Disciplinary predicaments: sociology and anthropology in postcolonial India

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The dictionary defines a predicament as a ‘difficult, perplexing or trying situation’. The following account of the peculiar predicaments that have defined Indian sociology and anthropology is broadly informed by three well known perspectives: Bourdieu’s notion of an ‘intellectual field’; Foucault’s well-known theses about the power-knowledge nexus and the genealogical method; and what used to be called ‘the politics of location’ in the older varieties of cultural studies. Thus, when I speak of Indian sociology, I am thinking of it as a field that is like a magnetic field, made up of a system of power lines’, a field shaped by ‘so many forces which, by their existence, opposition or combination, determine its specific structure at a given moment in time’ (Bourdieu 1969: 89). In addition, I am thinking of these disciplines as ‘sites of enunciation’ marked by specific ‘historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries’ (Mohanty 1987: 31). Above all, I am trying to think of such disciplinary locations as not only ‘the site of one’s questions and interventions’, but also as ‘the place of accountability’ (John 1996: 110, emphasis added).

At the same time, and in a more indirect way, I am responding also to the programmatic intent that drives Allen Chun’s account of the development of anthropology in Taiwan, namely that ‘[a]nthropological subjectivity must be viewed not simply in reference to the authority of writings which are the end product of analytical enquiry but more importantly in relation to the institutional framework within which academic production is situated’ (Chun 2001: 572). While my own reading of the debates he cites may be somewhat different, I am in complete agreement regarding the need to (re)position institutions and their practices in the centre of our analytical frames.

However, despite its immediate intuitive appeal, the argument that institutions play a decisive role in shaping the conditions of possibility of intellectual production is difficult to substantiate. For though we may believe, with Mary Douglas, that institutions think, remember or forget, much like people do, this is much harder to demonstrate for the former than the latter. Surely mundane methodological considerations of this kind are part of the reason why authors and works have been much more popular subjects of study than institutions and organizations. Even the most devout theorists amongst us have to contend with the sobering fact that all the immense labours that have gone into complicating the naïve notions of the author and the work have still not managed to erode their easy accessibility as signifiers with self-evident physical referents, such as a book or a person. By contrast, comparable arguments about the actions or effects of institutions must move in a much more resistant medium where implausibility is always just around the corner.
I have to begin, therefore, with some initial assertions that may seem to assume what needs to be investigated. But these assertions (or others like them) are also the unavoidable precondition for producing a coherent (hence contestable) account of disciplinary location. In short, even a debate about whereabouts must itself begin somewhere.

In India, the dominant practice has been to use the label ‘sociology’ to refer to sociology as well as social or cultural anthropology. The twinning of the disciplines under a common name obscures the fact that, by and large, anthropology has dominated over sociology, at least during the last four decades. Although the immediate context usually makes this clear, ‘Indian sociology’ can mean either (a) the sociology of India without regard to who is practising it; or (b) sociology as practised by Indian scholars in India; or (c) both simultaneously. At a different level, most discussions on ‘Indian sociology’ – especially on its intellectual history, theoretical orientations and so on – actually refer only to a small number of elite universities, research institutions and scholars. Thus, unless they are specifically about ‘regional’ contexts, these discussions usually ignore the most common concrete instance of the practice of ‘Indian sociology’, namely its teaching in hundreds of undergraduate colleges and three or four score universities all over the country.

It is against this background that I offer the following interpretation of the processes by which the disciplinary terrain of Indian sociology has been shaped, and the questions that the politics of location raises on this terrain. I underline the individual and subjective nature of this account because disciplinary history remains an undeveloped field in Indian sociology, and much of what is being said here needs to be subjected to collective scholarly examination and debate. Thus, when speaking of Indian sociology, the generic problems inherent in arguing about what institutions did or did not do are compounded by the absence of prior ground rules about what counts as relevant evidence, where it is to be found, and how it may be interpreted.

The shaping of an intellectual field

Three main factors have helped mould the intellectual field that is Indian sociology and have given it a distinctive disciplinary profile: (a) the ambivalent image of the discipline in the colonial period; (b) the postcolonial consequences of such an inheritance in the context of a public sphere dominated by the state-led drive for development, and therefore an academy dominated by the technological sciences and by economics; and (c) the disciplinary consequences of the twinning of sociology and social anthropology, to the relative neglect of the former. There is also another characteristic feature, one that may have receded somewhat in recent years but has by no means disappeared, namely a persistent anxiety about the ‘Indian-ness’ of Indian sociology and, more generally, about the extent and implications of foreign – that is to say, Western – intellectual influence. (The basic argument in the following section was first made in Deshpande 1994.)

An ambiguous inheritance

It is instructive to compare the equivocal relationship of sociology with Indian nationalism during the late colonial period, with the much more synergistic links that
were developed with economics and history. Both the latter disciplines were given
eormous energy and momentum by the nationalist movement, where sociology
was treated with suspicion even if part of its `Indological' component was well
regarded.

Economics – commensurate with its global status as the dominant social science
of the capitalist era – was seen as the discipline providing the cutting edge to the
case against imperialism. Perhaps one of the most striking signs marking the advent
of modernity in the non-western world is the emergence of the poverty of nations
as a social scandal. Certainly the experience of poverty – its empirical presence
in most parts of the globe and for large numbers – is as old as recorded history.
What is new in the era of capitalist colonialism is the recognition that this is a
preventable economic disorder rather than an ordained affliction. This is in large
part a mirror image of the discourses surrounding the wealth of western
imperial nations. As invocations of `manifest destiny' or the `white man's burden'
begin to give way to (or at least coexist with) the realization that the Empire is `a
bread and butter question' (Cecil Rhodes) or that `the East is a career' (Benjamin
Disraeli), it is not long before western-educated ideologues in the colonies begin to
assert that the wealth of the Mother country is causally related to the poverty of the
Possessions.

In the Indian case, the discourse of poverty is provided additional rhetorical
leverage by the fact that available historical accounts (many of them from western
sources or put into circulation by the west) had been emphasizing the wealth of
`India'. In these accounts, the nation and its wealth are both equally and inseparably
fabulous. For pre-modern Europe, `India' is the legend that launched major economic
pilgrimages, like those of Vasco da Gama or Christopher Columbus. With modernity,
the tables are turned: the wealth of the west and the poverty of India now come to
be paired in a new mythology.

With some ideological work, this reversal of fortunes could be causally related to
British rule. Particularly for the early Indian nationalists, many of whom served an
apprenticeship in British liberal politics, this connection, once made, could clearly be
seen as violating the political ethics of the British themselves. It is this moral
contradiction that led people like Dadabhai Naoroji to rail against `un-British rule' as
the cause of the `poverty of India'. The elaboration of the arguments implied by this
perspective resulted in the production of the ideologically powerful theory of the
`economic drain'. Dadabhai Naoroji's ceaseless pamphleteering and R. C. Dutt's
widely influential two-volume work are emblematic products of this strain of Indian
nationalism.

The less obvious but equally important aspect of the discourse of poverty is the
direct help it provides in assembling the technical means for imagining the Indian
nation. It has often been remarked that the British created `India' as a meaningful
administrative, political and economic entity. From the nationalist point of view,
however, what is even more important is the fact that British exploitation helped to
identify as Indian not only the national economy but also the millions of producers
– peasants, artisans, and workers – who were otherwise a hopelessly disparate and
fragmented constituency. By nurturing the collective recognition of a shared status as
exploited producers, the nationalist movement extracted from the very apparatus of
British imperialism the concrete and practical means with which the nation could be
imagined. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that economics was the natural inheritor of the intellectual mandate implied by this agenda.

The links between history and nationalism may not have been as powerfully synergistic as those with economics, but here too there was plenty of mutual support. In keeping with the requirements of modern nationalism, history was given the responsibility of writing a retrospective biography of the emergent nation. This included not only chronicling the evils of colonial rule, but also the projection of a nationalist consciousness into the past by re-writing the history of localized revolts or resistance to the British, and, more generally, the recounting of those ‘national’ aspects of the real or imagined past that colonial historiography had chosen to ignore or deny.

Most important, both disciplines could easily carry over their agendas 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. And nationalist leaders in control of the new state were well disposed towards history, given that the retroactive biography of the nation that the discipline was producing would also provide important ideological resources for legitimising the new leadership.

In sharp contrast, sociology seems to have inherited a profoundly ambiguous and disabling self-identity. This is a direct consequence of the fact that it lacked a distinct presence in colonial India, being largely subsumed under social anthropology and ‘Indology’. The latter two met with divergent responses from educated Indians, and this split carried over into the post-independence reputation of sociology. On the one hand, the nationalist elite approved of orientalist Indology in so far as it documented classical Indian/Hindu achievements in literature, philosophy, and the arts, and enthusiastically celebrated them. Indeed, Indian-Hindu religio-spiritual traditions and culture were the crucial fulcrum on which nationalist ideology leveraged itself. Asserting India’s cultural-spiritual superiority enabled the acceptance of undeniable Western economic-material superiority and the forging of a nationalist agenda for fusing the best of both worlds.

Social anthropology, on the other hand, met with hostility and resentment because it was perceived as deliberately highlighting the ‘barbarity’ of Indian culture and traditions.

This antipathy is vividly evoked by M. N. Srinivas, the most famous of Indian sociologists. Recalling the days of his youth when ‘anthropology, unlike economics, political science or history, was unpopular with educated natives in colonial countries’, Srinivas mentions that, in India, this was partly due to the notoriety of Katherine Mayo’s book *Mother India*. (First published in 1927, this sensational account of untouchability, child marriage, infanticide, sexual violations and other horrors was bitterly attacked by nationalists for presenting a distorted view of Indian society catering to Western stereotypes; Gandhi described it as ‘a drain inspector’s report’.) Srinivas describes how, in August 1943, he was chased out of a middle class club in Vijayawada 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, fasts and fairs when the angry lawyer lunged at me and said, ‘get out, we have no customs’.

(Srinivas 1992: 133)
The contrast in the public response to social anthropologists and economists is instructive. Although the latter documented the wretched living conditions of the Indian masses, they and their discipline could nevertheless be framed as patriotic and anti-imperialist, for India’s poverty could be attributed to British rule and turned into an argument for independence. Our ‘customs and manners’, however, could not be so easily disowned. Often cited by colonialists as proof that India did not deserve independence, they were an embarrassment for nationalists trying to speak the modernist language of their opponents.

More broadly, the subject matter of sociology – ‘traditional’ society – proved to be difficult terrain. Unlike the transformation of the economy or polity, where the past could be left behind without much soul searching because it was thought to be neither integral to national identity nor worth salvaging for its own sake, the ‘passing’ of traditional society and culture was apt to be viewed with mixed feelings. Tradition was an area of considerable ambivalence because, on the one hand, it contained the ideological wellsprings of social solidarity, cultural distinctiveness and hence nationalism; but, on the other hand, it was also the source of atavistic ‘social evils’ and other signs of backwardness that a modernist, forward-looking nation could not afford to dwell upon. In short, there was nothing obviously and unequivocally redemptive in the heritage of social anthropology; on the contrary, the discipline needed radical rethinking in independent India.

Developmentalism, the recasting of disciplines and Indian sociology

The all-important context for such a rethinking was that of a new nation embarking on a massive state-led programme of ‘nation building’ with economic development as its dominant motif. Understandably, the concrete forms taken by the nation building project had an enormous impact on the academic-intellectual field. Disciplinary identities and agendas were recast not only in response to direct or indirect state sponsorship, but also in response to the prevailing ideological climate. Although the science and technology-related disciplines were the main beneficiaries, the social sciences also profited from the huge and historically unprecedented expansion of the research and higher education establishment in India during the 1950s, 1960s and the early 1970s. In the planned and unplanned gerrymandering of disciplinary boundaries that this process inevitably involved, Indian sociology found itself at a disadvantage.

At one level, there is nothing very distinctive about this disadvantage for it was shared to a greater or lesser degree by all the non-economics social sciences. All disciplines experienced the heliotropic urge to orient themselves to the new sun of national development. But they also had to contend with the deep shadows that the discipline of economics began to cast as its advantageous positioning allowed it to grow very rapidly and to build up a sizeable lead over the other social sciences. So the non-economics disciplines had to assert their relevance for the developmental agenda while at the same time differentiating themselves from economics. This was all the more difficult given the contemporary faith in technicist perspectives on development, which once again gave economics an apparent advantage.

What is distinctive about Indian sociology, however, is that its union with social anthropology presented special constraints. Indian social anthropologists have gener-
ally refused to abide by the conventional distinction between anthropology as the study of ‘primitive’ or traditional societies and sociology as the study of ‘complex’ or modern societies. There is a lot to be said in favour of this refusal: the archaic separation is no longer practised; the two disciplines are closely related and overlap significantly; and, finally, both the types of society that each allegedly specializes in coexist in a country such as India. Although a merger of two disciplines implies that the product can claim the names of either or both of its components, in India the label of sociology has been preferred over social anthropology. This preference may have been motivated, perhaps, by the desire to downplay the embarrassing association with colonialist anthropology, and also by more pragmatic considerations such as the need to distance the discipline from physical anthropology (including palaeontology and anthropometry) which had a strong presence in India.

Whatever the motivation, it cannot be denied that the composite discipline of Indian ‘sociology’ is heavily tilted towards anthropology, and would be known by that name elsewhere. (When they go abroad, Indian sociologists are treated as anthropologists and almost always visit departments of anthropology rather than sociology.) The overwhelming majority of the scholars influential in the profession, both Indians and especially Westerners, have been trained as anthropologists. The most intensively studied areas have been caste, kinship, religion, village and tribe, rather than the class structure, cities, markets, industrial relations, or the media. In terms of methods, too, anthropological specialities, such as participant observation and informant-based fieldwork have been very prominent, while survey research and quantitative analysis have been rare.

We cannot be sure that the trajectory of Indian sociology would have been very different had its internal composition been otherwise. The new national priorities, which prompted the post-independence restructuring of the academy, did, after all, re-order the hierarchy of disciplines. The ‘natural’ advantages of disciplines such as economics could not be wished away, nor could other disciplines simply erase their pasts and reinvent themselves. Nevertheless, the anthropological bent of Indian sociology does seem to have affected its fortunes adversely. In the (sociological) areas that could claim a prominent place in the nation building project, the composite discipline was relatively weak and therefore suffered encroachment from its more assertive neighbours. On the other hand, the (anthropological) subjects where its authority was undisputed often ran counter to the ideological inclinations or the perceived practical needs of the new nation.

Consider, for example, the vast terrain claimed by that capacious cliché, ‘socio-economic’. Because of its methodological weakness, especially at the ‘macro’ level, Indian sociology has ceded more ground to economics here than it need have. Indeed, recent demands for a fuller analysis of the socio-cultural aspects of economic institutions have come more from economics than sociology. By contrast, an area of acknowledged sociological expertise, such as caste, has remained marginal to the mainstream of state policy. To put it simply, caste (unlike poverty, for example) has been seen as an institution about which nothing much can be done; we just have to wait for it to wither away, denouncing it in the meanwhile whenever it enters the public sphere. Finally, to take a different perspective, there is the case of the Community Development Programme, the one high-profile national development initiative in which sociologists were prominent. However, after an initial period of
enthusiasm in the early 1950s, policy makers from Nehru downwards lost interest in it as the emphasis shifted to the Mahalanobis strategy of development based on heavy industry. In the four decades that separate this programme from the Mandal controversy, sociology and sociologists have never been centrally involved in any major national initiative.

Thus, whether by virtue of its prior positioning or because of the preferences of the most influential practitioners at a crucial phase, the discipline that is labelled ‘Indian sociology’ experienced something like downward intellectual mobility in the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial period. Recent trends arresting and perhaps reversing this trend to some extent are due as much to disillusionment with economics as to initiatives from within other disciplines.

How Indian is Indian sociology?

A significant aspect of the predicament of Indian sociology also stems from its merger with anthropology, although in a different way. This is the persistent anxiety around the question: what precisely is, and should be, Indian about Indian anthropology-alias-sociology? Anxiety may seem an oddly extravagant word, but I wish to highlight precisely the extra concern that such questions provoke in non-Western settings. Comparable queries about (say) British or American anthropology do not carry a similar excess burden and seem quite amenable to straightforward answers listing the distinctive features (if any) of the discipline in each national context. The ‘Britishness’ or ‘American-ness’ of the discipline may be something to be remarked upon, perhaps, but it is not something to be worried about. This assurance – the very opposite of anxiety – is due to the fact that Western anthropology runs with, and not against, the historical grain of the discipline.

A famous fundamental principle of anthropology states that the anthropologist studies cultures other than his own native culture. But we also know that, despite the abstract neutrality of this principle, the practice of modern anthropology has been profoundly asymmetrical, consisting almost entirely of Western researchers studying non-Western subjects. In the common sense of the discipline, therefore, the Westernness of the anthropologist, and hence the equation of ‘other’ with ‘non-Western’, have both been taken for granted. Against this background, the non-Western anthropologist stands out as an oddity – all the more so when studying his or her own culture, because the ‘otherness’ rule is also violated. On the other hand, for reasons that seem obvious but need more careful scrutiny, non-Western anthropologists usually do end up studying their own cultures. It has only rarely been possible for them to study the West or even other non-Western cultures, and the few efforts that have been made have not had a significant impact on the mainstream of the discipline. (This continues to be so despite the recent developments in the western discipline that have prompted a reflexive self-examination of the processes of problem selection and led to a renewed emphasis on western anthropologists studying their own societies.)

Seen as oddities but wanting to be taken seriously, Indian anthropologists working on their own culture may have been somewhat uneasy about the perceived tension between their national-cultural identity and their professional status. But if this was true when the postcolonial era began around 1950, it is no longer so today, when disciplinary norms and practices appear to have changed considerably. So, any
lingering anxiety in Indian sociology-anthropology today is not fuelled by unease about studying one’s own society. If anything, the shoe is on the other foot. Heightened awareness of the discipline’s past, especially the mutually supportive global relationship between social anthropology and colonialism, has raised doubts about the intended or unintended effects of Western scholarship on India. There have been repeated calls for an authentically indigenous, truly Indian sociology that would offer a better understanding of Indian culture and society than foreign-born disciplines or theories. (Interestingly, such calls have come from foreign as well as Indian scholars). However, despite the strong intuitive appeal of such calls, it has proved very difficult to define an indigenous sociology, leave alone create it.

But there are countervailing arguments as well: that a discipline committed to cross-cultural understanding cannot afford to be parochial, for example, or that Western scholarship has provided Indian nationalism with some of its most potent intellectual tools and weapons. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the glaring inequalities that are part of the academic world, as much as the rest of it: Western libraries are better stocked with Indian materials than libraries at home; scholars based in the West have access to more material and non-material resources, are more ‘visible’ and have a greater impact on the global discipline than their counterparts located in India, and so on. With globalization, these inequalities have only got more complicated, they have not gone away.

The net result is that we can no longer be naively confident about the adequacy of a minimum consensual definition of Indian sociology as simply the sociology of India. Further questions about who or what Indian sociology is for, who it is practised by, or where its theories and methods come from are unavoidable today. These are not trivial questions, nor are they due merely to misplaced national chauvinism. In fact, the self-understanding of the contemporary humanities and social sciences has been transformed by recent work uncovering the synergy between structures of power and institutions of knowledge. Nevertheless, one also has self-consciously to prevent these (and similar) questions from behaving as though they were rhetorical ones, not greatly interested in the specifics of the answers that they might elicit.

The realization that ‘Indian sociology’ is a diverse field marked by inequalities and asymmetries along several criss-crossing axes, and that it cannot be taken for granted as a self-evident category, demands from us a double vigilance. We have to be alert, first of all, to the possibility that the persuasive power of a theorist or the content of a theory may be affected by their location, in all the varied senses of this term. But we also have to be on guard against reductive formulae that insist on a fixed relationship between location and content. Every location has inherent possibilities and constraints, but they do not take effect automatically; they must be scrupulously investigated in each empirical context. In the final analysis, the effects of location must be demonstrated, not assumed.

Towards a more nuanced mapping of locations
A more detailed and concrete mapping of locations is the inescapable first step before we can argue about the possible political implications of such a map. Thus, we must begin by breaking down the abstraction called ‘Indian sociology’.
Regional divisions and hierarchies

Most of the time, most of those who refer to ‘Indian sociology’ are usually only referring to whatever is happening in/from a small number of elite institutions. Greatly (some may say overwhelmingly) dominated by the city of Delhi and its two major universities, this elite set of institutions also includes such well-known ‘regional’ centres as Chandigarh, Hyderabad, Mumbai or Pune. Such a mapping already points to the process of centralization that seems to have taken place since the 1950s, when Delhi did not exist on the map, and centres such as Lucknow, Bombay, Calcutta, Baroda and the Osmania University of Hyderabad were considered important. An explicit mapping exercise is necessary not because such selectiveness of reference is unusual or necessarily problematic, but because it helps guard against the ‘taken for granted’ quality that one’s own location often acquires.

The hierarchical relations that obtain across this map are both obvious but also quite complex in many aspects. To begin with, the relationship between ‘Delhi’ and the ‘regional’ centres is clearly asymmetrical: the most prestigious (and powerful) positions are those in the sociology departments in Delhi University (DU) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). (There is an intra-Delhi hierarchy as well, with the Jamia Millia Islamia and Open University, and also the colleges of Delhi University, placed below the two ‘big’ departments; moreover, the relative ranking of DU and JNU presents complex problems, with many possible claims and counter-claims.) One clear indication of the presence of this hierarchy is that the departments at DU and JNU are both very highly inbred: apart, of course, from the ‘founding’ generations, it is rare to find faculty in either institution who are not alumni. However, regional universities and centres also enjoy significant levels of autonomy from Delhi, though they may be enmeshed in other kinds of power relations involving local institutions and political groupings of various sorts. Indeed, the general resentment against the Delhi elite is often a source of energy and sometimes also of unity among regional centres, although this is complicated by the fact that ‘Delhi’ is itself a heterogeneous entity, and it is usually possible (or even necessary) to ally with one section of Delhi while opposing others. Perhaps the aspect of this inequality that is most amenable to direct empirical verification is that, besides being perceived as more prestigious, the Delhi institutions have better and more stable funding than regional institutions. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to untangle the circular relationship between better resources and status on the one hand and greater productivity on the other, even if the latter could somehow be clearly established empirically.

In contrast to other Asian contexts, such as Taiwan, Indonesia or Malaysia, leading academic intellectuals in India (and especially in sociology) write almost exclusively in English. While some scholars have made a few sporadic efforts in this direction, there is no major intellectual of recent times who can be said to have been even-handed in his treatment of Indian languages and English. Language is thus a huge chasm that separates the tiny islands of intellectual debate and discussion based entirely in English from the overwhelming majority of the concrete sites – mostly undergraduate college classrooms across the country, including the majority in an elite city like Delhi – where sociology is taught in regional languages (even when the official medium of instruction may be English). In pointing this out, I am not trying
to make an argument about elitism as such – all intellectual activity is always open
to this charge – but rather to provide a picture of the specific contexts and contrasts
that are implicit in the abstraction ‘Indian sociology’ as different from similar
abstractions like ‘Malaysian sociology’ or ‘Indonesian sociology’.

This gulf between the top and the bottom contexts inevitably translates into the
usual complaints: irrelevant and poorly designed curricula, the severe lack of teaching
materials in Indian languages, the lack of systematic translations (with the exception
of some of the shorter ‘classics’), poor teaching, and student apathy, complaints that
are frequently voiced in gatherings of academics. Sociology has been more, and more
publicly, self-reflexive than most other disciplines in India, and these and related
issues have been discussed repeatedly, giving rise to a sense of déjà vu (Uberoi 2000;
Sundar and Deshpande 2000; see also Seminar December 1968, September 1972,
October 1980, and most recently, November 2000). These discussions can be followed
up by the interested reader; the relevant point here is to demonstrate that ‘location’
within the entity called ‘Indian Sociology’ can mean very different things, generating
expectations of varying kinds and degrees of accountability to different contexts.

Changes in funding patterns

One of the most important and far-reaching changes to have occurred recently is the
shift in funding patterns for academic research, particularly in the social sciences.
Until recently, academic research in India has been an almost entirely state funded
activity. In the social sciences, with the notable exception of economics, this funding
has been generally tied to the university system, with only a few non-university
centres of research. Thus, by and large, research funding has been an add-on to
university teaching, whether through the device of designating some specially se-
lected departments as ‘centres of excellence’ and allocating them extra monies for
research in addition to teaching, or whether through the system of invitation of
research proposals by institutions such as the University Grants Commission or the
Indian Council for Social Science Research. There are, once again, important inequal-
ities in this system, with (generally) regional universities (other than a few select ones)
getting a much smaller share of the research pie (which is not very big to begin with)
than the elite, metropolitan ones. However, the complicated cross-cutting patterns of
political and academic patronage that are central to large national institutions do also
ensure some minimum levels of equity within a generally inequitable system, even if
this does not always happen for the best reasons or in the most transparent manner.

Since the 1990s, and particularly in the last few years of the century, the Indian
state has been under tremendous financial pressure for internal and external reasons.
Given that education, and within education, research (particularly in such ‘low
priority’ areas as sociology or anthropology), is a soft target for the austerity drives
made inevitable by imbalances elsewhere in the system, state funding is now under
siege. There is now a significant shift in the orientation of the most active and
prominent institutions towards non-governmental funding. Sources of such funding
include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often (but not always) funded by
international sources, as well as direct funding from international (and multilateral)
research foundations and institutions. The relative importance of such funds has
increased tremendously in recent years and they now play a very significant role in
shaping research agendas. Thus, for example, topics such as the environment, governance, gender, citizenship and globalization are among the current crop of ‘hot’ funding categories. Once again, this is not necessarily a sinister development, and has to be considered in relation to the biases and distortions of the older system rather than an assumed ideal state. However, there is no denying the shift in sources of influence; the state is no longer the only player although its influence is far from negligible even now.

The larger question of how changes in funding sources affects issues of location and accountability are still to be considered in detail. There is as yet no definitive consensual position on the redistribution of intellectual interests that this may have brought about, although there is widespread interest in, and concern about, it. (See, for example, the remarks by M. N. Srinivas towards the end of the interview in Deshpande 2000). It is also true that it is not just funding but also increased competition from the media and NGOs that is changing the market for research in the social sciences. What was once a thin and shallow market is now being deepened and expanded into new and unknown territory.

**Globalization and the West**

Finally, the acceleration of trends towards more frequent and more intensive international interactions raises yet another set of difficult questions about location and accountability. It is common knowledge today that the academic field is populated by practitioners of different sorts, and that our erstwhile classificatory systems for describing them may no longer be adequate. For example, take the old distinction, once considered self-evident, between Indian and foreign scholars. The latter usually meant scholars born and brought up in the west who have spent time living in and studying India, while the former referred to scholars born and brought up in India who have done the same. One level of complication had already been introduced by scholars of the 1940s and 1950s, although it was not really thought of as such, in the fact that modern anthropologists or sociologists are all, in a certain broad sense, ‘trained in the West’, regardless of the geographical location where their training takes place.

Today, we have to deal with further complications such as the western academic of Indian origin, the Indian academic ostensibly living and working in India who actually spends much of his/her time in the West, scholars who by accidents of personal history may ‘belong’ to one culture and have grown up in another and so on. In the frameworks that were extant as recently as a decade ago, it was not uncommon to view residence in India as an important and morally charged criterion for describing an Indian scholar’s location. By the same token, residence abroad on a permanent basis also carried a negative moral charge, however faint, even though the same location was also, on another plane, the object of envy because of the better working conditions, and the access to power, prestige and glamour that it was seen to carry. We are only somewhat wiser today, having realized that one’s residential address is no guarantee of anything and certainly not of accountability or even orientation. This does not mean, on the other hand, that location is meaningless: it could and probably does matter, even though we are, as yet, unable to identify the links
clearly. Indeed, to specify how and why it matters in particular concrete instances is precisely the object of present concerns.

As with regional differences and changed patterns of funding, globalization also impacts on the internal inequalities within the Indian academy. The interesting possibility here is the limited opportunities that this may offer for Indian academics located in less privileged positions to circumvent or compensate for their location by gaining direct access to the West without the mediation of the local metropolitan centre. While there is certainly the potential here for the operation of an equalizing effect by ‘leapfrogging’ over local hierarchies, we must be wary of reading too much into this. For one thing, it is probable that academics based in the West are still the ones who benefit the most from the fact that inter-national contacts are now quite fine grained and can directly link localities to each other without passing through the previously mandatory relays of local power centres. However, even this scenario needs to be complicated further, given that the western academy is itself no stranger to hierarchies and structures of domination within its bounds. Secondly, the extent to which this possibility is being actualized in any major way is still open to doubt – international academic relationships are still (by and large) routed through local power centres, and these latter have hardly withered away, particularly the bureaucratic organs of the state. So there is every reason to believe that the so-called ‘Mathew Effect’ – to him who hath, more shall be given – is still in operation, and that the biggest beneficiaries of globalization continue to be the elite sections of the academy in both South and North. The only open question is whether others are also beginning to share in these benefits – and perhaps also the costs – in ways that had not been possible before.

Let me try to provide a quick example of what a preliminary attempt at identifying the specific advantages and constraints associated with particular intellectual-institutional locations might look like. This example relates to the study of caste in post-independence India (detailed arguments in Deshpande 2001), where some of the effects of location may be seen.

M. N. Srinivas, probably the most influential Indian sociologist of the last half-century, is best known for his notions of ‘sanskritization’ and ‘dominant caste’. Both concepts were aimed at establishing the presence of limited forms of mobility within a caste system that had, until then, been invariably theorized as rigid and static. ‘Sanskritization’ pointed to the adoption by lower ranked castes of the ritual-cultural practices of the higher ranked castes (such as vegetarianism, forms of worship etc) in a sometimes successful attempt at raising their own relative ranking. The concept of the ‘dominant caste’ drew attention to the important changes that independence had brought about in rural India. Post-independence land reforms had transferred legal ownership rights in land previously owned by (upper caste) absentee landlords to the erstwhile tenant castes. These castes were often also the most numerous, and they therefore formed large ‘vote banks’ (another popular neologism coined by Srinivas) that swept the leaders of these castes into positions of unprecedented political power in the regional governments. Thus, the combination of the vote and land rights converted the former tenant castes into ‘dominant’ castes.

These contributions of Srinivas are well known and have generated an extensive secondary literature; indeed, they have dominated the last four decades of scholarly engagement with the subject of caste. The relevant point here is to consider how these
insights may be related to Srinivas’ own location in the academic field. Although this requires a detailed argument (which I am developing elsewhere) let me simply suggest here that Srinivas’ need to search for change in a place (the Indian caste system) where it had never been looked for before had something to do with his location in a newly independent India where change was the overwhelmingly dominant intellectual and practical concern. (Srinivas had conducted the fieldwork on which these insights were based precisely around the time of Indian independence between 1946 and 1951. See also his comments in Deshpande 2000.) In this sense, therefore, it is plausible that his location helped him to see things that a differently located scholar may not have seen, even though counterfactuals of this sort are impossible to prove.

On the other hand, Srinivas’ training and self-positioning as an anthropologist, and his discipline-determined (exclusive) focus on the Indian village also ‘located’ him in a different, more disabling, sense. The anthropological vantage point that privileged the village and made possible the identification of important sources of change in rural society was also the vantage point that blocked the view of equally momentous changes occurring in urban India. This was particularly significant because the latter (urban) changes tended to qualify and moderate the effect of the former (rural) changes. Thus, while Srinivas’ justly celebrated work created the general impression that caste hierarchies were being radically transformed and perhaps even overturned in the rural areas, it also prevented a more balanced overview of Indian society as a whole, and of the ways in which caste privilege was being ‘re-located’, so to speak. To put it simply, although it was perfectly true that the middle castes were now dominant in the countryside, it was equally true that the upper castes had established a stranglehold over the emergent urban, industrial, scientific-technical and bureaucratic spheres, from which locations they continued to exercise overall control over Indian society. Although this is only a very quick and crude summary, I hope the moral of the story is clear: every location enables us in some ways and disables us in others – the point is precisely to identify these different ‘ways’ and to work out their net balance.

In conclusion, therefore, I will only reiterate my basic argument that, today, it is more important than ever to subject the question of location to careful investigation, without succumbing to the temptations of either the unsubstantiated moralistic censure of the past or the equally unthinking celebration of ‘multiple’ locations characteristic of the present.

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References


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