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Doing Sociology: Some Persistent Questions

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I return here to some long standing questions regarding sociology. *What* is sociology? *How* does sociology study the ‘social’? And *why* do sociology? Any effort to explore these questions is not a novel task and has been attempted many times before, prompting Uberoi to remark that, “it seems that Indian sociologists and social anthropologists are unusually afflicted by disciplinary *angst*” (Uberoi *et al.* 2000: 2). This self-reflexive propensity within sociology is central to its reflexive and critical nature.¹

A central contention of this note is that it is this reflexive and critical *identity* of the discipline that tends to get lost in the everyday doing of sociology. This is somehow paradoxical because there appears to be a preoccupation with the discipline’s identity within sociology. This however is not confined to India alone. There have been repeated debates on the identity and scope of sociology in the west at different points of time.

Institutional and intellectual contexts within which these debates were conducted are however different. But they are rarely brought into focus in the standard textbook rendition of sociology. Early attempts by classical theorists to carve out the discipline of sociology, the tensions between its encyclopaedic scope and the need for limiting it; or that of mid 20th century American sociology’s fetish of quantitative techniques cannot be conflated to our more local or national concerns. This is not to suggest that these trends do not travel and impinge upon the local in complex and mediated fashions. Indeed they do, and sometimes very directly as our discussion on measurement in Part II will show. But this should in no way render the specificities of contexts and debates that emerged within India invisible. For instance, our own very specific relationship between sociology and social anthropology or of disagreements between the field view and book view that forms part of the disciplinary history in India; or more contemporary concerns of what the discipline provides as skills for jobs; or of the gaps between doing sociology in the metropolitan centres and *mufassil* colleges; or the

relentless pressure of making sociology ‘easier’, a misplaced attempt towards equality sans quality.

The vantage point from where I seek to make some of the observations here stem therefore not so much from a scholarly review of debates on sociology as much as from the everyday experiences teaching sociology for three decades and my larger interest in matters of curricula and pedagogy. I do invoke the scholarly debates on the nature of the discipline but my primary focus remains on the curious ways that ideas from high academia find selective appropriation in academic syllabi, popular textbooks and guidebooks that form the bedrock of our classroom teaching.

This note is divided into two broad sections. In both, I flag off matters that I think most of us have faced both as students and teachers doing sociology. In Part I, I first look at that persistent question about identity and some of the common ways that this is addressed in the everyday doing of sociology; and two at the some of the major ways that contending intellectual legacies have looked at the discipline. In Part II, I revisit the question of relevance and its changing meanings over the decades with a special focus on the contemporary context. I also wish to add the caveat that Indian sociology has moved beyond expressions of collective anguish. I think there has been commendable work that have both analysed the challenges of our diverse and unequal classrooms and offered road maps. I do not have enough space to elaborate this point here. But I do wish to flag off Rege’s pioneering and enduring work in teaching practices that we as sociologists, while often speaking of ‘falling standards’² have not fully learnt from.³

The Quest for Identity

There are three common ways that the identity of sociology is understood in the everyday world of doing sociology: (i) by the object of inquiry: sociological topics are thus often understood as the study of the village, community, religion, caste, family - often ‘residual’ topics, those deemed left out from the ambit of other social sciences; (ii) by the method of investigation and deployment of techniques; and (iii) by its close link to social work and policy deemed appropriate to solve social problems. These ideas do bear similarities, albeit in an inaccurate fashion to varying conceptualisation of sociology within the intellectual history of sociology.

Were one to go back to the early years of western sociology, one clear trend emerges. Evident in Durkheim and Weber we see a concern to promote ‘a sociological approach within existing disciplines; in

history, law, economics, politics, comparative religion' (Bottomore 1975:23). The emphasis is on *sociology as an approach*. It seeks to look at 'the whole social of social life' and 'human history' but what is actually to be investigated has to be limited, but informed by an understanding of the whole. (*ibid.*: 18). It is instructive to note that Durkheim who was especially concerned with the autonomy of sociology did not suggest that it should be pursued in isolation from other social sciences. Indeed his contention was that 'Sociologists have....a pressing need to be regularly informed of the researches' made in the other disciplines.⁴ Sociology in this sense had to be *interdisciplinary*.

This changed over time. Sociologists over years began to define the discipline in terms of '*residual*' subjects which did not fall clearly within the sphere of other social sciences, and which could be regarded, therefore, as strictly sociological in rather a narrow sense. These tendencies were encouraged, to some extent, by a desire to establish the autonomy, the 'professional' standing, and the scientific character of sociology as an academic discipline. This view also gained ready acceptance because it fitted in with the common sense view of reality as clearly defined observable entities such as family, religion or caste.

In the 1930s and 1940s, American sociology saw a preoccupation with the construction of *elaborate conceptual schemes* most evident in Parsons whose influence need no emphasis. Many departments in India were inspired by his approach. Evidences remain but often in a bowdlerised fashion. For long therefore, through the 1960s and 1970s it was the learnt Parsonian jargon that defined the doing of sociology. (Chaudhuri 2003: 16) This obsession with jargons has persisted though the jargons themselves have changed over time and tend to differ from one institutional context to another. If 'functional necessity' and 'contradictions' were once common, we see abundance of terms such as 'excluded', 'marginalised', 'racialised', 'classed', 'sexualised' now. What is worrying is that there is no serious historical or theoretical engagement with the terms. Instead there is a mandatory invocation of terms. It is often thought that a mechanical use of concepts, in a purely ornamental way occurs only with students with poor grasp of English.⁵ This is not true if one looks at works emerging from what one may describe as privileged centres.

The other trend in American sociology that seemed to have left an abiding influence is a fascination with the *techniques* of sociological enquiry, usually though not necessarily applied to small-scale problems, which is understood as the discipline's defining identity. Finally, the idea

that sociology is the study of social problems as commonly understood in everyday life. Syllabi across the country often have full papers on social problems. I shall return to both these in the discussion on relevance in Part II.

As a student one was quick to learn the naming of the different ways but was unable to locate different perspectives in distinct contexts and then link them with contesting ideas of the nature, scope and method of sociology. In hindsight I feel that we rarely communicate the sense of the world that thinkers lived in and sought to intellectually grapple with. Cursory mention of biographical details of various dates: birth, years of publication of major texts, and death do not bring alive the world that produced the word. We need to emphasise the importance of learning to practice ‘reading a text about society backwards to discover and unveil the processes of its making’ (Talib and Savyasaachi 2003: 77-78). Cursory details however fit in well with the trend towards ‘objective’ questions as a test for knowledge. The process of intellectual history in such a scheme is seen as either extraneous⁶ or ‘outside the syllabus’ or ‘above the level’. It was the learning of the ‘five’ ways that were seen important. Five marks for five ways for patterned answers are easy to evaluate.⁷ The evaluation system seems to have increasingly become the final arbiter. There can be only one right answer is the demand of the objective questions. There simply is no space for sociology’s plural and diverse histories.

Indeed this plurality of views on the identity of sociology, instead of being seen as its strength is often seen as a sign of weakness, a mark that sociology is yet to acquire the precision of natural sciences. These many ‘diverse ways’ have been rightly understood by Patel as attempts to clarify, evaluate and reconcile ‘the contradictory claims concerning its identity as it has historically developed in India’ (Patel 2010: 281). Unfortunately history is rarely addressed - a point that is of equal importance when one discusses the matter of relevance.

Matters of Relevance and Irrelevance

There are distinct intellectual legacies of the discipline’s identity that bear upon our contemporary practice of sociology. Rege (2003) in her study of syllabi of colleges in Maharashtra noticed a pattern in the mix of theoretical legacies, namely the theoretical legacy of the classical thinkers; the methodological legacy of quantitative techniques; and the civic legacy of substantive topics. For the most part the three are understood and dealt with as discrete entities. This compartmentalisation fits in with the dominant mode of evaluation. And this bears upon the

way textbooks are written and classroom transactions are conducted. A small example from my experience with senior school textbook writing at NCERT (National Council of Education Research and Teaching) may make clarify the matter further. The books were written with an understanding that gender should inform the treatment of all topics, whether agriculture or family or globalisation. The pressing query from teachers was that if gender keeps popping up in different chapters, how would one know which chapter has to be used for a question on gender. Separation in terms of topics makes it conducive to teach and learn in terms of expected question on specific topics. Integration, which is the key of sociological approach, works against the logic of the given teaching and evaluation system. Dialectical materialism is a topic just as much as sampling or ethnicity or violence against women is. They belong to three distinct theoretical legacies of sociology, namely classical theory, techniques of research and substantive topics respectively, the point that Rege makes. Unfortunately, this is usually deemed irrelevant in the making of syllabi, often seen as a list of topics.

Indeed theory itself is irrelevant in both the larger public and policy discourse of 'use' and within the smaller world of syllabi, examinations and markings. Not surprisingly understanding about sociology as the study of *residual* topics is more popular than the classical thinker's emphasis on sociology as an approach, or of 'social relations' or of the key category 'social action'.

The buzzword of 21st century India is about skill enhancement. The focus therefore has to be on the skills that sociology can impart. This trend, however, has a longer history going back to the very intellectual legacies that went into the making of sociology. For a moment if we return to Bottomore's textbook on sociology, we find mention of a fourfold origin in political philosophy, the philosophy of history, biological theories of evolution and the movements for social and political conditions 'which found it necessary to undertake *surveys of social conditions*' (Bottomore 1975:16 emphasis mine). This emphasis on social surveys did not only emerge from the intent of applying natural science methods, important as that was. It emerged also from a new conception of social evils that something can be done to mitigate it. This legacy of sociology as linked to the study of social problems and for the making of social policy ought therefore not to be dismissed as 'applied sociology' a poor and distant cousin of 'pure' sociology.

This is tricky terrain and one has to navigate the thin path carefully. This is particularly true at a time where the legitimacy and

“use” of not just sociology but of all academic social sciences is being challenged. The rhetoric is of skills, deliverables and solutions. In such a context the tangible skills of the techniques of sociological research appear most useful and relevant. Apart from universities and older primarily state funded research institutions, corporations and developmental sectors are active producers of sociological knowledge, primarily responding to a certain formulation of research problem, seeking data for specified purposes whether of developmental organisations or corporations. Sociology graduates are more employable today than history graduates. While techniques of quantitative research are still privileged, qualitative techniques are also gaining ground in the *competing sites of knowledge production*.⁸

I do not think there is any necessary problem either with the focus on techniques of research or with concerns for social ‘problems’ or with the fact that sociology graduates may be more employable today. The problem lies in the way techniques are abstracted from an informed understanding of the history and structure, the institutions and ideas of the society that has to be studied. The buzzword is ‘operationalism’. It is instructive in the current context to recall Marcuse’s discussion on the concept of length and how the guiding logic was that of *measurement* in the physical sciences. He quotes from Bridgman:

We evidently know what we mean by length if we can tell what the length of any and every object is, and for the physicist nothing more is required. the concept of length involves as much and nothing more than the set of operations by which length is determined. *In general, we mean by any concept nothing more than a set of operations...* (Marcuse 2002:15 emphasis mine)

In the 1950s and 1960s America, the valorisation of techniques to the neglect of the sociological approach often meant technically sophisticated studies on topics such as on dating practices of college students. In 21st century India, it is often on topics such as measuring empowerment of women. While topics such as dating practices can be condemned as trivial, topics on ‘social problems’ such as women’s empowerment appears both weighty and relevant. But like the concept ‘length’, the concept ‘empowerment’ is assumed as a given. It is the operationalisation of indicators and measurement that matters.

Returning to the question whether the weightiness of a topic can define matters of relevance, Krishnaraj’s observations are instructive. ‘Topics’, she found, are chosen because (a) they are currently fashionable; (b) fall in line with the government’s or policy-makers’ interest; (c) funding agencies’ preferences; (d) issues that find publicity

in current literature – media, journals, conferences; and (e) individual choice which is itself often influenced by current fashion. (Krishnaraj 2005: 3008). Here, too, techniques take precedence over the formulation of research. Research product then becomes a commodity. Sociology is not just for locating immediate problems or seeking immediate solutions. While immediate problems need to be addressed, broader engagements with history, theory, other disciplines and empirical studies alone form the basis for understanding issues and formulating action. (Krishnaraj *ibid.*)

Perhaps it would make sense to conclude with Bauman who turns the question of identity around. He asks not *what* counts as sociology. But what *use is sociology?* He argues that for sociology to be useful it is not sufficient to study society from a safe disciplinary distance, or to follow academic fashion. One has to engage with society that makes people's concern its mission. In a world where sociology is 'another product in the marketplace'- keeping sociology relevant, according to Bauman, means maintaining the unending dialectical back and forth in the construction of 'commonsense' by focusing on 'everyday practitioners' not the spokespeople of different professions.⁹

The challenge is that in an increasingly mass mediated world, sociological findings continuously circulate in and out of common sense. The reflexivity of both sociology and modern life implies that social practices are constantly reformulated in the light of new information. Women's empowerment, for instance, has entered into the lexicon of everyday life. The pressing challenge is to retrieve women's empowerment as a loaded, complex, contested and historically evolved concept from its present avatar as one more topic in the paper on social problems. The task ahead is to reclaim the critical and reflexive edge of sociology; for once it is reduced to the technique of studying social problems as defined by others; and once sociology severs itself from history; sociology will fail to discern the ideological in the commonsense.

Notes

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1. Peter Berger's concept of sociological debunking, the act of going beyond the surface understanding to dig into the deeper meaning and give room to alternative implication of common beliefs is relevant here. Berger <http://www.sociosite.net/topics/texts/berger.pdf>
2. See Chaudhuri 2003: 5-6.
3. Through an array of programmes beginning at the undergraduate level Sharmila

Rege and her team of colleagues and students carefully crafted a bilingual system of teaching and training. Students, some of them first-generation learners, are not only taught to overcome their disadvantage through English language classes, but are treated as creative producers of knowledge in their own right in a bilingual mode. *Building Bridges: On Becoming a Welder* (Rege 2010) is the remarkable title of the first Bridge Course Manual produced under Sharmila's leadership

4. *Annee Sociologique*, I, 1898 cited in Bottomore 1975:22.
5. This does not appear to be quite correct. Bourdieu's own account of experiences in French universities is worth invoking. 'Through a kind of incantatory or sacrificial rite, they try to call up and reinstate the tropes, schema or words which to them distinguish professorial language' (Bourdieu 1994:4).
6. In quite another world of competent sociological doing, the question of intellectual history would be deemed extraneous for quite another reason. It would be deemed irrelevant because sociology was defined essentially as an empirical and comparative science.
7. See Singh 2012
8. Ethnography of how a food processor would be used in an Indian kitchen is one such example. (Sharan 2011)
9. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2014/05/26/book-review-what-use-is-sociology-zygmunt-bauman/> accessed 3rd June 2016.

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