

Crisis in Sociology: A Tired Discipline?

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If sociology could speak, it would say "I am tired".

—Jeffrey Alexander,
Theoretical Logic in Sociology

THE timeliness and the truth of Veena Das's observations about the crisis in sociology [Das 1993] are best underlined by the near-silence that has greeted them. To the best of my knowledge, there have been only two responses in the past six months—clear evidence of disciplinary fatigue if not morbidity. In calling attention to this condition and inviting debate, Das has fulfilled admirably the responsibility vested in her as a distinguished senior member of the profession. As a novice and a late comer to the discipline, I feel diffident about entering this debate; but I am pushed by the lack of response from those better placed, and encouraged by the two others who have cared to react [Giri 1993; Murthy 1993]. The notes that follow are less a diagnosis of the current crisis in Indian sociology than an attempt to identify some of the conditions necessary to produce one.

NEED FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

A troublesome aspect of Veena Das's analysis is the conflation of closely related but distinct aspects of the crisis. While understandable in an initial effort intended to propose an agenda rather than to provide a definitive treatment, it may nevertheless lead to avoidable confusion and muddled thinking, especially on the part of potential entrants into the debate.

In a certain broad sense, sociology, the social sciences, the university, and the Indian educational system as a whole—all of these may be said to be in crisis today. But sociology does seem to be singularly afflicted, especially in its apparent apathy towards its predicament, when compared to its neighbours like economics or history. While it may be said of economics that its (waning?) hegemony within the social sciences insulates it from such crises, the same cannot be said of history. Why, then, has history been able to maintain a certain momentum or display a sense of disciplinary alertness? Or, to take a more distant example, how has a discipline like English managed to elicit creative responses even when its very foundations are being shaken?

While Das's description of a general malaise be depressingly familiar to sociologists, it does not help us to pinpoint what is distinctive about the crisis in Indian sociology. Two out of the three causes that she offers—the decline of the university system and the faulty policies of the UGC—are in fact common to all disciplines, not only to sociology.¹ The broad context that she identifies (widespread incompetence and lack of commitment, moulded into a self-perpetuating cycle by the distortions built into the educational system) is undoubtedly shared by sociology. But we are not alone in this predicament. In which social science discipline in India today can one confidently expect islands of excellence—perhaps even archipelagos of competence—to extend much farther than the 'five or six departments' Das mentions? Why, then, has sociology in particular been unable to cope? In short, to explain the crisis, one must look to the peculiarities marking our discipline rather than to broad contextual phenomena.

SPECIFICITY OF SOCIOLOGY

Having made much of the question, I am constrained to confess that I do not have any-

thing like a worked out answer, only tentative suggestions about where one may be found. The place to look, I think, is in the genealogy of Indian sociology—the processes of discipline-formation at work during the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial regime.

In the course of its establishment as a discipline, Indian sociology seems to have fallen between economics and history. Both the latter disciplines were gifted enormous energy and momentum by the nationalist movement. Economics—commensurate with its global dominance within the social sciences in the capitalist era—was seen as the discipline providing the cutting edge to the case against imperialism. In keeping with the requirements of modern nationalism, history was given the responsibility of supplying the ingredients essential for (re)constructing the past of the nation in the making. Most important, both disciplines could easily carry over their pre-independence status into the post-independence era. Economics, of course, became the mainstay of Nehruvian socialism and the premier language in which the modern nation was articulated. History took up the task of writing a retrospective biography of the nation, rescuing various regions, classes and movements from the condescension of colonialist historiography.

In sharp contrast, sociology appears to have inherited a profoundly ambiguous and disabling self-identity. In the areas where it could have had a role to play in the process of nation-building, it suffered encroachment from both of its more assertive neighbours. Where its territorial claims were undisputed, they ran counter to the ideological and practical needs of the new nation. Thus, the dynamics of social change were appropriated by economics in the present and by history in the past. What remained was the ensemble of caste, religion, and 'customs and manners'—areas of considerable ambivalence and embarrassment for the modernist aspirations of the emerging nation, and hence hardly likely to elicit much enthusiasm. Moreover, the well known affinity between colonialism and anthropology had an added debilitating effect on Indian sociology, given that it was (and continues to be) much closer to ethnography than to the current version of mainstream western sociology. To put it crudely, a science of 'othering' that had the colonial context as its natural habitat was bound to be disoriented in a strongly nationalist context, even as it struggled to repress its identity crisis.

These rather cryptic assertions may perhaps be better appreciated when illustrated with an anecdote culled from the reminiscences of no less a personage than M N Srinivas. In the course of explaining why "anthropology, unlike economics, political science or history, was unpopular with educated natives in colonial countries", Srinivas recalls Katherine Mayo's 1935 tract *Mother India* and the notoriety it brought to the discipline, and remembers

being chased out, in August 1943, of a middle class club in Vijaywada (in Andhra Pradesh) by a fat walking-stick-wielding lawyer who thought I was planning to do a Katherine Mayo on the august culture of the Telugus. I was asking questions about caste, kinship, festivals, fairs and fairs when the angry lawyer lunged at me and said, "get out, we have no customs" [Srinivas 1992:133].

It is instructive to contrast this reaction with

that accorded economists who documented the wretched living conditions of the Indian masses, but were nevertheless framed as patriotic and anti-imperialist. India's poverty could be understood as being due to the British; our 'customs and manners', however, could not be so easily disowned. Given the hegemony of modernity within the nationalist movement, they even proved to be sources of unease if not shame.

There was, in short, nothing obviously redemptive about the heritage of the social anthropological enterprise; on the contrary, its *raison d'être* needed radical rethinking in independent India. That such a rethinking did not take place or, at any rate, did not go far enough, is probably one of the reasons underlying the current crisis in Indian sociology.

NEED FOR SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Having hazarded a hypothesis which may already be familiar to many, let me stick out my neck still further in claiming that the limited nature of disciplinary introspection in Indian sociology continues to be a problem even today.

We must remember that when we speak of the declining university system, an inept educational bureaucracy, or lethargic professional organisations, we are also speaking about ourselves because we are deeply implicated in these institutions. Ruthless self-examination must therefore be the indispensable first step towards diagnosis. Such self-questioning would, I think, prompt us to view with some caution Das's suggestion that the way out is in greater concentration of resources for research, together with attempts to ensure competent teaching at a much wider level.

Given that the material and non-material reward structure prevailing in the discipline today is very heavily biased against teaching, it is difficult to see how wider dissemination of good teaching can be promoted while simultaneously restricting access to the more prestigious research function. The devalued status of teaching is reflected in Das's lament that textbooks half a century old continue to be used: we must ask ourselves why we, and especially the more privileged and gifted among us, have done so little towards producing better and more teaching materials, and why we have generally been complicitous in stigmatising textbook writing. Such neglect is harmful even from the perspective of the most fanatically research-oriented: good teaching is an indispensable (even if insufficient) pre-condition for producing good researchers.² The profession must, therefore, urgently evolve collective mechanisms not only to train, support, monitor and encourage teachers, but also to demonstrate that it values them.

A much more basic problem with Das's solution is her assumption that further concentration of research facilities in a few 'national' centres is good for the discipline. The fact is that Indian sociology has already undergone relentless concentration in recent decades. As Srinivas and Panini (1992) point out, until almost the 1960s the discipline could boast of a number of dispersed but vigorous centres of excellence, including Baroda, Bombay, Calcutta, Lucknow, Mysore, Osmania (Hyderabad), and Poona. How many of these would a bright and ambitious student consider, or even be aware of, today? We should investigate the specific causes for the decline of this decentralised situation before advocating further centralisation.

Independently of these arguments, however, we must still try to pin down what precisely is 'national' about national institutions. Speaking as a member of such an institution, it is obvious to

that we are accorded material and moral privileges, and are assumed to be an asset to the nation at large; but it is less clear what we contribute in concrete terms to other 'non-national' institutions. Unless this relationship is clarified, we cannot hope to improve upon the existing situation, where 'national' institutions function mainly as magnets eliciting a one-way traffic in personnel and resources from other institutions. In a country with the size and diversity of India, dispersed region-based centres of social research are especially desirable.³ Centralised structures risk breeding a narcissistic elite accountable to no one. Thus, although I strongly sympathise with the substance of Ananta Giri's charge of 'uncritical metropolitanism', I am wary of its spirit because it seems to veer towards an equally uncritical indigenism.⁴

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF SOCIOLOGY

Most of what has been said so far does not directly address Veena Das's central question: why is there such a widespread lack of commitment to the discipline in Indian sociology today?

Part of the answer is, of course, to be found in the social context within which the discipline is embedded. As Das herself recognises, many students seek research degrees not because of an interest in sociology but solely in order to qualify for desirable jobs. One must note in addition, as G B Venkatesha Murthy begins to do,⁵ that in the general hierarchy of disciplines, sociology figures only towards the end, well after medicine, engineering, the sciences, computers, management and economics. Unable to attract 'the best', the discipline suffers mediocrity and worse. One may, on the basis of this kind of reasoning, explain much of what is happening (or not happening) in sociology, and go on to suggest that Das is perhaps unrealistic to expect the majority to be both competent and committed.

But to say this, and this alone, is to run into the problem of specificity all over again. Moreover, it still does not address the implicit core of Das's complaint, which can be reformulated as: Granted that only a tiny minority will seek a vocation in the social sciences, why have we in sociology failed to attract our fair share of this minority?

It is this question that calls for further introspection. If we assume that the originality and energy displayed by a discipline in tackling important social issues are decisive in attracting potentially committed members, then we must ask ourselves if we have been wanting in this regard. Here is where I must differ with Das on the question of 'brilliance'. The very word is misleading because it pushes us in the direction of individual genius and its inscrutable ways, the only possible response to which is bewildered admiration. Sociologists should be the last persons to subscribe to such an ahistorical and asocial conception. Even if it cannot be exhaustively explained sociologically, 'brilliance' is more an institutionally inculcated and contextually defined ability to innovate than a mysterious attribute of gifted individuals that cannot be 'methodically replicated'. Because, collectively and institutionally, we can reproduce the pre-conditions necessary for innovation. And such disciplinary innovativeness—even when manifested as the 'brilliance' of a few individuals—plays a decisive role in magnifying the attractiveness of sociology as a vocation.

We must ask ourselves why the vitality and originality of our discipline—and hence its ability to attract committed and competent novices—has been at a low ebb precisely at a time of unprecedented opportunity.

The decade of the 1980s should have belonged to sociology. It should have belonged to us because, for the first time in the history of indepen-

dent India, the nation faced a critical mass of acute problems that were primarily social rather than economic. For the first time, the dominance of economics over the social sciences seemed less 'natural' and more a matter of inherited power and privilege. Secessionist movements based on ethnic or religious identity, the intrusion of caste questions into a supposedly caste-less urban middle class milieu, and the elevation of the communal problem to centre stage in the national polity—all these developments (to name only three) were ideally suited for major interventions on the part of sociology and other non-economics social sciences.

But it would seem that our response has not been commensurate with the magnitude of the challenge. This is not to say that there have been no responses—I know of the interventions of Veena Das herself and of Andre Beteille, though there must surely be many others that I am not aware of. Nor is it to believe that the posing of a challenge somehow automatically calls forth an adequate response. Nevertheless, despite its lack of precision, I think others in the profession will also recognise as familiar my feeling of collective ineffectiveness. In searching for the sources of this relative ineffectiveness we must extend as far as we can the process of disciplinary self-questioning. We cannot—especially those of us in the more privileged enclaves of the profession—simply wait to celebrate retrospectively a paradigm shift that we presume to be unpredictable. Scientific revolutions may come without warning, but they certainly cannot come without preparation.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that much of what I have said may be naive or simply a repetitive echo of other, prior voices. I hope that others better situated than I will respond to the crucial questions raised by Veena Das with the seriousness and, above all, with the care that they surely deserve. Only this can demonstrate that the tiredness of our discipline is not terminal.

Notes

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- Moreover, it may be argued of her third factor, namely, the apathy of the professional organisations, that it is as much a symptom or consequence of our predicament as a cause.
- It is interesting to note that most of Das's disappointments with new entrants into the profession involve problems of substandard teaching.

- In fact, apart from the well known case of expensive shareable resources such as libraries, arguments against centralisation seem much stronger than those for it.
- Giri is absolutely right in insisting that we also learn to value regional languages and home grown journals in an effort to (re)build a 'community of discourse' in Indian sociology. However, in his haste to valorise local knowledges he seems to forget that caution is necessary even in such a laudable effort. The indigenous—or that which claims to be indigenous—is not valuable merely by virtue of this fact. Moreover, 'the West' today is no longer a geographical location but rather a set of institutional relations, and as such may be found in the most unexpected of places. We cannot, therefore, adopt an uncritical 'add Aurobindo' approach to indigenise social theory: an enormous amount of preparatory work needs to be done (and must be done) before Indian thinkers are enabled to wield the same influence on the institution of theory as westerners. The dangers of relaxing our guard in this regard have never been greater than at the present moment, when we may yet be coerced into celebrating (rather than critically studying), for example, Shivaji as a great political scientist or Swami Chinmayananda as the doyen of philosophers.
- His approach too, however, does not fully account for the specificity of sociology. Also it is regrettable that he chooses to contribute to contemporary mythology by implying that reservation policies are responsible for the crisis in sociology. The arguments against this view should be too obvious to need reiteration.

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