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RELEVANCE OF SOCIOLOGY—SOME DETERMINANTS

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Drawing upon Peter Berger's five images of sociology, this paper attempts to develop an argument that relevance of sociology can be decided only on the basis of the image/s that practitioners of the discipline carry in their minds. Going beyond these popular images, this paper highlights three major determinants of 'relevance' viz. (i) methodology, (ii) theory and (iii) ideology, and argues that both positivist and praxiological overtones are embedded in all the paradigms ranging from functionalism to Marxism. Moreover, the understanding of the 'relevance' question itself tends to shift the ground within a disciplinary discourse as it did in Indian Sociology. In the final analysis, the paper stresses that the question of relevance is a value or a moral question. It is only when the nature of these value is utilitarian that positivist science could mediate, otherwise, 'relevance' is determined primarily by the voice of conscience

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The discipline of sociology has gained considerable respectability and acceptability in the eyes of the public at large, as well as in the estimation of other social sciences since World War II. Despite this growing recognition, sociology has also become an omnibus science—highly deversified in its subject-matter and analytical perspectives, and equally, or even more, complex in its methodologies and applications. In terms of conceptual categories or theoretical approaches it has become increasingly difficult to claim sociology as a unified body of knowledge any longer. Within the professional circles of sociologists themselves, perception or images of the discipline differ widely.

Broadly, these images of sociology could be classified into five categories: (a) The positivist image of sociology treats it as a pure science that aims at a value-free, objective causal analysis and at offering scientific explanation of social phenomena. Within such a positivist frame of reference, a science often claims to have developed the capacity to generate general laws and to make predictions. (b) The view of sociology as fundamentally a part of the 'humanities' is quite in divergence from the first image. Here, the thrust is on 'understanding', through reflexivity, the humanist ethos and cultural creativity of all forms of social existence, rather than on predictions. In this image, "sociological perspective is a broad, open and an emancipated vista on human life and a sociologist is inwardly open to the measureless richness of human possibilities, eager for new horizons and new worlds of meaning". Such an image of sociology comes close to what Peter Berger (1963: 25-53) calls 'sociology as a form of consciousness'.[1] (c) The third image of sociology is that it constitutes a set of rules, just like grammar, which facilitates communication through shared symbolic structures. In this somewhat hermeneutic concept of sociology, its function is similar to that of a language of discourse. (d) The most common perception of sociology is that it is 'social engineering', and that its task is basically 'applied', rather than 'purely analytical'. In this interventionist conception of sociology, the discipline is treated as a problem solving craft. (e) Finally, at least some hold 'sociology', or for that matter every social science discipline, as basically a 'world-view', an ideology which either tacitly or explicitly states the desired end-states to which the processes of social transformation ought to move, and which broadly indicates the lines of inquiry, as well as, the methodological options open to a sociologist within a given socio-cultural matrix.

Although these categories are analytically separable, in reality, the professional sociologists' images of their craft often manifest in curious combinations. The issue of relevant sociology, or the relevance of sociology is, therefore, likely to be settled quite differently, depending on what images practitioners of sociology have in their minds.

In any discussion on 'relevance' of a social science discipline, one cannot possibly have pretensions of being totally value-free. No matter whether relevance is being examined from the standpoint of a practitioner of a craft, or from the perspective of the professional community to which the practitioner belongs or whether it is being assessed in terms of the expectations society at large has from the practitioner, value-loads are built-in in any such assessment. For that matter, they are inescapable in any evaluative exercise which is basically normative.

It is an interesting question in the sociology of knowledge to consider why the issue of relevance of the social sciences—including sociology—is being raised and debated frequently in the 1980s. Both from within the analyst's psyche and from outside, the question of relevance has been raised in recent years. Two points are particularly noteworthy here: (i) Such a discussion is a reflection on the growing self-awareness of sociologists, their willingness to question the very foundations of sociology and also their keenness to assess the espistemological assumptions underlying sociological theories and concepts, as well as the ontology of the nature of man and his consciousness. (ii) Secondly, significantly enough, those who are *not* in power are not asking questions about the relevance of sociology, but those in power often raise it. Hence, when professional sociologists discuss the issue of relevance, it is likely to be interpreted either as an act of self-defence or as an expression of powerlessness in the wider arena of the socio-political system.

Freedom Versus Social Conditioning

The most pertinent question, however, is who decides what is 'relevant sociology' and 'what is the relevance of sociology'. Both the questions, though framed differently, are in quintessence quite similar. No single answer to such questions would evoke agreement. It could be argued that sociology investigates all dimensions of social reality, and that, in using its theories and methods, the discipline, as well as its practitioners, must have intellectual freedom, implying freedom from all constraints —political or ideological. If the logic of this argument is followed seriously, then 'relevance' becomes an exclusive realm of the scientists themselves—in this case, of professional sociologists. An alternative, and an equally cogent argument, could be that sociology and sociologists free from all constraints and contexts, can be anything but realistic. The entire discipline of sociology emerged as a response to challenges posed by the growth of industrial capitalism in the West. The cultural and social context, in which knowledge production takes place, conditions and shapes that production process considerably. Hence, there are closer contextual and existential linkages between dominant paradigms and socio-historical forces at a given time (Singh, 1984:5). Relevance of sociology in this alternative frame is *determined* by the conditions or context in which it is debated and decided.

'Intellectual autonomy of sociology' is thus pitted against 'social conditioning' (even determination) of knowledge. Both these formulations are polar-type abstractions, typifications and, to a certain extent, ideological mystifications that tend to miss the dialectical connections between the two. Moreover, internal coherence of these two

'ideal-type' positions is more often taken for granted than subjected to critical discussions.

Freedom of sociologists in deciding what is 'relevant sociology' at a given time and place is, by itself, more of a 'desired end-state' than a reality. Since we assume that 'fact' and 'value' are inseparable in any understanding or reconstruction of social reality, freedom and autonomy of sociologists is as much a reality as it is a value-judgement and value-assertion. Such a mixture of fact and value is true even in the case of social conditioning of knowledge. One needs to recall only the major theoretical and methodological orientations that dominated the thought and action of scientists in the nineteenth century. Positivism, rationalism, utilitarianism, existentialism and dialectical materialism could be mentioned as some of the dominant paradigms, during the age of early industrialism and its sustenance through the colonial system. The science of society—sociology—developed as a separate discipline, not because it had readymade theoretical paradigms to fall back upon, but largely because its practitioners were able to synthesise these. Such syntheses were partly dictated and necessitated by the social conditions in which they were attempted by classical thinkers, and were partly outcomes of the individual analyst's special or unique ways of understanding, as well as of their intellectual sensitivities. The positivist paradigm exemplifies this kind of synthesis.

Methodologies and Relevance

Positivism is a case in point, particularly because Comte launched sociology on the foundations of what he called the new system of positive philosophy. It, in a sense had a built-in creation of defining what is relevant and what is not relevant committed to positivism. As a general approach in sociology, positivism emphasised the identity between the social and the natural or physical sciences, stressed on direct observation or proof as the only valid and ultimate source of knowledge (*i.e.* a definite epistemology) and aimed at formulation of general laws. In the Galilean-Newtonian tradition, positivism asserted 'formulation of general laws and prediction' as the ultimate goal of every scientific endeavour.

The classical sociologists Marx, Spencer, Weber and Durkheim were all influenced by positivism, which constituted the intellectual foundation of their age. Yet, each one of them responded to the social and economic changes of their time as he understood the relevance of his enterprise. Instead of getting captivated by existing paradigms, they modified or amended them with creative and innovative zeal. Thus, organicists, holists, emergentist-functionalists considered themselves no less positivist than methodological individualists. Similarly, "Marxists attempted to unite empiricist scientific tradition with historicism on the one hand and anti-analytical holism on the other" (Saran, 1962: 200). In other words, the classical thinkers in the sociological tradition adhered to a given paradigm to a certain extent, and defined its relevance in the context of the socio-historical forces of their times, although the latter sometimes required them to tread a different path.

Weber's commitment to positivism had different shades. Under the intellectual impact of Wilhelm Dilthey, who was avowedly a non-positivist, it is unlikely that Weber did not inherit some of the scepticism of his mentor towards doctrinaire positivism. Nonetheless, he considered only that sociology as relevant and scientific, which conforms to canons of objectivity and value-neutrality (Freund, 1972 : 37-86). In this way, on the one hand Weber shared Marxists' commitment to 'empiricist-

scientific tradition in methodological terms, but, on the other hand, he challenged the latter's materialistic reductionism as unacceptable. Weber's search for an alternative to the materialist paradigm landed him on idealistic reassertions—best exemplified in his thesis, 'Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'. Another important departure from the hard core nineteenth century positivism, is to be found in Weber's notion of sociology as an interpretative science. To him 'exegesis' and understanding, and not prediction, were as the ultimate goal of social inquiry. He did not share the Marxist view that unity of science via a single set of laws is possible. Rather, Weber thought that, although the study of society has to be objective and scientific, its laws are held to be unique, unlike those of physics and other terrestrial sciences. The relevance of what sociology does, must not, therefore, be decided by the yardsticks of the physical sciences.

In short, though positivism was inescapable in their times, all classical sociologists defined its relevance and contextualised it in accordance with the priorities perceived by them and in response to the socio-historical forces they confronted. Partly, the relevance of a paradigm was a given matter to them, but partly, they exercised their autonomy and freedom, and through critical reflection, made innovations creatively in setting its scope and limits in studying social reality as they thought was relevant.

As important debate in the philosopy of science refers to 'explanation' versus 'prediction' as the appropriate model for social science inquiry or for behavioural research. One group of methodologists argues that a good explanation is one which has the ability to predict. Carl Hempel and P. Oppenheim, for example, take the position that if an explanation does not allow predictions, then it is not adequate. In their view, explanation and prediction are two bits of knowledge which stand in a certain logical relation to one another, and are parts of the same deductive systematisation (Hempel *et al.* 1948: 135-75). In recent years, however, methodologists and philosophers of science have increasingly emphasised the difference between explanation and prediction. The former is about an actuality implying that a counter-factuality can prove it to be wrong, while there is no corresponding actuality for an unsuccessful prediction. Kaplan is of the view that explanations provide 'understanding' and may be able to suggest future trends that are not necessarily predictions. Hence, we can predict without being able to understand, and can understand reality without necessarily being able to predict (Kaplan, 1964: 349-51).

The question of relevance of sociology too cannot be considered in isolation from this important methodological debate. Those who consider 'prediction' as the ultimate test of science, would tend to apply the rigorous criteria of relevance drawn from the models of the natural sciences. In spite of the growing realisation among natural scientists that this hard-core positivism has serious limitations, protagonists of such a view find in it a useful stick to beat behavioural sciences with, and to tame them into accepting a subordinate role *vis-a-vis* the natural sciences. Frequently, national developmental priorities and fundings are decided on the basis of the usefulness of a science. This 'usefulness' is judged by their ability to identify causes by controlling other variables and then to 'predict'. All the rest, including the social sciences, are considered not so 'relevant' since they are regarded as lacking the ability to attempt causal analyses and make predictions with precision and accuracy. The social sciences are then left with the only option of either competing with each other to prove their 'degree of usefulness', or alternatively to be content with the redundancy more often thrust on them by their counter-parts in the natural sciences, who prove

themselves to be more successful and enterprising salesmen in the eyes of the powers that be. There are others who believe that even without acquiring the 'so-called predictive ability', understanding is a legitimate scientific task which is no less socially relevant.

The domination of empirical scientific sociology continued to be felt until recently. This brand of sociology, consciously or unconsciously, subscribed to a particular epistemological view and to an objective approach to social reality. Sociologists, in this tradition, sincerely believed that complete objectivity was not only desirable, but also possible, and that it constituted the best route to build scientific understanding. Sociologists with this act of faith confined themselves to an outsider's role, and seldom attempted to develop the capacity to empathise with the subjective consciousness of the people whom they studied. Now, a sociologist is expected increasingly to combine the objectivity of the outsider and the 'reflexivity' of the insider. It is the blend of the two, called, reflexive sociology—which sets the standards of relevance.[2] Reflexivity implies the "capacity to develop a disciplined mind, conceptual clarity, a dialectical universe of discourse and commitment to values of humanity and universality" (Singh, 1984b:7). This capacity cannot simply grow, as long as sociologists remain obsessed, both with the ultra-positivist tenets of 'predictability' and with the 'value-freeness' that prevents any sharing of symbolic cultural meanings and communications, between the observer and the observed.

Sociological Theory and the Question of Relevance

Theoretical paradigms play a significant role in the development of any science. A theory offers a general explanation of social reality, and, hence, it is a higher level abstraction than general laws. In fact, laws serve to explain empirical events which are time and place specific, whereas, theories explain laws (Kaplan, 1964: 346-47). Regardless of whether our interest is in scientific reconstruction for making 'prediction' or whether it is confined to only 'understanding', theoretical constructs are indispensable for any effort that claims to be a scientific activity. The record of sociology in developing theoretical paradigms has not been any less impressive than that of any other social science discipline. These constructions range from metatheories and grand-theories to middle range ones. Marxism (historical materialism as a theory), functionalism (both in its organicist and in structuralist-cultural ramifications), systems theory, structuralism and phenomenology at the one end and symbolic inter-actionism, exchange theory, ethnomethodology, reference-group and the like at the other end, constitute the broad spectrum of sociological theories.

In a scientific community, theoretical approaches lay down the ground rules for discourse both at the institutional and intellectual levels. Each of these approaches spells out its analytical scheme, conceptual apparatus and methodological priorities. As internally coherent systems of thought, theoretical constructions are supposed to be fountain-heads of new ideas, new models and insights, and of originality and creativity. However, once formulated, theories soon begin to serve as a source of identity among the adherents of a particular theory. They tend to treat their theory as a water-tight compartment, more as a finished product, than as a process of enrichment of knowledge and understanding, more as a dogma, than as a set of deductively interrelated propositions, and more as a sectional possession, than as a common asset to be shared by the entire scientific community. Theories then become dysfunctional to truly scientific endeavour, as they raise structural barriers

to a genuinely intellectual discourse and to creativity. The structure of intellectual life, particularly when it is institutionalised, inevitably builds into it an element of conflict which, paradoxically, is non-intellectual, and even anti-intellectual in nature. Theoretical schools, then, tend to become fortifications, from where offensives are launched to undermine the claims to relevance made by rival schools or positions. Theories, then, become stagnant and dogmatic restatements. The fragmentary view of theoretical constructs or paradigms is, thus, largely dictated by non-intellectual pressures and considerations of careers and positions in a scientific community. Practising sociologists, under such an intellectual climate, to some extent, become prisoners of their education. Unfortunately, the scientific vision of sociology has been blurred by such pressures, which can be attributed to the rapid quantitative expansion of sociology. This is how Randall Collins (1986: 1336-38) characterises the real crisis of sociology in the 1980s.

Raising the boundary walls, between supposedly distinct theories, was detrimental to the synthetic ethos of sociology, which had demonstrated its capacity to harmonise and integrate the formal with the concrete, the logical with the phenomenological and the transcendent with the historical realms of reality (Singh, 1984a: 1-2). Since, fortunately, practising sociologists, both in the West and in the developing countries, found their relevance only in being responsive to the historically and culturally specific social processes, changes in the theoretical paradigms were inevitable. Through their adoption in application, operationalisation, testing and in reconstructions, theories passed through stages of refinement and modification and also through synthesis.

In the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, the unnatural boundaries between theories have started crumbling down. In formulating research questions, as well as in analysing and interpreting their data, most of the practising sociologists in the developed as well as in the developing countries, have discovered points of convergence and, what Yogendra Singh calls of 'paradigmatic convolusion' (Singh, 1984a, 1984b). This trend was set by the development of the critical theory school, or the works of the Frankfurt School, which attempted to show the humanist ethos of Marx's theory of alienation, which is rooted in certain Hegelian notions. Some of the School members tried to unite psychoanlysis and Marxism — an effort which was bound to evoke a sharp reaction from orthodox Marxists. From Adorno to Habermas, this spirit of synthesis and innovation with paradigms has dominated the growth of critical theory (Bottomore, 1984). On the other side, we find the Althusserian attempt to construct structuralist Marxism. Drawing heavily on Levi-Strauss' categories of formal relations such as homology, symmetry, inversion, opposition and binary divisions, Althusser tries to redefine the Marxist notion of totality in pure structuralist terms, where unit of analysis is 'structure' rather than individual. His approach to Marxism is both anti-historicist and anti-humanistic (J. Rex, 1974) as it treats structural analysis of the existing contradictions as more relevant than historical materialism as such.

Such attempts towards theoretical synthesis are unabated even today, and are pointers of the mult-dimensionality of social reality, on the one hand, and the limitations of the universalistic claims made by protagonists of specific theoretical paradigms, on the other. This is not to suggest that the pursuit of theorisation and theoretical abstraction is a futile exercise. Rather, the discussion simply aims at pointing out how rigid, though rigorous adoption of a theoretical approach, does not necessarily render one study or analytical exercise more relevant than the other. It

only shows that all theoretic approaches and paradigms are relevant, depending on what problem one is studying, and how complex is the reality being approached, a certain theoretic construct, or a specific blend of two or more of them, may turn out to be more relevant than the other. No theoretical approach by definition can, therefore, be dismissed as either untenable logically or irrelevant empirically.

Ideology and Relevance

The affinity between theory and ideology renders the question of 'relevance of sociology' a praxeological one. Ideology refers to a set of beliefs and ideas about facts, causal relation and values in human affairs, which reinforce one another either through logic or through the affinity of sentiments inspired by them, at least some of which are unverified or unverifiable. As a set of ideas and beliefs ideology seeks (a) to articulate the basic values of a group of people and (b) to distribute power-in-society. Ideology in itself is neither philosophy nor a systematic theory (Apter 1964: 15-46). Values denote the abstract side of ideology, but it is less abstract than philosophy; power is the other dimension of ideology,since ideology realises itself through concrete actions towards the attainment of power, without which it is difficult to draw oneself closer to the desired end-states. As a guide to these actions, ideologues draw heavily on social theory and analysis.

The problem of the relation of ideologies to scientific analysis and theories is posited more directly in Marxism. In his *Theses on Feurbach* Marx has stressed: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it" (cited in Lukacs, 1971).

Theory and praxis thus form integral parts of the Marxist world-view. It is the unity of the two which is stressed in orthodox Marxist social thought. The central problem in Marxism is not how one understands, analyses and theorises but how to use that theoretical understanding or analysis for praxis—for changing reality in the directions set ideologically.

Marxist sociology, therefore, lays down the ground rules of 'relevance'. In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx clearly states the conditions in which a relation between theory and practice become possible. "It is not enough that thought should seek to realise itself, reality must also strive towards thought. It is only when consciousness stands in relation to reality can theory and practice (thought and action) be united. For this to happen emergence of consciousness must become the decisive step. The historical function of theory is to make this step a practical possibility" (Marx, 1970, also G. Lukacs, 1971).

Orthodox Marxism, however, takes a rather dogmatic and rigid view of the theory-action relationship as inseparable; any theory which has no potentiality to assume the form of an ideology, suggesting the line of direction of social and political activism, is treated as irrelevant. More liberal Marxists, however, consider studied criticism and analysis as a legitimate way of building a science. One of the important functions of sociology is to offer 'social criticism' which aims at demystification of the ruling class ideology (Bottomore, 1974: 90-94) because mystification is the principal source of alienation. The task of social criticism is to unmask the disguised forms alienation takes, whether in the realm of religion, power-politics or in the process of production. In the 1950s the Frankfurt School took up precisely this task of building 'critical theory' or 'critical sociology'. Its contention was that criticism is an equally

relevant method of building a science because (a) it helps to clarify one's own notions; (b) through social criticism a sociologist can effectively conscientise others; through critical analysis a social-scientist can expose the elements of mystification in any theory/ideology, and (c) thereby an analyst, through criticism can contribute significantly to social action and change (Singh, 1984b: 12).

The praxeological thrust and ideological overtones in Marxism are self-evident. These have tended to be more implicit or even veiled in functionalism and in systems theory of the Parsonian variety. Here the problem of social order is viewed within a moralistic frame, with explicit fascination for conservatism. The dual commitment in Parsons to positivism and functionalism has the third dimension, *i.e.* obsession with the *status quo* and resistance to change (Gouldner, 1970: 251-54). Postulates of these theories are based on assumptions about role, status, institutions and normative structures. Above all, premises regarding functional integration or capacities of structures or systems to restore their equilibrium, sound more like ideological assertions rather than factual statements. Problems of conflict and change were not ignored by functionalists and Parsons' systems paradigm altogether, but then 'conflict' came to be treated as dysfunctional, and change, as an end product of 'structure differentiation' which takes place only within the boundry-maintaining system, that has inherent capacity for reequilibrium and homeostasis (Parsons, 1970: 480-503). In American sociology, these orientations determined their own relevance and influenced considerably the choice of both methods and themes of study. From family and marriage to criminality/deviance, and from group dynamics in large scale formal organisations including labour-management relations, to problems of integration and assimilation of ethnic or immigrant groups—constituted some of the research themes in American sociology from the 1930s to 1950s and 1960s or so. The conceptual categories used frequently in these studies pertained to deviation or conformity, adjustment or adaptation or stability, order, solidarity and integration, which resulted in the mystification of the theory of role, status and structure. Empirical findings of studies with functionalist and systems theoretical orientation, were suggestive of coping strategies for problems encountered in interpersonal relations whether in families, ethnic neighbourhood, hospitals, army establishments, prisons or in large scale industrial organisations.[3] In short, 'applied' sociology became more relevant as it served the needs of the ruling classes in the United States. This brand of sociology was susceptible to the influence of establishment ideology, and it was exposed by C. Wright Mills (1962: 525-52) as early as in 1943.

The critical sociology tradition, however, gathered momentum once again in Western sociology in the 1960s, when the massive student protests on university campuses, in the wake of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, unleashed new historical forces. These protests developed into radical social movements throughout North America, including Canada (Bottomore, 1969: 80-118). It is worth noting that 'crisis' in Western sociology came to be discussed only in the context of such developments that questioned not only the adequacy but also the propriety of certain theoretical orientations (Gouldner, 1970). But then this crisis was visible in Marxism and Marxist sociology as well. Ideological dogmatism beneath orthodox Marxism came under attack not only from within the Frankfurt School, but also from outside by other nonconformists like Georg Lukacs, (1971), A. Gramsci (1971) whose writings of the 1920s and 1930s inspired younger sociologists, and even from professional sociologists such as Norman Birnbaum and Tom Bottomore (Birnbaum, 1971), who claimed to be Marxist themselves. Today, Marxism or Marxist Social thought has

hardly remained a homogeneous and unified system of ideas, of analysis and praxis (Bottomore, 1975: 65-75). As Immaneul Wallerstein (1986: 1295-1308) has put it: "Marxist era of Marx himself (1840s to 1883), the era of orthodox Marxism (from 1880s to 1950) and then the era of 'thousand Marxisms' (since the 1950s) are the three phases in which styles of utopia, rhetoric, and analytical rigours have undergone changes substantially. These changes, far from being accidental, were linked to social movements, that were the products of the larger historical processes which brought about corresponding changes in the notion of relevance and praxis, even within Marxist sociology."

The Problem of Relevance in Indian Sociology

Much has been written on the growth of Indian sociology, its stages of development, and the major influences in terms of theoretical, methodological and ideological orientations on its dominant trends since the 1920s (Mukherjee, 1979, Yogendra Singh 1984a, 1986, Srinivas and Panini, 1973, Lele 1981, Dhanagare 1984). It is needless to go over their details as a hackneyed ritual once again in this paper. Nonetheless, it is necessary to tie them down to the entire question of relevance of sociology or relevant sociology in the contemporary situation.

Indian sociologists have from time to time, shifted their professional concerns and have redefined the relevance of what they do in response to changing historical forces. Studies of microcosms of social realities—such as caste, kinship, structures, marriage and family, village social structure and factional politics in village *panchayats*, and studies on tribal societies—the transition and social transformation they were going through—attracted considerable attention of professional sociologists in India till almost the mid-1960s. Macro-level processes of change set forth by colonialism, as well as by the anti-imperialist national movement and by the forces of modernisation — introduction of new education, and entirely new production technology and its attendant value-structures—also came to be studied. The problems of modern industrial society, such as poverty, slums, urban conglomorations, crime and deviance and industrial unrest, as well as problem of youth identity and unrest, attracted considerable attention among researchers. The weaker and underprivileged sections, whether the scheduled castes, tribes, backward classes and women and their problems, began to be focused more sharply, as gaps in developmental theory and practice were identified and plugged. Current interests in Indian sociology revolve around some of the neglected issues and questions in agrarian sociology, social movements, particularly protest movements, role of professions and, of course, the broader questions raised by development experience and its inextricable links with the core-periphery and dependency questions in the development debate itself.[4]

The changing ideas of relevance have, thus, kept pace with historical forces and this pace has been accelerated rather strikingly since the late 1960s or early 1970s. Indian sociology is no longer wallowing in complacency, as it appeared to be when it was obsessed with mirco-level social structure (Dhanagare, 1980), nor is it oblivious any longer to theoretical approaches or paradigms which have came to be used, though only metaphorically, rather than substantively, by Indian sociologists (Singh, 1984a). Ideas of sociological intervention in social processes are being offered increasingly as an alternative to the positivist paradigm—and its limitations are being increasingly highlighted.

If the industry is the epitome of the production of commodities and profit in capitalist societies, production of theoretical and applied knowledge is the focal point of post-industrial societies. As Daniel Bell (1974: 26-27) and A. Touraine (1984) have pointed out, this production of knowledge takes place in universities and research organisations, which have now come to occupy major positions in decision-making, planning, policy formulations and hence, in the power structures. Whether Indian society has completed the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist or even to post-capitalist stages of development, may still be an unsettled polemical issue. However, there is no denying the fact that Indian Social Sciences, at the institutional and intellectual levels, have developed a stature of their own by producing data bases as a result of their empirical inquiries. Policy implications of these were quickly grasped by those who were and are associated with planning, policy formulations and implementation.

Increasing demands on the craft of sociology are now being made by the state and its agencies, and, to a certain extent, by private or corporate industrial business houses, who also happen to be both the consumers of social science research and its principal promoters. Research priorities are identified by the state-sponsored funding agencies and business houses, and the lines of inquiry are often laid down by them. Influx of research funds from foreign/international agencies also takes its own toll. The question of what is relevant sociology thus comes to be settled unilaterally either by the state or by the funding agencies. Under their impact, sociology is rendered almost like a servicing-station, and this role is very often accepted passively by grant-seekers who do not examine it critically.

Besides the state and big business and formal organisations, there are other, more silent, consumers of sociological knowledge. These consist of voluntary organisations, non-governmental, non-party action-groups and activists, as well as reformist-philanthropic bodies, who want their strategic social interventions to be preceded by bench-mark surveys and analyses. If the present experience is any reckoner, then it is clear that these organisations or groups engaged in amelioration, conscientisation and mobilisation of masses are going to make increasing demands on professional sociologists, and thereby redefine the relevance of sociology in the years to come.

Two more determinants of relevance need to be mentioned. First, the canons of empirical sociology, following the dictates of nineteenth century positivism, permeate mainstream Indian sociology even today. Those in this stream still believe in the possibility of an objective, scientific and a value-neutral sociology. Any social analyst's hobnobbing with social action, activism or with direct intervention, evokes disapproval as irrelevant and unprofessional indulgence. In the mainstream framework of relevance the separation between 'analysis' and 'action' is steadfastly maintained. Any attempt to combine the two evokes sharp reaction. On the other side, as mentioned above, there are growing pressures from non-party action-groups, voluntary NGOs or agencies to produce more relevant sociology, in which analysis would be an effective instrument for praxis and for changing the micro-level scenarios in which these activist-groups function.

To these growing pressures from the state, national and international agencies, business organisations as well as from action-groups, the reactions of professional sociologists tend to take three different forms: (a) complete submission and an uncritical acceptance (of grants, and hence of research priorities, theoretical approaches and conceptual categories), (b) rhetorical pleas for indigenisation of sociology and

(c) a total nihilistic dismissal of all positivistic-empirical sociology. These three attitudes reflect either the self-denial of sociology, a sulking and stultifying redundancy and anti-intellectualism, all of which are detrimental to the growth of a relevant sociology in any sense. Positivist ethos manifested in empirical inquiries is as useful as critical sociology and social criticism are. But, then, neither empiricist obsession nor hyper-criticality can be conducive to creativity and originality; instead, both if pursued exclusively can be counterproductive. Relevance and priorities, as defined by the state or private funding agencies, need not be outrightly rejected, but then the sociological imagination must not be either mortagaged or sold out to the fund-suppliers or political activists, or non-party action-groups. The real challenge for Indian sociologists lies not just in keeping all the channels of dialogue or expression open, but in combining and synthesising the spirit of scientific inquiry, with social criticism, a role they can ill-afford to dispense with. The real problem is how do we produce a discourse with the state, on the one hand, and the activists and the masses, on the other, without losing or compromising our own autonomy in defining the relevance of what we do.

The synthesis of the scientific spirit and social criticism, which we have advocated above, presupposes that in the ultimate analysis, the question of 'relevance' cannot be settled purely in the arena of 'science' as such. It is quintessentially a 'value' question, a moral question and, as such, a matter of praxis—the only determinate one as such, because it is only when the nature of these values is utilitarian that 'science' (its positivist canons and spirit) can mediate. On the 'basic' moral question, praxis would have to be guided by blind intuition — or what is often called the 'voice of conscience'.[5] In this sense the issue of the relevance as well as the accountability of sociology will always be settled in the minds of the analysts — i.e. the practitioners of sociology.

NOTES

1.   Some of these have been discussed by Peter Berger (1963)

2.   To Gouldner, the historical mission of a reflexive sociology is to transcend sociology as it now exists, and in order to succeed in this mission, it will have to be more radical. For details, see Gouldner (1970: 488-500).

3.   To cite an example, this kind of functionalist orientation is evident in Blau and Scott's treatment of formal organisations. See Blau and Scott (1962).

4.   At least some of these thematic thrusts, and the research done on them by Indian sociologists and social anthropologists, have been reviewed in the two series of Trend Reports published by the I C S S R covering the period upto 1979

5.   This formulation is based on the written comments of Professor Yogendra Singh on my paper, which he conveyed to me through a personal communication.

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