

SOCIAL SCIENCE GAZETTEER

Vol 19 (2)(3) July – December 2024

December 2024: pp 459– 470

©Author(s)

Article History

Received: 23 – 10 – 2024

Revised: 25– 10 – 2024

Accepted: 03 – 11 – 2024

Indian Sociology: Present Challenges and Future Prospects

Liladhar Soni

Abstract: *Indian sociology stands at a critical juncture, shaped by its colonial legacies, post-independence evolution, and the contemporary pressures of globalization, liberalism, and rising identity politics. The discipline, while inherently interdisciplinary, faces challenges in reconfiguring its epistemological frameworks to account for the pluralities and complexities of Indian society. This article explores the major debates, trends, and challenges confronting Indian sociology today, including the intersections of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity, and the influence of globalization. Through an extensive literature review, this article highlights how Indian sociology can transcend its current crossroads and move towards more inclusive and context-sensitive paradigms. The methodology combines a critical analysis of theoretical and empirical works within Indian sociology and cross-disciplinary engagements, offering pathways to re-emphasize the discipline in an increasingly changing and diverse socio-political landscape.*

Keywords: Indian sociology, colonial legacies, postcolonial era, caste, globalization, Multidisciplinary approach

Introduction

Indian sociology, deeply rooted in its colonial past, has long grappled with the task of contextualizing Western sociological paradigms

within the Indian socio-cultural milieu. Since its formal establishment in the early 20th century, Indian sociology has evolved through distinct phases—from its initial focus on caste and rural society to its engagement with broader issues such as development, social change, and identity politics. As India undergoes rapid economic transformation and rising social tensions, sociology is now at a crossroads, where the traditional focus on macro-structural analyses needs to be reconsidered in light of increasing fragmentation, cultural diversity, and intersectional identities.

Indian sociology's foundational emphasis on caste, religion, and kinship, while crucial, has come under scrutiny for being limited in scope. With the rise of liberal reforms, identity-based movements, and globalization, there is a need to rethink these frameworks to encompass more dynamic and hybrid social processes. This article critically engages with the current debates in Indian sociology and discusses how the discipline can evolve to remain relevant to contemporary socio-political realities.

Methodology

The methodology of this article involves an analysis of existing sociological literature, with a focus on both classical and contemporary works in Indian sociology. A comprehensive review of key texts and articles in Indian sociology, focusing on the major debates, theories, and methodological approaches. The article is structured thematically to cover key areas such as caste, class, gender and globalization. This thematic approach enables a focused analysis of the various dimensions of Indian sociology and the challenges it faces.

Colonial Foundations and Early Debates

The intellectual trajectory of Indian sociology can be traced back to the colonial period, where sociological inquiry was deeply intertwined with anthropological studies initiated by British administrators. The traditions and social system prevalent in Indian society were completely different from British rule and European countries. In such a situation, it was very important for the British to understand Indian

society better so that they could rule it efficiently. Therefore, they promoted social studies to understand Indian society. 'The administrative needs of the British rulers led them to collect information about the economic, social and religious life of the people. 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 also Indology '(Srinivas and Panini, 1973, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. 2011 p.34)

A large part of the world was ruled by Britain and many states were under British rule, but the situation in India was different from all these because the roots of traditions, customs and culture were deeper here than in other countries. 'The expansion of western capitalism and imperialism, together with its attendant ideas and concepts, was bound for confrontation with the traditional societies which were colonized. The confrontation between the two sets of societies, their institutions and values, was most dramatic in colonies like India having a strong sense of cultural identity preserved through history. The encounter eventually became channelled into fruitful exchanges, thought of unequal kind, and these ultimately led to decolonization and India's embarking on a unique road to modernization through planned development' (Moore Jr., 1969, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. 2011, p.32).

During British rule, in the early period of Indian sociology, many sociologists contributed to establish it and started sociological studies. 'In this pre-1950 phase the contributions of B.N. Seal, G.S. Ghurye, B.K. Sarkar, Radhakamal Mukherjee, D.P. Mukerji and K.P. Chattopadhyay are particularly noteworthy. Their intellectual interests, methods of data collection, and their interpretations of the Indian social system and social institutions were strongly influenced by the style and content of the ethnographic works produced by scholar-administrators during the colonial period. Studies on caste, family, marriage and kinship, social stratification, tribal communities, rural and urban society figured prominently in this period.' (Dhanagare, D. N. 2011 P.38).

Early works primarily focused on documenting and analysing India's caste system, social hierarchies, and rural communities. 'The absence of a proper grasp and appreciation of Indian social realities led to severe problems in the colonial administration. Inadequate, and often inaccurate, understanding of local customs and traditions, misjudgements about different institutional arrangements were bound to disturb peace and order. For example, failure to fully appreciate the traditional social systems of land tenure resulted in a number of agrarian disturbances and revolts. (Dhanagare, 1977, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. 2011, p.33)' Among the early sociologists in India, two names can be taken prominently such as G.S. Ghurye and D.P. Mukerji, they were pioneers in Indian sociology, and their works laid the groundwork for understanding the structures of Indian society.

The Post-Independence Era: Modernization and Developmentalism

Sociology expanded a lot in India after independence. Sociology started being taught as a subject in the universities and colleges of the states and institutions like Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and University Grants Commission (UGC) also contributed significantly to the expansion of sociology. After independence in 1947, Indian sociology entered a new phase of engagement with development, state-building, and social change. Scholars during this period were influenced by ideas of modernization and sought to understand the rapid socio-economic transformations taking place in a newly independent India. 'In the post-1950 period, professional social anthropologists have been concerned with the study of tribal societies-tribal villages, their economy, marriage, family and kinship structures, their customs, traditions and folklore-as well as change in tribal societies resulting from the impact of Christianity or other reform movements, modern political developments or social welfare measures of the state (Vidyarthi, 1972, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. 2011, p.55-56)' 'A.R. Desai. In his studies of nationalism, analysis of rural social structure, the nature of economic and social policies of change in India and the structure of state and society, he has consistently tried to expose the contradictions and anomalies in

policies and process of change resulting from the capitalistic-bourgeoisie interlocking of interest in the Indian society (Desai, 1959, 1966, 1975 as cited in Singh, Yogendra 2012, p.116).’ The structural theoretical orientation of sociology during the seventies is also reflected in the spurt of urban surveys which were completed from 1957 to 1969 (D’Souza, 1974 as cited in Singh, Yogendra 2012, p.112).

The prominent sociologists like M.N. Srinivas contributed to this discourse through concepts such as “Sanskritization” and “Dominant Caste,” which highlighted the adaptability and fluidity within India’s social structures. However, critics have noted that such frameworks often failed to address the complexities of power relations, gender inequality, and subaltern experiences, focusing instead on top-down views of social change. ‘The seventies of the century saw a further continued diversification of interests and specialization in the substantive area of research and teaching in the sixties. In earlier period, village community studies dominated researches, but the interests in the areas of agrarian relations, land reforms, agricultural labourers and scheduled castes and tribes began to attract greater attention of sociologists and anthropologists in the seventies’. (Patel, J., & Pandar, S. 2019, October 24–26).

‘In the eighties of the century, no doubt, gained strength in many of the areas of specialization mentioned in the foregoing account. Some areas of enquiry, such as social demography and medical sociology were crystallized. Some of the other areas of investigation opened up and more research in the development areas was undertaken on new lines. A few of the new areas have been introduced like; sociology of knowledge, sociology of science and technology, sociology of deviance, and historical sociology. Rao (1982) anticipated these areas for research in the eighties. There was an indication that interest in sociology of science and technology might get more widespread (Uberoi, 1978; Vishwanathan, 1977). The growing interest in historical sociology was reflected in Fox (1977).’ (Patel, J., & Pandar, S. 2019, October 24–26).

Theories of modernization and development were imported from the West and adapted to suit the Indian context. These theories prioritized industrialization, urbanization, and economic growth as necessary steps toward progress.

The years of the 1990s were full of debates on the crisis in the discipline. **‘In this debate saw a series of responses from the scholars in the field assessing the “Tiredness of the discipline” (Deshpande, 1995), the possibilities of a “community of discourse” (Giri, 1993), the dangers of “uncritical metropolitanism” (Murthy, 1993) and the relevance of gender and feminist pedagogues as strategies to confront the crises (Rege, 1994; Uberoi, 1994). The discussion has been made on the construction of sociological discipline (Thappan, 1991; Hegde, 1992) and teaching of sociology in Indian Universities (Uberoi, 1989-90; Deb, 1997). In the recent years, a new dimension has been reflected in the debate taking the issue of gender studies (Dube, 1986, 1996, 1997; Bhagwat and Rege, 1991; Patel, 1994; Uberoi, 1994) and women’s movement (Niranjana, 1992; John, 1996).’** (Patel, J., & Pandar, S. 2019, October 24–26).

The Emergence of Subaltern Studies

The 1980s saw a paradigm shift in Indian sociology with the rise of subaltern studies and postcolonial critiques. Scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Partha Chatterjee challenged the dominant narratives of nationalism and development, arguing that these perspectives marginalize the voices of oppressed and subaltern groups, such as Dalits, women, and tribal communities. The subaltern studies school drew on Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theory to question the hegemonic structures embedded within Indian society.

‘Guha (2013) in his article entitled “Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” argues that the historiography of the Indian nationalism was dominated by these elitists who were the colonial and bourgeois nationalist. This type of historical writing gives the impression that the Indian nation and the consciousness of nationalism was an achievement of only the elites. The contributions

made by the people in this regard have no relevance. Although they have made their contribution during the freedom struggle independent of the elite' in making and development of Indian nationalism. On the other hand, the elitist perspective of history writing portrays their articulation and uprising as the law and order problem. The one-sided perspective considers Indian nationalism as the response of the charisma of certain elite leaders. Thus, the subaltern historiography overlooks the politics of the people. The subaltern historiographers argue that there was politics of the subaltern classes in the nationalist movement parallel to the politics of the dominant elites. Their politics did not originate from elite politics and did not depend on their elite politics. For them the subaltern is an autonomous domain.' (IGNOU p. 45)

This shift marked a critical moment in Indian sociology, as it opened new avenues for studying power, resistance, and social exclusion. At the same time, it brought attention to the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity—an area that had been largely ignored in earlier sociological studies.

Liberalism and Globalization: New Frontiers in Indian Sociology

Since the 1990s, with India's liberalization policies and increasing globalization, Indian society has experienced unprecedented changes in its economic, social, and political spheres. The rise of the service sector, growth of the middle class, and the influx of transnational corporations have significantly altered India's social landscape. Sociology, in turn, has had to grapple with these new realities. While earlier studies focused on the rural-urban divide, contemporary Indian sociology has shifted its attention to the impact of globalization, migration, labour transformations, and the rise of new social movements. Sociologists like A. R. Desai has critiqued the effects of neoliberal policies, highlighting how they exacerbate inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups. Furthermore, globalization has led to the hybridization of identities, complicating the traditional frameworks that have long dominated the study of Indian society.

Sociology and other disciplines-

To understand complex social systems, different disciplines have to depend on each other. By taking each other along, we can gain insights to understand society in a more nuanced way.

'The influence of sociology and social anthropology has been considerable in India both on history and political science. History has not only influenced sociology but has been influenced by it, especially in the recent formulations of historical problems, where formation of structures, modes of production and other infrastructural realities of society deeply inform historical analysis (Thapar,1975, as cited in Singh, Yogendra 2012, p. 123-124). 'While the interaction between history and sociology, and political science and sociology, has been mutually reinforcing and has proved beneficial, the same type of interaction between sociology and economics has not taken place during the past one and half decades. Earlier, sociologists and economists used to interact more purposefully in uses of categories and in substantive studies. The reason for this lag lies in high mathematicalization of economics during the past one and a half decades which on the one hand endows economists with a sense of technical superiority in their researches and on the other alienates sociologists, who often not trained in mathematical logic, tend to be mystified by economists' works without, however, being impressed by them.' (Singh, Yogendra 2012, p.124)

Challenges in Contemporary Indian Sociology

There is no dearth of challenges before contemporary sociology. Apart from the issues which sociology has been considering traditionally, many new issues have emerged as challenges in Indian society due to the influence of globalization and modernization, understanding of which is also very important in sociology in the changing circumstances.

Reconfiguring the Caste Debate

The study of caste has been central to Indian sociology since its inception. While the frameworks developed by M.N. Srinivas and

Louis Dumont have been instrumental in understanding caste dynamics, the contemporary realities of caste-based politics and the assertion of Dalit identities demand new approaches. Scholars like Gopal Guru and Anand Teltumbde have emphasized the need to move beyond the conventional analysis of caste as a static and hierarchical system.

Moreover, the rise of caste-based political movements, such as the has redefined the caste discourse in India. These movements challenge the traditional frameworks of Indian sociology by asserting the agency of marginalized communities and questioning the hegemony of upper-caste scholars in defining the terms of sociological inquiry.

Intersectionality: Caste, Class, Gender, and Beyond

The concept of intersectionality, pioneered by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, has gained traction in Indian sociology, particularly in studies that explore the intersections of caste, class, and gender. Indian society is marked by overlapping systems of oppression, where caste-based inequalities are often compounded by gender and economic disparities. Traditionally, the study of caste and class has been a topic of major interest for Indian sociologists and the concept of class is taught along with caste in almost all regions of India.

Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege have argued that mainstream feminist movements in India have historically been dominated by upper-caste voices, thereby marginalizing the experiences of Dalit women. The intersectional approach is crucial for addressing the complex ways in which multiple identities intersect to produce unique forms of discrimination and oppression in Indian society. 'Amongst a range of feminist ethical ways of institutional practice, working as a collective and with a consciousness of difference was central to Sharmila's work'. (Tambe, A., & Dyahadroy, S. 2023, p155) Understanding and explaining communities like LGBT+ in a traditional society like India is emerging as a big challenge in the field of sociology. In the coming times, sociologists will have to think seriously about this too.

Contemporary young sociologists are working to understand the new trends like social exclusion, Ethnicity, culture in the broader context of social justice. The problems of language, publication and funding continue to continue. Sociologists are either working in regional languages and suffer from scantiness of vernacular journals or even if they are writing their reports in English there is very little chance of getting them published, particularly in limited English language journals. As a result, what is being done hardly ever comes to the knowledge of the international community and good works may never see the light of day.' (Patel, J., & Pandar, S. 2019, October 24–26).

Quality research in the field of sociology in India also remains a big challenge. Creating interest in the subject of sociology among new students and motivating them to do research in the field is also a very important issue. 'In the case of the researches in Indian sociology and its future directions of growth, surmises can be reasonably attempted based on two parameters: first, on the basis of the trends in sociological researches conducted so far; and secondly, on the basis of the new challenges that processes of social change and transformation may throw up deserving sociological attention.' Singh, Yogendra 2012, p.165-166)

Since its inception, Indian sociology has been seen primarily as a subject taught in the classroom, whereas it can contribute much more to society. The role of sociology can be important in understanding and explaining social realities. Similarly, sociological research and surveys can prove to be important in the context of policy making by understanding social realities. For this, to understand the challenges of the present and future times and the rapidly changing society, sociologists will have to prove themselves and the government system should also give them the platform so that they can play their meaningful role in this field. As a sociologist, our responsibility is to arouse interest in the subject of sociology among students and tell them that by studying sociology they can gain more subtle insight to understand society, but at present, like other social sciences, sociology is also facing disinterest among students. As a subject, sociology is also not expanding at the pace it should be on the other hand, there are

vacant posts of teachers in many universities and colleges which are negatively affecting our studies. A trend is also seen that students want to get employment in academic show field only when they are not able to get selected in administrative service and any other desired service, in such a case they are not able to feel the attachment towards their subject for a long time, then how will they be able to do justice to the subject. There is also a need to create such an environment that students should be interested in sociology as a subject right from the beginning and can do justice to it in future.

References:

- Desai, 1959, 1966, 1975, as cited in Singh, Yogendra (2012). Ideology and theory in Indian sociology (p. 116). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- Dhanagare, D. N. (2011). Themes and perspectives in Indian sociology (p. 38). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- Dhanagare, 1977, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. (2011). Themes and perspectives in Indian sociology (p. 33). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- D'Souza, 1974, as cited in Singh, Yogendra (2012). Ideology and theory in Indian sociology (p. 112). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- Moore Jr., 1969, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. (2011). Themes and perspectives in Indian sociology (p. 32). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- Patel, J., & Pandar, S. (2019, October 24–26). Rise and development of sociology in India. Research in Social Sciences and Humanities (ICRSH), Frankfurt, Germany.
- Singh, Yogendra (2012). Ideology and theory in Indian sociology (p. 124). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- Singh, Yogendra (2012). Ideology and theory in Indian sociology (pp. 165–166). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.
- Srinivas and Panini, 1973, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. (2011). Themes and perspectives in Indian sociology (p. 34). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.

SUBALTERN CRITIQUE. Understanding India; Major discourses, IGNOU (p. 45). <https://egyankosh.ac.in/>.

Tambe, A., & Dyahadroy, S. (2023). Remembering Sharmila Rege. *Nidān: International Journal for Indian Studies*, 8(1), 155.

Thapar, 1975, as cited in Singh, Yogendra (2012). Ideology and theory in Indian sociology (pp. 123–124). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.

Vidyarthi, L. P., 1972, as cited in Dhanagare, D. N. (2011). Themes and perspectives in Indian sociology (pp. 55–56). Rawat Publications, Jaipur.

Liladhar Soni, Professor - Sociology, SPC Government College, Ajmer (Rajasthan)

Email: sonild77@gmail.com
