

Book Reviews

Dr Gallup in an Indian Village

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Voting Behaviour in an Indian Village by A H Somjee. M S University, Baroda. 1959. Pp iv + 64. Price Rs 2/4

THIS brochure is to be welcomed as it embodies the results of an empirical study made at the time of the last General Election, of voting behaviour in Boriavi, a village 27 miles from Baroda on the Baroda-Ahmedabad railway line. It is to be hoped that Dr Sornjee's study is symptomatic of a change of interest among Indian political scientists from problems such as "T H Green's political philosophy" and "Social Contract theories in Ancient India" to actual investigation of Indian political behaviour in the context of economic, religious and social conditions obtaining in the country. Only when Indian political scientists get their teeth into this kind of problem is there some hope of any contribution to political theory being made by them. Dr Sornjee's pamphlet is therefore doubly welcome.

After an unnecessary, and, I regret to say, a pretentious section on the logic of a question and answer it looks as though Dr Somjee was trying to assure his colleagues that his investigation was really theoretical even though he was rubbing shoulders with grubby peasantry. Dr Somjee proceeds to tell us that he and his assistants adopted the method of 'participant observation.' 'Participant observation' is the rage among Indian highbrows today, thanks to the invasion of India by Point Four and TCM social scientists, Dr Somjee tells us that he had the advice of his colleagues in the Department of Sociology in planning his survey. It is a pity that his sociological colleagues did not explain to him the real meaning of 'participant observation.' In the latter the investigator spends at least a year in a community sharing the life of the ordinary people and winning their confidence. He collects a vast amount of data, and uses questionnaires as little as possible.

No one who had really studied a society by means of the method of participant observation' (what a

) would show the naivete which many of Dr Somjee's remarks show. For instance, Dr Somjee writes "Although socially a

homogeneous group, none of the Patidar samples expressed his caste sentiments in connection with voting in spite of direct questions to that effect from our ventilators." (p 24. Emphasis added) The idea that stranger-investigators could unearth caste-sentiments by direct questioning in formal interviews is too simple-minded for words. Dr Sornjee's remarks, made thirty pages later, belie his claims to employing the method of participant observation, "Consequently the lack of familiarity on the part of the investigator with his sample acted as one of the factors in the political inarticulation of some of the samples." (p 54)

Boriavi is too large a village (it is classified as a 'town' in the 1951 census) to be studied without the aid of sampling techniques. Dr Sornjee's pamphlet is liberally interspersed with numerical data and the reviewer is thankful to him for it. But surely, the expression of figures in terms of percentages is occasionally distorting especially where the sample studied is small. For instance, on p 25 Dr Somjee writes that 5 per cent of his samples were Barots and that the percentage of vote-intention among them was 100 per cent, 50 per cent voting for Congress and 50 per cent voting for Mahagujerat. Then comes the earth-shaking conclusion, "They (Barots) seemed to have been strongly influenced by the leaders of both the parties;" Thumbing through the pages one finds that two Barots were interviewed!

In the first few pages alone Dr Somjee makes it clear that he is not a mere fact-gatherer. He has a 'hypothesis' to test, viz, to find out the part played by forces such as 'falia' (neighbourhood group), caste and local leadership in the elections. He also states that he wanted to find out how an immense and nation-wide phenomenon like the General Election was translated into local terms. Both sensible tasks, in spite of the pompous manner in which they are stated. Dr Somjee writes: "Although the influence of the caste and religious sentiment on the voting-behaviour was consider-

able it cannot be said to be universally present. That is to say that neither all the caste and sub-caste groups expressed their sentiments of 'weness' in connection of voting through the idiom of caste nor did a sample explicitly state that he was going to vote for a particular candidate because he belonged to his caste or community. Brahmins, Patidars, Barias, Barots, Darjis, Luhars, Sonis, Dhobis, etc. did not say that they as a caste-group were going to vote for this or that candidate. Caste considerations begin to appear among the lower stratas (sic) of Hindu society such as Kachchia Patels, Bhois and Bariayas. There too the sentiment of caste with regard to the election was not universally present. To the best of our knowledge, none of these caste-groups excepting the Baraiyas got together to vote for this or that candidate. And so far as the Baraiyas were concerned they are so scattered in the villages of Kaira District that their caste leaders to the best of our information did not reach the average Baraiya voter." (p 30)

This long quotation gives a brief summary of Dr Sornjee's findings. It is confusing in some ways. In one place Dr Somjee implies that caste considerations were not present because his 'samples' (what a word!) said so while in another he says simply that such considerations were not present. Again, in one place, he says that caste considerations were present among the lower castes while in another he says they were not present even among the Baraiyas. Finally, no one acquainted with villages will agree with him when he says that Baraiya leaders were not in touch with their followers because of scattered settlements.

Even Dr Somjee says that 'religious' factors exercised a definite influence on the voting-decisions of Muslims, Christians, and Harijans. (Since when did Harijans become a separate 'religion'? Dr Sornjee's persistent references to them as distinct from the Hindus is understandable, to say the least.)

According to Dr Somjee himself, caste was obviously operative with

the lower castes (including Harijans), and religion with Christians and Muslims. Perhaps if Dr Somjee's methods had been a little subtler and deeper, he might have found caste operative with the higher castes as well. If the techniques of 'participant observation' had been really applied, Dr Somjee would have been able to listen in on many a conversation revealing the indirect ways in which caste expressed itself. Dr Somjee, for instance, says that the economic factor was the most potent factor of all. It may indeed have been so, but a surprising omission is the castewise distribution of land-ownership, and the numerical strength of each caste. This would have given some idea of the inter-meshing of caste and economic factors.


Sometimes it is really difficult to discover what Dr Somjee means. For

instance, explaining the Harijan vote, he says 'They voted as a caste, not in order to maintain themselves as a caste but to be able to rise higher in the economic and social scale.'(p 50) Translated into simple English this means that a caste which votes en bloc for a candidate in order to raise its position is not voting on caste considerations. Comment is superfluous.

Land Tenancy Act is rightly given an enormous amount of importance by Dr Somjee. But the reviewer would have liked Dr Somjee to explain how exactly this Act worked in Boriavi, Reports from other areas in Gujerat do not show that the Act was very effective in transferring land from big land owners to tenants. Again, Dr Somjee does not distinguish between landowners resident in the village and absentee landowners. Some landowners are

also tenants, and occasionally, even hire themselves out as labourers.

According to Dr Somjee, the 'leaders' were very important in influencing voting-behaviour of their followers. He would have added to the usefulness of his pamphlet if he had explained to his readers what exactly was the kind of hold the leaders had landownership, membership of particular castes, money-lending, crucial contacts, education etc. He writes: "It may be interesting to note that whenever a sample did not act in accordance with the dictates of caste, religious or economic considerations, wherever they definitely operated, one could trace the influence of a political leader in such a voting-decision." (p 4) This is contradicted for Christians and Muslims (p 51), who, according to Dr Somjee, voted for the Congress candidate on the instructions



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of leaders of their respective religious leaders residing outside Boriavi.

The reviewer is not trying to deny the importance of either leaders or of economic factors. What he is objecting to is that Dr Somjee's survey is neither deep nor systematic, and Dr Somjee lacks the requisite 'bag of tools' to carry out effectively the task he has undertaken. One methodological question seems to have escaped him altogether: what guarantee is there that voters finally vote as they have told

the investigators they would? Again, how does one know they give the reasons which really prompt them, assuming that they are clearly aware of them?

Dr Somjee's pamphlet seems to have been written in a great hurry. Spelling and punctuation leave much to be desired. One sentence reads: 'This difficulty was all the more greater in the case of female samples.' (Emphasis added) Then there is a *gem* on p 24: "Among the Patidars the samples who failed to express their vote-intention were

essentially female samples." (Emphasis added) What were they inessentially?

These criticisms should not be understood to mean that the reviewer does not welcome the pamphlet. He does. Dr Somjee's endeavour deserves to be praised. He is on the right road and that is the important thing. Let us hope that in the near future the Department of Political Science in Baroda will lead the other Universities in this type of research.

Rural sociology in India

THIS is a revised and considerably enlarged version of Dr Desai's earlier Introduction to Rural Sociology in India'. Both books have the same pattern: a first section discussing some of the problems and categories used in the study of rural society, and a second part consisting of reprints and abridgements of various substantive articles on the subject.

Virtually no changes have been made in the first part of the book. But the 'readings' of the earlier edition, none of which had specific reference to India, have been replaced by writings about Indian rural society. One or two of the articles selected come from the 'classics': for example, there is the famous extract from Capita) and there are two short pieces from Baden-Powell's book, 'The Origin and Growth of Village Communities in India'. But most of the pieces are taken from recent publications by sociologists, some of them from relatively inaccessible or ephemeral sources. In addition, Dr Desai has classified the pieces into ten sections, which are designed to show the change and development now taking place in Indian rural society, and the obstacles which such developments meet.

It is to be regretted that Dr Desai was not able to apply to the first part of the book the same radical surgery which he has used on the second. When a third edition of the book is contemplated, I would recommend that the following points should be taken into consideration. Firstly, although the

By A R Desai. The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, Bombay, 1959. pp xviii, 440, Price Rs 20.

categories and theoretical framework of the first part of the book are in many ways directly applicable to Indian society, there nevertheless remains here and there an outlook and approach which is not Indian, but American. For instance in the chapter on Economy, I consider that the distinctive character of Indian as against American agriculture—its labour-intensiveness—is not sufficiently brought out.

Secondly there is an unfortunate air of 'manifesto' or 'programme' pervading the first part of the book. We are continually being told what should be done. I confine myself to one example, from page 20:

"A detailed map of India indicating various natural and economic regions; indicating areas inhabited by populations living in various stages of economic development; showing linguistic regions including regions based on different dialects as well as different variations of the main language; and showing, further, religious regions based on different religious beliefs prevailing among the people; will throw great light on some of the most burning problems of Indian society...."

Would it not have been better, in a book designed to introduce people to the subject, to show them what has been done: or even, if such a map is an 'urgent need' to make it and publish it in the book? The basis of my criticism is that many of the questions described in the first part of the book as requiring an urgent answer, could in fact have been answered, at least in part, from the readings given in the second part, or from other sources. One might even argue that more

is known about the peasants of India, their economic, political and religious life, than about peasants anywhere in the world. The first part of Dr Desai's book has not tapped the rich sources of information to be found in the older, as well as more recent, literature about the Indian countryside.

Thirdly I would like to suggest that in future editions of the book there should be some discussion of sociological theory; at least an explanation of such basic concepts as 'structure', 'function', 'system', and so forth. It is true that an intelligent reader will pick up the meaning when he goes through the second part of the book, but, unless he is exceptionally intelligent, he will not realise that behind many of the analyses lies a coherent and systematic body of sociological theory.

Finally the student who uses this book would benefit if he were told something of the methods and techniques which can be used in the study of rural society, I think it would add life to the book if one were told how a survey is conducted, of what intensive fieldwork consists, how questionnaires are framed, what a genealogy is, what the 'case method' is, and, most importantly, if the student were warned to look at particular bodies of information and to try to evaluate their accuracy and worth against the methods used to collect that information. A teaching book should try at least to inculcate the habit of criticism.

Nevertheless, if intelligently used, Dr Desai's book will provide a stimulating aid to class-room teaching.