

# Ghurye, Govind Sadashiv (1893–1983)

CAROL UPADHYA

National Institute of Advanced Studies, India

Govind Sadashiv Ghurye is often called the “father of Indian sociology.” As head of the leading department of sociology in India for over three decades (the Department of Sociology at Bombay University), as the founder of the Indian Sociological Society, and as the editor of the *Sociological Bulletin*, he played a key role in the institutionalization and professionalization of sociology and anthropology in India. Although Ghurye’s cultural–historical approach was soon superseded by the structural–functionalist paradigm promoted by his former student M. N. Srinivas, he left an indelible mark on the theory and practice of social anthropology and sociology in India.

Ghurye was born into a Saraswat Brahmin family in the Konkan region of western India. He completed his BA and MA degrees, each in both Sanskrit and English literature, at Elphinstone College, Bombay—a center of intellectual and political ferment during the late colonial period. His exposure at Elphinstone to ancient Indian texts, European history and political thought, and the writings of late nineteenth-century social reformers shaped his lifelong interest in the evolution and nature of civilizations, especially of India. Ghurye, like other intellectuals of the period, also became deeply concerned with defining the contours of the new nation and shaping its future—a quest that was reflected in his sociological as well as political writings.

In 1920, Ghurye went to England to study sociology with Leonard T. Hobhouse, but he ended up working under the anthropologist W. H. R. Rivers at Cambridge—he wrote that he had “come to the conclusion that the anthropological approach to Sociology was the most appropriate one” (Ghurye 1973, 45). Rivers, whom he greatly admired, had already entered his diffusionist phase—a perspective that influenced Ghurye’s work even much later. Rivers’s sudden death in 1922 was a major blow to Ghurye, and he quickly completed his PhD under the supervision of Alfred C. Haddon. He returned to India in 1923, already with a contract in hand for his first book, *Caste and Race in India* (1932), which became his most widely read book, republished five times. Ghurye was the first Indian in Bombay province, and the third in India, to obtain a Cambridge doctorate. In 1924 he was appointed reader in the Department of Sociology at the University of Bombay as well as head of the department, replacing the first head (and first professor of sociology in India), Patrick Geddes. He was made professor in 1934 and remained at Bombay University until his retirement in 1959.

As founder of the Bombay School of sociology, Ghurye played a major role in shaping a uniquely Indian sociology. His view of Indian history and society built on an older discourse that had been crafted by the British and German orientalists and elaborated through the social reform debates and nationalist thought; it was a view that centered

*The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Edited by Hilary Callan.

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1486

on a vision of a glorious and ancient Indian civilization that had been corrupted by foreign invasions and required reconstitution. Combining these streams of thought with diffusionism and the popular Aryan invasion theory of Indian history, Ghurye developed a cultural–historical approach to sociology (Upadhyaya 2007). In many of his books, his major aim was to locate the sources of specific Indian social institutions, such as family and kinship structures, by tracing contemporary practices to ancient cultural norms and laws gleaned from Sanskrit texts. Although his approach is often labeled Indological, Ghurye’s interest was not just in reconstructing Indian civilizational history but in understanding continuity and change in social institutions.

Ghurye’s approach to the sociology of India was already evident in *Caste and Race*, where he traced the origins of the caste system to the Indo-Aryan civilization of the Gangetic plain, using historical, archaeological, and anthropometric sources. He argued that Indian civilization was formed through the slow assimilation of non-Aryan groups to Hinduism, and that the caste system spread through the same process of cultural diffusion. According to Ghurye, caste had emerged due to the quest of the “Indo-Aryan” Brahmins to maintain their purity by keeping themselves apart from the local population through endogamy and ritual restrictions. His model of caste resonates with contemporary accounts: he viewed caste not as a fixed system but as an aggregation of diverse social groups articulated into a loose social hierarchy based on the principle of purity. Castes and caste organization on the ground were constantly fluctuating as groups migrated and came into contact with other groups, intermarried, or shifted occupations—creating a complex and unstable social matrix that the British authorities and ethnologists (mistakenly, in his view) attempted to systematize and catalog into a clear structure. Ghurye was perhaps the first scholar to highlight the political consequences of the enumeration of caste in the Census of India, a procedure he condemned for leading to the emergence of caste associations, a “livening up of the caste-spirit” (1932, 158), and hence to competition and conflict. This insight was later picked up by Louis Dumont ([1970] 1998) in his discussion of the “substantialization” of caste identities under modernity.

Ghurye was a prolific writer, publishing thirty-one books and forty-seven papers and other writings over a span of fifty years on topics as diverse as population, archaeology, sexual behavior, urbanization, architecture, and contemporary politics—apart from many works on his core interests in Indian civilization and religion. Although most of his oeuvre is rarely read today, his influence on Indian sociology has been far reaching. Through his teaching and research direction at Bombay University, sociology came to be defined as the study of Indian cultural history and of the social institutions that he identified as central to the social order—caste, religion, family, and kinship—from contemporary and historical perspectives. Ghurye’s brand of sociology, institutionalized in his MA sociology syllabus, also incorporated a large measure of anthropology—reflecting his conviction that in the Indian context the distinction between anthropology and sociology is artificial. His influence on the discipline spread well beyond Bombay through his many students, who populated the new sociology departments that were established during the 1960s and 1970s as the Indian university system expanded. They included several prominent sociologists of the next generation, such as A. R. Desai, I. P. Desai, Irawati Karve, and M. N. Srinivas.

Although his method was primarily textual, Ghurye was also an empiricist who encouraged his students to collect primary data through field and documentary research. He directed numerous PhD and MA dissertations: students familiar with Sanskrit studied ancient social customs through classical texts, while the others were sent to their home regions to conduct ethnographic research or surveys on particular communities, local social institutions, or cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Ghurye believed that colonial ethnologists had produced a skewed view of Indian society, which needed to be corrected by collecting concrete “facts” about India’s cultural and social landscape.

Ghurye’s sociological perspective was reflected in his political concern with “national integration” (Upadhyaya 2002). His view of Indian cultural history as an ongoing process of “cultural assimilation” led him to criticize Verrier Elwin and the British administrators for wanting to preserve tribal cultures through state-enforced isolation from mainstream society. Ghurye (1943) contested the caste/tribe distinction itself, viewing tribes not as aborigines but as “backward Hindus” whose problems could be solved through absorption into Hindu society rather than through protectionism. In his later life he wrote on diverse political issues such as the rebellions in the northeast, Hindu–Muslim conflicts, and other divisive trends in the new nation-state, always from a cultural nationalist and social integrationist perspective. Ghurye’s political views were consonant with the conservative slant that marked his style of sociology: society was to be understood through the study of social institutions and cultural traditions rather than relations of power or property. For him, the task of sociology was to contribute to nation building by delineating the contours and deep history of Indian society in all its diversity. Although Indian sociology later became more diverse, encompassing a range of theoretical approaches and thematic areas, the understanding of “Indian society” that is taught in sociology courses across the country retains Ghurye’s distinctive stamp.

SEE ALSO: Caste; Desai, Akshay Ramanlal (1915–94); Diffusionism; India, Anthropology in; Karve, Irawati (1905–70); Srinivas, M. N. (1916–99)

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

---

- Dumont, Louis. (1970) 1998. *Homo hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Translated by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ghurye, G. S. 1932. *Caste and Race in India*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Ghurye, G. S. 1943. *The Aborigines—“So-Called”—and Their Future*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
- Ghurye, G. S. 1973. *I and Other Explorations*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Upadhyaya, Carol. 2002. “The Hindu Nationalist Sociology of G. S. Ghurye.” *Sociological Bulletin* 51 (1): 28–57.
- Upadhyaya, Carol. 2007. “The Idea of Indian Society: G. S. Ghurye and the Making of Indian Sociology.” In *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, edited by Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar, and Satish Deshpande, 194–255. Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black.