

Dominations in Indian Sociology

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Abstract - The growth trajectory of Indian Sociology in the past few decades is unsurpassed. From being treated as a 'residual category' and a subordinate disciple, it is now a well-developed and self-sustaining discipline. There are various demands placed on sociology after Independence which explicitly contributed to its development. But this development of Indian sociology is not free from certain dominations: (1) Domination of popular trends in sociology produced by western scholars, (2) Domination of certain sections in India, (3) Domination of State and Identity Politics. These domains of domination are significantly hindering the development of Indian sociology in an inclusive manner and degrading the efficacy of the knowledge produced in this field. The only way forward for Indian sociology is to develop indigenous sociological traditions, concepts, and methods to explain the social reality of India, to recognize the diverse trends of sociological knowledge being produced and promote civility, reason, and reflexivity among diverse perspectives of sociological knowledge.

Keywords: Indian Sociology, Western domination, Upper Castes, State Patronage

I. INTRODUCTION

The growth of Indian sociology in the past few decades is unsurpassed. It emancipated itself from being treated as a 'residual category' and a subordinate disciple to a well-developed discipline, with many acclaimed scholars continuously contributing for its growth, with many institutions and universities having departments of sociology, the establishment of professional bodies like Indian sociological society, numerous journals and conferences on this subject and huge scholarship coming out continuously on this subject. Sociology is no more an amateur discipline in India. It is now a self-sustaining 'gigantic knowledge' producing enterprise. It is no more a discipline where the scholars are "White, Christian, with strong monogamous and ethical attachments; abroad in a field inhabited by savages, a superior being out for objectivity" (Srinivas, Shah, & Ramnaswamy, 1980) and scholarship produced in it the study of 'other cultures' by western scholars. The publication of the book *The Field Worker and The Field* (Srinivas, Shah, & Ramnaswamy, 1980) is a milestone in Indian sociology. There are 18 contributors for this book and the contributions are wide-ranging covering different aspects of Indian society: M. N. Srinivas, A. M. Shah, A. Chakravarti, K. R. Unni, and P. C. Joshi report on their own village fieldwork experiences; K. A. Gupta, V. Dua, B. D. Varadachar, M. Bellwinkel, and S. Patwardhan give accounts of urban field studies; N. R.

Sheth, E. A. Ramaswamy, B. S. Baviskar, A. A. Minocha, and C. Sivakumar describe ethnographic research in factories, unions, a hospital, and colleges; and S. Seshaiyah, T. N. Pandey and R. Jayaraman report on one to three studies each done in various settings inside and outside South Asia (Gardner, 1981). Though the contributions in this book revolve around the aspect of village studies and fieldwork, it reflected the wide-ranging scholarship produced by Indian sociologists. There are numerous demands on the discipline of Indian sociology especially since Indian independence which explicitly contributed to this development.

Firstly, "it was increasingly realized that the teaching of sociology will have to be made more rigorous and theoretically oriented if it is to attain academic rank comparable to that of economics" (Damle, 1974). Secondly, when economic planning started with Indian state playing a crucial role in bringing about development and changes in social conditions, it is felt that to fulfill these objectives and also to evaluate the efficacy of the policies made by the government, it need sociologists who can study about the institutions, prescribe effective ways to bring changes in institutions and finally evaluate the performance of the policies made in that direction. Sociology responded to these demands in many ways and its response led to its development (Srinivas & Panini, 1973).

But there is one major concern pertaining to the development trajectory of this discipline: Whether all these developments in Indian sociology are independent of various dominations? Here domination connotes three different meanings: (1) Domination of popular trends in sociology produced by western scholars, (2) Domination of certain sections in India, (3) Domination of State and Identity Politics. These three meaning for 'domination' gives three different questions: Is it free from the influences of western trends? Is it not dominated by only certain sections, excluding other sections? Is it free from the influences of the Indian State? A. R. Desai (1981), one of the forthright academicians in India, in a paper written in 1981 listed out whopping 27 limitations in Indian sociology (pp. 4-7), which he claims as acknowledged by many other social scientists. All those limitations can be fit into these three domains of domination. By addressing these three dominations, the state of Indian sociology can be comprehended clearly.

II. DOMINATION OF WESTERN SOCIOLOGY

Indian Sociology is dominated by popular currents in Western sociology. Vivek Kumar (2016) pointed out the three main dominant sociological trends influencing Indian sociology: British, European, and American. British domination may be understood in the period of origin of Indian sociology because Indian Sociology is “developed primarily by British rulers with a view to understand the customs, manners and institutions of the ruled so as to govern Indians better and with less difficulty” (Damble, 1974). This could be understood because not only sociology, no other discipline cannot indigenously “flourish under authoritarian or colonial governments” (Bottomore, 1962). But their continuing influence is not a good sign for Indian sociology.

American domination is also very evident in the light of Ford Foundation projects in India. Expressing his discontent, A. R. Desai (1981) pointed out that sociologists are under the influence of the “conservative and liberal paradigms systematized by Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton in the U.S.A. and parallelly crystallized by Radcliffe-Brown and others in anthropology in the U.K. still underlie the practice of sociological discipline refined by Dahrendorf, Rex and some other scholars”. Indian sociologists borrowed hugely from the popular trends of western sociology and accepted their methods and techniques with less doubt and with no critical evaluation of their potential to suit for making sense of Indian society and conditions, and imitated their models for India. This did not help in comprehending the reality of Indian society.

This is not to say that no efforts are made in the direction of developing indigenous concepts to study Indian society. Efforts are made through debates in the first series of ‘Contributions to Indian Sociology’ by Louis Dumont and David Pocock and later in contributions made in ‘*Sociological Bulletin*’. But they weren’t enough for ‘Indigenization of Indian sociology’. It can be pointed out that these efforts have, no doubt, brought about self-awareness among Indian sociologists about the social conditioning of sociology.

They have also emphasized the need for indigenization of Indian sociology and the interpretation of Indian reality with indigenous concepts, the so-called ethno-sociology. However, this debate and the initial efforts have hardly resulted in the development of an indigenous sociological tradition in India. More disconcerting is the fact that it is seldom noted that the striving for indigenization of the sociology curriculum has not really been successful (Rao, 2016, p. ii).

This is also not to suggest that western scholarship or sociological models are false. But it is only to suggest that the Indian situation is sui generis and to arrive at Indian reality, it is important to employ indigenous paradigms and methods.

III. DOMINATION OF UPPER CASTES

Turning to the second domain of domination, it is to look at the domination of certain sections on Indian sociology. Vivek Kumar’s paper on ‘How Egalitarian is Indian Sociology?’ (2016) is seminal thought-provoking work on the domination of “so-called upper castes” in Indian sociology. He pointed out to the domination of twice-born castes in four broad categories: (1) Number of sociologists coming from this upper-caste background, (2) Primary and secondary sources used “for evolving the subject matter of Indian sociology”, (3) Locale in which field works are carried out and data collected to produce social knowledge, and (4) the domination that “starts unfolding in the sociology classrooms when topics like “Hindu social order,” caste, family and other India-centric papers are taught”. I will concentrate on two aspects of upper caste domination observed in the four categories listed above: Domination in numbers and locale of fieldwork.

Domination in terms of numbers is brought out based on the founders of institutions, members of professional organisations, contributors in prominent sociology books, and school textbooks. Four important centres of sociology, University of Bombay (1919), University of Lucknow (1921), Delhi University (1959) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) (1970) were either set up or were dominated by twice-born castes. By looking at contributors to major publications on the subject, Kumar (2016) selected 5 works: *Sociology in India* (1965), *Indian Sociology: Reflections and Introspections* (1986), *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (1997), *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology* (2008), *Doing Sociology in India: Genealogies, Locations and Practice* (2011)...in the 1965 publication 15 out of the 17 contributors belonged to the so-called upper castes.

In the publication *Indian Sociology* in 1986, 13 out of the 15 contributors were upper caste. Out of the other two, one was Syrian Christian and another was a Jat Sikh. The domination of the so-called upper castes was visible again in the 1997 publication *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* edited by M N Srinivas. The book has 12 contributors. None of them were Dalits or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) ...in *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology* (Uberoi, 2007) the domination of these so-called upper castes in the discipline was further endorsed. In this publication out of the 12 anthropologists and sociologists, who were declared as founders of sociology and anthropology except for two, Patrick Geddes and Verrier Elwin, all others belonged to the so-called upper castes. Surprising aspect about 2007 publication is B. R. Ambedkar is not recognised. Turning to school textbooks, in the setup by NCERT to develop sociology textbooks for class 11 and 12, which have total of 47 contributors, none of them are Dalits. If we look at knowledge produced through fieldwork, it is well-acknowledged proposition that the knowledge produced depends upon the location where the field worker stays to collect the data (Beteille, The

Tribulations of Fieldwork, 1972). Founding father of Social Anthropology Bronislaw Malinowski in his classic work “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” talked about the importance of staying with natives away from white residence to study about the reality of natives. If he had chosen to stay in White residences and work on natives, certainly a completely different knowledge would have been produced from what he produced by living among natives. None of the Indian sociologists considered as founders of this discipline “stayed in Dalit localities like Chamrauti, Cheris, Maharwada, Madi gawada, Adi-Dravida colony, etc (these are names of residential areas where ex-untouchables live in villages in different parts of the country) for the collection of their data” (Kumar, 2016). As it is pointed out above about the importance of location in Malinowski’s study of natives, a completely different reality of Indian society would have come about if sociologists stayed in Dalit localities to conduct their field works. Take the case of Andre Beteille’s work ‘Caste, Class, and Power- Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village’. In this work, Beteille (1971) acknowledged that his “data for Adi-Dravidas and also to some extent, for the non-Brahmins are of poor quantity” and this could have been rectified if he had lived with Adi-Dravidas. This raises doubts about the credibility of social science knowledge produced through the fieldwork. All this reflects the deficit in the knowledge produced in sociology. It is parochial and narrow and not inclusionary in its nature. Because of the upper caste domination, the social reality of India is a limited view.

IV. DOMINATION OF STATE AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Moving on to the third domain of domination, it is about the influence of the state on the knowledge produced. This aspect is closely linked to the second domain of domination discussed above and brings into the picture the notion of ‘political correctness’ of the sociological studies. In sociology, or in any other social sciences, to produce credible scholarship and sound pedagogy, they must stick to three interrelated aspects: civility, reason, and reflexivity (Patel & Harshe, 2003). Civility implies the democratic nature and discipline in which scholars express each other’s perspectives and participate in academic debates. The reason is having sound knowledge and shedding of dogmatism. “Reflexivity connotes an acceptance of inter-subjective differences” (Patel & Harshe, 2003). These three attributes emphasize the need of having diverse perspectives in the sociology. “Indeed, the more kaleidoscopic and competing societal world views, the more enriching social sciences can be” (Patel & Harshe, 2003). These aspects are under severe threat in the field of sociology and this is due to the rise of identity politics and the influence of the state in social sciences.

Here, two aspects are needed to be pointed out. Firstly, one of the demands that contributed to the growth of sociology is its need for economic planners and policy makers. They acknowledged that they need for sociological knowledge

about institutions, the ways to change them, and evaluate the performance of government policies. So, State patronage for the discipline of sociology is crucial for its development. This dependence on state patronage is deteriorating the quality of research produced in two ways-in terms of funding and setting the research priorities.

In the report produced by the Committee to review the functioning of Indian Council of Social Science Research (2011), it is found that resources that are allocated for social science research are “grossly inadequate, the procedure for disbursement of available resources... is opaque and not based on any clear cut objective principle” (Nayyar , Dholakia, & Parikh, 2011) [italics in original]. There are constraints on the use of resources and this directly leads to the next factor. The dependence on the state’s resources leads to “shift away from desired research priorities, compromising ability to pursue independent research....leave little, if any, room for carrying out basic and fundamental research in theoretical fields within the social sciences” (Nayyar , Dholakia, & Parikh, 2011). The result of this is much of research produced by the discipline of sociology is succumbed to the demands of the state and less concentration is paid to address key social problems. Though it emerged as an independent discipline from being a subordinate ‘residual category’, it continues to remain as obedient subordinate to the needs and priorities of the state.

Secondly, all the institutions of sociology and various top positions in them are occupied by certain sections, especially upper castes. The interplay between this demand of the state and upper caste domination on the discipline made the discipline fertile for the growth of identity politics. Caste and class identity combined with political expediency have become major qualifiers for getting placed in institutions and other professional bodies. The result of these two undesirable pressures in recruitment and working in institutions, “those who come to be in positions of responsibility are rarely men and women of towering intellectual stature” (Das, 1993). Because only a certain section is able to exercise its hegemony over discipline, the culture of tolerance towards diverse perspectives is discouraged and aspects of civility, reason, and reflexivity are completely absent in the way debates are carried out in the discipline.

On the other side, to keep the hegemony of identity, state patronage is necessary. So, it is impossible to think that the scholarship produced in this atmosphere of self-interested identity politics will be critical or against the wishes of the state. “As a visible strategy of survival, a silent majority of intellectuals are obsessed with political correctness to avoid the wrath of those pursuing identity politics” (Patel & Harshe, 2003). Identity politics distort the reality of Indian society and find validation with the views of the state and ideology of the ruling regime. Amidst this “anarchy of identity”, nothing good and sound can be expected from sociology. In the stock of knowledge that is produced in this identity politics regime, “instead of judging any argument

on its strength, identity itself is attributed to the argument. Weaving an argument through the prism of identity robs it of its reason as well as empirical substance and yet the argument can be paraded as valid on the grounds that it has internal consistency” (Patel & Harshe, 2003). Hence, politics of knowledge hinder, distort abuse and dogmatise the process of production of knowledge.

V. CONCLUSION

Indian sociology came a long way since its origin, but all the developments in sociology are not free from various dominations, i.e., the domination of western trends, the domination of upper castes, and the domination of the state and identity politics. There may be certainly other forces acting on Indian sociology. But these domains of domination are significantly hindering the development of Indian sociology in an inclusive manner and degrading the efficacy of the knowledge produced in this field. Only way forward for Indian sociology is to develop indigenous sociological traditions, concepts and methods to explain the social reality of India, to recognize the sociological knowledge produced by all sociologists irrespective of the caste they belong to and promote the subaltern traditions of sociology and Dalit scholarship, and finally, ensure and promote civility, reason, and reflexivity among diverse perspectives of sociological knowledge.

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