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Society and Sociology in India: Some Reflections

It is a matter of great pleasure for me that this particular issue of the prestigious and internationally acclaimed *Polish Sociological Review* is entirely devoted to some of the important aspects of Indian Society. The aspects covered in this special issue are important not only historically but also in the contemporary context. Whatever has been included in this volume will certainly provide a window to the world, and more so to European sociologists to have a glimpse of the contemporary Indian society. This would provide better understanding of society and sociology in India, and also generate further interest among overseas scholars, particularly the Polish sociologists and social scientists to study Indian society. The very fact that the Polish Sociological Association and the *Polish Sociological Review* invited me to guest edit this special issue on India, when I was not President of the Indian Sociological Society, speaks of the interest that the Polish sociologists already had for understanding Indian society. It is not only a matter of honour for me to be associated with PSR but also a matter of satisfaction and pride that India is drawing renewed attention of the international community of sociologists and other scholars.

It can be mentioned that India being an old society faced contradictions, has several socio-political turmoils, not only due to internal but also because of foreign onslaughts and invasions. As a consequence, in the past, it went through many social-structural changes and transformations which naturally were reflected in its socio-cultural fabric (Modi 1985). Each period of major socio-structural change in Indian society had its nuances and impact, altering and creating a set of new social hierarchies and social formations. These hierarchies and social structures have presented in one or other form, and have shaped and reshaped the nature and character of Indian society and its various institutions, be it marriage, family, *jāti*, caste, community, kinship, religious practices, rural / urban / tribal communities, state, etc.

As such, socio-cultural and economic and political institutions had been at the centre of indigenous intellectual traditions and discourses in India. A tradition of reflection on socio-cultural and politico-economic institutions had persisted in different philosophical and scholarly texts. A large number of these classical texts authored and compiled by eminent sages and scholars over the millennia contain valuable insights on different aspects of Indian society.

Some of the early pioneers of sociology in India subscribed to an indological approach which rested on the assumption that historically Indian society and culture were unique and that this “contextual” specificity of Indian social realities could be grasped better through “texts” (R. Mukherjee 1977).

However, one of the most eminent sociologists in India, namely, Yogendra Singh (1967) observed a few decades ago that the contemporary sociological literature in India from the point of theoretical orientation could be classified into five major types: (1) the comparative-historical approach, (2) philosophico-sociological approach, (3) logico-philosophical approach, (4) structural-functional approach, and (5) statistical-positivistic approach. Besides these major approaches Indian sociology has also shown some evidence of psychological and psycho-analytical approaches.

The above classification of theoretical orientations in Indian sociology still holds true to considerable extent. However, several new approaches and orientations have been in vogue in recent researches and writings. The prominent ones pertain to the domains of justice, feminism, cultural identity and civil society.

As on today, Indian sociology is passing through a critical phase. On the one hand, it is still dominated by the paradigms and methodologies of Western sociology and, on the other, Indian sociologists are becoming increasingly conscious of the persisting inequalities. They are trying to understand the nature of social inequality. Social justice and distributive shares have become key concerns today. Thus, for example, many sociologists are engaged in understanding the dynamics of the reservation policy (affirmative action). However, these studies are descriptive or at best analytical, but in most cases bereft of a sound theoretical foundation (Modi 2010).

The emergence of sociology in India as a formal discipline in the year 1919 coincided with several critical phases of history, both in India and in the West. By 1919, Mahatma Gandhi had already returned from South Africa. The scars of the First World War (1914–18) were still vivid and were haunting mankind. The post-war reconstruction was underway everywhere. Gandhi’s presence not only galvanized the freedom movement but also inspired several pioneering sociologists to study the problems of the common man, besides the study of day-to-day institutions, such as marriage, family, caste, community and kinship (Modi 2010).

Since the 1950s, the Indian sociologists have remained preoccupied with the issues of social change, social development and modernization. These issues are still important for Indian society as is apparent from the paper of Yogendra Singh in this issue of the PSR. Similarly, caste in Indian society still continues as a major concern. Caste constantly reinvents itself and appears in myriad forms contrary to the wishful thinking of many for its disappearance. Its economic and political gains keep strengthening it. A thorough and analytical discussion on caste in contemporary India has been undertaken by K. L. Sharma. Debates on caste have continued for long. Many Western scholars have seen and interpreted caste from their own perspective and mindset. As such, most Indian sociologists would be amused to see when M. Christopher Byrski has equated *Jati* with nation. Exclusion of Dalits as a consequence of the rigid hierarchy in the caste system is one of the most debatable issues in Indian society today. Alternative strategies adopted by the lowest caste groups

known by the generic term Dalits to improve their social status in Indian society has been taken up by Paramjit S. Judge. India is also often seen as a land of contrast where tradition and modernity coexist and Indian women are often showcased as emblematic of this coexistence. Paper by Maitrayee Chaudhuri presents a more historicized account of India's modernity from the vantage point of gender, offering a feminist critique, which is a new trend in Indian sociology. Indian society cannot be properly visualized without taking cognizance of the place of religion and secularism in contemporary India. Susan Visvanathan's paper examines such aspects where the secular and the religious domains intertwine. Besides the above, one of the central challenges confronting post-colonial India in its march toward decolonization is the intellectual challenge posed by the idea of modernity. Dhruv Raina has examined this challenge through the works of historians of science and philosophy.

No account of the Indian society and polity can be completed without taking cognizance of the nature of the state and democracy in India. Pratap Bhanu Mehta examines the obstacles in the path of accountable government even in well-established democracies more so in the face of social inequality, making a politics of common citizenship difficult to achieve. The question of common citizenship leads to the issues of civil society. Civil society as on today has become a globally valorized discourse. Anant Kumar Giri explores pathways of Indian modernities and its implication for rethinking civil society and public sphere globally. As on today, sociological picturization of any society cannot be completed without examining and exploring the impact of the globalization induced ICT revolution on socio-cultural aspects of society. India cannot be an exception in this regard. The impact of the ICT revolution on different sections of the Indian society and how it is creating new social classes in the era of globalization has been taken up by Binay Kumar Pattnaik.

The issues that have been taken up in this issue of the *Polish Sociological Review* would certainly motivate people to form and create a particular image of India. The image building of a nation by the nationals of some other country also depends not only on what they are reading about that country at a particular moment but also what they had been seeing and reading about it for a long time and as such, it is always possible to construct clashing images of a country or a nation. Piotr Klódkowski in his paper attempts to figure out such factors that provide clashing images of India both at home and in Poland. The themes that have been included in this issue of the *Polish Sociological Review* are of utmost significance in the context of contemporary Indian society, but these are certainly not exhaustive. There are several other equally significant issues, which may be taken up in another issue of the Journal.

Among the many challenges that sociology is facing in India, while some pertain to the quality of students—since the brightest or even the brighter of them are not coming to sociology under the current market forces—others pertain to the paucity of facilities and funding due to neglect on the part of State. The role of sociologists in public life is shrinking, particularly in the planning bodies of the country. The community of Indian sociologists has not been quite conscious about its role to contribute to theory building and conceptualization (Modi 2010).

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