

Sociology in Our Lives: Premise and Promise

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ABSTRACT

Sociology engages with the processes responsible for ordering of social reality and knowledge in accordance with socially generated and validated concepts. It builds on a premise that human lives are primarily 'social' and thereby their inter-connections and interactions constitute the subject matter of a discipline which is rooted in and concerned with the human quest to understand our social world. Sociology has survived through many limiting traditions or methodological orientations and has continued to evolve in its uniquely self-reflexive manner around the questions which brought it in existence. The urge to understand the human condition and produce knowledge which can liberate/emancipate is as central to the sociological research in the present as it has been in the past.

Keywords: Sociology, reflexivity, ideology, emancipatory, education and society

Debating definitions

To develop a definitive answer to the question 'what is sociology?' indeed requires an approach which is faithful to the existing ways of looking at the discipline and also perhaps in agreement with a relatively static (or may be even bounded) notion of the domain of sociology. If one considers the question in the light of another question, 'what do sociologists do?' as Giddens has done, it still leads to a diversity of opinions, methods, models and paradigms claiming to be authentic versions of sociological work (Giddens: 1987). However, the answer to the question 'what sociologists do?' also presupposes a category of 'sociologists' and this begs the question in arriving at a consensus regarding who is a sociologist? What indeed can be the self-image of a sociologist and to what extent it would correspond with that of her/his colleagues is a concern worth investigation especially in the present context where identity forms the core of any intellectual endeavour. These inquiries are essential to understand whether there can be a worldview of sociology which can be regarded as being authentic and unitary.

Though there can be many points of contention regarding what sociology is and what it is not yet asking the question seems to be an excellent way to figure out what it has been till now and what it can be in future. Sociology has evolved from the days of being called a natural science of society to its present engagement with post-modernist approaches. Sociology owes its origin to the advent of modernity in Europe characteristically reflected in the hegemonic evolution of the scientific episteme, the industrial and political revolutions as well as within the enlightenment philosophy.

However a conservative reaction to enlightenment also provided a significant dimension to the origin of sociology. Sociology, at its birth, was conceptualised as a scientific discipline uniquely positioned to play a crucial role in advancing the path to progress and since there could be no progress without order, it became primarily associated with questions of order. Auguste Comte saw in it the potential to uncover the hidden laws behind social reality and 'expedite the arrival of positivism', the highest stage in his evolutionary model of society referred to as the 'law of three stages' (Reitzer: 2000).

After Comte, Durkheim further developed the positivistic method in sociology and also delineated the subject-matter of sociology by saying that sociologists should study social facts. These social facts, according to Durkheim exist independent of their individual manifestation and are capable of exercising constraint on the individual. Durkheim says that social facts should be treated as things so as to be able to objectively study them. He was also a firm believer in the use of comparative method and thus for him 'comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology but sociology itself' (Durkheim, 1966).

According to Beteille, not only was the early use of comparative method tied to the idea of a natural science of society but also to the theory of evolution. Radcliffe-Brown borrowed from Durkheim the idea that societies were governed by laws that could be discovered by application of proper method. This was nothing but the comparative method, based on observation, description and comparison of societies as they actually existed (Beteille, 2002). Durkheim believed that society is imprinted upon the minds of the individuals and they actually act out society in their daily lives. His theories define society as a reality *sui generis* which 'renders man a product of societal processes and his freedom a resultant of progressive differentiation, of societal roles, forms and institutions (Singh: 2004). For Durkheim morality is another name for group solidarity with collectivity being the source of moral life of the individual. This conception of society and the individual leaves little room for the agency of the latter which becomes merely an expression of the structure (itself statistically calibrated) in Durkheimian sociology.

However the later day sociologists were thankfully conscious of the significance of the human agency and there came to exist a structure-agency debate in sociology. Another debate which dominated the scene in sociological world has been regarding value-neutrality in sociological research. It was Max Weber who defined sociology as an interpretative understanding of social action and thereby incorporated the realm of the 'subjective' in his methodological approach called *verstehen*. In Weber's view the sociologist was in a unique position as compared to a natural scientist as the former could imaginatively place oneself in the place of the

social actor in the process of comprehending her/his action. Thus the basic difference in the subject matter of natural and social sciences meant their methodology had also to be different. Thus Weber advocated that the task of the sociologist should be the understanding of meanings attributed by the actor in the process of carrying out social action. Thus Weber helped in shattering the value-neutral self-image of sociology by bringing to light the significance of the 'subjective' in the work of the sociologist. The debate has been carried further by the phenomenological, symbolic-interactionist and ethnomethodological perspectives which question the subject-object dichotomy in the field of sociological research.

Ideology in sociological journeys

A constantly significant companion of sociology in its journey has been ideology. Sociologists have grappled with ideology since very beginning and ideologies have impacted their arguments, methods and theoretical formulations. It was enlightenment ideology which celebrated 'reason' in response to which sociology emerged. According to Yogendra Singh, 'Marx made it the major theme of his sociology and his revolutionary praxis. Indeed it is he who demonstrated the significance of ideology in social science and sociology. He demonstrated its role not only as reflected in the class or power interests of the capitalist and the ruling class inherent in the sociological formulations and analyses, but also went deeper in his treatment and unravelled how ideology was implicit in the conceptual and paradigmatic structure of the sociological language itself' (Singh, 2004).

Structural-functionalist approaches which emphasized more upon the primacy of structure and institutional dimension of human lives thus came to be criticized for their ideological orientation in being status-quoist and conservative in nature. The critical school theorists like Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas also developed their theoretical arguments around the theme of ideology. Herbert Marcuse, for example, writes in 'One Dimensional Man' that a one dimensional society is characterized by an absence of what he calls the negative thinking (critical logic) and blind adherence to the technological rationality (instrumental approach). For Marcuse, technological rationality

is also a political rationality and thereby is deeply entrenched in ideology (Marcuse, 1964).

The treatment of the subject of ideology and the discipline's close relation with it proves what Peter Berger refers to as the 'debunking motif in sociology'. He says that the "sociologist will be driven time and again, by the very logic of his discipline, to debunk the social system he is studying". This is what leads the sociologist to see through the façade of the social structures and look behind (Berger, 1963). The logic of the discipline is also responsible for the tendency to be self-critical in sociologists and this is the true emancipatory potential of sociology. Reflexivity, in theory and methodology, forms the core of sociological practice.

Though to call every reflexive engagement with social theory as sociological practice would be naive yet it is difficult to deny that when in the classroom a student asks a question regarding the potential of sociology to solve social problems, a sociological seed is in the process of being implanted. This initial innocent questioning may actually lead to a mature understanding of the relationship between sociological research and social change or in other words of sociology as praxis. Thus an answer to the question 'what is sociology?' lies in conceptualising the discipline in terms of being a field of contestation which is also futuristically optimistic, a humble yet sharp, theoretically grounded yet creative engagement with our social existence. A sociologist would be someone who is able to locate her/his subject-matter as much in a poem, a work of fiction or a mathematics textbook as in the social organisation of a village. A true sociologist would be aware of her/his limitations as well as strengths in choosing problems of research and accordingly the methods.

The trajectory of sociology in India

Sociological understandings of society are usually cast in the frames of structural-functional, Marxist and critical perspectives as well as the approaches derived from the feminist standpoint or the subaltern critique. Sociology has a rich tradition of analysing the historical ways of emergence of the modern society in the west along with the prevailing tension with colonial modernity in the Indian soil. It has travelled from being a 'book view' oriented explanation to integrating the 'field view' within

its analysis of social reality, as advocated by M.N. Srinivas who was trained as a social anthropologist and brought a paradigm shift to the analysis of caste and social change in India. Caste, as we know it, can be referred to as not just an institution but a worldview. Sociological traditions in India have emerged under the shadow of caste. A whole range of scholars doing sociology in India have adopted caste as being synonymous with Indian society.

Therefore sociology in India has revolved around two major ideas. One is that Indian society is a tradition bound society which is evolving under direct influence of the west dictated modernity. Secondly that it is caste which best represents this dialectic with western modernity. Further the cousin of caste which social stratification studies have suggested is class. This twin emphasis has led Indian sociology to adopt tradition-modernity dichotomy as its existential axis. Most of the studies undertaken to understand the construction of Indian society in this image of the west have explored this dimension in various substantive areas of sociological analysis.

However, if one looks closely, one also gets a feeling that even the western image has been cast in terms of this dichotomy. Thus a rational west emerges out of its feudal past through a democratic, industrial awakening of the masses and formation of nation-state as symbolic of this transformation. For us it seems, progress has become a matter of asserting our advancement in terms of accomplishments made by the west while retaining an Indian core and ground. The relevance of the growth of post-modern perspectives in western society has not been paid much attention by our dichotomous models.

Education as a response to challenges before society and the prevailing crisis

Education has existed at the fore front of this dialogue with the west, historically undertaken from the days of the colonial rule in India. It was in the pedagogical responses of the national movement and its leaders that the British rule was challenged vehemently. We also see that in the educational ideas of Tagore, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Phule, a potential was visualized in the agency of education to resist and challenge a highly stratified society in India. This was so despite the different trajectories of the mode and functionality of education were

conceptualised in these approaches. The ideals of equality and peace marked the difference in proposing an educational scheme deviating from that of the colonial powers.

The cultures of nation building in India have depended upon education even after Independence in a major way. Our educational policies have taken up issues related to liberty, equality and fraternity in diverse ways including the logic of protective discrimination and focus on increasing access to education both at school and higher educational levels. Social justice has become a major pillar for state guided educational models in India. However at the same time we see a great amount of reliance on private enterprise in education which somehow does not appear to be in consonance with the discourse on social justice. This also has a deep impact upon the practices of doing sociology in different contexts.

Education and society are both witnessing a transition in India today. As one opens the newspapers, it is more than visible that business has cast its shadow upon education like never before. Some are referring to this as the neo-liberal assault. However, when the reports about dismal standards of education or mass copying in examinations come out, it seems as if something is seriously wrong with our education system. This serious problem can not just be categorized under the labels of privatisation ills or crisis of values. It is visible that a systemic failure awaits us if manifold interventions are not undertaken.

It has been observed that in the race to match up to the expectations of market many a times sociology is not given as much importance as supposedly market-friendly disciplines like management, commerce, economics or even social work. Students, who learn in schools to quantify success (as seen in percentage of marks) are obsessed with the market value of their chosen disciplines and thus have already subscribed to the conformist logic of market even before they enter a college or a university. This unfortunate state of affairs is compounded by the apprehensions about falling standards of educational institutions which are increasingly finding it difficult to maintain autonomy and an ethical pedagogical culture. An extremely technocratic and instrumental approach seems to be marginalising the purely academic spirit which

is essential for the sociology practitioners to think and work in an independent manner.

The social context of a sociologist is also a deciding factor in the practice of sociology and according to Maitrayee Chaudhuri 'few sociologists would have any disagreement with the proposition that on an average, both research and teaching of sociology in India is abysmally poor' (Chaudhuri, 2003). As one encounters educational crisis at a micro level, such as within a school, college or a university, one may at times feel like giving up the battle from within. It can be quite disturbing to see people pursuing teaching and careers in the educational field only for sake of finding employment which suits their financial needs or social roles. How disheartening it can be to witness women who have found themselves labelled as 'teachers' while the only rationale they have for being in the job is that they are considered best suited for it on account of their gender. Similar is the case of those men who argue that teaching came as a consolation prize after not having got success elsewhere as they openly confess that the academic world is a safe haven for those who can not compete in the real world.

The condition of the students is no better. Many are just preparing to adopt the above mentioned stereotypes in their future. And this preparation looms large over their eclipsed present. One is pained to see the colour of curiosity in their eyes fading with each passing day as they achieve a senseless maturity and the so called practical wisdom. If only, one wonders, there could be an alternate vision around. If only, one yearns, there could be a promising discontent voiced with unflinching faith and conviction.

A promising sociology for our future

The challenge that one faces is necessarily that of a moral kind. If the choices of today have been constructed as a consolidated package of history, it is a moral choice to respond to history without becoming overawed with it. To what extent can one be driven to run afar and close one's eyes to the tyranny of the past or the overbearing collective unconscious? It is certainly not convincing that human beings can not perceive the dangers associated with their lives today. These dangers are far more prominent in an existence appearing secure than one threatened by forces of an extreme kind.

War zones of the earlier era may appear less fatal to some than instruments of peace today. Violence has changed its meaning by having got absorbed in the rhetoric of strategy.

The existential crisis which had earlier led Indian sociologists to examine their own ways of doing sociology in negotiating with western concepts and categories has now acquired a different shape in the present context. The emancipatory potential of sociology too needs to be recast (or reaffirmed) in this changed setting. Increasingly the practice of sociology now requires negotiating with a reality which forces us to link the 'indigenous' with the 'global' in a more sensitive, imaginative and creatively newer ways. Whether the discipline will reinvent itself in the face of the challenges it faces today is however a question we need not answer for this is a foregone conclusion inherent in the logic of the discipline itself.

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