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Theory and Methods in Indian Sociology

Maitrayee Chaudhuri and Jesna Jayachandran*

This chapter is an attempt to review the broad trends within Indian sociology\(^1\) on theory and methods, approximately between 2000 and 2010. At one level, the task was simple enough—to survey extant literature of the period concerned, identify the ones on theory or on method, and review them. At another level, the task was daunting. The challenges were many and the introductory remarks are to reflect on the challenges that we faced, which perforce led us to clarify what exactly we understood by theory and methods in Indian sociology. This understanding or conceptualization was critical to decide what kind of writings we ought to be looking for. A schematic recounting of the practical and theoretical issues that was faced, is therefore not extraneous to our central object of investigation but constitutive of it.

The many and necessary linked issues were: (i) the paucity of writings either exclusively on theory or exclusively on method; (ii) therefore the need to cull what kind of theory and methods were at work from research in varied substantive areas, such as gender, culture, caste, religion, nation; (iii) while it is a given that theory and methods are inextricably linked, in actual practice this link is rarely addressed or even taken cognizance of; (iv) the prevalence of a widespread view that Indian sociology has had little to offer in theory and method; (v) an influential view that we need not bother too much with theory, for sociological knowledge resides in the field; (vi) a related view that continuous accumulation of data would finally throw up ‘theory’,

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which is an occasional event, and most of us need not unduly fret about it—views which augment the unstated idea that there is a pre-theoretical ‘field’ and the question of theory is really an option that we have to dwell in or not; (vii) the sociological community’s own self perception that they do not ‘do theory’; at best they apply theory and method derived from the west; (viii) hence the angst, differently expressed either as a question about the misfit between alien concepts and ‘Indian’ reality, or a search for indigenous categories.

We pose the above questions schematically in order to review trends in theory and methods in Indian sociology. In the above set of issues, a special mention has been made about the tendency to delink ‘theory’ and ‘methods’ in Indian sociology. We would however like to draw attention to a ‘distinction that should be made between the dominant attitudes towards theory and those towards methods. If theory appears as something extraneous to dominant sociological practices in India, the same cannot be said about methods.’ Indeed, too often methods appear as the defining feature of the discipline. This holds true whether it is the standard sociology textbook model of research that begins with the mandatory hypotheses, proceeds with the sample size and techniques deployed, collates the research findings, and ends with the final outcome. Recent years have also seen what one can describe as a mainstreaming of ethnography, an emphasis on narratives and ‘voices’ that needs both to be taken note of and accounted for. In other words, despite the centrality accorded to methods as a defining feature of sociology/social anthropology, one rarely comes across scholarly works on methods and its necessary link with theory (Mukerjee 2000; Srivastava 2004). This absence may be read as a preponderant acquiescence, though not consciously, of a propensity towards abstracted empiricism and a deeper belief in the existence of a pre-theoretical starting point.

If the unstated belief in the pre-theoretical marks one end of theoretical and methodological practices in Indian sociology, at another end is the angst that Indian sociology has not witnessed theory building and concept making. We began with a feeling that we would have little to do simply because there was so little literature that engaged with the theoretical and methodological. Significantly, a very similar response had greeted the idea when an attempt was made to delineate a conceptual history of feminism in India (Chaudhuri 2004). For Indian feminists, it was argued, have never sought to theorize. More
recently we have been witness to similar expressions of angst and anxiety among Dalit scholars who rue the fact that Dalits have not theorized the specificity of their predicament. In other words, there is a pattern in the manner that the matter of theory has been addressed within social sciences in India, a point more sharply and acutely articulated within sociology. ‘Indeed compared to their colleagues in other disciplines, it seems that Indian sociologists and social anthropologists are unusually afflicted by disciplinary angst’ (Uberoi et al. 2007: 2). This self reflexive propensity within sociology, we would like to argue, is ‘angst’; not incidental, nor extraneous, but central to the reflexive nature of the discipline.

It is not so much a lack as much as it is a critical mark of its intellectual orientation. Such an orientation demands a necessary examination of not just knowledge as an end product, but an exploration of the conditions and modes of knowledge production. This emphasis is marked in the disciplinary history of sociology in India, partly because of the reflexive nature of the discipline in general, partly because the colonial experience demanded a constant interrogation of the grounds of knowledge in general, and of theory in particular. We argue, therefore, that debates around indigenous or western theory, social theory or sociological theory, sociology or social anthropology, survey or ethnography in part can be read as theoretical and methodological debates. Such an understanding of some of the persistent debates in Indian sociology allows us to examine the many accounts on and about the discipline that has marked the trajectory of sociology/social anthropology in India over many decades as an engagement with theory. It allows us to read the ‘angst’ not as a failing, or an unwarranted preoccupation, but a more circuitous route to debate theory and disciplinary projects and possibilities. This matter of circuitous, meandering, and even extravagant mode of exposition in contrast to a tradition of parsimonious theory building that marks western social science later needs taking into account rather than an outright dismissal as outside the purview of ‘respectable theorizing’.

A point we also seek to make here is that what has been seen as disciplinary ‘outpourings’ has not been confined to mere expressions of angst, but also developed into some systematic mappings of the discipline (Das 2004; Chaudhuri 2003a, 2010a) as well as some self-conscious history of the disciplines. (Uberoi et al. 2007; Patel 2010a, 2011). Studies that have interrogated the discipline and its changing
contours therefore fall well within the ambit of a survey of trends of theory and method in Indian sociology.

The issue of lack of theory, as mentioned earlier was a matter of concern. We had two choices here: (i) to take this as an unfortunate given, or (ii) to take it as a claim that may need careful perusal to find out whether it tells us more about what kind and form of theory are we talking about. This we decided was a more productive path to take. A survey of trends in theory and method in Indian sociological works therefore would, for that reason, shed light on broader questions pertaining to extant ideas of theory and theory building, relationship between social thought and sociological theory, and our hermeneutic right to read western theory, interpret and use it as we deem productive.

We were also wary of the view about a lack of theory for another related reason. The large body of work done on caste, class, community, family and kinship, religion and politics, culture and rituals entails distinct and serious theoretical engagements. What therefore was required was a certain clarity about what would be considered theoretical and methodological engagement. First, sociologists in India have had to perforce deal with theory—sometimes explicitly as theory, sometimes implicitly, in hands on manner as they set about their task of understanding India. Expressions of this can be read in many of the early and later writings as part of a continuing debate carried as part of discussions ‘For an Indian Sociology’ in the Contributions to Indian Sociology (CIS). Expressions of this can also be read in the oft-repeated refrain of ‘paucity of theory’ and ‘concept building’ on the one hand and alien concepts on the other.

In more recent decades there is an increasing presence of sociologists/social anthropologists located, and more often than not trained, in the west, mostly in North American universities. We have a growing and influential body of work that needs attention and commenting upon. These are usually marked by a certain professional gloss and usually a certain kind of theory and methods, a well-honed use of language that is in currency in western dominated global academia. Even as they speak the language of post-colonialism and self-reflexivity, they are more a product of the universities that they are trained in rather than of the societies where they draw their origin from. This is in sharp contrast to the early sociologists/social anthropologists who were an inalienable part of the struggles and
ambiguities of a colonized society and then of a national process of 'nation building'—processes not so easily swept under the broad sweep of the term post-colonial. (Chaudhuri 2012: 20–2) How should one read this development? Should we now be happy that at last, like the academic world in developed societies, we are properly 'professional' and not caught within nationalist and social reform frames? Or should we be askance, appreciative, and yet prepared to unpack elements that have constituted a new professional academic brand, at once professional, seemingly radical—as it almost necessarily invokes the values of multicultur alism and diversity—whether of sexual orientation or colour, even as it shies away from any systematic analysis of persisting inequalities. Surveying trends in theory and method in Indian sociology therefore need looking afresh to our relationship to western theory, itself a reconfigured entity. At the same time we need to look more carefully at the idea that writings from the west are more theoretical and our own works less so. It's easy to be carried away by the idea, simply because of the packaged fashion that western trained writings appear in as compared to a more laboured form of articulation evident in our works. Whether that is a question of language, both in its limited and widest sense of culture is a question that has to be taken seriously. It is also easy to ignore and fail to recognize the repeated quest for 'indigenous' categories, the return to an idea of the 'cultural' and 'civilizational,' the basic questioning of what constitutes 'Indian' as theoretical questions for a sociological community deeply entrenched in understanding theory as 'generalization'.

This manner of understanding the sociology of theory and methods allows us to look at both explicitly articulated theoretical writings as well as those that would, so to say, need excavations from the substantive work being done. If we push our understanding of theoretical explorations thus, we can discern new theoretical and conceptual interrogations emerging from substantive analysis in areas such as caste, gender, religion, and community. Further, new areas such as women's studies and post-colonial studies also imply that new forms of analysis—gendered analysis of social institutions, new theoretical privileging of subjectivities, and new methodological emphasis on autobiographies and narratives—gain ground, thereby reshaping ideas of both theory and method. Challenges from diverse social movements have also brought back the question about why does one practice sociology or social anthropology, or for that matter any social science.
This manner of posing also allows us to explore what is understood as 'theory' generally within sociology in India, a point already made before. In other words, one can make explicit the domain assumptions that lie beneath the expressed term 'theory'. It is imperative to make explicit what actually is being referred to: theory as generalization; theory as a set of concepts articulated within a system; middle range or grand theories. The task of reviewing 'methods' in sociology raises a different set of issues: 'Do we look at works discussing methodological questions per se or do we review the broad trends in the methods used in sociological research? Works of the first kind are few and far between. One would thus necessarily look at the general trend in the methods used in the wider body of work in Indian sociology/social anthropology.' Such a treatment will necessarily be illustrative and not exhaustive. Indeed it is important here to insert the caveat that this study does not seek to be a comprehensive review but does attempt to reflect on the contemporary trends in theory and method,

Any treatment of theory and methods almost invariably brings in disciplinary questions. Questions such as 'what is sociology' or 'what is a sociological perspective' remain, even as the terms and content of debate change from the 'book view' to 'field view' framework, to more fluid issues of interstices and cultural in an intellectual world marked by post-modernism. Significantly Indian sociology like India is deeply unequal and very diverse. High-end 'global' academic products, therefore, co-exist with bazaar notes and writings informed of a sociology produced by such notes. A survey of research trends ought to at least mention this, even as this review exercise focuses more systematically on the writings in major recognized journals such as Contributions to Indian Sociology, The Sociological Bulletin, Economic and Political Weekly, Current Sociology, and International Sociology over a decade starting early 2000, and books of sociological relevance published in the same period.

THE CONTEXT

Twenty-first century India is a world apart from both its colonial past and its first fifty years or more of independence (Abraham 2000). The global ascendancy of India as a global economic power, notwithstanding its deep internal inequalities, means that India and Indian social science matters more than ever before in terms of global academia
and sociological research. Twenty-first century west too is a different world, and the buzz in western academia is the imperative need of 'internationalization of the curricula' and global 'research collaborations'. Non-western approaches and knowledge are in vogue and sponsors of research projects require 'authentic' Indian social science practitioners. It is at such a juncture that Sujata Patel can ask whether a dominant international sociology with universal particulars can contain non-dominant universals assimilated from research in other parts of the world (Patel 2010). A likely danger of this global interest, attention, and collaborative resources is that we become ready partners and work in the topics chosen, apply methods suggested, use concepts given, and quickly move on to a 'new' universal practice of sociology/social anthropology, albeit always 'in a language that privileges the local, difference and diversity'.

Markedly present in the last decade has been a rich body of work produced by scholars of Indian origin, but with institutional locations and professional training in the west. At one level this may not appear so different from a time when founding figures of Indian sociology like G.S. Ghurye and M.N. Srinivas too were trained in the west. We contend that there are significant differences, not just of biographical trajectories of the point of entry into the western academia, primarily Great Britain, but also of the broader epoch and its spirit, not to mention the sheer scale of the North American trained social scientists today, which invariably shape studies in and on India. The 'spirit of the epoch' of an earlier generation of Indian sociologists was the nationalist framework. 'Academic colonialism' and the need for 'swaraj' were inspiring motifs (Uberoi 1968: 27). How relevant are these issues today when we speak confidently about 'provincial universalism'? (Baber 2003).

There is no one answer to that. Critiques of a nationalist framework have been strong in Indian sociology, and not necessarily from the same vantage point. Globally, the post-modern, post-national turn in global academia in the last part of the twentieth century led to an overt recognition of diversity. The critique of universal rationality and ideology of progress and meta-narratives, be they nationalism or socialism, overturned the spirit of earlier times. Discernible influences from this broader theoretical and methodological turn, evident most tangibly in the rise of cultural studies in post-cold war North American academia are evident in sociological theory and methods.
in the last decade, even though in terms of spread it may be confined to specific centres and intellectual circles.

Closer home, critiques of nationalist framework emerged from the margins, whether caste or religion, region or tribe. They expressed both the dangers of cultural nationalist hegemonies as well as posited ‘professionalism’ as against ‘nationalism’; an interesting formulation, but one that begs an enquiry into both terms. How ought we to read T.K. Oommen’s observation that ‘the capital concern of the pioneers of Indian sociology, who had started practicing their profession by the early twentieth century, the heyday of the anti-imperialist struggle, was to Indianize and not to professionalize sociology’ (Oommen 2007: 122). This would be a productive entry point to discuss broader questions of nationalist frameworks, post-national conditions, and perhaps the limits and possibilities of professionalization.

Twenty-first century India is also marked by competing sites of knowledge production, other than universities, 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 organizations or corporations. Theory in such contexts would retreat while innovative methods may flourish. Some evidence of that would be discernible in sociological research emerging outside the formal academic institutions.\(^5\) Research emerging from international institutions (IIs), from the many evaluation reports of projects, and even from corporate houses would demonstrate the use of a wide array of methods—surveys, focused group discussions, narratives, and even visuals. In keeping with our basic emphasis on contexts, one can claim that the current context is more fruitful for methods. It is a context marked by a focus on the practical, the do-able. Data collection and analysis would be the priority rather than what could be considered empty theorizing. One has already mentioned the very deep roots of a belief in the pre-theoretical.

At the same time another trend is also evident in a more assertive claim to theorization, even as the old anxiety of a lack in theory remains. Here too contexts matter. The rise of post-modern and post-colonial theory has to be understood in a context of a changed world where not only has old style colonialism ended, but where we now have western academia peopled by a significant presence of people from the erstwhile colonies. We dwell on this at greater length in
the sections on cultural studies and the implications of the Indian diaspora on sociology. Our effort in the first two sections has been two-fold: (i) to delineate the manner in which we conceptualize this review exercise on theory and methods in Indian sociology—enabling discussions on disciplinary practices and histories; and (ii) foreground the new global context wherein questions of knowledge are produced and where concepts travel.

PRACTICES, HISTORIES, ORIENATIONS

This section would look at some of the concerns that sociology has been actively engaging with—namely practices, histories and orientations. One would further seek to identify the central themes that are addressed in these writings. The last decade saw the emergence of a body of work that has engaged with ‘disciplinary practices’ of which theory and methods form a critical part. We have already made the point that this propensity to reflect upon the epistemological and ontological grounds of knowledge is intrinsic to the intellectual making of sociology. Thus sociologists over the last decade have repeatedly engaged with questions of disassembling knowledge and foregrounding disciplinary locations. New conceptual critiques of methodological nationalism, a crucial underpin of sociology, have emerged from two diverse sources: local movements—tribal, caste, gender, environment—on one hand, and at another end from the global dynamics of capitalism (Chaudhuri 2003a, 2010a).

The discipline has seen not just rethinking of knowledge production but also of the challenges of communication. Pedagogic questions have received considerable attention and efforts to draw out connections between changing social composition of the classroom to questions of syllabi, and modes of learning have been consciously made. Significantly the pedagogical and theoretical are not seen as delinked issues (Chaudhuri 2003a: 3). For instance efforts were made to ‘...consider the importance of learning to practice reading a text about society backwards to discover and unveil the processes of its making’ (Talib and Savyasasachi 2003: 77–8).

At the same time, it was also felt that there was too much of reflection on current practices and too little of a ‘backward glance’, of historicizing (Uberoï et al. 2007: 2). A collection of twelve biographical essays on some of the founding figures in the history of Indian sociol-
ogy and social anthropology has been put together on the assumption that an informed critique and appreciation of the work of previous generations should be a prerequisite for the building of sound disciplinary traditions in India (ibid.: 4). A set of themes have been woven out of these biographies that shed important, though not entirely unexpected, light on the themes that have been central to sociology/social anthropology in India. A key issue was the matter of ‘academic colonialism’, the ‘colonization’ of the non-Western mind through the imposition of Western education, Western categories of thought, and the value-frame of modern (Western) science. This vexed issue of the west and us remain a motif in discussions of the last decade, even as more complex critiques of the nationalist framework emerge. Further we wish to argue that much of the disciplinary debates, even of the persisting theme of the relationship between sociology/social anthropology, have to be considered from the vexed west and us relationship, or differently articulated—our colonially mediated entry into modernity.

A recent volume edited by Sujata Patel provides a critical disciplinary history of the different ways in which ideas, practices, and traditions of sociology grew, were organized, and institutionalized in India from the mid-nineteenth century till present times. The interplay of three themes—time, space, and power—which makeup the arguments here ‘highlight two separate but connected dominant positions that have structured the formation of sociological traditions in India-colonialism and its practices, and ideologies of nationalism and notions of nation and nationhood’ (Patel 2011).

In doing a disciplinary history, Patel also raises theoretical and methodological questions and draws attention to the manner in which the two are so closely linked. She begins with the rise of the discipline in India in early 1919, and draws a quick history to its massive rise in disciplinary status, research work, and presence in Indian universities. She writes:

The ‘crisis of sociology debate’, I argue, relates to the many diverse ways the community is trying to clarify, evaluate and reconcile the contradictory claims concerning its identity as it has historically developed. These can be examined at four levels: Its disciplinary point of reference—Is it affiliated to theoretical traditions of social anthropology or sociology or is it an interdisciplinary social science? Its theoretical direction—Will it follow sociological traditions constructed in Europe
and North America or will it create its own indigenous perspectives? Its *professional orientation*—Is it an academic discipline whose main role is restricted to teaching and research within academic institutions or is it a discipline committed to public and/or radical political concerns? And its *geographical compass*—Is it concerned with relating its identity to global and/or national issues and processes or regional and local ones? Or should it combine all four. (Patel 2010a: 281, emphasis added)

Placing the debate on the nature of Indian modernity centrally, Patel argues that Srinivas’s sociology asserted civilizational continuity, focused on the caste system and assessed this ‘traditional structure’ through the prism of the village. In Srinivas one can see an amalgam of the principles of colonial modernity with the theories and methodologies of Radcliffe-Brown and the Malinowskian tradition of social anthropology. Srinivas’s theoretical architecture re-emphasized the disciplinary identity of sociology as anthropology. He also used theories and methods crafted within Europe (as done by his predecessor) and thereby affirmed the continuous linkages of his social anthropology with the principles of colonial modernity and its binaries (ibid.: 284). Srinivas’s sociology created a theory and methodology that carved it out from the discourses of economics and politics (both of which emphasized classes together with notions of power and domination in the context of democratic processes). The village acquired in Srinivas’s oeuvre a spatial, territorial, and structural significance. A localized setting became representative of a whole nation, a whole society. The microcosm came to represent the macrocosm. Not surprisingly class analytics was and remains a relative weak paradigm in Indian sociology.

However Srinivas departed from Ghurye’s Indological view of caste to initiate an empirical method of participatory observations (the ‘field view’) to study caste in the Indian village. Patel argues that the village is seen as a space to examine ‘tradition’ (equated with ‘society’) and hence gives in to colonial influences prevalent at that time. Empirically, Srinivas examines the population of the village by caste and by occupation in connection with agriculture. She argues ‘that the adjustment of the structural–functionalist approach with the colonial modernity leads to methodological confusion between caste and village...’. In such a formulation, ‘tribes, religious and ethnic groups (other than caste), as well as new emerging interest groups that did
not conform to the caste principles in their ways of everyday living, did not figure in his work' (Patel 2010a: 284).

If Patel’s contention is a neglect of interest groups, T.N. Madan’s remarks point towards an obverse trend. He writes:

"...Indian sociologists generally have been more concerned with social forms and processes rather than cultural traditions, with interests rather than values. The separation of sociology from cultural anthropology (a Western import) has been mainly responsible for this. (Madan 2011: xiv)"

While there is no agreed upon understanding of what the orientation of sociology ought to be, there are some clearly stated positions. One much repeated position has been that one has to ‘insulate the practice of sociology from the demands of ideology’. Béteille argues that:

Sociology... is an empirical and comparative discipline, devoted to the systematic study of society through the application of a distinctive body of concepts and methods, and here sociology is an empirical rather than a normative discipline. The primary aim of an ideology is not to understand or interpret society, but to change it by acting politically on it. Sociology as an intellectual discipline does not have any definite or specific political agenda... (Béteille 2009: 196, emphasis added)

In sharp contrast, Sharmila Rege argues that there is indeed an ideology that marks mainstream sociology; even as the norm of the dominant ideology, it speaks a language of neutrality and objectivity. One can, however, discern what constitutes this ideology by examining its response to the challenges raised by gender studies, a body of work it either ignores or seeks to discipline:

Strategic exclusions/inclusions of the ‘feminist challenge’ have to be managed in order to avoid the perennial questions about the sociological nature of the content and methodology. An engagement with the issue being studied is met with the reminder of the divide between the diverse interest in the 'social' of the activist and the sociologist in the 'social'. ... Thus, boundaries of 'good sociology' are drawn around general laws, scientific method, and a segmentalizing of human reality. The core of the discipline is sustained through the taken-for-granted ways of perceiving social reality—despite an expansion in the subject matter—often to include the marginalized subjects. The marginalized, be they women, dalits, adivasis, or the labouring classes, despite their inclusion in the substantive areas, remain on the periphery of the cognitive structures of the discipline. The intellectual and practical base of the
core is sustained through several dichotomies: social/political, social world/knower, reality/knowledge, objectivism/subjunctivism (Hegde 1989), book-view/field view, macro/micro, all of which firmly keep out praxeological issues. (Rege 2003b: 17, emphasis added)

Sociology in India has been challenged by diverse theoretical interventions which have questioned a dominant assumption of the role of sociology as a discipline engaged with 'what is' rather than 'what ought to be' from women studies, dalit studies, cultural studies, environmental studies, and poverty studies to identify some of the main counter currents (Heredia 2000; Kumar 2005). Sundar draws from the old understanding of social anthropology as seeking to understand human existence across all cultures to call for a reformulated role of the discipline to move towards elements of a common morality. We quote:

*Equally important, if we understand anthropology’s raison d’être as one that expands our notions of human existence across cultures and countries, how do we use this occasion to arrive at elements of a common morality?* I suggest that one way to do this is to engage in what one might call an ‘anthropology of culpability,’ defining culpability as guilt in a larger moral, and not merely legal sense, to try and understand when and how and to what extent people become culpable for acts of violence they have committed or that are committed in their name—while at the same time exploring the inequalities in attributions of culpability that are an essential part of the new world order. Throughout history, judgments (by dominant groups or persons) of a person’s, or a people’s, or a country’s degree of culpability for violations of some ‘natural’ order have influenced notions of what can be legitimately done to them. (Sundar 2004: 145, emphasis added)

Sundar thus argues that rather than attempting to save the souls of others, an anthropologists’ primary task today must be to widen public understanding of what it means to be human. This involves turning the same lens by which we examine others on ourselves, wherever we stand in the global contours of the discipline. To do this Sundar feels we must put bricolage, juxtaposition, and comparison—between the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’—at the heart of the ethnographic research and teaching enterprise. Although this idea was mooted at least two decades ago and ‘hybridity is the name of the fashionable identity game, in fact very little has been done in the direction of exploring cultures refracted in the common light of globally traveling discourses of terror, war, economic rationality, or even human rights’. She therefore
suggests ways in which anthropologists might understand the logic of culpability as it operates in the world today.

This resonates with Shiv Vishwanathan's observation that 'there is something antiseptic about Indian sociology. It has been marked by a search for competence, even exactitude but without achieving a deeper sense of the problematic. One can read twenty years of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* and think that Mandal, Narmada, Bhopal, or the turmoil in Punjab were all events that have not touched our social imagination' (Vishwanathan 2001: 3123). Other scholars too have voiced similar concerns, even if expressed in a different language (Menon 2006; Thakur 2006).

**DISCIPLINARY ORIENTATIONS, OBJECTS OF ENQUIRY, AND METHODS**

The constant negotiation with the west is a part of our historical trajectory. Both colonialism and nationalism, therefore, are constitutive of the theories and methods that have dominated Indian sociology. This relationship impinges on the manner that the broader debates about sociology/social anthropology, modernity and tradition, nationalist or professional are conducted. Further, as the discussion below would suggest, this therefore would also spill into questions of method, survey or participant observation, qualitative or quantitative data and debates on why sociology needs to take indigenous categories seriously.

The relationship between the two cognate disciplines is a recurrent theme in Indian sociology. This debate is closely bound to the ambiguous relationship, which we have had with the west—both politically and intellectually. It has an important bearing on the identity of the discipline, which in turn decides the choice of methods and objects of enquiry, a point we shall see different scholars across generations raise, though differently. T.K. Oommen makes the point that 'Asian sociologists are of two types: those who are sociologists everywhere (at home as well as in the West), and those who are sociologists at home but are labeled as social anthropologists in the West ... This has precious little to do with the initial training of these scholars...’ (Oommen 2007: 2). He further argues that:

The source of this ambiguity, however, is to be located in the origins of sociology and social anthropology in the West and their transplantation in the colonies. ... *In the West, anthropology and colonialism were*
inextricably intertwined; anthropology was perceived as the child of colonialism. In contrast, sociology is cognized as the offspring of modernity. Pursuantly, anthropologists studied ‘other cultures’ which were ‘pre-modern’ and sociologists investigated their own societies which are designated as modern. (Oommen 2007: 2, emphasis added)

The same route to cope with these irrelevant controversies is to recast the discipline so as to transcend particular historical contests. Thus, one can legitimately think of sociologies of ‘pre-modern’, ‘modern’, and ‘post-modern’ societies. However, this did not happen in Indian sociology/social anthropology. If in the 1930s and 1940s an Indological approach and exegetical analyses were preferred, during the 1950s and 1960s the ‘field view’ and participant observation were privileged to study villages, family and kinship, caste and religion (ibid.: 4).

Satish Deshpande in his essay on modernization argues that notwithstanding numbers, it is the social anthropological methods that remain influential even in the recent decade. Emphasizing the connection between disciplinary orientations, objects of enquiry, privileged standpoint, and methods of enquiry, he observes:

In Indian social anthropology the distinction between sociology and anthropology has been refused at least since Srinivas (that is since the mid-1950s or so). This is an unexceptionable refusal in so far as the convention of the former studying ‘complex’ and the latter ‘simple’ societies could not really be followed in India and is no longer the rule elsewhere either. However, the well-established Indian practice of referring interchangeably to sociology and anthropology hides the fact that the latter is much better developed than the former. Because the social anthropology of India was heavily oriented towards ‘tradition’ - that is towards institutions like caste, tribe, kinship and religion, and towards rural rather than urban society- modernization studies here were also biased in this direction. Had urban sociology, economic sociology, social history, or political sociology been better developed, the content of modernization studies may have been more balanced, with the new and emergent getting as much attention as the old and traditional. As it happened, most studies of modernization in India located themselves in the world of tradition and looked out upon modernity from that vantage point, with its attendant strengths and weaknesses. Indian sociology failed to cultivate intensively those methods (such as survey research or quantitative techniques) and research areas (such as industry, the media, or the class structure) of sociology proper which fell outside
its usual zone of interaction with anthropology. This in turn affected the manner in which the discipline dealt with the question of modernization, particularly since this question privileges generalization from a macro-perspective, something which anthropology is neither theoretically inclined towards nor methodologically equipped for. (Deshpande 2004: 194, emphasis added)

Deshpande makes the perceptive observation that Srinivas began his career in India in the 1950s with the opposite view—that is by advocating the cause of participant observation as a much-neglected method contrary to the popularity of survey research. At the end of the century, the shoe would certainly seem to be on the other foot; regardless of the numbers involved, there is a clear mismatch in terms of influence. It would not be easy to cite even five survey-based or quantitatively oriented studies that have had a major impact on the misnamed discipline of Indian ‘sociology’ during the last fifty years (Deshpande 2004: 194). Bina Agarwal, comparing sociology with economics, observes that ‘Indian sociologists and political scientists tend to be less quantitative than their American or British counterparts. ... economics in India is becoming more like it is in the west. She then makes a curious comment that ‘other disciplines remain more rooted in the Indian tradition’ (Agarwal 2001: 390, emphasis added). This however is not the place to follow this up.

T.N. Madan’s recent volume returns to this question of tradition. We would like to quote from, to buttress, our initial argument that we in India need to reconceptualize what we mean by theory, and also to aver to the West and US intellectual relationship. This is:

...a book about tradition—about dynamic cultural traditions as subjects of study and about intellectual traditions as evolving approaches to their study—in the context of the sociology of India. I do not employ the term ‘tradition’ to suggest the completeness or closure of a stock of ideas and perspectives, or an unthinking adherence to particular styles of thinking. In his celebrated book, The Sociological Tradition (1966), Robert Nisbet did indeed suggest that a set of core concepts (namely, community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation) may well be said to constitute the sociological tradition. Needless to emphasize that, for him, the Western sociological tradition is universal. I do not follow that trail in this book, although I am very much concerned in it with the idea of the sacred in non-Christian cultural traditions and the crafting of appropriate methods for its study. (Madan 2011: xi, emphasis added)
From a very different vantage point, Sujata Patel critiques the contested nature of both ‘tradition’ and ‘values’. She elaborates on the lasting impact of the linked processes of colonial modernity, the historical context of anthropology, the caste class hegemony of Indian nationalism, the subsequent influence of functionalism, and the choice of ethnography. In the colonial period:

.... we also see a challenge emerging to this discourse with the growth of an indigenous sociology rooted in ‘Indian’ values. The second phase coincides with the formation of the nation-state, the expansion of the higher education system and the standardization of a ‘national’ sociology. *Sociology now became ‘social anthropology’, utilizing the methods of ethnography and ‘field view’ to study the defining character of the Indian structure—the caste system. The focus was to analyse the micro-perspective—the village, its tradition(s); and to assess incremental change within a civilizational perspective from an upper caste and class perspective.* (Patel 2010a: 281, emphasis added)

Patel argues that Srinivas studies the structure of Indian society in terms of an adjustment mechanism that adapts to macro changes. This perspective examines the ‘traditional’ features of Indian society in a frame of dominant colonial modernity. Despite the difference in theory and approach, sociologists in India have since adopted a similar perspective in practicing sociology (Oommen 2008). According to Patel, a ‘lack of criticality’ in Srinivas’ ethnographical inquiry rooted in the ‘functionalist paradigm’ called for a distinction between the object that was studied and the subject/social scientist who had to maintain that distinction. ‘The method of ethnography within a functionalist paradigm was rooted in the principles of the British liberal ideology of the nineteenth century where state, market and other entities were seen as distinct domains. Epistemically it creates a ‘distance between the subject and the object. Functionalism does not accept that the object is the creation of the subject and is always in a dialectical relationship with it. In these circumstances ethnography merely mirrors the subject’s ideology and research, and presents an empiricist perspective on the one hand and creates theoretical and methodological ambiguities on the other’ (Oommen, 2008). Participant observation is thus an eminently flexible methodology (Saberwal 1983: 307–8). It could be deployed anywhere and utilized without the need for an analytical framework. Research can become a ‘soft experience’ (Patel, 2010: 285).
On the other hand we have the influence of new anthropological methods in India and Meenakshi Thapan’s work is an early attempt to reflect on questions of locations and subjectivities (Thapan 1998). In many ways it is indicative of a post-modern influence, which has had an enormous influence in social anthropological work in North American academia, besides post-colonial and gender studies. It privileges locations and reflexivity but remains shorn of any serious engagement with either history or deeper analytical framework, the point made by Satish Saberwal and addressed differently in Nandini Sundar’s argument of moral culpability. One could argue that often this reflexivity gets reduced to obsessive engagement with the ‘self’ rather than a critical engagement with self and society, politics and economics, power and property.

The issue of scale and methods, of quantitative and qualitative approach has been an issue of concern within Indian sociology, clearly reflected in the writings of the last decade. N. Jayaram warns of the dangers of methodological fundamentalism:

…one should recognize that quantity and quality are two dimensions of a thing, one amenable for measurement and the other can only be described to capture its essence. As such, they could be viewed as complementary rather than being opposed to each other. It is true that quantitative methodology is rooted in positivist epistemology, whereas qualitative methodology is grounded in non-positivistic, if not necessarily anti-positivistic epistemology. Which methodology a researcher adopts, obviously depends on his/her ontological and epistemological assumptions vi-a-vis the reality being studied. Failure to recognize this and blindly adhering to ‘quali’ or ‘quanti’ methodology for its own sake results in methodological fundamentalism. As all fundamentalisms do, methodological fundamentalism puts blinkers on the eyes of a researcher. (Jayaram 2006: 7, emphasis added)

Dalia Chakrabarti feels a purist attitude towards paradigms is not appropriate to qualitative research. The essence of this methodology, she feels, lies in its flexibility (Chakrabarti 2006: 162). Yogendra Singh returns to this matter with the important remark that ‘the explanatory power of concepts is often by mistake treated as being a function of the scale of the units of observation’. (Singh 2009: 179). He argues:

…the power of generalization that a sociologist gains from her/his study of a single village does not as much depend upon the unit character of the village but upon the nature of the methods and conceptual formulations
employed by him for the study. Whether one is focused on the simplicity or complexity of a single village as a social system depends less on the substantive features of the village. Rather, most of it is derived from premises about its nature inherent in the frame of reference contained in the instruments of study. For a statistician interested in the head-count of population of the village, it offers itself as a simple social system. But a sociologist or a social anthropologist finds in the village society an example of a system of enormous complexity where the contemporary realities go beyond ‘mere appearance’ and present themselves as phenomena that inheres enormous complexity. The social facts and institutions in a village have congealed historical existence through time, India being a civilizational society with multiple pasts. In cultural as well as social structural domains, a village has not only internal complexity, but also linkage with outside social and cultural systems which impinge upon its nature. (Singh 2009: 180, emphasis added)

The above observations are particularly important in a context where much of sociological research is empiricist. They too often do take the reality as it appears and conflate statistical co-relations as sociological explanations.

This review, as mentioned earlier, has framed this discussion on theory and methods in Indian sociology within a matrix of the West and non-West, with its colonially mediated modernity and nationalism. The last decade, as we saw in the preceding sections, has seen a theoretical critique of both the persistence of a colonial theoretical legacy and the limits of a nationalist framework. At a time when the modernization paradigm loomed large in Indian sociology, it was assumed that there would be a natural progression towards the secular and rational. Since the late 1980s and the 1990s, however, we see an increasingly liberalized Indian economy in a globalized market that has witnessed the rise of the religious right in politics and communal conflicts on the one hand, and evidence of growing assertion of dalits and backward castes, of tribals and ethnic groups on the other. Identity politics made its presence felt more than ever, raising serious questions about an unmarked nation and a secular modernity.

It is in this context that Sujata Patel writes that ‘some sociologists have drawn from an engagement with other disciplines and their theorizations, such as subaltern studies and post-colonial studies, to question Indian modernity (Gupta 2000; Deshpande 2003/04). Others have aligned to theoretical positions emerging from feminist thought and Dalit studies, to question the savarna orientation of mainstream
sociology (Oommen, 2008). New nations have been discovered, such as the *adivasis* (Sundar 2007 [1997]) and the Dalits, and this development has led to a refashioning of the very basic categories of sociology, whether caste or gender, religion or tribe. Important questions have emerged from north-eastern India about ‘Indian sociology’ and its understanding of a range of concepts—from nation to caste, kinship to culture (Nanda 2010). ‘Simultaneously, older areas have been reconstituted, such as those of the sociology of family and marriage (Uoberoi 2006) and that of urban India (Patel 2006b). Additionally, new specializations have developed, such as feminist sociology, environmental sociology, and labour studies have helped to push into the background the Srinivasian project of sociology’ (Patel 2010: 289).

Yet she points out that majority of these works do not sufficiently challenge the crux of colonial modernity, the creation of the ‘other’. She argues for an interdisciplinary perspective that is inclusive of subaltern perspective if it has to break the binaries of anthropology as the ‘other’ of sociology.

Questions of the modern and traditional in India has been a constant motif of Indian sociology. However in the new global context, of a time marked both by local assertions of identities and global demands of a consumer and cosmopolitan identity, new questions about this relationship have emerged. Likewise, questions of secularism and the possibilities of models other than the western modern are debated anew. It is in the context of rising religious fundamentalism that the idea of secularism has been revisited and theorized, with greater urgency. But here too the central question with which we have to start is whether ‘Indian secularism is the Indian version of a universal conceptual category’ (Madan 2011: 3). Madan therefore proposes to study Indian secularism in its specificity rather than generality, with the theoretical view that whatever is ‘historical’ is because it is ‘significant in its individuality’ (ibid.: 3–4). While modern ideologies of secularism provide one way of thinking about religious difference, Madan argues that there were other ways embedded within different traditions that could accommodate and (sometimes celebrate) difference within their designs of life. There are scholars who would contest Madan’s reading of the history of secularism in the West, and others who would argue that secularism is primarily a legal concept dealing with citizenship in the modern state. Yet others, such as the anthropologists Talal Asad, argue that we need anthropological
explorations into the very question of 'what accounts for the practices through which modern subjects are produced and that secularism in this sense is not only about law but also about deep transformations in subjectivity' (Asad 1993). The growth of identity politics in the 1980s is analysed in some detail in Veena Das's *Handbook on Indian Sociology*, which asks how forms of religiosity have been transformed thus, bringing questions of 'transformations of subjectivity' under regimes of modernity, political citizenship, and religion within the same framework of analysis (Das 2004: 7–8). We will notice in the following sections a renewed but differently articulated attention to subjectivities in gender and caste studies.

Meenakshi Thapan examines gender from a different perspective when she examines women's lived experiences of embodiment. The perspective of embodiment locates women in a physical and psychological space as well as the social and cultural domain. Her endeavor is concerned with the development of a 'sociology of embodiment, rather than a sociology of the body, in the context of women's lives in contemporary, urban India ... understanding of this focus on embodiment is mediated by gender and class, two critical elements, that constitute identity in relation to embodiment' (Thapan 2009: xiii).

The lived everyday experiences of women are placed in a larger context, which stems from a mixed heritage and the post-colonial situation, where modernity is a troublesome construct because it has to contend with a legacy of both a tradition that must be changed, even as it must also be valued. This contradictory experience indicates a constant movement between defining and redefining old and new social and political constructions of womanhood in the changing and markedly fluid social and public discourses of 'modern' India. This complex nature of the modern in India has seen multiple ways of theorizing from Indian social scientists. Within Indian sociology we have seen it being theorized as 'civilizational society', as congealed with multiple pasts, as mistaken, as hegemonic, as colonial, as fluid (Gupta 2000; Oommen 1999; Pathak 1998, 2006; Saberwal 1996, 2000; Singh 2009). This, we would argue, has been a productive site of theorization.

To return to Thapan's articulation of 'embodiment', one would also like to refer to other works that have looked at the micro-political level of bodily practices. One is not entering it in any great detail but this theoretical and methodological trend needs recognition. McDonald argues that the increasing absorption of Kerala into the
capitalist global order has resulted in the differentiation of a previously composite system of kalarippayattu. The analysis offered is not intended as a narrative of decline from some mythical ‘pure state’ of kalarippayattu. Rather, it emerges organically and is constantly subject to change, adaptation, and development, thus rendering problematic any normative contrast between an authentic and inauthentic practice (McDonald 2007). Reena Patel’s work of women in the call centre also uses the idea of body politics as one of the many theoretical bases to understand the experience of women in the call centre industry in India. The focus is on how women experience the ‘second shift’ (night shift) in the global economy where ‘physical mobility (getting to and from work) and temporal mobility (going out when one is expected to stay in) are job requirements’ (Patel, R. 2010). She draws on the concept of ‘mobility-morality narratives’ of family honour, chastity, and purity in family, and how society pressure women’s physical mobility and spatial access. In drawing out this matrix, Patel shows the ways in which women experience working the night shift—be it backlash for going out at night or liberation through earning their own money—are linked to larger structural forces such as global labor relations and nationalism (Patel, R. 2010).

Our reference to Patel’s Asian American identity and emphasis upon ‘the larger structural forces such as global labor relations and nationalism’ are deliberate. Studies post 9/11, particularly in North America, has shifted focus from a pre-9/11 celebration of fluid borders and hybridity to very different kinds of questions. The contexts have clearly changed from the time one wrote about the academic interest to study ‘bricolage’ and cultural mixes in music, food, and popular culture (Chaudhuri 2003a: 370–402). That was a time when an unabashed celebration of a booming capitalist western world, with endless consumer choices and possibilities, led to a blackening out of the constraints of structures. Real threats of terror and lived experience of unemployment and retrenchment altered an earlier imagination—that was ‘reaginized and yuppified’, where there were no ‘migrant workers, no Chicano barrios, no Central American refugees, or Asians, not even blacks...’ (Chaudhuri 2003a: 389). Writings in the last decade are decisively different. Critique of neo-liberalism, the centrality of capital, and its logic to understand contemporary thus acquire ascendancy. This trend, however, remains weak in Indian sociology, even as questions of inequality are subsumed within a
far stronger discourse of caste, exclusion, and inclusion, themselves concepts with a different trajectory, but now institutionalized spaces within the Indian academia.

The very visible absence of any serious engagement with Marxist theory and methods has always been a feature of Indian sociology (Patel 2007). However, its absence at a time when new trans-national capitalist formations redefine questions of nationalism appears a strange omission. In this regard the recent volume by Herring and Agarwal (2009) that maps the decline of Marxist analysis within South Asian studies in the North American academia deserves special mention.

CULTURAL STUDIES: NEW OBJECTS OF INQUIRY AND METHODS

The debate about sociology/social anthropology, discussed earlier in this chapter, has a long history in India. However, as we saw, sociologists of different generations have continued to revisit the debate even in the last decade, albeit with new questions. The influence of cultural studies on sociology is a far more recent development (Derné 2005). Though numerically it may not have a widespread presence within India, it has had an influence on the theory and methods of sociology in India. In the new global context, theories and concepts travel not just much faster, but at a far larger scale. Cultural studies had a very strong presence in post-colonial and South Asian studies in North American universities. A quote from Arjun Appadurai, one of the foremost proponents of such an approach about sociology of India, would be instructive:

The sociology of India since the 1950s has been dominated by one of two major interests. The first pertains to overarching ideologies of civilization, of tradition, and of cultural genius. The second has been a preoccupation with the workings of caste, ritual, and rank at the village level. ...On the whole they have proceeded in parallel until recently. This dual focus has meant that certain spaces, institutions, careers and practices have fallen outside the disciplinary gaze. Such spaces include streets, bazaars, and restaurants. Neglected institutions include the state, legal, and non-governmental organizations. Careers and occupations, such as those of bus conductors, grain dealers, truck drivers, and stockbrokers have paid scant attention. And such practices as life insurance,
blood donation, well irrigation, and moneylending, have received little sustained analysis. Many of these interstitial practices, spaces, and institutions span villages and cities, isolated communities and state organizations, informal and formal occupational strategies. They are neither about the Indian village-as such- or about Indian civilization, conceived as an integrated cultural design...Even where such studies have been conducted, they have been empiricist or institutional, rarely placing them within a wider framework of cultural analysis. (Appadurai 2004: 256, emphasis added)

Writings informed of such an approach are very visible in the Contributions to Indian Sociology (CIS) in the decade under review. Some of the works are by scholars of Indian origin and sometimes not. What binds them is a certain intellectual and institutional training/influence by American universities, in particular at a time when both post-modern ideas and cultural studies approach made their presence felt—roughly from the mid-1980s onwards. Significantly, at the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the CIS, a real fear was expressed that non-resident Indians (NRIs) or foreigners writing about India will soon outpace the number of Indians researching themselves; that NGOs and research institutes dominate output at the expense of universities, and that research output is project driven rather than long term, empirical, and micro-sociological rather than theoretical and comparative (Baviskar et al. 2008: 4). This is, of course, one change that sets apart the first decade of twenty-first century sociological writings on India—a change that needs serious theoretical questioning, not simply of locations, but a certain deployment of concepts and tools, not to mention the object of inquiry itself.

We would notice an abundance of terms such as racialized, classed, sexualized, but no critical questions of what these terms mean and what a mandatory invocation of such terms imply, and what could be the theoretical and methodological assumptions of not historicizing these terms. Could this be a fall out of a very local North American intellectual product exported globally as a model sensitive and constitutive of the idea of ‘difference’? They appear to be often though not always used as ornamental rather than explanatory terms. They are presented as unproblematic terms, boxed empirical/conceptual entities, rather than historically constituted efforts to grapple with extant distinct realities. We suspect that a reason for this is the manner that literary critical studies have often taken a lead in setting the
theoretical fashions in the West. Texts and society are related, but not cotenuous. This issue needs further explorations, but here, one would simply like to flag it as worthy of further examination.

Linked to the ascendancy of a cultural/textual turn was of course a concomitant decline of Marxist theory. The following paragraph of the retreat of class analytics in South Asian studies is instructive;

Post-modern theory from the humanities undermined class analysis through rejection of both causal theory based on demonstrable mechanisms—the core of class analytics—and empirical referents as a measure of truth value of statements of fact—the core of positivism. (Herring and Agarwal 2009: 8)

We need not dwell here for too long but as would be evident below, developments within the North American academy and the ascendancy of Indian studies therein were not delinked from the broader retreat of class analysis and the shift towards cultural analysis. The rise of identity politics on the American university campus and a decline of the New Left coincided with an increased prominence of Indian origin intellectuals. Most significantly and paradoxically, as matters of social oppression were entering the mainstream of scholarly production, the concern with capitalism and class began to wane. In this context it would be productive to look at the key concepts of ‘popular’ and ‘public culture’ in cultural studies. Arjun Appadurai elaborates:

While the term ‘popular culture’ has a clear set of referents and associations, ‘public culture’ is a newer conceptualization. Popular culture draws our attention to the everyday practices of ordinary people and, as a category, emerged in the social history of Europe as an antidote to the study of elites, of grand events, and of official sources and perspectives....prior studies of popular culture were often descriptive accounts of specific traditions, practices and cultural forms, and the perspective of these studies tended towards the ‘salvage’ mode, seeking to record cultural practices that appeared to be in the process of disappearing. (Appadurai 2004: 257–8)

Starting in the mid-1980s, the study of popular culture began to witness a shift away from a strict interest in the expressive practices of specific sub-cultural groups and to recognize that popular cultural expressions are inevitably tied to contests over power, value, and meaning. This period coincided with a waning interest in the studies of kinship, rank, and stratification among younger anthropologists working on India. The reasons for this shift are complex: in part, it
was a response to a global drift away from studies of kinship and social organization in anthropology as a discipline; there was also a recognition that the study of rural India, especially at the village level, needed to include wider networks of regional, state, and national processes and policies; and finally there was a growing sense that the study of larger forms of turbulence in Indian society and politics required fresh approaches to caste, class and identity. (Appadurai 2004: 258, emphasis added)

We would like to make two observations on the seemingly radical shift that Appadurai delineates. The first, that indeed there was a shift of focus to everyday lives of people, and their ordinary culture and lives. The remark that culture was now seen as a site of power and contestation is entirely valid when pitched against the dominant anthropological mode of looking at it from the ‘salvage’ mode. But if one pitches the remark against the body of scholarship that was emerging from India on caste, gender, religion, violence, tribe, his reading of Indian sociology appears inaccurate. A careful reading would also show that the theoretical movement away from class analysis towards a cultural framework brought in questions of power, but emptied it of a materialist analysis. In other words, while capital rode with renewed vigour and new property relations were being put in place across the globe, analysis of capitalism retreated.

The second alludes to Appadurais’ mention of a global shift in anthropology, away from kinship, rank, and stratification. In India, it is at this time that important new works on kinship emerged and feminist interventions on kinship opened up an entirely new mode of investigation (Dube 2001; Kaur 2004; Palriwala and Uberoi 2008; Uberoi 1999). Caste and gender analysis reopened analysis of kinship, gender, and caste in completely new and radical ways. We make this point to indicate how centrally important contexts, even national contexts, are in a globalizing world for marking issues in sociology/social anthropology. This underscores how important it is not to be carried away by claims which may be valid in one context but not in another. In a way, this actually throws light on the politics of recognizing theory unless it is rendered in a familiar language.

Scholars have gauged the influence of cultural studies differently. Taking note of the impact which cultural studies was making, particularly in disciplines such as English Literature in India in the late 1990s, Niranjana and Hedge writes in the context of sociology:
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What an encounter between sociology and cultural studies can suggest, therefore, is to problematize older accounts of culture by drawing attention to cultural practices as shaped and located historically.... As a kind of counter-thesis to sociology's generalizing universalisms, the field of contemporary cultural studies does endeavour to build, or extend, differential understandings of cultural processes, a task that requires a coming to terms with heterogeneity, both within and between cultures. (Niranjana and Hedge 2003: 346–7)

Chaudhuri's take on the impact in the same volume was a bit different. While recognizing the role that cultural studies had in interrogating an essentialist notion of culture, she draws attention to the political economic on one hand and the persisting significance of international boundaries, particularly in a context where diasporic Indian writings blur with home grown sociological work (Chaudhuri 2003b).

...I may not have fully appreciated the appropriation of India (which is probably entirely incidental and an unintended consequence) by post-colonial 'Indian' diasporic intellectuals. I perceived a difference between the West and me. But I also perceived a distinction between the diasporic Indian and my location. Post-colonialism for me (as for them) did mean an interrogation of 'my' cultural identity and rethinking of what seemed to be the persisting fixity of 'nation state' in constraining cultural identity (Chaudhuri 1998). But for me post-coloniality was still embedded by my Third World location.' (Chaudhuri 2003a: 395)

The cultural turn made sense in a context marked by a global retreat of Marxian theory after the collapse of the Soviet Union and ascendency of capitalism as the only possible option of development. Yet, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, in the background of global recession, we may yet witness a shift towards political economic analysis. A recent work which examines the decline of class analysis in South Asian social science in this regard is perhaps portend of things to come (Herring and Agarwal 2009). This should, however, not suggest that there is a necessary dichotomy between the 'cultural' and political economic, or that they are mutually exclusive.

It is more relevant here to veer away from both economic and cultural determinist explanation. There is a concern about the limits of the political and economic, and therefore the need to explore the cultural. This tension reappears in some new ethnographic works. One example is Ciotti Manuela's analysis of the ethnohistories of Chamar weavers living on the outskirts of the city of Banaras (Ciotti 2007).
It seeks to contribute to the understanding of the industrial working classes in South Asia and, thereby, to redress the lamented absence of studies on this subject (see Parry 1999). Manuela argues:

At the same time, the analysis of these ethnohistories responds to the call to focus on ‘culture’; how Indian workers think and act differently from others located elsewhere (ibid.: xiii). As Parry notes, one precursor of the cultural approach has been Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 1989 study of jute mill workers in colonial Bengal, where he argued that ‘a theoretical understanding of the working class needs to go beyond the ‘political-economic’ and incorporate the ‘cultural’’ (1989: 65). According to Parry, there is a tension between explanations ‘based on a universalistic logic intrinsic to industrial capitalism itself and explanations of a more culturally specific kind. (Parry 1999: xv; Ciotti 2007:322)

It is likely that in the next decade we may have greater engagement between the two perspectives. The widely used term neo-liberalism, within many who have been deeply located within a cultural studies perspective, is an indication of things to come.

**CASTE AND GENDER: NEW ISSUES, THEORIES, AND METHODS**

**Caste and Post-colonial Analysis**

It has been argued that perhaps the most devastating deconstructions of traditionalist notions of caste have, however, emerged in the context of post-colonial analyses. At one level there can be little disagreement with this; at another we need to rethink the sources of this post-colonial critique. Our discomfort is that post-colonial theory principally addresses the needs of Western academia. ‘What post-colonialism fails to recognize is that what counts as “marginal” in relation to the West has often been central and foundational in the non-West’ (Gandhi 1998: ix). One needs, therefore, to reiterate the point made earlier in the context of Appadurai’s reading of Indian sociology that while significant convergences have taken place, it is important to historicize the distinct contexts within which the Dalit and the Indian women’s movement arose in India, from which emerged critical interrogations and new conceptualization of caste and gender. This is separate from the context of western academia and its own story of cultural studies and post-colonial theory (Chaudhuri 2003b). We need to understand
this in the light of the broader argument we make of a certain North American construction of the post-colonial that seeks to subsume diverse global trends within its ‘local’, but hugely powerful, and therefore ‘universal’ conceptual framework.

For the moment let us return to the two main arguments in the post-colonial deconstruction. The first is that caste is an orientalist preoccupation that has often functioned as a ‘foil to build up the West’s image of itself’. By defining the South Asian ‘other’ as unjust, despotic, and governed by religious prejudice, Western scholarship has been able to reinforce a self-serving view of the West as secular, rational, and fair-minded. The second argument is more radical, and holds that caste is, in fact, a colonial invention (Dirks 2001). This is not to say that caste was fabricated out of thin air, but rather that what was a flexible and indeed often theoretical system became consolidated into a rigid and actual one as a result of British processes of government, enumeration (for example the Census that was a key aspect of knowledge production during the colonial period), and scholarship.

Such arguments have not gone uncriticized. It has been pointed out that the so-called ‘orientalist’ view of caste coincides with the one held by reformers like Ambedkar, who have fought for the social rights of Dalits in India, and that the idea that the British ‘invented’ caste serves to perpetuate the notion that Indians were passive entities in the colonial process (Gupta 2004). As Gupta scathingly writes, such a point of view not only makes the Hindus appear bigoted, which they are, but also stupid, which may not always be the case. ‘It is as if the inhabitants of India had no identity worth the name prior to colonialism, and were one large undifferentiated mass. The British changed all this, or so the story goes, and Hindus were calmly driven into all kinds of caste, religious, and sectarian corrals at the behest of colonial machinations.’ (Gupta 2004: viii).

What is clear then is that the issue of caste continues to evoke controversy, debate, and a deep feeling in South Asian anthropology and sociology, despite vigorous attempts by many to ‘put it in its place’. (Nadkarni 2008). This probably has much to do with the fact that, despite predictions and many decades of reformist policy, caste has stubbornly refused to disappear from the landscape of modern Indian society.

We are going to engage at greater length with the now very developed critique of caste and gender perspective. The last decade has also
been witness to the most intense critique of what is perceived as an ‘upper caste’ understanding of Indian society and also a critique of Hinduism as a religion that purportedly justifies the heinous caste system. Kancha Illaïha’s powerful book *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996) perhaps marked a whole body of critiques that emerged from within India.⁹

**Gender Studies**

Gender studies has in some ways had greater impact than cultural studies theoretical and methodological orientations in mainstream sociology. It may not be an exaggeration to argue that gendered analysis have, in a major fashion, re-conceptualized key sociological concepts within sociology, whether of marriage, family and kinship, caste and community, work and leisure, or social processes such as migration, urbanization, modernization, or globalization.

From the mid-1970s, when women studies emerged as a visible presence to this point, sociology has, in many ways, been recast, sometimes in the manner of tokenism, an add stir approach, which now makes gender a mandatory topic in sociology at all levels, to a more fundamental interrogation of what has been seen as a mainstream and malestream discipline. The process has not been easy (Chaudhuri 2010d; John 2001; Rege 2003a, 2003b).

Born out of women’s struggles for equality, women’s studies have challenged the process of knowledge construction in social sciences and humanities. *Indicating the politics of knowledge generation, feminist scholarship has contended that mainstream social sciences/humanities do not articulate women’s knowledge or their experiences of reality. This struggle to integrate women’s voices/experiences raises serious epistemological questions that fundamentally alter our understanding of social reality. Further, as there is an intimate connection between theory and method, feminist research has in its quest for recovering and articulating women’s experiences experimented with innovative research techniques.* (Poonacha 2004: 389, emphasis added)

Poonacha’s article demonstrates how attempts to recover women’s historical presence fundamentally alter our understanding of history. Rajni Palriwala in her case study of the teaching of gender in the Department of Sociology in the Delhi School of Economics (DSE), Delhi University, shows how difficult it was for gender studies to
be taken seriously within the institution. In her words ‘...questions regarding the absence of a gender dimension can be labeled as 'group and identity claims', rather than as issues of epistemology and methodology’ (Palriwala 2010: 321, emphasis added).

While the term intersectional in western scholarship is in great circulation now, what has been distinctive in Indian gender studies is an almost mandatory intersectional analysis which would necessarily understand gender in its inextricable connection with caste and class, state and nation, family and community, labour and culture. Thus studies such as Uma Chakravarti’s analysis of widowhood can be seen as one of seminal worth in sociological understanding of Indian caste society, even though extant institutionalized disciplinary divisions would place her within history (Chakravarti 1995). A focus on the manner in which both caste and gender structures have simultaneously reproduced have also led to new approaches and the deployment of new methods.

Caste and Gender

Sharmila Rege’s Writing Caste/Writing Gender marks a refreshing and clear break with conceptual captivities, whether of the more domestic ‘upper caste’ captivity of categories and concepts, or of the western kind. This is a break she explicitly theorizes. Rege argues:

... dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. (Rege 2006: 13)

In presenting these testimonies as political acts, she veers away the reader who may be tempted to reading these narratives as objects of pity and pathos instead of seeing them as stories of struggles and resistances. Stories of the ‘hateful past’ of the Dalits, Rege contends, is ‘one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of dalits has been countered’ (ibid.: 13). For many of us, these testimonies are eye openers. For too long have we been captive of ‘ignorance in which we are complicit through the privilege of class and education’.

We would like to return to that matter of ‘captive theorizing’, for these testimonies are critical in helping us to break from them. Many
writings on gender and culture often reflect an unquestioning acceptance of analytical frameworks that have emerged and developed in quite another social context. Further, too often we see the analytical frameworks themselves reduced to a mechanical deployment of terms and words that pepper the work. This, at one time, happened with structural functionalism, and at another time with Marxism. Thus the simple naming of Parson's 'pattern variables' or Marx's 'contradictions' would do as the theoretical input. In the contemporary period this often happens with terms like 'patriarchy', or the mandatory but often ritual acknowledgement to 'differences' between women—white and black, straight and gay, middle class or otherwise—or to terms such as 'fluidity', 'hybrid' and 'blurring'. This volume stands apart not because Rege does not engage with extant theory and current concepts, but because she engages with her 'feet planted firmly on the ground', having taken warnings against 'flying theoretical kites in thin air' (ibid.: ix). It is pertinent to mention that some of the translations are done by Rege herself. For how firmly can a sociologist stand sans knowledge of the concerned language.

What the testimonies seek to do is foreground 'the epistemological challenges posed by the dalit movement and literature to received social science frameworks'. This includes both the dominant practices of sociology as well as women's studies. Among the social sciences, sociology has been, for long, associated with the study of caste. It is widely seen as a 'sociological subject'. And Indian sociology for the most part sought to study caste only in villages, rituals, rites, thereby suggesting that caste had no active role in everyday urban life. Within the syllabi of mainstream sociology courses, the study of caste has been compartmentalized into reading studies on the features of the caste system in one term and modernization and sanskritization of caste in the other. Writings on/by Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar were not on the list of readings. Students of sociology remained largely ignorant of the non-brahmanical perspective on caste. In the course on social movements, dalit, tribal, and women's movements were cluttered into one module. There were no selections from dalit literature and narratives. Since the 'upper castes' have dominated urban middle class arenas such as universities and research institutions, caste until Mandal has hardly ever been an issue for public discussion. The Dalit movement, literature, and scholarship over the last decade have posed a serious challenge to the extant mode of understanding the sociology of caste.
Theoretical interventions by gender and caste studies have also made its presence felt within the choice and use of methods. Mention can be made here of two instances: use of autobiographies and use of multiple voices in ethnography. The use of autobiographies deserves special mention here.

Autobiographies address the ways in which people account for and express the experience of living within particular sets of circumstances, particularly those constrained by structures of domination. They challenge the received notions of dichotomies of public and private, knowledge and experience and thus disrupt hegemonic models of teaching and learning. The issue is not one of exposing the multitude of experiences but to move towards a standpoint by mapping life stories onto broader social processes. Critical autobiographies, that is autobiographies which make use of individual experience, theory and a process of reflection and attention to politically situated perspectives provide a basis to move away from false universalizations inherent in mainstream courses. Such critical autobiographies underline the processes or mechanisms through which different groups are embedded and reproduced in structures and identities. Caste, class and gender do not then emerge as static and experience may be presented in a way that contributes to theoretical understanding. The pedagogical challenge is one of ensuring that all participants stay open to new perspectives without collapsing either into narratives of guilt or lack. (Rege 2003b: 39, emphasis added)

INDIAN DIASPORA, A GLOBAL ACADEMIA, AND INDIGENOUS CONCEPTS

At the very start of this chapter, we sought to emphasize the very distinct context in this second decade of the twenty-first century. We have argued that social science today is witnessing a theoretical critique of methodological nationalism from both the local social movements, as well as the imperatives of global capital. The role of the Indian diaspora has to be located within this. A premier debate in the present conjunctures of globalization has been the prospect of ‘post-nation’ and the obsolescence of patriotism at the horizon of transnationalism. In an ethnographically rich and discursively sharp intervention, R.K. Jain articulates the contribution that diaspora studies can make to this debate. It offers a fresh insight into the dimensions of Indian social institutions viewed from the vantage point of diaspora (Jain
2010). Mention has to be made here of the increasing multi-sited ethnography, a point not entirely unlinked to the visible presence of the Indian diaspora (Gallo 2005). One, however, needs to problematize the diasporic locations. Nation states continue to matter even as they are transformed as do cultural contexts, a matter which Supriya Singh addresses. She argues that western economic sociological theory has neglected to understand the role of kinship and culture in diasporic remittances (Singh 2006).

Analogies are never adequate. Yet one is tempted to draw an analogy between Hindi films and Indian sociology. As Uberoi put it, the diaspora has come home (2006). The increasing visibility of Indian diasporic communities in the production of sociological knowledge in turn raises new questions and new formulations of theory and method. We have already drawn attention to both the possibilities and limits of ‘western’ post-colonial theory and cultural studies.

When discussing the diaspora it is important to remember its differentiated nature. Thus while Dalit diasporic communities may foreground questions of caste and discrimination in overseas Indian communities, others in North American locations may debate cosmopolitanism. We choose to illustratively compare two works: Inderpal Grewal’s work situated in North America with Vineeta Sinha’s situated in South-East Asia. As mentioned earlier, this chapter does not seek an exhaustive review. But it does hope to sociologize the current trends in knowledge production and journey, even if illustratively.

**Feminism, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism**

Inderpal Grewal argues for a different perspective of feminism in the transnational context. Theoretically the work examines feminism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism, and borrows from cultural studies. The method reflects the challenges of her theoretical take and examines ‘transnational connectivities’ in the production of gendered, transnational, neoliberal subjectivities. Grewal builds her argument of how feminism has historically operated in a transnational context by relying on a rhetoric of ‘choice’. Theoretically, she combines a post-colonial perspective with social and cultural theory to argue that contemporary notions of gender, race, class, and nationality are linked to earlier histories of colonization. The neoliberal subject—middle-class Asian Indian and American subjects—emerges through moments of
converging geopolitical and biopolitical interests. American multicultural nationalism post 9/11 relies on gendered, racialized technologies of governmentality that emerged out of a continuity that is rooted in colonial and post-colonial capitalism (Grewal 2005). She argues that knowledge formations and subjectivities cannot be drawn out in a linear transnational trajectory, or that societal forces be compartmentalized into those that are part of ‘civil’ society, and those that emanate from state power.

Her method is rooted in a cultural studies perspective. In the earlier section on cultural studies, we have already referred to the possibilities abounding therein, but noted the limitations to capture the dynamics of society—of structure and agency, of double hermeneutics, and of unintended consequences, which form the crux of a sociological perspective.

‘Hindu’ Categories and Communities among the Diaspora

The growing body of work emerging from the diasporic Indian academia has its own distinct influence. If cultural studies get re-routed to Indian contexts in one way, diasporic writings from older diasporic communities raise other conceptual and methodological questions. Vineeta Sinha writing from the south east Asian context thus seeks to problematize a number of categories that constitute the intellectual heritage of students of Hinduism. ‘Social science approaches to analysing Indian society, including religion in general, and Hinduism in particular, have generated an anthology of sense-making tools—a body of categories, concepts, schemas, and dichotomies. It is instructive to ask if these received categories continue to be appropriate’. She questions the categories ‘folk Hinduism’ and ‘sanskritization’ which have been pivotal in sociological and anthropological accounts of India and continue to provide an analytical framework for studying Hinduism today. Yet, these categories have been neither historicized sufficiently, nor received rigorous, intellectual attention, but continue to be accepted rather uncritically. ‘The categories ‘folk Hinduism’ and ‘sanskritization’ share a historical and analytical relationship and thus must be appraised jointly’. In these discussions, it is also important to historicize the category ‘folk’ and assess its conceptual utility. The ‘author’s approach is to deconstruct these categories, utilizing ethnography to raise questions about the continued value of using the named
categories for making sense of empirical, everyday manifestations of ‘Hinduism’ in contemporary societies, especially among Hindu communities in the diaspora’ (Sinha 2006). This question of indigenous categories is, however, of wider significance. Within India, sanskritization has witnessed critiques from both a gender and dalit perspective.

**Indigenous Categories**

The problematic yet defining relationship that we have with the West necessarily implies a vexed engagement with the idea of the ‘indigenous’—itself a term that is open to contestation (Mukherjee 2004). The use of indigenous categories has been a key theoretical and methodological issue within sociology (Pollock 2008). This is evident in V. Sujatha’s argument in the context of traditional health system that anthropologists accord differential treatment to folk conceptions, or the understanding of lay people, in different spheres of life.

In the domain of religion, folk conceptions are regarded as legitimate and valid and are treated with appropriate gravity. But in domains deemed to be ‘scientific’, such as medicine, physiology, agriculture and architecture, folk conceptions tend to be treated mainly as ‘subjective’ beliefs and not as valid forms of knowledge. This is a pity because *sociological engagement with folk knowledge in precisely these ‘scientific’ domains can provide insights into alternative conceptions of epistemological categories such as the ‘body’, ‘space’, ‘habitat’ and ‘natural forces’. Such an approach can open up an arena of conceptions other than the formalized and professionalized systems of knowledge in the same domain.* It may also illuminate the structure of knowledge and the politics of its dispersion. Health is a domain par excellence in which the confluence of practical needs, inherited knowledge and people’s ingenuity is clearly demonstrated. (Sujatha 2007: 169–70, emphasis added)

A recent reprint of Ákos Östör’s early work, reveal a ‘caution’ even while reiterating the significance of indigenous categories. Östör writes in the context of his working on rituals in Bengal:

Foremost in my mind was working with indigenous categories; the terms, concepts, ideas in and through which people act. Relations among domains formed by such ideas and actions proved to be the kernel of my approach. The configuration of domains is given by
categories in structure, event, locality and time. The search for cultural categories (which are, for anthropologists, ethnographic ones, elicited through the dialectic of field work) necessitates a comparison among societies. ... I do not want to reify method and theory here—methods are merely the way I go about my work as an anthropologist, something visible and accountable, so that others who wish to follow may come to similar or different conclusions. (Östör 2004: 6, emphasis added)

While the debate on indigenous categories has been a running theme in Indian sociology, the manner and the levels of analysis within which it is debated are uneven, often conducted at very different planes. It ranges from the relevance of 'cultural categories' to 'folk knowledge' to questions of hegemony and intra-indigenous debates. We also have the idea of knowledge as not just active but meditative, of efforts towards a 'spiritual' critique that transcends the necessary dichotomy of the 'material and spiritual' in western epistemology (Giri 2002, 2010).

The idea of indigenous reappears in other kinds of work, returning to a contrast between the oriental and occidental. Chatterjee, for instance, has a critical take on this. He argues that a relative abundance of scholarly intervention in the 'development process vs. indigenous people's rights' issue is paralleled here by a near absence of relevant social science literature on people's concern for pollution and degradation of the physical environment. An attempt is made to comprehend environmental concern in an Indian situation, taking into account some contextual issues that possibly differentiate Indian experience from the West. Indian tradition, in contrast with western tradition it is argued in general, stresses asceticism where frugality is more positively valued than extravagance. Different variants of self-denial and self-restraint features are embedded in every major Indian religion and worldview. The notion of Dharma—the stabilizer of an unstable life, the urn of life and existence (a Sanskrit equivalent of 'religion')—represents Indian psyche and occupies the central place in Hinduism, the predominant Indian religion. It can be argued that different brands of a Promethean view of human life underlie much of western thought. It can also be argued that due to relatively lower levels of development of science and technology, oriental people typically have not developed such usual occidental exuberance—or 'modern arrogance toward nature' (Chatterjee 2008: 8). Such a dichotomy can be easily questioned. Weber's Protestant Ethics would only be a
small part of this story just as the profligacy of globalized India's rich would be another.

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As one draws to the end of this trend report on theory and methods in Indian sociology, one would like to reiterate again the close connect between contexts and theory—the point from where I began. I would also like to repeat how distinctively different a twenty-first century academic world is. While scholars may gauge this moment differently, few would disagree that geopolitical considerations have brought both India and knowledge about India to the fore. Over the decades Indian sociological research has evolved from one with a distinct colonial intellectual dominance to a discipline that has opened up its epistemology, to involve the diversity of social experiences both within and outside India, subaltern perspectives as well as one that reflects upon dominant theories and practices (Patel 2010). Yet this very visibility of India and Indian studies, of Indian diasporic academia raises new and difficult questions about theory and methods (Assayag and Bénéî 2003, 2005). A niggleing doubt remains about new power questions in this transformed context.

This context is radically different. It is marked by a rapid and intense flow of knowledge and images. Theories and concepts travel thick and fast as we rapidly download PDFs. Intellectual centres which produce theories, and legitimize new academic standards and measures, do persist, even if it is articulated by our own South Asian post-colonial theorists located in American universities. Clad more often than not in radical post-colonial and post-modern language of difference and plurality, a sociology of knowledge perspective cannot gloss over the fact that historical and spatial locations matter. Taking a cue from the same theories one can argue that if identities are not fixed and given, then identities of scholars too are made and remade in a dialectical relationship with the state, societies, and academia of which they form an integral part. We need to take the claim about contexts not being simply a background, but constitutive of knowledge seriously.

This equivocal invocation of all diversities—race, sex, class—render a curious emptying of their historical and theoretical complexity, rendering them simply as the current package of political correctness, in circulation within North American academia. Importantly
for Indian sociology, which has its own history of the ‘book view’, a ready willingness to textual analysis is not such a difficult shift. Both historical sociology and material analysis were weak currents as Dhanagare’s elaborate review of historical sociology in India shows (2007a, 2007b). The first category of sociologists he refers to are those who have used classical texts—for instance Indological sources—in understanding contemporary social structures, institutions, statuses, roles, values, and cultural practices by tracing their origins to one or more Sanskrit texts, and then reinterpreting or rationalizing them in the present day context. In the second category were those sociologists who narrate the historical background of social reality, either of the past or contemporary ones, which they are researching for. The concern is that too often such a historical account does not form a part of the researcher’s explanatory scheme, nor is it integrated with their sociological analysis. In the second category, what is involved is mostly a metaphoric use of history. What Dhanagare however sees as most significant is the substantive use of history for sociological purpose—a broader level of explanation, generalization, and theoretical abstraction without which the sociological mission would remain incomplete.

His argument is that it is the potential of the substantive use of history, whether for a macro- or for a micro-analysis, whether by consulting secondary or primary archival sources, that needs to be fully exploited further by Indian sociologists. Indian sociologists need to rediscover the intrinsic value of history and historical method by creatively using it in their researches and by using them in their pedagogic practices. This indeed is being done within India as teachers and researchers negotiate with the daily issues and concerns that constitute the ‘social’ here and now. The global academia, however, has seen the rise of other influential trends that run against both historical and material analysis, some of which have already been discussed at length. The discussion would however remain incomplete without taking note of the ascendancy of ‘social constructivism’ in the last decade.

Hedge notes how the positivist dispute, which shaped the debates in the philosophy of the social sciences for much of the twentieth century, has been overshadowed by the debates centering around ‘constructivism’, which appear ‘to radically challenge established views and ‘truths’, even seeking to subvert what has been characterized as
the ‘Western rationalist tradition of scholarly and scientific inquiry’. Constructivism holds that social reality is not stable and objective; it is recreated in and through human discourse.

He notes that there are different kinds of constructivism: ‘distinguishing between positions that articulate an idea of society as socially constructed, those that affirm a view of scientific knowledge as constructed by society, and a more radical notion that science itself constructs society.’ The variety of positions, notwithstanding Hedge, discerns in constructivist literature a ‘Macho constructionist view’ of social reality. He finds a strong constructionist view of social and historical reality to be ‘partly trivial’ and ‘partly misleading’. It is trivial ‘because objects of the social and material world cannot be understood without human interpretations’. It is misleading because social constructions are always constructions of something; hence, they are not entirely arbitrary, and people are not able to design the world deliberately according to their wishes. Therefore ‘constructivist insights should not be seen in contradiction with realist ontology’. In this context, Hedge examines ‘truth as empirical adequacy’, and makes out a case for moving ‘beyond relativism’ (Hedge 2006).

We began with the widespread belief that Indian sociology has not theorized, has not produced its own set of concepts and tools. Increasingly this view has been questioned. For instance, Partha Nath Mukherji makes the point that Indian sociology has much to offer global theorizing. Drawing from Indian historical practices he revisits many concepts critical to any comparative study such as rights, nationalism, nation state, globalization, democracy, multiculturalism, and social movements to argue that ‘the West could gain from the South Asian realities, particularly from India’ (Mukherji 2008: 276).

This study argues that the West and non-West relationship in many basic ways impinging upon questions of theory and method. Frank Welz argues that we need to open this relationship further. We therefore need not just speak of indigenization, but of deconstructing the ‘West’. He argues:

As the classics fulfill the function of integrating the field of the sociological discourse in Europe and the US ... the discourse on indigenization of sociology in India moved Indian sociology to centre stage, emphasizing its peculiarity. (Welz 2009).
His point is that if lack of meta theory has been India’s weakness, the solution can be neither the normative complaint, nor a normative motivation for theorizing outside the dominant European and North American metropolises. The necessary step will be deconstructing the ‘West’, for Western sociology is less homogeneous than assumed in Indian sociology. ‘Antithetically, contemporary sociology as a discipline is universally fragmented. Tensions in Indian sociology are also tensions in other sociologies. The distinction of theory and empirical research, the debate on quantitative and qualitative approaches and the question of whether sociology should follow the rational-actor model derived from economics or better contextualize its models are important themes across the globe (Welz, 2009).

Global sociology too is faced with broad questions of what ought to be the objective of sociology today. In a world where the focus increasingly is on the practical application of knowledge, there is a need for a serious engagement with theory and method. The question however is which orientation will be promoted by Indian sociology? Will it go towards the study of social problems, or will it seek to analyse the larger social field that creates those problems and our knowledge of them? (Baviskar 2008: 431).

NOTES

1. Sociology throughout this chapter necessarily includes social anthropology.
2. This is evident in a wide variety of work emerging from new sites of knowledge production—whether the corporate or developmental sector.
3. This trend, of course, marks most non-western societies. See Alatas 2006.
4. A recent work by Vivek Chibber on the decline of class analysis in South Asian studies comments on both the North American and Indian context thus:

   … the traditional, Indological approach … was heavily oriented towards culturalism. This in turn made the field a hospitable ground for the entrance of post-structuralism, which, like mainstream Indology, not only eschews materialist analysis, but is largely hostile to class. Finally, I argue that the decline of class analysis is now visible in Indian universities too, and this is largely caused by the overwhelming influence that U.S. universities have come to exercise over Indian elite academic culture. (Chibber 2009: v–vi)

5. Ready examples from evaluation research in the developmental sector are the use of Rapid Appraisal and Focus Group discussions. For a more detailed review of research in the developmental sector, see Kumar (2010). Ethnography of how a food processor would be used in an Indian kitchen would also not be unusual.
Incorporation of these methods within the university syllabi is widely evident (Sharan 2010).


7 The last decade has indeed witnessed a renewed attempt to conduct ethno-
graphic research in areas usually unexplored; for instance the world of industrial
labour and work (Subramaniam 2009).

8 A comparison of the changing nature of Indian sociology and the changing
nature of public discourse in India, and the increasing visibility of the diaspora
may be interesting in this regard. See Chaudhuri 2010b. See Chaudhuri 2010c for
a discussion on sociological research by marketing agencies and other corporate
bodies.

report on Dalt Studies would cover this extensively. We, however, thought it
important to mention this here.

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