

Weber and Yoga

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

In his enlightening study, B. S. Turner (1974) made the pertinent observation that Max Weber's "definition of the 'social' as excluding non-human or superhuman actors (i.e., god) contravenes the basic assumption of Verstehende Sociology which claims to take the actor's definition of the situation as a starting point."¹ Here Turner spotlights one of the basic weaknesses of Weber's methodological praxis: not to take seriously enough the cultural postulations, the actor's intentionality, that is, not to practice Verstehende Sociology rigorously enough.² However, this appears to be a malaise that afflicts contemporary social scientists as well.³ If one were to look for a remedy, one might possibly find it in Phenomenology, which seems to fulfill the promise of the Weberian interpretative program.

The same inherent weakness is conspicuous in Weber's treatment of Hinduism in general and Yoga in particular.⁴ This has led to a number of misunderstandings about Yoga on his part, and it also promoted a kind of unchecked comparativism that is ultimately unproductive. Central to Weber's sociology of religion is the question of the relation between religion and the world, more precisely between religion and mundane economy. At the outset of his study, Weber states his objective as being an inquiry into the ways in which "Indian religion, as one factor among many, may have prevented capitalistic development" (p.4). As can be expected, this economic orientation pre-structured the data in a certain way and introduced various "blind spots."

Louis Dumont's (1972) appraisal of this work as "a miracle of empathy and sociological imagination"⁵ is certainly right in its second part, but I would be reluctant to subscribe to the former. In proffering these few thoughts on Weber's interpretation of Hindu "asceticism," I do not wish to add to the already voluminous critical literature on Weber. My purpose is primarily to select from Weber's work those passages where he applies his sociological imagination specifically to Yoga, and to discuss his analysis and critique in the light of more recent indological research and with reference to the yogic traditions themselves. In fairness to Weber it must be emphasized at the outset that he developed his ideas purely on the basis of secondary sources which, in those days, were still few and far between and often themselves quite inadequate and by no means free from prejudice.⁶ Hence the present criticisms of Weber's work are, by implication, a simultaneous critique of earlier indological scholarship.

Weber, first of all, recognized correctly that the anchorage of all Indian philosophical endeavor is to be found in the striving for salvation by means of what he styled "a metaphysically and cosmologically substructured technology" (p. 147). Yet, he did not seem too happy about this pandemic mysticism and remarked that whereas the Chinese literati (the mandarins) "scorned magic as a parasitical humbug" (p. 148) and managed to reduce mysticism to a mere "shadowy heterodox counter-image" (ibid.), the brahmins, by contrast, were "never able completely to shake off the historical relation to ancient magical asceticism" (ibid.).

He placed the origins of the later Hindu asceticism in the "magicians" of the Vedic period who practiced *tapas* or, as he circumscribed the term, "hysterical brooding intensity" (p. 149). As he noted correctly, not all of these ancient magicians were recruited from the priestly class, and perhaps he had in mind such figures as the *keshin* and *muni*, who lived at the margins of Vedic society. Elsewhere, he suggested that Yoga "doubtless rests on the ancient magical experience of auto-hypnosis and related psychological states" (p. 163). He regarded Yoga as "the rationalization of ecstatic practice" (*ibid.*)—adding in brackets—"of ancient sorcerers."⁷ However, he also observed that it cannot be decided whether Yoga "actually had its main origin inside or outside Brahman circles" (p. 164). Although the earliest history of Yoga is still not too clear, the discovery of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization in the 1920s and post-Weberian research on the Vrâtya fraternities have broadened somewhat our knowledge of archaic Yoga, and it now seems that it took shape equally inside and outside brahmanical circles.

Weber recognized the variability of the Yoga tradition and remarked that it was originally "a practice of specific lay asceticism"—a phrase that is ambiguous. He contrasted "Yoga technique," which in his view "sought primarily to achieve magical states and miraculous power" (p. 165), with what he called "Classical brahmanical contemplation," which "sought the blissful rapture of a gnostic comprehension of the godly" (*ibid.*). Yet, a few lines later, he noted that "Yoga was in its way also a supreme form of a specific, intellectualistic conquest of the godly". This is obviously a reference to Classical Yoga which, as he saw it, "rejected the irrational mortification, the Hatha-Yoga of pure magical asceticism" (*ibid.*).⁸

He further argued that with the ascendancy of the orthodox priesthood and its "immanent rationalism," it became less and less possible for members of the brahmanical elite to resort to "ecstatic therapeutic practices" and "the exhibition of neuropathic states", although they retained certain magical practices that were increasingly "rationalized" as they turned into "genteel intellectuals." He thus set up a dyadic paradigm: rationalism versus irrational orgiastic-ecstatic asceticism. His use of the term "rationalism" deserves closer scrutiny.⁹

"Rationalism" is undeniably a key concept and theme in Weberian sociology, though there is a fair amount of scholarly dissent about its precise interpretation. *Prima facie*, Weber's position seems to be an evolutionist belief placing a premium on "rationality" as the apex of cultural development. However, this interpretation has been rejected by Weber himself; nevertheless, his sociological thinking was not totally free from the 19th century evolutionist creed. A central factor in the process of "rationalization" is, in Weber's own words, "the substitution for the unthinking acceptance of ancient custom of deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest" (p. 133). He added further body to this interpretation by stating that rationalization can proceed in a variety of directions—positive and negative (such as at the expense of any belief in absolute values). However, as is borne out by a closer examination of his use of the concept, this is a rather flexible term, sometimes bearing very specific denotations, then again having a rambling general meaning.

Generally speaking, and ignoring for our purposes the several distinctions introduced by Weber (e.g. formal and substantive rationality), rationalism stands as the word itself indicates for the application of ratio or reason to thought and action, as opposed to affective or traditionalist behavior. Thus when he speaks of the trend toward increasing

rationalization among the orthodox Hindu priesthood, he refers to their efforts to systematize and intellectually interpret and re-interpret the earlier Vedic ritual beliefs and practices.

Although the usefulness of distinguishing between the rational and the irrational is perhaps not disputable, in Weber's case there is a definite evaluative and even prejudicial overtone inasmuch as he seems to champion rationality over irrationality. Notwithstanding that he admits the ubiquitous presence of irrationality in many, if not most, areas of life—notably economy—and even concedes to the irreversibility of irrationality in some domains, Weber appears to have cast his lot with reason first and foremost. This becomes obvious in his treatment of Indian asceticism.

Even though he considered Hindu asceticism to be "the most rationally developed in the world" (p. 149), he apparently confined his judgment to the technical side of Yoga, that is, its praxis dimension and the "theoretical technology" explaining it. However, in its goals, orientation, values and metaphysical beliefs, Yoga was for him a phenomenon of irrationality (see p. 168: "Yoga . . . with its irrational asceticism").

It is possible that he overrated the influence of the orthodox priesthood and its "rationalizing" endeavors. Most scholars nowadays would probably be more inclined to the view that the vast majority of Indians received their religious inspiration from those who "lived" the sacred tradition rather than from those who merely preserved and codified it: i.e. the *samnyâsins*, *yogins*, *munis*, *sâdhus* and *yatis* and the teachers and charismatic leaders of the various sects that sprung up around the worship of such central gods as Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva and Ganesh or goddesses like Kâlî, Lakshmi and Râdhâ, and so on. Weber did, however, fully recognize that outside the orbit of the brahmanical "sacrificial and prayer cult" there existed "popular individual ecstatic magic and orgiasticism" (p. 153), which had repeated "mass revivals." Still, in labeling these "emotional-irrational," he created an artificial dichotomy that distorts the empirical evidence in favor of the orthodox sacerdotal class. No doubt, rationalization processes occurred among non- brahmanical circles as well, as is witnessed by the consciousness technologies, cosmologies etc. propagated in the rich sectarian literatures.

Contrasting the "magical holy states," pursued outside the purview of the priesthood, with the classical soteriological teachings as their rationalization and sublimation, Weber put forward the idea that this development was three-pronged: first, the "magical secret power" began to be replaced by "personal holy status"; second, the holy condition of the brahmin came to be formalized and associated with "sacred knowledge" (as befits a *literati stratum*) and third, the rational interpretation of the world superseded the magical image of the universe.

This model suffers from the shortcomings of any ideal type construction, which, in an attempt to find the most general common denominator between things, sacrifices diversity and significant difference. Broadly speaking, what this model implies is a movement from magic/irrationality to religion/rationality. Weber correctly realized that this rationalization process (e.g. the warrior class). However, it is not clear to me what practical profit could be expected from such a generalized model. Is it meant to convey any more than the idea that such rationalization processes have actually taken place? It does not tell us anything about the underlying reasons of such change; nor can it be used to make historical predictions, or serve as a heuristic device to elucidate the

material from which it has been extrapolated. But, more importantly, to what extent does it actually reflect the data?

First, the distinction between "personal holy status" and "magical secret power" is by no means clear or unequivocal. I suppose it is intended to correspond with the distinction between brahmin and *tapasvin*, the former having *brahman*-knowledge or -realization, the latter possessing magical power(s). But this characterization is rather inapt. After all, the brahmin's *brahman* originally also meant something like "power." In the *Rig-Veda* it still signifies "prayer" and the "power" generated through prayer.*10 Only at a later stage in the evolution of Hindu thought and culture did the term acquire its classic meaning of "the Absolute."

Furthermore, the prayers of the Vedic priests not infrequently read like magical incantations. The *tapasvin*, on the other hand, sought after power through *tapas*, that is, extreme bodily and mental exertion which was accompanied by the production of psycho-somatic "heat" (*tapas*). What the brahmin hoped to achieve by means of intent prayer, elaborate sacrificial rites and chanting, the *tapasvin* aspired after through prolonged fasting, silence, standing stockstill and so on. Admittedly there is a certain difference between both approaches, but this is more one of degree than of type.

As Corrado Pensa (1969) has pointed out with regard to Yoga, the history of the concept of "gnosis"—Weber's second and related point—is intimately bound up with that of "power." He demonstrated, in fact, the organic interrelation between knowledge, power and purity for the Indian traditions in toto. Before him, Jan Gonda (1963) observed that the archaic Vedic concept of *dhî*, usually translated as "thought" but better understood as "vision," increases the potency of the soma upon being translated into words—thus again testifying to the close relation between knowledge and power. In later terminology, *samâdhi* likewise has power properties, and according to some authorities, it is only upon the realization of the Self (a knowledge event) that one acquires the eight classical supra-normal capacities (*ashta-siddhi*). Furthermore, Self-realization or *purusha-jnâna* is itself often described as the highest power/attainment (*siddhi*).

Weber's typology, based on a clear-cut separation of gnosis and (magical) power, at best holds true of the extreme positions in a diversified spectrum, and his interpretation can be regarded as the direct outcome of a unilateral reliance on the scriptural enunciations of the brahmanical orthodoxy and its clients.

The pursuit of magical states and miraculous powers is certainly characteristic of some of the old Yoga traditions, but it is exaggerated to claim this feature as the primary orientation of ancient Yoga per se, or of Hatha-Yoga for that matter. Weber's judgment appears to reflect the bias of the older generation of indologists, who found it difficult to practice "phenomenological epoche" with respect to Yoga. One of the cardinal concepts of the so-called epic Yoga is *bala*, meaning "strength" or "power," and in several passages of the *Moksha-Dharma* section of the *Mahâbhârata* one meets with the compound *yoga-bala*. On this point Franklin Edgerton (1924) remarked: "The 'power' of the Yoga doubtless refers to the supernatural powers (*aishvarya*) associated with the Yoga-method."*11 Yet this assertion is too categorical.

In many instances, *bala* stands for "capacity" or "potency" as when we read that "a powerless Yoga is involuntarily carried away by the sense-objects" (*Mahâbhârata*

12.289.22) or that the highest power of Yoga lies in meditation (12.294.7).^{*12} In the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (18.10), *yoga-bala* in conjunction with *bhakti* or "devotion/love" is said to steady the mind at the time of death. Edward W. Hopkins (1901) distinguished between a "popular" and a "philosophical" Yoga. The former is concerned with the acquisition of magical power(s) and is pre-eminently found in the earlier portions of the epic which, however, speaks of the *muni* and *tapasvin* rather than the *yogin*. This striking absence of typically yogic materials in the older strata of the *Mahâbhârata* was for Hopkins, as it is for us, a fact still to be explained. He did not propose the obvious, if possibly quite mistaken, thesis that *tapas* represents an earlier evolutionary type from which Yoga came to be developed. Weber seems to have been unaware of Hopkin's paper, and his suggestion that Yoga was modified from a magical technique into a gnostic tradition only inside the orbit of Brahmanism is unfounded.

Weber's "rationality" premise also led him to create a spurious dichotomy between the "contemplation" of the brahmin and the "rationally systematized form of methodical emotional asceticism" (p. 165) of Classical Yoga inasmuch as he considered the former to aim at a cognitive end-state, whereas the latter's goal is a "feeling" state according to him, though in keeping with the opinion of the day he labeled it "catalepsy." This, of course, is wrong. There is no justification for interpreting the supraconscious state of *asamprajnâta-samâdhi* as an emotive condition or, worse still, as a cataleptic state. Its function is specified as the actualization of oneself as the Self or transcendental subject. It is arguable that this cannot even be described as a cognitive state; according to Classical Yoga, at any rate, this actualization of one's true identity does not involve any typical knowledge processes (*prajnâ*), because the mind is by definition transcended.

One has the distinct feeling that Weber's treatment of Yoga never really takes off and that this particular chapter of his work, written in his customary ponderous style, represents a document of his unfinished struggle to come to terms with alien materials rather than a rounded picture of the end-product of his thinking. In his eagerness to construct a macro-model of ideal types, Weber possibly chose the wrong critical denominator—i.e., rationality; or a denominator which had not been adequately defined and therefore could not be expected to perform satisfactorily as a classificatory determinant or, for that matter, as an explanatory concept (which is its unspecified secondary application in Weber's study).

Notes

1. B. S. Turner (1974), p. 43.
2. Verstehende Sociology can, of course, not be considered as an autonomous, self-sufficient approach—as did, for instance, Winch (1958).
3. See, e.g., the remarks by Brittan (1973, 11): "'Verstehen' has been misunderstood by its critics and abused by its practitioners." And (p. 190): "Most sociologists pay lip-service to notions relating to the definition of the situation but in practice they tend to ignore them by seeming to act and believe that they know better what the definition of the situation is for those involved."
4. M. Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York, 1958, 1967), trsl. and ed. by H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale. The German original was published in 1921.
5. L. Dumont (1972), p. 66.
6. Weber seems to have mainly relied on Richard Garbe's (1896) early study, Hermann

Oldenberg's (1915) publication on the Upanishads, which contains material on the historical development of Yoga, and A. E. Gough's (1903) work, which is well-known for its Christian bias.

7. Compare this with the quite untenable notion, proposed by Karel Werner (1979) that Yoga is quintessentially praxis and only secondarily associated with certain metaphysical propositions. This view has been criticized by David Bastow (1979), whose critique found the support of Pratima Bowes.

8. This word is misspelled " atha Yoga" in the English translation.

9. B. R. Scharf (1970, 150) observed: "Weber, rather like J. G. Frazer, sees rationalized religion as a thin crust of belief overlaying a continual predisposition by the masses to magical explanations and manipulations of events."

10. See J. Miller (1974), especially pp. 46ff .

11. F. Edgerton (1924), p. 26.

12. Here *yoga* is used idiosyncratically for *yogin*, as in some other stanzas of the *Mahâbhârata*.

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