

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Sociology: An Overview

Welcome to the course and this is our first class and the course as you know is titled Indian Society Sociological Perspectives. And as we have mentioned in the introductory video, this course will provide you a very broad overview of the different sociological perspectives that have been used by sociologists to make sense of Indian society. And as you know, Indian society is widely considered as one of the most heterogeneous, complex, and complicated societies in the world with a long history, with a complex set of social identities and communities. So, it is a very, very, very, very huge challenge for sociologists or social scientists in general to make sense of this particular country. So, we are trying to understand how sociology as a discipline with its devoted focus of studying a society in a structured or scientific manner, how did it evolve in Indian society and what were the kind of theoretical trajectories that it adopted to make sense of Indian society. So, I introduced you to the syllabus very, very briefly of course.

But today onwards we are beginning a kind of a more structured analysis about various dimensions of studying Indian society. So as this very title indicates, we are talking about sociological perspectives in the study of Indian society, which explicates that there is no singular perspective within sociology to understand Indian society. Just like there are multiple perspectives within sociology, these perspectives or these different theoretical frameworks have been adopted in India as well to make sense of Indian society. So we will explain all these different approaches, different methodological orientations, different theoretical frameworks that were used from time to time to understand Indian society.

So before getting into the kind of a more substantial discussion about the sociological perspectives adopted to study Indian society, maybe it is important to understand or it is important to spend some time trying to provide some introductory information or introductory kind of lecture about two important disciplines. That is first of all, first is sociology of course and second one is anthropology. Because as you will come to know later in the course of the discussion and the course of this particular classes, the kind of a

relationship between anthropology and sociology in India is very, very complicated. There is hardly any major distinction between these two disciplines and that is how it evolved and developed over a period of time. Of course, there are debates and different opinion about that.

But when we look into the way in which Indian society has been studied by sociologists and anthropologists, we hardly come across a kind of a very watertight, we hardly come across a kind of a very hard distinction between these two disciplines. So, two lectures including this one and the next one, I will devote to give you some brief introduction to these disciplines. So, this particular class we are going to discuss about sociology and the next class we will discuss about anthropology. And some of you might have done courses in sociology already, so you might be familiar with the discipline. But I think that there could be others who may not have had the opportunity to study sociology in a formal manner.

So this is basically aimed at targeting that particular group of audience who would benefit from a kind of a very brief discussion about this discipline of sociology. So, this class we are talking about sociology and the next class we are talking about anthropology and the third class we will talk about the kind of a major theoretical debates or theoretical traditions within sociology and anthropology. So let us begin this section. So, sociology is widely defined by different sociologists. For example, Max Weber defines sociology as the study of social action.

Emil Durkheims defines sociology as the study of social facts. In general, we understand sociology as the study of society. But again, we know that this particular definition is very broad because studying society is a very, very, very broad characterization because every social sciences study society. So, a more, maybe the most appropriate or the most apt definition of sociology, a very general one of course is that it is a systematic study of patterned social relationships, or it is a study of social interactions through empirical investigation and critical analysis. So, this is not attributed to any particular sociologist but this is maybe, this may be one of the most widely accepted definitions because it talks about a systematic study.

A systematic study tells you about how the discipline itself has a kind of an established patterns. It has very specific understandings about its methodological and epistemological foundations. So, it is a systematic study and it studies patterned social relationships. This is an important concept. We look into systematized patterned forms of social relations that get reflected through say social institutions or various social processes.

We are not kind of looking into the individual behavior, we are not looking into kind of a very random kind of social relations but we are looking into more patterned, institutionalized, structured social relations. And in other words, it is known as social interaction, a kind of a more concrete forms of social relationships when people come together and when they begin to interact after some time you will see their relationships will no longer be random. They would have assumed certain kind of a specific characteristic features. And so, if this is about subject matter of what studies, then the second part of this definition is about how it studies. It studies through empirical investigation and critical analysis.

So it is considered to be a science, it uses empirical investigation and what kind of empirical investigation, what kind of tools are used, they are all different, there are so much of discussions and debates about it but this is an important element of sociology. It uses empirical investigation, and it uses critical analysis. And of course, we say that it has a long past but a short history. And this again is a very interesting characterization of the discipline because our inquisitiveness about understanding one's own society is a very long one. Every civilization, every old civilization had its own knowledge systems about that particular society.

So curiosity to understand one's own society, to write and to philosophize about one's own society has a very long past. But it has a very short history in the sense sociology as a discipline, as a modern professional discipline has a very short history that we know it is starting from the 19th and 20th century. So, we understand sociology as a modern science, modern social science. It emerged with a number of other disciplines during the period of modernity. It emerged as a modern social science in the 19th and century Europe.

So Europe is seen as the birthplace of sociology but again there are interesting discussions and debates. There are scholars who argue that you had something similar to sociology being practiced in different societies. Scholars talk about an Islamic scholar like Ibn Khaldun who have some very very fascinating arguments or theorizations about society. So there are arguments that Ibn Khaldun should be seen as the founder of sociology but that debate is ongoing. But a more systematic inception and gradual development of sociology happened in Europe from the 18th, maybe second later part of 18th century and 19th and 20th century in Europe.

And the most important aspect when you try to locate the emergence of sociology in Europe is that the society emerges as an object of study. This is a very very important argument. While human beings have been living in society, they are part of a society from say time immemorial ever since they came into this, or when they started living as a

society. But the idea that society can be studied in an objective manner or society needs to be studied, society deserves to be studied is a very very more recent development. That again has a connection with the whole kind of new understandings about how we ought to live, how we ought to live, how our society social life or personal life have to be ordered.

Is it ordered on the basis of certain divine interventions? Is it has to be a kind of ruled specifically as per the directions of certain superhuman power or do we have the right to shape our social life the way we want. So, I think we will when we discuss this second part, it becomes more clear. So, when you think that the society in which you live, it needs to be studied as a separate entity because it can undergo so much of transformations, it can take different shapes. It is a human beings who define the course of that particular society. So that is a very important point of realization that human beings can be the masters of their own society, their own social change, their own destiny and in that sense it needs to be studied more critically basically to understand how it functions.

And this is a markedly different understanding of human life in general and human society or in particular which has been seen as something that is kind of a pre-decided by certain say supernatural forces or pre-decided by religion, pre-decided by certain political authority so in which human beings have no freedom to live or human beings are supposed to live in a pre-decided manner. And why these discussions are important and why do we say that there is society emerged as an object of study during this particular period is because a host of factors, a host of processes or host of incidents or host of dynamics happened in Europe during this particular time from say 16th, 17th century until 20th century in Europe and due to a host of reasons including the industrial revolution, French revolution, scientific revolution and so on, colonialism, all these things. So, if you look into the history of Europe during this particular time, you understand that that is a period widely seen as the emergence of modernity and emergence of modernity it encompasses in a wide variety of changes, of course technological changes but also changes in the economy, changes in political ideas, changes in human relationships, changes in certain understandings about human freedom. So, a sum total of all these structural and cultural changes are subsumed under this term called as emergence of modernity. So that is why sociology is seen as a science of modernity.

Sociology is of a recent history because sociology emerged at a particular historical juncture. It emerged at a particular historical juncture and that juncture is characterized by what we see it as the enlightenment period in Europe. Of course, sociology is a product of that and the rise of modernity in Europe and the spread of this modernity to

across the globe through the process of globalization. I am not going into the details of each of these, that is industrial revolution, French revolution, scientific revolutions etc. because we do not have the time for that.

And I have already given a course titled classical sociological theories. That is again a 12-week course on focusing exclusively on classical sociological theories in which I have elaborately explained each of these points, the kind of historical context in which sociology emerged and important founding fathers of the discipline, their arguments. It is a very exhaustive analysis about classical sociological theories and those who are interested can watch those videos. Now, the word sociology or sociologie, it is a French word, is derived from the Latin word socius, means companion/ society and the Greek word logos, means knowledge and science. So, if you look into the etymology of the word, it is the science of society or it is the knowledge of society.

So again I am not going into the details, but sociology emerged as a science. Sociology was fashioned after natural and physical sciences because they wanted sociology to be a positive science and they wanted sociology to be modelled after any modern science that is studying the natural or physical phenomena. So, and then there was systematic development and institutionalization of sociology in Europe, especially in France and Germany. And these two are the most important places in which sociology emerged and developed as a systematic and professional discipline. The founding father of sociology, which kind of seen as maybe the father of sociology is a very vague usage, but Auguste Comte was a French.

And so these are the two places, Germany, and France and to a lesser extent England. These are the three major places in which sociology emerged as a discipline. So, the first formal department of sociology in the world was established at the University of Chicago in 1892 and the American Journal of Sociology was founded shortly thereafter in 1895. This is just a kind of a glimpse of the professional development of sociology. As you know the establishment of a department and the establishment of a journal, a dedicated journal, these are very important indications of the professionalization of a discipline.

So in the case of sociology, it happened during this particular time in 1892 and 1895. Now who are the most important people contributed for the, for laying the foundations of discipline? And again, you know that every social science or every discipline for that matter must have a series of important scholars who lay the foundations or those who are kind of contributed significantly for shaping the initial years of a discipline. A discipline then evolves into different directions and then get transformed in various forms. But this foundation is something important because that is the time when the discipline is given a kind of a unique foundation, a unique epistemological basis, a kind of a clarity about its

subject matter, a kind of a clarity about its methodological orientation. So, if you look into that of classical sociological thinkers, those who played important role or enormous role in founding the discipline, it is again a huge list.

You have Montesquieu, you have Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Wilfrid Pareto, George Simmel, Ferdinand Tonnies and lot of others. Again, we are not going into the details because it will take lot of time. Quite a lot of earlier scholars for example, Montesquieu and another person by name Saint Simon. These were not kind of sociologists per se because there was no sociology then, but they were widely seen as social philosophers. Those who kind of combined sociology with philosophy and Auguste Comte, maybe Auguste Comte as I mentioned is widely seen as the father of the discipline and Herbert Spencer and maybe these three people Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber are seen as the most important classical thinkers and Durkheim was a sociologist, Max Weber was a sociologist, but Karl Marx was much more than a sociologist.

And as you know he was an economist, he was a philosopher, he was a historian, he was a political activist, he was a political scientist and also he was a sociologist. So, these are the three important scholars, three important founding fathers of discipline, Durkheim, Marx and Weber and any classical sociological theory will devote substantial amount of time in trying to understand their arguments of these three important scholars. And of course, then you have Pareto, Simmel and Tonnies and others who are kind of considered to be important people, but not as subsensible as that of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber. And when you look into the development of sociology, it emerged as a positivist science. So, what is positivism? Positivism is a kind of a, is a discipline, is an orientation that is modeled after the natural science.

So the people especially Auguste Comte, he believed that sociology must be science and in his scheme of things he believed that sociology would be even superior to physics. Initially he called sociology as a social physics because they believed that this scientific methodology, scientific methodology of observation, classification, collection of data, experimentation, validation, these are the basic scientific method, these are the most superior methods of knowledge production. So, they basically understood sociology as a positivist science, a science just like how a physicist or a biologist understands their subject matter, a sociologist also understands his or her subject matter. So, it emerged as a positivist science, it claimed to be a science, but later, especially with the arrival of Max Weber, it was argued or it was kind of established that this positivism is not a virtue in itself because human society is much more complicated and complex than a kind of natural world or physical world and a positivist methodology will be incapable of understanding the complexity of society in its entirety. So, there is a kind of an anti-

positivist and phenomenological turn in the subsequent sociological theorization.

Again I am not going into that, but this is an anti-positivist turn where the theory as well as the methodology does not believe in using the so called scientific or positivist understanding that there is an objective reality out there, but rather it believes in a kind of a constructivist knowledge. It talks about how human beings construct knowledge about social reality. So, this phenomenological turn in sociology tries to understand how human beings construct their own understandings about reality and how a discipline like sociology must develop its own methodologies basically to understand that in that, understand this complexity. So the subsequent development of sociology will demonstrate that you see these two strands of thought that is positivist as well as anti-positivist, it continues, it goes hand in hand and there are the debates about the nature of sociology is kind of unending. It continues to be having divergent methodological foundations.

And when you look into the important theoretical traditions, you will find that there are three major schools of thought or three major theoretical traditions. One is a structural functionalism; second one is conflict of Marxian theory and third one is symbolic interactionism. I am not going into the details because that will take, that requires quite a lot of time and effort to explain each one of them. But basically, structural functionalism emerged from the writings of say Spencer and Durkheim and which try to understand the social structure of a society and how a particular social structure contributes for a particular kind of functioning of the society or in other words they try to understand what holds the society together or in other words how does the society attain the kind of equilibrium or the kind of stability. So, what holds the society together, how different parts of the society interact with each other and then provides a kind of a coherence to that society.

So this was a kind of a larger concern or larger orientation of structural functionalist. And the second one is conflict or Marxian theory as many of you know is derived from Marxian understanding about society and social change and according to Marx, conflict is an integral part of human society. Unlike structural functionalist who say look down upon social conflict, Marx and Marxist really argue that conflict is an integral part of society. It is an important element in ensuring social change. So this particular theoretical orientation that is conflict and Marxian theory try to understand, especially Marxian theory try to understand the kind of a class divisions within society and how these divisions will lead to kind of a conflict within society and how that conflict leads to better or more complex forms of society.

And the third one symbolic interactionism is kind of is a derivative of this

phenomenological school which tries to understand how this social, the kind of a, how human beings interact with each other and different perspectives about social realities constructed. For example, theories like ethno-meteorology or other things, ethno-meteorology and similar kind of theoretical arguments come under larger symbolic interactionism. It tries to understand how human beings use symbols and language and other things basically to create a kind of a shared inter-subjectivity. How interaction is possible, how we all share a society, the society is made possible through the realization of an inter-subjectivity. We all inhabit a space what is called as inter-subjectivity and it tries to understand that how we create, we construct certain ideas of normalcy, certain ideas of being, society being normal.

So, it looks into that, it is a kind of a more micro level analysis compared to that of conflict and structural functionalist theories. Now, if you look into the history of sociology, you see there is a decline of structural functionalism since 1960s and the growth of multiple theoretical perspectives including structuralism and post-structural theories. So, again this again is a very fascinating area to look into the trajectory of the evolution of sociological theories. You see certain theories will assume prominence during certain time and after some time they will lose its significance and something else will come in. And this is a result of a host of other socio-political and cultural factors in defining what theory attains prominence at what time.

So in general, structural functionalism was very powerful during 40s, 50s, 60s and by late 60s it started losing its significance because it could not really effectively explain the reasons of social change and conflict and a host of other things came into picture. So then by 70s structuralism became important and now what we are in is kind of a very broad and vague categorization called as a post-structural theories or post-modern theories. Again, it is an area in itself I am not going into that. And a wide variety of sociologies also influenced by a wide variety of intellectual currents including feminism, post-colonialism, orientalism, post-structuralism and so on. Again, I am not going into the elaborate discussions on each of these things.

Feminism, as you know, is the whole question of concerns about gender and how gender became a very powerful lens to look into society. So, sociology had to respond to the kind of a feminist critic of some of the very important critic of leveled against its methodological orientations, certain theoretical assumptions. So, sociology began to incorporate feminist frameworks into its fold. Then post-colonialism as a important theoretical strand looking into the influence of colonialism over the post-colonial societies and how this colonial influence linger on in these societies. And orientalism we will discuss in detail, kind of championed by the scholar Edward Said, how a kind of an orientalist argument that the West have created knowledge about the non-West or the

East basically to create a kind of a particular self for themselves.

It is a complicated argument, we will discuss that. And post-structuralism, so a series of wide variety of intellectual currents have influenced sociology. So just like any other discipline, sociology as well gets shaped and reshaped by other social, other kinds of intellectual currents. And more recently, the kind of emergence of globalization, say roughly maybe from 1980s onwards is another very important structural and cultural factor that reshapes sociology, formulation of sociology, both the theoretical as well as methodological challenges. Because globalization challenges quite a lot of taken for granted categories and assumptions of a discipline like sociology. So, there are very fascinating theorizations about how social theories emerge or how social theories try to negotiate with the challenges of globalization.

Incidentally, let me also tell you that I have another given another NPTEL lecture, a series NPTEL course titled Globalization Theoretical Perspectives. So that provides a kind of more or less exhaustive analysis about sociological theories on globalization. And those who are interested can watch that. So sociological analysis of virtually every field of human society. So, if you look into the discipline, there are so many different sub-fields and so many different specializations and there is hardly any dimension of human society that is not examined by this particular discipline.

It is so exhaustive if you look into the scope of the discipline. For example, the major themes include, stratification, social classes, social mobility, religion, secularization, power, law, sexuality, gender, caste, race, economy, consumption, globalization, and you name it, you will have certain kind of sociological theorizations about it. Because what I mentioned here are some of the important facets of this society in which we live, and sociology has its own perspectives and theories dealing with each of them. So, in that sense, the scope of sociology is very, very expansive.

It is very expansive. It tries to understand every aspect of the kind of a pattern of social interactions. And methodological formulations are in consonant with the specific theoretical frameworks, connections between ontology, epistemology, research methodology and research methods. This is another very important factor that we need to keep in mind. While sociology has a, in general has a kind of a particular epistemological orientation and a set of methodological frameworks and methods. Within this discipline, there are again further subdivisions of ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods.

So, the kind of connections are very important because you are, the method that you use to collect data for your research must originate or must have a kind of an organic

connection with your, with a kind of a particular methodology, which must be derived from a particular epistemology, which must have a kind of a correspondence with a kind of a larger, a kind of a specific form of ontology. So, as you know, ontology is the concern about what is. It is a question about reality. For example, a positivist kind of framework will have a particular ontological understanding about what reality is.

It would assume that a given reality is out there. And from that kind of an ontological understanding follows a kind of a particular epistemology. So, in order to study something like that as an external objective reality out there, how do you shape, what are the kind of knowledge systems of your discipline? That is what the epistemology looks into. And the methodology tries to understand how do you capture that as a discipline, how do you capture that particular reality. And methods are the kind of a specific tools that would, that will have a very specific correspondence with your methodological orientation. So there has to be a kind of an organic link between your ontological, epistemological, methodological and methodological concerns to finally arrive at your research methods.

So, quantitative as well as qualitative methods. For example, survey analysis of data sets, interview schedule, focus group interviews, participant and non-participant observation, textual and content analysis, discourse analysis, network analysis, internet ethnography and so on. A wide variety of methods which are kind of broadly divided into qualitative as well as quantitative. Again, this division is problematic in many cases. But these are some of the important tools that are used in social research, starting with the large-scale surveys to ethnographic participant observation where a scholar spends months together in a particular social setting, live there and then try to make sense of that society.

And it is widely used by a host of people. Of course, it is a mainstream of academics, politicians use it, bureaucrats use it, policymakers use it, corporates use it, business houses use it. So, in that sense, sociology and sociological understanding, sociological theorizations are widely used by a wide set of people. So that is why the discipline continue to be relevant, continue to be vibrant and continue to be more important and significant in the changing social settings. So that is all for this particular course. As I mentioned, this was aimed at only providing a very broad and brief overview of the discipline.

This I took up this particular initiative with the impression that there could be somebody who is watching this lecture, who is not kind of familiar with the discipline at all. So, this is basically aimed at providing a very brief introduction to those audience. So, we

will close the class here and we will move to the next one in which I will discuss about social anthropology. Thank you.