitude towards the houses of her parents and her husband, if we depended solely on the evidence of heroic poetry. In Indian heroic poems, the woman always sides with her husband's people. This is interesting also because on this point Indian heroic poetry provides striking contrast to the heroic poetry of some other

countries. But this does not give a correct idea of the complex situation in real life, which is conveyed much better by the folksongs.

However, the picture of social life derived from the analysis of all the branches of oral literature, cannot be taken to be fully veridical. The conclusions arrived at on the basis of this evidence should rather be taken as hypotheses to be further studied and tested in the light of information derived from other sources. Indeed, it would not be possible to interpret properly the oral literature itself without some knowledge of the life of the folk from other sources.

In spite of its limitations, oral tradition remains a valuable source of sociological data. Every source or method has its limitations, so also has folk literature. But it also has certain advantages. The more formal methods of collecting sociological data are expensive and time consuming. Peasant society with its vast body of customs and institutions which have been growing and accumulating for several millennia presents such a formidable field of study that the student of social science cannot neglect the study of its oral tradition as a source of information about beliefs, attitudes and usages among the peasant folk. This is all the more so because there are some special difficulties in the application of modern research techniques to the study of rural life in India. For instance, the questionnaire method which automatically excludes non-readers and non-writers can have very limited use, as rural India is still predominantly unlettered.

The study of oral literature may particularly help us in understanding complex attitudes. The analysis reveals many opinions and attitudes which might be missed in investigations carried out through usual methods. To take one example, it is generally assumed that in India the Brahman gets the unqualified veneration of the people of other castes. There is no doubt that he enjoys certain privileges and is shown special respect. When interviewed people will ordinarily assert that they respect Brahmans. But a study of the tales and proverbial expressions found in oral tradition would show that the matter is not so simple. In them the Brahman frequently features as a glutton, one who enjoys feasts at the cost of others, and an arbiter who adjusts religious verdicts to suit his selfish interests. Such pictures give us certain hypotheses. When we approach the peasant with

questions based on these hypotheses we are likely to get answers which take us nearer to facts.

Accounts of existing cultures greatly suffer due to the fact that verbally professed (particularly for questionnaire and interviews) behaviour patterns and attitudes are often taken to be the actual ones. Bronislaw Malinowski observes: "When the native is asked what he would do in such and such a case, he answers what he should do; he lays down the pattern of best possible conduct. When he acts as an informant to a field anthropologist, it costs him nothing to retail the ideal of the law. His sentiments, his propensities, his bias, his self-indulgence as well as tolerance of others' lapses, he reserves for his behaviour in real life. And even then, though he acts thus, he would be unwilling to admit often even to himself, that he ever acts below the standard of law."¹⁰ Folk literature can be of considerable help in tackling this problem. In oral tradition we get numerous pictures of tensions in relationships which should ideally be most cordial, and suspicion and resentment against people who are supposed to be venerable. These pictures, of course, cannot be accepted at their face value; but they give an insight into complexities of relationships, attitudes, and beliefs, which may be of considerable help.

This is shown very well by the vivid portrayal in oral tradition of the complex relationships found in the traditional Indian joint family. In the joint family sons continue to live with their parents even after their marriage. Consequently, we find in them people of more than two generations living together. Numerous traditional norms and folkways play their part in maintaining the solidarity of this family structure. This is very important because, as Sorokin, Zimmerman and Galpin have shown in their pioneering work,¹¹ in all societies based on plough agriculture the family is the pivot of social life and all their aspects bear the impress of the *gestalt* of familism. Incidentally, notwithstanding the claims of uniqueness of the institution of the Indian joint family, it strikingly shares the characteristics of the family in all peasant societies based on plough agriculture.

¹⁰ B. Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, London, Kegan Paul, 1947, p. 120.

¹¹ P. A. Sorokin, C. C. Zimmerman and C. J. Galpin, *Systematic Sourcebook in Rural Sociology*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1930-32.

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Though the Indian joint family system has maintained its vigor through more than two thousand years with the aid of intricate mores and folkways which look meaningless on the surface but are exceedingly effective in performing the latent function of maintaining its solidarity; it has nevertheless been pestered continually by certain built in tensions. But these tensions too seem to have acquired stable patterns. They occur again and again in every generation and their pattern becomes fairly clear through the analysis of oral tradition.

Oral literature as an integral part of peasant culture has surely to perform important functions as a means of social control. It does this not by being didactic, but by creating appropriate stereotypes and prototypes which are internalized by the folk. It does propagate the socially accepted ideas of the desirable, the detestable and the ludicrous by portraying heroes, villains and fools. But it is also a means of letting off steam by the oppressed in the system. By describing unwholesome situations and difficult roles, it prepares people to face them.

Recurring tensions and frictions in family relationships, as well as the ideals for each relationship, can be discerned through an analysis of oral tradition. It appears that in the traditional peasant society in India not only norms but also tensions have become stabilized and crystallized in the long course of its existence. In the joint family, we find not only joking relationships and relationships of avoidance, but also what we may call "quarrelling relationships." The relationship between the mother and wife of a man is an obvious example. Another such relationship is that of the wife and the sister of a man. The analysis of oral tradition brings out the complete cycle of these tensions and quarrels. It gives us interesting data about the usual causes of such conflicts, the course that they take, and their final resolution. Observation of actual life in peasant society shows that the recurring descriptions of family relationships, both of affection and cooperation and those of jealousy and conflicts, are not far removed from reality. In fact they bring out certain subtle aspects which would be very difficult to reach through any other technique of social research.

The impact of modern forces on peasant institutions is also brought out by the analysis of oral tradition. For example, folk literature in areas from where a large number of men folk go to

distant places to earn, bears clear impress of its effect on institutions like the joint family. Such emigration is usually partial. Only the able-bodied males go out, leaving behind their wives, children and aged parents. This causes serious anxiety both to the emigrant and those family members who are left behind. The folk literature, especially of the regions from where such migrations has been heavy, has not failed to respond to this situation. For instance, various *genres* of folk literature in the Bhojpuri speaking area show the deep impact of emigration.¹² In fact, the impact has been so deep that it has given rise to some new forms. The rise in the Bhojpuri area of the folk opera, Bidesia, which deals primarily with the temptations and torments to which an emigrant and his wife are subjected, is a case in point. Traditional forms of the folksongs and proverbs also bring out vividly the strain that this emigration puts on the joint family. Ideally, everyone in such a family is cared for according to his or her kinship status, irrespective of individual earnings. But the prolonged absence of menfolk puts too much strain on the system. If an emigrant fails to send money home, the position of his wife become all the more miserable. This has found expression in many a folksong.

NEED OF DEVELOPING ADEQUATE METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

While the value of oral tradition as a source of sociocultural data seems to be fairly clear, the development of adequate techniques for the analysis of oral material poses a serious challenge. Conclusions drawn on the basis of casual acquaintance with the oral sources are bound to remain impressionistic. The body of oral material is so large and varied that much would depend upon the selection of pieces that are cited as evidence. In this and also in the interpretation of the content, the bias of the research worker can creep in unless some objective techniques are evolved.

In this context one is inevitably reminded of the developments in the technique of content analysis. It is obvious, however, that

¹² Indra Deva, *Sociology of Bhojpuri Folk-Literature* (Lucknow University, doctoral dissertation), pp. 366-75.

this technique has usually been applied to communication material of a very different kind and its tools can hardly be adequate for our purposes without considerable adaptation and refinement. Content analysis as it has developed, puts great stress on indicating frequencies with a high degree of precision and on assigning numerical values to such frequencies.¹³ There would be special problems in doing this for the content of oral tradition.

A living oral tradition is always in a continued state of flux. Its parameters are far from sharply defined, so that the universe itself cannot be demarcated accurately. Its constituents too are continually reworked through the process of oral transmission, and so it is difficult to count them as discrete items. There are numerous versions of every folksong, tale, epic poem or proverb and none can be regarded as the only authentic text. It is difficult to decide how much variation makes a piece fit to be regarded as a distinct unit. One does not know where a song ends and another begins.

These attributes of the oral material raise serious questions about the applicability of quantitative techniques. Where neither the boundaries of the universe nor those of the constituent items are clear, any attempt at applying statistical techniques begins to appear as an exercise in futility. However, while efforts towards objectivity and precision must continue, the limitations of quantifying the analysis of oral tradition need not cause undue despair. Most of the significant sociocultural variables still remain unquantified and insofar as the data derived from the analysis of oral tradition has to be related to the former its non-quantitative nature need not be a serious handicap. It also remains true that though there has been a huge amount of quantitative research on the content of communication material like newspapers and radio programmes in the last four decades, it has not led to any worthwhile generalizations regarding society and culture or even the dynamics of public opinion. Many research methods and techniques yield results which may be verifiable but are hardly significant. Moreover, even when research procedures are reliable in the sense that all research workers would reach the same conclusions by following them, it often

¹³ B. Bevelson, "Content Analysis" in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. G. Lindzey, London, Addison-Wesley, 1954, pp. 488-522.

remains doubtful how far these conclusions square up with sociocultural reality.

While developing techniques for objective analysis of oral tradition we must balance the claims of verifiability and significance. Even if a technique is objective in the sense that it eliminates the bias of the researcher, its ultimate value will lie in the significance of the results which it can yield. For example, a count of frequency of occurrence of a particular set of words in a given sample may be more verifiable than analysis in terms of certain significant themes. But the latter may lead us to more meaningful results.

However, in the interests of objectivity of analysis, procedures will have to be devised for selection of suitable samples, identification of units of analysis, and some general canons of interpretation. In doing all this the purposes which such analysis is intended to serve have constantly to be kept in focus, and undue attraction for apparent precision has to be avoided.

Sociocultural reality is too complex to be exhaustively discovered and understood by the use of any single tool or technique. The inferences drawn from an analysis of oral tradition will, of course, have to be supplemented and even validated by those derived through other methods. Indeed, the effectiveness of such analysis would itself depend on other advances made in the conceptual, methodological and substantive fields in the study of peasant society.