

Young Reacher's Workshop

All India Sociological Conference, Lucknow 7th-8th November 2017

Doing sociological research with historical sensibilities.

Sociology's birth was associated with a historical sensibility. If this was true for August Comte and Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx and Max Weber, it was also true of G. S. Ghurye. However the professionalization of the discipline in 19th century Europe, its increasing organic connections with scientific approaches allied with statistics led it to disassociate itself from its origins as a historically oriented discipline. Gradually an approach called 'quantitative methods' developed and became the governing model for doing sociological research. In India too, the historical sensibility linked to G. S. Ghurye's Indology faded out as ethnographical perspectives came to be dominated in social anthropology while quantitative methods became the method for doing sociology. And yet some of contemporary India's prominent sociologists continued to use an historical sensibility, such as A. M. Shah (2016), Satish Sabharwal (1995) and D. N. Dhanagare (2007).

It was C. Wright Mills (1959) who questioned the divorce of sociology from history and argued that sociology is necessarily a study of history (institutions) as it intersects with biography. Since then sociologists from across the world have re-asserted this fact and argued that not only do the events of the past influence the present but social structures evolve over time and thus need to be studied both in time and space. Charles Tilly (1981) has asserted that an historical enquiry sensitises us to the fact that boundaries of social units are porous, structures keep changing, sequences never quite repeat themselves, what has happened before affects the character of the next structure, sequence or process. An historical perspective helps to confront the challenge of linking the particularities of time and space with an analysis of causal relationships or mechanisms to explain how social orders form, change, proliferate, and decline (Burke, 2005).

There is no single definition of what constitutes the historical method. However when social scientists examine changes in society over time, through happenings, events and processes then it can be called to be historical. If there is no single definition, then, correspondingly, there is no single way of doing history either. In significant ways, inquiries into history depend on the questions asked as also on the availability of material to help the investigation. Historical methodology thus is the process by which historians gather evidence and formulate ideas about the past. It is the framework through which an account of the past is constructed in order to analyse the present. Commentators have identified three ways of associating the historical method with sociology.

The first is through the use of techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other [evidences](#) to research and then to write histories in the form of accounts of the past. Historical evidence can take a variety of forms. Among the most important types of historical evidence are primary sources. Historians consider primary sources (published,

unpublished and unwritten) the most important source to write history. These consist of original documents, newspapers, diaries, artefacts, or other pieces of information that were created at the time under study. Sociologists doing this kind of history have also used literature including poems and novels to examine the sociology of a group. Another important type of historical evidence is oral tradition/history. Oral tradition consists of stories that are not written down but passed on verbally, usually from an eyewitness to succeeding generations. A new variation of this method is called life history narratives and is used in feminist and women's studies or in the study of marginalised/oppressed groups. In addition this way of integrating history includes use of published materials such as theses and journal articles. The latter are called secondary sources.

A second mode of doing historical oriented study is to build explanations that both generate theoretical understanding and comprehend the temporality of social life. This is done in the field of historical sociology. 19th century European sociology (in the form of conceptual schemes proposed by Karl Marx and Max Weber) and contemporary American historical sociology (perspectives suggested by Barrington Moore, 1966, Theda Skocpol 1984 and Charles Tilly, 1981) on the relationship between democracy and economic processes) have alerted us to patterns of complex sequences influenced by causal mechanisms. In particular, such studies concentrate on contexts that change meanings of actions or the conditions under which actions are carried out, so that similar actions have different effects in varied times and places. This implies a need to theoretically grasp both an understanding of durable processes and an assessment of events and processes that produce strains and conflicts and thus transform social order. Such theories of historical sociology affirm the use of certain historical methods and techniques while providing guidelines of interpretations of the same.

The third way of doing historical method is to study the primary sources themselves and examine who writes, who speaks, what institutions organise and collect records and how these are related to the power of those who rule and the power of the state. Sociologists have used post-structuralist method to study the archives or the documents within the archive. They have classified the archive, examined the absence and presence of documents and analysed the way these represent power. On this basis, they have written sociologies of various groups, such as the peasantry. (An excellent example being Ranajit Guha's evaluation of the archival documents in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, 1983).

This workshop invites students who work in different interdisciplinary domains to reflect on the way that they are using the historical method to enhance their sociological explanations and evaluate the challenges that they face when they use historical methods. This workshop will help them to make a critical assessment of their methodologies and methods and expose them to the new trends and approaches of doing historical method in India. Experts in various themes will be the chair and discussants commenting on students' presentation and guiding their next steps in organising their research.

Organisation of the workshop

This workshop is for doctoral students who are in an advanced stage of doing field work or have completed their field work and are in the process of writing their doctoral theses. It is divided into six sessions in addition to a keynote and a valedictory. We plan to advertise this workshop in all Departments of Sociology in the country and invite applications with abstracts. 18-20 students will be chosen for this workshop and 30 local participants from universities in the Uttar Pradesh will also be invited to be present. Each session will have 3 presentations by doctoral students and each of their presentations will be discussed by Resource Persons.

The workshop will be inaugurated by Uma Chakravarty who will give a talk on the interface between history and sociology and the valedictory will be presented by Rajesh Misra (Lucknow University). Resource persons will be Anindita Chakravarty (IIT, Kanpur), Arvinder Ansari (Jamia Millia), Chandan Kumar Sharma (Tezpur University), Manish Thakur (IIM, Kolkata) Shruti Tambe (University of Pune) and Sobin George (ISEC, Bangalore)

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