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## Indian Sociology at the Crossroads - Different Predicaments and Difficult Choices

**N Rajaram**

**Abstract:** *In the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indian sociology finds itself at the crossroads. There are four predicaments being faced by sociologists in India today. Firstly, some of the leading lights of sociology in India, like Ghurye and D P Mukerji, viewed that Indian culture could be understood only through Hindu texts. They continue to have influence today. The second predicament is the growing gulf between teaching of sociology in institutions which are English medium and those teaching in Indian languages; and the kind of knowledge production that is taking place. The third predicament is to do with the growth of cultural identity of Hinduism. This can be traced to the developments in 1970s & 1980s, when governments claiming to be secular were in power. Hindu identity got solidified in that period and gave fillip to Hindu nationalist politics. Lastly, in the last two decades, the state control over academic institutions has increased, and its policies to privatize has had further impact. This has made the world of sociology in India vulnerable. In this situation, the choices that confront sociologists in India in 21<sup>st</sup> century are very difficult*

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Indian identity, Crossroads, Diversity

Knowledge production in sociology in India has involved different epistemic positions and theoretical frameworks. It has ranged from Indological, to the structural-functional and the Marxist approaches

(Srinivas and Panini, 1973:200-6); while Oommen (1983:112-3) mentions five approaches and he terms them as “the traditionalists,” “the nationalists,” “the nativists,” “the cosmopolitans” and “the radicals.”

But today in the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, sociology in India is at the crossroads and faces different predicaments and confronts difficult choices. In recent years, there has been the promotion of a particular ideological framework and episteme, termed Hindutva, to comprehend social and cultural phenomenon. This has added to the predicaments that already exist, thus raising the question as to what kind of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination is taking place and will take place in the future.

The present predicaments that sociologists face today have four features. The first predicament can be traced to the kind of sociological knowledge of some leading sociologists of India - like Ghurye and D P Mukerji - who established sociology in India (in the second decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century). They held and propagated an episteme which is now viewed as reinforcing the world view of the protagonists of Hindutva. The second predicament is the growing gulf in knowledge production and dissemination between universities and colleges teaching in Indian languages and those doing so in English. The third predicament emerged in the post-Nehruvian era especially the 1970s and 1980s, at the cultural level when governments considered to be secular were in power. In this period, the upper caste world view of Hinduism got to be reinforced through modern mediums of mass communication, and further, this gave a fillip to the growth of Hindu identity politics. The fourth predicament is the lack of autonomy that academicians have, as state control and shepherding of academic institutions has increased. The paper concludes that in the present scenario, the choices before sociologists (and other academics) to produce knowledge from different perspectives are getting constricted.

A note about the epistemic position and perspective I adopt in writing this paper. Being in Vadodara in western India and having worked professionally in a state university and later in a central university, has

influenced the perspective I bring to bear on the present analysis of what constitutes Indian sociology.

### **The Early Years of Sociology in India**

Sociology in its present form emerged in Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. The transformation that was taking place there then needed an explanation, which led to the emergence of a science of society called Sociology. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, it got established as a professional discipline.

In India, sociology in its present form, emerged in the encounter with colonialism. The need of colonial administrators for information for smooth functioning of administration resulted in the first attempts in collecting knowledge of social and cultural life of Indians (Srinivas and Panini, 1973:184). Srinivas and Panini (1973:184) say, “this task became increasingly complex and systematic as the nineteenth century progressed, and it provided the stimulus for not only social anthropology and sociology but Indology.”

However, the starting of teaching of sociology began in the second decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1917, it was taught in Calcutta University. But the first department of sociology was established in Bombay University owing to the needs of colonial administration “to know the conditions of life in modern industrialising India... and how to utilize sociological methods in government” (Aspengren, 2011:537).

However, till 1950, “sociology and social anthropology were not taught in more than half a dozen universities, and Bombay University was the only centre of post-graduate study, and research” (Srinivas and Panini, 1973:194). Although Geddes founded the department, his student Ghurye, who succeeded him had a huge influence in the growth of sociology in the years to come (Srinivas and Panini, 1973:188).

In Lucknow, another centre where Sociology developed, Radhakamal Mukherjee and D P Mukerji were the well-known people who influenced the development (ibid).

As for research dissemination through journals in that era, there were various attempts to cater to the need for sociological knowledge dissemination. Srinivas and Panini (1973:193-4) refer to such attempts, some of which were short-lived.

### **The Post Independent Era -The Influence of the Twice Born Castes in The First Few Decades**

When India became free in 1947, and with planned development being introduced, policy makers were “thinking of using sociology to bring about rapid social change” (Srinivas and Panini, 1973:179).

Writing in 1952, D P Mukerji (1952:13) remarks that sociology had not yet got the recognition by political leaders and in academic institutions; and at that time, it was taught only in “four universities”. However, he also points out that “The Union Public Service Commission has allowed candidates to offer Sociology and Anthropology in the all-India competitive examinations. More than anything *else* this will confer a status on Sociology. Among Indian youth prospects for service mostly determine their selection of subjects for study” (Mukerji,1952:16).

Starting from such a dismal situation, the expansion of sociology was fast. “In the late ‘50s and ‘60s, there was a sharp increase in the popularity of the two disciplines” (Srinivas and Panini, 1973:197). There were more teaching posts as there was a tremendous demand for education at all levels; further, studying sociology did not require a knowledge of mathematics which was a requirement for economics. So, sociology was considered a “soft option.”

Sociology grew from 1950s onwards in various ways. Beteille (1973:217) mentions that in addition to universities, several research institutes that came up in ‘50s and ‘60s in Delhi and their expansion as regional centres in the ‘70s helped in its growth. He also points out to the challenge of teaching a subject like sociology. He says the “its boundaries are unclear, its aims and methods ill-defined, and its terms and concepts loose, imprecise and often arbitrary”(Beteille, 1973:219). He goes on to say that “Sociology more than most academic disciplines means different things to different people.” So, a

teacher of sociology realises that “the strength of his subject lies neither in a body of formal theory nor in a corpus of empirical material, but in a particular approach or orientation to reality” (Beteille, 1973: 220).

In the last few decades, many scholars have pointed out that the knowledge production from pre-colonial era to the first two decades after independence, had the perspective of twice born upper castes.

Oommen (1983:117), in an insightful essay, points out that the study of Hindu texts as suggested in Indological approach, to “apprehend Indian social reality as a whole” is in effect “Hindu sociology”. He goes on to say that this approach is “confining our attention to the value systems of the twice born Hindus” (1983:117).

In another essay, written much later, Oommen (2001a: 16) is more specific. He writes that Indian sociologists were “predominantly drawn from twice born caste Hindus” and “until recently, have largely neglected the social realities of the lowly placed and oppressed – OBCs and SCs.”

Jesus Chairez-Garza (2024:80) has pointed out critically as to how the first generation of sociologists like Risley, Ghurye and Radhakamal Mukherjee-in pre-independent and post- independent era- studied untouchability “framed as an ethnographic problem largely through a racial and Brahmanical perspective.”

Now, more recently, sociologists in India have been critically analyzing knowledge output of the leading lights of Indian sociology like Ghurye and D P Mukerji. They point out that they held a view of Indian identity as being culturally Hindu.

Let me begin with Ghurye’s sociology, as Ghurye has been considered by some as “father of Indian sociology” (Upadhyaya, 2002:28). First, I refer to the articles of Venugopal (1986, 1993) and then to Upadhyaya (2002).

Venugopal (1993:7) considers Ghurye’s view of Indian society as being slanted towards Hinduism and he says Ghurye had a cognitive dissociation with non-Hindu cultural motifs. In an earlier article

(1986:309), he points out that Ghurye held that “normative Hinduism as the model by which to judge social behaviour in India.” He further points out that for Ghurye, “Brahmins are the standard bearers of Hindu civilization” (Venugopal, 1986:307). Ghurye ruled out the ‘rapprochement’ in the field of art, architecture, literature and music (Venugopal, 1986:308). This clearly shows how knowledge of certain realities got blacked out in his sociology.

Carol Upadhyaya’s (2002) insightful essay is titled “The Hindu Nationalist Sociology of G S Ghurye”. She says Ghurye’s “perspective on Indian society was intensely Brahmanical” (Upadhyaya, 2002:45). She goes on to say, “as in Hindu nationalist thought, Ghurye believed that the continuity of Hindu civilisation was broken by the Islamic ‘invasion,’ and he adopted uncritically the colonial construction of Indian history as a struggle between Hindus and Muslims” (ibid.). He also echoed the assumptions that “Muslims have a culture separate from Hindus.” He ignored “evidence of religious syncretism at the level of everyday practices” and he “argued against secularist theory of Indian cultures” (ibid). She concludes his brand of sociology “as an elaboration on a narrow Hindu/Brahminical nationalist ideology that advocates cultural unity and nation-building rather than political and economic emancipation or equality” (Upadhyaya, 2002:51).

Another person who reflected his Hindu bias was DP Mukerji, who called himself a Marxologist and thus not a follower of Hindutva. In his presidential address at the First All India Sociological Conference in 1955, and I quote here from Oommen (2001a:17), Mukerji “insisted that it is not enough that an Indian Sociologist be a sociologist but be an Indian first. And how do sociologists acquire Indianity? By situating himself in Indian lore, both high and low.” He goes on to quote Mukerji who says, “unless sociological training in India is grounded on Sanskrit, or any such language in which the tradition has been embodied as symbols, social research in India will be a pale imitation of what others are doing.” Oommen (2001a:16) adds that “this is not simply a matter of praxiological aberration but also that of theoretical blackout” of OBCs and SCs.

This analysis of Ghurye and Mukerji, show how the views of these founding professors of sociology reinforces the claims of those who advocate Hindu nationalism.

As the politics of Hindutva grew in the 1990s, its identity politics attracted attention of some scholars. Rowena Robinson (2001) has analysed the growth of Hindutva on the net and its global reach. She points out that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religion has become the main marker of Indian identity, and this has found support in “the transnational middle classes.” She goes on to say that internet Hinduism has contributed to the increase in culture wars.

Oommen (2001b:220) makes an important point that analysts tend to “concentrate on one identity as the master identity- be it class, citizenship, religion, caste or language- and to treat other identities as secondary.” This is problematic. He says, “it is necessary to insist that individuals and collectivities have multiple identities, and no identity can acquire primacy in all contexts.” Individuals and collectives invoke or appropriate convenient identity markers from their identity set, which are a summation of their total identities.

The deep religious divides articulated in the 1930s by religious nationalists-Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims-manifested in the holocaust during partition and has persisted in the form of communal riots in independent India. He also points out the pathology of “aggressive identity assertion of religious organizations ignoring the identity of other religious communities” at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has resulted in spreading assertion of identity to religious groups who had been exempt from this like “the Christians and Sikhs” (Oommen, 2001b:223-24)

This is the first predicament faced today.

### **Some Positive Developments- Increase in Diversity and Inclusiveness**

As sociology progressed and grew, after the first two decades after independence, there were some positive developments. Sociology became more inclusive. First, owing to reservation policies, scholars

from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and OBCs became faculty members in universities and colleges. Along with this development and parallel to it in those years, more and more women sociologists became teachers and researchers in academic institutions. This has resulted in a critical appraisal of the growth of sociology, its practice and knowledge production.

Many scholars have made insightful contribution to the feminist perspective in Indian sociology. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indian Sociological Society is having more women scholars elected as President of the professional association.

As more and more scholars from the SCs, STs and OBCs have joined the profession, their contribution to knowledge production has increased. They have even critiqued insightfully the prevailing practices in the profession. I would like to highlight one such critical analysis. Vivek Kumar (2016:39) points out that “sociology is inegalitarian and exclusionary in nature. Sociology has been practised in the milieu of the domination of the so-called upper caste males for the last century.”

### **Teaching Sociology in Indian Languages- The Challenges and The Predicaments**

The teaching in Indian languages began soon after independence in many universities owing to the feelings of nationalism that prevailed in various regions. The leaders of the freedom movement wanted the promotion and usage of Indian languages in the educational sphere in newly independent India. In many universities, sociology began being taught in Indian languages.

By early '70s, the challenges of teaching in Indian languages came to the fore. Since then it has been the focus of analysis of various scholars at regular intervals. To mention a few, please refer to Neera Desai and Sudha Gogate (1970), Lakshmana (1974), S.L. Sharma (1977), Kushal Deb (1998), A.M. Shah (2000) and Oommen (2000). They have pointed out to the growing gap between what is taught in English medium versus those taught in Indian languages. Some of the issues mentioned by them include the challenge of translating terms;

lack of adequate study material be it books or articles, and thus syllabus in sociology not getting revised regularly. All this has resulted in differential levels between universities. Writing at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Oommen (2000) points out to what has happened to teachers of sociology. He says that “a large number of professionally competent sociologists are not comfortable with English as a medium of articulating their ideas.” He also adds that “tradition of research is not strong in Indian higher education, even in university departments.” This challenge continues to the present era, adding to the predicaments faced in knowledge production. This is the second predicament we face in 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

### **Growth of Hindu Identity**

The third predicament points to developments in the cultural sphere during the 1970s and 1980s, which strengthened Hindu identity and gave a fillip to the politics of the right-wing parties. This was the era when Nehruvian consensus of 1950s and 1960s had broken up (Deepa Srinivas, 2002:3).

In the 1970s, an English language comic series called *Amar Chitra Katha* (Immortal Picture Stories-ACK now onwards) became a roaring success. “It was founded in 1967, with over 440 titles created and sales of more than 90 million issues to date” (perhaps referring to 2009; McLain, 2009:2). McLain (2005:vi-vii) says “through content analysis alone, it is easy to conclude that the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series conveys a hegemonic conception of ‘Indianness’ to its readers, one that entails the marginalization of Muslims and other religious and cultural ‘outsiders’ from the national past, the recasting of women in so-called ‘traditional’ roles, and the privileging of middle-class Hindu culture.” This was the era when TV had not become widespread in India.

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the end of Nehruvian consensus when history and tradition were being challenged from the left and from the margins (Deepa Srinivas, 2002:4). It was in this context, the ACK series acted to “endorse sanskritised vedantic tradition as normative” says Deepa Srinivas (2010:17). She also says,

the ACK “articulates the hegemonic ambitions of a modern Hindu nationalism; a refined, brahminised, yet modern, masculinity emerges as normative within the discourse of ACK. It seeks to train future citizens of the nation through narratives that centre and foreground an indomitable and persevering masculinity” (Deepa Srinivas, 2010:4).

Thus, a world view at the popular level was created where the ACK comic books was considered as “authentic source of information about India and Hinduism, the possibility of greater debate of what it means to be Indian and Hindu is again largely foreclosed” (McLain, 2009:209).

The second cultural development happened during 1980s, when television gained immense popularity in India (Rajagopal, 2004). The decision of the Congress government in the mid-80s to telecast the epics Ramayana and later Mahabharata as a serial in government owned Television -Doordarshan - reinforced Hindu identity. The Ramayana serial was telecast from January 1987 to July 1988 and the Mahabharata serial from October 1988 to June 1990. (At that time, there were no private television in the country).

This telecast of a religious-based story was overturning decades old taboo says Arvind Rajagopal (2004). The decision to do so was done in the context of political developments of that time. The Congress government of Rajiv Gandhi decided to amend the effects of the Supreme Court judgement in the Shah Bano case on maintenance to be given to a divorced Muslim woman, succumbing to the pressure of the clergy amongst the Muslim community. This decision was attacked and criticised, especially by the right wing, as appeasement of minorities. To counter this, the government took two decisions to appease the Hindus (Chowdhury, 2023:ch2). First was to open the locks of the Babri Masjid so that Hindus could pray at the idol kept there in 1949; and second was the decision to permit the telecast of Ramayana episode as a serial on government owned television channel. The serials were an immense success, with record audiences across the length and breadth of the country. Rajagopal goes on to say that owing to this success, television media reshaped the way politics

got to be “conceived, enacted and understood” (2004:1). This was also the period of opening of the Indian economy. So, Hindu nationalism and liberalization got to be viewed as both needing to be released from suppression of the state (Rajagopal, 2004:35-36). He also mentions that “although spearheaded by the BJP, the power of the Ram Janmabhumi campaign was such that no major party dared oppose it” (Rajagopal, 2004:14). At some places, volunteers sometimes dressed themselves in the attire of television Ram and Lakshman (Rajagopal, 2004:30) when the yatra passed through that area. By late 1990s, BJP was in power at the head of a coalition government.

This is the third predicament we face now.

### **The Increase in State Control and the Privatization of Higher Education since 1990s**

The last predicament I refer to is the increase in state control and the policy of privatizing higher education.

Even in 1950s, as D.D. Karve (1957:88) points out, universities were dependent on the state for finances. In addition, they also had to get the approval of the government on several matters including purely academic ones. Since then, the control of the state has not reduced; it has only increased. In some states, like Gujarat, since 2023 a common university act has come to govern all public funded universities. Admissions and academic structure of courses are being implemented in congruence with New Education Policy

Another feature, in the last three decades, is the effort to ‘privatize’ higher education by the state. This is seen at two levels. First is the starting of private universities; and the second is to start self-finance courses in public funded universities.

The private universities were set up to cater to the demand for courses which were ‘job’ oriented, be they in technology, or management or law or pharmacy and so on. Subjects in social sciences, including sociology, came to be taught in the private universities teaching these courses where there was an interface with them (like law or management). Masters or Bachelors courses in Sociology was not

taught as a regular course in these institutions. Those private universities which ventured into teaching arts courses later, sociology came to be taught as part of liberal arts programme where a student could opt for sociology from a bouquet of courses. The medium of instruction in these private universities is English.

These private universities charge high fees; and thus, exclude certain sections of society who cannot afford them. Within a few years, differential professional standards being practised by private universities has come to the fore. Periodic reports started emerging that some of them were operating more like a business<sup>1</sup> enterprise.

Secondly, a parallel development was taking place in the public funded universities. They were being pushed to start self-financed courses. So, in some universities in Gujarat, sociology departments started 'social work' (self-financed) courses, as sociology and social work were considered akin. Further, to add to the problems, in the last decade, when teaching posts became vacant, they were and are not filled immediately. In most cases, the teachers who are and were appointed, are/were on a temporary basis and are/were given minimum salary fixed by the government. Teaching departments in sociology across the state are facing the same crisis, as this has become a statewide problem. State sanction was and continues to be needed for implementing academic programmes.

In certain other states, there are media reports that at the level of recruitment to permanent positions in colleges and universities, candidates have had to give bribes<sup>2</sup>.

All these developments have affected the quality of teaching and knowledge dissemination. Further, whatever little autonomy the teacher had, has got further constricted. So, it is not surprising nowadays to see in colleges and universities in Gujarat and in neighbouring states, Hindu festivals being celebrated on campuses of public funded universities.

In case of some well-known institutions like TISS or IIM which seemed to have had some autonomy in appointment of directors, they are now being made with the approval of the Government of India<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the remote possibility of asserting a whiff of autonomy by them has been snuffed out.

In this context, the kind of knowledge production and dissemination that is possible is what the state wants. This is set to expand and grow. This is the fourth predicament that we face now.

### Conclusions

This paper has pointed out to the different predicaments the world of Indian sociology faces in the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. I pointed out as how some of the founding fathers of sociology in India - Ghurye and D P Mukerji- had supported a world view which was that of twice born castes and their analysis mirrored that of the Hindu right in India. They still command influence; and that is the first predicament for sociology in India. The second predicament was the increasing gulf in knowledge production and dissemination between universities and colleges teaching through Indian languages and those through English. The differential knowledge production in such institutions is another predicament. The third predicament was the development at the cultural level in 1970s and 1980s, when governments which were secular in power. I referred to two mediums, the comic series of ACK and the television series on epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Both reinforced Hindu identity and gave fillip to right wing politics and worldview. The fourth predicament is the increase in state control over public funded universities and higher educational institutions. In addition, the policies of privatization, has made the world of sociology very vulnerable. In this situation, the choices that confront Indian sociologists are very difficult ones. What they decide will determine the direction of future developments.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In one case, a politician who had opened a private university in Gujarat, told a young man searching for a job, that if he could ensure twenty students to enrol for the subject, he would start the sociology course.

<sup>2</sup> See (1) <https://theprint.in/yourturn/subscriberwrites-corruption-in-permanent-faculty-recruitment-in-indian-state-universities/2136184/>; and

(2) Dainik Bhaskar, Nagpur edition, August 15, 2024 on bribes in Nagpur university(<https://epaper.bhaskarhindi.com/c/75648620>);(3) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/madurai/trb-recruitment-teachers-allege-colleges-seeking-bribe-for-experience-certificate/articleshowprint/71696149.cms>

<sup>3</sup> Those institutions which get government grants but appointed their own directors, will now have government appointed directors. See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/tiss-director-to-be-picked-by-govt-not-tata-trusts-led-board/articleshowprint/101678200.cms> . For change in appointment of directors of IIMs, see <https://prsindia.org/billtrack/prs-products/prs-bill-summary-4149>

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## Discovering Critical Indian Sociology

Rajiv Gupta

**Abstract:** *The present article is a modest attempt to establish the importance of 'Critical Indian Sociology'. Author Views that Critical Indian Sociology has not been given any place in almost all the universities of India. Social Sciences in India are by and large 'Pro – establishment' which cannot connect knowledge and action in the interest of commoners. In this article a brief indication is given about those ancient Indian classics, philosophies and personalities related to ancient, medieval and modern India which can be termed as insights for Critical Indian Sociology. Critical Indian Sociology can make students of sociology as destroyer of orthodoxies author believes. Author, again and again states that marginalised presence of Critical Indian Sociology is One of the Causes of formation of authoritarianism in democratic India.*

**Keywords:** Critical Indian Sociology, Authoritarianism, imagination, non-imagination, hierarchies, inequalities

Critical Indian Sociology refers to that branch of knowledge of scientific-ideological nature by which students of Social Sciences in general and Sociology in particular analyse and examine those (Indian) social realities which have led to paradoxical frames of reference in the 'life-worlds' of people. Critical Sociology, in fact, everywhere is associated with (i) searching alternatives (ii) searching social thoughts and (iii) searching theories of dissent and dissonance. These thought and theories encourage students of systems of various knowledge to place significance of 'Radicalism', 'Humanism' and 'Transformations' so that alternatives associated with the