

Unit 1

Social Background of the Emergence of Sociology in India

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Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to

- Describe the historical roots of Indian sociology
- Explain the sociography in classical and Arab Persian roots to emergence of sociology in India
- Discuss the heritage of social thought in India
- Describe the socio-economic conditions which existed at the advent of British rule in India
- Explain the three major approaches of the Westerners to Indian society and culture
- Discuss the official view of the British regarding caste and tribes, their customs and manners
- Describe the growth of associations and institutions promoting social inquiry
- Explain the early sociological beginnings and finally
- Discuss the early emergence of sociology in Independent India.

1.1 Introduction

Sociology, which in India is closely associated with social anthropology, is a relatively loosely-defined area of study in this country as in other parts of the globe. Different scholars adopt different approaches to it and have even different conception of its scope. But, most of them appreciate the need for studying the socio-cultural antecedents of its birth and growth. They agree that sociology in India bears the imprint of Western sociology. They differ in their evaluation of this impact of Western sociology.

1.2 The Historical Roots of Indian Sociology

Sociology is a “humanistic social science” (Abraham, 1973). It, therefore, has to take into account the specific ideas and ideals, values and aspirations, problems and predicament of concrete groups human beings in particular historical circumstances even when it tries to attain generalisations about human relations. Sociology therefore hardly fits in the mould of natural science and its development in different countries bears in one way or another the imprint of particular historical experiences and cultural configurations. Lack of attention to the fact in India has resulted in that one cannot even today speak with much conviction of an Indian tradition in sociology whereas one could speak of a German or American tradition of sociology (cf. Mannheim, 1953:185-226). This is largely because of the fact that in their teaching and research Indian sociologists have in an overwhelming manner drawn upon the concepts, methods and theories already in use in the West instead of developing their own. The activity of the sociologists in this regard is hardly different from what is done by the physicists or biologists or even economists. But the sociologists have a special kind of reason for their worry. The relationship of data on the one hand and concepts, methods, and theories on the other in the human sciences is different from what it is in the natural sciences. When an Indian physicist formulates, Andre Beteille most appositely points out, a general rule or principle such as the Saha Equation or Chandrasekhar Limit, he takes for granted that it will be used by the physicists everywhere and not just in India. “The utility of a common stock of tools is not in question in natural sciences; but in human sciences, its very existence is in question.” (Beteille, 2002:197)

True, because of their familiarity with Western sociology and its basic concepts and categories, the Indian sociologists did not have to struggle so hard as their predecessors in the nineteenth century Europe to establish the legitimacy of sociology as a serious intellectual discipline. But their over dependence on the Western pathfinders made them forget the fact that sociology in the West was “an intellectual response, a cognitive response, to the problems which that society was facing as a result of industrialisation and the type of social upheaval and transformation that were taking place” (Singh, 1979: 107-108). The Intellectual Revolution embodied in the movement for Enlightenment, Scientific revolution and Commercial Revolution, which spanned the period between the 14th and the 18th centuries, the French Revolution of 1789 and the Industrial Revolution put a deadly blow to the age-old feudal system monarchy and the church when the saga of the aspirations and achievements of individuals and the tale of their woes started, there was great uncertainty about the values and social order in the new situation. Sociology in the West came by way of an attempt to come to grips with it. It “was very largely a kind of cognitive system which the industrial bourgeoisie in the European context tried to develop as a response, as a kind of worldview to overcome the problems of the disintegrating traditional worldview and, at the same time the disintegrating paradigms of knowledge.” But, the industrial bourgeoisie did not develop in India when sociology came to the country (Singh, *ibid*: 108).

Sociology in India was the product of intellectual response of the Indians to the Western interpretations of Indian society and culture by the Westerners, mainly after the colonial rule of the British began in India. Anthropology, the kindred discipline with sociology, too was largely the product of European expansion of the world during the last three or four centuries. The need to

govern men of various races and vastly different cultures created the urgency in the European rulers to study the life and cultures of the ruled. The Western effort to gather information of the life and culture of the Indians, which formed the basis of sociology and anthropology in India, was marked by a similar interest of the colonial rulers. It is, of course, true that later genuine scientific interests enriched both the disciplines and they emerged in the Western context of modernity. At the same time one can ill-afford to ignore the colonial context within which sociology grew in this country. Lack of adequate attention to this dual aspect of the milieu in which sociology emerged in this country tends to give it the semblance of an appendage of Western sociology. No protest, for example, is made against the statement made in 1957 by Dumont and Pocock that "... the sociology of India has only properly begun in the last ten years." What is more deplorable is the audacious statement of Robert Bierstedt who would trace the roots of sociology to Plato and Aristotle but summarily dismiss the tradition of social thought in the east. Bierstedt writes, "Although I may be guilty of a species of provincialism, I have excluded all sociologists outside of the Western tradition of intellectual history. If excuse be needed, one may say that sociology has not characteristically been a discipline that has appealed to the Eastern mind and there does not exist, in fact, a corpus of Eastern sociological thought" (Bierstedt, 1959: u). Bierstedt's is not the lone voice. The error must needs to be corrected.

1.3 The Heritage of Social Thought in India

Indeed, India has a rich heritage of thinking and reflection on the socio-cultural reality. There "have been recorded observations on Indian society since the third century B.C." (Cohn, 1969:4) India has a millennium old living tradition contained in the religious and philosophical texts. These discuss ideas about man and society. Several stereotypes impede an adequate appreciation of the Indian tradition of deliberations on man and society (Dube, 1977:2). First, it is believed that the Indian treatises discussing ideas about society and its values were deeply grounded in metaphysics and ethics and were, therefore, far removed from social reality. For example, Bierstedt writes, "In intent and emphasis,... they were ethical rather than sociological, prescriptions for right conduct rather than propositions about any conduct, whether right or wrong... .. Their authors, in short, were lawgivers to the race rather than students of society" (Bierstedt, 1959: xii). Second, they allowed little scope for development of an empirical tradition in respect of knowledge relating to man and society. Third, the ascription of inviolable sanctity to the ancient texts, it is alleged, inhibited the growth of critical and independent thought in later periods (cf. Bottomore, 1962).

The truth is that the ancient texts, shastras and smritis, despite their philosophical and metaphysical content, were not concerned with the eternal verities of truths only and did not ignore the existential reality of the time. Even Manu's Dharmashastra which has drawn the ire of a large number of critics was not a utopia providing only the outline of an idealized normative order grounded in a system of philosophy and lacking in organic links with institutions and norms of society. This treatise abstracted and schematized from a wide range of elements of the social system of its time. The assumptions and principles underlying even the concept of **dharma** related **sthana/desa** (place/country), **kala** (time) and **patra** (person/social category). To comprehend **dharma** it was not enough to learn its philosophy; its empirical referents also were crucial for its proper understanding. To take a concrete

example, one may note the detail in which Manu described the right of the varna-samkaras (born of parents of different varnas) in the then society.

Manu, the upholder of the norm of maintaining varna, did not summarily dismiss the rights of those who deviated from the norm after the fashion of Aristotle who denied the rights of those who deviated from the norm after the fashion of Aristotle who denied the rights of citizen to the slaves in the Athenian society. Further, it is often forgotten that the scope and variety of ancient social thought were very large. Besides dharmasastras, it also produced arthasastras, kamasastras, vartasastras (relating to trades and vocations, vastusastra (relating to construction), which related to mundane life and social reality (Bhattacharya, 1990; Sarkar, 1941).

Treatises like Kautilya's Arthashastra (324-296 B.C.) urging upon the king to take regular census of the subjects and the livestock or Charakasamhita (8th century BC) advising the healers to take into consideration the norms and values and customs of the people who would approach them strongly refute the charge of lack of attention to empirical data in the ancient Indian tradition.

As against the pronounced concern of many sastras with the ultimate reality and other worldly issues, there were the Lokayata philosophers or followers of Charvaka who were sceptical, materialist and undaunted in their criticism of this concern with other worldliness. Traces of skepticism regarding the prevalent explanation of ultimate reality or the rites and rituals purportedly related to its realisation may be discerned in the Upanishadic literature of the sixth century B.C. Ajit Kesambakelam, a contemporary of Buddha preached complete materialism.

All the treatises or activities mentioned above unmistakably represent the existence of an intellectual tradition in India in which social philosophy maintained close links with the social reality of the time. Freedom of inquiry too was asserted.

1.4 Sociography in Classical and Arab-Persian Accounts

Relatively solid empirical foundations for understanding the culture and society of India lie scattered in the writings of many travelers and chroniclers. These travelers included Greeks, Romans, Byzantine-Greeks, Jews and Chinese and, increasingly from AD 1000 onward, Arabs, Turks, Afghans, and Persians. Most of the classical accounts of Indian society follow Megasthenes the Greek ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya (324-300 BC). He had the advantage of direct observation of parts of India. He described the Indian society as being divided into seven classes, though he did not refer to the varna theory. Three Chinese travelers. Fa-Hien (AD 400-411), Yuan Chwang (AD 629-644), and I-Tsing (AD 671-695) described the socio-cultural conditions of their time in India in great detail. An analysis of their accounts in a chronological order may give a valuable perspective on change in the Indian society.

Among the Arab travelers, Al-Biruni (973-ca 1030) seems to have been familiar with Sanskrit sources and the Indian systems of thought. He mentioned the four varna theory of caste in his description of the social life and customs of the people. A sort of sociological approach may be traced in his comments on the ethnocentric predicament of the Hindu. Ibn Butta, Arab traveller

from Morocco, offered valuable information regarding the geography of the land, or socio-cultural conditions and daily life of the people of India between AD 1333 and AD 1347. For South India useful information may be obtained from the chronicles of Marco Polo who visited that part of the country around AD 1293 and in Faristah's account completed in AD 1609. All these narratives and chronicles deserve to be considered as works in sociography since their authors based their accounts on what was observed and heard and not on accounts of the past as provided by others. This evaluation is applicable also to the accounts provided by European travelers.

In the seventeenth century many translations were made from the Sanskrit literature into Persian by Indo-Moslem scholars. They paved the way for a better understanding of Indian culture and society Abul Fazl, the author of **Ain-i-Akbari** which was a late sixteenth century gazetteer containing description of Akbar's court, revenue, and administrative system, was "an empiricist par excellence" (Dube, op. cit.). He covered the widest spectrum of society in Akbar's empire, paying attention even to the remote Ahoms and the inaccessible Gonds. His work suggests that the Mughals clearly recognized that the operational level of the Hindu social system was to be found not at the plane of four varnas but at the level of kin-based categories. Writers like Abul Fazl were not sociologists or social anthropologists in the modern sense. But, they were keen observers of the social life and even "perceptive social analysts" providing valuable stuff for the making of sociology.

Box 1.01: The Early European travelers

The earliest direct observers of the Indian social system, particularly caste system, were the Portuguese adventurers, merchants or administrators who began primarily on the Malabar coast. Duarte Barbose (1866, 1918, 1921) accurately reported major cultural features of the caste system which continue to be recognized as central today. Barbosa took a matter of fact approach and knew an Indian vernacular well. Jean Baptiste Tavernier, a French merchant and traveler, who provided a history of the reign of Aurangzeb and a detailed account of various Hindu beliefs, rituals and customs, which was based on conversation with the people and eye witness reports. Abraham Roger, the first chaplain at Dutch Factory at Calicut in Madras studied Hinduism from a Dutch-speaking Brahmin.

1.5 Socio-economic Conditions of India at the Advent of British Rule

The establishment of British suzerainty in the later eighteenth century prompted rapid acquisition of knowledge of the classical languages of India, of the structure of the society and of values and manners of her people by the British officials, missionaries and also Western scholars. The diverse responses of the native intellectuals to the ferment created by all these may be better understood in the light of the principal features of the Indian society and culture prevailing at that time.

As Gopal Haldar, a Marxist scholar, rightly points out, the essential features of the comparatively stable Indian socio-cultural system that persisted with minor variations down to the British times appear as follows:

- 1) *Economically*; its base was mainly agricultural, the tools and implements did not register any remarkable change through time, arts and crafts mostly connected with such poorly developed production grew.

- 2) *Socially*; its framework in the main was that of comparatively self-sufficient village communities in groups of contiguous villages; caste was the typical Indian institution to accommodate various socio-economic strata and nascent classes and bind together each in groups and ensure for such constituents an occupational protection as well.
- 3) *Ideologically*, the outstanding feature of Indian culture, the foundations of all its religion and philosophy, was the idea of karma and rebirth, which discouraged, in general, social mobility and individual initiative and secured social stability thereby.

Of course, new institutions and laws grew, though somewhat haltingly, literature, arts and philosophies blossomed. Besides, in the sub-continent regional variations also became well-marked at least from the middle ages. But the socio-economic system had since the time of Gupta Empire encouraged mainly what may be called feudal relations and a sort of Indian feudal system came to develop during the Muslim rule. Socio-economic relations akin to feudal relations lingered on even when exhausted. But, the Indian merchant classes were all through too weak and timid to overstep the socio-economic limits and develop new tools and a viable native capitalist system of larger production.

The British rule introduced, no doubt in its own interest, the railways, the press, the Western system of education, the clubs and associations which shook the prevalent socio-economic order. The British were, as if, working as “the unconscious tool of history”. But, the processes of exploitation unleashed by them destroyed the possibilities of development of industries and modern economic system in India. The British rule, rather, systematically destroyed the native industries of India for the benefit of the industries in Britain and their market in India (Desai, 1976; Mukherjee, 1957). Even though it sought to tie down the people it ruled to colonial backwardness; it released new historical forces within the Indian fold by throwing the traditional economic system and socio-cultural order out of gear. It gave birth to the desire for material advancement and better amenities and living conditions of individuals, as distinguished from groups or communities. Simultaneously, it gave birth to a spirit of inquiry into the minds of the native intellectual who came in contact with Western education. Both the social reformists and the conservatives took a fresh and critical look at their own society and culture as a reaction to Western interpretation of the same. Their ideas and explanation as well as the Western interpretation of Indian society and culture and data collected by the government officials, scholars and missionaries have laid the foundation of sociology in India.

1.6 Three Major Approaches of the Westerners to Indian Society and Culture

By the end of the eighteenth century three types of western interpretation of Indian reality became evident: 1) the orientalist, 2) the missionary, and 3) the administrative (Cohn 1968; Singh. 1979). The orientalists were enchanted by the Indian spiritual tradition mythology, philosophy, etc. Their reliance on textual view led to a picture of Indian society as being static, timeless and space less. The missionaries, who were zealots of the Christian religious traditions, looked at it as a socio-cultural and ethnic system which needed total religious conversion. Both the groups agreed

that Hinduism as practiced within the realm of their observation was filled with 'superstition' and 'abuses'. Though, the orientalists considered the situation of their contemporary Indians as a fall from a golden age. The missionaries, of course, added a lot to the empirical study of the Indian society which was strengthened by the administrators. The interpretation of Indian reality by the administrators, trained in British universities and indoctrinated by utilitarian rationalism, was more pragmatic and more matter-of-fact. Their purpose was to understand it in order to exploit its resources.

The administrators sought to develop categories that would help them in ordering their ideas and actions relating to the life of the natives of India avoiding the enormous complexities characterising it. For example, B. H. Baden-Powell's 3 volumes of **The Land Systems of British India (1892)** were not just a compilation of data but contained a series of arguments about the nature of Indian village and its resources in relation to the state and its demand over these resources. Baden-Powell recognized that there were in general two claims on the produce of the soil, the state's and the landholder's. He postulated that the government derived its revenue "by taking a share of the actual grain heap on the threshing floor of each holding". In order to ensure the collection of this share a wide range of intermediaries between the state and the grain heap developed. They asserted in their turn varying degrees of control or ownership/possession right over land and its produce. In addition, rights over the land were established by conquest.

Baden-Powell strongly contested Henry Maine's view that there was only one type of Indian village, viz., politically autonomous and economically self-sufficient village community. It continued to fascinate both the Western thinkers such as Marx and Metcalfe and the Indians Metcalfe observed, "They [i.e., The village Communities] seem to last when nothing else lasts." The idea of the unchanging village community was incorporated into general social theory of the later nineteenth and also twentieth centuries. The Marxists viewed the British rule as an unconscious tool of history" breaking the stagnation Indian society founded on unchanging village communities. The Indian nationalists on the other hand came to rely on R. C. Dutt's **Economic History of India** to establish that it was the evils of British imperial rule which degraded India from this idyllic state of village republics with agricultural prosperity to the conditions of stagnated rural economy dominated by moneylenders and rapacious landlords.

According to Baden-Powell, there were two distinct types of village in India: (1) "ryotwari" or non-landlord or severalty and (2) landlord or joint-village. But both he and Maine and their respective followers were interested in developing evolutionary stages of development of socio-economic formations. The types and classifications of villages were also attempted in relation to the institution of caste. They were found advantageous by the administrators. They reduced the need for specific knowledge. To act in terms of categories was relatively convenient. Latently, the categorical or conceptual thinking about villages directed attention away from internal politics in villages and from the questions of the nature of actual social relations and economic conditions engendered by the colonial policy. Of course, the reports such as those of the Famine Commission of 1901 and concern over widespread peasant riots and large scale alienation of land from peasant to moneylenders prompted the search for remedial action and a number of official investigations into the socio-economic conditions in the villages were made. Although some knowledge was acquired, the ground-reality was ignored.

1.7 Official View of the British Regarding Castes and Tribes

In 1769, Henry Verelst, the Governor of Bengal and Bihar, stressed the importance of collecting information regarding the leading families and their customs in addition to the cultural and social life of the natives. The revenue officers obeyed the order. Many prominent British officials followed the lead. For example, Francis Buchanan undertook the ethnographic survey of Bengal in 1807. Abbe Dubois, a French Missionary, wrote in 1816 **Hindu manners, Customs and Ceremonies**, which is considered valuable by sociologists even today (Srinivas, 2000). He was one of the first to have examined the interrelations of castes. Prior to his work, military Chaplain William Tenent's wrote two – volume work, **Indian Recreations: Consisting Chiefly of Strictures on the Domestic and Rural Economy of the Mahomedans and Hindoos** (1806). The mid and late eighteenth century western myth of “an undifferentiated orient characterised by the rectilinear simplicity of its laws and customs, the primitive innocence of its people” (Guha, 1963:26) in the face of empirical data were provided in such works. The fairly deep, if somewhat unsystematic, knowledge of Indian society started accumulating through the direct experience of many officials like Munro in his land settlements in Madras, Elephinstone in his diplomatic work in Maharashtra.

The first all-India census taken by the British Government in 1861 marked the beginning of more systematic attempts at gathering data. In 1901 Sir Herbert Risley sought to found an Ethnographic Survey of India which would develop as part of the census. He justified the proposal on the grounds of:

- 1) The contribution of such a survey to the solution of European problems with the aid of superior data available in India.
- 2) The need to collect ethnographic data, particularly the primitive beliefs and usages in India before they disappeared through social and cultural change, and
- 3) The indispensability of data for purposes of legislation, judicial procedure, famine relief, sanitation, control of epidemic diseases and the like.

The British Government finally conceded in 1905 to the demand for establishing the Ethnographic Survey which yielded huge bulk of data, valuable in anthropology and sociology in India. The volumes on tribes and castes of each province, the district gazetteers and finally, the Imperial Gazetteer of India (26 volumes, Calcutta, 1908-09) were all written as part of the Survey.

Box 1.02: Divide and Rule Policy of the British

Thanks to the work of such officials as Wilson, Risley, Barnes, Blunt, O'Malley, Hutton, and Guha, the census has become a precious source of information for demographic studies and also for social and cultural analysis. Its range and quality have further increased after independence. The census became also an instrument of official policy. For example, Risley, commissioner of the 1901 census “noted as well as deplored the tendency of the tribes to become jatis which meant their absorption into Hinduism” (Srinivas and Panini, 1973, 483). Observations of this kind contain the germs of the policy of creating divisions between Hindus and other groups and sections. It is significant that while caste distinctions among the Hindus were meticulously recorded, similar distinctions among other religious groups did not receive

equal attention, and, “ this fact seems to have gone unnoticed by Indian Nationalists” (Ibid. 474). Finally, the recording of caste divisions among Hindus at each census promoted, according to the Indian nationalists, “fissiparousness” and was therefore condemned by them. The census in independent India has ceased to record data on a caste basis.

1.8 Growth of Associations and Institutions Promoting Social Inquiry

Despite its serious limitations, the Western interest in Indian society created a ferment which led to the growth of social activity in the subcontinent (Duttgupta, 1972). A number of literary and scientific associations marked the intellectual scenario of eighteenth and nineteenth century India. Most notable was the Asiatic society of Bengal founded in 1797 by the world famous Sanskritist and Indologist, Sir William Jones. It regarded history, science, and art as the trinity of human knowledge. It encouraged work in indology, comparative philology, comparative mythology, comparative jurisprudence, history and anthropology. Its deliberations and publications including the *Asiatic Miscellany* covered a wide range of social institutions and problems. The Academic Association, started in Bengal in 1828 under the inspiration of Henry Derozio, kindled in the minds of youngmen such as Pyari Chand Mitra, Dakshina Ranjan Mukherjee, and Rev. K. M. Banerjee and questioning sprit with regard to literary and philosophical issues as well as contemporary social institutions and problems. The active but short-lived Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge (1838- 1843) examined themes like prostitution, the Hindu widow, and female education. Another notable society of the time, also in Calcutta, was Tattwabodhini Sabha. Founded in 1839, it discussed social conditions and problems and questioned several established customs and institutions. Rammohan Roy (1777-1833), whom Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru called the first Modern Man of India, was a great social thinker and reformer. His writings had considerable sociological content (Duttgupta, 1972). Rammohan’s crusade against Sati, and his views on religion, position of women, and rural society anticipated several major concerns that were to characterise Indian society later. Other notable thinkers and reformers of the time were Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Pyari Chand Mitra. Such activities were not confined to Bengal alone. Yogendra Singh mentions Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Dadabhai Naoraji (1825 - 1917), Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928), J. G. Phoolley (1827-1888) and M. G. Ranade (1824-1901) and several others in creating intellectual and social self-awareness in the country about India’s cultural and civilizational strengths and yet pleaded for radical reforms in society in order to meet the challenges of the western civilization and its colonial expansionism (Singh Y. 2004: 13&).

As to the associations in town or cities other than Calcutta, S.C. Dube (1977: 5-6) points out that the Literary Society of Bombay deliberated on and published in 1929 in its journal *Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay*, a comprehensive empirical survey of a small town, Lon. The volume published another comparable statistical survey of the “Pergunnah of Jumboosur.” The *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, started in 1835, published historical and ethnographic studies and also surveys of cities and villages. The Benares Institute founded in 1861and recognized in 1864, was popular and active. Its section on “social progress” received important papers regularly on ethnography and social problems. The Oudh Scientific Society of Lucknow

was also concerned with social problems. A paper on “Sociology for India” was presented before it by Syed Shurrafoodin. A Society for Sociological Studies was established in Jaipur in 1869.

Calcutta, of course, housed more associations than other towns or cities. The Bethune Society, established in 1851, contributed significantly to social science studies. A section on sociology was started in the Society 1859 in recognition of the subject’s elevation to the rank of a “science” and of the fact that it was replete with practical benefits to man.” Reverend James Long presented to the Society in 1861 his paper comprising “500 questions on the subjects requiring investigation in the social condition of the natives.” The most notable among the insititutions concerned with the social sciences was the Bengal Social Science Association (1867-1878). Its object was “to collect, arrange and classify. Series of facts bearing upon the social, moral and intellectual conditions of Bengal, and by such means to assist in the promotion of measures for the good of the country” (cited in DuttGupta, 1972). Indians formed an important part of the members of the Association’s council. Through questionnaires the Association collected a great deal of empirical data. The papers presented at it’s meetings also demonstrated an attempt at systematisation and logical analysis of facts about Bengal and other parts of India.

Another noteworthy fact was that Positivism and its founder Auguste Comte were known to the Indians, particularly, Bengalis such as Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, the famous Bengali Litterateur, and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, the first Indian author to have exmined the feasibility of developing a universal science of society, and many others. Bankim and Bhudev logically controverted the claim of Jogendra Chandra that positivism was superior to Hinduism. Positivism, however, buttressed the spirit of critical inquiry (Forbes, 1975). Herbert Spencer, the British sociologist, too, was a well known name for persons like Bankim, Bhudev or Vivekananda. His evolutionism or theory of Education was discussed and debated.

A little later, i.e., 1905 Shyamaji Krishna Verma, a non-resident Indian political and social revolutionary in Britain, deeply influenced by Herbert Spencer, started publishing a journal, **Indian Sociology**. His journal did not, however, focus upon sociology either as a discipline as enunciated by Spencer, nor did it primarily focus on social and cultural issues within the frame of reference of sociological categories. The issues discussed had a mix of the orientation of social reformism and political activism.

1.9 Responses and Reactions of the Indian Intellectuals

A close scrutiny of the records of the Associations and Societies mentioned above and the writings of native intellectuals reveals several interesting trends. A small section of the Indian intellectuals were completely overwhelmed by the West; a few, on the contrary, were drawn to the traditional heritage. Social reformers like Rammohan or Iswarchandra Vidyasagar or Jyotiba Phoole wanted to change the existing social institutions for a more humane condition. However, nearly all recognized the necessity and desirability of understanding the social situation. The question with many was neither of uncritical acceptance nor of blind rejection of the elements and ideas of the West. Persons like Bankimchandra and, particularly, Bhudev sought to reinterpret their tradition and challenge the Western interpretation

of Indian society, which presented the Indians not as subjects but as objects (Raychaudhury, 1978, Bhattacharyya, 2004). A little later Brajendra Nath Seal and Benoy Kumar Sarkar took up the threads. In case of the former, “one witnesses a critical and discursive response to the comparative evolutionary treatment of various societies and cultures, including that of Indian, by the British social anthropologists and sociologists, which often reflected not only the wrong premises in their treatment of other cultures or societies but also carried unjustifiable value (Singh, 2004: 136-147). Seal refuted attempts to interpret the Indian social and cultural reality from a reductionist, unilinear, evolutionary frame of reference. Sarkar wrote extensively in response to the writings of European Indologists and sociologists in whose writings one could clearly find the biases of ‘the orientalist frame of reference’ that depicted the Hindus or Indians to be ‘otherworldly’ or ‘pacifist.’ Particularly, the contributions of Max Mueller and Max Weber on Hinduism and the culture and social structure of the Indians came under his severe criticism (Bhattacharyya, 1990). Similarly, many other social scientists such as S. V. Ketkar, A. R. Wadia, K. P. Chattopadhyay, Bhupendra Nath Dutta (the first Marxist sociologist in this country) and N. K. Bose created through their writings the ambience for teaching and research in sociology and social anthropology in this country. Their writings and activities shared in common the consciousness of historicity of the Indian civilization and its distinct social and cultural identity which was denied the centrality it deserved by most of the western scholars, Indologists or sociologists. The writings of these early social scientists had a very high degree of consciousness effect on the Indian academics and intellectuals to provide legitimacy to the teaching and research in sociology. The discovery of India’s past, and the antiquity and richness, versatility of its heritage gave self-confidence to the elite and the material necessary for national myth-making. European missionaries’ criticism of Hinduism and conversion of poor and lowly Hindus as well as the tribal people into Christianity whipped up the nationalist sentiments of the new elite. There was an urge for social and religious reform, a reinterpretation of the past, an assertion of identity and an examination of the present. The ground was being prepared for the emergence of sociology.

1.10 Early Sociological Beginnings

Karl Marx and Max Weber as well as Durkheim depended on British and continental writings on India for their analysis of Indian society and culture. W.H.R. Rivers’ study of *The Todas* (1906) was based on intensive field work and was the first monograph on a people of India in the modern anthropological tradition. Two of his students, G. S. Ghurye and K. P. Chattopadhyay came to play a significant role in the development of sociology and anthropology in India. Rivers’ study was followed by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s on *The Andaman Islanders*. During the first two decades, two Indian scholars, L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer and S.C. Roy made their mark in anthropology though both of them lacked any formal training in the discipline. In addition to his research work among the tribes of Bihar, Roy founded and edited the famous journal, *Man in India*. Iyer, because of his anthropological writings, was appointed to a lectureship in ethnography in the Calcutta University which paved the way for the first University Department of Anthropology in India.

The efforts of Brajendranath Seal for the introduction of the discipline of sociology in Indian Universities deserve special mention. As a Professor of Philosophy at the Calcutta University Seal wrote, lectured and initiated studies

on what he called “comparative sociology.” He made a comparative study of Vaishnavism and wrote a paper on race origins and a treatise on **The Positive Sciences of Ancient Hindus** (1958 [1914-1920]). He argued that social development was multi-linear and judgments regarding the superiority or inferiority of social customs and institutions hardly made any sense. He observed that social institutions could be properly studied only in the context of race, religion and culture. As Vice-Chancellor of the Mysore University in 1914. Seal along with A. R. Wadia was instrumental in introducing social philosophy and sociology there. Seal also had a hand in the beginning of studies in sociology in the Calcutta University in 1907. Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Radhakamal Mukerjee, both of whom were disciples of Seal, taught the subject though there was no separate department of sociology there. Indeed, the recognition of sociology as a separate academic discipline came much later than, say, Economics or Political Science in Indian Universities.

The first department of sociology and civics started in Bombay University in 1919 under the leadership of Sir Patrick Geddes, though here too sociology was taught at first as a part of M.A. course in Economics (Srinivas and Panini, 2002). Geddes’ major focus lay on viewing social reality from a moral, communitarian, global and multidisciplinary perspective (Singh, 2004:138). He observed that “our great need today is to grasp life as a whole, to see its many sides in their proper relations; but we must have a practical as well as a philosophical interest in such an integrated view of life” (Mairet, 1957: xii). In this country he was known for his interests in town-planning, with emphasis on the problems of urban deterioration. His reports on the town-planning of Calcutta, Indore, and the temple cities of South India contain much useful information and display his acute awareness of the problems of urban disorganisation and renewal. His analysis of ‘valley section’ and his treatment of interrelationship of ‘work, place and folk for explaining the growth of regional cultures in societies reveal the strong influence of the French sociologist Le Play and his categories of ‘work, place and family’. Geddes consistently harped on the regeneration of city life and ecological awareness in the planning of social and cultural habitats at regional and global levels.

Because of the short stay in the Bombay University, Geddes’ sociological approach that revealed a strong blending of empirical methods with philosophical orientations could hardly be institutionalised. Nevertheless, Geddes exercise influence on the development of sociology in India through his students, G. S. Ghurye and N. A. Thoothi. N. A. Thoothi, in particular, observed Srinivas, tried to carry further Geddes’ line of research on his return to Bombay after obtaining a doctorate at Oxford (Srinivas & Panini, Ibid : 488). Radhakamal Mukerjee, the pioneer of Lucknow School of Sociology in India, also was influenced by Geddes as he came in association with Geddes in the urban surveys. Mukerjee subsequently carried out studies on social ecology and sociological effects of industrialisation.

G. S. Ghurye was sent to the United Kingdom (UK) by Geddes. He obtained a doctorate from Cambridge mainly for his work on caste. On his return to the country, he succeeded in finding a berth in Bombay University where he became after a few years Professor and Head of the Sociology Department. Under his leadership, Bombay became the leading centre for sociology, especially research, in the country, Ghurye had students from all over the country; some of them were heads of active departments and wrote significant books and papers. Ghurye himself wrote prolifically on a great

variety of themes. Ghurye's knowledge of Sanskrit enabled him to use the scriptures and epics in analysing and interpreting Indian culture and society. He insisted on fieldwork though he himself was an armchair sociologist.

Box 1.03: G.S.Ghurye (1893-1984)

Ghurye was catholic in his interests as well as methods. A few of his students, K. M. Kapadia, Irawati Karve, and S. V. Karandikar carried his approach and concepts to materials in the sacred texts and other literature in Sanskrit. M. N. Srinivas, a structural-functionalist, A. R. Desai, a Marxist, obtained their Ph.D. in Sociology under Ghurye's supervision. Ghurye founded the Indian Sociological Society in 1952 and was the first editor of its journal, *Sociological Bulletin*.

The Lucknow University became another centre of sociology and anthropology because of contributions of Radhakamal Mukerjee, Dhurijati Prasad Mukerji, and anthropologist D. N. Majumdar, all of whom were illustrious students of the Calcutta University. Despite the concentration of such talent, sociology had only a minor place in the department of economics and sociology in Lucknow University. Radhakamal Mukerjee was greatly influenced by Brajendra Nath Seal, Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Patrick Geddes. In his earlier works he was empirically oriented and sought to build a regional and ecological sociology. He stressed the need for multidisciplinary effort to comprehend reality better. He worked and wrote on an amazing variety of social, economic and cultural subjects and philosophical issues. His *Fields and Farmers of Oudh* (1930) offer a good example of the study of agrarian studies. He wrote also on the Indian labour class. He developed a theory of human migration and settlement in which he argued that human beings, like plants, thrive best in those frontiers which are similar in environment to those in which they have already succeeded. His regional analysis was pervaded with his notion of 'Sangha' which depicted the Hindu notion of commonality and cooperation rather than conflict. His stress on the importance of myth, language, ritual, art, and symbolism made his works appear, according to Srinivas, "philosophical, if not mystical" (Ibid.: 490). But, Yogendra Singh, a direct pupil of Mukerjee, maintains that one of the most significant contributions that Mukerjee has made to sociology lies in "his formulation of a general theoretical paradigm of social science and sociology from the perspective of Indian philosophical traditions" (Singh, 2004: 142). He thus sought to offer an alternative to the Western theoretical approach in sociology.

D. P. Mukerji too, like Radhakamal, acknowledges the relevance of the Indian tradition and philosophy for arriving at valid theoretical and conceptual schemes for the study of the Indian society. But unlike Radhakamal, D. P. does not totally reject the Marxian contributions particularly its dialectical logic enunciating the centrality of the processes of conflict and contradiction in the social processes. He exposed the irrelevance and vacuity of much of thought and activity of the Indian Middle Class imitating blindly the Western ideas including both Parsonian and Marxist variants. He posited his own notion of Person over developing as a responsible agent interacting with others in society guided by dynamic tradition as against the Western, Parsonian, notion of Individual pursuing his own material interests (Bhattacharyya, et al, 2003). D. P's "same ideas regarding the study of tradition were not pursued with resolve and dedication" (Dube, 1977:9)

D. N. Majumdar, an anthropologist by training had a major concern with the

problem of culture change. He maintained that “with his expert knowledge of social relationships, the sociologist can help, predict, control and direct social change and ‘speed up social progress’.” He founded the ‘Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society’ and its quarterly journal, **The Eastern Anthropologist**. His emphasis on anthropological fieldwork and on culture inspired his students such as T. N. Madan, R. K. Jain, Gopala Sarana or T. N. Pandit who became important names in Indian sociology and anthropology.

A. R. Wadia, a founder of teaching of sociology in Mysore University looked upon sociology as applied philosophy. This university had the distinction of being the first to introduce the subject at the B.A. level in 1928-29.

A combined department of sociology and anthropology under the leadership of Irwati Karve was started in 1930s in the ambit of the Deccan College and Post Graduate Research Institute in Poona. Karve, authoress of the famous work *Kinship Organization in India* (1952) did extensive fieldwork in different parts of the country and her knowledge of Sanskrit gave her access to data in scriptures, law books and epics. Sociology Department of Poona University is an heir to the bequest of Sociology Department of the Deccan College.

The Osmania University offered in 1928 sociology as one of the options at the B. A. level. However, it was only in 1946 that a full fledged Department in Sociology was started there. Christoph Von Fuerer - Haimendorf and S. C. Dube were associated with it.

This story of early beginnings of sociology in this country should mention the contribution of Nirmal Kumar Bose as well, though he could not continuously serve the academia because of his imprisonment during the Freedom Struggle. Beginning as an Assistant Lecturer in Anthropology in Calcutta he later became the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India and the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Government of India.

Bose was basically a student of Indian civilization and culture. His approach was historical but he insisted on fieldwork by the researcher without any prejudgment in mind. His interests included tribal life, peasant society and urban centres as well as temples and pilgrims. He sought to demonstrate that production relations explained the persistence of the caste system and the changes occurring in it (Bose, 1968 and 1975). He demonstrated the unity and diversity in Indian peasant life through a study of the distribution of cultural traits across the length and breadth of India. He expressed concern over the fact that parochial loyalties were strengthened by the rising middle classes in their desire to consolidate their sectarian advantages. Though a Gandhian, he made a critical analysis of Gandhism. He instilled this spirit of questioning in the minds of his pupils and associates (Befielle, 1975).

All scholars interested in the accounts of tribes in India will remain indebted to Verrier Elwin for his valuable monographs on the Baiga, Muria and Agaria of Madhya Pradesh and the Saura of Orissa. All these are based on his first hand studies. But, Indian sociologists and anthropologists have failed to follow his advocacy for the protection of the Indian tribes from the more advanced sections of the populace. It seemed to encourage an “isolationist policy” for the tribals. You will learn more about this in Block 5 Perspective on Tribes in India, Unit 3 of this course.

1.11 Sociology and Independent India

The study of sociology and social anthropology gradually and slowly became professionalised during 1910-1950. Autonomous departments on these two subjects did not exist in more than half-a-dozen universities, and Bombay University was the only centre of post-graduate research in sociology (which included anthropology) when India became independent. Sociology and anthropology seemed to be overshadowed by economics and political science, the practitioners of which seemed to have the ability of answering questions by the nationalist leaders of the country. The association of sociology with European and American traditions made it suspect in the eyes of Indian academics. Anthropology was suspected as nationalist opinion regarded as an instrument of colonial policy (Srinivas, 2003:495). There was an additional reason for dislike of anthropology. To be studied by anthropologists often suggested that those who were studied were considered primitive, and nationalists resented this implication particularly when the anthropologists were largely from the ruling race. But, in spite of this unfriendly, if not hostile, intellectual milieu, a small band of scholars continued their work analysing fundamental social institutions such as caste, joint family, untouchability, religion and sect. They published ethnographic accounts of particular groups recorded folklore and depicted the material culture of tribes and rural people. Sociology in India at least academically could find a solid base to stand upon in the results of the work of these scholars.

Reflection and action 1.1

Interview at least three people of different ethnic/socio-cultural/class backgrounds. Tell them that you want to know about their 'marriage customs' or 'religious practices'. Have a set of questions with you to be asked from the interviewee. But silently note down your observation of her/his reaction to your request.

Write a note of about two pages on "The Perception of Public About a Social Investigation". Compare your note with other learners at your study centre.

Independent India was looking for a dynamic society capable of keeping pace with the tempo of economic development promised by the freedom struggle from the tutelage of colonial government. To understand how the millions of Indians with their myriad beliefs and values would respond to the call of development of the new nation was a desideratum. Sociology seemed to hold the promise for effective assistance for the task. The undertaking of planned development in the country, and the creation of national Planning Commission which later formed a Research Programme Committee, generated the demand for reliable data about the life and activities of peoples all over the country. New opportunities became available for students of sociology. Separate University Departments of sociology sprang up all over the country.

1.12 Conclusion

A perusal of the history of beginning of sociology in India dispels the misconception that there was no tradition of social inquiry and interest in learning the material conditions of men and women in this country. Despite the philosophical metaphysical and otherworldly consideration, the ancient and medieval texts bear in many cases the evidence of interest of their authors in the reality of life of men and woman on the earth and their

problems. Before the coming of the British who brought the Indians in direct contact with the West, there were travellers of many races as well as native chroniclers who produced valuable documents about Indian society and culture as well as its economy. True, at a certain stage the society seemed to have lost its dynamism because of the perpetuation of certain institutions and customs that needed change in keeping with the changing times but that were not changing. The British colonial rule gave it a jolt. But the new historical forces did not and could not work in their full strength because of the exploitative policy of the British rules. They, of course, generated a huge volume of data regarding the social, cultural and economic conditions of the people of India. But, they were manipulated and used for their own material interest.

The British rule stressed the values of individualism and pursuit by Individuals of their own material interests ignoring at times those of the communities they belonged to. The British did, of course, bring to this country the values of freedom of inquiry and rationality. Their academic colonialism enchanted a section of native intellectuals though others questioned it. However, the spirit inquiry into the nature of their own society and culture was kindled in the minds of Indian intellectuals. This interest in and access to empirical data and the questioning spirit formed the ground for the emergence of sociology in India.

Still, the hangover of academic colonialism seems to have persisted with the Indian sociologists and social anthropologists who seem to be beholden to the international reference group. Since sociology came from the west, it seems only natural in the initial days. But its persistence beyond a length of time may prove unwholesome for the development of the discipline. The nationalist upsurge was more prominent among the pioneers though it did not display richness in formulation of concepts and theories. Their pupils and followers have a greater access to the international development in sociology and have their secure places in universities and research institutes, which stand upon the labour of love and dedication of those who toiled in the past. Their effort towards understanding the specificity of Indian people before its comparison with peoples in other lands seems to be ignored. May be, it is a reason why even today we cannot talk of an Indian Sociology.

1.13 Further Reading

Mukherjee, Ramkrishna 1979. *Sociology of Indian Sociology*. Allied Publishers, Bombay

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Srinivas, M.N. and Panini 1986. "The Development of Sociology and Social Anthropology in India" in T.K. Oommen & Partha N. Mukherji (eds) *Indian Sociology Reflections of Introspections*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay.