

Presidential Address on Indian Society and Sociology: Challenges and Responses

At 38th All India Sociological Conference, Udaipur (2012)

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At the outset, let me thank and express my heartfelt gratitude to Mohanlal Sukhadia University, and its functionaries for organizing the 38th All India Sociological Conference in this beautiful lake city of Udaipur.

I must also express my heartfelt thanks to all the members of the Indian Sociological Society for having given me the opportunity to serve it as its President. I once again assure you all that I will do my utmost to promote and strengthen sociology in every part of the country.

A major step in this direction has been initiated in the form of establishing five Zonal Sociology Promotion Councils. The ISS Managing Committee has also constituted more than half a dozen committees to promote and address our common concerns such as young scholars, women's participation, research co-ordination, publications, programmes, job-oriented courses and papers, liaison with regional associations, finance and membership, and of course to suggest ISS election reforms.

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As some of you may be aware, the ISS has entered into MOUs with the National Sociological Associations of Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa (popularly known as BRICS) besides the Polish Sociological Association. We also have limited understanding with the British Sociological Association. We can look forward to having some joint international conferences and other collaborative academic activities in near future. The benefits of such dialogues to the benefit of the participating partners can hardly be overemphasized. Only last week, when I was in Bangladesh to address the Conference of Bangladesh Sociological Association, we have agreed to establish the South Asian Association of Sociology (SAAS).

We have also decided to bring out the ISS e-Journal and e-Newsletter. Going forward, we shall explore the possibility of bringing out the ISS Journal in Hindi and other regional languages too. Friends, I can go on to appraise you about the initiatives that the ISS has taken to strengthen and widen the scope of its activities, but I think it is now time that I come to my address.

I now seek your kind indulgence to the customary address delivered by the President of the Indian Sociological Society. The theme of my address is: 'Indian Society and Sociology: Challenges and Responses'. My predecessors have been eminent stalwarts and scholars, who nourished sociology in India to great heights. I am too small a person to match their scholarship and yet I deem it my duty and honour to reflect on the current challenges faced both by the society and sociology in India.

Even as many of us have been concerned about the changing face and characteristics of our society, the question beckoning us as sociologists is: Are we doing enough to observe and study these changes and are we enabling our students to become productive leaders of social change? If that is a tall order, can we say that we are contributing to a better understanding of Indian society and its ever evolving challenges.

All through its history, Indian society has remained a multicultural society in every sense of the word. So is the case today. Probably no other country in the world can match its diversity and its capacity to absorb and amalgamate external influences of the magnitude that we have encountered. We have

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successfully met and overcome these challenges, and gone back to our path of growth and development, may be after strife and tribulations. Each period of major socio-structural change in Indian society had its nuances and impact, altering and creating a set of new social hierarchies and social formations. These hierarchies and social structures have presented in one or other form, and have shaped and reshaped the nature and character of Indian society and its various institutions, be it marriage, family, *jati*, caste, community, kinship, religious practices, rural/urban/tribal communities, state, etc (Modi, 2012a).

As such, socio-cultural and politico-economic institutions had been at the centre of indigenous intellectual traditions and discourse in India. A tradition of reflection on socio-cultural and politico-economic institutions had persisted in different philosophical and scholarly texts. A large number of these classical texts authored and compiled by eminent sages and scholars over the millennia contain valuable insights on different aspects of Indian society (Modi, 2012a).

However, gains of the post-independence period in India are enormous. In spite of its social, religious, cultural, political and economic diversities India is functioning as a unified entity to the amazement of the whole world.

Over the last few decades, India has made tremendous progress in almost all aspects of life. The process has become sharper over the last two decades and more visible, thanks to the increasing role and activism of the media, be it print or electronic and now the internet.

If caste and kinship were the dominating themes until the sixties, social unrest and political plurality coupled with issues relating to individual rights and freedom dominated the seventies. The nation awakened and the defining memories linger on of the victory on the eastern front and creation of Bangladesh, imposition of emergency and leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan.

Eighties saw renewed challenge to national integration – whether it be Punjab in the north, Tamil Nadu in the south or Assam in the north east. If society and politics had to deal with issues of terrorism and separation, later part of the decade witnessed polarization across religious divides. What started as agitation for and against reservation for backward and less privileged

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castes, through Mandal Commission recommendations, echoed in the backlash of majority community, commonly referred to as the ‘Kamandal’ response. The decade witnessed renewed insurgency in J&K, even as the country faced huge political churn and instability. In between, issues of corruption took centre-stage, as evidenced by the huge support garnered by V.P. Singh.

Come to nineties and the nation made some huge decisions and deviated from the path it had been following the previous two decades. Economic reforms and liberalization unshackled the economy and threw open opportunities, which did not exist till then. The dismantling of the License Raj and opening up of the economy saw growth of several first generation entrepreneurs – from Mittals (Airtel) in the telecom space to Dhoots (Videocon) in consumer good industry to Subhash Chandra (Zee) in television to Tantis (Suzlon) in renewable energy space to Anil Agarwal (Vedanta) in metals and minerals space to Narayan Murthy in IT. The list is endless. These were the faces of new India and came to symbolize hope, aspiration and possibilities.

Nineties were dominated by the buzz around economic reforms coupled with lack of labour reforms; of free flow of capital and foreign investment to lack of transparency; to increased investments in infrastructure to stuttering reforms in power sector.

Cometh the new millennium and with it came the new found aggression and self-confidence of the average Indian. No more was he going to play second fiddle to the developed world or be in awe of the white skin. The Y2K experience and the IT boom had given Indians a new voice and confidence of success. Increasing material prosperity and greater disposal income meant consumerism was here to stay. Thanks to the unbridled population explosion of the previous decades, the demographic dividend was on the anvil. The country had hit the sweet spot of demographic divide – it had a vast pool of young, hungry and assertive youth. They were impatient for more and had faith in themselves. Nothing was impossible and impossible actually meant ‘I’M POSSIBLE’.

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The telecom boom and the National Highway Development Programme meant better communication and better mobility. Nation was on the move!

Yet, several formidable challenges: exploding population, widespread poverty, regional inequity, illiteracy, urban congestion and squalor, ruptures and cleavages based on religion, language and gender threatened to tear apart the social fabric, apart from continuing power outages. Another dimension has been added by globalization in terms of both economy and geo-politics. Never before in the history of mankind did a country with democratic dispensation had to feed so many poor and teach so many illiterate, and also simultaneously compete with the most advanced countries for a place under the sun (Mashelkar, 2000).

No discussion of the social situation in India can take place without discussing the twin issues of caste and untouchability. There are scholars who obliquely suggest that caste is a rumour and untouchability has become irrelevant in India. The other reaction is rather moderate in as much as it suggests that caste and untouchability have not disappeared, but have changed their nature. Others argue that those who tend to deny the very existence of caste suffer from the guilty feeling or sense of embarrassment that this social malaise causes to such people. On the other hand, there are those who argue that caste and untouchability cannot be wished away; it is there and exists but in a milder form (Guru, 2008).

Babasaheb Ambedkar offered us a multi-layered, counter-hegemonic reading of caste that was lost on at least three generations of sociologists and possibly accounts for several of the conservative trends we have seen in the social science in institutions of higher learning. What is particularly interesting is the silence in the sociological work that emerged at that time and for at least five subsequent decades about Ambedkar's contribution to the sociology of caste (Kannabiran, 2009). We all know that caste persists as a system of inequality that has burdened the Indian economy with inefficiencies in the allocation of labour and other critical resources, reducing the full development of human capital in society. Far from disappearing as the economy modernizes, discrimination remains a problem. It is not amenable to

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self-correction, but rather requires interventionist policies to remedy, as articulated by Thorat and Newman (2007). One such interventionist policy pertains to reservations.

India today is caught in the grip of querulous debate over developing reservation policies for groups and communities suffering from economic exclusion associated with caste, gender and religious identity. Appropriate discussion with regard to economic empowerment and equal opportunity is the only way out to deal with the question of reservation policies. The questions regarding 'creamy layer' also need to be addressed in this context. Supreme Court judgments do not mean the end of debate on reservations.

A long-standing challenge for those who support affirmative action is to end the phenomenon of quotas being an instrument of political mobilization rather than a mechanism to ensure social justice. The main issues that need addressing are identification of Other Backward Classes, the criteria for deciding the creamy layer and the fallout of sub-classification of the intended beneficiaries. None of these issues can be seen as having been permanently decided by the Mandal Commission or the courts nor can they be seen as not changing over time (Palshikar, 2008). As such, we sociologists have great responsibility to reflect on these intertwined and waxed issues with sensitivity and fairness to all concerned.

It is not caste alone that has generated inequality in Indian society but certain economic factors are equally responsible for this. Poverty is the foremost among these factors. Almost as many Indians are below the poverty line and illiterate as the entire population of India in 1950. In 2005, one in every third person in the world who consumed less than \$ 1.25 a day (at 2005 purchasing power parity) lived in India – more than any other country. They accounted for about 40 per cent of India's population. Twenty-five years earlier, 60 per cent of India's population lived below the same poverty line, in real terms. While this is clear progress, India's long-term pace of poverty reduction is no more than the average for the developing world, excluding China, as pointed out by Martin Ravallion (2008).

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The performance of the Indian economy, as measured by the growth rate of aggregate income, has been remarkable, both in terms of past performance and in comparison to other nations. Among the several factors behind this, two, which stand out are the economic reforms of the early 1990s and the sharp increase in the saving rate following bank nationalization in 1969. This outstanding aggregate growth, however, comes with growing inequality and (declining but still) unacceptably high poverty. It is argued that this is partly a consequence of globalization and gives rise to novel policy dilemmas, including need for multi-country coordination of policies of a kind that has little precedence, as per Kaushik Basu (2008), former Chief Economic Adviser of India and currently the Chief Economist with the World Bank.

However, the link between globalization and inequality is not yet very clear. While the pro-globalizers claim that integration with the world market has worked wonders in reducing poverty in India as well as China, the critics claim that globalization has contributed to a widening of inequality. Both these positions seem to be off the mark. As such a more nuanced understanding is called for. This has not yet been undertaken in all seriousness by sociologists.

While globalization and liberalization policy of the 1990s seemed to have given impetus to the broadening of the middle class in India which today constitutes almost 30 per cent of the Indian population and is growing every day; a pertinent question that remains unanswered is if globalization has encouraged inter-generational occupational mobility. Even today, very few systematic and rigorous studies on inter-generational occupational mobility in India exist. However, substantial inter-generational persistence has been reported particularly in the case of low-skilled and low-paying occupations e.g. almost half the children of agricultural labourers end up becoming agricultural labourers that clearly suggest considerable inequality of opportunity in India, as per recent studies by Motiram and Singh (2012).

At the same time, the new economic policy has led to the emergence of new business classes from communities whose traditional occupation was not commerce. In India, historically big and small business alike have been

dominated by a few traditional mercantile communities, like the
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Vaishyas/Banias and Marwaris in north and east India, the Chettiars in the south, and the Parsis in the west. This monopoly has been slowly whittled away, beginning in the late colonial period and accelerating after independence as members of a range of dominant agricultural castes like the Kammas of AP, Patidars in Gujarat, Gounders in Tamil Nadu, upper caste groups like the Khatri and even lower caste communities like the Nadars, have become prominent in different sectors of business and industry (Upadhyaya, 2009). The emergence of new business classes has added new dimensions to the socio-economic scenario of the Indian society. Its impact is yet to be assessed more so in its sociological dimensions.

At the same time, we also need to assess the impact of displacement caused by large development and infrastructure projects, as also due to the transfer of land from farmers to industrialists under the policy of promoting special economic zones (SEZs) – which has almost become a mad race between the various state governments.

Another area of major concern for us is politicization of religion which has led to the surfacing of intense debates on secularism vs communalism. The validity of secularism as a political ideology has been questioned, in the context of the communal violence against the Christian community in Orissa and in the jingoism against the Muslim community in the name of 'hunting down the terrorists'. Since the post-Mandal agitations the political climate of India has drifted towards the right and has destabilized 'secular India'. This failure of secular ideology in India has often been interpreted as a manifestation of the inadequacy of the modernization programmes taken up by the state.

The frame of debate around secularism emphasizes the issue of modernity and religion, which essentially invokes a Western model where secularism as an ideology comprehends the distance between the church and the state. This strand of argument employs secularism and communalism as analytical tools for explaining the religious and secularian identities in the context of the problems of integration with a liberal democratic state, and thus bypasses the

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historical evolution of the terms like 'secular' or 'communal' in the Indian scenario (Mukhopadhyay, 2009).

The writings indicate that communalism is an outcome of the competitive aspirations of domination and counter-domination that began in colonial times. Cynical distortions of the democratic process and the politicization of religion in the early decades of independence intensified it. In recent years, economic liberalization, the growth of opportunities and a multiplying middle class have further aggravated it. More alarmingly, since the 1980s, Hindu communalism has morphed into fundamentalism, with the Sangh Parivar and its cultural politics of Hindutva playing ominous roles (Upadhyay and Robinson, 2012).

Another important issue for us to consider and probe is that of corruption. Jayaprakash Narayan, V.P. Singh and now Anna Hazare have drawn widespread attention to the issue of corruption. As citizens we might have kept our eyes closed towards this widespread malaise in society but as conscientious academicians we cannot remain aloof and as such there is a pressing need for the understanding of the various dimensions of corruption both in private and public life.

The waxed questions of discrimination, disparities and inequality based on caste, dalits, reservations, creamy layer etc. compel us to think as to 'what is to be done?' As such we have to think and ask questions such as: 'Do we need special policies to tackle discrimination and disparities or are universal anti-poverty or redistributive policies enough to close the caste gaps?' As pointed above popular themes such as the issue of the creamy layer, reservation and efficiency, perception of non-dalits and dalits about the effectiveness of policies should be dealt without any bias and with academic sincerity.

As Jodhka (2009) has pointed out why is it that sociologists and social anthropologists have remained preoccupied with the study of their own society, the Indian Hindu society, the caste system, family and the village, and yet at the macro level, the challenges of nation-building? Also why it is so that we have written very little on the oppressive and dehumanizing aspects of

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caste system? Likewise, studies of tribal communities also in most cases remain descriptive in nature. Islam has always been a major faith tradition in south Asia. How come we see very little engagement to the Islamic as being part of the civilizational values of Indian society? While until some time back, no serious attempts were made at studying the Muslim communities of India and their social structure? Many of us are aware of the problems of questions, but we have not yet engaged with them more seriously.

As such we can see that as of today sociology in India is passing through a critical phase. On the one hand, it is still dominated by the changing paradigms of Western sociology and enamored by their methodologies, and is failing to make its own contributions to social theory and conceptual development. On the other, Indian sociologists are gradually becoming more conscious of the persistent inequalities operating at the inter-national as well as intra-national levels. They are trying to understand the processes, the reasons for, and the victims of inequalities. At the operational level, many young sociologists are working to understand the dynamics of the reservation policy (positive discrimination) both in the context of its positive and negative consequences, as also the issues of social inequality in the broader context of social (in)justice. However, a major handicap has been that many of these studies are either descriptive or at best analytical, but in most cases bereft of a sound theoretical foundation, even though efforts are being made to examine issues in the broader context of marketization and globalization (Modi, 2010).

Whatever the challenges of marketization and globalization and the growing clout of business management, the future of sociology in a large country like India, presently witnessing one of the fastest growing economies in the world, is not likely to lose its sheen and importance since there exists a large scope of research to grapple with the problems of poverty, illiteracy, health, hunger, and marginalization of a large section of its population, in a big and appropriate manner (Modi, 2010).

The problems of language, publication and funding continue to persist. Sociologists are either working in regional languages and suffer from paucity of

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vernacular journals or even if they are writing their reports in English there is very little chance of getting them published, particularly in scarce English language journals, let alone foreign ones. As a result what is being done hardly ever comes to the knowledge of the international community and many a good works may never see the light of the day (Modi, 2010).

Among the many challenges that sociology is facing in India, while some pertain to the quality of students – since the brightest or even the brighter of them are not coming to sociology under the current market forces – others pertain to the paucity of facilities and funding due to neglect on the part both of the central and the state governments.

Indian Sociological Society is making every possible effort to strengthen the reach and scope of sociology. The ISS now regularly organizes a North-South dialogue between the eminent Indian and international sociology scholars on the occasion of its conferences. To enhance its reach internationally and to open the doors of dialogue between its members with the international community of sociologists, the ISS has already concluded MOUs with all the BRICS countries, latest being the Chinese Sociological Association.

Taking cognizance of the spread and utility of the information-communication revolution and in order to face the challenges of the contemporary world more effectively and also to bring the ISS at par with ISA, it has already embarked upon a plan to place every possible data at its command on its website. Its membership, as also its newsletter and the journal will shortly be available online as I mentioned earlier. The very fact that ISS is now functioning through its 23 research committees and an ad-hoc group, covering a large variety of areas and themes, speaks volumes about its growing contribution to the development of sociology in India. Yet it is noteworthy that many specialized areas on which the International Sociological Association has RCs or else working groups and thematic groups are still missing in the structure of ISS RCs. Noteworthy among them are futures research, language and society, sociology of sports, sociology of work, sociology of arts, biography and society, and sociology of disasters. Similarly, the ISS is yet to grapple with

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the sociology of local-global relations, and also the body in the social sciences and time-use research. On the other hand, ISS seems to have the lead in the study of such areas as backward and marginalized groups, and tribal communities which mainly face the problems of poverty, inequality and injustice. It is precisely for these reasons that a large number of Indian sociologists present their researches focused on these themes in the respective research committees.

The fast growing NGO and NPO sector is also contributing significantly to the growth and development of applied and action sociology in India. This sector is also trying hard to grapple with and bringing to light the problems of the backward and the marginalized groups in the country. While academic sociology in India is losing ground in terms of providing jobs, the NGO sector has emerged in a big way to help the young sociology entrants since they are considered well equipped and trained in field research and research methodologies.

However, in spite of the fact that there is hardly a theme on which sociologists in India are not working, their role in public life is shrinking particularly in the higher planning bodies of the country, even as these bodies are deliberating on social issues of national consequence. The fraternity of sociologists in India has never been as conscious as today about its failure to contribute universally acceptable theoretical models and about their limited role in the affairs of sociology at international level, in spite of their being the second largest community of sociologists in the world (Modi, 2010). If we have to compete with the world and if we want to carve out our place both at the national as well as at the international level as sociologists, who matter, the only way out is to have passionate engagement with our discipline. This is the call of the hour. I would like to envisage and envision a sociology in India which is deeply concerned with the issues of the common man, the downtrodden, the marginalized and such others as well as their empowerment that could lead to a desired type of society based on egalitarian principles.

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