INDIAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY: AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

India is land of Diversity. Our country has various languages, religion, culture, tradition etc. various elements of Indian culture such as Indian books on philosophy, Indian cuisine, yoga etc. have created an impact all over the world. Western culture is also called European civilization, Western civilization or Western lifestyle. It is based on certain belief systems, traditional customs moral and ethical values. The term not only applies to European countries but to places where we see spread of European culture. India is a country rich in its heritage and culture, but we are seeing fading of Indian culture at many places of India, especially at the urban societies of India.

The use of the Indological approach during the early formative years of Indian sociology and social anthropology is seen in the works of S.V. Ketkar, B.N. Seal and B.K. Sarkar. G.S. Ghurye, Louis Dumont, K.M. Kapadia, P.H. Prabhu and Irawati Karve have tried to explore Hindu social institutions and practices, either with reference to religious texts or through the analysis of contemporary practices. The journey of 'Sociology of India' that began with 'colonial Anthropology' or 'colonisation' of the non-Western mind (Alatas, 1974), prepared the ground for our pioneers, some of whom were involved in the nationalist struggle against the British, to rely on a textual view for offering alternative explanations about its society and culture. Like the Western sociology, Indian sociology took its shape in response to the structural crisis that the Indian society faced under colonial rule as well as its aspirations for political freedom. It was under such a situation that pioneers of Indian sociology searched for their specific identity in the traditional cognitive value frame.

The effort to revive and energize traditional culture and establish Indian sociology in its own footing quite different from that of Western or colonial categories led to the popularity of Indological approach. But Indological approach itself did not give rise to any uniform and common explanation about Indian society and culture. The religious texts of different ages that Indologists very often studied not only emanated the idea of a 'Hindu India'; they also proposed contrasting and conflicting visions of time, space and object. As a corollary, the need for supplementing those with field view was also felt by some of our pioneers. The whole discourse of Indology is also interrupted by theories on post-colonialism and Orientalism. Interestingly, notwithstanding scholars using different sources of information, the analysis in the final count became Brahminical in nature and spirit. This further raised doubts about the possibility of 'confluence of Indology and Sociology' suggested by Dumont. The challenges of studying Indian society today are enormous given the diversity of perspectives and paradigms. This paper would try to focus into the criticality of these issues in the context of contemporary demand for both indigenisation and universalization of discourses of sociology of India.

Study of Indian Tradition and Rise of Indology

It is widely known that Indologists took India as a unique society, culture or civilization and emphasized on the need to focus on its specificity. They also stressed on studying India as a whole and this entails delving deep into Indian glorious past through Indology and ancient history. In their quest for indegenisation, the fundamental problem faced by our pioneers was to discover the roots of Indian sociology in the Indian tradition (Singh, 1983:17). The Indological writings dealing with the Indian philosophy, art and culture are reflected in the works of B. N. Seal, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, G.S. Ghurye, Radhakamal Mukerjee, D. P. Mukerji, S. V. Ketkar, Louis Dumont and many others. The Indological tradition-initiated studies on ancient Indian-notably Hindu-ideology, values, institutions, and cultural norms and practices through careful examination of classical sacred texts.

The context of such discourse was marked by deliberate propagation of Eurocentric categories by British and European scholars on Indian society and culture. In cognitive and value terms, many of these categories distorted history and imputed meaning to perpetuate colonial rule (Singh, 1986: 1). Among the European scholars studying India, there were three distinctive groups having specific objective to study Indian society and culture. These were the Orientalists, the Missionaries and the British Administrators. Like the Indologists, the Orientalists also stressed on the languages and texts of the Orient. But, unlike them, Orientalism was a European enterprise from the beginning. The European scholars spoke for the Indians and contrasted Orient from that of the Occident (West). As Bernard Cohn (1968: 8) has argued, the Orientalists interpreted

Indian society as static, timeless and spaceless. In this view, there was no regional variation and Indian society was seen as a set of rules that every Hindu followed. Though in terms of material realities, the European did define indigeneity by taking indigenous material, yet this process entailed the use of European tools or 'modalities'. The way the Europeans gave a shape to the indigenous material was more important than the material itself. Cohn termed this as 'epistemological violence' which not only misperceived but also reconstructed the fundamental aspects of Indian society. The missionaries, on the other hand, relied on the normative principles of Christianity to judge Indian social institutions negatively. Finally, the British administrators-cum-anthropologists offered a mechanistic, segmentary and instrumental nature of Indian society.

It constituted a typical 'colonial paradigm' for social analysis and offered a deeply fractured picture of Indian society (Singh, 1986). These misrepresentations irritated and annoyed the pioneers of our social science disciplines. They therefore found Indology a suitable escape route to reply to unpleasant questions about caste, community, tribe, religion or village life. It appears from the foregoing discussion that pioneers of Indian sociologists did not confine themselves to the fore walls of a particular approach and preferred a combination of different and often contrasting methods for the study of Indian society and culture. The claim of Indology being the dominant approach to study Indian society at the initial phase of Indian sociology therefore needs to be critically evaluated.

Limitations of Indology

The Indological view despite certain advantages has transformed the thoughts and actions of ancient Indians into a distortion of reality. Srinivas (1962: 130) found that ideas which are carried over from literary material vitiate the observation of field behaviour. An example of such a failure to understand the factual situation is provided by the way in which the idea of Varna has vitiated the understanding of caste. The only cure for this marked literary bias lies in doing field research. The field worker, confronted by the bewildering variety and complexity of facts is forced to relate the ideal with the actual. It is also argued that the Indological assertion of studying India through text invariably led to study of Hindu text and growth of Hindu sociology (Oommen, 1986: 250). Such an approach also reduced Indian values to those contained in Hindu religious texts ignoring the value or normative systems of marginalised dalit, minorities or women. Ironically, the core of the mainstream Indian sociology is sustained through the taken-for-granted ways of perceiving reality thereby maintaining a strong ideology (Rage, 2003: 17). As the 'book view' did not reflect reality in true sense of the term, scholars have stressed on 'field view' to get at facts. Ronald Inden (1986) has shown how human agency in India is displaced by Indological discourse not onto a reified State or Market but onto a substantialised caste. He wrote, "The societalism of Indology, the view that reduces religion, politics and economic to the social, has made caste into the true agent of the actions of India's people" (Ibid. 441). Yogendra Singh (1983: 17) also believes that "The schools of sociology in India which have consciously attempted to draw the elements of Indian tradition, the Smritis and Scriptures into a language of sociology have only succeeded in exegetic interpretation and not a secularisation or intellectualisation of traditional principles as such. It has been argued that classical texts often change hands and go through several interpolations by the time they are handed down to us. Pathy (1996: 62) notes that there are many versions of epics representing counter-cultures. For instance, Ramayana of Valmiki, of Tulsi, the Tamil version, and Michael Madhusudan Dutta's Bengali epic Meghnath Badh Kavya are all distinct. As Hinduism itself is fragmented in terms of social structure, value system and ideology, it is impossible to provide a single encompassing model. Hence, any effort to produce a single Indian model would miss processes like de-sanskritization, Dalitisation, tribalization, Islamization or Tamilization.

Rise of Comparative Methods

In 1955, Dumont argued that the sociology of India must converge between sociology and Indology. He wrote, 'It should be obvious, in principle, which a Sociology of India (as a "whole", a civilization) lies at the point of confluence of Sociology and Indology' (Dumont and Pocock, 1957: 7). According to T. N. Madan (2011), the qualifying words 'in principle' are important as they make room for a certain flexibility to accommodate contextual differences and local traditions. Madan feels that by saying so, Dumont avoided any kind of dogmatism. The method was dialectical in the sense that although Indology may provide points of departure, the principles derived from it were to be confronted with what the people actually did (their observable/meaningful behaviour). Dumont himself characterized it as a combination of the views from 'within' and 'without', yielding understanding at a higher level. Dumont's support for comparative methods became more evident when he wrote, 'As soon as history takes on the character of a comparative discipline, it becomes indistinguishable from sociology. Sociology, in turn, not only cannot do without history but it needs historians who are, at the same time, sociologists' (cited by Madan, 2011: 225).

It is this insight which underlies, thinks Madan, Dumont's formulation of the complementarity of Indology and sociology in the sociological study of India. He therefore wanted to transcend narrow ethnography. 'Ideology', Dumont writes, 'does not tell us everything about a society' (1966: 22), just as observed behaviour without reference to ideas and values 'collective representations' that underlie them will remain incomprehensible in a deeper sense. Obviously, Dumont did not consider Sanskrit texts as the sole source of information, nor are they elevated to the level of final authority. The tendency to either romanticise (or fabricate as Edmund

Leach argues) the past or rely on limited ethnography may result in distorted explanations of social reality. Even those who relied on field as a source of data got involved in the 'insider-outsider' debate to determine what is best for social anthropologists. For Srinivas (1997) studying one's own society is as difficult as studying the other'.

The ethnographic tradition of sociological research however came under heavy criticism for ignoring history and totality. As against limited ethnography, the large-scale surveys found enormous popularity among those who favoured extensive data to generalise or find statistical correlations among variable on many aspects of social life. Deshpande (2004:194) has argued that our attachment with micro studies since Independence has denied us the benefit of conducting survey on issues like industry, class structure or media seriously as they fell outside the purview of anthropology. But it is equally true that such extensive data enumeration often lacks serious theoretical engagement and ignores the question of subjectivity. They do not reveal 'concrete human experiences' talk, feelings, action as evident in their social and economic organization.

The quantitative methods do not allow the researcher to learn the way human beings respond to social constraints and construct their social worlds. Hence, in recent times, there has been growing interest in applying qualitative techniques ofdata collection in sociology. For instance, the use of narratives, feminist methods, focused group discussion (FDG), life history and case study method, participatory rural appraisal (PRA), visual or unobstructive methods have started gaining ground in social sciences and this trend has started questioning the monopoly of quantitative methods in academic sociology. There has been a growing interest among even quantitative researchers to use some of the methods associated with qualitative research. Qualitative and quantitative data derived from different sources are, therefore, illuminating, comprehensive and when properly combined, one approach enhances the other. In an excellent review of theory and methods of Indian sociology, Maitrayee Chaudhuri and Jesna Jayachandran (2013) have noted deployment of new concepts, tools including new objects of enquiry in the sociological writings on India since the first decade of 21ˢᵗ century. But in the second decade of this century, they noted a new shift towards political economic analysis.

They feel that these concerns have made it possible to initiate serious theoretical questioning in Indian sociology. In the context of dalit and women's movement in India, for instance, a new conceptualisation of caste and gender arose. The post-colonial analysis also deconstructed the traditional notion of caste4. All these interventions again popularised the need for use of indigenous categories and concepts. But it is equally true that search for cultural categories necessitate a comparison among societies (Ostor cited by Chaudhuri and Jayachandran, 2013: 123). The point that emanates from this analysis is that concern for theory and methods in Indian sociology is closely linked to changes in context.

Western Culture Impact

The effect of western culture is greatly seen in our customs, tradition, social and moral behavior, our love and respect for others. These days a person loves to live in freedom, he does not want to bind themselves in Indian customs and traditions. Day by day we see breaking of joint family and more and more development of nuclear family. Very few are interested in making adjustments and share their things with other family members, the word privacy is given greater importance and the love and respect towards other especially elders is decreasing day by day. In this information age people are too busy to care for others. Western culture has brought with it the seeds of selfishness in the minds of Indian. These are contradictory to Indian culture which has always taught to live in harmony with each other and always love and respect everyone at home. With lack in experience of a nuclear family due to the absence of grandfather and grandmother, and both parents working a child fails to learn ethical or moral values, and learn whatever little he sees and understands from the world and his teachers. In this way we end up bringing up a child who has little ethical values and do not hesitate in doing any unfair practices, because no one is there to teach him good or bad or stop him from doing something bad. We need to give importance to our Indian culture which taught us to live in peace and harmony with other by the way of increasing our tolerance and patience. Many people of other countries are realizing the importance of Indian heritage and are adapting the goodness of Indian culture such as practice of Yoga and meditation, wisdom and teachings passed by the ancient saint etc. The knowledge of Indian wisdom helps human being of any race to enrich their life.

Conclusion

It appears that the challenges of studying Indian society today are enormous given the diversity of perspectives and paradigms. There is no common understanding about the orientation of Indian sociology today. In the context of demand for wider perspective in studying Indian society, one cannot but have to agree with Dhanagare (2007), Oommen (2001), Jayaram (2006) and many others about the need for creative and systematic engagement with social history as well as a 'view from below' so as to avoid methodological fundamentalism. The need for balance between the micro and macro analytical perspectives is more prominent as Indian sociology has become more accustomed to accept social criticism. Our effort to contextualise Indian sociology in the present context and make generalisations through theoretical abstractions would guide us to look for variations in field reality so as to develop

relevant conceptual tools for public debate and sensitivity. As Partha Nath Mukherji (2004: 33) argues, one of the important assumptions underlying indegenisation is that social reality is best comprehended if it is analysed, inferred, explained, interpreted with the help of conceptual abstractions that are,

(a) Either deep rooted in its structure, culture and historical process,

Or are sufficiently efficient in capturing the complex realities, no matter if they are formulated in contexts other than their own. In other words, the process of indigenising sociology or social sciences has to be consistent with the process of universalising the discipline. Today the demand for indigeneity is not to be confused with parochialisation in sociology. It is rather a search for the universals in the particulars. And Indian sociology has much to offer in this endeavour.

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