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Newness in Sociological Enquiry

Dr. Rashmi Pandey

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Akbarpur Mahavidyalaya, Akbarpur, Kanpur Dehat

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Many of those who entered the profession of sociology in the last decade, as also those who are entering it today are dissatisfied with the existing state of the subject. They are eager to explore new ways of undertaking their work. The search for newness is of course central to science and scholarship, and an essential condition of their progress and even their continuing vitality. At the same time, nothing new emerges in the world of ideas out of a sheer desire for novelty: newness would amount to little if it did not arise from a careful, detailed and methodical scrutiny of existing knowledge-its concepts, methods and theories. It speaks well of a profession when its new entrants are out of sympathy with the mere mechanical reproduction of existing and available knowledge in their field. But that cannot justify the frantic search for novelty for its own sake. And if it be said that those who hunger for newness do not do so aimlessly, it can also be said that those who transmit accepted knowledge need not do so mechanically.

On an occasion like this, it is not enough to ask: how does newness begin? One must also ask how it becomes integrated into the practice of a discipline. This, I should stress, is a difficult issue, particularly in the early phase of a discipline's career when it may not at all be clear that what seems to have become established is going to last and must therefore provide a yardstick for the inclusion or exclusion of new components. At the same time, it will be unrealistic to expect that everything that is new, even if it appears sound, will be automatically accepted and accommodated. The established practice of a discipline is itself a social fact is well to remember that practices that are taken for granted in the discipline today did not get automatically incorporated into it without facing any resistance; I could give many examples from the work of sociologists of my generation and of the preceding one.

My main interest today is not in individual sociologists and their personal achievements, but in sociology as a discipline and a profession. Individual virtuosity has, and in my view ought to have, a smaller place in scholarship than, let us say, in jazz music. Most sociologists realize this, particularly as they advance in years, but young scholars find it hard to accept it, especially when they are highly talented. I do not wish to devalue the latter but only to point to the need for a proper appreciation of the relation between tradition and individual talent in sociology as in other branches of scholarship.

Sociology in India, as in many parts of the world, is in need of renewal. This much we

can all agree upon without having to make dire predictions about the crises that are impending. Much of the work produced in the last two or three decades is of very poor quality. A great many things get published that do not deserve to be published, largely because we have failed to establish an honest, reliable and discriminating system of refereeing. In many colleges and universities, teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is often perfunctory and sometimes dispensed with altogether. At the same time, some work of quality has been produced continuously in the last 50 years.

The problem with us is not that the small amount of good work done by preceding generations is unjustly criticized by succeeding ones, but that it is ignored and then quickly forgotten. In India, each generation of sociologists seems eager to start its work on a clean slate with little or no attention to the work done before. This amnesia about the work of their predecessors is no less distinctive of Indian sociologists than their failure to innovate. My main argument today is that the amnesia and the failure to innovate are two sides of the same coin; we will not be able to understand the one unless we understand the other. It would be rash for me to point my finger at anyone, for I know very well that someone else can point his finger at me. I simply draw attention to this as an obdurate condition of our discipline and our profession with no intention of singling out any individual sociologist or group of sociologists for blame.

I will now run quickly through some of the work produced by sociologists and social anthropologists in the recent past in India. My broad objective will be to see if any newness was introduced by this work and to ask, incidentally, how this newness came into being. Naturally, my treatment will be selective and illustrative, for it will be impossible-and also inappropriate-to attempt an exhaustive survey of research in the subject in India. Further, I will confine myself to the work done in the last 50 years, that is, since independence, without any judgement on the quality and significance of the work of earlier scholars.

The first thing to note is that there was a tremendous burst of work in the years immediately after independence, associated to some extent with the expansion of institutions of advanced study and research, namely, the universities and the newly-created institutes of research. The sheer volume of work in the first two or three decades after independence far exceeded what had been produced in the entire period before independence. Fifty years ago, sociology was still a young subject, and in retrospect, the scope for innovation appears to have been large. But of course, much of the work produced even then was stereotyped and trivial, and on a small part of it was of lasting value. In research, whether at the level of the individual scholar or the profession as a whole, most of what is done falls by the wayside and only a little endures; it is well to remember that research is in this sense a costly undertaking.

The first two decades after independence may be described as the great age of village studies. I am sure that the work of this period appears dull and uninspiring to those who are entering the profession today, but this is because the very success of that work led to its routinization in the 70s and eighties. That is not at all how it appeared to those of us who were entering the profession in the 50s and 60s before this work became a part of established sociological practice. The first full-length monograph on an Indian village was published in 1955 by S.C. Dube (1955). I was still a student in the Department of Anthropology in Calcutta where everybody or almost everybody studied tribes. The new book, along with the two collections edited by Srinivas (1955) and by Marriott (1955), opened up new possibilities of research, and within a matter of years young social anthropologists, myself included, took up detailed and intensive studies of the Indian village which was at that time a whole new field of enquiry and investigation.

Village studies established not only a new domain of research, but also a new way of looking at Indian society and culture as a whole. Through a series of writings in the 50s and 60s, Srinivas (1962) established the distinction between the 'book-view' and the 'field-view' of Indian society, advocating the primacy of the latter over the former in sociological enquiry. The thrust in these studies was on life in the village as it was actually lived, and not on that life as it had been ideally conceived to be. The concept of the village as a harmonious and integrated unity was found grossly inadequate in the light of careful ethnographic studies. It gave way before accounts of the divisions visible everywhere and the conflicts of interest associated with them. Moreover, the idea of the village as a self-sufficient unit was replaced by one in which the many links of the village with the outside world were carefully examined and recorded.

Village studies were important in another way. They became for many sociologists and social anthropologists the basis for training in the craft of their discipline (Beteille and Madan 1975; Srinivas et al. 1979). Sociology is an empirical discipline in which the observation, description, interpretation and analysis of facts is of central importance. In earlier accounts of Indian society and its institutions, facts were used for apt illustration rather than detailed and methodical enquiry. Village studies established high standards of enquiry through participant- observation. Unfortunately, similar standards were not established as extensively in survey research, the other principal mode of empirical investigation. It may even be argued that the standards of empirical investigation through participant-observation established in the 50s and 60s have tended to become somewhat relaxed over the years. In my own very limited personal experience, the few students from overseas whose research I have supervised have produced better empirical work than the majority of their Indian counterparts.

The field-view of society transformed the study of caste. This had implications for the understanding of caste not only in the present but also in the past. Here, a landmark was the paper published by Srinivas in 1956 on 'Varna and Caste' (reprinted in Srinivas 1962: 63-69). Srinivas argued that the operative units of the system were not the four categories of the idealized scheme of *varnas*, but the innumerable *jatis* which provided the real basis of social identity on the ground. Whereas the *varnas* were the same four throughout the country and throughout its history, the *jatis* varied from one region to another, and split, amalgamated, emerged anew even disappeared over time. By closely examining the dynamics of caste, sociologists in the 50s and 60s were drawing attention to the declining role of caste in religion and ritual and its increasing role in politics. Here I ought to point out that sociologists were in advance of journalists who began to appreciate the great significance of caste in democratic politics only in the 80s and 90s.

One particular aspect of the dynamics of caste drew considerable attention among sociologists at first and then among students of Indian society and culture as a whole. This is the process whereby individual castes change their social rank after a change in their economic and political conditions. If one takes the book-view and sees castes as *varnas*, one gets a picture of a hierarchy that is completely frozen and static. If one takes the field-view and sees castes as *jatis*, one gets a picture of castes continually changing positions, although this is almost always a change in slow motion, not easy to detect in the particular case while it is taking place. This new representation of caste, with its own patterns of mobility, has encouraged historians and indologists to take a fresh look at their data relating to the past.

I have described two major shifts of perception brought about by sociological studies in the 50s and 60s. But there were also many minor shifts, too inconspicuous for attention in each individual case, whose cumulative effect has been considerable. As a

result, our present understanding of family, kinship and marriage, of religious belief and practice, of local-level politics, and of economic arrangements and transactions is both richer and deeper than it was 50 years ago. Thus, newness in our discipline does not come about solely or even generally through a sudden and dramatic breakthrough; more often it is the unforeseen consequence, over a long stretch of time, of collective effort that is at best loosely organized. What I wish to stress here is that someone may in fact contribute to newness in his discipline without himself being aware of it while making his contribution.

The work to which I briefly referred above, and particularly the enthusiasm for village studies and the field-view of society, created something like a community of scholars who actively influenced if not interacted with each other. Disciplinary boundaries became porous, and although sociologists and social anthropologists took the lead in village studies, they were joined by political scientists, historians, geographers, economists and others. It is also important to note that the community included Western as well as Indian scholars, and it will be false to say that the flow of ideas was only in one direction. Looking back on that experience, it can be said that indigenous and foreign scholars worked in more active and fruitful collaboration, and on more nearly equal terms, in the study of society and culture in India than perhaps in any other country in the world. What I would like to stress is that this collaboration, with all its strains and stresses, had become an established fact before the theorists of hegemony had had time to agonize over its moral and political implications.

Thus, it is quite clear that some new ideas, new concepts and new approaches did emerge in the study of Indian society and culture in the last 50 years. But of course all of this was embedded in routines of study and research that were for the most part dull, monotonous and repetitive. Would it not be marvelous if we could henceforward dispense with the dull routine and simply get on with the pursuit of innovation? To someone who has chosen the vocation of scholarship, such a desire must appear both shallow and frivolous. In sociology, whether in India or in the West, we cannot achieve significant Innovation if we disregard the routine of scholarship.

If we acknowledge that sociological knowledge is cumulative, it will be clear that the growth of that knowledge cannot be left solely to individual creativity. Every intellectual discipline is at the same time a craft, with its own requirements of training and apprenticeship. The outgoing generation cannot teach the incoming one to be original, and it should not even try; but it does have the responsibility of handing down to it the traditions of its craft. By the traditions of a craft I mean something more than a set of technical procedures, important though they are, that can be acquired directly from the kind of manual that comes with the personal computer. These traditions are assimilated in and through the institutions, such as and centres of research, where the vocation of sociology is collectively practised.

It may be useful to pursue the metaphor of the craft a little further. Here I would like to refer very briefly to the work of Meyer Fortes who was an acknowledged authority in the field of kinship studies and whom I had the good fortune to know personally. Towards the end of his life, he wrote an account of his career which he called 'An Anthropologist's Apprenticeship'. Following the philosopher A. J. Ayer, he divided anthropologists into two types, the 'pontiffs' and the 'journeymen', saying that he himself was of the second and not the first type. The journeyman is devoted to his craft rather than to some grand creative project. Fortes (1978: 1-2) saw his own intellectual career thus:

A journeyman's eyes are on his material, not on higher things. His aim is to turn out a particular product at a time using the best tools at his disposal. What he has by way of skill and technique are directed strictly to the job in hand, to making the most of the

he has to work with in the light of whatever good ideas happen to be appropriate to his task.

It was through work done in this spirit that he made his most significant contribution to his discipline; and he did in fact bring much 'newness' into the study of kinship.

I had of course read some of Fortes's writings as a student in Calcutta in the 50s for he was then already an established scholar. When I came to know him many years later, I naturally tried to find out from him what he considered his most significant contribution to social anthropology. But I never got very far. He somehow managed to turn the discussion around to Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown who had been his teachers or to younger persons who had been his pupils. He was by no means approving of all the work they had done, for as a man and a scholar, he was of a critical, not to say a carping, disposition, but till the end he kept himself informed about the work being done in his field. He read everything, took out whatever little he found to be of value, and attacked the rest relentlessly; in this attack, he spared neither his teachers nor his pupils. He always spoke respectfully of his seniors, even those who had entered the field only a few years ahead of him, but he had an unforgiving hostility towards those who sought to project themselves as pontiffs, mahants of creative geniuses.

Like N. K. Bose, my teacher in Calcutta, Meyer Fortes believed that anthropology was a science. What place can tradition have in the work of the scientist? It is easy to be misled by the antithesis between tradition and modernity into the belief that the progress of science must take place wholly outside of tradition. The falsity of this belief becomes immediately apparent if we look at the experimental sciences where no one can hope to achieve significant results without first acquiring the culture or the tradition of the laboratory in which he is initiated into his craft. It is true that this tradition can become a constraint and an obstacle to further progress; it is also true that individuals emerge from time to time who reconstitute the tradition of their science; but today no individual genius can begin to do this without first mastering the existing tradition of his craft.

While no intellectual discipline can dispense with apprenticeship in its craft, the form and duration of this apprenticeship varies from one discipline to another. I am told that in the experimental sciences, a Ph. D degree is no longer enough, a young scientist has now to do an additional spell as a 'post-doe' in the laboratory of a mature scientist before he can strike out on his own. In our discipline, the conditions of apprenticeship are somewhat different, and sometimes they appear excessively lax and permissive. The requirements of Ph. D. work as a form of apprenticeship are not always taken seriously by either the student or his supervisor. It is natural that a fresh entrant into the Ph. D programme should be eager to make a breakthrough in his discipline, and so he tends to choose somewhat grandiose topics for his dissertation. It is then his supervisor's responsibility to bring him down to earth, to explain to him that the ground must first be prepared before any significant contribution can be made, and that this preparation is a slow and laborious process. In our universities today, this responsibility is seen more often in its breach than in its observance.

In India, the apprenticeship that is indispensable to the formation of the sociologist is subverted by a variety of factors. Professional standards are not sufficiently well established to discourage work of poor or even very poor quality. There is inadequate attention to detail in the collection and arrangement of empiric material, and the data collected through both participant and survey research are often insubstantial and unreliable. Concepts are not always clearly defined or rigorously applied, and frequently what is presented as a new concept is only a new term. Arguments of the most sweeping kind are dressed up as new arguments without any firm support of either data or

reasoning.

If the craft of sociology had been well developed, there would be some check against this. In its absence, technical requirements are easily set aside in the interest of social relevance. Many sociologists, both young and old, feel that the real problem is not to interpret the world, but to change it. Changing the world is indeed a noble objective but it is doubtful how many of us have the intellectual tools for making that change. In the first two decades of independence many sociologists and social anthropologists expected to contribute to social transformation by working through the government in such fields as rural reconstruction, community development, Panchayati Raj, and so on. The Planning Commission was then the mecca for social scientists working for the transformation of society. Then a disenchantment with what could be done through the government set in, and in the 70s and 80s, many found a new appeal in programmes of active intervention through voluntary or non organizations. There is of course no reason why sociologists should not work with either the government or non org if they are convinced that their work will be made more socially relevant in that way. But they must first ensure that they have, as sociologists, the technical equipment required for attending effectively to the problems set before them by the agencies with which they work. Some of this equipment can be improvised on the job, but not all of it.

Someone who values autonomy in intellectual pursuit must be mindful not only of his own individual autonomy but also of the Sociological Bulletin autonomy of his profession. Professor P. C. Mahalanobis, one of the most influential intellectuals of independent India, is reported to have said, on being provoked by Nehru, that 'scientists should be on top, not on tap'. Today most young sociologists will perhaps agree that they should not be on top for ready use by agencies of the government. But many of the same persons seem to believe that their profession has a tacit obligation to meet the demands of Leninists, feminists, environmentalists, eco-feminists and other promoters of radical social change. Professional integrity requires some measure of autonomy from both government and opposition.

Of those who say that it is desirable, at least initially, to work within a tradition of scholarship, one might well ask whether there is indeed an established tradition of sociological enquiry in India. One might point to certain distinctive features of the tradition in France, in Germany, or in the United States. But if such a tradition exists in India, its essential ingredients are by no means clear to everyone. One might say at best that there are several and diverse traditions, with little or no agreement on their relative merits, so that one has to pick one's way through a thicket of terms, concepts, techniques and procedures, and in the end rely mainly on improvisation. This is by no means a happy state of affairs, but such, according to many, is indeed the current state of sociology in India.

Why have Indian sociologists, despite continuous effort for three quarters of a century, failed to develop firm traditions for the systematic study of society and its institutions? Many would say that this is because they have depended too heavily on borrowed theories, borrowed concepts and borrowed methods of enquiry. This true to a greater or lesser extent of all branches of modern science a scholarship in India but it manifests itself in a particularly acute form in the discipline of sociology. For several generations, Indian sociologists have agonized over the mismatch between the concepts and methods on which they draw from the common pool of their discipline and the data to which they seek to apply them. That this mismatch is widespread and pervasive can hardly be denied. Moreover, it is a good thing that we should be troubled and concerned about it, provided that our worry does not lead to paralysis in the practice of our craft.

The fact that most of the basic tools of sociological enquiry and analysis used in the

study of Indian society and culture were devised outside India does not disturb all Indian sociologists equally. Some would say that one should use such tools as are available adapt them to one's use as well as one can, and improvise to the extent possible. Whether we engage in participant-observation or in survey research, the basic procedures have to be broadly the same everywhere, so why worry about where or by whom they were first devised? Again, there are broadly similar concepts and methods for interpreting and analysing social stratification and mobility, family, kinship and marriage, religious belief and practice, political processes, and economic transactions wherever they exist and operate, and we would be foolish to turn our backs on the available concepts and methods in the hope of devising new ones by our own unaided effort. Why, they would ask, try to reinvent the bicycle?

But perhaps the majority continue to be disturbed by the mismatch between the tools available to them and the material on which they have to work, and they seem to oscillate between two alternative courses. The first course is to work within the system, keeping the mind open to the possibility of small, Incremental changes in the hope that the cumulative effect of such work by many scholars over several generations will lift the subject to a higher plane theoretically and methodologically. This probably is how most of us work, in the spirit of the journeyman, although few of us can reasonably hope to achieve the success of Meyer Fortes to whose work I earlier referred.

The second response is articulated by a smaller number of persons, but they are more radical and more assertive. Their views raise echoes in the minds of many scholars, particularly in the younger generation, and therefore deserve attention. They assert that the poverty of our social theory follows inevitably from our unreflective adherence to a framework of enquiry and analysis that is altogether inappropriate. Working within the framework leads to its further entrenchment and to a continuing dissipation of intellectual energy. They call for a replacement of the established framework with its entire baggage of concepts, methods and procedures by an alternative sociology or, even, an alternative to sociology. In this view, if I were to put it starkly, newness does not emerge bit by bit, it has to be created all at once.

What is to be the shape of this new, alternative sociology? Naturally there are different Voices that seek to express different views and impulses. These voices are more agreed about what is to be set aside than about what is to be put in its place. One source of this call for the rejection of the existing framework is radical Marxism which has trained its guns on 'bourgeois sociology' for nearly a century. Another source of it, more specific to our intellectual climate, is radical nationalism whose target is Western, rather than bourgeois, sociology. In our contemporary context, the second source is more potent than the first one, although of course the two may be combined, either consciously or unconsciously.

The search for alternatives to existing theories, concepts, methods, procedures and techniques will no doubt continue, for that search is a part of intellectual life everywhere. It will lead to the opening up of new areas of substantive enquiry, as it has already done in the last couple of decades in gender studies, in environmental sociology and in the sociology of science. The real question is how this search will connect itself with the existing body of knowledge that has already accumulated. I am not convinced that a radical disconnection between what has been done in the past and what is to be done in the future is either feasible or desirable. Those who wish to create a whole new alternative sociology will no doubt go their way, at least for some time, but my instincts tell me that their work too will in due course of time either fall by the wayside or fall in line. Experience shows that the idea of paradigm shift is operationally less useful in the social than in the natural sciences.

The discontent with existing approaches and the search for radically new alternatives has had paradoxical consequences. It has led able scholars into extreme forms of the very weaknesses they attack most mercilessly in others. It is doubtful that we will ever be able to lay to rest the ghosts of 'bourgeois sociology' and 'Western sociology', and the attacks against them are often misdirected, and they backfire with unfailing regularity.

Twenty-five years ago, Seminar magazine devoted one of its issues to the discussion of the social sciences, and in particular to the demands of quality and of relevance within them. In a forceful article on 'The Question of Relevance', P. C. Joshi pointed out that 'the lack of relevance of social sciences constitutes one of the key problems in many underdeveloped countries including India' (1972: 24). He questioned 'the relevance of the entire Western intellectual heritage to the underdeveloped countries', and attacked the 'mere borrowing and transfer of knowledge from the Western to the non-Western world'. However, he then proceeded in the main part of his article to give a vivid exposition of the views of four major thinkers, Gunnar Myrdal, Wassily Leontief, J. K. Galbraith and Simon Kuznets, all acknowledged Western authorities. Apart from a brief and passing show of deference to Gandhi and Mao, there was no discussion of any Indian or other Asian social scientist.

These contradictions reveal themselves in discussions not only of research but also of teaching. In a paper on the teaching of economics in India published some ten years ago, Sukhamoy Chakravarty drew attention to the many shortcomings in the existing practice (1986:1165-68). These he attributed to three main factors: the extensive use of texts written outside India, the pervasive desire among Indian economists to catch up with the West, and the generally lackluster quality of Indian teachers of the subject. The essay provides a very scholarly exposition of the ideas of the world's leading authorities on the subject, but there is no discussion of the work of any Indian economist. Reading the paper one might justly wonder what there is to teach to students of economics in India other than the works of those European and American authors to whom Chakravarty gives his exclusive attention. He does mention that there are some important exceptions to the generally poor quality of Indian economists, but he does not tell us who they are, or, more importantly, what makes them exceptional. How can we begin to raise the level of the subject in India if we pay such scant regard to even the important exceptions among the four or five generations of economists who have taught and written about the subject in India?

It is evident that the ablest among our social scientists are unable to discuss the works of Western authorities without a sense of guilt. That is understandable and not necessarily undesirable, but unfortunately the sense of guilt is almost always overlaid by a thick coat of self-righteousness. We are too quick to throw stones all around without paying any heed to the glass houses we erect for our own habitation.

We have all encountered some advocates of autonomy and self-reliance who quote extensively from the works of Western scholars: promoters of new alternatives who are never too shy with their references to Foucault and Derrida. If there is nothing wrong in borrowing from Malinowski and Parsons, there should be nothing wrong in borrowing from Foucault and Derrida; but this must be understood on both sides. The adoption of new ideas can be healthy and fruitful only if it does not lead to a complete disregard of what was going on before. It is here that we find the weakest link in the chain. Every new generation of Indian sociologists acts as if nothing had gone on before; it does not ask what its own fate will be when another new generation takes its place.

Being attentive to what has been done before does not require one to close one's mind to new ideas. One should pursue the search for ideas according to one's interest and inclination, and not be unduly concerned over the intrinsic worth of the places in

which others are pursuing their search. One should be prepared to look for new ideas wherever they may be found, and some of the best scholars I have known have been diligent scavengers, retrieving very good ideas from other people's dustbins. But it is not enough to find new material; we must then undertake the slow and laborious effort of finding a place for it in the existing practice of the discipline. Only then will that practice change in a significant way.

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