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9. ABSTRACT
 This study examines the role of social groups and religious values in the economic development of peasant communities. Writings on economic development published since 1950 often state that social groups and religious values are prime factors in the modernization of village societies. Most of these writings depict social groups and religious values as aspects of traditional village culture which hinder and obstruct economic reform. But a growing number of recent analyses indicate that social groups and religious values can also be positive forces for the implementation of economic innovations. These two sociocultural factors are reported as being highly significant to community development whenever they coexist in the form of religiously distinguished social groups.

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Social Groups and Religious Values
As Factors in Economic Development:
A South Asian Example

by

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The author is a graduate student in Anthropology and Sociology at Rice University. This paper reports research related to AID contract no. AID/csd-3302, on "Distribution of Gains, Wealth and Income from Development."

Program Discussion Papers are preliminary materials circulated to stimulate discussion and critical comment. References in publications to Discussion Papers should be cleared with the author to protect the tentative character of these papers.

Preface

As the second in a series of three interrelated essays, this discussion paper is concerned with social groups and religious values as factors in economic development. In relation to my preceding and following discussion papers, this work is a transitional step between general theories of socioeconomic development and a case study of a particular developmental project. Many of the underlying assumptions held in this paper are supported by the preceding discussion paper, in which social groups and cultural values were shown to be prominent variables in several recent analyses of village development.¹ The specific topics treated in this present work are exemplified in a following discussion paper with an examination of a developmental project carried out in South Asia.

Within the context of the Program of Development Studies' multifaceted approach to income distribution, this discussion paper explores social groups and religious values as factors involved in the planning and implementation of developmental programs. This topic is one of seven questions raised by von der Mehden in the Program of Development Studies' outline of research.² Presently, only a few works examine the roles of social groups and religious values in economic development, and these are

¹The role which social groups and religious values play in studies of economic development is brought out in my earlier work, "Noneconomic Factors in the Study of Economic Development," Program of Development Studies Discussion Paper no. 61, Rice University, Houston, 1975.

²These seven questions and the overall scheme in which they exist are presented in James Land, "Distribution of Gains, Wealth and Income from Economic and Political Development," Program of Development Studies Discussion Paper no. 7, Rice University, Houston, 1972.

limited to case studies of community and regional projects. The information contained in this literature indicates that the implementation of developmental projects, especially at the village level, frequently depends on the social groups and religious values which are often part of indigenous economic systems. To contribute toward a better understanding of this subject, this paper looks at the economic functions of social groups and religious values, and evaluates their importance as factors of development.

Social Groups and Religious Values
As Factors in Economic Development:
A South Asian Example *

In the framework of economic development, social groups are conceived of as social bodies, ranging in size from small units as a nuclear family to larger groups as the social stratum of all of the white-collar workers in a nation. The smaller types of social groups, which are usually based on kinship bonds, are chief elements in the economy of village societies, whereas large-scale groups are associated with a country's national level of economy and are found in areas of dense population.¹ Studies of rural development concentrate on small and middle sized social groups in order to comprehend the economy of the village and to investigate the junctures between the village economy and the greater economy of the region or nation. As we will see from a review of several case studies, the success or failure of village development projects frequently hinges on an understanding and pragmatic use of local groups.

Several nineteenth century scholars examined social groups as factors in economic development. However, the concept of social groups was limited

*This paper is based on work performed in conjunction with the author's doctoral dissertation.

¹This notion has been employed as an analytical device to determine economic development in evolving societies: the fewer institutions based on kin relations in an economy, the more developed it is considered to be. This idea is offered by Thomas McHale and then applied by Charles Smith in McHale, "Econocological Analysis and Differential Economic Growth Rate," Human Organization, XXI, 1 (Spring, 1962), 30-5; Smith, "Economic Institutions as Social Indicators," Ethnohistory, XIX, 1 (1972), 13-26.

at this time to large groups usually distinguished by occupation or economic roles. This emphasis on large social groups was, to a great degree, an offshoot of the economic theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which were concerned with complex economic systems in the industrial nations of the West. Economic change was described in these theories with large-scale components, and when social groups were included in these analyses, the groups were also dealt with on a macro level. One of these theories is the well-known scheme of economic change developed by Karl Marx, in which a laboring class overthrows the capitalist class, thence changing the economy from a capitalistic to a socialistic form. Several other studies produced in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries treated social groups in a similar fashion--explaining aspects of economic growth or major changes in economy with analyses of the interactions between large social groups.

When the study of economic development shifted its attention to rural, nonwestern economies, the smaller kinds of social groups were recognized as a worthy subject for investigation. In the mid-twentieth century, developmental programs were initiated for the purpose of modernizing underdeveloped nations--the majority of whose populations are located in rural villages. Economic life in peasant villages is founded on long-established social groups such as kinship units, associations based on age and sex, and handicraft and occupational groupings. To deal with these microeconomies, the designers and field administrators of developmental projects discovered that it was helpful and sometimes necessary to gain an understanding of small social groups.

Developmental studies of religious values followed much the same course as writings on social groups. Religious values were incorporated into theories of economic development by only a few nineteenth century scholars; but in more recent years, ideas of religiosity have become commonplace in discussions of socioeconomic growth. As in the study of social groups, attention was drawn to religious values when economic development programs in preindustrialized nations necessitated a more comprehensive knowledge of rural communities. Religious values are a vital part of village life, as recourse to supernaturalism is one of the only ways that villagers can cope with the problems of sickness, troubles with crops and livestock, natural phenomena which threaten their well-being, and other matters that lay beyond their means of secular control. A subsistence economy is often the focal point of supernatural beliefs, for villagers commonly use religion to allay their apprehensions about the uncertain nature of food production and acquisition. The religious values held by the members of a society also bear on economic development whenever they support notions of economic achievement or are antithetical to such ideas. Generally speaking, most writings on this subject state that religious values retard economic growth by impeding projects of economic reform. However, other studies argue that these values may function as positive forces which encourage development.

A small number of contemporary works have treated the interaction between religious values and social groups, examining the effect that religiously defined groups have on economic change. The interplay of social groups and religious values can readily be seen in South Asia where occupational caste groupings are differentiated largely on the basis of Hindu concepts of purity

and pollution. Each of the caste groups interrelate with the other castes according to strictly regulated modes of interaction. Any particular interaction between two caste groups is determined by their relative position on a social hierarchy that ranges from very pure to highly polluted castes. When economic change or development takes place among the castes, it often affects their hierarchical relationships, patterns of interaction, and religious behavior. Such combinations of religious values and social groups are not limited to India or South Asia alone, but the relationship is particularly prevalent in this cultural area and has much to do with the economic development of the societies in this part of the world.

Social groups

Within the writings that examine the role of social groups in economic development, there are two primary topics which can be discerned. The first of these topics has to do with the ways that social groups function in relation to the economy of village communities. Different kinds of social groups in small villages carry on different types of economic functions, the nature of which is generally determined by the size and constituency of each group. There seems to be a definite tendency for the smallest groups in a little community to be the chief units of food production, whereas the more complex groups in the village are usually related to processes of reciprocal exchange and redistribution. A second topic of study concerning social groups is the way that the groups retard or encourage development. Some groups may function to hasten economic growth by bridging the gap between the micro and macro levels of a nation's economy.

This occurs when social groups connect the economy of a small society to the industrial economy in urban centers. As we further investigate these two general topics, it becomes apparent that the essence of the economic structure in rural areas is made-up of social groups and social bonds, and that whenever economic transformation occurs in these rural economies, the social groups are at the center of the change.

Economic organization in village societies is founded upon several kinds of social groups that perform the functions of production, reciprocity, redistribution, and trade. The fundamental unit of production in these communities is the family, which is usually the smallest of the village groups. Family members work together in the specific tasks of the local economy, dividing the labors according to their abilities and social custom. The next type of group in an ascending scale of size and complexity is another kinship grouping that can be described as a collection of individual families who are related through male and/or female lines of descent. These kinship groups vary in their particular characteristics from one culture to another, but in their most common form they are referred to as lineages. Lineages serve more complex economic functions than do the families alone, for lineages may act as networks for the exchange of goods and services through practices of reciprocity and redistribution. Beyond families and lineages, there are usually only a few other types of groups in a small village, and these tend to be specialized in their nature and economic role.¹

¹For a thorough discussion of social groups as they relate to economy in societies of various stages of complexity, see Leslie White, The Evolution of Culture (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959); Elman Service, Primitive Social Organization (N.Y.: Random House, 2nd ed., 1971); and Marshall Shalins, "Tribal Economies," in Tribesmen (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), Chapter 5.

Whether it be the nuclear family, with a mother, father, and their children, or the larger extended family which often includes two or three nuclear families, the family group is usually the chief unit of economic production in a village. Division of labor within the nuclear family is, for the most part, based upon age and sex, with the adult males doing most of the strenuous agricultural work, construction of buildings, and much of the trading. Adult women process grain and other crops, prepare meals, care for the smaller children, and make items for the household. Both the men and the women make handicrafts and perform the daily tasks demanded by the specific means of food production. Younger males aid their fathers whenever it is possible, and adolescent females help their mothers with her duties. Boys and girls share the household chores as gathering fuel, carrying water, and tending the livestock. With this simple arrangement, most necessities of life are acquired by village peoples.

Families in a village are most often drawn together by larger kinship groups such as lineages, whose economic activities generally center around acts of exchange. The families of a lineage in some societies live in close proximity to one another, whereas in other societies the families in a lineage may be geographically separated.. In the latter case, the lineage families frequently gather on festival days, during religious ceremonies, and upon the marriage or death of one of the family members. When the members of a lineage assemble, a feast can be expected, with food and drink being provided by a host family or through the collective contributions of all of the families. In some societies, the expense of a lineage feast is so great that a host family may have to go into debt for a number of years to cover the cost. Relatively wealthy families can afford, and are expected to

sponsor, more elaborate and more numerous gatherings than are the other families in the lineage. These disproportionate spendings function to level the differences in familial wealth by redistributing it among the members of the group.

A second mechanism by which goods are exchanged within village societies is through acts of reciprocity. Many times taking the form of gift exchange, acts of reciprocity entail the giving of obligatory gifts and services for gifts and services received. This practice does not usually occur within a family or between close relatives, but it is a common custom among more distant relatives or nonrelatives of large social groups. When a person initiates an act of gift exchange, it is done with the expectation that the donee will reciprocate with a gift of approximately equal value. With this understanding, gifts are often made by individuals who desire something in return. Once a gift or service is accepted, the recipient is obligated to return the gesture, and the donor may help the recipient in selecting a reciprocal gift by hinting at his desires.

Redistribution, acts of reciprocity, and other social functions of village economy are also carried out by social groups besides the family and the lineage. Political bodies in peasant villages, for example, are sometimes at the center of a redistributive system. A central authority, such as a headman or a village council, may require periodic payments of crops or other forms of wealth from villagers. The political authority can use these receipts to hold public feasts, for use as a communal reserve in case of emergency, or to lend out to those who lack sufficient food or seed. As in our earlier description of redistribution, these acts tend to balance out any economic inequalities among the village people. Other village groups

which perform economic functions include a host of associations whose criteria of membership are based not upon kinship relations as in families and lineages, but usually upon age and sex. Specific examples of such associations are a clique of middle-aged women who weave cloth together and a club of adult men who join company for the manifest goal of hunting wild game. Interest groups such as these are vital organs in the economic systems of little communities where organized labor unions, social service organizations, and market facilities are absent.

The social groups in small communities have been dealt with in studies on economic growth for some time; however, their potential as tools for implementing projects of development has only recently been recognized. Writings which bring out the importance of small groups as economic institutions in villages state that families and other kin groups are the bases of horticultural and agricultural production, and they should be taken into account in any attempt to improve the economy of rural regions.¹ This approach to social groups is primarily to warn experts of development that the local groups can block attempts at modernization. More pragmatic schemes of economic growth place a greater emphasis on the positive potential of social groups. In these schemes, it is suggested that developmental projects be generated around indigenous groups or new groups created in the

¹A representative work which treats familial groups in this manner is found in Arthur Lewis, The Theory of Economic Growth (London: Richard Irwin, Inc., 1955), 113-20. Economic change in developing societies is indicated to depend on the social networks of established kinship groups; David Moyer points this out in his work which argues that kin relations take precedence over purely economic considerations in the development of village economies, "The Social Context of Economic Change: A Study of Eskimo Boat Management," Human Organization, XXX, 1 (Spring, 1971), 11-24.

village setting.¹ These indigenous and newly formed groups are described as associations that may function as intermediary links interjacent to the village economy and the national economy. Many of these associations relate to regional markets and inter-village systems of trade.

In the most self-sufficient peasant village, there are always some fundamental needs of life that must be obtained by trade from outside the community. To purchase salt, iron, spices, matches, and other manufactured goods, peasant villagers journey to regional markets or, instead, purchase the supplies from middlemen who carry the goods to the outlying villages. If the area is well-developed, the regional market, and possibly even the surrounding villages, will be joined by a motorable road to an industrial town whence a myriad of manufactured goods may derive. In less developed regions, trading at the market center may be limited to one or two "market days" each week when the people from peripheral villages bring their goods to sell or barter. Several permanent merchants are located in the regional market towns, selling merchandise that is trucked into the market from urban centers and buying some of the produce brought to the market by the villagers. The merchants in the market, the market itself, the people from the outlying villages, and any traders who transport goods in and out of the market can all be seen as associations that link the economy of the industrial nation to the economy of small communities.

¹The pragmatic use of indigenous groups is mentioned in the study of Christoffel Van Nieuwenhuijze, Development: A Challenge to Whom (Paris: Mouton, 1969), 125-6. An explanation of how the groups can be built into developmental projects, with illustrations from case studies, is given by William Whyte and Lawrence Williams in Toward an Integrated Theory of Development: Economic and Noneconomic Variables in Rural Development (Ithaca: New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1968).

Most complex of all the social groups in a developing nation are the groups at the national level. Studied mainly by political scientists and economists, these national groups include political parties, military forces, ruling families, social elite, and many other social strata of urban centers. One way that these groups affect economic development is by channeling national resources and allocating trade rights and sources of credit to particular segments of the population. This kind of favoritism creates marked inequalities in income distribution. As an example of how this occurs, the influence of social elites will be cited.

It has been found that socially elite groups in a backward nation often retard rural development. This happens when elite groups work to keep the economy of an underdeveloped nation in its former state, which is usually to the advantage of the elites and in keeping with their preconceived assumptions of how an economy should function.¹ When a nation begins to modernize, the political structure is compartmentalized and the new government offices that form are staffed with the members of the country's elite. A conflict is imminent in this situation, for the elitest bureaucrats have been raised to think in terms of a rigidly stratified society and also in terms of their own social group which has vested interests in the former structure of the economy.² These and other related notions prompt the elite to govern developing nations in ways which perpetuate the old economic

¹A specific example of this behavior on the part of elites is described in Leslie and Noralou Roos' study of Turkish bureaucracy, Managers of Modernization: Organization and Elites in Turkey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). Further information of this problem of elite groups in developing nations can be found in S. Huntington's Political Order in Changing Societies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 177-88, and in several of the works in Gustav Ranis, ed., Government and Economic Development (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

²One way that this may occur is when governments favor a wealthy class by granting import licenses, credit, and other commercial incentives

structure and which fail to better the life of the rurality. The conflict between the actions of elite groups and goals of rural modernization is one of the reasons that it is difficult to integrate the rural and national levels of a country's economy.

This problem of coupling the macro and micro sectors of economy in underdeveloped nations is prominent among the tasks which face the engineers of economic development.¹ One way to approach this problem is to work with the intermediary groups associated with regional markets. The great majority of the people in backward countries are peasants, who depend on markets outside their villages for various commodities. These people maintain established ties with the merchants who sell the needed goods, and these ties exist in and around the regional markets where the urban economy joins the economy of the little community. A schematized model representing the merger of these two levels of economy could be made by plotting out the primary social groups that act as links in connecting these two economic spheres. The common types of groups on the village level and some of those on the national level have been dealt with in the foregoing pages of this work; what remains to be done is to examine some of the ways in which intermediary groups draw the two economic sectors together.

to the members of this high income class. This point is made by James Land and Ronald Soligo, "Income Distribution and Employment in Labor Redundant Economies," Program of Development Studies Discussion Paper no. 9 (1971).

¹George Dalton and Edward Norbeck have pointed out this problem in their writings on economic development, George Dalton, "Theoretical Issues in Economic Anthropology," Current Anthropology, X, 1 (Feb., 1969), 63-80; Edward Norbeck, "Gaining a Livelihood," in manuscript. Set in a more abstract framework, the problematic separation of the macro and micro aspects of a nation's economy is discussed by Irma Adelman and Cynthia Morris in their treatment of "dualism" in the article, "An Econometric Model of Socioeconomic and Political Change in Underdeveloped Countries," The American Economic Review (Dec., 1968), 1184-1218).

A more precise knowledge of intermediary groups can be gained by summarizing an actual project that used such groups as its principal method in developing the economy of a village. This case of development is taken from Latin America where an experimental model of modernization was initiated and managed by sociologists and anthropologists¹ in the community of Huayopampa. A major goal of this project was to develop a source of income for people in Huayopampa in addition to their previous livelihood. This was attempted by introducing fruit trees into the village. Fruit trees thrived in the area, and after a few years the community had extensive orchards with such abundant fruit that it could be sold to outsiders. However, the nearest market town lay a considerable distance from the village. After the road to the market was improved with the collective efforts of the citizenry from Huayopampa and other villages along the road, the trucking services available in the region were enlisted to haul the fruit to the market. But the transportation fees charged by the truckers were viewed as exorbitant by the villagers, and the cost of transporting the fruit lowered the profit margin so much that the villagers no longer wanted to sell the fruit. In spite of attempts at negotiation, the truckers refused to lower the cost of their services. At this point in the project, the managers were faced with our original problem of how to connect the village economy with the regional economy. They had tried to incorporate the preexisting group (the truckers), but the self-interests of this group prevented it from being used to connect the village economy to that of the greater region.

¹The details of this project are contained in the work by William Whyte and Lawrence Williams, op. cit.

Having failed to join the two levels of economy by means of the autochthonous truckers, the managers of the project decided to create a new intermediary association that would link the village with the market. The owners of the fruit orchards were brought together into a cooperation, and with money collected from each of the members, a communal truck was purchased. Periodic trips to the town were made with the communal truck, and, besides transporting the fruit to the market, the truck also brought back insecticides for the fruit trees and other items requested by the owners. The fruit sales were now so lucrative that the members soon recouped their initial investment on the truck and began to acquire a sizeable profit. Huayopampa prospered from the economic innovations, and the development project became a prototype for future plans of development throughout the nation. In this case of development, the cooperation acted as an intermediary association that bridged the separation between the village and the regional market, illustrating how social groups can be employed as positive factors in implementing development projects.

However, the role of social groups is not always positive for, as we have already seen in the look at elites, social groups may be obstacles rather than instrumental forces for development.¹ Two reasons that social groups sometimes act as hindrances to development are: first, the fear of social change, and, second, the adoption of nativistic policies. The first of these concepts has been touched upon in our short description of elite groups which seem to be threatened by one or more aspects of economic change. Economically favored social groups such as elites often perceive social change

¹A general study of cultural obstacles of development is contained in the article by Philip Hauser, "Cultural and Personal Obstacles to Economic Development in Less Developed Areas," Human Organization, XVIII, 2 (Summer, 1959), 78-84.

as threatening, whether the changes come as economic development or as other sorts of cultural transformation. Those social groups which maintain superior economic positions in their society have much to lose by changes in the nation's power structure or economic system. Other social bodies which see economic development as a menace to their security are the middlemen and small businessmen who make a living from the villagers who trade in the regional markets. If the economy of the outlying villages is better connected to the source of manufactured goods by a new road or new intermediary groups, then the merchants and traders who once served as middlemen between the village and the industrial centers will probably suffer if they do not adjust with the evolving economy.

A second way that social groups may thwart economic development is by adopting nativistic policies--or the desire to restore their nation to its pristine condition. Usually in the form of political factions or religious sects, these groups are reacting against their subjugation by foreign powers, their exploitation by industrial nations, and the loss of their traditional ways of life. To rectify these situations, nativistic movements call for an expulsion of all foreign elements from the nation and advocate a return to life as it was lived before modernization or colonialism took place.¹

Religious values

People in peasant communities harbor numerous supernatural beliefs which are used to relieve their anxieties about daily troubles and to answer transcendental questions regarding otherworldly matters. Villagers cling stubbornly to these beliefs, and frequently these beliefs are noted as

¹Nativistic movements are dealt with by Edward Norbeck in Religion in Primitive Society (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1961), 231-66.

being factors of major consequence in the development of rural societies. Sometimes, religious values work to encourage development-oriented behavior, but these values are more commonly portrayed as barriers to economic development. A primary reason that religious values are interpreted as obstacles to village development lies in the assumptions and attitudes of modern westerners, who tend to view the ideas and practices of peasant religions as irrational. However, when the religious values of a village are seen in context of the cultural ethos of the community, they are totally rational and consistent with traditional philosophies and ways of life. By understanding supernatural beliefs in their cultural context, conflicts between the beliefs and developmental projects can be avoided, and the beliefs may even be put to use as tools for implementing socioeconomic growth.

The possible effects of religious values on economic development can be seen in many cultures including our own. A familiar example of a religious impetus for economic growth exists in the relationship of Protestantism and capitalism, where economic success in one's lifetime is a strong indication of a favorable afterlife.¹ The belief in predestination in Protestantism spurred economic activity which, in turn, led to the rapid industrialization of the West. A common example of how religious values can deter economic development is found in the religious system of the Amish. Amish religion contains sanctions against elaborate styles of living, machinery besides that which is absolutely necessary, and excessive means of livelihood--thus dissuading these people from developing their economy and, instead, advocating an ascetic way of life.

¹Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, translated by Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1930).

As seen in the examples of Protestant and Amish religion, religious values can reinforce or impede activities that give rise to economic growth. The question of how and why religious values of certain societies act on economic development has been treated by Sorokin with a theory that classifies cultures into two general categories: sensate cultures and ideational cultures.¹ In sensate cultures, capital is said to be invested in ventures that produce more capital, whereas the wealth in ideational cultures is often spent for religious things such as churches--hence, the economy in sensate cultures is supposed to have a greater potential for more rapid economic growth. However, this relationship is explained as holding true only if there is a close congruence between the social values and the actual behavior within the population. The overall relationship between economic growth and the two types of cultures may be inverted whenever religious incentives for development cause ideational cultures to be economically successful or when secular reasons for asceticism retard the economic growth in sensate cultures. Illustrating this inversion is the positive effect that Protestantism has had upon the economy of certain sensate cultures in the West.

In the small societies of underdeveloped nations, traditional religious beliefs often come into conflict with the goals of developmental projects. Sometimes this dissonance has to do with religious practices of redistribution which thwart attempts at capital savings.² The encouragement of capital

¹Pitirim Sorokin offers these categories in his Social and Cultural Dynamics, III, "Fluctuations of Social Relationships, War, and Revolution," (N.Y.: The Bedminster Press, 1962), 221-2.

²Practices of redistribution are described in our earlier examination of social groups.

accumulation is a common method employed in developmental projects as a first step in establishing small businesses or other entrepreneurial endeavors, but capital savings are difficult to acquire when the religious customs of a society work to redistribute accumulations of wealth. An inability to save capital has been reported in the Mexican village of Amatenango, where men must spend a great deal of their time and resources in a hierarchy of religious and civil offices. One of these ritual offices is that of alferez, which costs the incumbent large amounts of wealth for the supporting of its functions. The office of alferez is given to wealthy men in the community, reducing many of them to near poverty. Customs associated with the office of alferez are strongly sanctioned by the threat of witchcraft for anyone who does not live up to the responsibilities of the office. Continual expenditures for the various religious duties in Amatenango serve to level any outstanding inequalities in the wealth of the population, and they also frustrate any attempt at capital saving.¹

A second aspect of village development which has incurred strong religious conflicts is the widespread undertakings to introduce techniques of birth control. Done in order to bring about a better per capital standard of living, projects directed at controlling the population growth in small communities frequently encounter stalwart opposition due to religious principles concerning the value of life or religious customs that demand the procreation of many offspring. When the moral tenets of a religion place a high value on human life and forbid its destruction for any reason, then these values will clash with programs of population control. In such

¹Manning Nash, "The Social Context of Economic Choice in a Small Community," Man, vol. 219 (1961), 185-95.

religious system, strict moral sanctions might be raised against any willful attempt to prevent pregnancy or birth. The precepts of some religious systems require the procreation of many offspring in order that male or female lines of descent may be perpetuated. Sons are deemed necessary in some South Asian societies so that fathers will be provided with a male successor who, after the father's death, will conduct periodic obsequies that assure the security and well-being of the deceased. To guarantee the presence of a son for two or three decades after the father passes away, a fairly large family is usually attained in order to insure more than one son, and birth control will not be considered by the people who maintain these ideas until the sons are born into the household. In cultures which hold such religious beliefs, the relationship between demographic control and the religious values must be fully comprehended before realistic efforts can be made toward the implementation of birth control techniques.¹

One way to prevent religious conflicts in situations of development is by gaining a thorough knowledge of the religious values in small communities. Native religious systems in village societies, however, are rarely studied by those who plan or administer projects of economic modernization. Instead, religious values are oftentimes interpreted as being irrational modes of behavior. This misunderstanding of nonwestern religions as irrational comes about when the religions are judged by the standards of the western world-view, which is characterized by the rational, scientific approach to life. Viewing the elements of one culture as irrational by the criteria of another is purely an act of ethnocentrism. In the cultures

¹For a more detailed account of the interrelationship of values and population control see Ansley Coale, "Population and Economic Development," in American Assembly, The Population Dilemma: Objectives and Methods (N.Y.: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

existing in the underdeveloped regions of the world, there are vastly different assumptions about the universe and ways of living that most often seem irrational to westerners, but these beliefs and patterns of behavior are completely meaningful and logically consistent within the cultural setting of the local people.¹ To avoid ethnocentric misunderstandings of religious systems, the religious ideas in a society can be conceptualized as mental links that connect many of the elements of native cosmology in the minds of the population.²

When religious values are understood within their cultural context, they, as all other sociocultural elements, have more potential for pragmatic application in projects of economic development. In the few writings which treat religious systems as a device for implementing developmental projects, religious values are explained as being very effective in both initiating and supporting economic change. These studies indicate that religious values may become vehicles for economic development if they are understood and used to their fullest advantage.³

¹This general subject regarding ration versus irrational behavior in underdeveloped nations is treated with special emphasis placed on village religions in an article by Benjamin Paul, "The Rational Basis in the Perception of Cultural Differences," Economic Development and Cultural Change, I (1952/3), 133-38.

²The interpretation of religious values as links in the framework of social process is put forth by Judith Blake and Kingsley Davis, "Norms, Values, and Sanctions," in Robert Faris, ed., Handbook of Modern Sociology (N.Y.: Rand McNally, 1964). By explaining values as links, Blake and Davis avoid the pitfall of assuming religious values to be determinants of behavior, while still maintaining that they are useful constructs for considering processes of social change.

³Bert Hoselitz makes this point and gives examples of the use of various types of cultural values--not specifically religious--in French and East Indian societies; "Tradition and Economic Growth," in R. Baribabti and J. Spengler, eds., Tradition, Values, and Socioeconomic Development (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

One illustration of how ideas of supernaturalism may be used to implement economic development comes from the Vicos Project--a case of planned economic change conducted in a small Peruvian community under the direction of the anthropologist, Allen Holmberg. The Vicos Project needed several highly motivated groups to undertake a number of economic reforms. Holmberg chose six villagers who had passed through the complex religious hierarchy of the community as foremen, or mayorales, for his needed groups. Due to their success in the community's religious system, these novice foremen commanded great respect among their fellow villagers. Their leadership was unquestioned, and the new social groups performed well, thus enabling Holmberg to accomplish his projected goals.¹ This instance of development demonstrates how religious values can be utilized as a positive force in instilling innovations in the economy of a community.

Religious values and social groups in South Asia

As we have seen in the preceding paragraphs, social groups and religious values are sometimes combined as social bodies distinguished by certain religious values. Such religiously distinguished groups are especially prominent in the South Asian countries of India, Nepal, Ceylon, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Sikkim, where almost one billion people classify themselves into distinct social groups on the basis of religious beliefs. Distributed throughout many rural villages--over half a million of which have been counted in India alone--this huge population is divided

¹Allen Holmberg, "Changing Community Attitudes and Values in Peru: A Case Study in Guided Change," in Richard Adams, et al (eds.), Social Change in Latin America Today: Its Implications for United States Policy (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., 1960).

into occupational castes, or ja'ti. Developmental projects established in South Asia consistently find that religious values associated with the caste groupings have much to do with the possibility of improving the living conditions and creating more productive economies in South Asian villages.¹ Studies which endeavor to explain this situation generally point to conflicts that arise between traditional South Asian values and progressive reforms, stating that the religious customs repeatedly prevent innovative behavior.² Supernatural beliefs contained in Sanskritic religions continually impede economic development in the small communities of South Asia by supporting traditional modes of group interaction, leadership, occupation, and patterns of social mobility.³

At the core of South Asian religions are the central doctrines of Sanskritic philosophy--karma, dharma, and ideas about reincarnation. Stated generally, the notion of reincarnation affirms that the life-essence of every animal being is reborn after the animal dies, and that this process of transmigration usually continues through an infinite series of rebirths. However, if a life-essence is reborn as a person, there is a chance that it can escape the cycle of transmigrations if the person lives by the religious doctrines of karma and dharma. The concept of karma holds that past actions

¹Irma Adelman and George Dalton bring out the relative importance of the religious values related to South Asian social groups in the article "A factor Analysis of Modernization in Village India," in Economic Development and Social Change: The Modernization of Village Communities, ed. by George Dalton (N.Y.: The Natural History Press, 1971).

²A more extensive explanation of these problems in South Asian development is contained in the work of Nasir Khan, Problems of Growth in an Underdeveloped Economy--India (N.Y.: Asian Publishing House, 1963).

³The religious and social factors which act as obstacles to modernization in South Asia are dealt with by Karl Kapp in Hindu Culture, Economic Development, and Economic Planning in India (N.Y.: Asian Publishing House, 1963).

determine a person's destiny, and to control one's fate in the present life and all future lives a person must take care in all activities. It is said that those individuals who have been most pious in their former lives have earned high ranking positions in the social hierarchy of South Asian society. The philosophy of karma further explains that one of the chief ways of controlling your actions is by observing the laws of dharma, which state that people should try to excel at the socioeconomic role into which they were born. These religious beliefs strongly influence the behavior in village societies by advocating that a positive afterlife is possible only for individuals who conform to the customary patterns of living within each caste grouping.

The caste groupings in South Asian society are also supported by prescribed occupational roles and concepts of ritual purity and pollution, both of which were long ago set down in Vedic scriptures. Ranging from the smallest family to an entire village, all of the social groups in every South Asian village are in some affected by these distinctions of occupation and purity-pollution. A highly polluted blacksmith, for example, is often forbidden to come within close spatial or social proximity to a priest, for it is believed that such actions would ritually contaminate the priest. For similar reasons, a family which is considered to be very pure will not live near or associate on equal terms with a family that is polluted. If an entire hamlet consists of households of a distinctive occupational profession, it will also be set apart from the greater society in which it exists.¹

¹An excellent source for an exhaustive explanation of South Asian social groups and their socioeconomic interrelationships is found in: David Mandelbaum, Society in India, I and II (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1971).

These rules of social differentiation and the practices that they entail are all referred to as the caste system.

When South Asian castes interact, their relationships are most frequently characterized by reciprocal, economic services that are governed by religious beliefs. Each of the social groups renders its professional services to the other groups, usually without immediate payment. The households of each caste offer their services to and receive services from households of other caste groups, and over time, the services taken and given generally cancel one another out. If the reciprocal exchange of services does not balance out, then payment of cash or property can be demanded from the debtor after a certain period of time or at fixed dates. Eventual payment of the service debts is assured by the doctrine of dharma, which requires one to live up to the obligations of the socioeconomic system or gain negative karma. This exchange of services includes almost all of the specialized talents found in a rural village--leatherworkers, potters, merchants, street sweepers, priests, blacksmiths, etc.--and together they constitute the economic network, or jajmani system, of the South Asian village.

Religious sanctions within the jajmani system are highly effective in encouraging traditional forms of caste behavior. Any caste member who does not follow the religious beliefs associated with the jajmani system is thought to be acting irrationally, for such behavior will surely bring catastrophe to the villager's door--not only in social ostracism, but also in an array of daily troubles. Illness, sterility, lost possessions, and other unpleasantness may all be caused by a failure to live by the religious teachings related to caste society. However, it is not only worldly

fears that induce the South Asian villager to live by his religious laws and caste codes. Religious values also function to answer cosmological questions regarding rebirth and the general order of the universe. This transcendental aspect of religion is closely interwoven with the pragmatic side of Sanskritic supernaturalism, and together they maintain a firm control over the daily actions of the villagers. Known as the concept of the Great and the Little Traditions, this dualistic interpretation of South Asian religion has been widely used to explain how religious values pertain to caste groups and the jajmani system.¹

Innovative behavior in economic or other social matters is discouraged by the rigidly structured nexus of Sanskritic religion and caste groups. Conscious efforts to improve the living conditions in peasant communities of South Asia are repeatedly foiled by the long established jajmani system with its extensive religious sanctions. Little chance for social mobility is present within South Asian society, and the few opportunities for mobility that do exist come as gradual status increases for individual caste groups. As stated throughout this study, however, with understanding and pragmatic application these sociocultural elements can be made to work as an implemental device for promoting economic change. Also suggesting the pragmatic use of religious values and caste groups in development, Dasgupta and others think that the same socioreligious networks that have hitherto stymied community development could be employed as means for fostering economy reformation in South Asian villages.²

¹A collection of works which deal specifically with the social functions of the Great and the Little Traditions is contained in the text edited by Edward Harper, Religion in South Asia (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1964).

²The possibility of using religiously defined social groups to establish successful economic change in rural South Asia is pointed out by

Summary

This discussion paper examines social groups and religious values as two factors in the economic development of small societies. It is indicated within this work that these two sociocultural factors may have a direct bearing on the success or failure of developmental projects. In peasant villages, social groups and religious customs are frequently integral parts of indigenous economic networks, and any attempts to modify or expand the economy in small societies must take into account these local groups and religious beliefs. Special consideration should be given to groups that are religiously distinguished, as these kinds of social bodies seem to act as especially powerful forces in a little community. Illustrating the significance of religiously defined groups are the South Asian caste groupings, which perpetuate traditional economic structures by means of supernatural sanctions over the service relationships among castes. The literature on village castes and South Asian development, as well as the majority of the literature on economic development in general, states that social groups and religious values can be insurmountable barriers or useful instruments in the economic development of villages, depending upon the extent to which these sociocultural factors are understood and employed.

Sugata Dasgupta, Social Work and Social Change: A Case Study in Indian Village Development (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1968). A similar interpretation of the importance of social groups and religion for South Asian development is made in the compendium of works edited by Karigondar Ishwaran, Change and Continuity in India's Villages (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1970).

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