

# Practising Sociology through History

## The Indian Experience – I

*This paper examines, in two parts, the extent to which Indian sociologists have creatively engaged themselves in systematic use of history for understanding and explaining social phenomena. It also critically assesses the rigour with which a reconstruction of past events and experiences has been attempted so as to understand and explain the present in sociological studies in India. While reviewing seminal writings of scholars who used Indology extensively, as also those of sociologists who have attempted systematic use of history in macroanalysis, this paper focuses attention on contributions of Indian sociologists who have used the historical method rigorously in rural studies, as also in studies of social movements, agrarian structure and change, caste and analysis of industrial and urban settings. Finally, it distinguishes between “metaphoric” and “substantive” use of history and opines that the real potential of historical sociology lies in the latter. It also expresses optimism that despite the initial indifference of Indian sociologists towards history, they are now rediscovering their discipline’s roots in history and are also realising its intrinsic value in generating, what Earnest Nagel (1961) called, “historical explanation”.  
[The second and concluding part will be published next week.]*

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A few social science disciplines in India – more specifically, anthropology, sociology and political science – have chosen to estrange themselves from history in the course of their development and institutionalisation for quite some time. The reasons are not far to seek. Barring some notable exceptions, most Indian sociologists preferred to distance themselves from historical analysis between the 1930s and 1960s. In recent decades, however, in the study of both existing structures and the processes of social change, professional sociologists in India have been increasingly reaching out to history and trying to rediscover historical connections of their discipline. As Charles Tilly (1981: 37) has argued: “the discipline of sociology grew out of history...out of the nineteenth century efforts to grasp and control the origins, character and consequences of industrial capitalism”. The element of truth behind this assertion and its wider implications are now being gradually realised by Indian sociologists in practising their craft.

Despite such close connections between the two disciplines, both sociologists and historians have shared certain misgivings about each other’s work that have led them to believe in some kind of division of labour: between the brains and the brawn, between past and present, and between analysis and narration. Consequently, “sociologists and historians tend to perceive each other in terms of a rather crude and naïve stereotype” [Burke 1980: 13-14]. It is often assumed that sociology takes care of analysis of the present, and history that of narratives and reconstruction of past events. Many historians too have tacitly subscribed to and reinforced mystification about such an insulated binary distinction between history and sociology that it views the former as “idiographic” and the latter as “nomothetic”. For no reason though, most conventional historians were too defensive in confining their practices to collecting facts – reconstructing and interpreting them. However, in doing so they either used

sociological concepts by assuming their meaning-structures or felt that theoretical anchorages and underpinnings of those concepts were to be provided by sociologists. In their turn, sociologists, while studying and analysing institutions and processes, have also used what is today broadly called as “historical method” in the sense that the place and time of action (or event) enter into their explanations [Tilly 1981: 6-7]. When a sociologist tries to integrate time and space into his/her argument, then quintessentially his or her study marks off some kind of a historical analysis.

Intellectual tradition of historical sociology can be traced to the classical writings of Karl Marx, Franz Oppenheimer, Max Weber down to Karl Mannheim and others. All of them were seized with historical problems. Some attempted to portray general features of the history of mankind, while some tried, as Marx did, to understand ideas as expressions of certain periods of history or of classes seen as corresponding to stages of development of the means and relations of production. Others attempted to reverse such arguments, as Max Weber did [Parsons 1949: 500-30] or to synthesise them all, particularly in understanding conflict of group interests in industrial society as, for example, Dahrendorf (1972: 157-205) has done. Until the dawn of structural-functionalism as a dominant paradigm, sociology was conceived primarily as a discipline akin to history, more specifically to the philosophy of history. Doing sociology through history essentially meant searching and providing answers to questions about the present out of the past, irrespective of whether the questions pertained to society, culture or civilisation in entirety or to any specific institutional social reality. This point needs to be made here rather emphatically, knowing fully well that it is often difficult to separate “present” from “past”, and that attempts to do so are often arbitrary.

Most philosophers of history, however, tended to theorise not simply about civilisation (i.e., comprising positive knowledge and

development of ideas about nature of man) but also about how their theories came to be applied to “objective life situations in different periods of history and how that knowledge was viewed subjectively” [Aron 1964: 34–46]. Most practitioners of historical sociology have, however, lowered their sight to focus attention, not as much on understanding developments at the civilisational level as on specific societies, cultures or institutions in different historical periods. Particularly, they chose to address themselves to changes in structures in response to external forces that ignited their inner dynamics. The thrust of historical sociology has all along been on understanding processes that bring significant alterations in institutions and structures as well as in ideas, norms and values over a long span of time. Therefore, a sociologist trying the craft via or through history aims at understanding the present, if possible, by attempting to explain it in the light of past events and experiences and their meaningful linkages. A sociologist may undertake such an exercise either by using authentic secondary sources produced by historians who have verified past events, or by verifying facts and their interconnections by consulting primary archival sources during one’s own data collection. Sometimes such an exercise may be brought to bear upon prognosis about the future trend or social course that is discernible, if not predictable.

It is, therefore, necessary to recognise that historical sociology, notwithstanding its initial obsessive flirting with evolutionism, is less concerned with any general theory of knowledge. Rather it essentially involves a quest for a theory, or at least an understanding and search for historical causality, and for methods of empirical verification in those fields of investigation where first hand experience is not only possible but is also valued as the most dependable source of understanding (i.e., *weltanschauung*). Arguing in favour of sociology as a historical social science, in a sense, predicates practising sociology through history to a certain extent. However, it is not suggested that it is the *only* meaningful mode of doing sociology or of understanding social reality.

In this essay it is proposed to look into the extent and the rigour of use of history by Indian sociologists in their attempt to understand and explain social phenomena and to critically assess whether they found historical reconstruction as necessary and desirable in their sociological studies. Two clarificatory points need to be made right at the outset. It must be noted that many ace historians have used sociological conceptual categories in their analyses and there is no reason why their works could not be considered as substantively “sociological” in nature.<sup>1</sup> The scope of this exercise is, however, confined to a critical review of the works of professional sociologists in India who have used history purposefully. Secondly, assuming that history is an important source of data and analytical insights for sociologists, one need not take a dogmatic historicist position, either anti-naturalistic or pro-naturalistic as Karl Popper (1969: 5–54) has put it. Historicism broadly refers to an approach that asserts making historical prediction as the main aim of the social sciences. Even though a historicist does not have to commit to methods of natural sciences, the historicist position subscribes to formulating general laws, canons of scientific objectivity, and theorisation as the main agenda for social sciences. Although relativism permeates, if not dominates, studies of human societies, social institutions and human behaviour, a historically oriented sociologist does not, in fact, should not, give up the quest for generalisation, explanation and theorisation. Such a quest ought

to be pursued without any pre-conceived historicism. It is recognised that such attempts to generalise, explain and theorise do suffer from limitations of time and space; i.e., they may not measure up to the norms of universality often asserted by either philosophers of science or by those who believe in the possibility of the natural science of society. Despite unavoidable elements of selectivity and subjectivity in a sociologist’s inquiry based on use of history, especially in the process of collection of facts, data and any form of suitable evidence, some kind of optimism must propel that endeavour. Such optimism implies a robust faith that one’s efforts could be brought to fruition in the form of at least some tenable generalisations that may lead to formulation of sociological laws and may make some contribution to the existing theoretical discourse. The most important element of this optimism is openness, in the sense that a historical method would at least deepen one’s understanding of social reality even if it may or may not yield causal explanation, or what Nagel (1961: 15–28) called “genetic explanation”.

It is noteworthy that striking similarities exist in the agenda of both sociologists and historians; these are evident especially in the field of social history. It follows that all history is, and necessarily involves, reconstruction from a sociological point of view. When a professional historian starts looking at the daily life patterns of inhabitants of the land in the past – their economic life and activities; interests of different social categories (say, classes) and their control over resources and relations to one another; their households and family life; and their religious beliefs and cultural practices – in an attempt to understand changes in those patterns through a time span, his or her analysis is bound to blend methods of history and sociology. As a general field of study though, “social history has an omnibus invertebrate character” [Perkin 1965: 55–56]. On the contrary, sociological orientation and imagination, when deployed, can prevent social history from dealing with everything that goes on in society. A sociologist does not have to rewrite history. With its conceptual armory and theoretical storehouse, sociology can help in concretising and sharpening historical problems and research questions, so that research leads to finding meaningful answers to not only “what” and “how” but also “why” questions.

One common objective of research and investigation both in sociology and in history is to aim (or ought to aim) at rising above the level of simple narration and description of specificities, in order to analyse generalities and to discuss them at the level of abstraction and theorisation, whenever possible. Sociology, or for that matter any social science, dealing with abstractions is a familiar experience. As Popper (1965: 135) has very rightly emphasised, “most of the objects of social sciences are abstract objects or they are basically theoretical constructs”. However, Popper accepts only those generalisations and interpretations as scientifically valid that are arrived at either through the route of induction (inductivist interpretation – implying empirical verification of every statement based on facts and their generalisation) or that of deduction where a statement is either accepted or falsified first by rules of validity in deductive logic and later by rules of empirical proof or verification (i.e., the *logos* activity). In other words, in advocating the notion of unity of scientific method, Popper has ruled out any role of intuitive understanding or interpretation (ibid, pp 137–39). However, both sociology and history are basically interpretative disciplines. This is not to suggest that “intuition” can be used

as a euphemism for indulgence in wild and unsustainable guesswork. Intuition must not degenerate into an unbridled free play in interpretation, generalisation and theorisation. Of course, it needs to be admitted that interpretations based on tested hypotheses in themselves cannot be mistaken as theories; but they can be theoretical in the sense that, based on verified data and source material, interpretations do contribute to theoretical debates.

Sometimes sociologists, to narrate past events, do use history or historical source materials and cite them meticulously. Yet, at times this is done without either linking the past with the present or without unfolding the motor force of history. Such casual references to past events or to sequence of events cannot help sociologists to deepen their understanding, and to explain present day structures and processes. When Marx and Engels insisted that “political economy has to be treated as a historical science”, they were suggesting that history ought to deal with material that is constantly changing. In other words, they critiqued the conventional way of writing history and pleaded for a new historiography – an alternative way of history – that involves systematic reconstruction. It needs to be noted here that Marxist historians often tend to allow their “ideological predilections to run through their historiography” [Bottomore et al 1985: 211-13]. Such a tendency invariably leads to selectivity in and suppression of facts that border on distortion, thereby negating the very spirit of science. Hence, historical interpretations and constructions are not to be reduced to “official” history as it happened in Stalinist Soviet Union during the interwar years [Bettelheim 1996: 195-96] or even during the cold war era. Such an ideological overload, that is likely to creep into one’s analysis, might have been one of the reasons why most Indian sociologists, trained in the “value-freeness of sociology”, were put off by the very idea of combining sociology and history.

The real purpose of historiography is to offer an image of the past in order to unravel the forces that underlie the present. It is a method of doing comparative history and sociology whereby the past is reconstructed in order to understand and, if possible, explain the present. It would be quite instructive to see the extent to which practitioners of sociology in India have worked their way through history. The exercise here is only illustrative and not exhaustive. It is naturally restricted to my familiarity with relevant sociological literature.

## I Use of Indology

G S Ghurye, the doyen of Indian sociology, is regarded to have done pioneering work in historical sociology. One may begin by looking at his celebrated work on caste and race in India [Ghurye 1969]. It is interesting to note that, prepared originally as a doctoral thesis in Cambridge University, this work was first published in the ‘History of Civilisation Series’ (consisting of more than 50 volumes, a monumental work edited by M Owen of Cambridge). Ghurye had himself expected its reviews to appear in standard journals of anthropology, Indology and sociology, especially those published from the US; but he felt quite disappointed when American journals did not take any serious cognisance of that work [Ghurye 1973: 83-84]. In Ghurye’s own estimation his acclaimed work was more “Indological” than “historical”. As one of his reviewers has commented: “almost a third of length of this book (contained) examination of race

and caste in which Ghurye resorted to anthropometry – a method that had not hitherto been applied in India”.<sup>2</sup>

In the first ever review of sociology sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, A M Shah (1974: 438-39), who has done a critical review of historical sociology, has argued that Ghurye brought his background of Indology and rigorous training in Sanskrit to bear on his important writings on family and Kin in the Indo-European culture, the Indian ‘sadhus’, gods and men, and ‘Pravara’ and ‘Charana’. What is relevant to our discussion is not really the question whether Ghurye was intellectually committed to evolutionism and diffusionism, but whether or not classical Sanskrit texts, written and compiled several centuries ago, could be considered as reliable representation of facts, and whether relying exclusively on their use could be adequate for historical reconstruction. Classical texts often change hands and go through several interpolations by the time they are handed down to us. Hence, the question as to whether or not an analysis based on textual interpretation, however meticulously attempted, could be accepted as a viable substitute for rigorous use of historical method, still remains open. It needs to be emphasised that in studying Indian society it is quite legitimate to examine classical texts as sources of cultural practices, behaviour patterns, norms and values, and as legitimating institutions that regulate day-to-day life of people. As Dumont (1972: 70-103) has argued: understanding the values, belief system and ideology underlying caste system in India is vitally important and indispensable. Dumont’s assertion need not be disputed. Nonetheless, while bringing out the most fundamental distinction between “purity” and “pollution”. Dumont has drawn heavily on textual interpretations from P V Kane’s *History of Dharmashastras*. In this context, whatever has been presented by Dumont as historical evidence and data is essentially extracted from normative classical literature that tended to depict “ideal” rather than “real”. That “ideal” was a product of the dominant brahmanical culture and regimented social order in which prescriptions and proscriptions of purity and pollution were coaxed in religious-ethical codes of the *Dharmashastras* and *Grihyasutras* – this has also been admitted by Dumont (ibid, pp 88-112).

It is true that Ghurye and Dumont never confined themselves to the use of sacred texts only. Both have used primary data and secondary sources produced either by themselves or by other sociologists and anthropologists. However, Ghurye’s Indological probing and frequent excursions in anthropometry cannot be mistaken as systematic reconstruction of history or historical analysis of structure and change in Indian society. Paradoxical as it may sound, Ghurye tried to generate historical explanation and perspective (historiography) without systematic “use of history” in the sense this expression is understood today.

Indology in the tradition of Max Muller is commonly understood as a discipline that studies traditional Indian – mostly Hindu – ideology, values, institutions, and cultural norms and practices through careful examination of classical sacred texts. In Indian sociology and social anthropology, apart from Ghurye, several other scholars have contributed to the Indological studies by using textual sources for interpretation and reconstruction. Whether or not those scholars formally belonged to sociology discipline is quite immaterial. Notable among them are Ketkar (1909), Altekar (1927), Karandikar (1929), K M Kapadia (1945), and Iravati Karve (1953, 1961). Among them, Altekar, in his study of village communities in India, has extensively used such sources as Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, *Shukraniti*, the *Jatakas* and also other

acclaimed historical research monographs. He has thus succeeded in reconstructing the village communities in western India – the structure of village councils, their officials and functions, administration of justice, settlement of village disputes, land revenue and land tenures, as well as caste and occupational structure. Through this historical analysis, Altekar has drawn conclusions to suggest that until the beginning of the British rule, village communities in India enjoyed relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state, that they were not a static or unchanging social reality, and that to a large measure they functioned as self-governing systems in western India;<sup>3</sup> however, they were not considered as village republics nor were they fully “democratic” in the contemporary sense [Altekar 1927: 120-27]. On future of village communities in India, Altekar, with streaks of romanticism, has emphasised the need to revive and recapture the spirit of harmony and mutual cooperation – attributes that have been often associated nostalgically to Indian villages in history by both neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist historians as well as by social scientists. Altekar had, however, warned colonial administration against excessive formalism of rules, laws, acts and statutes and additional taxation that village communities were not familiar with (ibid, pp 127-33).

In contrast, studies on Hindu exogamy by Karandikar and on history of caste by Ketkar are predominantly Indological, in that they have nearly totally relied on classical textual sources. This is not the case either with Kapadia’s studies (1945; 1955) on Hindu kinship, and marriage and family in India, or by Irawati Karve (1953) on kinship organisation. Both have abundantly used ethnological and anthropological research findings in addition to relying on textual sources. More specifically, Karve (1953; 1961) has systematically used anthropometry and ethnographic data on family, various castes, tribes and clans, as also linguistic data on kinship terminologies, religions and cultural regions of Maharashtra [see for instance Karve 1975]. Her work on caste is mostly embodied in *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* [Karve 1961: 50-77] in which she questions Ghurye’s contention that the system of caste and varna was a product of the Indo-Aryan culture and that it diffused to parts of the Indian subcontinent. Similarly, Karve was disinclined to accept Ghurye’s thesis (which was also Nesfield and Hutton’s thesis) that jati – the smallest endogamous unit – resulted from occupational specialisation and diversification. Although Karve (1961: 50-69) has titled her chapter on caste as “a historical survey”, most of the references cited in this chapter are from such textual sources as Vedas, Upanishadas, *Manusmriti*, *Bhagavadgita*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and so on. Hence, like Ghurye’s work, Karve’s work also suffers from the limitations of Indological approach if it is to be understood as use of history in “reconstruction of caste as a form of living hierarchical system of discrimination” [Sundar 2005: 7]. Her references to the present day caste system and its functioning are only token, if not casual, and not supported by any historical data, textual sources or even by contemporary field data.

Karve’s other well known work, *Yugant* (1991) is essentially an insightful re-interpretation of the epic of *Mahabharat*, in which she has challenged the commonly held norms of a Hindu family – particularly those ideas associated with ideal womanhood (such as vaginal purity as a precondition of a virtuous wife, unflinching devotion to husband, and the like) as defined by the patriarchal authority structure of the dominant upper strata of the society. Karve’s otherwise brilliant commentary on the epic,

thus, presents a paradox of being “historical” without any systematic use of history. This is not to deny the originality of her interpretation of the role of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari and other female characters in the epic. Specialists in gender studies today find these interpretations by Karve as full of feminist ethos [Channa 2005: 5-6].

Extensive use of Indological source material for sociological analysis is also evident in the work of Veena Das who drew our attention to the caste Puranas as an important source hitherto neglected by sociologists. According to her, most caste Puranas were apparently composed between the 7th and 18th centuries. Basically, a caste Purana is a text that reflects on the way a particular caste community understood its mythical origin, how in doing so it often tended to elevate itself to a ritually superior status than what was accorded to it by other castes within the village social organisation, and how such a text helps in inculcating a sense of identity among members of that caste, no matter how few of its members actually read and understood that text [Das 1987: 10-17]. Das’s argument is that there has been a wide gap between the way anthropologists understood “truth” or “social reality” with positivist assumptions of direct observation of that reality and the way sociologists of knowledge have been insisting that conceptual categories mediate between reality and its understanding. And when it comes to understanding observable behaviour it is specific meanings superimposed by cultural ideas on conceptual categories that in the ultimate analysis become more decisive in epistemological terms (ibid, pp 2-3). Although Das does not subscribe to a “one-sided assumption that all knowledge about Indian society can be derived from studying classical Sanskrit texts only”, nonetheless she feels that “the richness, complexity and sophistication in Hindu practices cannot possibly be gauged without consulting scriptures in which Hinduism gets reflected” (ibid, p 5).

Obviously then, like Karve, Das also treats mythologies as a defining element of culture, and believes that understanding of culture in the Indian context is more likely to remain incomplete, if not superficial, until it is based on careful perusal of Puranas and other forms of mythologies that classical brahmanical texts contain. In her study, Das has drawn on Levi-Straussian structuralist analytical categories in understanding the relations between the ‘brahman grihastha’ (householder), kingship and ‘sanyasa’ (renouncer) on the one hand and differences between sanyasi in the brahmanical Hinduism and ‘bhikku’ (monk) in Buddhism on the other. In doing so she has highlighted the renunciatory ideals in the texts like *Dharmaranya Purana*, ‘Smriti’ and ‘Grihyasutra’ literature and their inversion in the Buddhist tradition. Das (ibid, pp 139-49) finds this contrast even more striking in respect of relations of the two types of renunciators with other social categories. However, a real problem arises when social construction of lived categories like sanyasi, ‘parivrajak’ or bhikku, and what they meant in concrete behavioural terms, is attempted purely on the basis of classical texts – whether *Dharmaranya Purana*, or a caste purana of the modh brahmanas and baniyas, an *Aithereya Brahmana* or puranic texts, or on the basis of interpretation of ‘Suttavibhaga’ of the *Vinaya Pattika*.

In yet another study, Veena Das has analysed the symbolism of laterality, the division of the body and the universe into right and left along with the use of spatial categories found in the classical text *Gruhyasutra* of Gobhila. She has rejected Dumont’s position, which stresses the binary divide between “pure” and

“impure” as the most fundamental opposition in Hindu belief and ritual. Das (1976: 248-51) draws distinction between rituals associated with the use of the right side (namely, the passage of time, rites of initiation, of pregnancy and marriage) and those with the left side (i.e., death rituals, rites to ghosts, demons, ancestors and serpents). Here, using the concept of liminality, and the textual sources, Das has shown that “symbolism of impurity in Hinduism too has more meaning to it than just the “other” of the “pure”. Liminality may often symbolise a creative transcendence of the given categories of the system” (ibid, p 261) – a point which is well taken. However, reliance purely on a text can certainly not make up for historical analysis. Quintessentially most classical texts portray at best the “ideal”, and at worst they are no more than grand mystifications. Myths in themselves, of course, do constitute a fascinating subject of inquiry. The question is whether we are to distinguish between myth and history or not. In fact many social anthropologists have used myths as an alternative mode of explanation quite antithetical to history.<sup>4</sup> Generally post-Enlightenment historiography has been rather dismissive about myths and it has all along questioned adequacy of “myths” or sacred (textual) narratives in traditional societies as authentic record of “what really happened” [Hechs 1994: 1-5].

In his study of the pandits of rural Kashmir, T N Madan (1989: 13-19) has given a brief historical account of Kashmiri pandits in which he has recapitulated important events or political rule of different migrants and invaders in Kashmir. The major source he has cited in this characteristically brief historical outline is that of pandit Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* – a 12th century Sanskrit text (which is in verse) that is a sort of chronicle on Kashmir from the earliest times to the 12th century. Since Madan’s study, originally published in 1965, focuses on structural specificities of kinship and family among Hindu pandits of Kashmir, he emphasises the fact that historically Muslims and Hindus evolved into two insulated communities with “a two-fold division of society founded on occupation and fortified by endogamy” (ibid, p 19). In his concluding review Madan has underscored the “economic ties between Pandits and the Muslims as providers and buyers of services whether in agriculture, trade and commerce, education or in domestic life” (ibid, pp 192-93). In yet another study, Madan has traced the historical evolution of relationship between Muslim and Hindu kings right from the days of Islamisation of the Kashmir valley that actually began with persuasion by Turkish missionaries, especially those associated with the Surhawardi school of Sufis from the eighth century onwards [Madan 1972: 118-19]. His historical analysis has shown quite convincingly the kinds of interfaces between the Muslim identity and Hindu representations, and the Hindu identity and Muslim representations (ibid, pp 123-37) that have been decisively impacted by the Muslim and Hindu rulers of those times. Further details of this argument need not be gone into in the present context. Our main problem arises from Madan’s exclusive reliance on a Sanskrit text that is partly Indological and partly historical, and not backed by any other sources. Moreover, he has not used this historical account to raise a question as to how and why, despite close economic interdependence, a minuscule minority, namely Kashmiri pandits could sustain its structurally exclusivist institutions of family, marriage and kinship, nor has he developed any historical explanation of such a unique instance of unhampered structural and cultural aloofness, almost bordering on insularity, of Kashmiri pandits.

Amrit Srinivasan’s study (1980) of four myths from *Bhagwata Purana* is also a case where indological source material has been used for developing a sociological argument. She has argued that though Puranas are considered as heterogeneous and incoherent texts that are full of interpolations and contradictions arising from hearsays, the puranic narratives or lore are essentially unstable or open for incorporation of new material within a familiar framework or the rearrangement of the old. Srinivasan (1980: 198-209) has tried to show that in a literate culture with a continuous history, the meaning of the structures is relative to social and historical context. Hence, mythologies and puranic narratives provide an essentially chronological dimension of textual time for the study of the transformative mechanism. Her argument is basically deductive despite the fact that she has examined four cases of mythical narratives. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Srinivasan accepts any “text” as an incipient “context”. It hardly needs to be overemphasised that texts may at times be necessary, but certainly not sufficient, for historical reconstruction, analysis, reasoning and interpretation.

## II

### Systematic Use of History in Macro-analysis

At the Bombay School of Economics and Sociology, Ghurye and research students, as discussed earlier, had set towering examples of how history, at least in the limited sense of Indology, and sociology could be fruitfully cross-fertilised. Styles of using history in the Lucknow School appeared to be quite different as its stalwarts – especially Radhakamal Mukherjee, D P Mukerji and D N Majumdar – were quite averse to allowing fragmented growth of narrow social science disciplines. They tried to develop the Lucknow school as a centre of interdisciplinary research programmes in economics, sociology and political science. D P Mukerji – one of the founders of Lucknow School – was an avowedly Marxist sociologist. He always pleaded for economics to be closer to Marxism because he thought it did not separate economics from politics, and sociology from history [Joshi 1986: 1455-57]. Notwithstanding this unequivocal position of D P, it is interesting to note that formally history was never associated with the Lucknow School. During its most creative phase the Lucknow school and its academic research had three prominent foci or features: (a) their rootedness in the history of ideas, philosophical thought that was seen as the foundation of every intellectual practice, or attempt, to understand social reality, (b) their responsiveness to the nationalist urge and proximity with the Indian National Congress, and (c) their praxiological concerns that brought the stalwarts of the school closer to grassroots level problems – whether industrial or agricultural or tribal, and hence the involvement of scholars of the Lucknow School in the national planning for reconstruction and development (ibid, pp 1457-59). These tendencies were sharply reflected in the teaching, research and writings of Radhakamal Mukherjee as also of D P Mukerji. It is quite evident that, caught between “philosophical, meta-theoretical, epistemic” concerns on the one hand and “ideological-praxiological” moorings on the other, these two pioneers of the Lucknow School showed little or no interest in trying rigorous historical analysis, although they were conscious of its importance in understanding structures and change. However, their historical approach remained confined to the field of history of ideas and was seldom reflected either in their pedagogic practices or in research.

This ambivalence towards the need to bring sociology closer to history in the Lucknow School did not, however, prevent some of its illustrious students from using history purposefully in sociological understanding. The work of T N Madan, who studied in Lucknow, has already been discussed above. A significant contribution to what may be called historical sociology came from P C Joshi who also studied in Lucknow. Joshi has traced historically the thinking in India on agricultural land questions in general, and problems of tenurial as well as agrarian reforms in particular, right from the early colonial period, more specifically since the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Joshi has brought this analytical exercise to bear on understanding as to why land reforms in India since independence turned out to be very radical at ideological level and why they failed at programmatic level. The actual implementation of land reforms legislations in India did technically remove the old style absentee landlordism but only after tenants were made to pay fabulous sums as compensation to the landlords. Reforms only created a new class of owner cultivators out of the established tenants, who now became the new middlemen while the lowest category – comprising of the landless poor, sharecroppers and marginal peasants – received little or no benefits. Joshi has thus offered historical explanation of land reforms as implemented in post-independent India (i.e., the present) in terms of the class character of the colonial and postcolonial state (i.e., the past) [Joshi 1975].

Another noteworthy work in the tradition of historical sociology from a product of the Lucknow School is Yogendra Singh's (1973) study of *Modernisation of Indian Tradition*. He has traced the major changes in the Indian cultural tradition as well as in social structure and institutions from the earliest times (starting from the Vedic and epic cultures) and has highlighted the sources of orthogenetic changes in Indian culture that were introduced by Jainism, Buddhism and a number of other philosophical schools and the 'bhakti' (devotional) school that sharply criticised and reassessed some of the then prevailing values and institutional practices. Singh argues that renaissance and Sanskritisation were the two orthogenetic processes through which Indian tradition was already moving in the direction of modernisation [Singh 1973: 28-59]. According to Singh, the impact of Islam is visible in the Indian tradition in the form of readiness to be liberal and pragmatic and in this sense it further accelerated the modernisation process. Heterogenetic changes, effected by the impact of western civilisation during the colonial period, are evident in the macro-structures of urban settlements, industry and new institutions of law and justice, in the great variety of social reform movements (from Raja Rammohan Roy to M K Gandhi), and in micro-structures of jatis (castes), family, village, its economy and polity (such as panchayati raj) and the like. Basically, Singh's argument is historically developed and his major conclusion is that the nature of modernisation in Indian society, despite the prolonged spell of colonialism, is irrevocably influenced by the initial conditions. It means that each society develops its own path and adaptive patterns of modernisation, suggesting that validity of the universal theory of modernisation stands questioned by this historicity unique to each society (ibid, pp 208-15). It needs to be mentioned in this context that in this study Singh has used secondary source material most creatively; and though he has himself not done any intensive archival work on the periods he has covered in his study (perhaps because he felt that was not his priority), that does not

necessarily lower the value of his seminal contribution to historical sociology.

### III Historical Analysis in Rural Studies

Students of sociology in India know it well that after Bombay and Lucknow the Delhi School of Economics emerged as a major centre of excellence in teaching and research in sociology since 1959 onwards. Academic leadership of M N Srinivas at the Delhi School is chiefly given the credit for introducing structural-functionalism as theoretical orientation with analytical rigour and also for the fieldwork tradition with which Delhi School came to be identified for a fairly long time. One of the first few students of Srinivas, A M Shah (1974: 416-17) holds the view that "Srinivas had been an advocate of the use of historical records in the study of Indian society because he found them indispensable for analysing rural social life". Srinivas thought that a good grasp of local history reinforced an anthropological fieldworker. Particularly, Srinivas found village records and documents as an invaluable source material that provided both data and insights for studying legal disputes – relating to caste, land, any other immovable property, and agrarian issues. Although one may agree with Shah's observation, one wonders whether use of historical method could at all be considered as a strong forte of Srinivas. In his famous "itineraries" – that embody his reflections and autobiographical memoirs – Srinivas has come out with a confession that his "commitment to Radcliffe-Brownian structural-functionalism had had practically a blinding effect on him as he started subscribing to the view that history was irrelevant to understanding the present day structures, institutions and practices as well as changes" [Srinivas 1973: 141].

A prominent exception to this streak of anti-history trend in Delhi School is undoubtedly the work of A M Shah and R G Shroff (1959) who studied a Gujarat village from historical perspective to understand the structure and change among barots – a caste of genealogists and mythographers. Likewise, with the help of official records and rare documents, Shah (1964: 83-93) has also probed into the political system in Gujarat right from the 18th century onwards. In yet another study undertaken jointly with two other scholars, Shah has revealed that "self-sufficiency of an Indian village" and an autonomous "joint family system" as the dominant pattern in Indian rural households have been built as a "grand myth" [Shah et al 1963]. Almost a generation later at the Delhi School of Economics, Anand Chakravarti followed it up in his study of contradiction and change in agrarian social structure in a Rajasthan village and also in his subsequent study of Purnea district in Bihar where he has abundantly used historical source material (gazetteers, records of land revenue settlements, etc) by combing through the archival sources himself.

Chakravarti's initial study is a micro-level account of a Rajasthan village, Devisar; it provides an elaborate historical background of the caste structure, especially of the rajput clan (Kachwaha) that claims descent and genealogy from the mythology of the *Ramayana*. Chakravarti has spelled out the feudatory arrangements and the traditional land control that rajput clans had after north India came under the Mughal rule. His argument is that the feudal system and land control remained intact in the hands of rajput clans till almost abolition of 'Jagirs' in 1954. The Jagirdars' land control was inherited, i.e., they held inalienable

right in their respective territories. They were, however, deprived of this traditional authority when their land rights were taken away by the jagirdari abolition legislation [Chakravarti 1975: 22-39]. Thereafter, rajput clans witnessed a steady decline of their traditional authority because new patterns of power and authority were emerging as a result of introduction of local self-government in the form of panchayati raj institutions that created space for political participation, choice and electoral politics. These changed the rural scenario as democratic decentralisation generated both: (i) new political environment, and (ii) leadership. Chakravarti has explained the displacement of traditional authority in terms of the emergence of new political entrepreneurs. Although rajput clans still dominated the village, it is not because they still had some land-ownership, but mainly because of availability of new political resources (ibid, pp 191-221). Chakravarti has used "historical background" here to contrast the present-day political power base of rajput clans with their traditional authority that they had enjoyed by virtue of monopolistic land control in the past.

In his second major work, Chakravarti (2001) has examined agrarian class relations in a canal-irrigated village (called Aghanbigha) in Purnea district in north Bihar by doing intensive fieldwork. Here he found that production relations between the 'maliks' and labourers were highly exploitative because, after the introduction of irrigation and subsequent to it commercial farming, the traditional system of 'bataidari' (sharecropping) had started declining, though the dominant landlords continued to be as oppressive towards their labour as before, that was reflected in wage payment and tight work schedule. Tenurial rights were denied to the bataidars and labour could not mobilise itself against the landlords. Chakravarti's main focus is on understanding everyday class relations. Even when profit was the main motive of farming, landlords continued to depend on pre-capitalist forms of labour utilisation (like use of attached or bonded labour, or leasing out to bataidars on an year-to-year oral tenancy with no legal rights (ibid, pp 278-93). In this study, Chakravarti has used some historical source material but only to provide background of commercial agriculture in Purnea, and also to explain the impact of ecology due to the Kosi River changing its course (ibid, pp 19-62). Chakravarti has attempted to respond to the mode of production debate on "feudalism/semi-feudalism in India" and also "development of capitalism in Indian agriculture" (ibid, pp 282-86). Despite the use of some historical material, this study is based less on history and more on anthropological fieldwork. His conclusion is that agricultural labour in this part of Bihar is dependent on their landlords because of unorganised labour market; moreover, labour could not resist their exploitation partly because it had no agency to mobilise them, and partly because of the nexus between the landlords and the agencies of the state. This conclusion, however, does not follow from the historical background provided by Chakravarti.

In the area of rural studies, Ramkrishna Mukherjee who belonged to none of the established schools in Bombay, Lucknow and Delhi, made a significant contribution at a time when village studies or studies on peasant societies/communities were dominated by ethnographic tradition and fieldwork approach of social anthropologists till almost mid-1960s. However, in his somewhat less frequently cited study, *The Dynamics of Rural Society*, Mukherjee (1957) has argued by demonstrating that dynamics of any society cannot possibly be grasped fully without a careful historical analysis of the development of its basic economic

structure. He has further emphasised that function of economic structure in shaping or moulding its dynamics is no less vital for studying agrarian societies than it is in studying industrial societies. By carefully using aggregate and time-series data on land ownership, land transfers (by sale, gift or mortgage), changing crop patterns and crop yields, and also data on use of sharecropping as a dominant pattern of land cultivation, Mukherjee has traced historically the emergence of three rural classes and production relations in Bengal's agrarian society right from the pre-British period (ibid, pp 14-27). He has also shown how landholding classes were impoverished by the colonial economic policies that almost always favoured the British East India Company's monopoly trade throughout the 18th and 19th centuries [Mukherjee 1958: 40-51] and how India's external trade during the colonial period actually helped the transformation of food into commodities, thereby benefiting British industrialists exclusively.

The most noteworthy aspect of Mukherjee's *Rural Dynamics* (1957) study is that it has historically tested a hypothesis that economic structure delineated the contours as well as historical course of social dynamics in the context of West Bengal. He has traced the origins of the present day rural classes (by marshalling data on economic structure of 12 villages in the Birbhum district in the 1930s) to the production relations of the pre-British days, and has shown how the present rural classes corresponded to the class structure of late medieval Bengal. Using this historical background, Mukherjee (1957: 7-40, 90-101) finally explains why the class of landless labourers existed only marginally and why preponderance of sharecroppers has been a unique feature of rural West Bengal till today. This study is an excellent example of Mukherjee's methodological rigour not only in defining agrarian class categories but also in demonstrating their development historically in non-rhetorical empirical terms. He has also shown how certain classes have persisted in the rural dynamics of Bengal over the last three to four centuries. More importantly, Mukherjee did all the first hand archival work, although he has also used aggregate data and statistics, and a number of very authentic research monographs of professional historians, for reconstructing the class structure and production relations in the "past" as he found it crucial to understand the "present". To further corroborate his historical explanation of rural dynamics in terms of the development in economic structure during the colonial period, Mukherjee even undertook a full-length study of the East India Company with a view to revealing its true

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character as an instrument to serve the interests of industrial capitalist and trading class in England [Mukherjee 1958] by siphoning off the wealth generated in Indian agriculture in the production of food and industrial raw materials. [97]

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## Notes

[The first draft of the manuscript of this paper was presented at the Special Session on 'Perspectives and Challenges in Indian Sociology' organised at the XV World Congress of Sociology, held at Brisbane (Australia) on July 7-12, 2002. Comments by T K Oommen, D Sundaram and Sujata Patel on my presentation were quite useful. A fully developed paper, emerging out of the first draft, was subsequently presented at the Centre for Social Studies, Surat as the 18th I P Desai Memorial Lecture. It was presided over by A M Shah. While finalising this paper for publication, I have richly benefited from some of the points he raised in his closing remarks that were not only pertinent but also perceptive. My thanks are due to all of them. However, usual disclaimer applies.]

- 1 The list of historians whose researches and writings are akin to sociology is rather long. Quite a few of them have used sociological concepts and also adopted what may broadly be called "sociological perspective". Questions they have raised about society and social institutions, protest movements, Indian national movement, changing agrarian and land relations, agrarian systems, colonial political economy, feudalism, commercial agriculture and capitalism in Indian agriculture, nascent capitalism and emerging class structure in India, and rebellions of subaltern groups and the like are basically sociological in nature. To name a few of them, Shashi Bhushan Chaudhury, J C Jha, Kali Kanker Dutt, Irfan Habib, R S Sharma, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, Ravinder Kumar, Ranajit Guha, B B Mishra, Binay Bhushan Chowdhary, Sunil K Sen, Savyasachi Bhattacharya, Harbans Mukhia, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, Majid H Siddiqi, Aditya and Mridula Mukherjee, Sourabh Dube and a few others are those scholars who may be called sociologically oriented historians. However, it is not intended to review their works in this paper.
- 2 This quotation from the review of Ghurye's book, *Caste and Race in India*, published in the *Statesman* (Calcutta) is taken as cited in Ghurye (1973: 83).
- 3 Later on A M Shah, in his study of a Gujarat village has demonstrated with historical proof that "autonomy and self-sufficiency of Indian village" was no more than a constructed grand myth. This point is discussed later in this paper.
- 4 One need not undermine the importance of myths in understanding social reality. Often it may so happen, as A M Shah put it in his presidential remarks, "In the garb of scientific observation sociologists and anthropologists may actually create new myths, while what historians tend to dismiss as 'myths' may be closer to reality". His point is well taken. Even then it is generally accepted that the task of social scientists, as a community that accepts "disciplined scepticism" as an act of faith, is to separate myth from history.

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