

CHAPTER 3

ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

Look around you. What do you see? If you are in a classroom, you may see students in uniform, sitting on chairs with books open on their desk. There are school bags with lunch and pencil boxes. Ceiling fans might be whirring overhead. Have you ever thought about where these things — school clothes, furniture, bags, electricity, come from? If you trace their origins, you will find that the source of each material object lies in nature. Every day, we use objects whose production draws upon natural resources from around the world. The chair in your classroom may be made from wood with iron nails, glue and varnish. Its journey from a tree in a forest or plantation to you depends on electricity, diesel, facilities for trade, and telecommunications. Along the way, it has passed through the hands of loggers, carpenters, supervisors and managers, transporters, traders and those in charge of buying school furniture. These producers and distributors, and the inputs that they provide into chair manufacturing, in turn use a variety of goods and services derived from nature. Try and

map these resource flows and you will soon see how complex such relationships are!

In this chapter, we will study social relationships with the environment as they have changed over time and as they vary from place to place. It is important to analyse and interpret such variations in a systematic way. There are many urgent environmental problems that demand our attention. To address these crises effectively, we need a sociological framework for understanding why they occur and how they might be prevented or resolved.

All societies have an ecological basis. The term **ecology** denotes the web of physical and biological systems and processes of which humans are one element. Mountains and rivers, plains and oceans, and the flora and fauna that they support, are a part of ecology. The ecology of a place is also affected by the interaction between its geography and hydrology. For example, the plant and animal life unique to a desert is adapted to its scarce rainfall, rocky or sandy soils, and extreme temperatures. Similar

ecological factors limit and shape how human beings can live in any particular place.

Over time, however, ecology has been modified by **human action**. What appears to be a natural feature of the environment — aridity or flood-proneness, for example, is often produced by human intervention. Deforestation in the upper catchment of a river may make the river more flood-prone. Climate change brought about by global warming is another instance of the widespread impact of human activity on nature. Over time, it is often difficult to separate and distinguish between the natural and human factors in ecological change.

Activity 1

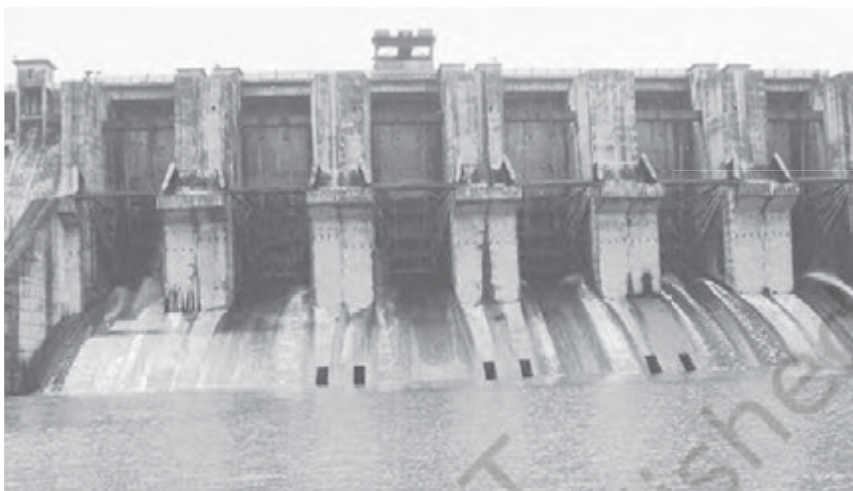
Did you know that the Ridge forest in Delhi is not the natural vegetation of this region but was planted by the British around 1915? Its dominant tree species is *Prosopis juliflora* (*vilayati kikar* or *vilayati babul*) which was introduced into India from South America and which has become naturalised all over north India.

Did you know that the *chaurs*, the wide grassy meadows of Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand which offer excellent views of wildlife, were once agricultural fields? Villages in the area were relocated in order to create what now appears to be a pristine wilderness.

Can you think of other examples where what seems to be 'natural' is actually modified by cultural interventions?

Alongside biophysical properties and processes that may have been transformed by human action — for example, the flow of a river and the species composition of a forest, there are other ecological elements around us that are more obviously human-made. An agricultural farm with its soil and water conservation works, its cultivated plants and domesticated animals, its inputs of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, is clearly a human transformation of nature. The built environment of a city, made from concrete, cement, brick, stone, glass and tar, uses natural resources but is very much a human artefact.

Social environments emerge from the interaction between biophysical ecology and human interventions. This is a two-way process. Just as nature shapes society, society shapes nature. For instance, the fertile soil of the Indo-Gangetic floodplain enables intensive agriculture. Its high productivity allows dense population settlements and generates enough surpluses to support other, non-agricultural activities, giving rise to complex hierarchical societies and states. In contrast, the desert of Rajasthan can only support pastoralists who move from place to place in order to keep their livestock supplied with fodder. These are instances of ecology shaping the forms of human life and culture. On the other hand, the social organisation of capitalism has shaped nature across the world. The private automobile is one instance of a capitalist commodity

A dam**A small dam**

that has transformed lives and landscapes. Air pollution and congestion in cities, regional conflicts and wars over oil, and global warming

are just a few of the environmental effects of cars. Human interventions increasingly have the power to alter environments, often permanently.

The ecological effects of the Industrial Revolution in Britain were felt all over the world. Large areas of southern North America and the Caribbean were converted to plantations to meet the demand for cotton in the mills of Lancashire. Young West Africans were forcibly transported to America to work as slave labour on the plantations. The depopulation of West Africa caused its agricultural economy to decline, with fields reverting to fallow wastelands. In Britain, smoke from the coal-burning mills fouled the air. Displaced farmers and labourers from the countryside came to the cities for work and lived in wretched conditions. The ecological footprints of the cotton industry could be found all over urban and rural environments.

The interaction between environment and society is shaped by **social organisation**. Property relations determine how and by whom natural resources can be used. For instance, if forests are owned by the government, it will have the power to decide whether it should lease them to timber companies or allow villagers to collect forest produce. Private ownership of land and water sources will affect whether others can have access to these resources and on what terms and conditions. Ownership and control over resources is also related to the division of labour in the production process. Landless labourers and women will have a different relationship with natural resources than men. In rural India,

women are likely to experience resource scarcity more acutely because gathering fuel and fetching water are generally women's tasks but they do not control these resources. Social organisation influences how different social groups relate to their environment.

Different relationships between environment and society also reflect different **social values and norms**, as well as knowledge systems. The values underlying capitalism have supported the commodification of nature, turning it into objects that can be bought and sold for profit. For instance, the multiple cultural meanings of a river — its ecological, utilitarian, spiritual, and aesthetic significance, are stripped down to a single set of calculations about profit and loss from the sale of water for an entrepreneur. Socialist values of equality and justice have led to the seizure of lands from large landlords and their redistribution among landless peasants in a number of countries. Religious values have led some social groups to protect and conserve sacred groves and species and others to believe that they have divine sanction to change the environment to suit their needs.

There are many **different perspectives on the environment** and its relationship to society. These differences include the 'nature-nurture' debate and whether individual characteristics are innate or are influenced by environmental factors. For instance, are people poor

because they are innately less talented or hard-working or because they are born into a situation of disadvantage and lack of opportunity? Theories and data about environment and society are influenced by the social conditions under which they emerge. Thus the notions that women are intrinsically less able than men, and Blacks naturally less able than Whites, were challenged as ideas of equality became more widespread during the 18th century's social and political revolutions. Colonialism generated a great deal of knowledge about environment and society, often systematically compiling it in order to make resources available to the imperial powers. Geology, geography, botany, zoology, forestry and hydraulic engineering were among the many disciplines that were created and institutionalised to facilitate the

management of natural resources for colonial purposes.

Environmental management is, however, a very difficult task. Not enough is known about biophysical processes to predict and control them. In addition, human relations with the environment have become increasingly complex. With the spread of industrialisation, resource extraction has expanded and accelerated, affecting ecosystems in unprecedented ways. Complex industrial technologies and modes of organisation require sophisticated management systems which are often fragile and vulnerable to error. We live in **risk societies** using technologies and products that we do not fully grasp. The occurrence of nuclear disasters like Chernobyl, industrial accidents like Bhopal, and Mad Cow disease in Europe shows the dangers inherent in industrial environments.

Bhopal Industrial Disaster: Who was to Blame?

On the night of 3 December 1984, a deadly gas spread through Bhopal, killing about 4,000 people and leaving another 200,000 permanently disabled. The gas was later identified as methyl isocyanate (MIC), accidentally released by a Union Carbide pesticide factory in the city. In its *State of India's Environment: The Second Citizens' Report*, the Centre for Science and Environment analysed the reasons behind the disaster:

'Union Carbide's coming to Bhopal in 1977 was welcomed by all, because it meant jobs and money for Bhopal, and saving in foreign exchange for the country, with the rising demand for pesticides after the Green Revolution. The MIC plant was troublesome from the start and there were several leakages, including one that caused the death of a plant operator, until the big disaster. However, the government steadfastly ignored warnings, notably from the head of the Bhopal Municipal Corporation who issued notice to Union Carbide to move out of Bhopal in 1975. The officer was transferred and the company donated Rs 25,000 to the Corporation for a park.

The warnings kept coming. In May 1982, three experts from the Union Carbide Corporation, USA, surveyed safety measures and pointed out alarming lapses. These fears were reported in a local weekly *Rapat*, in what was to be a series of prophetic articles in 1982. At the same time, the factory's employees union also wrote to Central ministers and the chief minister warning them of the situation. The state Labour Minister reassured legislators at several times that the factory was safe. Only a few weeks before the gas leak, the factory had been granted an environmental clearance certificate by the state pollution control board. The Central government rivalled its state counterpart in casualness. It ignored the plant's safety record in granting it permission and ignored Department of Environment guidelines on the siting of hazardous plants.

Why the guidelines and warnings were ignored is clear. The company employs the relatives of powerful politicians and bureaucrats. Its legal adviser is an important political leader and its public relations officer is the nephew of a former minister. The company's posh guesthouse was always at the disposal of politicians. The chief minister's wife had reportedly received lavish hospitality from the company during visits to the USA, and the company had donated Rs 1.5 lakh to a welfare organisation in the chief minister's home town.

Union Carbide Corporation also played its full part in the run-up to the tragedy. The Bhopal plant was under-designed and lacked several safety features. It did not have a computerised early warning system, a standard device in the company's factories in the US. The company had not worked out emergency evacuation procedures with the local community. The plant was not being maintained and operated at the requisite level of efficiency. Morale was low because sales were dropping and the plant was running at a third of its capacity. Staff strength had been reduced and many engineers and operators had left, making it impossible for the existing staff to monitor all the tasks. Many instruments were out of order.

Discussion: Which social institutions and organisations play a role in industrial accidents like the Bhopal disaster? What steps can be taken to prevent such disasters?

MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS AND RISKS

Although the relative importance or urgency of different environmental hazards may vary from country to country and context to context, the following are globally recognized as the main ones:

A. Resource Depletion

Using up non-renewable natural resources is one of the most serious

environmental problems. While fossil fuels and specially petroleum hog the headlines, the depletion and destruction of water and land is probably even more rapid. The rapid decline in groundwater levels is an acute problem all over India, especially in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Aquifers which have accumulated water over hundreds and thousands of years are being emptied in matter of a few decades to meet the

growing demands of intensive agriculture, industry and urban centres. Rivers have also been dammed and diverted, causing irreversible damage to the ecology of water basins. Many water bodies in urban areas have been filled up and built upon, destroying the natural drainage of the landscape. Like groundwater, topsoil too is created over thousands of years. This agricultural resource, too, is being destroyed due to poor environmental management leading to erosion, water-logging and salinisation. The production of bricks for building houses is another reason for the loss of topsoil.

Biodiversity habitats such as forests, grasslands and wetlands are the

other major resource facing rapid depletion, largely due to the expansion of areas under agriculture. Though various parts of the globe, including some parts of India, appear to have seen some re-forestation or increase in vegetative cover in recent decades, the overall trend is towards the loss of biodiversity. The shrinking of these habitats has endangered many species, several of them unique to India. You may have read of the recent crisis when it was discovered that the tiger population had fallen sharply despite strict laws and large sanctuaries.

B. Pollution

Air pollution is considered to be a major environmental problem in urban and rural areas, causing respiratory and

Deforestation



other problems which result in serious illness and death. The sources of air pollution include emissions from industries and vehicles, as well as the burning of wood and coal for domestic use. We have all heard of pollution from vehicles and factories, and seen pictures of smoking chimneys and exhaust pipes in cars. But we often don't realise that *indoor pollution* from cooking fires is also a serious source of risk. This is particularly true of rural homes where wood fires using green or poorly burning wood, badly designed

a result of air pollution exposure. This finding more than doubles previous estimates and confirms that air pollution is now the world's largest single environmental health risk. Reducing air pollution could save millions of lives. This has enabled scientists to make a more detailed analysis of health risks from a wider demographic spread that now includes rural as well as urban areas. In 2012, total 3.3 million deaths linked to indoor air pollution and 2.6 million deaths related to outdoor air pollution.*

Industrial Pollution



fireplaces (*chulhas*), and poor ventilation combine to put village women at serious risk because they do the cooking. WHO reports that in 2012 around 7 million people died — one in eight of total global deaths — as

Water pollution is also a very serious issue affecting surface as well as groundwater. Major sources include not only domestic sewage and factory effluents but also the runoff from farms where large amounts of synthetic

* Weblink: www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/air-pollution/en/

Spraying pesticide in a brinjal field



fertilisers and pesticides are used. The pollution of rivers and waterbodies is a particularly important problem.

Cities also suffer from *noise pollution*, which has been the subject of court orders in many cities. Sources include amplified loudspeakers used at religious and cultural events, political campaigns, vehicle horns and traffic, and construction work.

C. Global Warming

The release of particular gases (carbon dioxide, methane and others) creates a 'greenhouse' effect by trapping the sun's heat and not allowing it to dissipate. This has caused a small but significant rise in global temperatures. The resulting climate change is projected to melt polar ice-fields and raise the sea level, thus submerging

low-lying coastal areas, and more important, affecting the ecological balance. Global warming is also likely to result in greater fluctuations and uncertainty in climates across the world. China and India are increasingly significant contributors to world carbon and greenhouse gas emissions.

D. Genetically Modified Organisms

New techniques of gene-splicing allow scientists to import genes from one species into another, introducing new characteristics. For instance, genes from *Bacillus thuringiensis* have been introduced into cotton species, making it resistant to the bollworm, a major pest. Genetic modification may also be done to shorten growing time, increase size and the shelf-life of crops.

However, little is known about the long term effects of genetic modification on those who eat these foods or on ecological systems. Agricultural companies can also use genetic modification to create sterile seeds, preventing farmers from re-using them, and guaranteeing that seeds remain their profit-yielding property, forcing farmers to be dependent on them.

E. Natural and Man-made Environmental Disasters

This is a self-explanatory category. The Bhopal disaster of 1984 killed about 4,000 people when a toxic gas leaked from the Union Carbide factory, and the tsunami of 2004 killed thousands of people are the most recent examples of man-made and natural environmental disasters.

WHY ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS ARE ALSO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

How environmental problems affect different groups is a function of **social inequality**. Social status and power determine the extent to which people can insulate themselves from environmental crises or overcome it. In some cases, their 'solutions' may actually worsen environmental disparities. In Kutch, Gujarat, where water is scarce, richer farmers have invested in deep bore tubewells to tap groundwater to irrigate their fields and grow cash crops. When the rains fail, the earthen wells of the poorer villagers run dry and they do not even have water to drink. At such times, the moist green fields of the rich farmers seem to mock

them. Certain environmental concerns sometimes appear to be universal concerns, not particular to specific social groups. For instance, reducing air pollution or protecting biodiversity seem to be in the public interest. A sociological analysis shows, however, that how public priorities are set and how they are pursued may not be universally beneficial. Securing the public interest may actually serve the interests of particular politically and economically powerful groups, or hurt the interests of the poor and politically weak. As the debates over large dams and around protected areas show, the environment as a public interest is a hotly contested arena.

The school of **social ecology** points out that social relations, in particular the organisation of property and production, shape environmental perceptions and practices. Different social groups stand in different relationships to the environment and approach it differently. A Forest Department geared to maximising revenues from supplying large volumes of bamboo to the paper industry will view and use a forest very differently from an artisan who harvests bamboo to make baskets. Their varied interests and ideologies generate environmental conflicts. In this sense, environmental crises have their roots in social inequality. Addressing environmental problems requires changing environment-society relations, and this in turn requires efforts to change relations between different social groups — men

and women, urban and rural people, landlords and labourers. Changed social relations will give rise to different knowledge systems and modes of managing the environment.

What literally defines **social ecology** as “social” is its recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems. Conversely, present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within society. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today — apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes.

Murray Bookchin, political philosopher and founder of the Institute for Social Ecology

Two examples of environment-society conflicts are given below:

Sustainable Development

The relation between ecology and economy has been a complex one. But one thing is certain that, unless there is a balance between the two, the future of humanity will remain bleak. Since the last 300 years, the way economic development has been going on, with its emphasis on controlling the nature and exploiting it ruthlessly for the benefit of a section of population, has led to extinction of thousands of species of flora and fauna. The emphasis

on non-renewable energy and introduction of large number of new species ostensibly to meet growing demand of industrial world has played havoc with ecology. There is growing concern worldwide that if the present pace of depletion of natural resource and extinction of biodiversity continues for some more time, the future generation will have to pay the price for it.

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.” (Brundtland Report, October 1987).*

Today the basis of capitalist development is consumption. Old things must be destroyed just for the introduction of new things so that people continue to consume new industrial products. “There is growing inequality in the world. No amount of growth and economic prosperity is enough anymore, because aspiration is the new God. This means that anybody who is poor is marginalised simply because they have just not made the grade. There is no longer space for such failure in our brave, newer world. It is about the survival of the fittest, in a way that would have made Darwin

* Presentation of the report, *Our Common Future*, by Brundtland at a press conference organised by the World Commission on Environment and Development in London, England on 27 April 1987.

insane.” (Why shouldn’t I be intolerant?, Sunita Narain in *Down to Earth*, 25 January 2016)

We are living in an unequal world where we want to control resources and opportunities. The already existing system of social stratification makes it only too easy for some sections of people to control most of the available resources and opportunities. We have to make the world worth living not only for ourselves but for generations to come. We cannot be ignorant to the needs of the present nor can we be oblivious of the needs of the future. We need to build a society where people are at par; where there is equitable distribution of resources; where the aim is development but one that is inclusive and not exclusive. This is what will make us sustainable.

In this light, spearheaded by the 193 member states of United Nations as well as the global civil society has, through a deliberative process, arrived at the 17 “Global Goals” of sustainable development with 169 targets. These goals to a large extent derive from the sentiment expressed often by former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon in his quote, “there can be no Plan B, because there is no Planet B”.

Water Parks

Water-starved Vidharbha has a growing number of water parks and amusement centres. In Shegaon, Buldhana, a religious trust runs a

giant “Meditation Centre and Entertainment Park.” Efforts to maintain a 30-acre ‘artificial lake’ within it ran dry this summer. But not before untold amounts of water were wasted in the attempt. Here the entry tickets are called “donations”. In Yavatmal, a private company runs a public lake as a tourist joint. Amravati has two or more such spots (dry just now). And there are others in and around Nagpur.

This, in a region where villages have sometimes got water once in 15 days. And where an ongoing farm crisis has seen the largest number of farmers’ suicides in Maharashtra. “No major project for either drinking water or irrigation has been completed in Vidharbha in decades,” says Nagpur-based journalist Jaideep Hardikar. He has covered the region for years. Shri Singh insists the Fun and Food Village conserves water. “We use sophisticated filter plants to reuse the same water.” But evaporation levels are very high in this heat. And water is not just used for sports. All the parks use massive amounts of it for maintaining their gardens, on sanitation and for their clientele. “It is a huge waste of water and money,” says Vinayak Gaikwad in Buldhana. He is a farmer and a Kisan Sabha leader in the district. That in the process, public resources are so often used to boost private profit, angers Mr. Gaikwad. “They should instead be meeting people’s basic water needs.” Back in Bazargaon, *sarpanch* Yamunabai Uikey isn’t impressed either. Not by the Fun and Food Village. Nor

by other industries that have taken a lot but given very little. “What is there in all this for us,” she wants to know. To get a standard government water project for her village, the panchayat has to bear 10 per cent of its cost. That’s around Rs.4.5 lakh. “How can we afford Rs.45,000? What is our condition?” So it’s simply been handed over to a contractor. This could see the project built. But it will mean more costs in the long run and less control for a village of so many poor and landless people. In the Park, Gandhi’s portrait still smiles out of the office as we leave. Seemingly at the ‘Snowdome’ across the parking lot. An odd fate for the man who said: “Live simply, that others might simply live.”

(P. Sainath in *The Hindu*, June 22, 2005.)

‘God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism in the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.’

— **Mahatma Gandhi**

As a consequence of developments like the water park described above, small farmers in areas of dryland agriculture now find life increasingly impossible. Over the last six years, reports indicate that thousands of farmers in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have killed themselves, often by drinking pesticide. What drives farmers, people who

stoically deal with the uncertainties inherent in agriculture, to this extreme step? The investigation of journalist P. Sainath shows that farmers’ recent distress is due to a fusion of environmental and economic factors. Agrarian conditions have become more volatile as farmers are exposed to the fluctuations of the world market and as government support for small farmers declines due to liberalisation policies. Cotton farmers grow a high-risk, high-return crop. Cotton needs some irrigation. It is also very susceptible to pest infestation. Cotton growers thus need capital to invest in irrigation and pest control. Both of these inputs have become more expensive over the years: high levels of extraction have depleted water reserves so farmers have to drill deeper, and pests have become resistant to many pesticides, requiring farmers to spray new pesticides, more frequently. Farmers in need of credit to purchase these inputs end up approaching private moneylenders and traders who charge them high rates of interest. If the crop fails, the farmer can’t repay the money. Not only can they not feed their families, they cannot fulfil family obligations like arranging children’s marriages. Faced with financial and social ruin, many farmers have nowhere to turn. Suicide seems to be the only way out to them.

Discussion: Is water scarcity natural or human-made? What social factors shape how water is allocated among different users? How do different patterns of water-use affect different social groups?

Activity 2

Find out how much water your household uses in a day. Try and find out how much water is used by comparable households belonging to different income groups. How much time and money do different households spend on getting water? Within the household, whose job is it to collect water? How much water does the government provide to different classes of people?

The Urban Environment: A Tale of Two Cities

Here is a typical conflict over the urban environment. On the morning of 30 January 1995, Delhi was waking up to another chilly winter day. Imagine the well-to-do colony of Ashok Vihar in north Delhi, posh houses shrouded in grey mist, early risers setting off on morning walks, some with their pet dogs — Pomeranians and Alsatians, straining at the leash. As one of these morning walkers entered the neighbourhood 'park', the only open area in the locality, he saw a young man, poorly clad, walking away with an empty bottle in hand. Outraged, he caught hold of the man and called out to his neighbours. Someone phoned the police. A group of enraged house-owners and two police constables descended on the youth and, within minutes, beat him to death.

The young man was eighteen year-old Dilip, a visitor to Delhi, who had come to watch the Republic Day

parade in the capital. He was staying with his uncle in a jhuggi (shanty house) along the railway tracks bordering Ashok Vihar. His uncle worked as a labourer in the Wazirpur industrial estate nearby. Like all other planned industrial areas in Delhi, Wazirpur too has no provision for workers' housing. The jhuggi cluster with more than 10,000 households shared three public toilets, each one with eight latrines, effectively one toilet between more than 2000 persons. For most residents, then, any large open space, under cover of dark, became a place to defecate. Their use of the 'park' brought the industrial workers and their families up against the more affluent residents of the area who paid to have a wall constructed between the dirty, unsightly jhuggis and their own homes. The wall was soon breached, to allow the traffic of domestic workers who lived in the jhuggis but worked to clean the homes and cars of the rich, and to offer access to the delinquent defecators.

Dilip's death was thus the culmination of a long-standing battle over a contested space that, to one set of residents, embodied their sense of gracious urban living, a place of trees and grass devoted to leisure and recreation, and that to another set of residents, was the only available space that could be used as a toilet. If he had known this history of simmering conflict, Dilip would probably have been more wary and would have run away when challenged, and perhaps he would still be alive. The violence did not end there.

When a group of people from the jhuggis gathered to protest against this killing, the police opened fire and killed four more people.

As cities grow, the conflict over urban space is becoming more acute. While migrants come to the city in search of work, they cannot afford scarce legal housing and are forced to settle on public lands. This land is now in great demand to build infrastructure for affluent residents and visitors — malls and multiplexes, hotels and tourist sites. As a result, poor workers and their families are being evicted to the outskirts of the city and their homes demolished. Besides land, air and water have also become highly contested resources in the urban environment.

(Taken from: Amita Baviskar in 'Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power and Identity in the Making of Metropolitan Delhi' in *International Social Science Journal*. 175: 89-98. 2003)

Discussion: Why do the urban poor often live in slums? Which social groups control landed property and housing in the city? What social factors affect people's access to water and sanitation?

Activity 3

Imagine that you were a fifteen year-old girl or boy living in a slum. What would your family do and how would you live? Write a short essay describing a day in your life.

GLOSSARY

Hydrology: The science of water and its flows; or the broad structure of water resources in a country or region.

Deforestation: The loss of forest area due to cutting down of trees and/or taking over of the land for other purposes, usually cultivation.

Green House: A covered structure for protecting plants from extremes of climate, usually from excessive cold; a green house (also called a hot house) maintains a warmer temperature inside compared to the outside temperature.

Emissions: Waste gases given off by a human-initiated process, usually in the context of industries or vehicles.

Effluents: Waste materials in fluid form produced from industrial processes.

Aquifers: Natural underground formations in the geology of a region where water gets stored.

Monoculture: When the plant life in a locality or region is reduced to a single variety.

EXERCISES

1. Describe in your own words what you understand by the term 'ecology'.
 2. Why is ecology not limited only to the forces of nature?
 3. Describe the two-way process by which 'social environments' emerge.
 4. Why and how does social organisation shape the relationship between the environment and society?
 5. Why is environmental management a complex and huge task for society?
 6. What are some of the important forms of pollution-related environmental hazards?
 7. What are the major environmental issues associated with resource depletion?
 8. Explain why environmental problems are simultaneously social problems.
 9. What is meant by social ecology?
 10. Describe some environment related conflicts that you know of or have read about. (Other than the examples in the text.)
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INTRODUCING WESTERN SOCIOLOGISTS

Sociology is sometimes called the child of the 'age of revolution'. This is because it was born in 19th century Western Europe, after revolutionary changes in the preceding three centuries that decisively changed the way people lived. Three revolutions paved the way for the emergence of sociology: the Enlightenment, or the scientific revolution; the French Revolution; and the Industrial Revolution. These processes completely transformed not only European society, but also the rest of the world as it came into contact with Europe.

In this chapter the key ideas of three sociological thinkers: Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber will be discussed. As part of the classical tradition of sociology, they laid the foundation of the subject. Their ideas and insights have remained relevant even in the contemporary period. Of course, these ideas have also been subjected to criticism and have undergone major modifications. But since ideas about society are themselves influenced by social conditions, we

begin with a few words about the context in which sociology emerged.

THE CONTEXT OF SOCIOLOGY

The modern era in Europe and the conditions of modernity that we take for granted today were brought about by three major processes. These were: the Enlightenment or dawning of the 'age of reason'; the quest for political sovereignty embodied in the French Revolution; and the system of mass manufacture inaugurated by the Industrial Revolution. Since these have been discussed at length in Chapter 1 of *Introducing Sociology*, here we will only mention some of the intellectual consequences of these momentous changes.

Activity 1

Revisit the discussion of the coming of the modern age in Europe in Chapter 1 of *Introducing Sociology*. What sorts of changes were these three processes associated with?

The Enlightenment

During the late 17th and 18th centuries, Western Europe saw the emergence of radically new ways of thinking about the world. Referred to as 'The Enlightenment', these new philosophies established the human being at the centre of the universe, and rational thought as the central feature of the human being. The ability to think rationally and critically transformed the individual human being into both the producer and the user of all knowledge, the 'knowing subject'. On the other hand, only persons who could think and reason could be considered as fully human. Those who could not remained deficient as human beings and were considered as not fully evolved humans, as in the case of the natives of primitive societies or 'savages'. Being the handiwork of humans, society was amenable to rational analysis and thus comprehensible to other humans. For reason to become the defining feature of the human world, it was necessary to displace nature, religion and the divine acts of gods from the central position they had in earlier ways of understanding the world. This means that the Enlightenment was made possible by, and in turn helped to develop, attitudes of mind that we refer to today as secular, scientific and humanistic.

The French Revolution

The French Revolution (1789) announced the arrival of political

sovereignty at the level of individuals as well as nation-states. The Declaration of Human Rights asserted the equality of all citizens and questioned the legitimacy of privileges inherited by birth. It signaled the emancipation of the individual from the oppressive rule of the religious and feudal institutions that dominated France before the Revolution. The peasants, most of whom were serfs (or bonded labourers) tied to landed estates owned by members of the aristocracy, were freed of their bonds. The numerous taxes paid by the peasants to the feudal lords and to the church were cancelled. As free citizens of the republic, sovereign individuals were invested with rights and were equal before the law and other institutions of the state. The state had to respect the privacy of the autonomous individual and its laws could not intrude upon the domestic life of the people. A separation was built between the public realm of the state and a private realm of the household. New ideas about what was appropriate to the public and private spheres developed. For example, religion and the family became more 'private' while education (specially schooling) became more 'public'. Moreover, the nation-state itself was also redefined as a sovereign entity with a centralised government. The ideals of the French Revolution — liberty, equality and fraternity — became the watchwords of the modern state.

The Industrial Revolution

The foundations of modern industry were laid by the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It had two major aspects. The first was the systematic application of science and technology to industrial production, particularly the invention of new machines and the harnessing of new sources of power. Secondly, the industrial revolution also evolved new ways of organising labour and markets on a scale larger than anything in the past. New machines like the Spinning Jenny (which greatly increased the productivity of the textile industry) and new methods of obtaining power (such as the various versions of the steam engine) facilitated the production process and gave rise to the factory system and mass manufacture of goods. These goods were now produced on a gigantic scale for distant markets across the world. The raw materials used in their production were also obtained from all over the world. Modern large scale industry thus became a world wide phenomenon.

These changes in the production system also resulted in major changes in social life. The factories set up in urban areas were manned by workers who were uprooted from the rural areas and came to the cities in search of work. Low wages at the factory

meant that men, women and even children had to work long hours in hazardous circumstances to eke out a living. Modern industry enabled the urban to dominate over the rural. Cities and towns became the dominant forms of human settlement, housing large and unequal populations in small, densely populated urban areas. The rich and powerful lived in the cities, but so did the working classes who lived in slums amidst poverty and squalor. Modern forms of governance, with the state assuming control of health, sanitation, crime control and general 'development' created the demand for new kinds of knowledge. The social sciences and particularly sociology emerged partly as a response to this need.

From the outset sociological thought was concerned with the scientific analysis of developments in industrial society. This has prompted observers to argue that sociology was the 'science of the new industrial society'. Empirically informed scientific discussion about trends in social behaviour only became possible with the advent of modern industrial society. The scientific information generated by the state to monitor and maintain the health of its social body became the basis for reflection on society. Sociological theory was the result of this self-reflection.

Karl Marx (1818-1883)**Biography**

Karl Marx was born on 5 May 1818 in Trier, part of the Rhineland province of Prussia in Germany. Son of a prosperous liberal lawyer.

1834-36: Studied law at the University of Bonn and then at the University of Berlin, where he was much influenced by the Young Hegelians.

1841: Completed his doctoral thesis in philosophy from the University of Jena.

1843: Married Jenny von Westphalen and moved to Paris.

1844: Met Friedrich Engels in Paris, who became a lifelong friend.

1847: Invited by the International Working Men's Association to prepare a document spelling out its aims and objectives. This was written jointly by Marx and Engels and published as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)

1849: Exiled to England and lived there till his death.

1852: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (published).

1859: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (published).

1867: *Capital*, Vol. I, published.

1881: Death of Jenny von Westphalen.

1883: Marx dies and is buried in London's Highgate Cemetery.



Karl Marx was from Germany but spent most of his intellectually productive years in exile in Britain. His radical political views led him to be exiled from Germany, France and Austria. Though Marx had studied philosophy he was not a philosopher. He was a social thinker who advocated an end to oppression and exploitation. He believed that scientific socialism would achieve this goal. To that end

he engaged in a critical analysis of capitalist society to expose its weaknesses and bring about its downfall. Marx argued that human society had progressed through different stages. These were: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism. Capitalism was the latest phase of human advancement, but Marx believed that it would give way to socialism.

Capitalist society was marked by an ever intensifying process of alienation operating at several levels. First, modern capitalist society is one where humans are more alienated from nature than ever before; second, human beings are alienated from each other as capitalism individualises previously collective forms of social organisation, and as relationships get more and more market-mediated. Third, the large mass of working people is alienated from the fruits of its labour because workers do not own the products they produce. Moreover, workers have no control over the work process itself — unlike in the days when skilled craftsmen controlled their own labour, today the content of the factory worker's working day is decided by the management. Finally, as the combined result of all these alienations, human beings are also alienated from themselves and struggle to make their lives meaningful in a system where they are both more free but also more alienated and less in control of their lives than before.

However, even though it was an exploitative and oppressive system, Marx believed that capitalism was nevertheless a necessary and progressive stage of human history because it created the preconditions for an egalitarian future free from both exploitation and poverty. Capitalist society would be transformed by its victims, i.e. the working class, who would unite to collectively bring about a revolution to overthrow it and establish a free and equal socialist

society. In order to understand the working of capitalism, Marx undertook an elaborate study of its political, social and specially its economic aspects.

Marx's conception of the economy was based on the notion of a mode of production, which stood for a broad system of production associated with an epoch or historical period. Primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism were all modes of production. At this general level, the mode of production defines an entire way of life characteristic of an era. At a more specific level, we can think of the mode of production as being something like a building in the sense that it consists of a foundation or base, and a superstructure or something erected on top of the base. The base — or economic base — is primarily economic and includes the productive forces and production relations. Productive forces refer to all the means or factors of production such as land, labour, technology, sources of energy (such as electricity, coal, petroleum and so on). Production relations refer to all the economic relationships and forms of labour organisation which are involved in production. Production relations are also property relations, or relationships based on the ownership or control of the means of production.

For example, in the mode of production called primitive communism, the productive forces consisted mostly of nature — forests, land, animals and so on — along with very rudimentary forms of technology

like simple stone tools and hunting weapons. Production relations were based on community property (since individual private property did not yet exist) and included tribal forms of hunting or gathering which were the prevalent forms of labour organisation.

The economic base thus consisted of productive forces and relations of production. On this base rested all the social, cultural and political institutions of society. Thus, institutions like religion, art, law, literature or different forms of beliefs and ideas were all part of the 'superstructure' which was built on top of the base. Marx argued that people's ideas and beliefs originated from the economic system of which they were part. How human beings earned their livelihood determined how they thought — material life shaped ideas, ideas did not shape material life. This argument went against the dominant ways of thinking in Marx's time, when it was common to argue that human beings were free to think whatever they wanted and that ideas shaped the world.

Marx placed great emphasis on economic structures and processes because he believed that they formed the foundations of every social system throughout human history. If we understand how the economy works and how it has been changing in the past, he argued, we can learn how to change society in the future. But how can such change be brought about? Marx's answer: through class struggle.

CLASS STRUGGLE

For Marx, the most important method of classifying people into social groups was with reference to the production process, rather than religion, language, nationality or similar identities. He argued that people who occupy the same position in the social production process will eventually form a class. By virtue of their location in the production process and in property relations, they share the same interests and objectives, even though they may not recognise this immediately. Classes are formed through historical processes, which are in turn shaped by transformations in the conditions and forces of production, and consequent conflicts between already existing classes. As the mode of production — that is, the production technology and the social relations of production — changes, conflicts develop between different classes which result in struggles. For example, the capitalist mode of production creates the working class, which is a new urban, property-less group created by the destruction of the feudal agricultural system. Serfs and small peasants were thrown off their lands and deprived of their earlier sources of livelihood. They then congregated in cities looking for ways to survive, and the pressure of the laws and police forced them to work in the newly built factories. Thus a large new social group was created consisting of property-less people who were forced to work for their living. This shared location within the production process makes workers into a class.

Marx was a proponent of class struggle. He believed that class struggle was the major driving force of change in society. In *The Communist Manifesto* (which was also a programme of action), Marx and Engels presented their views in a clear and concise manner. Its opening lines declare, 'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle'. They went on to trace the course of human history and described how the nature of the class struggle varied in different historical epochs. As society evolved from the primitive to the modern through distinct phases, each characterised by particular kinds of conflict between the oppressor and oppressed classes. Marx and Engels wrote, 'Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried out an uninterrupted,

now hidden, now open fight'. The major opposing classes of each stage were identified from the contradictions of the production process. In capitalism the bourgeoisie (or capitalists) owned all the means of production, (such as investible capital, existing factories and machinery, land and so on). On the other hand, the working class lost all the means of production that it owned (or had access to) in the past. Thus, in the capitalist social system, workers had no choice but to sell their labour for wages in order to survive, because they had nothing else.

Even when two classes are objectively opposed to each other, they do not automatically engage in conflict. For conflict to occur it is necessary for them to become subjectively conscious of their class interests and identities, and therefore also of their rivals' interests and identities. It is only after this kind of

Activity 2

Although it is also called a 'class', does the group formed by you and your classmates form a class in the marxian sense? What arguments can you give in favour and against this view? Do factory workers and agricultural workers belong to the same class? What about workers and managers working in the same factory — do they both belong to the same class? Does a rich industrialist or factory owner who lives in the city and owns no agricultural land belong to the same class as a poor agricultural labourer who lives in the village and owns no land? What about a landlord who owns a lot of land and a small peasant who owns a small piece of land — do they belong to the same class if they live in the same village and are both landowners?

Think carefully about the reasons for your responses to these examples. [Suggestion: Try to imagine what interests the people mentioned in these examples may have in common; think of the position they occupy in the larger social system, particularly in relation to the production process.]

'class consciousness' is developed through political mobilisation that class conflicts occur. Such conflicts can lead to the overthrow of a dominant or ruling class (or coalition of classes) by the previously dominated or subordinated classes — this is called a revolution. In Marx's theory, economic processes created contradictions which in turn generated class conflict. But economic processes did not automatically lead to revolution — social and political processes were also needed to bring about a total transformation of society.

The presence of ideology is one reason why the relationship between economic and socio-political processes becomes complicated. In every epoch, the ruling classes promote a dominant ideology. This dominant ideology, or

way of seeing the world, tends to justify the domination of the ruling class and the existing social order. For example, dominant ideologies may encourage poor people to believe that they are poor not because they are exploited by the rich but because of 'fate', or because of bad deeds in a previous life, and so on. However, dominant ideologies are not always successful, and they can also be challenged by alternative worldviews or rival ideologies. As consciousness spreads unevenly among classes, how a class will act in a particular historical situation cannot be pre-determined. Hence, according to Marx, economic processes generally tend to generate class conflicts, though this also depends on political and social conditions. Given favourable conditions, class conflicts culminate in revolutions.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Emile Durkheim was born on April 15, 1858 in Epinal in the Lorraine region of France on the German border. He was from an orthodox Jewish family; his father, grandfather and great grandfather were all rabbis or Jewish priests. Emile too was initially sent to a school for training rabbis.

1876: Enters the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris to study philosophy.

1887: Appointed lecturer in social sciences and education at the University of Bordeaux.

1893: Publishes *Division of Labour in Society*, his doctoral dissertation.

1895: Publishes *Rules of Sociological Method*.

1897: Founds *Année Sociologique*, the first social science journal in France; and publishes his famous study, *Suicide*.

1902: Joins the University of Paris as the Chair of Education. Later in 1913 the Chair was renamed Education and Sociology.

1912: Publishes *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

1917: Dies at the age of 59, heartbroken by the death of his son, Andre in World War I.



Emile Durkheim may be considered as the founder of sociology as a formal discipline as he was the first to become a Professor of Sociology in Paris in 1913. Born into an orthodox Jewish family, Durkheim was sent to a rabbinical school (a Jewish religious school) for his early education. By the time he entered the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1876 he broke with his religious orientation and declared himself an agnostic. However, his moral upbringing had an enduring influence on his sociological thinking. The moral codes were the key characteristics of a society that determined the behaviour patterns of individuals. Coming from a religious family, Durkheim cherished the idea of developing a secular understanding of religion. It was in his last book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that he was finally able to fulfil this wish.

Society was for Durkheim a social fact which existed as a moral community over and above the individual. The ties that bound people in groups were crucial to the existence of society. These ties or social solidarities exerted pressure on individuals to conform to the norms and expectations of the group. This constrained the individual's behaviour pattern, limiting variation within a small range. Constriction of choice in social action meant that behaviour could now be predicted as it followed a pattern. So by observing behaviour patterns it was possible to identify the norms, codes and social solidarities which governed them. Thus, the

existence of otherwise 'invisible' things like ideas, norms, values and so on could be empirically verified by studying the patterns of social behaviour of people as they related to each other in a society.

For Durkheim the social was to be found in the codes of conduct imposed on individuals by collective agreement. It was evident in the practices of everyday life. The scientific understanding of society that Durkheim sought to develop was based on the recognition of moral facts. He wrote, 'Moral facts are phenomena like others; they consist of rules of action recognizable by certain distinctive characteristics, it must then be possible to observe them, describe them, classify them and look for certain laws explaining them' (Durkheim 1964: 32). Moral codes were manifestations of particular social conditions. Hence the morality appropriate for one society was inappropriate for another. So for Durkheim, the prevailing social conditions could be deduced from the moral codes. This made sociology akin to the natural sciences and was in keeping with his larger objective of establishing sociology as a rigorous scientific discipline.

DURKHEIM'S VISION OF SOCIOLOGY

Durkheim's vision of sociology as a new scientific discipline was characterised by two defining features. First, the subject matter of sociology — the study of social facts — was different from the other

sciences. Sociology concerned itself exclusively with what he called the 'emergent' level, that is, the level of complex collective life where social phenomena can emerge. These phenomena — for example, social institutions like religion or the family, or social values like friendship or patriotism etc. — were only possible in a complex whole that was larger than (and different from) its constituent parts. Although it is composed entirely of individuals, a collective social entity like a football or cricket team becomes something other than and much more than just a collection of eleven persons. Social entities like teams, political parties, street gangs, religious communities, nations and so on belong to a different level of reality than the level of individuals. It is this 'emergent' level that sociology studies.

The second defining feature of Durkheim's vision of sociology was that, like most of the natural sciences, it was to be an empirical discipline. This was actually a difficult claim to make because social phenomena are by their very nature abstract. We cannot 'see' a collective entity like the Jain community, or the Bengali (or Malayalam or Marathi) speaking community, or the Nepalese or Egyptian national communities. At least, we cannot see them in the same straightforward way that we can see a tree or a boy or a cloud. Even when the social phenomenon is small — like a family or a theatre group — we can directly see only the individuals who

make up the collectivity; we cannot see the collectivity itself. One of Durkheim's most significant achievements is his demonstration that sociology, a discipline that dealt with abstract entities like social facts, could nevertheless be a science founded on observable, empirically verifiable evidence. Although not directly observable, social facts were indirectly observable through patterns of behaviour. The most famous example of his use of a new kind of empirical data is in his study of *Suicide*. Although each individual case of suicide was specific to the individual and his/her circumstances, the average rate of suicide aggregated across hundreds of thousands of individuals in a community was a social fact. Thus, social facts could be observed via social behaviour, and specially aggregated patterns of social behaviour.

So what are 'social facts'? Social facts are like things. They are external to the individual but constrain their behaviour. Institutions like law, education and religion constitute social facts. Social facts are collective representations which emerge from the association of people. They are not particular to a person but of a general nature, independent of the individual. Attributes like beliefs, feelings or collective practices are examples.

Division of Labour in Society

In his first book, *Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim demonstrated his method of analysis to explain the evolution of society from the primitive

to the modern. He classified a society by the nature of social solidarity which existed in that society. He argued that while a primitive society was organised according to 'mechanical' solidarity, modern society was based on 'organic' solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is founded on the similarity of its individual members and is found in societies with small populations. It typically involves a collection of different self-sufficient groups where each person within a particular group is engaged in similar activities or functions. As the solidarity or ties between people are based on similarity and personal relationships, such societies are not very tolerant of differences and any violation of the norms of the community attracts harsh punishment. In other words, mechanical solidarity based societies have repressive laws designed to prevent deviation from community norms. This was because the individual and the community were so tightly integrated that it was feared that any violation of codes of conduct could result in the disintegration of the community.

Organic solidarity characterises modern society and is based on the heterogeneity of its members. It is found in societies with large populations, where most social relationships necessarily have to be impersonal. Such a society is based on institutions, and each of its constituent groups or units is not self-sufficient but dependent on other units/groups for their survival. Interdependence is the essence of organic solidarity. It celebrates

individuals and allows for their need to be different from each other, and recognises their multiple roles and organic ties. The laws of modern society are 'restitutive' in nature rather than 'repressive'. This means that in modern societies, the law aims to repair or correct the wrong that is done by a criminal act. By contrast, in primitive societies the law sought to punish wrong doers and enforced a sort of collective revenge for their acts. In modern society the individual was given some autonomy, whereas in primitive societies the individual was totally submerged in the collectivity.

A characteristic feature of modern societies is that individuals with similar goals come together voluntarily to form groups and associations. As these are groups oriented towards specific goals, they remain distinct from each other and do not seek to take over the entire life of its members. Thus, individuals have many different identities in different contexts. This enables individuals to emerge from the shadow of the community and establish their distinct identity in terms of the functions they perform and the roles they play. Since all individuals have to depend on others for the fulfilment of their basic needs like food, clothing, shelter and education, their intensity of interaction with others increases. Impersonal rules and regulations are required to govern social relations in such societies because personalised relations can no longer be maintained in a large population.

The Division of Labour in Society provides a good preview of Durkheim's enduring concerns. His effort to create a new scientific discipline with a distinct subject which can be empirically validated is clearly manifested in the way he

discusses the different types of social solidarity as social facts. His objective and secular analysis of the social ties which underlie different types of society laid the foundation of sociology as the new science of society.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Max Weber was born on 21 April, 1864 in Erfurt, Germany into a Prussian family. His father was a magistrate and a politician who was an ardent monarchist and follower of Bismarck. His mother was from a distinguished liberal family from Heidelberg.

1882: Went to Heidelberg to study law.

1884-84: Studied at the universities of Gottingen and Berlin.

1889: Submitted his doctoral dissertation on *A Contribution to the History of Medieval Business Organisations*.

1891: Submitted his habilitation thesis (entitling him to be a teacher) on *Roman Agrarian History and the Significance for Public and Private Law*.

1893: Married Marianne Schnitger.

1894-96: Appointed Professor of Economics first at Freiburg, and then Heidelberg.

1897-1901: Has a nervous breakdown and falls ill; unable to work, travels to Rome.

1901: Weber resumes scholarly work.

1903: Became the Associate Editor of the journal *Archives for Social Science and Social Welfare*.

1904: Travels to the USA. Publishes *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

1918: Takes up a specially created chair in Sociology at Vienna.

1919: Appointed Professor of Economics at the University of Munich.

1920: Weber dies.

Almost all of his major works which made him famous were translated and published in book form only after his death. These include: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (1946), *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1949), *The Religion of India* (1958) and *Economy and Society* (3 vols, 1968).



Activity 3

Try to compare what Durkheim and Marx say about the social division of labour. They both agree that as society evolves, the social organisation of production grows more complex, the division of labour becomes more detailed, and this creates unavoidable interdependencies among different social groups. But where Durkheim emphasises solidarity, Marx emphasises conflict. What do you think about this?

Can you think of reasons why Marx may be wrong about modern society? For example, can you think of situations or examples where people are joining together to form groups or collectivities despite being from different class backgrounds and having conflicting interests? What counter arguments could you give to persuade someone that Marx may still have a point?

Can you think of reasons why Durkheim may be wrong about modern society giving more freedom to the individual? For example, isn't it true that the spread of mass communication (specially through television) has tended to standardise popular fashion in things like clothes or music? Today, young people in different social groups, different countries, states or regions are now more likely to be listening to the same music, or wearing the same kind of clothes than ever before. Does this make Durkheim wrong? What could be the arguments for and against in this context?

Remember, sociology is not like mathematics where there is usually only one right answer. In anything to do with society and human beings, it is possible that there are many right answers, or that an answer is right in one context but wrong in another, or that it is partly right and partly wrong, and so on. In other words, the social world is very complex, and it changes from time to time and from place to place. This makes it all the more important to learn how to think carefully about the reasons why a particular answer may be right or wrong in a particular context.

Max Weber was one of the leading German social thinkers of his time. Despite long periods of physical and mental ill health, he has left a rich legacy of sociological writing. He wrote extensively on many subjects but focused on developing an interpretive sociology of social action and of power and domination. Another major concern of Weber was the process of rationalisation in modern society and the relationship of the various religions of the world with this process.

Max Weber and Interpretive Sociology

Weber argued that the overall objective of the social sciences was to develop an 'interpretive understanding of social action'. These sciences were thus very different from the natural sciences, which aimed to discover the objective 'laws of nature' governing the physical world. Since the central concern of the social sciences was with social action and since human actions necessarily involved subjective meanings, the methods of enquiry of social science

also had to be different from the methods of natural science. For Weber, 'social action' included all human behaviour that was meaningful, that is, action to which actors attached a meaning. In studying social action the sociologist's task was to recover the meanings attributed by the actor. To accomplish this task the sociologist had to put themselves in the actor's place, and imagine what these meanings were or could have been. Sociology was thus a systematic form of 'empathetic understanding', that is, an understanding based not on 'feeling for' (sympathy) but 'feeling with' (empathy). The empathic (or empathetic) understanding which sociologists derive from this exercise enables them to access the subjective meanings and motivations of social actors.

Weber was among the first to discuss the special and complex kind of 'objectivity' that the social sciences had to cultivate. The social world was founded on subjective human meanings, values, feelings, prejudices, ideals and so on. In studying this world, the social sciences inevitably had to deal with these subjective meanings. In order to capture these meanings and describe them accurately, social scientists had to constantly practise 'empathetic understanding' by putting themselves (imaginatively) in the place of the people whose actions they were studying. But this investigation had to be done objectively even though it was concerned with subjective matters.

Thus, 'empathetic understanding' required the sociologist to faithfully record the subjective meanings and motivations of social actors without allowing his/her own personal beliefs and opinions to influence this process in any way. In other words, sociologists were meant to describe, not judge, the subjective feelings of others. Weber called this kind of objectivity 'value neutrality'. The sociologist must neutrally record subjective values without being affected by her/his own feelings/opinions about these values. Weber recognised that this was very difficult to do because social scientists were also members of society and always had their own subjective beliefs and prejudices. However, they had to practise great self-discipline — exercise an 'iron will' as he puts it — in order to remain 'value neutral' when describing the values and worldviews of others.

Apart from empathetic understanding, Weber also suggested another methodological tool for doing sociology — the 'ideal type'. An ideal type is a logically consistent model of a social phenomenon that highlights its most significant characteristics. Being a conceptual tool designed to help analysis, it is not meant to be an exact reproduction of reality. Ideal types may exaggerate some features of phenomenon that are considered to be analytically important, and ignore or downplay others. Obviously an ideal type should correspond to reality in a broad sense, but its main job is to assist analysis by bringing out

important features and connections of the social phenomenon being studied. An ideal type is to be judged by how helpful it is for analysis and understanding, not by how accurate or detailed a description it provides.

The ideal type was used by Weber to analyse the relationship between the ethics of 'world religions' and the rationalisation of the social world in different civilisations. It was in this context that Weber suggested that ethics of certain Protestant sects within Christianity had a deep influence on the development of capitalism in Europe.

Weber again used the ideal type to illustrate the three types of authority that he defined as traditional, charismatic and rational-legal. While the source of traditional authority was custom and precedence, charismatic authority derived from divine sources or the 'gift of grace', and rational-legal authority was based on legal demarcation of authority. Rational-legal authority which prevailed in modern times was epitomised in the bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy

It was a mode of organisation which was premised on the separation of the public from the domestic world. This meant that behaviour in the public domain was regulated by explicit rules and regulations. Moreover, as a public institution, bureaucracy restricted the power of the officials in regard to their responsibilities and did not provide absolute power to them.

Bureaucratic authority is characterised by these features:

- (i) Functioning of Officials;
- (ii) Hierarchical Ordering of Positions;
- (iii) Reliance on Written Document
- (iv) Office Management; and
- (v) Conduct in Office.

(i) *Functioning of Officials*: Within the bureaucracy officials have fixed areas of 'official jurisdiction' governed by rules, laws and administrative regulations. The regular activities of the bureaucratic organisation are distributed in a fixed way as official duties. Moreover, commands are issued by higher authorities for implementation by subordinates in a stable way, but the responsibilities of officials are strictly delimited by the authority available to them. As duties are to be fulfilled on a regular basis, only those who have the requisite qualifications to perform them are employed. Official positions in a bureaucracy are independent of the incumbent as they continue beyond the tenure of any occupant.

(ii) *Hierarchical Ordering of Positions*: Authority and office are placed on a graded hierarchy where the higher officials supervise the lower ones. This allows scope of appeal to a higher official in case of dissatisfaction with the decisions of lower officials.

(iii) *Reliance on Written Document*: The management of a bureaucratic organisation is carried out on the basis of written documents

(the files) which are preserved as records. There is cumulation in the decision making of the 'bureau' or office. It is also a part of the public domain which is separate from the private life of the officials.

(iv) *Office Management*: As office management is a specialised and modern activity it requires trained and skilled personnel to conduct operations.

(v) *Conduct in Office*: As official activity demands the full time attention of officials irrespective of her/his delimited hours in office, hence an official's conduct in office is governed by exhaustive rules and regulations. These separate her/his public conduct from her/his behaviour in the private domain. Also since these rules and regulations have legal recognition, officials can be held accountable.

Weber's characterisation of bureaucracy as a modern form of political authority demonstrated how an individual actor was both recognised for her/his skills and

training and given responsibilities with the requisite authority to implement them. The legal delimitation of tasks and authority constrained unbridled power and made officials accountable to their clients as the work was carried out in the public domain.

Activity 4

To what extent do you think the following groups or activities involve the exercise of bureaucratic authority in Weber's sense?

(a) your class; (b) your school; (c) a football team; (d) a panchayat samiti in a village; (e) a fan association for a popular film star; (f) a group of regular commuters on a train or bus route; (g) a joint family; (h) a village community; (i) the crew of a ship; (j) a criminal gang; (k) the followers of a religious leader; and (l) an audience watching a film in a cinema hall.

Based on your discussions, which of these groups would you be willing to characterise as 'bureaucratic'? Remember, you must discuss reasons both for as well as against, and listen to people who disagree with!

GLOSSARY

Alienation: A process in capitalist society by which human beings are separated and distanced from (or made strangers to) nature, other human beings, their work and its product, and their own nature or self.

Enlightenment: A period in 18th century Europe when philosophers rejected the supremacy of religious doctrines, established reason as the means to truth, and the human being as the sole bearer of reason.

Social Fact: Aspects of social reality that are related to collective patterns of behaviour and beliefs, which are not created by individuals but exert pressure on them and influence their behaviour.

Mode of Production: It is a system of material production which persists over a long period of time. Each mode of production is distinguished by its means of production (eg: technology and forms of production organisation) and the relations of production (eg: slavery, serfdom, wage labour).

Office: In the context of bureaucracy a public post or position of impersonal and formal authority with specified powers and responsibilities; the office has a separate existence independent of the person appointed to it. (This is different from another meaning of the same word which refers to an actual bureaucratic institution or to its physical location: eg. post office, panchayat office, Prime Minister's office, my mother's or father's office, etc.)

EXERCISES

1. Why is the Enlightenment important for the development of sociology?
 2. How was the Industrial Revolution responsible for giving rise to sociology?
 3. What are the various components of a mode of production?
 4. Why do classes come into conflict, according to Marx?
 5. What are social facts? How do we recognise them?
 6. What is the difference between 'mechanical' and 'organic' solidarity?
 7. Show, with examples, how moral codes are indicators of social solidarity.
 8. What are the basic features of bureaucracy?
 9. What is special or different about the kind of objectivity needed in social science?
 10. Can you identify any ideas or theories which have led to the formation of social movements in India in recent times?
 11. Try to find out what Marx and Weber wrote about India.
 12. Can you think of reasons why we should study the work of thinkers who died long ago? What could be some reasons to not study them?
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CHAPTER 5

INDIAN SOCIOLOGISTS

As you saw in the opening chapter of your first book, *Introducing Sociology*, the discipline is a relatively young one even in the European context, having been established only about a century ago. In India, interest in sociological ways of thinking is a little more than a century old, but formal university teaching of sociology only began in 1919 at the University of Bombay. In the 1920s, two other universities — those at Calcutta and Lucknow — also began programmes of teaching and research in sociology and anthropology. Today, every major university has a department of sociology, social anthropology or anthropology, and often more than one of these disciplines is represented.

Now-a-days sociology tends to be taken for granted in India, like most established things. But this was not always so. In the early days, it was not clear at all what an Indian sociology would look like, and indeed, whether India really needed something like sociology. In the first quarter of the 20th century, those who became interested in the discipline had to decide for themselves what role it could

play in India. In this chapter, you are going to be introduced to some of the founding figures of Indian sociology. These scholars have helped to shape the discipline and adapt it to our historical and social context.

The specificity of the Indian context raised many questions. First of all, if western sociology emerged as an attempt to make sense of modernity, what would its role be in a country like India? India, too, was of course experiencing the changes brought about by modernity but with an important difference — it was a colony. The first experience of modernity in India was closely intertwined with the experience of colonial subjugation. Secondly, if social anthropology in the west arose out of the curiosity felt by European society about primitive cultures, what role could it have in India, which was an ancient and advanced civilisation, but which also had 'primitive' societies within it? Finally, what useful role could sociology have in a sovereign, independent India, a nation about to begin its adventure with planned development and democracy?

The pioneers of Indian sociology not only had to find their own answers to questions like these, they also had to formulate new questions for themselves. It was only through the experience of 'doing' sociology in an Indian context that the questions took shape — they were not available 'readymade'. As is often the case, in the beginning Indians became sociologists and anthropologists mostly by accident. For example, one of the earliest and best known pioneers of social anthropology in India, L.K. Ananthakrishna Iyer (1861-1937), began his career as a clerk, moved on to become a school teacher and later a college teacher in Cochin state in present day Kerala. In 1902, he was asked by the Dewan of Cochin to assist with an ethnographic survey of the state. The British government wanted similar surveys done in all the princely states as well as the presidency areas directly under its control. Ananthakrishna Iyer did this work on a purely voluntary basis, working as a college teacher in the Maharajah's College at Ernakulam during the week, and functioning as the unpaid Superintendent of Ethnography in the weekends. His work was much appreciated by British anthropologists and administrators of the time, and later he was also invited to help with a similar ethnographic survey in Mysore state.

Ananthakrishna Iyer was probably the first self-taught anthropologist to receive national and international recognition as a scholar and an

academician. He was invited to lecture at the University of Madras, and was appointed as Reader at the University of Calcutta, where he helped set up the first post-graduate anthropology department in India. He remained at the University of Calcutta from 1917 to 1932. Though he had no formal qualifications in anthropology, he was elected President of the Ethnology section of the Indian Science Congress. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by a German university during his lecture tour of European universities. He was also conferred the titles of Rao Bahadur and Dewan Bahadur by Cochin state.

The lawyer Sarat Chandra Roy (1871-1942) was another 'accidental anthropologist' and pioneer of the discipline in India. Before taking his law degree in Calcutta's Ripon College, Roy had done graduate and post-graduate degrees in English. Soon after he had begun practising law, he decided to go to Ranchi in 1898 to take up a job as an English teacher at a Christian missionary school. This decision was to change his life, for he remained in Ranchi for the next forty-four years and became the leading authority on the culture and society of the tribal peoples of the Chhotanagpur region (present day Jharkhand). Roy's interest in anthropological matters began when he gave up his school job and began practising law at the Ranchi courts, eventually being appointed as official interpreter in the court.

Roy became deeply interested in tribal society as a byproduct of his

professional need to interpret tribal customs and laws to the court. He travelled extensively among tribal communities and did intensive fieldwork among them. All of this was done on an 'amateur' basis, but Roy's diligence and keen eye for detail resulted in valuable monographs and research articles. During his entire career, Roy published more than one hundred articles in leading Indian and British academic journals in addition to his famous monographs on the Oraon, the Mundas and the Kharias. Roy soon became very well known amongst anthropologists in India and Britain and was recognised as an authority on Chhotanagpur. He founded the journal *Man in India* in 1922, the earliest journal of its kind in India that is still published.

Both Ananthakrishna Iyer and Sarat Chandra Roy were true pioneers. In the early 1900s, they began practising a discipline that did not yet exist in India, and which had no institutions to promote it. Both Iyer and Roy were born, lived and died in an India that was ruled by the British. The four Indian sociologists you are going to be introduced in this chapter were born one generation later than Iyer and Roy. They came of age in the colonial era, but their careers continued into the era of independence, and they helped to shape the first formal institutions that established Indian sociology. G.S. Ghurye and D.P. Mukerji were born in the 1890s while A.R. Desai and M.N. Srinivas were about fifteen years younger, having

been born in the second decade of the 20th century. Although they were all deeply influenced by western traditions of sociology, they were also able to offer some initial answers to the question that the pioneers could only begin to ask : what shape should a specifically Indian sociology take?

G.S. Ghurye can be considered the founder of institutionalised sociology in India. He headed India's very first post-graduate teaching department of Sociology at Bombay University for thirty-five years. He guided a large number of research scholars, many of whom went on to occupy prominent positions in the discipline. He also founded the Indian Sociological Society as well as its journal *Sociological Bulletin*. His academic writings were not only prolific, but very wide-ranging in the subjects they covered. At a time when financial and institutional support for university research was very limited, Ghurye managed to nurture sociology as an increasingly Indian discipline. Ghurye's Bombay University department was the first to successfully implement two of the features which were later enthusiastically endorsed by his successors in the discipline. These were the active combining of teaching and research within the same institution, and the merger of social anthropology and sociology into a composite discipline.

Best known, perhaps, for his writings on caste and race, Ghurye also wrote on a broad range of other themes including tribes; kinship, family and

Govind Sadashiv Ghurye (1893-1983)

G. S. Ghurye was born on 12 December 1893 in Malvan, a town in the Konkan coastal region of western India. His family owned a trading business which had once been prosperous, but was in decline.



- 1913: Joined Elphinstone College in Bombay with Sanskrit Honours for the B.A. degree which he completed in 1916. Received the M.A. degree in Sanskrit and English from the same college in 1918.
 - 1919: Selected for a scholarship by the University of Bombay for training abroad in sociology. Initially went to the London School of Economics to study with L.T. Hobhouse, a prominent sociologist of the time. Later went to Cambridge to study with W.H.R. Rivers, and was deeply influenced by his diffusionist perspective.
 - 1923: Ph.D. submitted under A.C. Haddon after River's sudden death in 1922. Returned to Bombay in May. *Caste and Race in India*, the manuscript based on the doctoral dissertation, was accepted for publication in a major book series at Cambridge.
 - 1924: After brief stay in Calcutta, was appointed *Reader and Head* of the Department of Sociology at Bombay University in June. He remained as *Head* of the Department at Bombay University for the next 35 years.
 - 1936: Ph.D. Programme was launched at the Bombay Department; the first Ph.D. in Sociology at an Indian university was awarded to G.R. Pradhan under Ghurye's supervision. The M.A. course was revised and made a full-fledged 8-course programme in 1945.
 - 1951: Ghurye established the Indian Sociological Society and became its founding President. The journal of the Indian Sociological Society, *Sociological Bulletin* was launched in 1952.
 - 1959: Ghurye retired from the University, but continued to be active in academic life, particularly in terms of publication — 17 of his 30 books were written after retirement.
- G.S. Ghurye died in 1983, at the age of 90.

marriage; culture, civilisation and the historic role of cities; religion; and the sociology of conflict and integration. Among the intellectual and contextual concerns which influenced Ghurye, the most prominent are perhaps diffusionism, Orientalist scholarship

on Hindu religion and thought, nationalism, and the cultural aspects of Hindu identity.

One of the major themes that Ghurye worked on was that of 'tribal' or 'aboriginal' cultures. In fact, it was his writings on this subject, and

specially his debate with Verrier Elwin which first made him known outside sociology and the academic world. In the 1930s and 1940s there was much debate on the place of tribal societies within India and how the state should respond to them. Many British administrator-anthropologists were specially interested in the tribes of India and believed them to be primitive peoples with a distinctive culture far from mainstream Hinduism. They also believed that the innocent and simple tribals would suffer exploitation and cultural degradation through contact with Hindu culture and society. For this reason, they felt that the state had a duty to protect the tribes and to help them sustain their way of life and culture, which were facing constant pressure to assimilate with mainstream Hindu culture. However, nationalist Indians were equally passionate about their belief in the unity of India and the need for modernising Indian society and culture. They believed that attempts to preserve tribal culture were misguided and resulted in maintaining tribals in a backward state as 'museums' of primitive culture. As with many features of Hinduism itself which they felt to be backward and in need of reform, they felt that tribes, too, needed to develop. Ghurye became the best-known exponent of the nationalist view and insisted on characterising the tribes of India as 'backward Hindus' rather than distinct cultural groups. He cited detailed evidence from a wide variety

of tribal cultures to show that they had been involved in constant interactions with Hinduism over a long period. They were thus simply further behind in the same process of assimilation that all Indian communities had gone through. This particular argument — namely, that Indian tribals were hardly ever isolated primitive communities of the type that was written about in the classical anthropological texts — was not really disputed. The differences were in how the impact of mainstream culture was evaluated. The 'protectionists' believed that assimilation would result in the severe exploitation and cultural extinction of the tribals. Ghurye and the nationalists, on the other hand, argued that these ill-effects were not specific to tribal cultures, but were common to all the backward and downtrodden sections of Indian society. These were the inevitable difficulties on the road to development.

Activity 1

Today we still seem to be involved in similar debates. Discuss the different sides to the question from a contemporary perspective. For example, many tribal movements assert their distinctive cultural and political identity — in fact, the states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were formed in response to such movements. There is also a major controversy around the disproportionate burden that tribal communities have been forced to bear for the sake of developmental

projects like big dams, mines and factories. How many such conflicts do you know about? Find out what the issues are in these conflicts. What do you and your classmates feel should be done about these problems?

Ghurye on Caste and Race

G.S. Ghurye's academic reputation was built on the basis of his doctoral dissertation at Cambridge, which was later published as *Caste and Race in India* (1932). Ghurye's work attracted attention because it addressed the major concerns of Indian anthropology at the time. In this book, Ghurye provides a detailed critique of the then dominant theories about the relationship between race and caste. Herbert Risley, a British colonial official who was deeply interested in anthropological matters, was the main proponent of the dominant view. This view held that human beings can be divided into distinct and separate races on the basis of their physical characteristics such as the circumference of the skull, the length of the nose, or the volume (size) of the cranium or the part of the skull where the brain is located.

Risley and others believed that India was a unique 'laboratory' for studying the evolution of racial types because caste strictly prohibits inter-marriage among different groups, and had done so for centuries. Risley's main argument was that caste must have originated in race because

different caste groups seemed to belong to distinct racial types. In general, the higher castes approximated Indo-Aryan racial traits, while the lower castes seemed to belong to non-Aryan aboriginal, Mongoloid or other racial groups. On the basis of differences between groups in terms of average measurements for length of nose, size of cranium etc., Risley and others suggested that the lower castes were the original aboriginal inhabitants of India. They had been subjugated by an Aryan people who had come from elsewhere and settled in India.

Ghurye did not disagree with the basic argument put forward by Risley but believed it to be only partially correct. He pointed out the problem with using averages alone without considering the variation in the distribution of a particular measurement for a given community. Ghurye believed that Risley's thesis of the upper castes being Aryan and the lower castes being non-Aryan was broadly true only for northern India. In other parts of India, the inter-group differences in the anthropometric measurements were not very large or systematic. This suggested that, in most of India except the Indo-Gangetic plain, different racial groups had been mixing with each other for a very long time. Thus, 'racial purity' had been preserved due to the prohibition on inter-marriage only in 'Hindustan proper' (north India). In the rest of the country, the practice of endogamy (marrying only within a particular caste group) may

have been introduced into groups that were already racially varied.

Today, the racial theory of caste is no longer believed, but in the first half of the 20th century it was still considered to be true. There are conflicting opinions among historians about the Aryans and their arrival in the subcontinent. However, at the time that Ghurye was writing these were among the concerns of the discipline, which is why his writings attracted attention.

Ghurye is also known for offering a comprehensive definition of caste. His definition emphasises six features.

- (i) Caste is an institution based on *segmental division*. This means that caste is divided into a number of closed, mutually exclusive segments or compartments. Each caste is one such compartment. It is closed because caste is decided by birth — the children born to parents of a particular caste will always belong to that caste. On the other hand, there is no way other than birth of acquiring caste membership. In short, a person's caste is decided by birth at birth; it can neither be avoided nor changed.
- (ii) Caste is based on *hierarchical division*. Each caste is strictly unequal to every other caste, that is, every caste is either higher or lower than every other one. In theory (though not in practice), no two castes are ever equal.
- (iii) The institution of caste necessarily involves *restrictions on social interaction*, specially the sharing of food. There are elaborate rules prescribing what kind of food may be shared between which groups. These rules are governed by ideas of purity and pollution. The same also applies to social interaction, most dramatically in the institution of untouchability, where even the touch of people of particular castes is thought to be polluting.
- (iv) Following from the principles of hierarchy and restricted social interaction, caste also involves *differential rights and duties* for different castes. These rights and duties pertain not only to religious practices but extend to the secular world. As ethnographic accounts of everyday life in caste society have shown, interactions between people of different castes are governed by these rules.
- (v) Caste *restricts the choice of occupation*, which, like caste itself, is decided by birth and is hereditary. At the level of society, caste functions as a rigid form of the division of labour with specific occupations being allocated to specific castes.
- (vi) Caste involves *strict restrictions on marriage*. Caste 'endogamy', or marriage only within the caste, is often accompanied by rules about 'exogamy', or whom one may not marry. This combination

of rules about eligible and non-eligible groups helps reproduce the caste system.

Ghurye's definition helped to make the study of caste more systematic. His conceptual definition was based on what the classical texts prescribed. In actual practice, many of these features of caste were changing, though all of them continue to exist in some form. Ethnographic fieldwork over the next several decades helped to provide valuable accounts of what was happening to caste in independent India.

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, sociology in India was equated with the two major departments at Bombay

and Lucknow. Both began as combined departments of sociology and economics. While the Bombay department in this period was led by G.S. Ghurye, the Lucknow department had three major figures, the famous 'trinity' of Radhakamal Mukerjee (the founder), D.P. Mukerji, and D.N. Majumdar. Although all three were well known and widely respected, D.P. Mukerji was perhaps the most popular. In fact, D.P. Mukerji — or D.P. as he was generally known — was among the most influential scholars of his generation not only in sociology but in intellectual and public life beyond the academy. His influence and popularity came not so much from

Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji (1894-1961)

D.P. Mukerji was born on 5 October 1894 in a middle class Bengali brahmin family with a long tradition of involvement in higher education. Undergraduate degree in science and postgraduate degrees in History and Economics from Calcutta University.

1924: Appointed Lecturer in the Department of Economics and Sociology at Lucknow University

1938: 41 Served as Director of Information under the first Congress-led government of the United Provinces of British India (present day Uttar Pradesh).

1947: Served as a Member of the U.P. Labour Enquiry Committee.

1949: Appointed Professor (by special order of the Vice Chancellor) at Lucknow University.

1953: Appointed Professor of Economics at Aligarh Muslim University

1955: Presidential Address to the newly formed Indian Sociological Society

1956: Underwent major surgery for throat cancer in Switzerland Died on 5 December 1961.



his scholarly writings as from his teaching, his speaking at academic events, and his work in the media, including newspaper articles and radio programmes. D.P. came to sociology via history and economics, and retained an active interest in a wide variety of subjects ranging across literature, music, film, western and Indian philosophy, Marxism, political economy, and development planning. He was strongly influenced by Marxism, though he had more faith in it as a method of social analysis than as a political programme for action. D.P. wrote many books in English and Bengali. His *Introduction to Indian Music* is a pioneering work, considered a classic in its genre.

D.P. Mukerji on Tradition and Change

It was through his dissatisfaction with Indian history and economics that D.P. turned to sociology. He felt very strongly that the crucial distinctive feature of India was its social system, and that, therefore, it was important for each social science to be rooted in this context. The decisive aspect of the Indian context was the social aspect: history, politics and economics in India were less developed in comparison with the west; however, the social dimensions were 'over-developed'. As D.P. wrote, "... my conviction grew that India had had society, and very little else. In fact, she had too much of it. Her history, her economics, and even her philosophy, I realised, had always centred in social groups, and at best,

in socialised persons." (Mukherji 1955:2)

Given the centrality of society in India, it became the first duty of an Indian sociologist to study and to know the social traditions of India. For D.P. this study of tradition was not oriented only towards the past, but also included sensitivity to change. Thus, tradition was a living tradition, maintaining its links with the past, but also adapting to the present and thus evolving over time. As he wrote, "...it is not enough for the Indian sociologist to be a sociologist. He must be an Indian first, that is, he is to share in the folk-ways, mores, customs and traditions, for the purpose of understanding his social system and what lies beneath it and beyond it." In keeping with this view, he believed that sociologists should learn and be familiar with both 'high' and 'low' languages and cultures — not only Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic, but also local dialects.

D.P. argued that Indian culture and society are not individualistic in the western sense. The average Indian individual's pattern of desires is more or less rigidly fixed by his socio-cultural group pattern and he hardly deviates from it. Thus, the Indian social system is basically oriented towards group, sect, or caste-action, not 'voluntaristic' individual action. Although 'voluntarism' was beginning to influence the urban middle classes, its appearance ought to be itself an interesting subject of study for the Indian sociologist. D.P. pointed out

that the root meaning of the word tradition is to transmit. Its Sanskrit equivalents are either *parampara*, that is, succession; or *aitihya*, which comes from the same root as *itihās* or history. Traditions are thus strongly rooted in the past that is kept alive through the repeated recalling and retelling of stories and myths. However, this link with the past does not rule out change, but indicates a process of adaptation to it. Internal and external sources of change are always present in every society. The most commonly cited internal source of change in western societies is the economy, but this source has not been as effective in India. Class conflict, D.P. believed, had been “smoothed and covered by caste traditions” in the Indian context, where new class relations had not yet emerged very sharply. Based on this understanding, he concluded that one of the first tasks for a dynamic Indian sociology would be to provide an account of the internal, non-economic causes of change.

D.P. believed that there were three principles of change recognised in Indian traditions, namely; *shruti*, *smṛiti* and *anubhava*. Of these, the last — *anubhava* or personal experience — is the revolutionary principle. However, in the Indian context personal experience soon flowered into collective experience. This meant that the most important principle of change in Indian society was generalised *anubhava*, or the collective experience of groups. The high traditions were centred in *smṛiti* and *shruti*, but they were periodically

challenged by the collective experience of groups and sects, as for example in the *bhakti* movement. D.P. emphasised that this was true not only of Hindu but also of Muslim culture in India. In Indian Islam, the Sufis have stressed love and experience rather than holy texts, and have been important in bringing about change. Thus, for D.P., the Indian context is not one where discursive reason (*buddhi-vichar*) is the dominant force for change; *anubhava* and *prem* (experience and love) have been historically superior as agents of change.

Conflict and rebellion in the Indian context have tended to work through collective experiences. But the resilience of tradition ensures that the pressure of conflict produces change in the tradition without breaking it. So we have repeated cycles of dominant orthodoxy being challenged by popular revolts which succeed in transforming orthodoxy, but are eventually reabsorbed into this transformed tradition. This process of change — of rebellion contained within the limits of an overarching tradition — is typical of a caste society, where the formation of classes and class consciousness has been inhibited. D.P.’s views on tradition and change led him to criticise all instances of unthinking borrowing from western intellectual traditions, including in such contexts as development planning. Tradition was neither to be worshipped nor ignored, just as modernity was needed but not to be blindly adopted. D.P. was

simultaneously a proud but critical inheritor of tradition, as well as an admiring critic of the modernity that he acknowledged as having shaped his own intellectual perspective.

Activity 2

Discuss what is meant by a 'living tradition'. According to D.P. Mukerji, this is a tradition which maintains links with the past by retaining something from it, and at the same time incorporates new things. A living tradition thus includes some old elements but also some new ones. You can get a better and more concrete sense of what this means if you try to find out from different generations of people in your neighbourhood or family about what is changed and what is unchanged about specific practices. Here is a list of subjects you can try; you could also try other subjects of your own choice.

Games played by children of your age group (boys/girls)

Ways in which a popular festival is celebrated

Typical dress/clothing worn by women and men

... Plus other such subjects of your choice ...

For each of these, you need to find out: What aspects have remained unchanged since as far back as you know or can find out? What aspects have changed? What was different and same about the practice/event (i) 10 years ago; (ii) 20 years ago; (iii) 40 years ago; (iv) 60 or more years ago

Discuss your findings with the whole class.

A.R. Desai is one of the rare Indian sociologists who was directly involved in politics as a formal member of political parties. Desai was a life-long Marxist and became involved in Marxist politics during his undergraduate days at Baroda, though he later resigned his membership of the Communist Party of India. For most of his career he was associated with various kinds of non-mainstream Marxist political groups. Desai's father was a middle level civil servant in the Baroda state, but was also a well-known novelist, with sympathy for both socialism and Indian nationalism of the Gandhian variety. Having lost his mother early in life, Desai was brought up by his father and lived a migratory life because of the frequent transfers of his father to different posts in the Baroda state.

After his undergraduate studies in Baroda, Desai eventually joined the Bombay department of sociology to study under Ghurye. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the social aspects of Indian nationalism and was awarded the degree in 1946. His thesis was published in 1948 as *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, which is probably his best known work. In this book, Desai offered a Marxist analysis of Indian nationalism, which gave prominence to economic processes and divisions, while taking account of the specific conditions of British colonialism. Although it had its critics, this book proved to be very popular and went through numerous reprints. Among

Akshay Ramanlal Desai (1915-1994)

- A. R. Desai was born in 1915. Early education in Baroda, then in Surat and Bombay.
- 1934-39: Member of Communist Party of India; involved with Trotskyite groups.
- 1946: Ph.D. submitted at Bombay under the supervision of G.S. Ghurye.
- 1948: Desai's Ph.D. dissertation is published as the book: *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*.
- 1951: Joins the faculty of the Department of Sociology at Bombay University
- 1953-1981: Member of Revolutionary Socialist Party.
- 1961: *Rural Transition in India* is published.
- 1967: Appointed *Professor and Head* of Department.
- 1975: *State and Society in India: Essays in Dissent* is published.
- 1976: Retired from Department of Sociology.
- 1979: *Peasant Struggles in India* is published.
- 1986: *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence* is published.
Died on 12 November 1994.

the other themes that Desai worked on were peasant movements and rural sociology, modernisation, urban issues, political sociology, forms of the state and human rights. Because Marxism was not very prominent or influential within Indian sociology, A.R. Desai was perhaps better known outside the discipline than within it. Although he received many honours and was elected President of the Indian Sociological Society, Desai remained a somewhat unusual figure in Indian sociology.

A.R. Desai on the State

The modern capitalist state was one of the significant themes that

interested A.R. Desai. As always, his approach to this issue was from a Marxist perspective. In an essay called "The myth of the welfare state", Desai provides a detailed critique of this notion and points to it many shortcomings. After considering the prominent definitions available in the sociological literature, Desai identifies the following unique features of the welfare state:

- (i) A welfare state is a positive state. This means that, unlike the 'laissez faire' of classical liberal political theory, the welfare state does not seek to do only the minimum necessary to maintain law and order. The welfare state is an

interventionist state and actively uses its considerable powers to design and implement social policies for the betterment of society.

- (ii) The welfare state is a democratic state. Democracy was considered an essential condition for the emergence of the welfare state. Formal democratic institutions, specially multi-party elections, were thought to be a defining feature of the welfare state. This is why liberal thinkers excluded socialist and communist states from this definition.
- (iii) A welfare state involves a mixed economy. A 'mixed economy' means an economy where both private capitalist enterprises and state or publicly owned enterprises co-exist. A welfare state does not seek to eliminate the capitalist market, nor does it prevent public investment in industry and other fields. By and large, the state sector concentrates on basic goods and social infrastructure, while private industry dominates the consumer goods sector.

Desai then goes on to suggest some test criteria against which the performance of the welfare state can be measured. These are:

- (i) Does the welfare state ensure freedom from poverty, social discrimination and security for all its citizens?
- (ii) Does the welfare state remove inequalities of income through measures to redistribute income

from the rich to the poor, and by preventing the concentration of wealth?

- (iii) Does the welfare state transform the economy in such a way that the capitalist profit motive is made subservient to the real needs of the community?
- iv) Does the welfare state ensure stable development free from the cycle of economic booms and depressions?
- (v) Does it provide employment for all?

Using these criteria, Desai examines the performance of those states that are most often described as welfare states, such as Britain, the USA and much of Europe, and finds their claims to be greatly exaggerated. Thus, most modern capitalist states, even in the most developed countries, fail to provide minimum levels of economic and social security to all their citizens. They are unable to reduce economic inequality and often seem to encourage it. The so-called welfare states have also been unsuccessful at enabling stable development free from market fluctuations. The presence of excess economic capacity and high levels of unemployment are yet another failure. Based on these arguments, Desai concludes that the notion of the welfare state is something of a myth.

A.R. Desai also wrote on the Marxist theory of the state. In these writings we can see that Desai does not take a one-sided view but openly criticises the shortcomings of Communist states. He cites many

Marxist thinkers to emphasise the importance of democracy even under communism, arguing strongly that political liberties and the rule of law must be upheld in all genuinely socialist states.

lights, schools, sanitation, police services, hospitals, bus, train and air transport... Think of others that are relevant in your context.)

Activity 3

A.R. Desai criticises the welfare state from a Marxist and socialist point of view — that is he would like the state to do more for its citizens than is being done by western capitalist welfare states. There are also very strong opposing viewpoints today which say that the state should do less — it should leave most things to the free market. Discuss these viewpoints in class. Be sure to give a fair hearing to both sides.

Make a list of all the things that are done by the state or government in your neighbourhood, starting with your school. Ask: people to find out if this list has grown longer or shorter in recent years — is the state doing more things now than before, or less? What do you feel would happen if the state were to stop doing these things? Would you and your neighbourhood/school be worse off, better off, or remain unaffected? Would rich, middle class, and poor people have the same opinion, or be affected in the same way, if the state were to stop some of its activities?

Make a list of state-provided services and facilities in your neighbourhood, and see how opinions might differ across class groups on whether these should continue or be stopped. (For example: roads, water supply, electricity supply, street

Probably the best known Indian sociologist of the post-independence era, M.N. Srinivas earned two doctoral degrees, one from Bombay University and one from Oxford. Srinivas was a student of Ghurye's at Bombay. Srinivas' intellectual orientation was transformed by the years he spent at the department of social anthropology in Oxford. British social anthropology was at that time the dominant force in western anthropology, and Srinivas also shared in the excitement of being at the 'centre' of the discipline. Srinivas' doctoral dissertation was published as *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*. This book established Srinivas' international reputation with its detailed ethnographic application of the structural – functional perspective dominant in British social anthropology. Srinivas was appointed to a newly created lectureship in Indian sociology at Oxford, but resigned in 1951 to return to India as the *head* of a newly created department of sociology at the Maharaja Sayajirao University at Baroda. In 1959, he moved to Delhi to set up another department at the Delhi School of Economics, which soon became known as one of the leading centres of sociology in India.

Srinivas often complained that most of his energies were taken up in institution building, leaving him with

Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1916-1999)

M.N. Srinivas was born on 16 November 1916 in an Iyengar brahmin family in Mysore. His father was a landowner and worked for the Mysore power and light department. His early education was at Mysore University, and he later went to Bombay to do an MA under G.S. Ghurye.



- 1942: M.A. thesis on Marriage and Family Among the Coorgs published as book.
 - 1944: Ph.D. thesis (in 2 volumes) submitted to Bombay University under the supervision of G.S. Ghurye.
 - 1945: Leaves for Oxford; studies first under Radcliffe-Brown and then under Evans-Pritchard.
 - 1947: Awarded D.Phil. degree in Social Anthropology from Oxford; returns to India.
 - 1948: Appointed Lecturer in Indian Sociology at Oxford; fieldwork in Rampura.
 - 1951: Resigns from Oxford to take up Professorship at Maharaja Sayaji Rao University in Baroda to found its sociology department.
 - 1959: Takes up Professorship at the Delhi School of Economics to set up the sociology department there.
 - 1971: Leaves Delhi University to co-found the Institute of Social and Economic Change at Bangalore.
- Died on 30 November 1999.

little time for his own research. Despite these difficulties, Srinivas produced a significant body of work on themes such as caste, modernisation and other processes of social change, village society, and many other issues. Srinivas helped to establish Indian sociology on the world map through his international contacts and associations. He had strong connections in British social anthropology as well as American anthropology, particularly at the

University of Chicago, which was then a powerful centre in world anthropology. Like G.S. Ghurye and the Lucknow scholars, Srinivas succeeded in training a new generation of sociologists who were to become leaders of the discipline in the following decades.

M.N. Srinivas on the Village

The Indian village and village society remained a life-long focus of interest for Srinivas. Although he had made

short visits to villages to conduct surveys and interviews, it was not until he did fieldwork for a year at a village near Mysore that he really acquired first-hand knowledge of village society. The experience of fieldwork proved to be decisive for his career and his intellectual path. Srinivas helped encourage and coordinate a major collective effort at producing detailed ethnographic accounts of village society during the 1950s and 1960s. Along with other scholars like S.C. Dube and D.N. Majumdar, Srinivas was instrumental in making village studies the dominant field in Indian sociology during this time.

Srinivas' writings on the village were of two broad types. There was first of all ethnographic accounts of fieldwork done in villages or discussions of such accounts. A second kind of writing included historical and conceptual discussions about the Indian village as a unit of social analysis. In the latter kind of writing, Srinivas was involved in a debate about the usefulness of the village as a concept. Arguing against village studies, some social anthropologists like Louis Dumont thought that social institutions like caste were more important than something like a village, which was after all only a collection of people living in a particular place. Villages may live or die, and people may move from one village to another, but their social institutions, like caste or religion, follow them and go with them

wherever they go. For this reason, Dumont believed that it would be misleading to give much importance to the village as a category. As against this view, Srinivas believed that the village was a relevant social entity. Historical evidence showed that villages had served as a unifying identity and that village unity was quite significant in rural social life. Srinivas also criticised the British administrator anthropologists who had put forward a picture of the Indian village as unchanging, self-sufficient, "little republics". Using historical and sociological evidence, Srinivas showed that the village had, in fact, experienced considerable change. Moreover, villages were never self-sufficient, and had been involved in various kinds of economic, social and political relationships at the regional level.

The village as a site of research offered many advantages to Indian sociology. It provided an opportunity to illustrate the importance of ethnographic research methods. It offered eye-witness accounts of the rapid social change that was taking place in the Indian countryside as the newly independent nation began a programme of planned development. These vivid descriptions of village India were greatly appreciated at the time as urban Indians as well as policy makers were able to form impressions of what was going on in the heartland of India. Village studies thus provided a new role for a discipline like sociology in the context of an independent nation. Rather than being restricted

to the study of 'primitive' peoples, it could also be made relevant to a modernising society.

Activity 4

Suppose you had friends from another planet or civilisation who were visiting the Earth for the first time and had never heard of something called a 'village'. What are the five clues you would give them to identify a village if they ever came across one?

Do this in small groups and then compare the five clues given by different groups. Which features appear most often? Do the most common features help you to make a sort of definition of a village? (To check whether your definition is a good one, ask yourself the question: Could there be a village where all or most features mentioned in your definition are absent?)

Activity 5

In the 1950s, there was great interest among urban Indians in the village studies that sociologists began doing at that time. Do you feel urban people are interested in the village today? How often are villages mentioned in the T.V., in newspapers and films? If you live in a city, does your family still have contacts with relatives in the village? Did it have such contacts in your parents' generation or your grandparents' generation? Do you know of anybody from a city who has moved to a village? Do you know of people who would like to go back? If you do, what reasons do these people

give for wanting to leave the city and live in the village? If you don't know of any such people, why do you think people don't want to live in a village? If you know of people living in a village who would like to live in a town or city, what reasons do they give for wanting to leave the village?

Conclusion

These four Indian sociologists helped to give a distinctive character to the discipline in the context of a newly independent modernising country. They are offered here as examples of the diverse ways in which sociology was 'Indianised'. Thus, Ghurye began with the questions defined by western anthropologists, but brought to them his intimate knowledge of classical texts and his sense of educated Indian opinion. Coming from a very different background, a thoroughly westernised modern intellectual like D.P. Mukerji rediscovered the importance of Indian tradition without being blind to its shortcomings. Like Mukerji, A.R. Desai was also strongly influenced by Marxism and offered a critical view of the Indian state at a time when such criticism was rare. Trained in the dominant centres of western social anthropology, M.N. Srinivas adapted his training to the Indian context and helped design a new agenda for sociology in the late 20th century.

It is a sign of the health and strength of a discipline when succeeding generations learn from

and eventually go beyond their predecessors. This has also been happening in Indian sociology. Succeeding generations have subjected the work of these pioneers

to constructive criticism in order to take the discipline further. The signs of this process of learning and critique are visible not only in this book but all over Indian sociology.

GLOSSARY

Administrator-anthropologists: The term refers to British administrative officials who were part of the British Indian government in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and who took great interest in conducting anthropological research, specially surveys and censuses. Some of them became well known anthropologists after retirement. Prominent names include: Edgar Thurston, William Crooke, Herbert Risley and J.H. Hutton.

Anthropometry: The branch of anthropology that studied human racial types by measuring the human body, particularly the volume of the cranium (skull), the circumference of the head, and the length of the nose.

Assimilation: A process by which one culture (usually the larger or more dominant one) gradually absorbs another; the assimilated culture merges into the assimilating culture, so that it is no longer alive or visible at the end of the process.

Endogamy: A social institution that defines the boundary of a social or kin group within which marriage relations are permissible; marriage outside these defined groups are prohibited. The most common example is caste endogamy, where marriage may only take place with a member of the same caste.

Exogamy: A social institution that defines the boundary of a social or kin group with which or within which marriage relations are prohibited; marriages must be contracted outside these prohibited groups. Common examples include prohibition of marriage with blood relatives (sapind exogamy), members of the same lineage (sagotra exogamy), or residents of the same village or region (village/region exogamy).

Laissez-faire: A French phrase (literally 'let be' or 'leave alone') that stands for a political and economic doctrine that advocates minimum state intervention in the economy and economic relations; usually associated with belief in the regulative powers and efficiency of the free market.

EXERCISES

1. How did Ananthakrishna Iyer and Sarat Chandra Roy come to practice social anthropology?
 2. What were the main arguments on either side of the debate about how to relate to tribal communities?
 3. Outline the positions of Herbert Risley and G.S. Ghurye on the relationship between race and caste in India.
 4. Summarise the social anthropological definition of caste.
 5. What does D.P. Mukerji mean by a 'living tradition'? Why did he insist that Indian sociologists be rooted in this tradition?
 6. What are the specificities of Indian culture and society, and how do they affect the pattern of change?
 7. What is a welfare state? Why is A.R. Desai critical of the claims made on its behalf?
 8. What arguments were given for and against the village as a subject of sociological research by M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont?
 9. What is the significance of village studies in the history of Indian sociology? What role did M.N. Srinivas play in promoting village studies?
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