

Rajasthan Journal of Sociology

ISSN 2249-9334

Volume 12 October 2020



**Peer Reviewed and UGC-CARE List Bilingual Journal of
Rajasthan Sociological Association**

IN MEMORIAM

Persona of the Profound: Professor Yogendra Singh

(2nd November 1932 – 10th May 2020)

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Eminent Sociologist and Emeritus Professor Yogendra Singh was the most unassuming person at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, (JNU) New Delhi. Born in a modest rural zamindar family in village Chaukhara in Basti District of Uttar Pradesh, Professor Singh had long and exemplary academic journey from doing masters and PhD from Lucknow University under the tutelage of the likes of R.K. Mukherjee, D.P. Mukherjee, D.N. Majumdar, Baljit Singh and A.K. Saran to teaching at Institute of Social Science, Agra; Jai Narayan Vyas University, Jodhpur, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur and most prominent of them all – the founding, nurturing and blossoming of CSSS at JNU. Spending about a significant ten years of his academic life in Rajasthan, he took up the challenging task of establishing CSSS at JNU – a centre of sociology which styled a mini India, was free from any specific isms and stressed upon a sociology over European social anthropological strain as well as positivistic methodological flavour. Truly it was much like his syncretic and integrative approach of his celebrated works of *‘Modernization of Indian Tradition and Social Change in India – Crisis and Resilience’*.

I endeavour to paint this word sketch of the inner content of this great personality, the brilliance of whom was revealed to many but in a relative sense, very lucky few. Beside his grand look and mature behaviour, there was no assertion from his side of either being more correct or at the helm of affairs or being the mastermind behind the establishment of the centre. The Chairpersonship was rotational at the Centre and his having taught the next generation of professors, was never highlighted by him as he took it for granted due to his seniority in age and service tenure. But in retrospect I think that at that age and being positioned at the apex institution after tiding over four decades of small and large currents in Sociology and more than three generations of intellectuals, it was a great achievement to remain abreast of all the new trends and challenges, and to remain at the top. It might have entailed rigorous reading, skill upgrading and unshakable focus, to remain there at the top, unchallenged.

Professor K.L. Sharma¹ fondly and rightly remembers, “He was an academician and teacher who was never hungry for power or office. His only interest was in scholarship and academia. He was a thorough gentleman who never spoke ill of anyone.” He was known for his simple and unassuming nature and had a laid back, calm and composed approach, as opposed to the administrative stinginess which surfs up in many of us while dealing with students and their peculiar situations. He had no qualms in accepting the fact that his colleagues were no less in competence and would refer students to other colleagues, saying that they would guide better, or were specialised at

answering a particular query. His class lectures were attended not just by students of the designated batch but also by students from other centres and senior batches. Students across various disciplines found him significant, relevant and important. After the classes, he would slip away quietly and humbly and get engaged in higher order things which have recently been acknowledged as his achievements in the finely detailed intellectual accounts by stalwarts like Professor K.L. Sharma², Professor B.K. Nagla³, Professor Anand Kumar⁴, Professor Dipankar Gupta⁵ and in the blog 'Doing Sociology' run by passionate and sensitive bunch of students of the centre.

I have no words to describe the brilliance of Professor Yogendra Singh as any language will fall short if an attempt is made. He was like a great Banyan tree with many strands of knowledge emerging out of his fertile complex mind, making him impossible to categorise into any kind of isms. His academics was down to earth; practical and day to day; ground finely along with the most serious Sociological Theories, so that what emerged out of it was an amalgamation, a compound, a complex of ideas which were new and absolutely original. Behind his laughing, joyous deliberations, were hidden words of immense wisdom and experience.

He was a great mentor. He never expected his students to carry his legacy forward and never underestimated their capability to understand and assimilate his sophisticated, cultured, academically tamed thinking. He accepted disagreement as reality and would liberate by saying that 'you give it a thought' and then 'do what you think is the best'. With positivity, he would give his best, never concluding that he wasted his time. Professor Anand Kumar⁶ has rightly pointed out that even though he was rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty, he was very modest. He would always focus on a student's positives rather than their negatives.

Each point of observation he made, was researchable. One could fall short in time, energy and resources, but never on the possibility of seeing reason in his lectures. Pursuing his cues, one could hit upon ideas as if brain sparks, revitalizing and rejuvenating it. Listening to him and following his instructions led to change in the way I looked at things; in the way I connected Reality to theory; and in the way I pursued academics in general. His simple living and high thinking lifestyle impressed me deeply. He would appreciate the work of the students and would always have something more to discuss on that. In the most nervous moments, when I was ashamed of how little literature I could generate, he would accept me with my imperfections and shortcomings.

For the members of the fairer sex, he had a very decent and royal approach, never giving extra attention and never putting down as less capable beings. Neither demanding more time, nor making them wait, never doubting their potential and never unnecessarily ignoring them out of superiority complex. Such was the balance in his mind and personality. He was much ahead not only of his time, but also of the times in which we are now living, in which women are treated as objects, belittled, rejected and shown their level. He was grand, cultured and abundant; as serious and meditative as deep dense forest. He could empathise and understand most unacademic needs of a young unestablished struggle laden youngster who was under various pressures from all corners of the society, and would give practical suggestions to come out of the blocks in progress.

He was a humble listener. It is often alleged that people in the teaching profession are poor listeners. On the contrary, he was a patient listener and would think deeply about what was being articulated. Professor Singh, who had pertinent issues, significant ideas and many on-going writings at hand, would meet the people with a free mind, give full attention to their concerns and also things which were not said or half said or said but not meant. He would be far away from misunderstanding a person or situation or a concept. It was during one such conversation, that he suggested that I should try to connect the Phenomenological Theory to my ideas on music. I thought that would be digressing, and would lead to a setback in terms of time. He felt that my raw observations were very close to the phenomenological theories and that would give me some Sociological grounding. Since it was coming from him, I religiously pursued his advice and it entailed a lot of mental effort. It took me two to three months of rigorous reading and deciphering complex structures of language to be able to see what he meant.

He was each time full of endless creative and original ideas. He was much ahead of everyone because of his penetrating focus on his work and he kept it simple. His lifestyle was not complex. There was no other need, no other desire, except the need to keep his intelli-bone active. He was brilliant. He was most update and most modern and forever new. He was the Fountainhead of knowledge. He is an Exemplar, a role model for today's hyper active, and attention deficit generation, who is busy running after APIs and promotional benefits and climbing trains and aeroplanes to get lost in a cloud of madness. The CAS was there at his time also for Professorship at JNU, but he kept on climbing the stairs of success effortlessly. There was no need to match the markers, as he was the marker.

He has mentored three generations of Sociologists all over the country and many are working in other countries too. However, it is worth highlighting that no one carries the burden of entitlement. There is no debt and therefore no need to repay. We can all of us hold our heads high as intellectuals in our own right and in our own style. There is no legacy to be carried forward to the next generation. There was no pressure overtly or covertly to write what he thought; nor was there the pressure to re-write a whole portion nor a lack of appreciation for what had been written and would go as a piece written under his guidance. One need not appreciate the ideas he articulated during the discussions. There was the liberty to write him off as incorrect or outdated and he gave the freedom to disagree, argue, reject, dispose-off his ideas completely. He was not bitter about any person or event or situation. He was open to criticism. It was totally possible with him that you went to him saying I haven't written anything or you went to him with a piece totally different from what was discussed the last time.

He would put you back into perspective humbly, but never reject you outright. Not because he was diplomatic, but because he could appreciate your point and see its relevance in the context of your writing, thought process or your life experiences. He gave all the liberty to take all the time to think and read and to produce absolutely nothing sometimes. He would say that 'that happens' and would tickle your mind with more ideas so that you feel inspired to write. He would unconditionally trust you and never stop signing your progress reports and scholarship bills. Administrative set up and logistics were all taken care of and never a source of anxiety if he was with you. He

would not judge you. That simplified your relationship with him. You had nothing to prove. You could just approach him whenever and be liberated no to go back to him forever.

Such was the fatherly, unconditional ever-smiling, sunshine-like bright warmth of Professor Y. Singh's personality, which glowed equally for everyone he knew and I feel lucky enough to have received it. It never faded in all the sessions, even when I left my PhD halfway. At the loss of such a great mentor I feel helpless and am left with no option but to grieve in silence and to pledge in my heart to take his goodness and distribute among my less fortunate students in Rajasthan.

There is one Y. Singh in each mind, and in this way, there are many Y. Singhs who will be alive forever. Those who are writing, and those who are reading his life sketches with keenness, are equally full of love and gratitude for him, and hold him to be his own. Each memory is locked in an island of imagination having a space-time background. In this plethora of images, the image that I have created is very privately mine and may not coincide with the other images.

So, in all humility, I am presenting this extremely inadequate, sketchy description of a multifaceted multidimensional public figure. In this era where the great centre of learning, the Jawaharlal Nehru University is being deconstructed by petty political interests and in the era of post COVID world, where online universities and platforms of learning have taken over; in this era of video lectures, and you tube channels; in this era of likes, subscribes and shares; I hope my pen has been able to convey the importance of having one to one contact with great mentors, Gurus and pedagogues like Professor Singh, who could shape academicians by their tools of reading, inspiring, discussing, critiquing and mildly pushing students towards pure academics, bringing them back to the books and original Sociological theories and thus shaping so many academic personalities in the present era.

Endnotes

- 1 See KL Sharma, 'Apostle of Sociological Theory – Yogendra Singh (1932-2020) in *EPW*, Vol LV No. 21, p 28-29, 30 May, 2020
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 See BK Nagla, 'Yogendra Singh (1932-2020): The indigenous Sociologist' in *Social Change*. 50(3) p500-502, Sage India, 2020, & 'Ek Utkrisht Samajshastri: Yogendra Singh (1 November 1932-10 May 2020)' *Samajik Vimarsh*. 3(1) p136-140, Sage India, 2020.
- 4 See Anand Kumar's facebook post on Prof. Yogendra Singh, https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2795584240490801&id=331338816915368&_rdr
- 5 See Dipankar Gupta. 'In Yogendra Singh's work, historicity and universality went hand in hand' in *The Indian Express*, May 12 2020.
- 6 See Aranya Shankar, 'Yogendra Singh, founder of JNU's sociology centre, passes away at 87' in *Indian Express* accessed from <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/yogendra-singh-founder-of-jnus-sociology-centre-passes-away-6403729/>