

# UNIT - 1

## PERSPECTIVES ON THE STUDY OF INDIAN SOCIETY

Paper 02 concerns itself with the study of Indian society. This chapter helps understand various perspectives and approaches adopted by the pioneer sociologists to understand Indian society.

### Indology

Indology means systematic study of Indian society and culture. It deals with interpretation of ancient texts and linguistic studies of problems of ancient Indian culture. It involves academic study of the history, culture, languages and literature of Indian subcontinent through ancient mythological texts.

### Features of Indology

- Indology considers Indian society and culture as unique which could be grasped better through texts
- It relies on historical analysis and comparative methods to make sense of Indian society
- Scholars of this school adopted a textual perspective (textbook view) of understanding the social phenomena.
- It involves the study of language, beliefs, ideas, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, rituals, ceremonies and other related components of culture.
- The sources for indologists are religious manuscripts, ancient literature, inscriptions or epics, folk traditions, myths etc

Scholars like G S Ghurye, Louis Dumont, K.M. Kapadia, P.H. Prabhu and Irawati Karve are pioneers of Indological approach to study Indian society

### G S Ghurye

Govind Sadashiv Ghurye is acclaimed as the 'father of Indian sociology', 'the doyen of Indian sociologists' or 'the symbol of sociological creativeness'.

His general view of society is that Indian society is unique and it should be understood in terms of concept and theories particular to Indian society. According to him, Indian society is a 'Hindu Society' and it cannot be understood without understanding Hindu tradition

### Theoretical Approach

Ghurye practiced theoretical pluralism i.e. he adopted flexible approach to theory and methodology. He used multiple methods and sources to study the social reality

- He insisted on field work, though he himself was an armchair scholar. His empirical field worker side can be seen in his field survey in 'Sex Habits of Middle Class People in Bombay' and 'Mahadev Kolis'

- He used historical and comparative methods in his studies
- Being an Indologist, he utilized literature such as Vedas, Shastras, epics, poetry of Kalidasa or Bhavabhuti to shed light on cultural and social life in India
- His sources include literary, historical, archaeological, sculptural, painting and iconography. This gave his research an extra dimension

Let us examine his views based on his work. He was interested in the general process of evolution of culture in different civilizations and Indian civilization in particular.

### Ghurye on Caste and Kinship

His work *Caste and Race in India* used historical texts, anthropological and sociological evidences to understand caste and kinship system in India. He claimed that the kinship and caste network served in the past as integrative force.

He adopted attributional approach towards caste system and identified six features-

- Segmental division – Caste segments into smaller sub-divisions and sub-castes
- Hierarchy- The segments of caste has ranks or preference which makes the system hierarchical
- Pollution and purity- The members of higher castes are considered pure and enjoy some privileges while the members of lower castes are considered polluted and have some sanctions
- Civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections- Caste system is marked by rules for commensality, temple entries and interaction in general
- Lack of choice of occupation- Caste is used as one of the key determinant for the practice of occupation
- Restrictions on marriage- Endogamy is important feature of caste system. The various segments of caste practice endogamy and gotra exogamy

The relationship between caste and kinship is very close as exogamy is practiced based on real or imaginary kinship. The caste as an effective unit constitutes of kinsmen

### Tribe

Ghurye in his *Scheduled Tribes* dealt with historical, administrative and social dimensions of Indian tribes. He considered tribes as backward Hindus and the reason for their backwardness is their imperfect integration in Hindu society. Hence, it is futile to search for the separate identity of tribes and wanted their integration with mainstream society

### Rural- Urbanization

He believes urbanization in India as an outcome of the need of market felt in rural hinterland. The agriculture surplus needed markets to exchange the produce and as a result one part of village started functioning as a market. This led to a township which ultimately became urban centres. He doesn't consider urbanisation as a result of industrial growth and advocates indigenous source of urbanization

This pattern was changed by colonialism where towns and cities were no longer the outlets for agriculture produce but became the manufacturing centres

He gave the concept of rururbanization to secure the advantages of urban life simultaneously with nature's greenery

### Culture and Civilization

Culture for Ghurye is the core element to study society. He considers culture as the heritage of the mankind. Man preserves the best of his old culture while creating his own spirit of new culture.

In the initial years, he considered diffusion as crucial process for culture transfer. Diffusion is an anthropological concept where a invention or discovery is made at one place and it has been diffused to the rest of the world as a cultural trait. However, later on he realized acculturation as a more relevant process than diffusion, specially in the case of India

## National Unity and Integration

Ghurye identifies five sources of danger for national unity in India. They are

- Scheduled Castes
- Scheduled Tribes
- Backward Classes
- Muslims as religious minority
- Linguistic minorities

He considers them as potential threats because of the chances of narrow group loyalties resulting in tension and conflict

## Contribution of Ghurye to Indian sociology

- He promoted and directed the course of research in diverse fields of Indian society
- He was an institution-builder as he was the principal architect of Department of Sociology, Bombay University.
- He is credited to produce a batch of renowned scholars such as M N Srinivas, Irawati Karwe
- His writings on topics like caste, culture, race, religion etc and his practice of theoretical pluralism provided intellectual freedom to sociology

## Criticism of Ghurye

- He presents an over- Hinduized view of Indian society which shows his bias towards a section over others
- He failed to explain the dehumanizing aspect of Indian caste system
- Some scholars claim that Ghurye's knowledge of the India's past, instead of helping him, stood in his way of analysis.
- Most of Ghurye's works are based on textual and scriptural data and lack empiricism
- He did not discuss the impact of modernity. His main concern was the core of Hindu society rooted in traditions and culture

## Criticism of Indological Perspective

- Indology gives primacy to the Brahmanical point of view in texts. Indologists relies on the 'book view', authenticity of which is questionable. These texts generally depicted an idealized version of Indian society.
- There are no written records of tribal or village history, thus it was not studied through Indology.
- A.R. Desai criticize that viewing Indian society from the lens of culture and providing a textual view is far different from the real India with its inequalities, diversities, dialectics and exploitations.
- Contradictory information in Indological sources introduced subjectivity in the analysis

## Structural Functionalism

Structural Functionalism focuses on understanding the 'order' and 'pattern' of the social world. It deals mainly with the problem of order at a societal level. The theoretical and empirical analyses have generally been based on the assumption that societies can be seen as persistent, cohesive, stable, generally inherited wholes, differentiated by their culture and social structural arrangements.

**M N Srinivas** is considered to be the first sociologist who systematically used this perspective for the understanding of Coorgs of Mysore. Although, W H Wiser had used this perspective in highlighting the functional importance of Jajmani system, Srinivas applied this perspective for the understanding of the whole society.

## Characteristics of structural functionalism

- It stresses on the element of harmony and consistency and not those of conflict and contradiction.
- The functional unity of a system is defined in terms of social order. In defining society in holistic terms, it implies that everything within the system is necessarily functional for the whole.
- It treats changes as slow, cumulative process of adjustment to new situations.
- It relies on empiricism and field view to capture the true essence of social reality. It is often called as contextual perspective

M N Srinivas, S C Dube, McKim Marriott, D N Majumdar are some followers of this perspective

## M N Srinivas

Srinivas initiated the tradition of macro-sociological generalizations on micro-anthropological insights and of giving a sociological sweep and perspective to anthropological investigations of small-scale communities. His structural functionalism was a blend of approaches used by Radcliffe Brown and Evans Pritchard.

## Theoretical Perspective

- He studied India not on the basis of indigenous or western textbooks but through direct observation and field study
- He studied Indian society in totality i.e. the interrelationship of various groups, structures and institutions
- He believed in doing small regional theories rather than construction of grand theories

Let us understand the major themes of Srinivas's work. But before that, let's look at the difference between field view and book view

Field View	Book view
Knowledge about the different regions of Indian society can be attained through field work which involves the methods of interview, participant observation etc	The knowledge of main elements of society like religion, varna, caste, family, village and geographical structure is gained through sacred texts or from books
Field view is core tenet of structural functionalism	Book view is also known as Indology

## Social Change

Social change is a recurrent theme in Srinivas's work. His concept of sanskritization, westernization and secularization introduces the element of dynamism in Indian sociology.

In his *Social Change in Modern Society*, he defines-

**Sanskritization** as the process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other groups takes over the custom, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a twice-born (dwija), caste. The sanskritisation of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the local caste hierarchy.

**Westernization** refers to the change resulting from the contact of British socio-economic and cultural innovations

## Religion

Srinivas's work *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* explains the interrelationship between rituals and social order in Coorg society. With the crucial notion of purity and pollution, he explains the incorporation of non-Hindu communities and cults in Hindu social order and way of life

He considers Hindu traditions as Indian traditions. The rituals, beliefs and traditions held and shared by Brahmins, Baniyas and Rajputs constitute Indian traditions and those of lower sections, untouchables and tribals do not have any status of traditions

## Village

Srinivas considers village as the microcosm of Indian society and civilization. He studied Indian villages by conducting the field studies. The study of Rampur- a Mysore village gave him the concept of dominant caste

**Dominant Caste** is any caste which has numerical strength, economic power ie ownership of land and political power. This concept doesn't consider the ritual ranking of a caste in the social hierarchy

He used historical analysis to counter the argument of British administrators that village was an unchanging unit of self sufficiency.

## Criticism of M N Srinivas

- The concept of sanskritisation and dominant caste put him closer to Hindutva ideology of cultural nationalism.
- He is accused of marginalizing and alienating religious minorities.
- M N Srinivas in his village studies highlighted the harmony and interdependence in the villages. He neglected the divisions and conflicts that exist in society
- His ethnographic work merely mirrors his ideological bias ie elitism or Brahminical Domination

## Criticism of structural functionalism

- Structure functionalists are often considered as conservative and status-quoist and ignore change and conflict in the society.
- In order to claim functional unity of the system, they often sidelines dysfunction and non functions
- A number of studies become too much empirical that there were nothing more than explanations of empirical generalizations.

## Marxist Sociology

This approach involves dialectical-historical orientation for the analysis of social reality. In India, this view found favor among nationalist leadership after Russian revolution.

It is comparatively less developed branch of Indian sociology in India because before independence British government was strictly opposed to Marxian thoughts. After independence, due to euphoria generated by the welfare state, Marxist perspective was given a pass

A R Desai, S A Dange, D D Kosambi, P C Joshi are some of the pioneers of Marxian sociology

## Characteristics of Marxian Perspective

- It gives primacy to economic infrastructure and material productions and other structures are seen as rooted in economic infrastructure.
- It focuses of social tensions and conflict in the society. For example, the Jajmani system was interpreted as coercive and exploitative institutions by Marxists like Berreman.
- It uses historical materialism to understand the transformation of Indian society

## A R Desai

Desai closely studied the works of Marx and Engels and the writings of Leon Trotsky. He advocated and applied dialectical-historical model in his sociological studies. He rejected any interpretations of tradition with reference to religion, rituals and festivities. It is essentially a secular phenomenon which develops in economics

## Theoretical approach

- His studies mainly of nationalism and its social configuration, his examination of community development programmes for economic development in villages etc are all based on a Marxist method of historical-dialectical materialism

- He pointed out the growing nexus among the capitalist bourgeoisie, the rural petty-bourgeoisie and a state apparatus which results in contradiction in India's transformation
- He claimed that the social unrest is rooted in the capitalist path of development followed by India

## Desai's work

### Village

He viewed Indian villages as self-sufficient units in pre-British period. The village council was the de-facto owner of the village land which represented the village community. All exchange of product produced by the village workers, was limited to the village community. The village did not have any appreciable exchange relations with the outside world

The culture of pre-British India was feudal in nature, which was predominantly mystical in character. This was due to the fact that the society was economically on a low level, stationary and socially rigid.

The transformation of the pre-British India from feudal economy to capitalist economy was a result of the British conquest of India.

- British destroyed the old land relations and artisans with the emergence of new land relations and modern industries.
- New classes like the capitalist, industrial workers, agricultural labourer, tenants, merchants etc., emerged.
- The new land revenue system, commercialization of agriculture, fragmentation of land etc led to the transformation of Indian village.
- British impact not only led to the transformation of the economic anatomy of Indian society, but also its social physiognomy

## Social Background of Indian Nationalism

Desai in his work *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism* applies the Marxist approach to the study of nationalism in India during the British rule. He claims that India's nationalism is the result of the material conditions created by the British colonialism

The advanced British nation, for its own purpose, radically changed the economic structure of the Indian society, established a centralized state, and introduced modern education, modern means of communications, and other institutions. This resulted in the growth of new social classes and the unleashing of new social forces, unique in themselves. These social forces by their very nature came into conflict with British Imperialism and became the basis of and provided motive power for the rise and development of Indian nationalism

## Stages of Indian Nationalism

**First phase (up to 1885)-** Leaders during this period focussed on socio-religious reforms and movements associated with it. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and other Western-educated middle class intelligentsia were the pioneers of Indian nationalism. This was based on the spirit of the new principles of democracy, rationalism and nationalism. During this period, leaders had a very narrow social base.

**Second Phase (1885-1905)-** During this period, the moderates were in the forefront of the national movement. The Indian national Congress and its leaders used constitutional methods of protest during this period. The leaders were mainly from educated middle class and a section of merchant class. A new class of Indian industrialists also emerged in this period and began to gain strength. They started orienting towards the Congress which adopted the programme of industrialisation of the country in 1905 and organised the Swadeshi campaign which benefited the new Indian industrialists as demand for their products increased.

**Third Phase (1905-1918)-** During this period many extremist leaders started leading the movement. The nationalist movement became militant and acquired a wider social base by the inclusion of sections of the lower middle class into the movement. This phase is marked by Tilak's leadership and Gandhi's entry into the national movement.

**Fourth Phase (1918-1934)**- Gandhiji became the undisputed leader of the national movement. Nationalist movement gained a mass base and added to its arsenal the weapon of direct mass action. Leaders in this period were more popular and believed in the capacity of masses. Indian capitalists became economically stronger during the First World War period as result of industrial expansion. They actively supported INC. This period also saw the rise of Dalit movement, Hindu Mahasabha, communist party, Akali Dal and finally civil disobedience movement. Desai argue that Indian industrialists began to exert a powerful influence in determining the programme, policies, strategies, tactics and form of struggle of Indian national movement led by the Congress.

**Fifth phase (1934-1939)**- Fifth phase witnessed the provincial elections, decline of the Muslim league and ascendancy of the Congress party. This consolidated the position of Congress and also made their position rigid vis-a-vis the Muslim league.

**Sixth phase (1939-1947)**-The final phase witnessed Independence and partition of the country into India and Pakistan. Desai said Indian intelligentsia compromised with Indian capitalists and remaining feudal lords. This was a betrayal of the progressive cause of Indian people on the part of Indian middle-class intelligentsia

In conclusion, Desai argues that Indian freedom movement, like French revolution was conceptualised, funded and organised by the bourgeoisie and educated middle class

## Peasant Struggles

Desai through the study of peasant struggles both pre and post independence claims that the progress could be achieved only by radically transforming the exploitative capitalist system of India. The new propertied class fight for greater share in the fruit of development and agrarian proletariats struggle for survival and better life

## State and society

Desai believes state as valuable ideological vehicle to the ruling class pursuing the capitalist path. He consistently tries to expose the contradictions and anomalies in policies and process of change resulting from the capitalist-bourgeoisie interlocking of interest in the Indian society. According to Desai, the polarization of class interest, especially of the bourgeoisie, is the foundation of modern society in India.

## Criticism of A R Desai

- According to **Yogendra Singh**, the important limitation of the dialectical approach for studies of social change in India is the lack of substantial empirical data in support of his major assertion
- He doesn't offer any theoretical perspective to study relationship of caste, class, gender.
- He ignores the impact of charismatic authority like Gandhi in India's freedom struggle
- **S C Dube** points out that Desai forgets the proliferation of middle class in India during the course of history, which was a major group to influence class structure in India.

## Other Indian Marxist

**Kathleen Gough**- Gough promoted the welfare of lower castes in India, hoping to bring them closer to the principles of Communism. Gough also strongly opposed upper castes who generally supported right-wing politics and anti-Marxism

Gough's Study on Marriage among Nayars of Kerala is one of her famous work. She claims that Nayars seem to have treated marriage different from sex and economic relations between men and women. The basic household unit is called the taravad that is matrilineal.

Her definition of marriage is- It is a relationship established between a woman and one or more persons, which provides that a child born to a woman under circumstances not prohibited by rules of the relationship, is accorded full birth status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum

**Gail Omvedt**- She was an Ambedkarite scholar who contributed immensely to the anti-caste movements, environmental, farmers'and women's movements, especially with rural women. Her core theme of work about social inequality and the unequal distribution of resources

**Utsa Patnaik-** She is an Indian Marxian economist. She revisited the drain of wealth whereby Indian producers received payments for exported goods from the taxes they had themselves paid, initially to the East India Company, and later to the British Crown. She also sheds light on the continuity of imperialism in the post-colonial period where it operates through policies that reduce purchasing power by cutting government expenditure, or disproportionately taxing non-capitalist classes as opposed to transnational corporations and wealth elites.

### Criticism of Marxism

- They are accused of economic reductionism
- Over emphasis upon conflict led them to overlook integration and solidarity aspect of Indian society
- They ignored the importance of religion and culture in the lives of people of India. Religion occupies an important place in Indian society and world view of people is influenced by it.
- Caste was often equated with class which generated an over-simplistic view of the pattern of social inequalities.

### Subaltern perspective

The term 'subaltern' was coined by Antonio Gramsci. It implies people of inferior rank for his/her various attributes such as economic condition, race, ethnicity, gender, caste, sexual orientation and people are marginalised for such attributes. Thus, subaltern perspective is the way to understand society from the below

### Ranajit Guha

The subaltern studies which emerged in India as a post-colonial theory is about re-writing history of the people. According to Guha, the subaltern historiography focuses on the peasants and tribal movements during colonial period in India as it has been overlooked by the dominant mainstream elitist historiography. Their mobilisation and resistance independent of the elite, emerged from people themselves. The subaltern historiography constructs the binary of the elite and the people.

- The subaltern politics and mobilisation was guided more by the traditional institutions like clan, caste, kinship, territoriality, family network, deprivation. The elite politics and mobilisation was governed more by legalistic and constitutional considerations.
- The subaltern mobilization was more violent, aggressive and spontaneous while the elite mobilisation was cautious, controlled and moderate.

As a Marxist subaltern historian, Guha claims that the peasant and tribal insurgents should not be considered as 'objects' of history but as 'makers' of their own history

With this, we conclude the chapter. We will see the application of various concepts and perspectives offered by these thinkers in the upcoming chapters.

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