

Study of Sociology in India: Some Deliberative Challenges

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Abstract

The discussion on sociology of India concerns itself with approaches to the study of Indian society. This is related to the researches, which are done on Indian society. The essence of sociology and its uniqueness as a social science lies not in its subject matter per se, but in its theoretical and methodological orientations. In this respect, the author discusses three fronts— the intellectual, professional, and pedagogical- on which sociology is being challenged are only apparently disparate. It may appear that each of them needs to be tackled on its own terms.

KEYWORDS: Sociology, Intellectual, Pedagogic, Indigenization

Introduction

Indian society has remained a multicultural society in every sense of the word. Probably, no other country in the world can match its diversity and its capacity to absorb and amalgamate external influences of the magnitude that India has encountered. We have successfully met and overcome these challenges and gone back to our path of growth and development may be after strife and tribulations. Each period of major socio-structural change in Indian society had its nuances and impact, altering and creating a set of new social hierarchies and social formations. These hierarchies and social structures have presented in one or other form, and have shaped and reshaped the nature and character of Indian society and its various institutions, be it marriage, family, jati, caste, community, kinship, religious practices, rural/urban/ tribal communities, state, etc.

As such, socio-cultural and economic and political institutions had been at the centre of indigenous intellectual traditions and discourse in India. A tradition of reflection on socio-cultural and politico-economic institutions had persisted in different philosophical and scholarly texts. A large number of these classical texts authored and compiled by eminent sages and scholars over the millennia contain valuable insights on different aspects of Indian society. However, gains of the post-Independence period in India are enormous. In spite of its social, religious, cultural, political, and economic diversities, India is functioning as a unified entity to the amazement of the whole world. The essence of sociology and its uniqueness as a social science lies not in its subject matter per se, but in its theoretical and methodological orientations. In the West, the theoretical and methodological orientations of sociology have undergone dialectical changes, both through accretion and revision. These changes can be viewed and interpreted as sustained responses to challenges thrown up by the changing socio-economic and political conditions there. These changes in Western sociology have encouraged the proliferation of several paradigms. The subject of sociology in India has completed hundred years. However, “sociology” as practised in Indian universities, institutions and colleges in the past and in the contemporary period has been influenced by different shades of

domination. Sociologists have highlighted at least three shades of domination evident in the practice of Indian sociology.

Challenges of Sociology on the Intellectual Front

In India, sociology, as it is known and practised today, has not been an indigenous discipline. It came into the country to serve the missionary and administrative interests of the colonial rulers. As such, its establishment and growth in the country has had a strong Western imprint. Given the intellectual neo-colonial attitudes and cultural imperialism of the West, this imprint has continued even after independence. Scholars have, however, been seized of the matter. Thanks to Indo-phile Sociologists like Louis Dumont and David Pocock, such epistemological issues surfaced in Indian sociology as early as the mid-1950s through the debate on 'sociology for India' in the first series of Contributions to Indian Sociology. The debate has continued since in the New Series. Some contributors of Sociological Bulletin too have debated the paradigmatic issues in Indian sociology. An integral part of these debates has been the issue of indigenization of concepts and methods. These efforts have, no doubt, brought about self-awareness among Indian sociologists about the social conditioning of sociology. They have also emphasized the need for indigenization of Indian sociology and the interpretation of Indian reality with indigenous concepts, the so-called ethno-sociology. However, this debate and the initial efforts have hardly resulted in the development of an indigenous sociological tradition in India. More disconcerting is the fact that it is seldom noted that the striving for indigenization of the sociology curriculum has not really been successful.

The changing intellectual orientations of sociology at the international level have a bearing on the sociological scene in India. The theoretical concerns and methodological orientations of Western sociology are, if only a bit late, incorporated into our sociological agenda, both teaching and research. How far are the changing theoretical concerns of Western sociology relevant for Indian sociology? How significant are its methodological strategies in studying indigenous reality? Unless we ask these and similar questions, we cannot stop the mindless import of theoretical paradigms and methodological models. The indigenization of Indian sociology is the intellectual challenge that needs to be addressed imminently.

Challenges on the Professional Front

As a profession sociology has grown considerably over the last 50 years. The life membership of the Indian Sociological Society, the sole and undisputed all-India professional body of sociologists in the country, has increased manifold. Besides, several state level and even university level sociological societies have emerged. However, the proliferation of organizations and the growth in their membership do not necessarily mean that the profession is doing well or that it is reckoned by 'others' as a significant body.

Sociologists often complain that they are ignored by planners and policy makers. The Planning Commission or other key policy making bodies in India do not have sociologists as members. While sociologists are sometimes consulted, their opinions or recommendations are not taken seriously. The services of sociologists are not always utilized in information gathering-Non-sociologists are often employed in socio-economic

data-gathering operations. Sociologists cannot claim monopoly over the techniques of data collection that have been conventionally used in their discipline. Nor can they have exclusive claims as far as data interpretation techniques are concerned. In fact, the complex nature of social reality being what it is, an interdisciplinary or at least a multi-disciplinary approach is not only necessary but even inevitable. The lending and borrowing of concepts and theoretical insights from allied disciplines will surely become the norm in discourses on society. That is, sociology must look more outwards if it has to be relevant. Be that as it may, it is important to ask ourselves what our achievements are and which of these are deserving of recognition and appreciation. One perception is that sociologists have not offered lasting solutions to pressing problems confronting society.

While this criticism may be dismissed as an unreasonable expectation, the expectation seems reasonable enough considering the tall claims often made about the subject being the scientific study of society. Worse still is the perception that sociologists do not have anything novel or significant to say about social reality and social problems. They, it is said, only repeat in an esoteric and obfuscating language that which is merely common sense. Establishing popular legitimacy is certainly a difficult challenge for any discipline. In the case of sociology, this challenge is compounded by the superficial indigenization of the subject. We have often heard the call for 'relevant sociology'. It is true that in complex and changing socio-economic and political scenarios, the standpoint of 'relevant' itself would be contentious. Even so, the need for a debate on 'relevant sociology' appears imperative. While we are on the subject of 'relevant sociology', it is important to recognize and confront the growing intolerance towards freedom of expression. The age of being content with name-calling is over, and we now have increasing instances of articulated protest, and even threats, from sectarian groups against views expressed by sociologists. This is no doubt a general challenge confronting the scholarly world. However, considering the sensitive nature of some of the issues dealt with by sociologists, the challenge is more serious in the case of sociology. The easy way out of this intimidatory situation is to turn to 'soft' topics. However, by doing this, one only justifies the accusation that sociologists deal with trivialities and have nothing significant to say about their society.

Challenges on the Pedagogical Front

As an academic subject sociology has expanded considerably over the last 50 years. It is now a widely taught course of study, both at the under-graduate and post-graduate levels. It is an established part of the curriculum at the higher secondary or 'plus-two' level. Its popularity seems to have grown among the candidates appearing for various competitive examinations for the civil services. The proliferation of sociology courses in colleges and universities does not hide the fact that the subject is not a favorite choice of students. The nature of our post-secondary education being what it is, generally it is the leftovers and dregs amongst the students who take up sociology. This is particularly so at the post-graduate level. Incidentally, students who take up the subject also happen to be those with extremely poor background in mathematics and an inadequate exposure to quantitative methods. The popular perception is that sociology is a soft option, an 'easy' subject in which

anything can pass: sociology, after all, studies that which everyone is familiar with—family and caste, social problems and rural areas.

At what level can we start teaching sociology meaningfully is a debatable issue. What is currently taught in the name of sociology, to students whose academic preparation is deficient and whose motivation is suspect, is something that needs an urgent critical review. The pedagogic challenge confronting sociology in terms of the content, resources and methodology of teaching and the motivation of learners will surely have far-reaching consequences on Indian

sociology in the next millennium. It is true that sociology is not unique in this regard. One could generalize the pedagogic challenge under reference as a reflection of the crisis confronting the

system of higher education in the country, especially in the humanities and social sciences. To start with, there is the problem of linguistic skills of the students. The library language of sociology in India being English, conventionally the subject has been taught in the English medium. Although English is still taught in most states as a compulsory language from at least high school to the first degree level, the proficiency of students in that language is pathetically weak. What sort of higher education is possible when the educatees have poor linguistic skills in the library languages anybody's guess. There has, no doubt, been a process of switch-over to Hindi in some northern states and to state languages in other states. However, this process has neither been uniform nor efficacious. It is further hampered by the non-availability of standard text books and reference works in Indian languages. In fact, the reading material available in some languages is extremely poor. The problem is more serious at the post-graduate level. It is hardly surprising that very few regional language students clear the National Eligibility Test conducted by the University Grants Commission or the State Level Eligibility Test conducted by the state governments.

In the case of sociology, the issue of the language for teaching is more than one of availability of text books. It rises to the fore the issue of translation of concepts. Many a concept of mainstream sociology does not have a precise and unambiguous equivalent in the Indian languages. Thus, the exercise of indigenizing sociology should consider the linguistic aspect too. This is not a problem new to sociology as taught in the English language. Several concepts drawn from the German language are used verbatim in English. Often, the same word is translated differently by different translators. All this makes the teaching of courses like classical sociology, sociological theories, philosophy of social science and sociology of knowledge in Indian languages an extremely difficult task.

The problem of teaching sociology in the Indian languages, to students who have scant proficiency in English, is a pedagogic challenge that sociology has to confront. The challenge is compounded by the nominal presence or even the total absence of quantitative components in sociology courses, which by default has given a spurious qualitative orientation to the subject. The lamentable decline in the standards of doctoral theses and M.Phil dissertations is admitted everywhere.

Conclusions

Sociology in the three fronts— the intellectual, professional, and pedagogical is being challenged only apparently disparate. It may appear that each of them needs to be tackled on its own terms. However, on deeper reflection it becomes clear that these challenges are interrelated and that they need to be addressed simultaneously. The intellectual aspect of the challenge has a bearing on both the pedagogical and the professional aspects. More important, it is the pedagogical aspect that will have a lasting impact on the professional aspect. Even as many of us have been concerned about the changing face and characteristics of our society, the question beckoning us as sociologists is: Are we doing enough to observe and study these changes and are we enabling our students to become productive leaders of social change? If that is a tall order, can we say that we are contributing to a better understanding of Indian society and its ever evolving challenges? All through its history, Indian society has remained a multicultural society in every sense of the word. So is the case today. Probably no other country in the world can match its diversity and its capacity to absorb and amalgamate external influences of the magnitude that we have encountered. We have successfully met and overcome these challenges, and gone back to our path of growth and development may be after strife and tribulations. Each period of major socio-structural change in Indian society had its nuances and impact, altering and creating a set of new social hierarchies and social formations. These hierarchies and social structures have presented in one or other form, and have shaped and reshaped the nature and character of Indian society and its various institutions, be it marriage, family, jati, caste, community, kinship, religious practices, rural/urban/tribal communities, state, etc.

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