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## Sociology, Social Research and Social Problems In India

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Sociology is a new science to be introduced in India. It is a much younger science than in the West, where it had its birth at the turn of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century. In the West during the last forty or fifty years, in fact since sociology gained recognition as a science of society, it has taken long strides in emerging as a body of more systematic social theory “in which theory that had formerly been largely speculative in character was drawn into closer relationship with empirical studies .... This was accompanied by the restatement of propositions, often deduced from sound theory and expressed as hypotheses and then tested by observations”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Western sociologists are keeping more to ‘hard facts’.

The same impact can be felt in India. But the developments have not been so spectacular. For, Indian sociologists have inherited a different social philosophy, which is not only ancient but goes far beyond even the known history of many civilizations. It is also unique in considering the relation of man not simply as a relation to other human beings but to all life. In the Hindu social system, the whole *Cosmos* is believed to be dominated by one Supreme Being, which is identifiable with Self. But a distinction is drawn between the *Cosmic Self* and the *Psychic Self*. The Cosmic self is the Supreme Reality, the *Unity* which lies behind all multiplicity, known as *Brahma*. But the Psychic Self, the manifestation of one’s own self, is *Atman*. It is the ‘subject which persists throughout the changes. It is the simple truth that nothing can

destroy. Death does not touch it nor vice dissolves it. Permanence, continuity, unity, eternal activity are its characteristics”.

Again, it is the doctrine of **Karma** that sums up individual action and behaviour. **Karma** literally means deed, action. At every moment of our life, we are performing some **Karma** (action). Each action produces its own reaction or result, and the nature of this result depends upon the moral or immoral nature of the action performed. Driven on by this **Karma**, the individual moves from existence to existence, since individual life is only a span out of a series. This series is called the round of **Transmigration**. And this round ends only with the attainment of salvation (**Moksha**), the realization of the Supreme Unity and the experiencing of it subjectively.

The doctrine of **Karma** provides a continuum of social existence, in terms of **ashrama**. It literally means a stage, a period or a condition. The past being determined and the future only conditioned; ‘life’ in Hinduism cannot be regarded as a fatalistic resignation but as an opportunity for intense striving as a preparation for self-realization.

In this sense, human life must be lived for the realization of the four ideals of life, namely, **dharma, artha, kama** and **moksha**. The law of **dharma** imposes upon the individual a set of rules to be followed in his relationships, filial, economic, religious, and social. The second ideal of **artha** may be interpreted as action or conduct leading to the economic or temporal good of the individual as living in a social group of which he forms an organic but unique part. **Kama** indicates the cultural aspect, in the sense that it means the enjoyment of life and thus proves to be a strong corrective to the streak of pessimism and renunciation. It regulates the relationship between the senses on the assumption that the life of the flesh, far from being something sinful or harmful in itself, has a necessary and moral function to perform. Last, there is the ideal of **moksha** or salvation which demands that all the actions must be performed by the individual with this ultimate end in view. To facilitate the fulfillment of these ideals, an individual’s life is divided into four stages of **brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha**

and **sanyasa**. These may be translated as periods of life devoted to study, household duties, contemplation and renunciation.

It is, therefore, obvious that spiritual values to us are not so much a form of mystic religion but as a mode of life. It also explains the complete absence of an organized Church in India, quite unlike the West. In this connection, it may also be mentioned that while other civilizations have perished, the Indian civilization, which is contemporary with those of Egypt and Babylon, is still functioning. How has India managed to remain more or less the same in the midst of social migrations, upheavals and political changes that have elsewhere changed the face of society? Why is it that her conquerors have not been able to impose on her their language, their thoughts and customs, except in superficial ways? It is because the vitality of Indian culture lay in its power to reaffirm the old values and unmask the decaying ones only to rediscover them. This is what Buddha, Mahavir and Shankaracharya, who gave a new lease of life to Indian civilization achieved. There have been many reformist movements in the country, but none so revolutionary as to upset her fundamental values. As Hans Kohn points out, “A truer basis of unity than modern national sentiment was to be found in a common intellectual heritage, persisting through an unbroken tradition and moulding and permeating India’s whole social life to the minutest detail, and in the peculiar contemplative piety which lies at the root of all the various forms of Hinduism”.<sup>2</sup>

Religion has played a very important role in the life of our country. It is the centre around which the whole of Indian social life rotates. A wave of blind imitation of everything that was Western had begun to spread in the country in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is also the period when the Britishers had succeeded in consolidating their power in India. The free thinkers and the ‘Young Bengal’ group under the leadership of Derozio acted like Nihilists, paying no respect to traditions or ancient beliefs. But they miserably failed in their attempts. However, at the same time, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshub Chander Sen and Swami Dayanand Saraswati infused new life into Hindu society; their great achievement was that they

succeeded in preserving the fundamental unity of the Hindu social organization and its value system.

Whenever Indian society was faced with forces of disintegration the society threw up a new culture from within itself. But the contact of Indian society with the West, unlike that of modern with medieval society in Europe, introduced a foreign element in Indian culture. It is in this context that the modern sociological thought of India has to be understood. This impact led some thinkers, who wanted to return to the traditional principles, to reject the Western civilization altogether. Among the prominent modern thinkers who ascribe to this view, to mention a few, are Coomaraswamy and Bhagwandas. Coomaraswamy is very uncompromising in his criticism of the Western civilization, while Bhagwandas, though adhering to the traditional sociological thought of India believes in a rationalistic synthesis. But it is rationalism on a religious basis. However, a healthier development has been in the direction in which attempts have been made to interpret traditional concepts and values from a modern rationalistic–positivistic point of view. Contemporary sociology in India poses the problem. If no solution has been found, it forms the worst dilemma of Indian sociologists. This predicament is perhaps the key to the understanding of the fundamental trends in contemporary social thought in India.

Even the current sociological view cannot be said to be divorced from metaphysical thinking, as Radha Kamal Mukherjee has observed that ‘social interest and experiences must express our conceptions of the nature and functions of divinity’. Mukherjee’s main concern from the beginning of his intellectual career has been the reorientation of the social sciences as expounded by Western thinkers. His approach may be said to be interdisciplinary. He regards universal law as affecting human beings ‘in something which is moulded by the interaction of classes and interests within the State’. Furthermore, it is in ‘groups and associations which conflict or co-operate with one another’ that human values are moulded. He has tried to show how economic principles are founded on physical and psychological principles and how intimately they are connected in their functioning with the

institutional set-up. Mukherjee is not an orientalist. In his *Institutional Theory of Economics*, he not only joins the American School led by Veblen, Commons and Mitchell, but gives it a new orientation by emphasizing the new role of traditions and values. ‘Personality develops out of a process of interweaving of group interests and values with clearly marked out and even stereotyped values’. This organization of impulses will be furthered and completed by religion. He further elaborates his viewpoint in his *Dynamics of Morals*. He gives a fourfold typology of groups arranged in a hierarchical series: The Crowd, the Interest Group, the Community and the Commonalty. These groups have different norms of organization, criteria of evaluation, sanctions and means of control and different ends and values.

Professor Mukherjee’s thinking is clearly indicative of the rise of sociology in India. His thought covers a vast field, from ecological studies and observations to religion and mysticism. He even goes further and endeavors to integrate such extremes as ecology and mysticism into one grand whole. In the final analysis, as Saran points out, the bases of Dr. Mukherjee’s synthesis of traditional and modern thought are the concepts of level, hierarchy and the theory of symbolism; also, the methods of re-interpretation and adaptation.<sup>3</sup> The concepts and methods are all traditional. In both economics and sociology, he has made a big effort to meet the challenge of the West.

Another prominent exponent of the synthesis theory of Indian culture is D P Mukerji. He looks at the impact of the West on the Indian society as a phase in the social process of cultural assimilation and synthesis that has been going on in Indian history almost from the very beginning. In his view, Indian culture has grown by a series of responses to the successive challenges of so many races and cultures, which has resulted in a synthesis. Western impact is the latest phase in this process and the problem is not one of acceptance or rejection but of understanding the laws of cultural synthesis in the context of Indian history. Mukerji gives an indication of being under the influence of Marxian thought, though he cannot be said to be an orthodox Marxian in his analysis of Indian culture. For, in his view,

the process of synthesis of culture which Muhammadan rule in India had initiated was interrupted by the English conquest, since it also meant a change in the economy of the country, which put a new emphasis on economic factors in the processes of culture formation and culture change. The Britishers, while introducing a new economy, tried to foster it by the unrealistic policies of land settlement and education. And, in this process the old middle-class was replaced by a new middle-class. Indian society ceased to be of the 'closed' type without becoming 'open'. And here lay the danger. This mechanical unity of Indian society could be set apart at the slightest clash of middle-class interests. But he does not believe in any such contingency ever arising, since he is convinced that the new economic forces which are working in Indian society will lead to the emergence of a new, stable culture in India.<sup>4</sup>

But in his later thought he shifts more towards the role of tradition in Indian culture. He is not prepared to be dubbed a 'traditionalist', but he passionately advocates the study of traditions with a view to reinterpret the Hindu theory of man and society. Thus, he gives a clear indication of his departure from his earlier attempt to analyse social change in terms of Marxian thought. "Thus, it is that I give top priority to the understanding (in Dilthey's sense) of traditions even for the study of their changes. In other words, the study of Indian traditions, which, in my view, is the first and immediate duty of the Indian sociologist, should precede the socialist interpretations of changes in the Indian traditions in terms of economic forces". Professor Mukerji's lament is: "It pains me to observe how our Indian scholars succumb to the lure of modern 'scientific' techniques imported from outside as a part of technical aid and 'know how' without resistance and dignity. In the intellectual transactions which are taking place, it seems that we have no terms to offer, no ground to stand upon".<sup>5</sup>

It may, therefore, be said that in our sociological thinking there is a preponderance of belief in nature and divinity. An individual's actions are believed to be justified not only in his own lifetime but even beyond. Thus, Darwinism, which had such a great influence on Western thought, possibly could not have found a place in Indian

thought. Even now in our society an individual's behaviour and values are interrelated as part and whole. Hence, sociology in India cannot be entirely 'objective' in its content and approach. It has to contain a little bit of abstruse philosophy, which provides a continuum between the past and the present, which constitutes the dynamics of Indian society.

A great product of such a synthesis in thinking was Mahatma Gandhi, who led the struggle for freedom of the nation to its successful end. He cannot be said to be a revivalist or a believer in sociological archaism by any means. On the other hand, he was a great social innovator. He did not belong to the *elite* but to the masses and succeeded only because he could appeal to their spiritual sentiments and make himself understood. He believed in the dignity of man, not under class-structure, but as a being to whom nothing is higher. The ultimate ideal of man is to realize God, and anything that lowers man in this world, lowers his dignity. Closely connected with this belief was his conception of man in relation to his environment. Since the world is a creation of God, one must enjoy the world with a sense of sacrifice. Gandhi did not pin his faith on the material welfare of man, and thus he substituted 'standard of life' for 'standard of living', which had moral values. But the basic idea underlying Gandhian thought was non-violence. There were others, for instance Buddha, who preached non-violence— *ahimsa*. But they meant by it the negation of enjoyment. To Gandhi, non-violence was not a negative approach. It meant to him that in order to promote the dignity of man and to develop his personality there must not be any compulsion or coercion. Non-violence was an approach to a problem through persuasion and compromise and hence it was the only suitable weapon to be used in the struggle for freedom. It is the greatest tribute to Mahatma Gandhi that through non-violent means India regained her freedom, because hardly a parallel can be found in the history of the world where a nation has established her freedom only through non-violent means. It was a dynamic force created by Gandhi by harnessing spiritual values of the people and making full use of them. As Bogardus observes, 'Gandhi's social strength illustrates the surprising effectiveness that can be achieved under theories of life and world negation'.

However, we find a more modernistic trend in current social research in the country. In the wake of Independence, the country was faced with many social problems which needed a new technique to handle them. India is predominantly an agricultural country. For a very long period the village social system continued to remain integrated, because external factors could not enter deep into it. The result has been that for centuries the rural social organization, power structure and leadership, retained their traditional hierarchical character, with higher castes and landlords maintaining the power equilibrium. But since the advent of the national movement, which had its culmination on August 15, 1947, Indian village life has been faced with a new challenge involved in the process of democratization and innovation. With many legislative and tenurial reforms and finally with the inception of development schemes of rural reconstruction, the village social system is confronted with new forces and factors of change. Therefore, today the village, its social organization, its culture, its value pattern, its leadership, its economic structure, in fact, the entire village community, is standing at the threshold of a new era. The old power structure, which was based solidly on the traditional caste structure and feudalistic traditions, is meeting a challenge from the new forces of democratization in the shape of constitutional rural *panchayats* at the village level and the entire Parliamentary democracy at the national level. Therefore, changes of far-reaching socio-economic importance are being ushered in by the villagers themselves, greatly facilitated by innovating leadership on the one hand, and the conscious attempts by the State on the other, so that the people may be motivated to pursue their own goals and build an economically sound and productive system. It is for this reason that village studies and monographs represent a new trend in social research. We have now quite a few interesting studies of rural life as lived in different parts of the country. Recently, illuminating village studies have been published by Srinivas, Dubey, Mujumdar, Oscar Lewis, Gough, Beals, McKim Marriot, Steed, Mandelbaum and others. All these authors have adopted a different approach by not studying rural life as traditional rural sociologists would, because these social scientists had different orientations and backgrounds. If

Oscar Lewis was interested in comparing his Ranikhera village with its counterpart of Tepoztlan in Mexico and thus comparing the two cultures on the basis of the findings of these two villages, others want to explain how the norms and values are being carried on in a traditional way. In other words, the studies made so far reflect the microcosmic approach and try to generalize from one village the nature of social structure of the rest of rural India. How far these generalizations may be said to be a scientific analysis of the Indian rural community is open to grave doubts.

It is in this field that the American influence has been most powerful. In fact, it is mostly American scholars who have made these studies, and those that have been made by Indians are, with few exceptions, in collaboration with American research projects. The techniques used have been mostly interviews and questionnaires administered by paid investigators. I have nothing to say against the interest being taken by foreign social scientists in studying processes of rural change in India. It is something for which we may even feel grateful since we have had the advantage to empirical research techniques. But the difficulty arises in the use of interpreters, whose real assignment is that of collection of field material. Again, it is open to objection that the data so collected should have been processed in another country and the book on the Indian village written according to a preconceived plan there. These doubts were raised by Professor D.N. Majumdar in his Presidential Address (Anthropology Section) to the First Indian Sociological Conference (1955). He went so far as to say: 'This is ..... mechanisation with a vengeance and a challenge to methodology in the social sciences'.

It has been the belief of sociologists in this field that intensive studies of a few selected villages would yield, in course of time, certain generalizations, firstly, in the field of Indian rural sociology and, secondly, in general social theory. With the latter objective, comparative studies have also been made. All that they have succeeded in achieving is describing the habits and customs, rituals and ceremonies and economic structure of the villages. The social structure of villages has been studied in terms of caste ranking and

socio-economic relations of castes. It could be expected that in this process the determinants of these inter-caste rankings were discovered, but it is difficult to establish any consistent set of criteria even for a single village. The chances of discovering general principles applicable to Indian rural society are remote. It ignores the fundamental fact that the Indian village is a community. So far it has been a self-contained socio-economic unit. It has not been concerned with the great political upheavals that had taken place in the history of India. What is the vital force that kept the Indian village community alive and self-sufficient throughout her history? The present studies fail to give an answer, since the approach is mainly ethnographic. However, this approach to rural sociology may have some appeal to cultural anthropologists, since it affords them an opportunity to interpret a traditional society in terms of the assumptions of modern thought. But such an attitude implies the refusal to understand *tradition* in its correct perspective. There is another danger in such ethnographic-monographic studies. It has led to a number of implicit or explicit generalizations, which are unwarranted not only because they have been inducted from insufficient data but also because evidence to the contrary is available. Most of these studies have been made in short periods, ranging from six to eighteen months, which is a very short period for a proper appraisal, particularly so in the case of foreign social scientists, who do not understand the language of the people. Under these circumstances, exaggerations and important omissions can hardly be avoided.

Similarly, the Joint Family, joint in home, kitchen and worship, is giving way to a more individualistic family under great economic pressure, created by competition, unemployment and disparity in income. Even then, if economic co-operation is lacking between members of a family, worship remains a family function. The ancestors receive family ministrations on the anniversary of their deaths, their names are memorized and cited at social ceremonies, and their goodwill and blessings are secured by appropriate rituals. But the fact remains that new trends are to be clearly observed in the old joint family, which is gradually breaking up. In this direction, Dr. Ghurye

and Dr. Kapadia, both of the Bombay University, have done pioneering work. Dr. Ghurye has made a comparative study of family institutions in the West and India (*Family and Kin in Indo-European Culture*, Oxford, 1955), while Dr. Kapadia has written on both *Hindu Kinship* (Bombay, Popular Book Depot, 1956) and *Marriage and Family in India* (Bombay, Popular Book Depot, 1956). Dr. Kapadia describes the growth of kinship, marriage and family on the basis of ancient sources and generally tries to interpret them in terms of modern thought. An attempt has also been made to study changes in the structure and functioning of the modern family, as well as the effects of recent legislation on marriage, divorce and Hindu women's right to property. However, the methodology of both is historical-sociological.

In the field of social research, the caste system of India has attracted the attention of almost all the sociologists and anthropologists. The earlier tendency in this field was to seek the origins of the caste system and to provide a rational, at any rate historical, basis of it. Notable among such scholars are Ibbetson, Nesfield and Risley. The recent tendency is to study caste in its functional aspects, particularly from the point of cultural structure. In this connection, particular mention may be made of Hutton, Majumdar and Ghurye, who have made a notable contribution towards focusing attention on the functioning of caste in contemporary society. Recent researchers have also been occupied with analysing caste, occupation and economic status, inter-caste relations (tensions and distance), caste attitudes, degrees of inter-caste connubium, social tensions and caste structures. Caste has also figured very prominently in some of the recent village studies.

The acceptance of Planning as an avowed policy by the Government of India has given a new turn to sociological research. Perhaps at no other period in Indian history has the need for such an action been felt to be so paramount as now. After attaining Independence, the country found itself faced with many vital problems of social and economic reconstruction. It was under great socio-economic handicaps that India launched her career as a Welfare State. And thus, in order to achieve

the objectives of the Welfare State, planning came to be recognized as an accepted policy of the Government.

The Constitution of the Republic of India (Part IV) gives in detail the principles which should guide the State in promoting the welfare of the people. They are not justiciable rights given to the citizens but included in the Constitution as **Directive Principles of State Policy**. The State is required to secure for the citizens an adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work, protection against abuse and exploitation of workers, fulfillment of people's economic necessity, the protection of their health as also the protection of children of tender age and youth, against exploitation and moral and material abandonment. Within the limits of its economic capacity and development, the State is required to make effective provisions for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness or disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want. These directives in the Constitution are not mere expressions of pious hopes but constitute the essential ingredients of social policy in India and the basis of planning.

Real India consists of villages; nearly 82 per cent of the country's populations are village dwellers. But it is tragic to find that, in general, the village presents a picture of poverty, malnutrition, poor standards of public health, and illiteracy. It is, therefore, obvious that if the nation is to progress, the development of the rural community should be given top priority. The planners have been quite conscious of this fact. The First Five-year Plan defined the immediate and ultimate objectives of Rural Community Development Programme as follows:

1. To provide for a substantial increase in the country's agricultural production, and for improvements in the system of communications, in rural health and hygiene, and in village education.
2. To initiate and direct a process of integrated culture change aimed at transforming the social and economic life of the villagers.

As has been mentioned elsewhere, the Indian village is a very complex system. The habits and tastes, social practices and traditions, area of

belief, social structure, attitudes and values of rural communities, are not only different from the urban areas but also form an integrated whole. Therefore, if the State intends to take the initiative in order to bring about radical changes in the village community, it would be easier by adopting a sociological approach. This can only be done with the help of trained social scientists. As Dube points out: "While planners and administrators must share the primary responsibility for the formulation and implementation of rural development projects, the social scientist can give them invaluable help in the areas of social organisations, human relations, culture, and values touched by the Plans".<sup>6</sup>

It is true to a great extent that at present, in the case of Government-sponsored village welfare work, the relations between the common village people and government officials are characterized by considerable distance, reserve and distrust. It is not because villagers are not appreciative of what is being done for them by the State, but their reaction to any innovation is very sharp. Either they reject it in its totality or accept it. There is little scope for experimentation, since in this process of rejection or acceptance traditional values play a very important role. Again, a peculiar type of vacuum exists in the life of the villagers. Some recent government measures, such as radical tenurial reforms, creation of statutory village *panchayats*, introduction of the Community Development Programme and the Constitutional ban on the public practice of untouchability, have highly raised their level of expectation and aspiration. This has also affected interpersonal and inter-group relations in the village. While expectations have been aroused, 'in concrete terms people have not had enough evidence of it so far to warrant a shift in their attitude'. In a community, which has been reared on tradition for centuries, a new programme or scheme can only be accepted after their resistance has been over-come, not through the 'exercising of authority' but by creating an era of understanding. This explains to a great extent, the lack of people's participation in the Community Development Programme. Therefore, a full appraisal of their attitudes, values, sentiments and beliefs ought to be obtained first before launching of

any scheme. In this field, sociologists can be of immense help. It is encouraging to find that the government is fully aware of this need. The Government of India has set up a Central Institute of Study and Research in Community Development at Mussoorie, and the Uttar Pradesh Government is maintaining another institution, Action and Planning Research Institute at Lucknow with the same object. In both the Institutes, sociologists and anthropologists are engaged in research in the field of community development under government service. There are some foreign social scientists also who are associated in some of these projects. But it would be more fruitful if the University Departments of Sociology were also associated with such studies and evaluation programmes. For, after all, what is needed is a balanced and critical evaluation of the motivations and mechanism of change in rural communities, together with the analysis of the cultural determinants of acceptance and rejection. The findings will prove to be of immense help towards better planning and execution of development programmes. This also emphasizes the need for the development of Rural Sociology as an important branch of sociology in India.

It is, therefore, evident that in view of the great social developments that are taking place in the country, sociology can legitimately be expected to gain in importance and contribute to the practical side of living. For, as Gunnar Myrdal, points out, "the social sciences have all received their impetus much more from the urge to improve society than from simple curiosity about its working".<sup>7</sup> But as sociology gains greater recognition in the country, it may be expected that the Universities will have very important function not only of training the increasing number of sociologists needed for practical tasks but of taking the main responsibility for carrying on research, both in general and methodological questions relating to social advancement.

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### **Acknowledgement:**

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