

Abstract: Towards Indigenisation of an Uncertain Transplant: Hundred Years of Sociology in India

Sociology as an academic discipline was originally transplanted in India during the British colonial era. The first full Department of Sociology was set up in the University of Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1919 with the eminent Scottish sociologist, Sir Patrick Geddes. Over the hundred years since then, sociology has come to be institutionalised and expanded in Indian higher education: it is taught widely in universities and colleges, and a large amount of sociological research is carried out in universities and institutes. There is a large professional body of sociologists – Indian Sociological Society (established in 1952) – with a life-membership exceeding 4,000. With all this, there is a growing sense of cynicism among those doing sociology in India, as they seldom see in it any purpose beyond career advancement. This is matched by misgivings among both the policy-makers and the general public about the practical use of sociology.

The crisis confronting sociology in India today has much to do with the subject being an 'uncertain transplant.' During the colonial era and the early years of independence, the curriculum of sociology was strongly influenced by British social anthropology. This was mainly due to the education received by the

pioneers. After independence, the curriculum of the discipline came to be strongly influenced by American sociology, with an ever-increasing number of sociologists undergoing training in the United States of America. Not only the curriculum of sociology, but its research agenda, too, came to be determined by western (mainly, American) sociology. Sociologists in India, and more generally the academics, looked for endorsement of their work from the western sociologists. Thus, if the transplantation of western sociology in India was uncertain, its growth and development imitated the trends in western sociology.

Over the decades, a variety of proposals have been made – and some even practised – to address the question of the fit between sociology and its existential subject matter: Marxology and Marxian Approach, Subaltern Studies, Integral Sociology, Unitary Social Science, Indigenisation, and Contextualising Sociology. The premier journal Contributions to Indian Sociology fostered a continual discussion on a ‘Sociology for India’. However, sociology in India continues to remain a mirror image (distorted though, as all mirror images are) of its primary western counterpart. The habits of what Syed Hussein Alatas (1974) calls the ‘captive mind’, it appears, die hard; sociology in India remains a mimic social science in its hundredth year of formal existence.

This paper examines the problems and prospects of indigenising sociology in India. It is divided into five parts: Part One introduces the problematic of sociology in the context of countervailing forces of universalisation and indigenisation; Part Two discusses the crisis confronting sociology in India by delineating its transplantation during the colonial rule and its expansion as a mimic social science in the post-independence era; Part Three analyses the issues of ontological and epistemological fit in the teaching and research in the subject; Part Four examines the alternatives proposed to address these issues; and Part Five concludes by reflecting on the prospects of indigenising sociology in India.