Doing Sociology in India
Genealogies, Locations, and Practices

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Looking Back
The Practice of Sociology in CSSS/JNU

Maitrayee Chaudhuri

INTRODUCTION

Writing institutional histories are as problematic, if not more, as writing histories of nations. This is even more so if one is an insider and complicit in both its everyday life and recollection. It is in the nature of writing histories that it is contentious and ‘others’ will always tell the story differently. This is not too different from the travails of writing ethnography. Locations are central. And a great deal happens between observation, participation, documentation, and the act of writing. This chapter is aware of the methodological difficulties of drawing from the available documentation be it on the history of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) or of the Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS). Likewise this chapter is mindful of the complexities involved in recollections and memoirs of faculty members, students, and of the wider world. However I do not think that the craft of retrieving, however partial, is impossible. Indeed the very task of institutional histories would then be rendered unworkable and writing histories entirely arbitrary. This raises the question of ‘why write institutional histories?’

Answers may vary but if one proceeds on the assumption that history writing in the modern era have been critical in the making of modern identities and nation-states then the act of narrating the past of institutions has to be placed in the context of institution building. For histories whether of dominant or oppressed groups can be seen as discourses—ways of constructing meanings which influence and organize peoples’ actions and conceptions of themselves. Likewise histories of institutions construct identities and provide road maps for the future. I therefore proceed with the view that histories as discourses do shape institutional directions. At the very same time I privilege the historically ‘objective conditions’ in which the Indian nation-state was located in the late 1960s when the decision to establish JNU was taken. The JNU Act (henceforth The Act) was passed in 1966. The Act was constitutive of its context which itself was a complex amalgam of objective political and economic developments as well as layers of ideas and contending discourses.

In the case of CSSS both the broader history or narrative of JNU and the more specific history of CSSS have to be simultaneously drawn upon. The institution of JNU, since its very inception, evoked strong feelings. Insiders’ narratives routinely invoke traditions of innovative teaching methods, creative research, democratic practices, a vibrant students’ movement, and a culture of dialogue and participation. Opposing versions attack its purported privileged position, its assumed intrinsic anti-establishment sentiments and its fraudulent radical, Marxist persuasions.

For students of sociology from many parts of India, the sociology center in JNU is a coveted address. Students from its very inception came from every corner of the country and from varied class, caste, tribe, region, and religion. Within the fraternity of sociologists in the country CSSS has a distinct place. This distinction is however not without contention. Not surprisingly, therefore, it evokes responses that range from the warm to the hostile. Within the sociological community in Delhi it has often been seen as 'different' and by some, as decidedly 'less' from the sociology practiced at the Delhi School of Economics (Delhi School hereafter). That also leads us to the other histories that a history of CSSS entails, namely: the diverse and complex disciplinary history of sociology and its relationship to social anthropology. Not unimportant in this entire chronicle is the role of individuals—their institutional and intellectual antecedents in the making of these institutions. I will take up these issues later. But the point that I was seeking to make here is that narratives of JNU and CSSS from the start were multiple and contentious, a point that this chapter will seek to capture and convey. Indeed the effort here is
to map the past with recourse to multiple sources—primary documents, interviews, discussions with personages differently located within and outside the centre. I have sought to examine the documented histories of the centre such as its vision statements, course outlines, evolving thrust areas and its own reflections over the years. This has been accompanied by discussions with faculty members who built the centre from its early days as well with students from different points from the past and the present. The books and articles of faculty members over the years as well as the PhD theses and MPhil dissertations of research students over the years provide a fair sense of the sociological orientations of CSSS. Effort has been made to mention them illustratively either in the course of the chapter or in the references. That I have been a student since the late 1970s and now a faculty member for almost two decades is the vantage point from where the story is being told. To that extent this is both a partisan and an insider's story.

This chapter is broadly divided into two parts, reflecting its underlying understanding that the history of sociology in CSSS is linked to two other histories—the history of JNU and the history of sociology. Part A therefore delineates the broader history of JNU, the context within which it was established, its objectives and goals, its institutional structure and intellectual orientation. Part B focuses on CSSS but in narrating its story one returns to its links to the disciplinary history of sociology. I seek to do so in three ways: I begin with the stated perspective of the Centre as evident from documented sources and discussions with the founding faculty members. Woven into the exposition will also be the unstated but evident intellectual and institutional influences. I move on to the Centre’s response to new developments in the field, as evident both from the courses offered and research areas pursued by both faculty members and students. Attention is also drawn here to the specific academic organizational structure of JNU for it has a bearing on the manner that CSSS could respond to new issues and approaches. I focus very briefly on two aspects, namely the idea of ‘interdisciplinarity’ and the ‘autonomy of teachers’ to innovate and introduce new courses. Reading backwards one seeks to explore the nature of the intellectual orientations to the sociology practiced at CSSS. Finally, I touch upon the ‘culture’ and ‘everyday life’ of the Centre that in some senses capture the spirit of the practice of sociology in CSSS.

**PART A**

**The Broad History**

**The Context**

The Jawaharlal Nehru University Act of 1966 brought JNU into being. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru had passed away in 1964. His daughter Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister. Many of the great optimisms of the immediate post-independence war may have faded. Nehru himself had been shocked by the war with China. Wider discontent was visible. The promises of employment and equity were largely unfulfilled. At another end the process of rethinking on the dominant models of development were being expressed. This was a time when the optimism of post-1947 was waning but the Nehruvian vision was still looming large. Perhaps this contradiction led to the overpowering presence of a left students’ movement, expressing a nationwide discontent. JNU, thus, was at once shaped by the continuing legacy of a Nehruvian vision, itself containing within it an overt socialist rhetoric and a form of development that was not, and an expressed left critique stemming both from the academia as well as the students’ movement. Narratives of a wide range of people differently located in JNU’s past invariably mentions the students’ movement. This persists to date. A great deal of sociology therefore emerged from outside the classroom. No account of sociology in CSSS can afford to overlook this. The story of an interrogation of sociology within CSSS whether of class, development, nation, and state in the 1970s; or of caste, tribe, and gender and globalization in the 1980s and 1990s are therefore both a story inside and outside of the sociology classrooms.

**The JNU Act**

The JNU Act embodied the Nehruvian vision. A close reading of the Act shows that the key terms are: national integration, social justice, secularism, democratic way of life, international understanding and a scientific approach to the problems of society.

Quite clearly the vision of the dominant strand in the freedom movement, the Karachi Resolution 1931, the dominant themes in the Indian Constitution, the central ideological strand in the twenty-nine
sub-committees of the National Plan Committee established in 1938 and the myriad state documents was evident here. What was different was that this was the late 1960s. There was clearly a sense of crisis. Significantly, we will find that sociology of social movements emerged as a central research area in CSSS. ‘It was a sign of its time’ was the response of many faculty members.

The galaxy of speakers at the first convocation indicates the interest and support that the state had for JNU. It was deemed a national project and seen as a response to the inadequacies evident in higher education:

Since the University has an all-India jurisdiction, it has to shoulder academic responsibility in other parts of the country as well. Its New Delhi Campus should, therefore, be viewed as the nucleus of a system of recognized, maintained and constituent institutions in the different regions of the country. (Report of the Working of the University [RWU] April 1969–August 1971:13; emphasis mine)

The all India compositions of both students and faculty throughout its history is a good sign of this.

Role in National Development

A role in national development was deemed essential keeping in view its larger national and developmental vision. The overwhelming presence of Jawaharlal Nehru in the establishment of JNU can be discerned easily from the addresses in the First Convocation of JNU, evident in the speeches of the then President of India, Sri V.V. Giri, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the address by Professor V.K.R.V. Rao, Minister of Education and Youth Services, and the first Vice Chancellor, G.P. Parthasarathi on the occasion of the First Annual convocation held on 14 November 1969 (RWU 1969–71).

This consensus about JNU being a ‘national memorial’ like many was perhaps a bit of ‘invented history’ for there was considerable opposition within the nation to JNU. Professor Yogendra Singh mentions the many questions in parliament, which were raised about this alleged ‘white elephant’ and a ‘university without students’. Morarji Desai, when he took over as the Prime Minister, instituted an enquiry into it. Yet it was undeniable that there was a broad institutional and ideological support for JNU both from within the country and from the international community that included a message of good wishes that the Vice Chancellor received from the Secretary General of the United Nations, U. Thant who expressed the hope that ‘this University… will make a significant contribution, not only to the educational needs of India, but to the promotion of international understanding at the University level’ (RWU 1969–71: 18; emphasis mine). We examine below to what extent the broader story of JNU—this ‘national’ character and approach, this paradigm of ‘national development’, ‘democracy’, ‘broad humanism’, and this internationalist vision of alignment with the oppressed people—impinge upon the sociology of CSSS.

PART B

Part A focused on the broad history of JNU and iterated that a story of sociology at CSSS is closely linked to the broader study of JNU. Part B focuses on CSSS and seeks to unravel:

1. Its diverse stated and unstated intellectual legacies and the final nature of the amalgam;
2. Its responses to new developments in the field;
3. Its everyday ‘culture’.

The Amalgam: A Nehruvian Blueprint and a Mix of Intellectual Traditions

As we move into this section it will be obvious that the Nehruvian vision of ‘national development’, the ‘national character’, and ‘international understanding’ informed the sociological orientation of CSSS. This, I argue, forms half of the intellectual amalgam of CSSS. The other half is a peculiar mix of intellectual orientations drawn from a very wide range of sources, which this chapter seeks to decipher.

The Overt Nehruvian Blueprint: The One Half of the Amalgam

I begin with the stated intent of CSSS. This blueprint is overtly stated in the convocation address of President V.V. Giri who felt that ‘obviously, a university named after a great and charismatic personality like Jawaharlal Nehru has certain advantages… But it also throws upon the university the onerous responsibility of ensuring that Panditji’s basic approach
and philosophy' (RWU 1969–71: 13). What was this approach and what implications did it have for the practice of social sciences in JNU? I draw essentially from President Giri's address.

First, 'a scientific outlook and enlightenment, commitment to social progress and international understanding', ought to be reflected in its academic programmes.... Second, 'that a country like India should not get the full benefit of modern science and technology unless simultaneous efforts were made to study the Indian polity, economy and society and to restructure them to suit the demands of modern life'. Third, 'that... it should lay special emphasis on the study, not only of each individual discipline, but of these essential linkages between different disciplines which help to create the seamless web of knowledge and which will help that synthesis for which Jawaharlal strove so hard and which alone can help India to modernize herself quickly and effectively'. Fourth, since Nehru has played a unique role in developing what Tagore called the Vishwabharti ideal to bring India in the mainstream of international life, one has, therefore, a right to expect that in this University, there should be a special emphasis on the study of international relations, of world peace and allied problems of internationally important languages and on the development of services and programmes essential for such studies. Fifth, the emphasis on national integration through the development of a democratic and secular outlook, enrichment of our composite culture, general economic advance and special efforts to ameliorate the conditions of living for the less fortunate sections of society like the Harijans or the Adivasis' (RWU 1969–71: 13). This approach has been markedly present in CSSS.

I argue that there were two distinct trends at work here though both pertain to the issue of development and modernization. One, the concern with national development and problems of special groups like the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes stemmed from a convergence of the national developmental paradigm with a modernization paradigm that ruled much of sociology in the post World War II period which also coincided with Independent India’s try with independence and development. This was to my mind the dominant position within the faculty and to some extent that of the students. Two, the same set of issues were being approached by students from various radical perspectives, drawing upon Marxist theoretical persuasions that were critical of the ‘national developmental’ paradigm that rested upon a certain form of capitalist development that necessarily rested on an exploitative and extractive social and property relations. Thus, while a Marxist perspective (dominant outside CSSS in JNU) was not evident in CSSS in the 1970s, those students who were influenced by Marxism were largely free to pursue their orientation. Class was a category of analysis that was widely debated but caste was not. The story is radically different in 2010. It is significant that in the 1970s, caste studies appeared to be the mainstay of much of sociology in India outside CSSS. Perhaps this has much to do with the early pioneers such as Yogendra Singh (Singh 1977: 5) and T.K. Oommen who was an early scholar of agrarian relations, social movements and social change (Oommen 1996, 2010).

I would like to also mention here that the kind of overt intellectual critique of mainstream studies on tribe or gender, which began to make its presence felt within CSSS later, was not present in the first decade. In the late 1970s as a MA student one was largely innocent of what sociology of India would look like from the Dalit or tribal, or a gender perspective. Today it is impossible not to engage in it for critiques emerge from the classroom itself. What does the caste-tribe continuum mean to the large number of students from the north eastern part of India? What class, caste, gender ideological premises are concepts like Sanskritization and modernization based upon? What is ‘mainstream’? What is ‘integration’? Many of the questions emerge from the growing strength of tribal, women, and Dalit movements. Many emerge from new global, intellectual, and political trends. This is a point that needs reiteration. Both the local and global presences made their presence felt within the classrooms of CSSS (Chaudhuri 2003, 2010).

**The Eclectic Mix of Sociological Traditions: The Other Half of the Amalgam**

We discuss below the influence of structural functionalism on the practice of sociology in CSSS. However, as mentioned earlier the broader whole of JNU and the debates within the students invariably made their presence felt within the sociology classes. Hence even when theoretical debates centre staged Talcott Parsons and Merton’s contribution to functionalism, Marcuse, Poulantzas, and Althusser were also part of the reading lists. This overiding influence of the larger intellectual world perhaps also accounted for the fact that while no course on gender
studies existed until the early 1980s, dissertations of students reflected a range of gender related topics.  

What was distinct about the sociology practiced in CSSS is easier described by taking recourse to what it was not rather than what it was. It was not Marxist. It was not Indologist. It was not modelled on British social anthropology. We have already alluded to the legacies of Talcott Parsons. The most obvious of the Parsonian framework traces is of course the nomenclature, the Centre for the Study of Social Systems. That Parsons had a strong influence on Yogendra Singh seemed to be a widely held belief. Personally when queried about whether the nomenclature of Social Systems stemmed from Parson, he laughed it away. Other faculty members however were more willing to accept it and expressed it in interesting ways.

Nirmal Singh felt that Yogendra Singh was at one point very strongly influenced by the theoretical framework of Parsons but grew closer to a broad anti-imperial position subsequent to his stay in the United States of America. M.N. Panini writes in an internal note circulated at the centre:

The expert committee had also suggested that our Centre be named the Centre for the Study of Social Systems. The idea was to get together scholars in diverse disciplines to study ‘social systems’. Remember those were the times of rebellion against structural functionalism but only a person with the aplomb of Professor Yogendra Singh who was the first to take charge of our Centre, could really extricate himself from embarrassment by stressing the importance given to comparative studies of societies that will necessarily have to take note of conflict and change even as system stabilising forces are considered. (Panini 2005)

If we look at the primary documents we do discern the Parsonian touch, perhaps more in language than in the actual content of what and how sociology was taught in CSSS. I quote from some of the first official statements about CSSS. Section C of RWU titled Social Sciences mentions seven centres, all interdisciplinary—that is, they would be viewed as a number of social systems at various levels, all of which being related to each other and articulated to a single system. (RWU 1969–71: 7; emphasis mine)

Almost fifteen years later in 1986 we have another note on the centre. In this note, there is a focus on ‘social change’, ‘economic development’, as well as on the use of a framework of ‘social systems’ which get articulated in a single system’. The 1986 document also mentions that courses at MPhil level range from ‘colonialism, untouchability, Hindu Muslim tension to professions and social movements’ (JNU/RSP 1986: 55; emphasis mine). The combination captures the spirit of CSSS. Yogendra Singh was the first faculty member to initiate the setting up of CSSS and his own writing even prior to his joining JNU provides a cue towards the vision that informed CSSS. For Parsons was clearly not the only influence. His range of interests was very wide—with a weakness for broad theoretical and philosophical questions. Further he had already a well-established interest in larger questions of the discipline of sociology. The volume titled Sociology for India of which he is one of the editors was brought out in 1967. The eclecticism, notwithstanding a pride of place given to structural functionalism that marked CSSS is already evident. He writes:

The prospect for sociology in India, thus, lies in a continued tradition of research based on a variety of methods and intellectual orientations. In the midst of it, the structural-functional model of sociological analysis would perhaps occupy a place of prominence…. For the growth of sociology in India, it is necessary that all varieties of methods and concepts might be applied to the study of Indian socio-cultural phenomena not because it is a historical necessity but also because the path of methodological integration lies through accretion and interplay of theoretical and methodological traditions in sociology. (Singh 1967: 182–3; emphasis mine)

Parsons and structural functionalism was significantly present. But as Dipankar Gupta recalls those years were ‘times’, of radical student movement and Marxist theoretical debates impinging upon the kind of sociology students practiced. Debates on capital accumulation, under development, mode of production were a must. T.K. Oommen often recalls that his early work was on agrarian relations and movements was not perceived as ‘sociology’ proper by established sociologists of that time. In other words Parsonian sociology did have its own place but many other events and trends also played its own part in the growth of CSSS. Not surprisingly a random list of the first twenty topics of MPhil and Phd dissertations from the official records on the internet as from the 1970s and 1980s read as:

- Work, Automation and Alienation
- Women’s Participation in Politics in Orissa
- Women in Indian Industry
- Women Doctors and Nurses in India
Urbanization in Modern India
Trends in the Indian Women's Movement
Untouchability and the Role of Legislation
Unorganized Sector: a Study of the Construction Workers in Madras
Unemployment and Radicalism among the youth in West Bengal
Underdevelopment and Tribal Movement in Santal Parganas and Chotanagpur
Tribe, Ethnicity and Nations: a Study in Interrelationship
Traditions of Peasant Mobilization in India...
Traditional Naga political organization and the Changing Trends...
Traditional patterns of Political and Economic Organization in selected Tribal
groups of Arunachal Pradesh
Towards a theory of Labour Movement: A critical review of the Indian working
class
Towards a Theory of Understanding Trade Unionism: Its possibilities and
limitations
Traditional AQ Naga Social Control on Transition
Towards A Theoretical framework of Economic Anthropology
Theories of Development
Technology and the Status of Women in India

I would argue that there was and is certain openness in the practice of
sociology at CSSS. This should not suggest that no differences exist or
that efforts are not made periodically to decide boundaries and gate keep.
However, there has been a kind of 'adaptability' a certain 'plurality' that
significantly marked both the early scholars' intellectual perspectives and
institutional functioning. I seek to study the manner that this openness
and gate keeping actually worked by looking at the responses that CSSS
has had to new developments in and outside the discipline.

Responses to New Developments: Of Gate Keeping
and Flexibility

Responses to new developments in the discipline in CSSS cannot be
understood without drawing attention here to two ideas that informed
JNU as a whole, namely, 'interdisciplinarity' and 'teacher's autonomy',
which allowed teachers to initiate new courses as well rework with the
readings of old courses. 'Interdisciplinarity' may not have quite worked
out as intended. But I argue that the 'autonomy of teachers' has helped
in a major way to ensure that new and old research fed into the teaching
programme.\textsuperscript{22}

The Logic of the Organizational Approach and Interdisciplinarity

The vision document felt that 'the traditional structural pattern of the
universities, in which a Department is created for each separate discipline,
will not suit' the new purposes of interdisciplinarity. The University,
therefore, proposed to create a few well-conceived Schools, each of which
would consist of a group of centres. The idea was that:

In developing the institutions on its campus at Delhi, the University would like
to break new ground, with a view to realizing three of its major objectives as laid
down in the Act, namely, (1) to promote inter-disciplinary studies, (2) to provide
for integrated courses in the humanities, natural sciences and technology, and
the social sciences, and (3) to strive to create, in its teachers and students, an
awareness and understanding of the social needs of the country and to prepare
them for fulfilling such needs. The focus in each Centre would be a major problem
of study which would require an inter-disciplinary approach, and which would
be of special significance to the country in the present situation. (Singh 1996)

Interdisciplinarity in the sense visualized did not take off. Yogendra
Singh observes in a volume produced to commemorate twenty-five years of
JNU:

Despite the results achieved so far, the JNU experiment in interdisciplinary
orientation in social science teaching is still on trial. The constraints on its
successful efforts are many. The first important one is the academic culture
in general in the country. Since departments at all the other universities are
organised around single disciplines and M.A., M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees are
given in the discipline itself, JNU has to recognize this fact in determining its own
boundary for innovation. A second constraint that has also been experienced in
varying degrees at the JNU centres is that of faculty members' recognition of the
validity and relevance of other social sciences in their own thinking and research
in the discipline involved... It is generally felt that the ideal solution would be
fusion of the paradigms. This, however also requires a certain amount of human,
not merely mental rapport among the faculty between contending disciplines, a
condition often difficult to achieve. (ibid.: 65)

Old Courses, New Courses/Old Orientations, New Orientations

If the early years reflected a certain orientation (notwithstanding its
eclecticism), discussed in the earlier section, new recruitments brought
in new kinds of courses and approaches.\textsuperscript{23} Patricia Uberoi has piloted
two courses on gender, one at the MA and another at the MPhil Level.
I have taught the gender course at the MA level but perhaps very differently from Patricia (Chaudhuri 2002). Patricia also introduced a course on ‘Modes of Symbolic Communication—Belief, Ritual and Art’, which Susan Viswanathan among others have been teaching. Three new options, which were introduced about seven years ago included a course on ‘Modern Indian Social Thought’, ‘South Asian Social Thought and Media’, and ‘Globalization, International Institutions and Society’. Significantly some amount of debate on the relationship between Indian Social Thought and Sociology was conducted, with one view holding a more conservative take of what constituted sociology proper. That the course on Modern Indian Social Thought is now firmly established and extremely well received by students from other disciplines is perhaps also a sign of changing times. Mention must be made to the fact that the new intellectual challenges from the Dalit, gender, and tribal perspective have also left its mark here. Avijit Pathak was one of the early members who argued for the inclusion of modern Indian thinkers within the ambit of readings on sociology. Anand Kumar introduced the course and taught it for many years. Significantly many teachers have worked, albeit from different approaches in this area.

More recently newer faculty members like Harish Naraindas (2003) and V. Sujatha have introduced new courses on sociology of science and medicine. Most recently we have had a year long discussion before deciding to reduce one compulsory theory course and for the first time introduce a new compulsory course on ‘Religion and Society in India’ in which four faculty members were actively engaged in producing, namely Susan Vishwanathan, Renuka Singh (Singh 2004), Nilika Mehrutra, and Amit Kumar. Readers may recall the feeling that the early thrust on modernization and development had marginalized studies of tradition, religion, and tribes—also thought the legitimate sphere of inquiry for social anthropology. Yet one of the first faculty members of CSSS, C.N. Venugopal had written on religion (Venugopal 1998).

M.N. Panini, in an internal note of the centre, comments on the challenges posed by cultural and gender studies: on the one hand on the identity of the discipline and on the other of the challenges posed by globalization on the discipline:

We can identify two main challenges that we have to confront today. One is the challenge posed to the identity of the discipline and the other is the challenge posed by the processes of globalisation that seem to unsettle our disciplinary moorings. … The field of culture is not exhausted by culture studies—in fact, sociologists can set right the trend towards essentialism that culture studies breeds by focusing on culture as in a continuous state of formation; we have to stress the role of cultural processes because processes interlink with contexts and the study of processes defy elegant epistemologies evolved in the analyses of texts. (Panini 2005)

Patricia Uberoi in her reflections had remarked that in 1985–6 when she had joined the centre, there were neither optional nor compulsory courses on gender (Uberoi 1989–90: 279). My own reflections suggest that over time faculty members did include a gender component, even though more often than not it was of the add and stir approach. I think that:

This suggests two things. One there appears to be a consensus that women studies is sufficiently mainstreamed and is therefore considered mandatory to be taught. Two that there is no resistance to this component being added. Both I think are only half truths, hiding more than they reveal. (Chaudhuri 2000: 247)

I describe it as half-truth because the add-on approach to gender implies adding on ‘gender’ but not necessarily a fundamental rethinking of the discipline. Further, in the hierarchy of knowledge, gender studies would be often rendered as not really the stuff of serious academic inquiry. Patricia too mentions that studies on gender were not overtly opposed, but trivialized. This trivialization is an issue that has been addressed by feminist scholarship for it reflects fundamental epistemological assumptions and institutional practices (Rege 2003: 18). I personally recall a time when asked to fill up a form for faculty specialization, a colleague laughed and suggested I write ‘women studies and women studies and women studies and...’! On other occasions I have faced similar remarks about the limitations of a sociologist who works on women studies (Chaudhuri 2000). This somewhat cheerful condescension co-existed with an incredible amount of space available for individual faculty members to teach as one wished, to write as one desired. I did not actually witness a course being pushed in or pushed out for intellectual reasons or reasons of ‘disciplinary purity’. Interpersonal differences were a more likely reason for oppositions. But even this is not carried out in any sustained fashion. The ruling spirit is really to live and let live. The very rich and diverse, even though uneven body of researches that students have produced over the years is perhaps the best indication of this.
It is instructive to see the response to other perspectives that have been marginal to mainstream sociology such as tribal studies. Tiplut Nongbri draws attention to the sizeable body of studies on tribes that have emerged from CSSS. The telling fact is that while tribal studies was a course enlisted from the very inception of CSSS, and while large number of students worked on the area, it was offered only when Tiplut decided to offer it. (Nongbri 2003, 2005) And significantly only one other faculty member, namely Nilika Mehrotra (Mehrotra 2004) has since actually offered the course. Tiplut has two important points to make: one, the defacto marginalization of tribal studies in the teaching (not research) of sociology in CSSS; and two, that it was not just accidental that it was Nilika who was primarily trained as a social anthropologist who chose to offer it. For studies of tribes generally fell outside the dominant practice of sociology in India. The no longer so vexed relationship between sociology and social anthropology do appear to make its presence felt.

Since the study of caste has been so central in Indian sociology how was it approached in CSSS? I have already mentioned Yogendra Singh’s concern in the context of studies on stratification. K.L. Sharma who taught ‘Social Stratification’ wrote extensively on the relationship between caste and class, which seemed to be the central point in debate in the 1970s (Sharma 1974). It somehow fitted into the overall framework of modernization and development where the shift from ascribed to achieved identities were in many ways built into its logic. Dipankar Gupta is the other noted scholar who has contributed to studies on social stratification (Gupta 1993) apart from his major interventions in other areas (Gupta 2001, 2010)26

The year 2010 is a different point in history. The most far-reaching and sustained critique of sociology of India, whether in CSSS or elsewhere has emanated recently from Dalit studies. Late in the 1970s we were largely innocent of what Indian society would look like from the ‘bottom up approach’ which Nandu Ram spoke gently of even in the 1970s (Ram 1988, 1995). Today, Vivek Kumar himself a product of CSSS is sharply critical and passionately vocal about the manner that Indian society has been taught in Indian sociology (Kumar 2005, 2006). He seeks to:

...highlight how this domination unfolds in Indian Sociology with specific reference to teaching of Hindu Social Order and Caste in Sociology classes by the Indian Sociologists... In turn other collectivities are reduced to minority status and have been marginalized or blacked out in the society as well as in curriculum of Sociology. (Kumar 2010: 363–4)

The youngest faculty member G. Srinivas has worked on the formation of the Dalit middle class and is interestingly teaching the course on Social Stratification at this point. Surinder Jodhka’s work indicates the new directions that caste studies have been taking in more recent years (Jodhka 2008, 2010a, 2010b).

If Vivek Kumar is sharply critical, M.N. Panini’s observations are more laudatory:

Looking back, we can justly feel satisfied with the contributions that our faculty and students have made to the areas of sociology of modernisation and development and to the sociology of social movements. Of course, our research interests have gone beyond the two thrust areas to include studies of Indian diaspora, gender studies, sociology of education, studies of tribes and tribal identity, Dalit studies, social ecology, studies of nations and nation building in India, urban studies, urban rural linkages and agrarian studies. That we have shaped the discourse in several of the areas listed above is indeed an understatement. Our Centre has already taken the initiative in introducing courses on studies of diaspora, on modernisation from the south Asian perspective, on the role of media and on the sociology of international institutions.... (Panini 2005; emphasis mine)

A cursory look at the list of writings by the CSSS faculty in the references below would justify the claim.27

One can very clearly see that sociology at CSSS has had a dynamic and engaged relationship with the broader society outside. Its institutional structure allowed a more quick response to developments in society. Its intellectual positioning prevented an unintended fossilization that often a canonical approach to disciplines may bring about. One had set on this journey to explore stated and unstated intellectual responses with the hope that one may stumble upon the defining characteristic of sociology at CSSS. Maybe the words ‘adaptability’ and ‘plural’, so often used by the early scholars at CSSS, maybe the words ‘marginal’ and ‘unequal’ so often used by scholars today provide a cue to how best to describe sociology at CSSS.

The Hold All Approach

The intellectual influences on CSSS in the early years, I have argued was an amalgam of Nehruvian vision and liberal sociology, of post World War reigning paradigm of modernization and development and also a
certain scepticism towards Marxism, then closely associated with actually extant socialist states. At the same time a broad anti colonial heritage, also part and parcel of the Nehruvian vision was integral to CSSS. If there was this mix, can then one really identify **tangible features that define sociology in CSSS**? The question mark is deliberate. For, there is nothing explicit, nothing on the face of it of that can define CSSS as Marxist, or Durkheimian, or Indologist, or Structuralist. Dipankar Gupta felt that sociology in CSSS was never doctrinaire. Talcott Parsons was important, Levis Strauss was important but so were Garfinkel and Goffman, Mead and Blumer. A straight answer to what defines sociology at CSSS is perhaps a non-starter. It is the wrong question. But certain features did characterise the CSSS approach, evident in words and phrases such as a: 'broad perspective'; an emphasis on 'macro issues'; a 'shift from a sociology of village studies to social movements', and 'developmental concerns'; 'non-doctrinaire'; with an 'emphasis on theory'. Dipankar Gupta contrasted the focus of CSSS on large concerns, macro issues, social conflicts, movements with the Delhi School, which at one point was often associated with what he termed as more 'esoteric' topics.28

**Outside the Radical Image**

Sociology was in some ways an outsider to the radical image that other social science centres in JNU such as history and economics had in the 1970s. What was clearly different from other centres in the social sciences of the late 1970s was that we had no scholars who explicitly used the Marxist approach. We had no debates conducted within the Marxist framework. But of course Marx was one of the three core thinkers, apart from Weber and Durkheim. As true of a great deal of sociology in India, discussions on Marx within CSSS were guilty of a reverse 'determinism' that presumed and operated with a determinist notion of 'economic determinism'. There were, however, research students who were influenced by Marx and engaged seriously with his works. On the whole, however, the chances of a student being more familiar with at least some work of Weber or Durkheim would be far more than that of any work of Marx.

**Methods of Inquiry**

There appears to have been a privileging of the survey method in CSSS, notwithstanding Ravindra Jain's significant and influential presence. Significantly he himself mentioned in the workshop that led up to this volume that he had knowingly chosen to join JNU over the Department of Sociology in the Delhi School because of the connect that it provided with broader questions. His social anthropology therefore was influenced by the sociology at work in CSSS (Jain 1977, 2010). However, in more recent years I discern a break between an earlier preponderant emphasis on the survey method and increasing use of textual analysis and participant observation. This could be in part explained by the orientation of many faculty members, who have joined over the last decade. In part it could be explained by the growing impact of the new anthropological methods. Social anthropology itself has reinvented itself and objects of inquiry could be the state, globalised labour, or the diaspora, or the culture of institutions. Ravindra Jain's own works on the Indian diaspora and engagements with new contemporary issues perhaps marks the trend (Jain 1993, 2010).

It is useful to read M.N. Panini's take on the preferred methods of inquiry in the early years:

The idea was that we would all be involved in fieldwork and besides participant observation that was the trend those days we would carry out survey research wherever necessary as well as use historical methods that sociologists in India had neglected. There was also some initial enthusiasm in the construction of indicators for assessing development. It seems that at that time we had even anticipated Mr Mahboob ul Haq! Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, Professor Singh's research project could not take off. (Panini 2005; emphasis mine)

One of T.K. Oommen's regret is that the centre could not produce any collective work. One project that he mentioned was on crafts of social research. He mentions that the two books widely used on method were primarily about the social anthropological methods that distinguished the Delhi School and gave them a defined identity. Both formal and informal discussions with both T.K. Oommen and Partha Mukherjee suggested that they saw the sociological method practiced by CSSS as clearly different in both its approach and object of study. Thus social movements, not village studies; macro as against micro studies; and the use of survey methods and not participant observation were advocated. Oommen's own interest in developing this distinct perspective is widely known (Oommen 1969, 1972, 1986). Quite clearly this is not the case today. While the influence of social anthropological methods spreads, a large body of work does use survey methods and quantitative analysis. Most
significantly a combination of methods is often used and that great divide which was once perceived between sociology and social anthropological methods is not perceived in the same way.

All told, I must mention that over the years I have not been struck by the use of any defined method of inquiry, or a consistent tool of research. What I have been struck by is a self-conscious engagement with sociology of knowledge and concerns with contemporary developments in society. We have already noted Yogendra Singh’s observations (see note 22). Professor T.K. Oommen has been very involved with broader questions of the role of social sciences in understanding and intervening in the pressing issues of our times. Not surprisingly he increasingly engaged with questions of nationalism, civil society, and the difficult question of reconciliation (1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2008). His large body of work reflects the engagement with questions of the linkage of theory and concepts, of empirical research and theory, and above all of the importance of situating knowledge (Oommen 1991, 2000, 2007).

The Practice of Sociology in CSSS/JNU

In many ways this apparent dichotomy between a professed commitment to an inclusive vision and everyday hierarchies played itself out. My own take is not to deny the existence of either ‘traditional’ or more ‘modern and secular hierarchies’ but to contest whether they were so overpowering that one just had to succumb or perish. I have mentioned earlier that while differences existed about the nature and boundary of sociology, sustained opposition and obstacles were not part of the culture.

The early years were defined broadly by Yogendra Singh, T.K. Oommen, Ravindra Jain, and C.N. Venugopal. Each one was very different. But no one had the missionary zeal of producing a body of students who would push forward their approach. No one passionately stood by a perspective. This ‘hold all approach’ of CSSS allowed for spaces, and legitimate spaces, to carry on one’s preferred choice of orientation in both teaching and research. The downside, as T.K. Oommen states is the lack of a distinctive identity and the inability to function collectively in research collaborations despite the fact that ‘the centre today has many good teachers and scholars’.

T.K. Oommen feels that the impact of the center would have been far greater and tangible had CSSS been more professional and worked as a collective. He mentioned three concrete instances of the possibility of collaborative work that was imminent but never took off. The projects he mentioned were:

1. Social Indicators;
2. Craft of Social Research in India; and
3. Social Movements

It did not quite happen that way and still does not. However, if on the premise that this chapter rests, histories do shape institutional directions, then it is important to address the issue of lack of professionalism and collective research. Perhaps ideally this is how it ought to happen. Perhaps some may opt for such a direction. But should all? I raise this question because we are poised at a point in the larger global history of higher education where a new consensus on ‘pragmatism’ and a demand for ‘immediate returns’ is taking over. The logic of a university for a fruitful
role in society demands a certain flexibility and autonomy, a certain space for both productivity and creativity, and for a mode that allows for assessing ‘returns’ in a long term and mediated sense.

If two decades back, the faculty was diverse and varied, it is perhaps that much more today. Until Patricia Uberoi joined CSSS in the first half of the 1980s CSSS was literally manned by an all male faculty. Tiptul Nongbri joined a little later. We have six women faculty members and that Tiptul Nongbri as Chairperson was followed by Susan Visvanathan today is perhaps indicative of the changes over the years. This diversity is not just about ethnic or regional origins. It is equally about individual and intellectual orientations and persuasions. This chapter has already discussed at length the mix of plural intellectual legacies and practices. I would also, however, like to argue that this would not have been possible sans the laid-back everyday atmosphere and the logic of a plural composition. This story would be grossly incomplete without mentioning the warmth that students and faculty members share. Indeed many teachers, Avijit Pathak being an early pioneer has increasingly innovated new pedagogic interventions that now marks dialogic culture of classrooms. That this was partly possible only because of the institutional structure of JNU mentioned earlier.

A point that struck me over the years was that one of the distinctive features that may have played its role in the story of CSSS is the fact that apart from R.K. Jain who was both trained and taught in the West, Y. Singh and T.K. Oommen were entirely trained within the country, as have been most to date. This meant that references to teachers and gurus were more often a Y.K. Damle, or D.P. Mukherjee, or an A.K. Saran. This was quite different from recollecting everyday encounters with stalwarts in the West. For recollections are important in the manner an institution builds up. As interrogations of institutions intensify from a Dalit Bahujan perspective, these recollections and retellings too undergo change. This ‘local’ and ‘national’ even as contested legacy has also meant that connections between CSSS and regional and local institutions were more naturally established and nurtured than with western ones. The very visible presence of CSSS trained teachers in different institutions across the country is a fitting testimony to this linkage and to its broader contribution to society.

As this chapter has unfolded it is apparent that social and political hierarchies have shifted and changed over time in both JNU and CSSS. In the late 1970s ‘class’ was a central category of analysis. Everyday discourse then contrasted students from elite and non-elite backgrounds, Hindi speaking from English speaking, city from villages. In 2007 assertions of ethnic, regional, caste, and religious identities were much sharper. The student movement continues to be strong with a dominantly though not exclusively left orientation.

Folklore in the 1970s and 1980s suggested that two factions dominated CSSS, one led by Yogendra Singh and the other by T.K. Oommen. Each was purported to command loyal adherents. Some attributed the divide to a North–South one, others to a personality clash. The enthusiasm and zeal of some of the followers was the only tangible evidence of differences. I joined the faculty filled with trepidation about the pitfalls of steering clear from the supposed groups, only to find that life at CSSS was pretty uncomplicated if one liked it that way.

E.H Carr spoke of the course of history as a ‘moving procession’, a metaphor fair enough, provided it does not tempt the historian to think of himself as an eagle surveying the scene from a lonely crag. The historian is just another dim figure trudging along another part of the procession (Carr 1961: 35–6). I am very much this dim figure, both a witness and participant in the procession as it winds along, the relative parts of the different procession constantly changing.

In trying to write the history of CSSS we discover that many narratives exist. They exist in documents, in the recollections and retellings of the founding faculty members, in folklore of students—past and present, in periodic recounting in faculty meetings. Like the narrative of the nation, as it is told and retold, the narratives of institutions in telling and retelling provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, institutional symbols, and rituals which stand for or represent the shared experiences which give meaning to the nation and in this case to the institution. It lends significance to everyday life and connects it to an institutional past. There is an emphasis on continuity so that our present institutional culture is seen as the flowering of a long process. Shifts take place in the narratives, reflecting changing faculty orientations, student composition, interrogations from new social and political assertions. Some of these shifts are sharp, for instance, ideas about a conservative
ideological orientation maybe replaced by ideas about an interrogative tradition. Yet the emphasis on continuity remains. Year after year as new students are welcomed into the institution, teachers and older students retell stories of JNU night life, meetings in the hostel messes, Ganga Dhaba, the diversity of student composition in CSSS, its interrogative and dialogic orientation.\(^{35}\)

**NOTES**

1. It is important to mention that the admission policy of JNU from the early years had devised a weightage system to ensure that students from disadvantaged groups and backward regions entered the university.

2. A great deal of folklore exists about what in the past was seen as frosty relationship between the two centres. Professor Yogendra Singh reminiscences that there were cordial relations from the start and how he was invited to plant sapling along with Professor M.N. Srinivas in the Delhi School. There are other stories that suggest it was not quite so genial.

3. A scholar, herself a product of JNU, editing a volume on women's movements describes those times as: The movements we document are ones that originated in the generalized economic and political crises that gripped the country towards the end of the nineteen sixties. The promises of independent India had by then proved to be largely unfulfilled for large sections of our people. The policy of planned economic development resulted in heavy industrialization and agricultural capitalization, but led to a host of new contradictions. The tepid implementation of land reform had failed to solve the problem of rural inequality and the rural masses remained sunk in poverty. Urban poverty and unemployment were also serious problems, while increasing radicalization provided the students and youth with a way of channelizing their frustration and anger; the ruling party responded with increasing draconian laws and measures directed against any form of protest’ (Sen 1990: 4).

4. Even as early as 1976, the UNU had been engaged in several international network projects, …The UNU had been told by an international panel of development specialists that development theory was now in disarray, and that the UNU should create an inter-regional and interdisciplinary dialogue, involving the researchers of different world regions who were in search of ‘alternative development’, i.e. development that did not just emulate the Western industrial development model (Mushakoji 1993; xi emphasis mine).


6. T.K. Oommen recalls how the first Vice Chancellor of JNU, G. Parthasarathy had invited the first President of JNUSU, Koshy to also speak from the Podium in the First Convocation, indicating the new tradition and how he had read out a text different from what he had shown the Vice Chancellor before, a point perhaps that demonstrated time and again the conflict.

7. Apart from public debates and lectures, study classes by various groups of students have been a very integral part of life at JNU.

8. See notes 4 and 5.

9. Interviews with Professor Nirmal Singh (7 August), Professor Dipankar Gupta (8 August 2007), Professor T.K. Oommen and Professor Yogendra Singh (January 2007), all showed how significant they considered the research on social movements. Professor Oommen has often mentioned how his early work on the Bhoodan movement was dismissed as outside the purview of sociological research.

10. Interview with Professor Yogendra Singh, 18 January 2007 at CSSS, JNU.

11. While CSSS stood apart from other centres in the School of Social Sciences in not having an expressed Marxist orientation, it did offer courses on the study of societies in the then existing socialist world.

12. Scholars such as Susan Viswanathan as we see later, mention that this focus on the ‘modern’ of CSSS gave her little space as one wishing to study ‘tradition’ (Viswanathan 1996, 1999, 2002). She felt that therefore social anthropologists like Professor R.K. Jain felt marginalized, a charge he refutes strongly. Indeed he claims that he deliberately chose CSSS over DSE for he saw greater challenges and possibilities there.


14. I joined MPhil in 1979 and worked on ‘The Participation of Women in the Indian Trade Union Movement’ and was not alone in my batch to take up such topics.

15. Venugopal, one of the first to join CSSS, did write on Ghurye and the Indological approach. More recently some interest is visible. See Amit Sharma (2005).

16. Yogendra Singh recalls: Disciplines visualized were:

1. Sociology
2. Social Anthropology
3. History
4. Economics
5. Psychology

Readers will notice that the focus on modernization and development is unequivocal, just as the historical and comparative perspective. At the same time the model of social anthropology and psychology, economics and history were kept in mind. T.K. Oommen also recalls that there was a kind of Harvard model in mind. There was an idea that captured the model that Social System will be studied by Sociology, Cultural System by Social Anthropology and Personality System by Social Psychology. Sudhir Kakar was offered the post of a social
psychologist but did not accept last moment. One Pestonji accepted and then left. The Parsonian model cannot be more explicit.
17. Interview with professor Nirmal Singh 7 August CSSS/JNU/Delhi.
18. Mention must be made here of the Working Groups set up by the Academic Advisory Committee to formulate programmes for the different Schools and Centres. CSSS had the following members:
   1. Professor M.N. Srinivas
   2. Professor Rajni Kothari
   3. Professor Ramakrishna Mulherjee
   4. Professor M.S. Gore
   5. Professor Rasheeduddin Khan
   6. Shri J.P. Naik
   That only three members formally belonged to sociology/social anthropology understates the focus on an interdisciplinary approach.
19. A story that he has recounted on many occasions is that in his first class in the University of Lucknow Professor Radhakamal Mukherjee had carried the book War and Peace and drove home the point that reading it would show what sociology is all about.
20. Social science teaching in India, as in most developing countries, faces a number of problems and contradictions. Not all the contradictions, however, are of a cognitive or a pedagogic nature. There are also existential, historical, and developmental contradictions intrinsic to the educational systems and processes in these societies. Some of the major contradictions in social science teaching problems in India can be described as lying between a concern for universal categories in theory as against the demands for native models or indigenous categories; contradictions between the quest for disciplinary depth and interdisciplinary lateral awareness; and, finally those between social relevance or policy orientation and fundamental thinking. At the structural level, there also exist significant contradictions between metropolitan and regional or local traditions and practices (Singh 1996: 56).
21. Interview with Professor Dipankar Gupta on 8 August 2007.
22. An Information Booklet on CSSS brought out in 2004 mentions: 'What is distinctive about the Centre is that it provides adequate space for innovation and experimentation. This is why the courses offered are updated. New courses are also offered, from time to time, incorporating advances in theory and taking into account fresh empirical developments'.
23. Thrust Areas as of 2010 are: Sociology of Diaspora, Sociology of Small Towns, Studies of Tribal Indigenous Groups with Special References to North East, Studies of Civil Society, Minorities, Women and Weaker Sections, and studies of Interface of Agriculture and Industry and Country-Town nexus.
25. As mentioned earlier many students in CSSS despite this absence were working on gender issues. The list of MPhil and PhD topics above is self explanatory.
four of the present faculty of nearly twenty have studied in JNU alone from their Masters onwards. Others may have but one of the degrees from here. This is interesting, considering the charges of in breeding and gate keeping have also been part of the many narratives.

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