Contextualization of Indian Sociology

Within the context of history, colonialism, and its impact on the intellectual and cultural traditions in India, of which sociology and other social sciences are at a certain level of manifestations, provides an important historical backdrop for its theoretic, ideological and professional evaluation. Major theoretic orientations in Indian society have shown varying degrees of ups and downs during the last century. The analysis is not possible without a framework of sociology of knowledge within the context of history.

Radhakamal Mukerjee, B.N. Seal and B.K. Sarkar continuously refuted the efforts of western ideologists. Seal thought that institutions could only be compared when they were historically co-existed and parallel. To Mukherjee, Indian social institutions are unique. Therefore, the study of any society should be done in the particular context of that society. Ideology, theory and method are related to the context. Without the context, there is no relevance of any ideology, theory and method. Keeping this in view, we would discuss the work of sociologists in Indian context. The Indian sociology, as an emergent distinctive discipline during colonial and post-colonial phases, has been significantly influenced and patterned on western paradigm. Almost all sociologists in India have taken up studies on the theoretical paradigm of Durkheim, Weber, Marx and Parsons.

Besides the western paradigms, according to Singh (1993), Indian sociologists have adopted four theoretical orientations:

(i) Philosophical
(ii) Culturological
(iii) Structural
(iv) Dialectical-historical

Before the discussion of these theoretical orientations, we would like to refer an important essay on ideology, theory and method in Indian sociology by Yogendra Singh (1993) which covers a period of about a quarter century from 1952 to 1977:

(i) 1952 to 1960 – a period of adaptive changes and innovations;

(ii) 1960 to 1965 – a period of significant shifts in theoretic priorities and beginning of some critical tensions in theory and ideology of Indian sociology;

(iii) 1965 to 1970 – a period of marked sociological self-awareness and growth of new directions in theoretical and substantive contributions; and


These four periods correspond with four theoretical developments in Indian sociology as mentioned above.

(i) The philosophical orientation in Indian sociology is associated with the contributions of Radhakamal Mukerjee, D.P. Mukerji and A.K. Saran. This orientation has not made a significant impact on the theoretical nature of the Indian sociology. According to Singh (1983) it is interesting to note that despite the profoundness of scholarship of these scholars, the impact is minimal. The impact of western sociology was becoming more and more enveloping and empirical bases of societal understanding looked simpler than the rigour of
philosophy and pain of meaning-fully digging the past; that to swim with the current stream was easy sociological course, than the cognitive grasp of complex historical past.

(ii) The culturological orientation begins with the work of Srinivas, Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India. Brahminization, Sanskritization and Westernization were major concepts derived from this study. Sanskritization characterized a change within the framework of Indian tradition.

(iii) The structural orientation focuses on power structure, social stratification, family structure, demography and similar aspects, which reveal patterns, arrangements and repetitiveness. The empirical aspects are converted into abstracted concepts, models and categories. The structural studies have also taken comparative framework.

(iv) The dialectical-historical orientation is primarily based on Marxist approach and method for the analysis of social reality (Breenridge and Veer, 1994). The dialectical method has not been termed as Marxist as adaptations have been made keeping in view the Indian social reality. It is, however, a less developed branch of Indian sociology.

D.P. Mukerji and Ramkrishna Mukherjee empha-sized the significance of dialectical model (Singh, 1983). A.R. Desai had consistently used dialectical-historical approach with ideological fervour and commitment. He has consistently exposed contradictions in policies and programmes of change. The dialecti-cal-historical orientation grew rapidly in the seventies, when micro-empirical realities were subjected to class observation along with macro-structural social and economic processes in India (Singh, 1983).

Singh’s typology of four major theoretic orientations is signif-icant and logically coherent. According to Singhi (1993), these theoretical orientations basically have implicit or explicit ideological connotation. The implications can be discerned at the level of analysis, which as a critique rejects the way social reality is managed or justifies the formation of social reality as it has come to be manipulated and constructed.

At other level, they imply need for alternatives, modifications and corrections. Knowl-edge-neutrality is contradictions in terms. Evaluation and analysis of social reality reveals systematic formulation of scattered, diverse and immediate impressions which are mediated through common man’s impressionistic perceptions and views. At the third level, dominance of theoretical orientations generated institutionally tends to lead to negation and blinding of our own intellectual traditions.

In his book on Sociology of Indian Sociology, Ramkrishna Mukherjee (1979) describes the trends in Indian sociology. He itemized the narratives, which are presented in Tables 1-4 with particular reference to the Indian sociologists who played the pioneering role. The contributions of some of the pioneers of Indian sociology focus mainly on the ‘why’ and ‘what will it be’ questions, these constituted their main interests in the dynamics of Indian society.

When considered in greater detail, their value preferences, theoretical formulations and research orientations vary considerably. However, so little attention has been paid to the pioneers and their works that a precise account of these variations would be impossible at present. Also, research into this phase of Indian sociology may elicit more names and enables these varia-tions to be understood more comprehensively. Nevertheless, even the superficial
analysis of the similarities and differences among the pioneers brings out certain trends which characterize the first phase of Indian sociology and provides the base from which the next phase can be examined. The Indian society cannot develop under colonial conditions was implied or stated explicitly by the pioneers. At the same time, they regarded the independence of India as merely a stage in the development of the society: it was not the ultimate goal. This goal was also defined differently by the pioneers, as will be noticed from the rough outline of their value preferences given in the Table 1 (see separate image uploaded).

Table 1 shows that within the framework of man and society, the goals set by the pioneers ranged from an idealized version of oriental culture to the materialistic view of social development as propounded by Marx. Also, between these two polar-opposite goal sets, there are those emphasizing the culture-specific or value-specific development of man or the establishment of a society free from exploitation but coming about through cooperation and harmony among the social segments of the resolution of contradictions and conflicts among them.

Table 2 shows that the theoretical formulations of the pioneers were not unsystematic and abstract generalization about man and society. Also, they did not merely express those characteristics of a social phenomenon, which were spontaneously observed by them – a point in which, like in their value preference, they differed from the modernizers who supplemented them in the social arena.

On the contrary, their multi-dimensional comprehension of social reality from historical, contemporary and futuristic perspective meant that their widely divergent theoretical formulations had considerable inductive power to explain the changing reality by accentuating different aspects of social dynamism. The pioneers considered different aspects of the Indian (or the world) society to reveal its substantive reality.

Empirical research was strongly advocated by the pioneers, except perhaps by Coomaraswamy. Following their various value preferences and theoretical formulations, their research orientations registered different approaches to sociological research, as noted in Table 3.

However, irrespective of the above formulation of their approaches, which may have to be revised or elaborated in the light of further research into the work of the pioneers, it is evident that their interest in empirical research was not exclusively with respect to any particular social phenomenon like caste, family, national integration, stratification, or rural or urban society. Also, even while dealing with one phenomenon (such as caste), they did not restrict their attention to only one specific aspect, such as the relative positions of the castes variations in that aspect of the phenomenon.

Thus, we find even from an imprecise account of the works of the pioneers in Indian sociology that from different points of view they had proceeded systematically to analyse the Indian social reality is neither an insular nor an imitative manner. Even Coomaraswamy, who appears to have rejected western culture, had the entire Oriental culture with its various mores and modalities in view (see Table 4). The others too did not indulge in repetition of these theories to suit the native situation. Indian thinkers, with one to two exceptions, have been too much dependent on the West for their theory and have been promptly accepting the changing theoretical framework from the West (Saran, 1958: 1023).
It is true that a lot of empirical work has been done during past few decades but it would be difficult to suggest that sociology has gained theoretical maturity of its own in India. New areas of research have multiplied but the theoretical rigour and depth of interpretation seem to be lacking. The contribution of earlier generations of sociologists continues to be regarded and recognized as rigorous and significant by serious scholars.

It reflects the following major approaches to the study of Indian society: Indological: Ghurye and Dumont; Structural-Functional: Srinivas and Dube; Marxian: D.P. Mukerji and A.R. Desai, Ramkrishna Mukherjee; Civilizational: N.K. Bose and Surajit Sinha; Subaltern: Ambedkar, David Hardiman and Ranajit Guha; Cultural Approach: Yogendra Singh etc. Most of these approaches have been discussed in the lessons of different units of the course on the Perspectives on Indian Society.