From about 1930 onwards a new wave swept through the historical profession in the United States and history and the social sciences moved closer towards each other. The result was an explosion of the new history with very strong sociological and anthropological overtones. This multidimensional approach was applied increasingly to the study of Indian society by American academicians after 1947. The result was that India began to be examined from many perspectives "linguistic, cultural, geographic, ethnographic, social, political, economic, administrative, and primarily, historical" by American social scientists like Bernard Cohn, Milton Singer and Daniel Thorner, to name just a few. Together they have undertaken a stream of studies encompassing Indian economy, industry, rural life, agriculture, urban centres, migration patterns and Indian women.

The tenor of this "new" history was first set by Robert Redfield who applied the principles of social anthropology to the study of civilization. In fact, in most of his works Redfield attempted to "adopt the concepts and
methods of social anthropology in collaboration with those of the philosophy of history, archaeology and history, to a comparative study of civilizations."¹

Redfield undertook his first field study in 1926 in Tepoztlan, Mexico to investigate the peasant community of this area from different perspectives. This was in conformity with the basic methodological assumptions of a social anthropologist according to which "the everyday life, activities, and products of the common people, whether these people be primitive, preliterate, illiterate, folk, peasant, or urban"² were the main object of study. Apart from the common people, the social anthropologists also concentrate on political and cultural elites of ancient societies, the development of linguistics, social institutions and culture as a whole, through personal observation, made possible by direct "field work". Field observations and reports of the social anthropologist follow a set pattern of theoretical conceptions keeping in mind the basic postulate that "all aspects of a society and its culture, are parts of an interrelated and interdependent system, with each part contributing to the functioning and maintenance of the whole system...."³

2. Ibid., p. 2.
3. Ibid., p. 3.
The techniques and concepts popularized by Robert Redfield were adopted, modified and applied to the study of Indian villages by American social anthropologists. The anthropologist's basic method involves a face to face study of local groups in units which either he circumscribes or which are circumscribed by the natives as villages, neighbourhoods, tribes or clans... His locus of research is an Indian village, a village and its region... His problem is an Indian tribe in search of the Great Tradition, conflict and cohesion in an Indian village, caste and communication in an Indian village. The people, the place and the problem studied are specific.4

The major activity of American anthropologists in India has been directed towards the study of social change and acculturation. These scholars are also greatly concerned with the hurdles plaguing Indian society and through serious scholarship aspire to suggest ways to raise the standard of living of the poverty-stricken masses, "to reduce inequalities, economic and social and to wipe out illiteracy."5

Bernard Cohn is a scholar with intensive formal training in two disciplines - history and anthropology - which he has put to optimum use to earn a well-deserved reputation as the most creative thinker on modern Indian history working in the United States. He advocates that historians should rid themselves of the tendency to stick to a narrative framework. In keeping with modern research and ideology, the historian "has to start not with data but with ideas and then ask what data are available or could be found to test and refine his ideas... Increasingly the historian must take an "inside" view of the society, which means he must understand the interaction between symbols and symbol system, between Indian cultural premises and the actions taken by Indians and the social structure."6

Cohn's brilliant scholarship shines forth in his landmark study, *India: The Social Anthropology of A Civilization* (New York, 1971) where he advances his central argument "that a civilization, a social system, a nation exists in time as well as in space."7 Any observation or insight into the past is closely interlinked with the social and cultural fabric of the present. For this reason over a

period of time different forces have led to varied perceptions and different viewpoints of India’s past. In this work, Cohn places before his readers the entire range of perspectives on Indian society using the analytic tools and methodology of social anthropology.

Earlier in 1968 Bernard Cohn, along with another outstanding scholar, Milton Singer, edited Structure and Change in Indian Society (Chicago, 1968). The essays contained in this volume were presented at a Conference on Social Structure and Social Change in India held at the University of Chicago, June 3-5, 1965. The papers reflect the three main focal points of study as caste, family, and the social aspects of language. The volume is however dominated by studies of caste, which is dealt under four separate headings: "caste and social structure", "the structure of inter-caste relations", "change in the caste system", and "caste in politics, economics and law". The basic social units of joint family, caste and village are not taken in any of these papers as structural or cultural isolates. They are seen rather as intimately connected with one another and with other social units, through social networks of various kinds."

This volume and Village India edited by Mc Kim Marriot in 1955, together have opened up completely new

vistas of village-level investigations in India and have further paved the way for the kind of historical, economic and political studies, which were inconceivable earlier. This volume begins with Cohn's incisive essay, "Notes on the History of the Study of Indian Society and Culture" from the Classical and Arab-Persian accounts of the third century B.C. right up to the official British census and other studies during the early years of the twentieth century. After making a complete appraisal, Cohn arrives at the definite conclusion that "caste is the central institution of rural Indian society; it governs behaviour and values... The way you study caste is to observe it in action and ask people about it."\(^9\) In the new academic climate, social anthropologists stress that "politics, study of entrepreneurs, systematic study of cultural rules, history, sociolinguistics, and law, are all underlaid by new and more rigorous methods of quantification and model construction and are all tempered by wider comparative knowledge"\(^10\) to give an all-encompassing perspective of Indian history.

More recently, Bernard Cohn has published a large number of his writings in a single volume, *An Anthropologist*

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9. Ibid., p. 25.

10. Ibid.
Among the Historians and Other Essays (Delhi, 1987). It contains twenty three of his most important studies spanning three decades from 1955 to 1984. The essays are arranged in five thematic sections, each depicting Cohn's major area of interest "History and Anthropology" occupies the foremost place and the essays in this section cover a wide range of topics reflecting Cohn's superior intellect, thought, research and mastery over two disciplines. In his writings, Cohn has been able to project an "integrated view... in which culture, history and anthropology are brought together as inseparably related moments of a common project." Within that project, "culture is the common frontier of anthropology with historiography," and the two disciplines are seen as working together in order to "interweave all data on culture into a history of human culture."11 Further stressing on the close links between the two subjects, Cohn writes, "research in history is based on finding data; research in anthropology is based on creating data."12 Therefore, the two are interdependent. One cannot function without the other.

The second section, "India as a Field of Study" conveys socio-cultural perceptions and interpretation of


12. Ibid., p. 6.
Indian villages, regions, networks and centers, history, the impact of colonialism and the census operations initiated by the British. In the third section "Untouchables" Cohn reviews the changing status and traditions of the depressed and backward castes like the Chamars. The fourth section, "The British in Benares" is an analysis of several issues which arose as a result of colonialism, especially the changing equations of power and status amongst the landlords taluqdars and Rajas in the Benares region. Also included in this part are chapters on the nature of British society, law and administration in India. The final part of the volume is entitled "Representative of Empire." It consists of one of Cohn's most recent studies "Representing Authority in Victorian India," and suggests further new modes of investigation and analysis.

Certain attributes inherent in Bernard Cohn's writings have ensured that his scholarship remains a "source of intellectual sustenance" for generations of scholars to come. His arguments carry great strength, conviction and distinction and he has initiated fresh insights into the problems of colonialism and decolonization of South Asian civilizations, especially India.

Milton Singer is another well-known anthropologist to have made a meaningful contribution to modern Indian historiography. His interest in Indian culture and society dates back to the early 1950's as a result of his close
association with Robert Redfield. Over the last four decades Milton Singer has organized a number of seminars on the significant aspects of Indian culture and society, besides writing and editing many books which have become indispensable to scholars wishing to undertake research in South Asia and India. For his contributions, Milton Singer was awarded the distinguished scholarship award by the Association of Asian Studies in the United States in 1984.

On Indian culture and society, one of the earliest volumes to be written by Milton Singer was his highly acclaimed *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (New York, 1972). This work includes a number of previously published articles spanning the period from 1955 to 1972. The articles encompass a wide range of topics including the Westerners' changing perception and view of India, beginning with Harold Isaac's study, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*. A major theme of the book however is to trace "how some Madras Hindus adopt their cultural traditions as they acquire modern literary and scientific education, move into a metropolitan center, and go into industry..." According to Singer, these "adaptations" convey something "about the structure and change of Indian civilization and perhaps of other civilizations as well."

To substantiate his hypotheses, the author studies the impact of public and private religious practices, cultural performances and the development of industrial entrepreneurship in Madras city. Singer has also suggested valuable strategies for an all round analysis of society in totality and says that "the understanding of another culture or civilization, as social and cultural anthropology rightly teaches, requires that the foreign traveller rid himself of ethnocentrism and look at another culture in its own terms."

Two sections of this volume are devoted to the examination of "Tradition and Modernity" of Indian culture. Singer advises that foreign scholars should rise above the earlier prevalent stereotype view that India's traditional society was "stagnant and unchanging". On the contrary, "Indian society,... has been adjusting itself to new forces and circumstances throughout its recorded history and has evolved certain strategies of adaptation which continue to serve it well." Singer has identified a few of these strategies and exhorts other scholars to undertake further research and analysis in order to pinpoint more strategies.

Singer is in agreement with Redfield especially in his conception of the "great tradition" and "little

14. Ibid., p. 3.
15. Ibid., p. ix.
tradition" of Indian culture. Singer's basic postulate is "that because India had a "primary" or "indigenous" civilization which had been fashioned out of preexisting folk and regional cultures, its "great tradition" was culturally continuous with the "little traditions" to be found in its diverse regions, villages, castes and tribes."\textsuperscript{16} Explaining further, "great tradition" denotes intellectual and aesthetic achievements, while folk and popular culture constitute the "little tradition". And in the region around Madras city, Sanskritic Hinduism represented the "great tradition." In the essay, "The Cultural Role of Cities," Singer "sets forth a framework of ideas and hypotheses for studying the role of cities in cultural change within the middle - run time perspective of individual civilizations."\textsuperscript{17}

Another noteworthy work edited by Milton Singer is Traditional India: Structure and Change, (Jaipur, 1975). In this book, Singer has aimed at a reinterpretation of India’s traditional culture "through an objective study of the variety and changes in cultural traditions" without having to necessarily choose "among them a single meaningful pattern of existence."\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17} Milton Singer, When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{18} Milton Singer, Traditional India: Structure and Change, Jaipur, 1975, p. ix.
The author once again tries to look for linkages between the "little tradition" of culture and society of India's villages to the "great traditions" of India's civilization. He categorizes the Indian civilization "as a structure of tradition" and has undertaken "to disclose the intricate system of relationships in the structure of tradition"19 in India. The Indian civilization offers a unique example of an "overarching unity and continuity of tradition" despite great diversity in "caste and class; religious communities; linguistic and regional groupings; age, sex, and family history; tribal, peasant, and urban levels of cultural development."20 The challenging task therefore, before social scientists and anthropologists is to evolve a sound methodology to account for this unprecedented phenomenon of the Indian civilization.

According to Milton Singer, a solution to this spectacle can only be found by accepting the fact that there is a basic unity in the "structure of the whole tradition" that constitutes Indian society and culture. This can be "achieved through the use of two operational concepts, the social organization of tradition and cultural performances and cultural media," and applying both these modes to "study changes in the structure of tradition."21

19. Ibid., p.xi.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
In *Man's Glassy Essence: Explorations in Semiotic Anthropology* (Delhi, 1986), Milton Singer has done pioneering work in taking up a unique theme for the examination of Indian culture and society. Milton Singer felt that a major shortcoming of cultural anthropology was "its failure to develop a theory of cultural symbolism united to its needs," forcing anthropologists to rely heavily on philosophers, psychologists and linguists to fill this vital gap in their research methodology. In his quest for a suitable theory of symbolism, Singer was greatly impressed by the suitability of the ideas of the American philosopher and scholar, Charles S Peirce, "who propounded a general theory of signs to which he gave the name "semiotics" and which Singer thinks has the potential to be applied for an analysis of "patterned communication in all its modalities." This complex and difficult theory requires advanced formal training in philosophy to be fully comprehended. Despite this limitation, Singer's abstract ideas and theory as propounded in this volume are admirable and testify to his deep understanding of "social psychology, symbolic logic, and philosophy of science." This work depicts his "flair for

synthesising diverse ideas, and for perceiving underlying interconnections between them, which may escape others."

Last but not the least, is the contribution of Daniel Thorner to the "new" history of India. It was his deep rooted interest in Indian economy and British investments in India even during the "anti imperialist" wave sweeping through the country during mid - nineteenth century, that led him to examine and write on the Indian economy and agrarian structure. As early as 1939, Thorner was awarded fellowships by the University of Columbia and the Social Science Research Council to undertake research at the India Office Library in London to study the development and impact of the railways network in India. With the growing American involvement in the European War, Thorner was recruited by W. Norman Brown "for the India desk of a new research unit set up in the Library of Congress to collect and collate information about foreign countries," including India. From 1964 onwards, Daniel Thorner visited one part of rural India for a whole month every year till his untimely death in 1974.

Prior to this too, Daniel Thorner came to India during 1955-1956 as visiting Professor to the Delhi School of Economics where he delivered five lectures on India's

24. Ibid.
Agrarian Structure; the Pattern of Land Reform Legislation and the agrarian prospect in the country. These lectures are contained in his book, *The Agrarian Prospect in India* (Delhi, 1956) and are based on personal observations made after extensive field work in the villages of India. In the villages, he found three principle groups - the proprietors, mainly absentee landlords, working peasants and the landless labourers, whose positions remained unchanged despite the Land Reform Legislation in post-independence India.

Daniel Thorner is critical of the Zamindari Abolition Act of 1950, which according to him, failed to ameliorate the condition of the rural masses. The only glimmer of hope was Acharya Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan Movement (Land Gift), which tried to focus on "improving the position of the most submerged and disadvantaged class in the countryside, the utterly landless."26 The Bhoodan movement was evolved by Vinoba Bhave to counter the influence of the communist wave sweeping through India. The idea first appealed to Bhave in 1951 while on tour of the Telengana region, as a viable alternative to communism in order to safeguard the interests of the people who actually "plough, harrow, sow, weed and harvest"27 the land.

On the same theme, Thorner wrote *Land and Labour in India* (Bombay, 1962). In this work he was critical of British economic policies, especially the system of the collection of land revenue, in India. A major portion of the book is devoted to study of changes since the eighteen-eighties "in working force structure, national income, and the level of agricultural output..."\(^{28}\) besides analyzing the causes for India’s perennial famines and food scarcity.

Daniel Thorner’s latest work is *The Shaping of Modern India* (New Delhi, 1980), which is a collection of his articles, compiled and published after his death by his wife, Alice. In this volume, his basic premise is that despite certain retrograde steps in India, especially in the economic sphere, and also for fanning communalism, the British definitely were responsible for India’s modernization "The dominant influence in the shaping of Modern India has been its connection with Britian... Along with the opening up of the Indian economy in the 1840’s and 1850’s through railways, telegraphs, and steamships, the process of social and political change was greatly accelerated... Land settlements rode rough shod over the claims of conservative upper classes and dealt directly with the peasantry,"\(^{29}\) which led to a greatly changed scenario in


the Indian countryside. To understand Indian society in its entirety, Thorner has applied a vast range of conceptual tools, including the theories of Henry Maine (Comparative Method), H H Mann (Social and Economic studies) Karl Marx (the Asiatic Mode of Production), Feudalism, Capitalist Agriculture and Peasant economies.

II

Such studies as have been undertaken on Indian civilization and history after the end of World War - II emerged largely due to the germination of the idea of guiding the relations among nations by a "conversation of cultures" and "a civilization of dialogue" to enable the building of a new world order where "international relations would be reconstructed on a basis different from that which led to the Second World War - imperialism and colonialism, master - race myths, psychological warfare, balance of power politics, chauvinistic nationalism."30

One of the earliest scholars to stress upon the need for an "intellectual unification" in order to counter the designs of the Soviet bloc was Robert Redfield. He stated "mutual security depends on mutual understanding, and for understanding you have to have a conversation."31


conference on the post-war organization of Area Studies sponsored by the Social Sciences Research Council in 1944, he suggested "a long, integrated, and intensive study of the languages, history, economics, government, society, anthropology and arts of Russia, China, India, and Latin America,"\(^\text{32}\) to give Americans a multi-dimensional and in-depth view of these areas.

The emergence of the Cold War witnessed a "global competition between the Soviet-led forces of communism and the American-led forces of liberal democracy."\(^\text{33}\) In their quest for military superiority, together the two superpowers turned vast areas of the so-called Third World into a theatre of "small wars, large wars, wars between states, wars among tribes, civil wars, ethnic wars, race conflicts, religious wars, peasant-based insurgencies coups, countercoups, and perhaps others kinds of violence."\(^\text{34}\) All this precipitated an arms race among the developing countries on an unprecedented scale forcing them to divert scarce resources away from developmental projects and seek weapons from the two superpowers.

To check the Soviet bloc, the United States devised the policy of "containment" and was successful in creating a

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32. Ibid., p. 159.
34. Ibid.

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series of alliances to strengthen its position. India’s importance was perceived even during the course of World War II. American strategists realized that India could contribute significantly to American global objectives and therefore Washington sought to "use its influence and resources to foster strong bilateral ties with India... strategic location constituted an... important element of American interest. U.S. analysts extolled the key position of the two new states (India and Pakistan), as a global crossroads; not only did they sit astride the major sea routes connecting Europe and East Asia, but they abutted the critically important oil fields of the Middle East."35

While Pakistan responded enthusiastically to American overtures and readily granted military bases to the United States, India was more cautious in its approach and feared that American arms to Pakistan would be used against it. Not wishing to be pushed around in foreign affairs, India under Jawahar Lal Nehru became one of the leading architects of the Non-Aligned Movement. This in turn was viewed by Washington as a "pro-Russian plot". Enhanced mutual mistrust and suspicion made Indo-U.S. relations "alternately cordial and suspicious, friendly and hostile, warm and cool in frustratingly ambivalent sequence since the

birth of India’s Republic, reflecting in part misunderstandings of each other’s worldviews, but also basic differing realities animating and motivating both distant nations in a complex world."

Nehru’s refusal to budge from his policy of nonalignment, coupled with his growing friendship with Communist China and criticism of colonialism and American military presence in South and South East Asia, led to heightened tension between the world’s two largest democracies during the 1950’s. Though India did have its admirers like Chester Bowles and John F Kennedy in the United States, and they advocated a major economic aid program for the subcontinent, the continuing supply of arms to Pakistan ensured that relations remained strained between the two nations.

American stance towards India was always one of oscillation and American diplomats and intelligence experts could never fully assess India’s importance to American global geopolitical objectives. Consequently, their policy lacked coherence and clarity. Nor could Americans fully comprehend the complexities of Indo-Pakistan or Sino-Indian relations right upto the late 1960’s. They also over-estimated their influence upon both India and Pakistan in bringing about an amicable solution to the Kashmir problem.

The result was that India remained a challenge and an enigma. More and more American scholars continued to be drawn towards the country, either due to a genuine fondness for it or due to the generous funds that were made available for undertaking research in this region. Through serious scholarship, social scientists and Indophiles tried to unravel the mystique of India and the "exotic" Orient. Having been introduced to India largely through Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) and Harold Isaac's, *Scratches on Our Minds* (1958), "the dominant perception of India shifted dramatically" from the late 1950s. "To the foreign policy elite, India became the "essential democracy" the critical test of democratic development. This view was related to a sense that America was failing in its approach to Asia while the Soviet Union and China were gaining influence among the nonaligned peoples." There was consequently a growing demand that America take definite steps to safeguard its interests which "necessitated preserving a world order within which democratic programmes needed to be integrated within the framework of individual country's modernization.""38

Democrats like Senator John F Kennedy and John Sherman Cooper became proponents of a major economic

38. Ibid., p. 175.

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assistance package for India and in a Senate speech on March 25, 1958, "The Choice in Asia," Kennedy foresaw that "India, the most important of all the uncommitted states, has entered its formative period. A successful Indian program is important at least as much for the example it can set for the economic future of other undeveloped countries as for its own sake." 39 However, this Indo-US euphoria was shortlived and by the mid-1960's India's predominant image in the U.S. was that of an "estranged democracy."

India's attempts to modernize were viewed with skepticism in the United States. Her agricultural problems and food shortage were attributed to wrong policies, viz., the socialist experiment; and journalist Selig Harrison, expressed doubts whether the Indian nation would survive, in his book, India: the Most Dangerous Decades (New Jersey 1960). Even the green revolution was greeted with cynicism by most Americans. "At the base of the estrangement (was) the enduring image of India as a backward country and a corresponding American unwillingness to accept India as a steadily modernizing nation with significant international interests." 40

Despite remarkable scholarly output, India has continued to remain a target of derision for the average

39. Ibid., p. 176.
40. Ibid., p. 193.
American and the tone of a recent volume on India by Arthur Bonner, *Averting the Apocalypse: Social Movements in India Today*, (Durham, 1990), is not much different from Katherine Mayo’s work written over sixty years ago. Traditional stereotypes still predominate American perceptions of India - "For Americans, even today, India is a land of beggars and sacred cows foolishly preserved, and of wretched despair."41

However, the end of the Cold War has created a climate for vastly improved relations between India and the United States. "A growing recognition of converging geopolitical interests and shared democratic and secular values has replaced mutual distrust resulting from differing perceptions of the Soviet threat. Belying prophecies of its imminent collapse, India has ... demonstrated its capacity for political renewal and stability...."42

Minor irritants like the issue of human rights abuses in Punjab and Kashmir, India’s refusal to sign the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its fervent efforts to develop the intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMS), continue to cause discomfort in Indo-US bilateral relationship. But a positive basis for improvement exists


due to their "shared commitment to the goals of an open, pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, democratic society at home and to external environments that are peaceful, non-threatening, non-fanatical and conducive to commerce and prosperity." 43

On the economic sphere, India's leaders have embarked upon an ambitious program of reforms that has paved the way for increased foreign trade and greater foreign investment. In this atmosphere of liberalization, India and the United States can look forward to mutually beneficial economic ties as India has been identified by the US as one of the ten biggest emerging markets around the world.

India and the United States are at a turning point in their relations and interaction in the cultural sphere too is on the increase. The improved ambience was visible during Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's recent visit to the United States. Addressing a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress on May 18, 1994, the Indian Prime Minister said, "Indo-U.S. relations are on the threshold of a bold new era... we look forward to continuing our partnership with America and with the American people..." 44 Reciprocating these sentiments, President Clinton stated the following day in a press conference: "Today we begin what I hope will

43. Surjit Mansingh, "Indo-American Relations in the Post Cold War Period," Centre for Contemporary Studies, NMML, New Delhi, 1993, p. 29.

be a very close working relationship as our two countries forge a stronger partnership... Our nations share many common values... and... ways to deepen our ties and to expand cooperation 45 must be explored.

One such "way" can be to encourage and take steps to increase exchange of scholarship through a liberal availability of funds for serious research. There is an over-lapping of perspectives between India and American academicians and together they can help generate the kind of knowledge which will ensure that the positive aspects of Indo-US relations are highlighted, a mature understanding arrived at, which will assist in the building of a new world order based on mutual trust and understanding of each other’s cultural heritage.

45. Ibid., pp. 21-22.