

Sociology in India is relatively young, compared to other social science disciplines. Initially, India attracted researchers from abroad to study tribal cultures—a subject matter that characterised social anthropology. Foreign scholars carried out sustained fieldwork and wrote ethnographic accounts of several exotic communities living in different parts of the country. While missionaries, tradesmen and travellers were attracted towards these societies because of their exotic way of life, ethnologists used this material to develop the ‘Science of Man’ in an evolutionary framework. The colonial government, too, seemed interested in knowing about the culture and social structure of these tribal areas to better administer them. These areas also attracted Christian missionaries to work among them and to convert them to Christianity.

So ethnographic accounts of tribal societies in India helped develop this new specialty. While foreign scholars used Hindu scriptures and royal histories of various princely states to understand Hindu society, ethnographic studies contributed to the understanding of the diversity present in India’s indigenous civilisation. Sociology initially focused on the scriptures and anthropology on the description of the day-to-day life of primitives. The fact that both these disciplines were contributing to the understanding of human society was undermined and the distinction was made on the basis of technique of research—participant observation and survey research/desk research.

Sociology in India has for a long time been caught in a fruitless debate on the distinction between sociology and anthropology. The trend towards water-tight compartmentalisation was so strong that a student of sociology at the University of Delhi expressed her surprise that during her 2 years of study she was not even aware that just down the road there existed an anthropology department. The insularity has grown so much that most departments of anthropology have virtually become a branch of biology, having little or no communication with sociology.

The editors of the book under review and the various contributors of chapters clearly feel unhappy with such a distinction, and indeed have taken steps to move away from this differentiation. It is this they have termed New Sociology. The debate over the distinction between these two disciplines was in vogue in

India in the 1960s and early 1970s. While this became part of disciplinary politics that prevailed in universities, the fact remains that most senior scholars of the time were critical of such a distinction. If one were to see the pioneers in Indian sociology one would find that all these scholars held degrees in economics, political science and anthropology. To name a few, Ghurye, Srinivas, Dube, Gore, Madan, Bêteille and Chauhan. Of course, one cannot overlook the fact that there are also hard-core sociologists who have their formal degrees in sociology and have contributed to the discipline through empirical and theoretical research.

Hinting at such developments, the editors and contributors to this book have shown courage, coming out of, in a sense, their disciplinary cages, exploring different frontiers and using different methodologies to create a further highway of sociological research. The blurb indicates that these young authors have attempted to ‘redefine the contours of the discipline—through the choice of field sites, the exploration of new issues and problems, and the reworking of traditional anthropological methodology in the new, unconventional sites’.

When I was approached to review this book, it was its title that attracted my attention and excited my curiosity. Is New Sociology different from what has been practiced so far? Is it an invitation to discard the achievements of the past and chart out a new path? Does it call for researching those areas that have been hitherto untouched? Or is it a call for the return to anthropological methodology after several years of fruitless debate over the distinction between sociology and social anthropology?

I find a brief answer to my queries in a reference found in the book to Michael Buraway who addressed a gathering at Delhi University in January 2013, and pleaded for ‘the makings of public sociologies’—a term which has ‘political underpinnings’ and an ‘agitative’ protocol, typical of NGOs. Read carefully, the contributors to this volume propose to virtually abolish the distinction between the twin disciplines, adding new frontiers of research, innovating appropriate methodologies, and making the discipline a political tool. The latter agenda may be disputable.

I have been writing on the futility of the distinction between sociology and social anthropology—a point of view endorsed by many. I find that this book has considered it appropriate to at least make bibliographical reference to my works. (It is generally a tendency amongst our colleagues to quote foreigners and ignore the work of nationals.)

What worries the contributors is the question: ‘How can sociology best comprehend the transformation of the world over the past decade and more, and what should be the political stance towards the dark side or the downside of these changes?’ (p. 5). On a careful perusal of the book, I unearth the agenda for maintaining a ‘critical distance’ between state and civil society. During the period of British colonisation, the social sciences were in the service of the colonial regime: to know the culture of the local people; to develop suitable strategies to rule the colonised and to prove their racial superiority.

When India gained Independence, the social sciences were invited to assist in the process of directed social and cultural change; community development programmes brought to the fore interdisciplinary orientation. The book seems to be an invitation to maintain a critical distance between the state and civil society,

a somewhat honorific term used for NGOs whose functionaries, it was generally perceived, performed the role of critics. The editors also mention Veena Das in supporting the 'need for descriptive accounts of communities with endangered identities' and for 'ethnographies of violence'. That these themes are not studied by the contributing authors is a different matter.

Formulated this way the concern seems attractive. The book also merits praise for including carrying out the first steps in research in hitherto untrodden areas, such as the study of Muslim mothers caught in a situation of terror; the case of a mosque established for fostering harmony between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, now engulfed in religious conflict; defence and security as areas of research; the study of a genetic laboratory and a film studio lab; examining a social situation through photographs taken by respondents.

One must admit that these are new areas where sociological research has the scope of entry and expansion. The novelty of the theme and experiments with new techniques certainly makes this book different. The outcome of these exercises will certainly fill in some missing gaps, and prompt young researchers to explore new frontiers and add to their portfolio of techniques and methods. The arrival of the culture of computeracy has opened up several possibilities and helped the task of the field worker. In days of yore one had to travel by bus, walk on foot, remain cut-off from urban and modern amenities, and routinely write one's field diary. All that is now *passé*. One must, however, cannot disregard that hard toil of the early researchers on whose shoulders we now sit, better equipped to explore new frontiers.

I have read the various chapters carefully, taking time to understand the message they contained. But as pieces of research based on fieldwork they, in my view, need more effort. Additionally, since the chapters read almost like notes; they leave much to be desired. Studying a sample of nine mothers located in a metropolis; watching the manner in which a film is edited; an interesting reference to a mosque that was built on the foundations of a Hindu house by a Sikh saint now a disputed site; examining interviewees as interviewers via the camera; the organisation of a biological lab devoted to rewrite genetic history of man or seeing the working of an institute engaged in defense studies are certainly all new territories for solid sociological research. Compared to the old studies of institutions of rural development—mostly stolen from earlier research and full of unsolicited advice to government agencies—the studies found in this volume have a freshness of their own.

The urge for the search of new territories for research and inventing appropriate methodology is a welcome move. However, the exploration of the new territory does not mean a farewell to the current sociological orientation. The book displays a freshness in terms of concern to explore more uncharted territories. Adjusting social science methodology to new sites is a formidable task. Depending on the outcome of these challenging and promising exercises, the new road for sociology may be built. The very fact that there is a concern for new departures, one can certainly hope for better arrivals at new destinations.

On a careful reading of this book, I come away with mixed reactions. Let me hope that the concerns of the contributors are genuine and that their sincere hard

work will provide a freshness in our sociological orientation. And that in itself seems to be a good beginning.

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