Towards a praxiological understanding of Indian Society: The Sociology of A.R. Desai

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(To be published in Satish Deshpande, Nandini Sundar and Patricia Uberoi (ed.s) Disciplinary Biographies: Essays in the History of Indian Anthropology and Sociology. New Delhi, Permanent Black)

The philosopher's have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point, however is to change it.

Karl Marx, XI Thesis on Fuerbach, (1845)

A R. Desai or Akshay Ramanlal Desai (1915-1994) was first and foremost a Marxist, and then a sociologist and a teacher. It was his interpretation of Marxism as a perspective that understands and explains the specific Indian context in relation to a general Marxist theory of classes that defined the contours of his sociology and his pedagogic practices. Desai’s project of Marxist sociology was envisioned at a very important juncture in the history of the growth of the subject and thus influenced its many contradictory receptions. He became a teacher in the Department of Sociology in 1951 when the influence of the Bombay school of sociology under G.S.Ghurye was declining. By the time he became a Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology in the University of Bombay in 1969, the centre of academic power had shifted from Bombay to Delhi, as the subject became institutionalised in the context of post independence developments in higher education. This shift coincided with the emergence of a specifically social anthropological perspective in understanding and explaining Indian society—an empiricist, structural functional perspective premised on the distinction between value and fact.

It was at this historical juncture that Desai’s Marxist sociology was conceived, and it took the contrary position of affirming the relationship of values to fact. It also envisaged a role for itself as an alternative to a growing and institutionalised conservative sociology. It is no wonder then that Desai’s sociological vision stands out for its differences with Indian social anthropology of the sixties and seventies rather than its affinities with it. When the latter was concentrating on analysing the micro (the village), Desai’s sociology studied the macro and the meso (capitalism, nationalism, classes, agrarian structure, the state, and peasant movements among other things). And while the effort by the former was to create
a space for the 'social', unmarked by discourses relating to history, economics and politics, Desai framed an interdisciplinary sociology in which there was very little difference between sociology and social science. Thirdly, when mainstream sociology/social anthropology perfected the methods of participant observation and fieldwork to understand the Indian social structure and to capture the processes of change, Desai's Marxist sociology used the historical method to give specific meaning to the Marxist notion of structure and the various elements in its constitution in India, such as feudalism, capitalism, the relationship between class and nation, peasants and working class, the post-colonial state and the rights of the deprived. And lastly, unlike mainstream sociologists whose audiences consisted only of students and researchers in university departments and research institutes, Desai's readers were these as well as the literate population of the country.

Desai has an extensive bibliography and his work and his ideas are accessible in a variety of publications that range from books and edited works to pamphlets available also in regional languages. In these publications, he explores the relationship between nationalism and the growth of classes in India; the nature of the post independence Indian state and its role in fashioning capitalism; changes in agrarian society during colonialism and the post independence period; the nature and growth of the workers' movement; new forms of urbanisation with special reference to slums; new developments in Indian politics including the political use of caste and religion by communalism; and lastly, the growth of the Rights movement in India — in effect an entire range of issues and questions dealing with the transition from feudalism to capitalism in India.

I map out the main tenets of A.R. Desai's Marxist sociology through a discussion of three early texts written between the period 1948 and 1961. These set out Desai's assessments regarding the processes of change in India. The first two texts, Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948) and Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism (1960) analyse nationalism, class formation and the nature of the state in pre and postcolonial India while the third examines the character of rural transition in India. In the following sections, I draw out some of the salient points of Desai's theories on the troubled binary of nation/class and its relationship with pre-capitalist formations and the post independence state. Later I discuss his assessments of the nature of capitalism in India and the changes taking place in rural India as reflected in the book Rural Transition in India (1961). In the
course of this discussion, I also examine the extension of some his earlier ideas on state-civil society relationships as it is incorporated in two sets of edited books published on social movements in India. Peasant Struggles in India (1979) and Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence (1986); and his next set of books on the Human Rights movement titled Violation of Democratic Rights in India (1986) and Repression and Resistance in India (1990). I also explore some of the contradictory influences (specially that of his family and his father, as also those of leftist student groups) that shaped his ideas and ideologies and thus his sociology. And lastly, I assess the implications of his ideas for social science knowledge in India (and not only sociological knowledge).

Though it has not been debated at length in the context of the growth of sociology in India, commentators have highlighted the nationalist roots of modern social theory in India. It has been argued that nation and nationalism have loomed large and helped to ask questions, identified issues and problems for discussion and oriented the perspectives of modern social theory in India. Even where it has not helped to identify issues, problems, theories and perspectives — as in Indian social anthropology of the sixties and seventies — the nation has framed the intellectual location of the same. Desai’s sociology is distinct from Indian social anthropology in this regard. His sociology was embedded in the questions and issues that dominated nationalism, and his concepts, categories and theoretical approach were organically connected with the left perspectives that theorised nationalism. Desai was emphatic that sociology must assess the characteristics and features of Indian capitalism. In this paper I ask: what kinds of strengths did Desai’s sociology inherit from its organic relationship with nationalist and Marxist perspectives? While elaborating on his contributions to the making of specialisations such as political sociology, sociology of the agrarian system, sociology of social movements, urban sociology and sociology of communalism (among other areas), I also discuss some of the limitations that his sociology exhibited. I ask whether these limitations are due to Desai’s specific interpretation of the Marxist concept of ‘praxis’ in which the balance between theory/knowledge and intervention are tilted towards the latter rather then the former. Did his commitment to ‘change the world’ and not merely ‘interpret it’ affect the content of his sociology?

The Making of a Marxist
Interviews with Necraben Desai (his wife), and with A. R. Desai’s friends and colleagues suggest that two sets of ideologies and cultural practices had a critical influence on Desai and helped to frame the perspective that he adopted on the nation and the nature of nationalism in *Social Background to Indian Nationalism*. The first set was related to his involvement in radical groups among the student movement in Baroda where he first registered as an undergraduate student, and later his involvement as a student with other leftist and Marxist groups participating in the nationalist movement in Surat and Bombay where he did further studies. The second set was due to the influence of his father, Ramanlal Desai, a civil servant, novelist, committed nationalist, and a Fabian socialist with an admiration for Gandhi. The first set of influences was instrumental in training Desai to theorise issues of nation and class and committed him to a revolutionary intervention in society and to using historical materialist methods to examine nationalism, while the influence of the second set was significant in leading him to a its reiteration of nationalism as the only ideology that could confront colonialism. In *Social Background to Indian Nationalism*, Desai combines these two perspectives and argues that nationalism is an all-class movement that plays a positive role in confronting colonialism.

Having lost their mother early in life, Desai and his younger sister spent their life travelling and living in various homes set up by their father as the latter was transferred to towns and district headquarters of Baroda State. In these travels Desai developed an interest in the world around him. Discussions at home with family and friends on nationalism and the role played by it in changing the nature of rural society created a milieu in which he came to believe in the necessity of having social and political commitments and goals outside his immediate family and career. Though Ramanlal Desai did not leave civil service to join the national movement, these issues find reflection in his novels. For instance, the most popular of them, *Gram Lakshmi*, documents in four volumes the changes taking place in rural Gujarat after the arrival of the British, the exploitation suffered by the peasants due to excessive rent and the possibility of a Gandhian revolution. The critique of colonialism, the positive role of nationalism, and the importance of citizens relating to the making of the new India were ideas that ran through almost all the novels written by Ramanlal Desai. In these, he exhorted his readers to relate to the world around them and to understand it in order to change it. These precepts had an influence on Desai as he grew up in this Nagar Brahman household in early twentieth century Baroda State.⁴
As soon as he joined college Desai was introduced to radical and communist ideas. Baroda was then a base of intellectuals of radical persuasions and activists of the growing Communist Party. By the early thirties a kisan movement had already started in Gujarat. Desai gravitated towards the student and later peasant movement after he entered college in Baroda, where there was a family home. Desai became a member of the Communist Party from 1934 for five years. However it seems that he was not very comfortable with the doctrinaire positions taken by the communists. His rustication from the college in Baroda because of his political activities led him to go to Surat, and later to Bombay for studies where he met C.G. Shah, a communist who has been described as ‘one of the most well read intellectuals of the city’ Shah, who was critical of the strategy advocated by Stalin and the Comintern, had just formed a study group of young communist comrades. (Shah, 1990:2) Desai became part of this group and was introduced for the first time to Trotskyite positions. During these years he found work in a library of radical and communist literature set up by Lokhandwala, a Gujarati trader. Together with other radicals and communists he was employed to work in this library and comment on this literature. Here Desai wrote his first monograph: Gandhi X-rayed, and made an assessment of the complexities of revolution in the Indian feudal states. At this time he was also on the fringes of the Bolshevik-Leninist party organised by a group of Trotskyites from Sri Lanka which included many Indians. It is in this political and intellectual background that Desai penned Social Background of Indian Nationalism.

Nation and Class in India’s Transition to Capitalism.

Social Background of Indian Nationalism was submitted as a doctoral thesis in 1946 and was first published in 1948 by the Bombay University Press as part of the Sociology Series under the general editorship of G.S. Ghurye. Since then, it has been reprinted almost every alternate year and has gone through six editions. This text has now become a textbook, referred to by undergraduate and postgraduate students not only in sociology but also in history and political science. There is irony in the fact that Desai was able to write a social history of Indian nationalism much before this topic became popular among Indian historians. The book attempted to simultaneously argue and organically connect three discrete positions. It tried to, one, explain the role played by colonialism in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in India; two, evaluate the specificity of the nature
of Indian pre-capitalist formation, specially the caste system; and three, examine the role played by nationalism in confronting colonial capitalism. *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* was received extremely well.

This book is a historical work and its arguments are based mainly on interpretations of primary historical sources. Desai understands nationalism as a historical category that emerges at a certain stage of evolution of the social structure when both objective and subjective socio-historical conditions mature. This book lays out the distinctive stages of this development by first examining the nature of pre-capitalist structure in India. Here it discusses ideas regarding “self sufficiency of community” as well as the nature of the agrarian system in pre British India that made the village its key unit. It then proceeds to analyse the British conquest and evaluate the nature of transformation that it inaugurated in the agrarian society. 

Through this book, Desai introduced new interpretations being discussed within the communist groups regarding the specificity of the Indian case in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Against some received interpretations of Marx wherein it was suggested that Marx had argued that capitalism would and could play a revolutionary role in changing the nature of productive forces in traditional Indian society dominated by the caste system, Desai — borrowing from the nationalist ideology — suggested that colonialism did not play a revolutionary role. Rather it had a flip side to it, for it destroyed the institutions that could have made possible the growth of capitalism in India, namely the factories that had emerged to mass produce goods during the pre-capitalist period. However, colonialism had a positive effect in that it made possible the growth of nationalism through a contradictory process. It aided the growth of new classes through the new education system, helped to create the conditions for the emergence of social reform movements, and ultimately influenced the growth of the nationalist movement. This book maps out the contradictory nature of colonialism.

Desai's arguments on Indian nationalism are also sensitive to the specificities of its character and content. Indian nationalism heralded India into the modern world. However it was also extremely complex and remained peculiarly Indian because it incorporated features specific to the making of Indian society. Indian nationalism was framed in the context of social and religious diversities, territorial vastness, and incorporated powerful
indigenous traditions and institutions, making it distinct and different. Lastly, and most significantly, this book argued that the nation was not class, though it was intimately connected to it. Nationalism was a movement of various classes and groups comprising a nation, attempting to remove all economic, political, social and cultural obstacles that impede the realization of their aspirations. It was a multi-class nationalist movement. However it was a movement internally divided, because different classes contested within it to mark it with their own interests. Ultimately, the class at the helm of the movement attempts to impose its own class interests on the movement, fill it with the content of its own class needs and aspirations, subordinating those of other classes to its own.

The specificities of the Indian experience are explained in the following manner:

- Indian feudalism is characterized by lack of private ownership of land, where the village community is the de facto owner of the village land, the monarch receives a definite proportion of produce as revenue and the revenue collector was the representative of the monarch in the village.

- The development of occupational organizations and new forms of consciousness that were growing slowly diminished the importance of caste organizations and weakened caste consciousness itself.

- The British rule destroyed the pre-capitalist forms of production relations and introduced modern capitalist property relationships. The caste system was the ‘steel frame of Hinduism’ and had thrived in the pre-capitalist economy. The economic foundations of caste were now shattered by the new economic forces and forms introduced by colonial capitalism.

- The advanced British nation, radically changed the economic structure of the Indian society for its own purpose, established a centralized state, and introduced modern education, modern means of communication and other institutions. This has resulted in the growth of new social forces unique in themselves.

- Because their very nature came into conflict with British imperialism, these social forces provided the motive power for the rise and development of Indian nationalism.

- The nationalist movement in India was led and dominated by the capitalist class. It accomplished this through its classical party, the Indian National Congress, which launched, shaped and provided ideological, political and programmatic content to the nationalist movement.
State and Capitalism in Post Independence India

In 1960 Desai published a sequel to the book, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, titled *Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism*. While *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* remains structured within the questions raised by Marxist perspectives on nationalism, the sequel, *Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism*, and the next book of essays, *Rural India in Transition*, address the debates among Communists regarding the transition to socialism, and also provide for a general sociological perspective. In these books we see Desai combining the agenda of Marxist theory with that of a general theory of sociology. For by then, Desai had joined the Department of Sociology at the University of Bombay and was interacting with colleagues in the professional world of sociology. He was eager to provide a Marxist Sociology for India in a context wherein there were competing schools providing varied understandings of Indian society.

According to Desai, a critical sociology of India has to undertake the study of the capitalist system as its main focus. Capitalist developments in India cannot be understood without using the historical method. Such a sociology has to examine the history of nationalism, the growth of classes that nationalism encouraged, and the relationship between these classes and the modern Indian state. The State’s role in promoting capitalism, especially in the rural areas, needs to be assessed as well as the contradictions that emerge from these processes, such as the growth of new forms of inequalities through the formation of new classes in rural areas, or lack of access to housing in urban areas, the increasing inequalities with the rich getting richer, and lastly, the escalation in the use of state’s powers as it employs them to extend capitalist growth.

The theoretical basis of these arguments lies in the evolution of Desai’s ideas regarding the specificity of India’s path of capitalist development. Against the positions taken by the Communist parties of the time, he became convinced that India had commenced capitalist development under the British rule. In this, he was following the precepts fashioned by Trotskyite groups who rejected the theory of ‘two-stage revolution’ argued by the Communist Party and supported later by its two offshoots, Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist). These parties argued that India must pass through a ‘national democratic’, ‘people’s democratic’ or a ‘new democratic revolution’
before it can inaugurate a socialist revolution. Instead, Desai suggests India had already started on a capitalist path of development through colonialism. Today, the capitalist system is being institutionalised through the agency of the modern Indian State, which has had to take a dominant role in the context of the weakness of the bourgeoisie in India.

These arguments are now elaborated in these books and presented for the consideration of sociologists Drawing from C. Wright Mills critique of structural functionalism, Desai argues that the project of sociology is to delineate 'historical social structures'. Arguing that post independence social science has 'taken to expedient apologetics in place of scientific inquiry', Desai suggests that sociologists accept the relevance of the Marxist approach (Desai, 1960:xii). He sees Marxist sociology as providing an alternate historical materialist perspective against the conservatism running through contemporary Indian sociology. Both these books are significant because they help him build this alternate perspective and lead him to clarify the elements that constitute his Marxist Sociology. The arguments in Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism and the essays in Rural India in Transition reflect the new intellectual context that Desai is addressing.

*Recent Trends in Indian Nationalism* was written initially as a postscript to *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. This small book-monograph has not been discussed by contemporary commentators, but remains significant for its critical and incisive theorisation of the nature of the postcolonial state in India. This long essay extended the arguments elaborated in the earlier book to examine the nature of contemporary capitalism, defined and elaborated the new class structure that emerged as a consequence of nationalism, and assesses the relationship between these classes and the state in India.

Desai’s arguments may be summarised as follows:

- India saw the uneven development of new classes as a result of economic transformation initiated by colonialism, specifically the penetration of Indian society by commercial forces that established modern industries in India for their own interests. As a result capitalism in India was characterised by the following a) a weak technical base b) monopolistic organisation and c) based on speculative rather than productive processes.
Uneven development of capitalism was a function of two features. a) the differential integration of the new economy in time and b) the differential integration of the pre-capitalist communities with the new economy. In the new environment, the banias who were traders in the pre-British period were the first to take to modern capitalist commerce and banking and grow to become the commercial and financial bourgeoisie, while the brahmans were the first participants in the modern education system and become in the process the intelligentsia and grow into a middle class.

The Indian bourgeoisie is largely composed of certain castes and communities belonging to land owning classes of certain geographical regions of India. Desai, disputes the application in India of the classic Marxist contradiction between town and country, and suggests instead that the interests of the bourgeoisie in India are not distinguishable from that of the semi feudal land owning class. This characteristic affects the style, content and nature of the political programme of the Indian bourgeoisie. This class cannot complete the tasks of bourgeois democratic revolution such as a complete liquidation of feudalism, organization of a prosperous national economy, solution of the nationality problem, democratisation of the social institutions and creation of a modern rationalist culture. Given these characteristics, it cannot evolve genuine bourgeois political programmes. It thus uses negotiations between the ruling classes as a political style to deflect criticism.

In this it is helped by the nature of the administrative structure inherited through the state. The state after independence reflected almost all the aspects of the colonial state. Two processes helped this development. a) the nature of transfer of power. This took place through negotiation rather than revolution and b) the mass support for the Congress party. The latter utilized it to strengthen its negotiating capacity with the colonial authorities. Thus, in the end the constitution of India was a bourgeois constitution that guaranteed rights to the bourgeoisie rather than to the proletariat.

The weakness of the bourgeoisie, its institutionalised relationship with the feudal land owning class, and the received colonial state apparatus put into place, according to Desai, the play of certain specific contradictory features of Indian capitalism. The first characteristic relates to the dominance of the state over the ruling classes and the use of its
welfare orientation not in the interest of the exploited people, but in the interest of Indian capitalism. He evaluates the ideologies and practices of development and planning including the role played by the public sector in these processes, as well as the legal instruments of a similar kind put into place by the post-independence state, to examine how these help the development of capitalism in India. According to Desai, planning plays a critical role in preserving the capitalist system in the epoch of monopoly capitalism in two ways. First, it transfers the main burden for financing of the various Plans on the common people. This leads to the decline of purchasing power of the taxpayers and a drain of the very source of financial resource. Second, it aids the growth of concentration and centralization of capital. This centralization is reinforced by the control of industry, trade, and finance by a few families, belonging to certain castes and certain nationalities. Thus the program of mixed economy, gives lip service to its "socialist" aspects, but instead develops capitalism. Additionally it also makes possible a close liaison and fusion between big business, the government and institutions that shape the ideological and cultural life of the Indian people. It is no wonder that the national economy is characterized by lopsided, asymmetrical development and is in the grip of structural disequilibria.

Because the modern state is a strong state that intervenes, participates and initiates policies and programs that are necessary to sustain an economically weak bourgeoisie, it assumes enormous powers for itself. These powers are now used against the democratic assertions of the people, thereby contradicting the civil rights that it has assured for the people of India. Over the decades the Indian State has attempted to curb civil rights and liberties rather than enhance them. Desai suggests that in order to protect and preserve the capitalist foundations of society, the state had to sacrifice democracy.

Third, through an analysis of the changing agrarian and industrial structures he signals the need to analyse the implications of programmes and policies introduced in rural India together with an assessment of new inequalities emerging in the urban arena. He argues that the critical issue in rural India is unemployment. This theme is discussed once again in the essays incorporated in the book Rural India in Transition. The book assess the changes taking place in the countryside as a result of land reform through the introduction of legislation for tenancy reform and land ceiling, through new programmes and policy interventions such as Community Development Programme and Panchayati Raj. It also
evaluates the limitations of the new movements in rural India such as the *bhoomi* movement that emerged to help the state to implement land ceiling legislation.

Desai argues that while land reforms have helped, its impact has been limited to a few and has instead led to the growth of a class of rich peasants. It has not benefited the underprivileged sections for which it was framed. By eliminating parasitical landlordism, the Indian state has created new classes which are directly dependent on the state. The Indian state, due to its capitalist outlook, has abstained from transferring land to the actual tillers of the soil. Desai believes that the focus of the agrarian policy was to create a class of agricultural capitalists, rich farmers and viable middle peasant proprietors directly linked to the state. Desai argues that these policy measures of the government — economically, socially and politically — only the rich sections of the agrarian society. On the other hand, in the urban arena, an urban upper class has emerged which is predominantly hybrid, isolated from the masses, and combines an authoritarian upper class with upper caste values of both capitalist and feudal India respectively. Ironically, the principle of equality of citizens laid down in the Constitution is contrarily giving rise to a new ruling class imbued with a feudal culture.

Thus, if colonialism and nationalism were key concepts to understand the processes of change in pre-independence period, the role played by the state in changing rural society is the critical issue that now occupies Desai’s attention. He argues that a) rural change generated by the state has resulted in sharpening the contradictions among various classes, and this in turn is leading to the growth of tensions, antagonisms and conflicts; and b) these changes are strengthening the rich section of rural society. He was one of the first sociologists to have noted the new relationship between caste and politics in contemporary India. Examining the correlation between caste, wealth, economic rank, class position, political power and accessibility to education and culture in India, he argues that caste affiliations have led to the growth of caste movements, such as anti-Brahmin and Adi-Dravid movements in Maharashtra and South India.

The task of nation building cannot be accomplished by the historically weak Indian bourgeoisie in a backward country during the period of the general crisis of the world capitalist system. It cannot resolve or liquidate mass poverty, mass unemployment, mass illiteracy, and mass ignorance. These developments have led to the growth of a weak
capitalist society, which cannot resolve the economic, political, social, educational and cultural problems arising from its current crisis. This crisis will only further the aggravation of economic disequilibria which in turn will aggravate political instability and social, moral and cultural degeneration. Desai concludes that the tasks left unfinished by nationalism could only be attained through a socialist revolution. Desai is convinced that Indian social and economic conditions have ripened to the point that a non-capitalist alternative is not only desirable but also necessary. This conclusion motivated Desai to spend the rest of his professional and political life documenting the ways in which the modern Indian capitalist state furthers inequalities, deprivation and marginalisation among the Indian people. He documented how movements of resistance emerged questioning these processes, and how the state in turn utilised the massive resources of violence at its command to repress these movements.

State and Social Movements: Resistance and Repression

In the two decades between the late sixties and the late eighties, intellectual and institutional forces helped to displace those perspectives in sociology that were competing with the dominant structural functional school which affirmed a strong preference for distancing value from fact.  Its institutionalization as the dominant school occurred in the context of institutional changes in the area of higher education.  First, the expansion of higher education led to the growth and spread of the teaching of sociology as new universities were formed.  Second, as mentioned earlier, there was a shift of the power centre of academia to Delhi. These trends were reinforced with the setting up of the Indian Council of Social Science Research in New Delhi. Lastly, it was in this period that the Indian Sociological Society merged with the All India Sociological Congress and shifted its offices to Delhi.

If this was the condition of sociology, there were contrary developments in other social sciences. The establishment of Jawaharlal Nehru University in the late sixties saw the growth of the Marxist perspective in social history together with an increasing interest in Marxist theories of state. Desai's earlier work, especially *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, found a new audience in the disciplines of history and political science.
A. R. Desai was traveling on new paths and was becoming very concerned about the looming crisis in society. Desai's perceptions of society and his assessment of the development of new processes became sharper and more penetrating as time passed. Agitations, protests and struggle were emerging in the countryside. The working class, the traditional revolutionary force, was in the throes of changes both in the context of its structure and its changing political consciousness, and the trade union movement was not able to play its traditional role. In the meantime new contradictions were emerging in urban areas with the growth of new forms of social organization, for instance the slum. Simultaneously politics was changing and political parties were using caste and religious issues in the mobilizing the populace. For Desai, the key to an assessment of all these processes lay in the analysis of the modern Indian state. He argues that it is important to ask the question: why was the state playing an undemocratic role? Why was the state in India using extra-constitutional powers to repress the growth of democratic movements in the country? Answers to these questions, he argues, can only come through a historical-comparative analysis of the state-civil society dynamics taking place in India. Desai it seems was no longer involved in a debate with conservative sociology. They had already made their assessment of him. Rather now his vision encapsulated a set of questions that overwhelmed all the social sciences in India.

During these two decades Desai initiated four complementary projects which analysed contemporary trends by documenting new information. First, he expanded on his earlier work on rural transition and attempted to capture the growth of new contradictions in rural India by documenting the struggles and agitation occurring in contemporary agrarian India. From these travels emerge two edited collections that theorized the distinctions between colonial and contemporary social movements in rural India. Titled *Peasant Struggles in India* (1979) and *Agrarian Struggles in India After Independence* (1986), these two books immediately became and continue to be a major source of reference on social movements and agrarian sociology in India. In the first of these books, Desai questioned the received evidence that peasants were not and are not militant. He was also making visible a set of histories forgotten by mainstream social science and thereby constructing the foundations of the sociology of agrarian structure in India.¹⁷

*Agrarian Struggles in India After Independence* divides the agrarian struggles of post independence into two phases: pre- and post- Green Revolution period. Desai argues that
the first period is characterised by a low level of agrarian struggles, lack of political direction, and the predominance of the landed peasantry rather than landless labourers. On the other hand, the post Green Revolution period is marked by differences among classes and groups that revolt, the variety of protests and differences in political ideology among agrarian struggles. It is interesting to note that Desai does not distinguish between tribal and peasant struggles in this book.

Second, during these decades Desai initiated one of his most ambitious projects, that of documenting the history of the working class movement in India. In order to realise this, he organised a research collective of seven scholars who worked for more than ten years to collect and organise various documents, ranging from newspaper records to private diaries and interviews. Initially Desai had proposed the documentation of the labour history in two to three volumes. As the data got collected it became an eighteen-volume source book. This work is significant not only because it made visible a series of struggles and agitations of the working class not known or documented before, but also because of the definition of the worker and the working class that he used. His study was not restricted to the industrial working class alone but encompassed the entire oppressed sections in society who were selling their labour power in the market. The change in definition is significant because Desai was the first to notice the ‘informal sector’ discovered later by economists and anthropologists. It is unfortunate that of these eighteen volumes, only the first three have been published. The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) is preparing the rest for publication.18

Third, Desai wrote a series of articles on the relationship between state and society in India that assessed the programmes policies and institutions of the state and simultaneously captured the social and political processes that they promote. These essays, published as State and Society in India: Essays in Dissent (1975) and India’s Path to Development: A Marxist Approach (1984), not only lay out the terms of a Marxist sociology of development but also question the theories of modernisation being used by social scientists.19 These essays extend this argument and for the first time use theories of underdevelopment to explain India’s particular situation. However whilst using these theories Desai does not abandon his position on the critical role-played by the state in modern India in creating the underdevelopment of development. All Third World states, he argues, take on a role to protect the interest of the propertied classes of their nation-
states. These books contain an evaluation of the implications of imperialism, the planning process, the mixed economy, the public sector, and the casteist and communalist politics which has emerged.

The importance and significance of the state and the use it made of its repressive powers made Desai initiate the last of his major projects which occupied him through most of the eighties. This project also made him widen his political networks; he had resigned in 1981 from the Revolutionary Socialist Party of which he was a member from 1953. As a result of this work he met many ‘activists’ ranging from comrades in the various section of the Left including the Marxists-Leninists and independent Marxists to others including those in voluntary groups, and liberals who were committed to fight for civil liberties. The result of this endeavour was a two volume book, Violation of Democratic Rights in India (1986) and Repression and Resistance in India (1990), which focused on the state and documented the way it restricted and curtailed the struggles of the oppressed for these rights. In these volumes Desai addresses the question: why does the state show little interest in ensuring that the oppressed get the civil rights guaranteed to the people of India through the Constitution? He also examines the nature of parliamentary democracy and the contradictions that this institution raises for the ruling classes and the state in India. What is remarkable is the fact that for the first time Desai incorporates in his analysis struggles not only of classes but also other groups who cannot be defined as a class in Marxist language. For instance, he uses the category ‘rural poor’, ‘adivasis’ (to denote tribes) and dalits (to denote the ex-untouchables). Secondly he defines these struggles a ‘rights struggles’ rather than class struggles, and divides these rights into bourgeois property rights, civil liberties and proletariat rights.

Why did Desai eschew the use of Marxist categories for assessing the entire range of struggles? Why does he feel the necessity to define them in terms of ‘human rights’? Why does the first volume devote so much attention to the United Nations definition of human rights? What indeed is Desai’s theory of knowledge/fact and value? What relationship did Desai envisage between Marxist theory and scientific method? What is the defining characteristic of his sociology?

In a review of Desai's edited book titled *Agrarian Struggles in India After Independence*, K. Balgopal (1986) applauds Desai's emphasis on the Indian state to understand the nature of struggles in contemporary rural India. However, two aspects of Desai's introduction also puzzle him. The first is Desai's classification of the landed classes in Indian agriculture into rich peasants, middle farmers and landlords. The second is his division of agrarian struggles in terms pre-Green Revolution and post-Green Revolution periods. In many parts of India, the Green Revolution programme was not introduced. And yet, Desai thinks that it is a benchmark for an analysis of the contradictions it generates. On what basis can one assert this? The same problem occurs again in relation to Desai's understanding of the differentiation among ruling classes. Where is the empirical substantiation for this classification? Balgopal wonders whether the problems lie in Desai's orientation. Is Desai being political and ideological rather than sociological? Is he interested more in changing the world rather than interpreting it?

Problems of empirical substantiation also occur in Desai's work from his first book, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Here he argues that pre-colonial India did not have private property and that village India was self-sufficient, autocratic and unprogressive, among other things. Though there is now enough historical material to question these assessments, Desai did not retract these errors in subsequent editions of his book. If his project was completely political, as it is argued, than the logic of its ideology suggests that he should not have translated McIver and Page's textbook *Sociology* into Gujarati for students of sociology, nor should he have termed his sociology of the agrarian system, *Rural Sociology*. As he has himself suggested, the term Rural Sociology emerged in the context of developments in agriculture in the United States especially the growth of a new class of farmers. One wonders why he uses this terminology when terms like peasant society and agrarian society were available within Marxism. Moreover, his introduction to the book gives a classification of aspects of rural life and not an historical materialist rendering of the nature of rural structure. If he became aware of these concepts later, why did he not change the titles of his books or insert addendums? An entire generation of students have read and organised their ideas of agrarian systems on the basis of a very specific definition of rural sociology. One wonders why he allowed this conservative categorisation to continue in his own work? Surely it does not advance scholarship nor extends his political project?
It is not that Marxist theory was insensitive to issues of method, and was not seized of the need of using new categories to embrace new social experiences. When Desai was writing his sociology the Frankfurt school’s debates on various aspect of Marxism were being elaborated. Desai’s own predilection was for a historical perspective. And he was certainly aware of the debates in Marxist historiography regarding transition and transformation and issues of class and state (discussed among the New Left as most of its members were influenced by Trotskyite ideas). Maybe because in the seventies and eighties Desai was concerned more with the present than the past, he interacted closely with Marxists developing the Dependence and Development of Underdevelopment theories rather than historians. As shown earlier, his attempt was to provide a specific interpretation of the Indian case against the background of underdevelopment theories: the latter were mainly economists keenly involved in examining new forms of capitalist system in the emerging world economy rather than evaluating Marxist method and methodology.

That Desai’s agenda was organised in political terms is not in doubt. But here politics should imply a perspective rather than a specific strategy of political mobilisation and intervention through collective action. Though a member of a political party, he did not allow the party line to dictate his intellectual questions and theories. He can be called a ‘scholar-activist’, with his scholarship defined by a political perspective, a commitment to assess facts in context to values. It was this perspective that led him to ask sociological questions and evaluate contemporary processes in context of the nation state rather than the microscopic local that dominated the perspective of social anthropology. It is this perspective that made him a sensitive observer of the ills besetting India as he attempted to build an analysis to eliminate them. His assessments were macro level attempts to understand the play of social and political forces in the context of the nation state and thus had a contemporaneity to them. He was clear that the key to these ills lay in property relations established in India through colonialism and nationalism. In this sense nationalism was a theoretical frame through which he evaluated both the causes and consequences of contemporary processes. It also became a mediating link to build a Marxist sociology for India.

His corpus of work is an attempt to educate the sociologists and the general public about the contradictions that affect Indian society. When he is arguing for nationalism or making
visible the complexities of peasant movements in India (much before the subalterns made
the study of peasants fashionable), or analysing communalism and claiming human rights
for all, he showed an understanding of Indian society unparalleled among the social
scientists of the day. In many ways Desai’s theories, and the broad strokes in which he
argued them, paved the way for new arguments to be presented and new positions to be
taken. Most significantly, his work as an archivist helped to make visible the complexities
of the colonial and post colonial experiences that shaped sociological processes in India.

This political orientation defined Desai’s work within the department in Bombay
University as teaching and learning became activities that would inspire students and like
minded colleagues to identify processes occurring in the world around them. Bombay then
was the theatre of new struggles: it saw the growth of the Shiv Sena as well as the Dalit
movement. Additionally there were demonstrations, meetings and strikes launched by
organised workers, which included anti price rise demonstrations and the railway strike.
The pre and post emergency periods saw the growth of the women’s’ movement. Desai
considered these events an example of the maturity in contradictions. He initiated research
projects to study these events (such as the projects on slums, history of working class
struggles, state society and development) and simultaneously encouraged students,
colleagues and comrades to do research on these issues.21 He also tried to integrate these
concerns within the intellectual community of the city.22 These concerns flowed into the
curriculum of the department. New papers such as Sociology of Development, Sociology
of Marx, Sociology of Economic Planning and Sociology of Art were introduced during
his Headship. (Savur, 2002)

However, Desai’s audience was larger than what was defined by the profession of
sociology or that of the social sciences. And he wrote directly for them not only in
English but increasingly in Gujarati. The C.G.Shah Trust that he set up put into circulation
small pamphlets containing his essays for the general public. He also wrote for The Call,
the party journal of the Revolutionary Socialist Party and started and edited a Gujarati
journal called Paalkar. His commitment to the need for a ‘correct’ interpretation of
processes taking place in India and for collective action made him align first with the
Revolutionary Socialist Party which he joined in 1953 and remained a member till 1981.
Later he continued to work with the Inquilabi Sangathan of India (a section of the Fourth
International in India) till his death.
A.R. Desai believed that the first task of a revolutionary was to make a correct assessment of society. To this end, he devoted every moment of his life. His all-pervading enthusiasm was for a critical engagement with the world fashioned by capitalism in an effort to demystify it. And so was his involvement in various struggles, that of workers and peasants, tribes and castes, women and slum dwellers who provided ways of confronting the dominant order of the ruling class and gave different visions for developing a new society free from exploitation. This passion to learn, to relate and to identify with movements of the oppressed enveloped him, and overflowed through him to others who came in contact with him.

This ebullience and commitment was reinforced by personal traits of warmth, affection and overwhelming generosity. As a result he left an imprint on all those whom he encountered, whether Marxists or not, whether colleagues or students, whether activists or those who were ideologically neutral. Possibly this was also because his inter-personal relationships were marked by a deep sense of humanism and a complete belief in democratic practices. In a predominantly hierarchical academic and political culture, he stood out for being absolutely non-hierarchical. He, his comrades and students participated as equals in study circles that he led, analysing processes of class formation and state oppression in India. He continued with this work after his retirement in 1975. He moved back to Gujarat, and interacted with its intellectual community. He travelled around the State building groups that engaged with the changes taking place then, making Baroda his base. His end, at the age of 79, came there.

1 This paper has benefited from discussions with friends, comrades, colleagues and students of A.R. Desai. I am particularly grateful to Neeraben Desai for spending time to answer detailed questions despite her ill health. Interviews were conducted with Jairus Banaji, Praful Bidwai, Bhagwan Dingh Joshi, Uday Mehta, Indra Mushi, D. Narain, Vinayak Purohit, Manorama Savur, Ghanshyam Shah, Sonal Shukla over the period between January 2002-June 2002
2 See Patel (2000, 2002) for an assessment of Srinivas and the growth of sociology in India.
3 A biographical snapshot of Desai is available in the Festschrift to A.R. Desai. See pp 1-3 Shah (1990)
4 Desai was trained to be a tablaclli in childhood and learnt this skill from one of Baroda’s most famous schools of music which had Fayaz Kahn as its Principal.
5 Interview with Neeraben Desai. January 31 2002
6 Both these monographs are not mentioned in the bibliography as these were mainly polemical and political texts written before A.R. Desai wrote his sociological works.
7 On the Sri Lankan initiative to build a joint Indian-Sri Lankan Trotskyite party see Amasinghe (2000), especially pages 56-65. A.R. Desai’s name does not find mention in this text though in an interview Vinayak Purohit suggests that A.R. Desai was part of group.
Some critics have suggested that this text borrows heavily from R.P. Dutt’s *India Today*. Many of Desai’s arguments also resonate with Barrington Moore’s, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, (1966), who also borrows from R.P. Dutt, though he does not refer to Desai.

In a recent introduction to the writings of Marx and Engels on national and colonial questions, Aijaz Ahmad argues that Marx lost ‘faith in the industrializing mission of colonial capitalism in India’ and characterized British colonialism ‘a bleeding process’ Ahmad, 2001:7)

The new orientation to Desai’s work emerged with his increasing interaction with other professional sociologists not only from India but also outside India. From the early fifties Desai had also started doing empirical research sponsored by various government and international agencies on themes such as: Literacy and Productivity among Industrial Workers, Non Wage Benefits in Manufacturing, Slums and Slum Dwellers in Bombay, Potters in ‘Dharavi’, and lastly the *magnum opus*, the 18 volume *Source Book of Labour Movement in India*. From the early sixties his contacts with international sociologists also widened with his increasing participation in international workshops, seminars and conferences.

Desai had already written a long monograph on the nature of agrarian question in India that the Indian Society of Agriculture Economics had published in 1949. It was later published as *Rural Sociology in India* (1961)

For instance, in his Presidential Address to the All India Sociological Congress in 1980 he states: “The dominant approaches which shaped sociological studies have been basically non-Marxist. The practitioners and advocates of dominant approaches have always adopted an attitude wherein the potential of Marxist approach to understand the Indian reality has been bypassed, underrated or summarily dismissed prima facie by castigating it as dogmatic, value based and therefore lacking objectivity and value neutrality. Sociological Bulletin, Vol 30 No.1 March 1980 pp 8-9

The review of the theme Sociology of Politics for the first Survey of Sociology and Social Anthropology does not refer to any of Desai’s texts on the modern state nor his analysis of the public sector and planning in India. Ironically Desai was a member of the committee doing the survey.

Between 1960-61 and 1980-81 there was a 167% increase in the number of universities.

Desai does not seem to have played a significant role in the merger agreement. He seems to have been noncommittal on this issue. On the politics of this merger see Patel (2000)

Desai’s *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* became the text for new histories to be constructed. In the Preface of the essays on nationalism, Bipan Chandra states: ‘The social character of the (national) movement, its origins stages of development, the nature of social support and popular participation, the tactics and strategies evolved or used, and stages of development were not properly studied. There have been of course exceptions; for example the works of A.R. Desai, R. Palme Dutt and several economists during the 1920s and 1930s’ Bipan Chandra, (1979:vii)

Commentators have acknowledged the definitive work of A.R. Desai which helped to facilitate the formation of the subaltern school. See Ludden (2001) and Mukherjee.

A.R. Desai organized a collective of researchers to do this work. These included Pratul Bidwai, Sunil Dighg, Kamala Ganesh M.N.V. Nair, S.D. Punekar, Manorama Savur, and Robert Varikayal. Desai was the General Editor of these volumes. The first three volumes titled ‘Labour Movement in India’ has been published by Popular Prakashan Bombay. These volumes covered the following periods, 1850-1890, 1891-1917 and 1918-1920. Recently ICHR has asked Manorama Savur to prepare the rest of the volumes for publication. Presently she is trying to complete volumes that cover the period 1923 to 1937.

A prelude of this argument appears as an introduction of the two volume edited book published by Bombay University’s Department of Sociology on modernization theories on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Department (1969)

This was related to the assessment of the peculiarities of the English case and led to a debate between E.P. Thompson and the New Left. The key to this debate was the contending methodologies developed by the empirical school of Marxist historiography in England and the new school against the new approach that combined Western Marxist methodologies and theories. Additionally, Desai knew Thompson; the latter visited him when he came to India.

Desai guided the theses of 28 odd students. Topics ranged from Marxist theory, urban issues, industrial change, labour and trade movement, peasant movement and agrarian structure as well as sociology of art

Desai started study circles in which scientists from Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and student and academics of Indian Institute of Technology participated together with student and colleagues from Bombay University. (Savur, 2002: 59).
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