

Challenges and Promises of Sociology in the Twenty-first Century: A West Bengal Experience

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Abstract: *To explore the possible course of sociology in the twenty-first century is intriguing and challenging for analogy, particularly, sitting at the initial decade of the century. To claim absolute correctness for the result of such an exploration ahead of actual social happenings may seem to be smacking of positivism and accompanying determinism. Human creativity reflected in social and cultural activities of men and women is by nature indeterminate. At the same time, paradoxically enough, human mind wants to chart out its course of action and put a shape to the flow of activities engaged in and shared by human minds collectively since the alternative is dreadful uncertainty and insecurity. This fear of uncertainty has haunted the origin and development of sociology in the earlier centuries. Any discussion of the coming crises of sociology or its soaring aspirations for achieving a better understanding of human ability to get over the crisis, thus, needs a discourse beset with a frank confession of trepidation and humility by those who are committed to the honest pursuit of sociology.*

I

Development of sociology in the last century has sensitized its students to the problem of imposition of grand theory originating in the West prevailing there. There is a gradual but reluctant acceptance by the sociologists on their attempts in the rest of the world to understand the socio-cultural realities. Their attempts have been to understand those who dominate the realm of sociology, of the veracity and validity of the local(s) as against or, at the least, vis-à-vis the global which is alias the occidental. However, the sociologists in the world outside the dominant or metropolitan Western hemisphere have not up-till now risen to the challenge of the autonomy of presenting their own narratives of their lived experiences and the future imagined by them and thus enriching sociology with alternative discourses. It has been the task before the succeeding

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generations to watch whether and how far the task is accomplished and will they, hopefully, contribute to its fulfillment. Sociology in its attempt at being objective must have to take account of the subjectivity of the millions spreading over the globe, who have been mostly taken for granted so far.

Apart from the subjective-objective debates over the realm of sociology, a major concern has erupted from the increasing polarization of the discipline on the grounds of standards and forms. In fact, there exists immense inequality in the field that may instigate one to speak of sociologies – central and peripheral. While the elite centers of sociological research and teaching institutions enjoy the centre-stage, the peripheral sociology is pursued in the rest of the areas, especially in vernacular languages. It is true that the volume is remarkably increasing in the peripheral areas. It has been a serious problem as vernacular languages have often not been successful in initiating appropriate exercises despite tremendous expansion in the field. While central sociology nurtured at the elite centers could have managed to bridge the gap between the Western and Eastern sociology and has been the mediator between the two, the non-elite peripheral sociology could not fill up the vacuum. The conditions at the periphery still stand troublesome to innovate and experiment in the areas of sociological research and teaching. It has thrown up the major challenges before the twenty-first century sociology, particularly in the South Asian countries. The paper intends to find out the problems associated with the development of sociology in general and, West Bengal in particular. An attempt is also made to find out the possibilities that also involved in the development of sociology as an academic discipline as well as a discipline with all practical significance. A probable course of action may also be unearthed following the discussion and exercise of the theme under study.

II

Sociology and humanity have a common interest in upholding civil society; a society which keeps both the market and the state at bay. It is already established that neither the state nor the market can ensure the civil life as both of them are prescriptive by themselves and want society to follow their whims on the plea that both of them are actually meant for the betterment of society. The situation has further aggravated with the passing of different phases of marketisation. Initially started with the commodification of labour it has traversed a long way and now there is almost nothing which are not commoditized and eventually it necessitates a reshaping of sociology having the problems and challenges facing mankind in the current phase of growth and development. We are passing a phase where marketisation has been sweeping every corner of the world in general and the civil life in particular. In fact, all of the early efforts to fight against the onslaughts unleashed in the early phases of commodification are no longer in operation and they

are not even treated as adequate to tackle the challenges. The days of labour movements to force the owners in favour of them are over. It is futile to remind the state about the social rights that were guaranteed by the state itself in the early centuries. We are now passing a world where nothing is sacrosanct and anything can be used against anything to gain one's immediate interest just on the plea of state and market. Commodification of all natural resources, public utilities has been an assault on day-to-day survival but without any remedy. Here and there certain inhumanitarian steps have definitely been arrested, but other inhumanitarian grounds have been deepened. Unemployment is taken as a curse but natural rights are curved by the same name of employment. Special economic zones (SEZs) are coming to boost the economy through ensured investment, but evictions are also looming largely on the part of the hapless people even without intimation. Even the administration controlled by the so-called pro-poor parties is sufficiently ahead of others. Reduction in social protection and suspension of industrial regulation for a more liberal economy has been suitably formulated and executed to clear the obstacles before the power-monger hungry framers and executors. It has smoothened the aggressiveness of the state and the market but, proved to be disastrous for the toiling masses.

The changing nature of the market and the process of marketization can not be ignored to have an idea about the changes that have pauperized humanity over the phases and that again explain the complexities, problems and prospects of sociology in the 21st century. It is pointed out that we have already crossed certain major waves of marketisation that have affected the humanity at large and civil society in particular. The first wave of marketisation started with the commodification of labour and it invariably resulted into certain counter movements as well. The second wave emphasized on the commodification of money and that also gave rise to resentments among the civil society people. The current wave is the wave of marketisation of land, nature and environment and that have been very serious. The commodification of labour and money still persists and in states like ours it even could not sensitize people as it is expected to be. But, in the mean time, we have entered into the third wave which is simply a challenge towards humanity. The commodification of nature, land and environment, the proliferation of special economic zones for giant investments, malls for the destruction of retail varieties, have been the latest wave which calls for immediate attention as well as reshaping of all social sciences like sociology.

The malady of the current phase of development is actually marked by its unprecedented and limitless scale. It is termed as globalization and it has severed all of the early barricades of state socialism, colonialism or expansionism. Issues like global warming, nuclear radiation, contagious diseases etc, really know no bounds and affect all corners of life. The all pervasive development has by-passed almost all defences against it. The claims, movements and recognition of labour

rights, social rights etc have lost much of their meanings. The notion of human rights has also gathered a number of connotations. While it has been the sole resort for those who suffer the assaults from both the state and the competitive market, in many cases it has been a tool for the exploiters to suit the particular interest of the same state and the market. Electoral democracy is often used to justify the activities like invasion, nuclear explosion etc, again in the name of the right to freedom of choice and protection of private entrepreneurship. It is such a complex situation at which the responsibilities of the social scientists have become much more serious, challenging and practical.

Having such a backdrop at hand, we can analyse the problems and prospects of sociology in the current century. It is true that sociology grew up in the last century in response to the waves of marketisation and the consequent repercussion of people. Sociology came into existence as a norm-oriented discipline to defend society against the aggressiveness of the market. The so-called development could not ensure the stability of social relationship, rather antagonized it through the destruction of community life, increasing proletarianization and degraded integrity among the people. Early thinkers diagnosed the situation and definitely prescribed for moral integrity. In the later phase also, when political and social rights were ensured following public demand, sociology grew up to dissect the situation and to assist the policy framers. Specialist fields like criminology, sociology of deviance, urban sociology, etc., extended the horizon of sociology and came up to embrace the issues related to policy-framing, execution, administration, evaluation etc, into the orbit of the discipline. The current phase has been more severe and the state has become more or less non-regulatory. It has rather been a facilitator of private enterprises and the free market economy. Society is thus under a double attack from the market and the state. Sociology, in this milieu, can not remain to be a stoic or indifferent spectator or simple analysis of society. It requires not only an involvement to analyse society either from the global or the local perspective, but a task to knit the society together.

The current phase of sociology can not ignore the ongoing processes of sweeping change following globalization. A strong tendency of homogenization is in operation everywhere. The impact of such process is drastic on societies like India and states like West Bengal which are marked by their inherent pluralistic character. The myth that both the pro-globalization and anti-globalization specialists have orchestrated in every sphere of social analyses has proved to be simplistic. It is naïve to state that the changes that are taking place in the cities and countryside of Bengal, be it positive or negative, are the manifestation of globalization only. Nor it is correct to say that the state remains non-responsive to the influences of globalization world-wide. Knowingly or not the state becomes a facilitator of globalization and it welcomes market as the most pragmatic alternative. But, the fact is that both the perspectives are exclusivist and

hegemonic. A nexus is in existence and the unwarranted influences often create serious problems both in the proper analysis of the situation as well as in framing and execution of the policies regarding social issues. Statistical analyses often unnecessarily project that the recent changes in the country and especially in the countryside have taken place following globalization, establishment of SEZs, liberalization of trade facilities, etc. It is also claimed that the non-development of certain areas are due to non-response towards those inevitable scopes for global development. The alternative explanations show that the so-called development can only take place if the internal dynamics are strengthened. Areas like health, education, gender parity etc, are the bases on which directed changes are erected. The perspective, no doubt, often invites parochialism, championing of localism etc. It forces one to think locally and transform globally to maintain parity between the indigenous strength and forthcoming pushes towards social change. The global-local perspective of analyses thus invite serious attention and forces all social scientists to think over the issues that otherwise may plague the explanations on society in the 21st century.

The changing situation and the mixed responses towards globalization invariably place the social scientist in general, and sociologists in particular, to apprehend the issues related to social analysis from a different perspective. Sociologists have definitely developed paradigms in the early centuries following the major issues of those days. They were not even ready to foresee such a vigorous change that has taken place within a few decades in the world at large and in the little communities in particular. A bewildering situation has developed as both the dynamism and stagnation are noticed in different areas often in connection with the presence or absence of structural changes or adjustments with the global forces. It has made the issue more complex and a re-orientation of sociology has become immediate to its discussants as well as practitioners.

III

Sociology as a body of knowledge is now on the eve of a complex trajectory of modernity. At least two dangers or threats are there that haunts the consciousness of the practitioners of sociology. The so called process of homogenisation is dangerously negating the inherent plural and diverse social relations which the people have nurtured for long. Rather we find an assertion of fundamentalism that plagues all aspects of collective existence: politics, culture as well as the domain of knowledge. Another threat involves that of the globalization, rather, in-egalitarian or asymmetrical globalization. Despite certain infrastructural facilities, information and communication technology, we are actually experiencing a one-sided America-oriented

globalization. The principle of global feeling i.e., live locally and think globally, has not been a saviour. It has rather been a costly one and forced us to follow an alternative principle i.e., live locally and transform globally.

Fundamentalism and globalization, though they appear qualitatively different from each other, is proved to be exclusive and hegemonic. Both of them denies and rather creates obstacles before the onward march of the civil society. Nobody can deny the fact that the resurgence of fundamentalism, revivalism etc., have been the result of unwarranted globalization, hybridization of culture and even the denial of indigenous sanctity. Except in the political domain, nowhere the unholy alliance between the two can work for the development of civil society, least of the emancipation of men. It is, however, not to say that the mainstream indigenous analyses are free from biases, nor it can be said that the so called revivalist or conservative discourses are immune from tension-breeding exercises. But what is urgent is to acknowledge the critical and complex nature of the situation and to find out the explanations related to the politics of globalization or the resurgence of fundamentalism that cripples not only the nationalistic aspirations but forces the people to become a passive spectator of growing hegemonic globalization that invariably results into a situation of attrition.

The twenty-first century thus, must make a public turn to face and win over the challenges before the discipline. Sociology can no longer remain a passive analysis of society only. Since sociology lives and continues with sociology, any threat to the society also irks sociology. It is the dynamism that also keeps sociology vibrant and up-to-date. In the absence or failure of state intervention to contain market aggression, sociology requires intervening in public affairs more meaningfully. It is not that the sociologists only dissect the public plans and programmes or evaluate and prescribe the inertia and dynamism involved in them, but they must intervene into the processes of the framing of public policies. Plans and programmes must be preceded by elaborate participation of the beneficiaries and the elaborate public policies. The twenty-first century sociology requires to be much more intervening to the public policy with more open perspective rather than the early sociology which was more or less contained with moral infusions and speculations, comments etc.

IV

The new era of global change, thus, requires a shift in the field of sociology too. It is so required to equip sociology to accept the challenges of the twenty-first century and to continue its

prospects. It is a shift from policy sociology to public sociology. Gone are the days when sociologists used to participate only on the issues related to the drafting of policy statements, preparation of development schemes for the specific areas only. Sociology was mostly concerned with social welfare, policy problems, suggestions, administrative advices on specific areas concerning specific people like working women, marginal people, victims etc. A few sociologists were also asked to chair the commissions for the marginal people, down-trodden etc, or the sanctioning of the telecasting of programmes to ease the situation or to highlight governmental programmes etc. But sociologists' participation in public issues was minimal and only a welfare paradigm used to guide the research activities of the sociologists. It is almost total in cases of government-funded projects in maximum cases. There is little scope to have an integrated opinion of the sociologists on any public issue. Departments of sociology hardly find it practicable to conduct surveys or organize seminar, symposium etc to deal with the issues related to public intervention in the framing up of social policies. Similarly, the field of sociological practice is also vertically and horizontally divided. What is percolated in the cities, particularly in the metropolitan cities, is quite different in other parts of the country. It is again vertically divided within a region as the standard in the city is different from the rural areas. As such there is no sociology, but sociologies to deal with the challenges having no integrating thread. The same is there in the disintegration between research and teaching. The interior parts of the country are not linked with the sociological research procedures as if the teaching in those areas is not supposed to be encouraged and enriched with researches. Nor the areas are placed at the centre of attention of the researchers despite the potential inputs present there.

The experience of West Bengal shows that it is no exception in this respect. Despite the rapid changes in the state following the penetration of market in public life with all its hazards, the discipline of sociology could not respond to the call of the day. In the current decade, when the state has undergone certain government sponsored or government desired changes amidst of public protests, the state has expressed a strong governmental aggression and witnessed strong peoples' reaction, sociologists could neither intervene into the formation or preparation of public policy nor could have made arrangements for academic exercises. In fact, it is not yet realized to unearth the spheres where and how the sociologists can intervene into the preparation of public policy. Not a single sociology department of the entire colleges and universities has ventured to invite any public discussion or any thread bare interactions among the teachers and researchers in sociology regarding the most important issues like land acquisition and its consequences in West Bengal, which has left tremendous impact on the politico-economic and social landscape of the state. In fact, a tendency is there to extend a tacit support to the governmental plans and programmes even if they are inimical to peoples' interest. A strong competition is there among the practitioners of sociology either to serve the media or to serve the government ignoring all

types of critical outlook which is necessary to equip sociology to face the problems and challenges of the current century and to find out the prospects.

A few possibilities of sociology can, of course, be mentioned to understand the probable areas of prospect in the twenty-first century. Sociology is increasingly being perceived as the most methodical discipline to deal with the day-to-day activities, problems and prospects. Applied sociology is increasingly being acknowledged as a practising discipline by the project formulators and executors. The DFID, USAID, WB etc, are extending their supports to implement several schemes and projects for the alleviation of mass problems. Gender coordinator, adolescent councilor, urban planner etc, are the posts where the students of sociology are being preferred than any other discipline. This means that sociology requires more practical orientation towards the public issues and a concern to frame up public policies and to upgrade the discipline so that it can tackle the situation including preparation of public policy and their implementation that the programme formulators find serious and timely. The areas like evaluation, social audit, consultancy, counselling and clinical sociology are the applied fields in which the discipline of sociology required to be more oriented. Irrespective of the debate of diagnostic versus prescriptive science, the students of sociology must adept the skill in those areas and thereby enrich the field with necessary arsenals to face the problems and challenges in the fast changing world.

It is true that sociology as a theoretical science has developed with the primary focus to advance the theoretical understanding of some phenomenon. But as an applied science, it has also its focus on solving some real-world problem. The primary focus of basic sociology is in the theoretical realm: developing theories of human social behaviour and testing hypotheses derived from those theories. Sociology, as a basic scientific discipline, refers to sociological research whose purpose is to advance our knowledge about human social behaviour with little concern for any immediate practical benefit. This is the point which put sociology ahead of other disciplines to deal with the society, particularly in the fields of analysis and understanding of the situation from a very value-neutral scientific perspective. But, the on going century can not deny the increasing necessity of applied sociology which consists of research and other activities designed to focus on sociological knowledge or research or findings on a particular problem identified by some client with some practical outcome in mind. The primary focus of applied sociology is on the policy or action realm: making recommendations about social programs or policies that might be implemented or changed. Basic Sociology remains to be an attempt to develop theories that explain how societies work and why people behave the way they do. Hypotheses are derived from those theories and are made subjected to empirical tests. Confirmation of the hypotheses

provides some verification for the theory. The overall goal remains to advance our knowledge of human behaviour. Applied Sociology on the other hand uses Sociological theories and research tools to tackle some particular problem that somebody wants to get them solved.

The challenges before the discipline of sociology in the twenty-first century lie in the appropriate understanding of the society both at the micro and macro level. It is a high task to scale the state or society by way of its level of commodification. It is similarly challenging to accept either of the pro-globalization or anti-globalization perspective. It is harder task to realize the exclusive and hegemonic perspective of both globalization and fundamentalism which are likely to continue at the absence of another. But the prospect of sociology lies in the acquaintance with the appropriate pragmatic methodologies to grasp the situation and grapple with it. As an applied science, sociology is equipped enough to address any problem, be it micro or macro, as suggested by the client who needs the problem solved. The sociologist's task is to develop a systematic assessment of the problem given the needs and goals of the client.

The prospect of sociology in the twenty first century lies in its skill in applied sociology. Applied sociologists can work in a number of spheres like that of the applied researcher, in which a client's problem calls for the collection and analysis of data in order to recommend solutions to the problem. The expertise in such areas can easily show prospect of the discipline, particularly to those of the future students of sociology. Applied researchers may work in a variety of settings, such as government agencies, private corporations, private research organizations, or under individual contract with some agency or organization. They also conduct many different kinds of research as the situation and the client require. An applied sociologist can work as a sociological consultant, whose role is to make recommendations to clients for changes in programs or practices based on the existing body of sociological knowledge about human groups and human social behaviour. Unlike applied researchers, consultants don't collect and analyze data themselves but rather rely on the conceptual and theoretical knowledge distilled from the basic and applied research of others. Using this knowledge, the consultant offers a solution to a problem or offers a general understanding of the socio-cultural environment relevant to a client. For example, a sociological consultant might use past research on the link between socioeconomic status and attitudes towards crime to help a lawyer pick a jury that would be most favorably disposed towards the lawyer's client. Another sphere in which applied sociologists work is that of the clinical sociologist who attempts a sociological diagnosis of group problems and behaviour and develops a planned programme of change. Some clinical sociologists, for example, conduct family counseling directed toward helping families to overcome problems; others help people change undesired behaviours such as overeating or alcohol abuse. As do sociological consultants, sociological clinicians utilize existing sociological knowledge without

conducting research themselves and that can provide quick and timely response to the emerging demands of the clients as well as that of the fast changing society.

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