



Prof. Devanayak Sundaram

**Formerly Professor and Head, Department of Sociology, University of Madras
in Conversation with R. Indira, Former President, Indian Sociological Society
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Devanayak Sundaram: Prof. Devanayak Sundaram one of the senior-most sociologists in India, has been guiding the discipline's trajectory for more than six decades. The Department of Sociology at the University of Madras came into existence with his joining the Department as a Lecturer in 1969. Prior to this he had served as Psychiatric Social Worker in JIPMER, Puducherry , Training Research Fellow at NIMHANS, Bengaluru and Senior Social Scientist in the Institute of Rural Health and Family Planning in Gandhi Gram.

In his illustrious career, Prof. Sundaram guided the establishment of Social Reform Department for Government of Tamil Nadu (1999), submitted a report on behalf of Justice Mohan Commission of the Government of Tamil Nadu(31 January 1998), submitted an evaluation report of the UNICEF programme in a Madras city slum to the Government of Tamil Nadu and organised the WHO South Asian regional seminar on Environment and Housing in (1987). He was a member of Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission, Government of Tamil Nadu from 1993 to 2003 and from 2005 onwards to advise on policy issues of socially excluded groups in Tamil Nadu. He was also a member of ICSSR. He has been on various High-Level committees of UGC, besides being a Convener, Subject Panel in Sociology and Nodal Person of Curriculum Development. Prof. Sundaram established a Working Group on Law and Migration in RC Sociology of Law for International Sociological Association. He continues actively in Law and Society and is annual conferences spread over globally. His programmes abroad included Gothenburg, Sweden July 2010; Durban, South Africa, July 2006, France: September 2006, Australia: July 2004, Mexico: May 2000, Durban, South Africa: October 1997 USA, February–April 1995. France: May 1995, Bielefeld, Germany: July 1994, France: August 1990, Spain: August 1990, Yugoslavia: October 1984 and Canada: September 1977. He was also a consultant in various fields like Water, Road Transport and Health.

Prof. Sundaram superannuated from the Department of Sociology in 1999, but continues to mentor and guide students and departments across the country in their sociological journey.

Q. Could you let us know the way sociology emerged and developed in Indian universities?

The University of Mumbai played a pivotal role in the development of sociology in India, particularly through its Department of Sociology, established in 1919 with Sir Patrick Geddes as its first head. It became a key centre for sociological and anthropological research and training in South Asia. The Department was also known for its pioneering research that included a project to map the ethnographic landscape of India through systematic field studies. The Department trained many leading figures in Indian sociology and anthropology, including Professors Prof. G.S. Ghurye Irawati Karve, M.N. Srinivas and I.P. Desai. Prof. G.S. Ghurye a prominent figure in Indian sociology, considered the 'Father of Indian Sociology', founded the Indian Sociological Society in 1952 and served as the first editor of its journal, 'Sociological Bulletin'.

The Department of Sociology at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (MSU) was established in 1951 with Prof. M.N. Srinivas as its founder head. Over the years, it has grown into a leading department in the region, known for its strong focus on both theoretical and empirical sociological studies.

The Department of Sociology at the University of Delhi has a rich history, evolving from its establishment in 1959 to becoming a leading center for sociological studies in India. Initially part of the Delhi School of Economics, it was recognised as a Centre of Advanced Study in 1968 by the UGC. The Department offers both Masters and Doctoral programmes, and has been instrumental in training numerous scholars who have gone on to make significant contributions to the field. Prof. M.N. Srinivas was its first head and the Department had many distinguished faculty members including Professors A.M. Shah, J.P.S. Uberoi, Andre Beteille and Veena Das.

The Department of Sociology at Lucknow University has a rich history, being one of the earliest centers of teaching and research in sociology in India. The Department of Economics and Sociology, established in 1921, included sociology as a subject, with Prof. Radhakamal Mukerjee as its founding professor. He, along with Professors D.P. Mukerji and D.N. Majumdar, shaped the early direction of the department, emphasising the culture-civilisation comparison and the interdisciplinary relation between economics and sociology. Prof. Radhakamal Mukerjee the first Professor and Head of the Department distinguished himself by his advocacy of subjects such as human ecology, social ecology and regional sociology. Professors D.P. Mukerji and D.N. Majumdar were instrumental in shaping the early curriculum and research focus, fostering a unique "Lucknow School of Thought". The Department focused attention on issues of rural economy, agrarian relations, population problems, and the

conditions of the Indian working class. Many prominent sociologists emerged from the Lucknow University Department of Sociology, including Professors T.N. Madan, Yogendra Singh, and B.R. Chauhan.

The University of Mysore had one of the earliest departments of sociology in the country. An independent Department of Sociology was established in the year 1949 in this university. Prior to this, the sociology course was offered in the Department of Social Philosophy at Maharaja's College. Prof. Brajendranath Seal, the second Vice-chancellor of the University of Mysore and Prof. A. R. Wadia were instrumental in introducing sociology in the curriculum of Social Philosophy at the university. The first undergraduate programme in sociology, in the country was offered by the University of Mysore in 1927-28. A one year's master's programme in sociology by dissertation was introduced in 1949. By 1955 a regular two-year postgraduate course in sociology was being offered in the University of Mysore. Prof. C. Parvathamma, the eminent professor laid a strong foundation in the formative stage of sociology at the University of Mysore, and she remained as Head of the Department till 1987. The Department parented two other departments, the first being the Department of Anthropology in 1974, and second, the Department of Social Work in 1999.

Besides these Universities, the Institute of Agra Studies in Agra with Prof. D P Saxena as the Director, Osmania University in Hyderabad and the University of Pune were the universities in the early 1950's that functioned as prominent centres of teaching and research in sociology. What needs to be chronicled is the contribution of sociology departments and their eminent teachers for the growth of sociological knowledge through conceptualisation of society, study of social processes, conflicts and the dynamics of social change by focusing on issues of nation-building, community development, education, industrialisation, rural transformation and social institutions. For example, the Department of Sociology in the University of Mumbai, under the leadership of Prof. Ghurye, focused on systematic field studies of Indian society, contributing significantly to the understanding of its diverse social and cultural landscape in the production of such knowledge.

Similarly, Prof. M. N. Srinivas gave the concept of Sanskritization, which has been critiqued by various scholars like John Abraham of Delhi who in her writings on Narayana Guru, said that the concept was appropriated by the Narayana Guru movement. Similarly, Prof. C. Parvathamma of the University of Mysore, in her study of Veerashaiva Movement has found that there were efforts at de-Sanskritization in order to climb up the social ladder. Also, in Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian ideology of de-Sanskritization as a tool of social mobility was discussed.

In all these universities, the departments of sociology made significant contributions to sociological knowledge through ethnographic analysis of Indian

society as was advocated in the University of Mumbai. At the same time, there were studies on family, kinship and marriage by Prof. Iravathi Karve and others. Besides these there were village studies by Prof. Andre Beteille and studies on caste, class and social order by Prof. B.R. Chauhan. Thus, in the first fifty years after the emergence of sociology, the departments of sociology across the country laid a firm foundation for the growth of the discipline.

Q. Could you take us through your sociological journey?

My professional journey began in April 1962, when I was selected for the post of Psychiatric Social Worker in Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Education and Research (JIPMER), Puducherry. I was asked to teach sociology for the medical graduates, besides doing research in the field of social epidemiology. With this experience, I chose a Research Training Fellowship at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences in Bengaluru in August 1965. Later in November 1968, I was selected as Senior Social Scientist in the Institute of Rural Health and Family Planning in Gandhi Gram near Madurai, Tamil Nadu. In October 1969, I joined as a Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences, University of Madras.

With the help of Prof. C.A. Perumal of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, I took steps to establish an independent Department of Sociology, and a full-fledged Department of Sociology was established in the University of Madras in the year 1976. I became the founding Professor of Sociology at the University of Madras this year. In 1984, I was also appointed Dean Extension. I retired from the University of Madras in July 1999 as a Senior Professor and Head of the Department of Sociology.

Besides teaching and research, I have been engaged in a number of committees that were set up by the Government of Tamil Nadu to submit reports on issues of social concern. These include Committees to:

- Study caste clashes and their impact on affected and displaced persons and their rehabilitation in southern districts of Tamil Nadu, 1998: Justice, Mohan Commission of the Government of Tamil Nadu.
- Propose the establishment of the Social Reform Department for the Government of Tamil Nadu,
- Evaluate the UNICEF programme in Madras city slums.

A few of my international assignments/visits are listed herewith.

- Sweden: July 2010 to attend the XVI ISA World Congress of Sociology to chair a session on Sociology of Law and Migration.

- Durban, South Africa: July 2006, to attend the XV ISA World Congress of Sociology and to chair a session on Sociology of Migration.
- Malta: September 2006: To chair ISA RC 41 Mid-Congress of Sociology session of RC 41 Sociology of Population.
- France: September 2006, to do field research on French Indian Nationals from a historical perspective.
- Australia: July 2004, XIV World Congress of Sociology; to organize a session on Sociology of Gender and Migration for RC 31.
- Mexico: May 2000, Indian Council of Social Science Research Exchange Fellow on Water Studies.
- South Africa: October 1997 Member, Indian Council of Social Science Research, Government of India Delegation.
- USA: February–April 1995 Fulbright Programme under UGC Indo-American Fellowship Programme to University of California, Santa Barbara.
- France: May 1995, Visiting Professor on Migration, Maison de Science de l’Homme, Paris, France.
- Germany: July 1994, to attend the XIII World Congress of Sociology and organize a session on Sociology of Female Migration, in RC 41.
- France: August 1990, to do Literature Survey and Library Work on Renosant-migrants at the University of AIX-EN-PROVENCE and Maison de l’Homme Science, Paris, France.
- Spain: July 1990 to attend the XII-World Congress in Sociology at Madrid. To present a paper on Sociology of Migration in the RC 41.
- Yugoslavia: October 1984, University Grants Commission, Government of India Cultural Exchange Fellow to visit Yugoslavia.
- Canada: September 1977, as an Asian Co-coordinator of the International workshop on Participatory Research at Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, Toronto.

I have also conducted Semester India Programmes in the University of Madras, and the details are as given below:

- 1992: Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina, on “Culture and Population, Caste and Kinship” for its faculty members.
- 1991: Arkansas State University, Little Rock, Arkansas, U.S.A. on India Social Structure for school Teachers.
- 1985: University of New Mexico, U.S.A on “Women, Family and Social change in Indian Family System” for women’s studies scholars and professionals.
- 1982 - Grambling State University, Louisiana, U.S.A. on “Caste and Social Structure in India” for faculty members of the University.

- 1981 onwards (4 years) Colgate University, U.S.A. on “Indian Society: Continuity and Change” for undergraduate students of Philosophy, Culture and Religion.

As a sociologist-Member of the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission I helped the Commission to:

- Do Ethnographic analysis of caste groups seeking their inclusion in the reservation category.
- Work out a Sub-classification of social groups under the existing Reservation policy: A case of Arunthatiyars, Chakkilyars, and Madigas in Tamil Nadu.
- Provide justification for the socio-economic survey of castes and communities by the Backward Classes Commission.
- Undertake a case study of education and social development of backward classes.
- Study legal responses as social policy of marginalised groups.
- Present the Backward Classes and the pending case of 69% reservation before the Supreme Court of India-‘Caste in Context and Backward Classes’.

I was nominated as Convener of the Subject Panel in Sociology by UGC under the Chairmanship of Prof. Armaity Desai. The members of this Panel were Prof. Abha Avasthi, Prof. Karuna Chanana and Prof, G .Visvanathan. It updated the syllabus for the UGC entrance examination for those intending to pursue research in universities. The UGC also nominated me as a Nodal Person for Curriculum Development in Sociology with Prof Uttam Bhoite, Prof. S.L. Sharma, Prof N. Jayaram, Prof. R. Venkataratnam, Prof A R Momin & others. We submitted the report more as a recommendatory rather than a mandatory measure.

After my retirement from the Department of Sociology in the University of Madras, Dr. R. Indira joined me in the year 2001 to prepare Sociology Lessons for National Institute of Open Schooling, Government of India, New Delhi. Prof G Ram Reddy, the then Chairman of UGC requested Dr. Latha Pillai with her background in Psychological-Measurement and Evaluation to prepare for setting up the *National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)* which was a relatively new idea in India at that point in time.

I was also regularly interacting with principals, teachers and university representatives on the changing dimensions of higher education and the importance of quality reviews. Besides these activities, I was interested in the area of Water Studies. Accordingly, I prepared a report on Integrating Sociology in the Agricultural Universities and submitted it to the USAID aided organization named Water and Power Consultancy (WAPCOS).

I also submitted a paper on Water Governance (Irrigation Management Transfer) Farmers' Participation-an Indian Case Study: A Conceptual Framework (D. Sundaram*(dsundaram@hotmail.com)) This paper was presented in a department seminar of the School of Agricultural Engineering, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada, US, April 1995. Besides these, I also submitted a paper on Water, Technology, Commoditization and Poor--- an Indian Case Study (Paper is a version of the chair's presentation at the Session titled - Water and Agricultural Sustainability-of the Research Committee of 40 of Sociology of Agriculture and Food, at the World Congress of Sociology, International Sociological Association, Brisbane, Australia, July, 2002) Also, I have been nominated to the Government of Tamil Nadu organization named Institute of Water Studies (IWS) to support the research studies submitted by various scholars from different educational organizations and also to evaluate the end results of the submitted reports.

Dr. J Krishnamurthy, another scholar from our department has joined Annamalai University. Besides teaching and research, he was also editor of ISS News Letter

All these give a glimpse of my association with sociology education.

Q. What changes do you envisage in the teaching-learning process to relate sociology to real-life experiences and changes taking place in society-at-large?

‘A teacher can never teach unless he is still learning himself. The teacher who has come to the end of his subject and who has no living traffic with his knowledge but merely repeats his lesson to his students can only lead their minds, he cannot quicken them’. Here lies the knowledge commitment of the teacher’. The tradition of sociology teaching in class rooms of Indian Universities must engage in a quest for a new

sociology, which encourages new forms of social research that are useful for policy making, administration and human service delivery. The contemporary system of education in India has to increase the capacity of the learners as there is an expansion of colleges and universities along with increase in enrolment of students with heterogeneous learning capacities. In this regard education as well as training must change from its conventional paradigm. Students today have increased expectations of knowledge. So, education, in general, has to direct its efforts to prepare individuals with new roles in a changing economic and socio-political system.

In this context, education has to be made relevant to changing paradigms of learners. Education, which was hitherto seeking, testing, and codifying knowledge, is required to be innovative enough to transform theoretical knowledge into practical experience. In this context, the social responsibility of education increases to the extent of bearing and rearing knowledge in a professionalised way beyond classical theoretical knowledge. A teacher's way of knowledge enhancement must be dynamic and processual rather than the textual and received one. This is the crucial factor, i.e. the role of a teacher learning to confront the student for making a commitment to knowledge acquisition in the classroom, This has to be kept in view while planning the courses and reconstructing the course content through curriculum and research endeavours.

The ways and means of classroom teaching of sociology have to enable the learner to think in disciplinary perspectives. Thus, teaching practices should contribute to 'Learning to Think' within disciplinary contexts. In this process, the teacher confronts the students who have differences in learning capacity, language differences, and cultural differences. To face this challenge, teachers need a new kind of knowledge to go beyond curriculum.

In this endeavour, one of the several factors to be considered is the 'Development of Student Thinking'. Classroom activities must build student capacities. Also, writing skills of students must be enhanced. All these can be done through the organization of orientation and refresher courses in Academic Staff Colleges. Since the late 1980s these efforts are already being made. Sociology teachers, like those in any other subject have

to refresh themselves in the contents and themes of sociology. These orientation courses and refresher courses must be made a mandatory requirement.

In this regard the curriculum of the courses in sociology should be framed with a strong integration of course papers with a set of prescribed books with a notion that the contents of the book should form the basis for teaching and drawing students to reflect on the IDEAS of Sociology. Also, it would force the students to read standard books and avoid the tendency to depend upon bazaar notes. It was considered that the curriculum content of each paper should have the problems and issues relevant to Indian Society, and also have the books written by Indian authors who are now fostering the idea of raising the standards of teaching sociology. We may have to work on fostering a TEXT BOOK CULTURE, as the tradition of textbooks-based teaching for Indian academia is a challenge, while the knowledge industry in sociology in India has produced veritable material without a textbook culture.

In this regard, the Curriculum Development Report on sociology teaching in universities prepared by UGC was a recommendatory rather than mandatory commitment. Yet, colleges and universities all over the country did make use of the report as a reference source. The students of sociology who are from a non-sociology subject background do have bridge courses sponsored by UGC, which enable them to get into learning the subject of sociology without any difficulty.

The practice of teaching and research in sociology in India must recognise the shift from the pure codification of knowledge to building professional skills, as a requirement for community and public use. Thus, it is increasingly being recognised that knowledge production is coming under critical scrutiny, particularly from the transformative perspectives of end users—namely, policymakers and governance agents—who assess its value either as a practical tool or as a theoretical pursuit relevant to the foundational thinkers of the discipline. In this context, one cannot ignore the need to transform classrooms of sociology education with the increase that is taking place in the number of first-generation learners. The discipline of sociology must transform fresh knowledge by taking into account all the problems mentioned above. This kind of creation of fresh knowledge on society through a new sociology and new research

practices that are action oriented and powered more by the community and less by the state is the need of the hour.

Q. What in your view are the challenges faced by teachers and learners of sociology in the contemporary context?

There are two issues that need consideration, these being medium of instruction and indigenization of sociology. These are my thoughts on this question.

Medium of Instruction

Teaching Sociology through the medium of the mother tongue leads to a high cognitive load being placed on the learner and less cognitive load being placed on the subject. Further, there can be no two opinions about the feasibility of teaching and research through the medium of one's own language. So, both the teacher and learner have to interact carefully to find ways and means of building the language component of teaching and learning carefully. In this regard, the article titled 'Learning through a Language: The Increased Question of Mother tongue in a Multiethnic Social life' by Gargi Goyan, published in Sociological Bulletin (Volume 74 Issue 2 April 2025), is relevant for those who face the challenge of teaching and learning through the mother tongue.

Indigenizing Sociology

As we are aware, sociology emerged in the West out of the socio-political context of the French Revolution, because of which August Comte and Emile Durkheim discovered the social contents. With the Protestant Revolution, there emerged the rise of individualism. Karl Marx and Max Weber are other sociologists who constructed society by defining human subjects as the product of an external environment and stated that the process of alienation and anomie of individuals- as an expression of a form of marginalisation in society and product of industrial social order. All these are not exclusive. As one sees, these constitutive elements are structured by various conditionalities, which are development or violence/conflict, induced. For example, the concept of industrial social order, the centrality of social classes, the significance of property, and the process of division of labour and class formation in the context of industrialisation are the representational elements towards the moral crisis leading to the manifestation of social issues. From Europe sociology education spread to USA and other parts of the world, including India, from the year 1919.

While this is so, in India, sociology education must give thought to indigenizing Sociology. Teachers can find the socio-political contexts in the various dynasties that have ruled India and the social movements that have taken place in the country at different points in time. To be particular, the *Bhakti* movement in medieval India

emerged as a pathway for secularising the social order. This movement is akin to the Protestant movement in Europe, which conceptualised individualism. Thus, the discourse on contemporary social issues must become part of knowledge and scholarship and is worthy enough to be pondered sociologically.

Q. Why do you think the work done by departments of sociology in universities in south India is yet to be documented as was done in the case of the Bombay School? What are your suggestions for initiating such an effort?

The work done in Departments of Sociology in the south has been documented in a few publications, such as for example, “Doing Sociology in India: Genealogies, Locations and Practices” (Sujata Patel, Oxford University Press, 2011), but university wise details need to be documented. The Indian Sociological Society can organise seminars in the respective universities, region-wise. These could include departments of sociology in the states of the North-East, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and the Union Territory of Puducherry.

6. Can you share with us your thoughts on the role that ISS has played in the development of sociology and its future paths?

The history of Indian Sociological Society, as an association of sociologists goes back to the times when the first bulletin was published in March 1952-1958 with Prof. G. S. Ghurye as editor, followed by Prof. K. M. Kapadia till 1966. Then, the system of ISS having presidents, instead of editors and these presidents being selected through elections came into existence. All these years the ISS has stood out as a knowledge production site in universities, colleges and research institutes. As a professional body, through its annual conferences and issues of ‘Sociological Bulletin’ it has also helped policy makers, and development practitioners.

There is enough funding base for the ISS, but there is scope for increasing the funding base by increasing the Life Membership fees. ISS can also generate funds from state governments, as one-time contribution and getting it invested in Fixed Deposits through which, it can generate funds.

I am sharing below my thoughts on the creation of new Research Committees by ISS. The RC on Sociology of Law was merged with crime and deviance and came to be known as Sociology of Law, Crime and Deviance. I propose that a new Research Committee on **Sociology of Law and Migration** be created. Another RC on **Social Exclusion** which can take up critical studies on the type of exclusion being experienced by different groups across India, from centuries and the protest movements that have countered this exclusion can be set up by ISS. Globally there are a number of refugees and asylum seekers and displaced persons from conflict zones and in different parts of India, especially in Jammu and Kashmir region. I propose that an RC on **Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Displaced Persons be set up**. I also propose a Research Committee on **Disaster Studies**, given the increasing number of disasters happening in every part of the country. Given the power of media, particularly the power of social media a Research Committee on **Film, Culture and Society** can be constituted.

7. What is the future of sociology today with the discipline losing its ground in many institutions in different parts of the country, especially with the entry of private players in the education sector?

Those were the days in Tamil Nadu when students in large numbers, wanted to go for higher education. The then Government of Tamil Nadu under the Ministry of M. G. Ramachandran decided to open Self-Financing colleges in Tamil Nadu. Many groups with their accumulated wealth constituted Trusts to finance these Self-Financing colleges. Most of the colleges started under the Self-Financing scheme were medical or engineering colleges. At a later stage, colleges of Arts and Science were also permitted to start evening colleges and admit students in the self-financing mode, but the demand was only for science or commerce courses with employment potential. There was no demand from students for the sociology course as such.

If sociology courses have to attract students, the content needs to have a professional orientation. There should be a shift from pure codification of knowledge to the development of professional skills, as this is a requirement for the discipline being considered useful for the community. In this context it must be mentioned that UGC came up with a proposal that arts and science courses must also include in their scheme, professional courses, such as commerce for example. UGC even provided financial support for introduction of such courses, It needs, however to be seen how many colleges used this opportunity.
