

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
Dr. Santhosh R
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras
Week-04
Lecture-15

Indological Approach

Welcome back to the class. In this class, we are beginning a series of discussions on different schools of thought or different theoretical perspectives that have been influential in the history of Indian sociology. And as we have mentioned several times in the previous classes, while sociology and anthropology provides a very unique perspective to understand society, within this sociological and anthropological perspectives, there are so many different theoretical orientations informed and fashioned by different epistemological ontological and methodological orientations of theoretical dispositions within these theoretical frameworks. And that is a story of sociology or anthropology in every country. And India is also no exception to this story because Indian sociology and anthropology has been shaped very specifically due to a host of historical and cultural and political reasons. So, it is very important to understand what were the important schools of thought or important perspectives or important frameworks adopted within Indian sociological tradition to make sense of India, one of the most complicated and heterogeneous societies in the world.

So, in the previous class, we had a, I think, slightly lengthy discussion about the inception and growth of sociology as an institutionalized discipline. We discussed couple of two essays, trying to understand the connection between Indian anthropology, Indian sociology and colonial administration. And we looked at the institutionalization of Indian sociology, the establishment of Bombay University and then its subsequent development. So, in this class, we are starting with the Indological approach and this will be followed by other important approaches like, you know, Marxian perspective, structural functionalism, structuralist approach and a host.

So, as you know, the discussion from here onwards, the moment we try to, the chapter from where we try to understand the different theoretical approach, it constitutes the most important primary focus of this particular course, understanding, you know, Indian society through different divergent theoretical perspectives. So, Indological approach and we again, I hope you remember that we had a, we had some discussions, especially we elaborately discussed Ronald Indens take on Indology and Orientalism. So, we know the kind of, we are kind of familiar with the larger critic provided by some of the scholars

starting with Edward Said and later developed by, you know, Edward, by Ronald Inden, who tried to problematize the kind of a, you know, western understanding about Indian society and how that created a kind of a particular knowledge and what was the intention behind it, how did they construct a kind of a particular knowledge. And, but it is also important to note that this Indological approach or an approach that, you know, took Indian scriptures and old literature as the primary source of information was not only confined to some of the Orientalist scholars or some of the scholars from Germany or Britain, but it was also heavily influenced Indian scholars and

G. S. Ghurye considered to be the one of the important pioneers or even many people even call him as a father of Indian sociology, has heavily influenced by Indological approach, which we will discuss in the coming class. So, what does, you know, Indological approach, what does it mean? What are its orientations? What are its theoretical premises? What are its, what are its fundamental assumptions? And what were the kind of promises that it offered? And what were the kind of limitations of this particular approach? These are the issues; these are the themes that we are going to discuss in this class. So, one of the very important presumptions of Indological approach is Indian society as an ancient living civilization with rich culture and unique history. So, this is again, I think, I do not need to elaborate that it was, it was, it was widely or it is widely understood that Indian society is one of the oldest civilizations ever, you know, it is not something that is disappeared, but still alive and it is very much live living civilization with a rich culture and unique history. And we have also come to know that the European approach towards India or European attitude towards India was very different from their attitude towards other people whom they considered as primitive or kind of, you know, tribal because we had a very, very thriving civilization, thriving culture, much, much older to many of the European civilization, much, much rich in terms of, you know, its, its literary, scientific or, or mathematical other kind of knowledge basis.

So, so, so this Indological approach understands Indian civilization, Indian society as a living civilization with a rich culture and unique history. And also, it is, since it was this cultural, this civilization was of a very high, you know, standard or it had reached very high levels of, of, of, you know, progress, there is extensive written material available reflecting India's past going back to millennia. So, if you look into the ancient scriptures, if you look into the kind of literature in the forms of, you know, Vedic texts or Upanishads or other, you know, scriptures that are available, they go back to millennia, they back to couple of thousands of years and they provide very important insights. And this includes and this also includes travelogues and religious philosophical treatise.

So, as we, as we know that there have been very, you know, extensive travelogues

available from other scholars, from other, other people who travelled across India through, you know, through Chinese travelers or, or Arabian travelers and, or European travelers. But more importantly, we have a host of religious and philosophical treatise texts are available. So, Indological perspective is founded on the assumption that these texts and scriptures provide important insights into the history and cultural essence of Indian society as there is a continuity of the civilization. So, this is a very, very, very fundamental argument that there is an uninterrupted continuity. There is an uninterrupted continuity within Indian society or Indian society constitutes an Indian civilization.

And this Indian civilization has certain essence and, and, and hence Indian society has certain essence and this continuity which started off say thousands, maybe some 3000 or 4000 years ago or many people claim it goes even further. So, there is a continuity of that. So, the essential features of Indian society, the essence of Indian society remain unchanged. So, in order to understand what are these, what is the essence of Indian society, the easiest thing is to catch hold of or to get access to these, you know, texts or these scriptures that are written thousands of years ago and they, they present you with the kind of important ideas, important values, important ethics or, or the essence of Indian civilization that continue even today. So, this is the kind of an argument, very, very important presumption that characterizes Indological approach.

Indology argues that India is one, emphasizes the presence of a traditional Sanskritic and higher civilization that demonstrate its unity. Again, this is the same idea. They consider India as one and the India that, you know, as we see today with its geographical boundary, as you know, it is a very, very modern phenomenon, but they would expand its larger into kind of an Indian peninsula stretching from Afghanistan into Sri Lanka or, or, or, yeah. So, that kind of a much more expansive geographical, you know, space is seen as Indian civilization and they consider it as one and emphasize the presence of a traditional Sanskritic higher civilization that demonstrates its unity. So, most of the Indological texts or Indological scholars, you know, revolve their interest around the Sanskrit text and Sanskrit and, and, and, you know, especially the Brahmins as a caste and, and the Sanskrit was closely associated with them.

So, they are supposedly seen as the, as the founding heads or they are seen as the resource people, as, or, or as the champions of, of this higher civilization. India had a glorious past and to understand that one must go back to the sacred books that were written during the ancient times. Both the philosophical and cultural traditions of India are rooted in these texts. These ancient books reveal the real ideas of Indian culture and society. One must understand these books to chart out the future development of India.

So, this is again an argument which has become very popular now with the recent, you

know, transformation in the political scenario in India. You know, there are very powerful arguments being made or there are very important decisions are being made to look into Indian past, Indian legacy and then to derive knowledge from that there and then to apply that into the Indian society so that India, India, you know, progresses much more, much more rigorously. So, this idea is something very essential to Indological understanding as well. So, this understanding of the past is not only an attempt to understand how it was, just not only for the sake of intellectual curiosity, but they believed that those ideas and insights can be used in the present society. Those ideas and insights can be used for a, for charting out a better course of future for the country because they consider it as a continuity.

And they think that some of these are, some of these really represent some eternal wisdom, eternal wisdom, important pieces of wisdom and information and insights, theoretical insights which are, you know, which can withstand the challenges of time. Indologists use ancient history, epics, religious manuscripts and texts, etc. in the study of Indian social institutions. So, one of the most important focal point of these Indological studies were the Indian social institutions. And among them, you know, the most important thing was caste, then you had religion, then you had family, then you had village system.

So, these are considered to be the typical Indian institutions, social institutions which hold the society together. And these scriptures were assumed to be having, you know, provided a very important theoretical basis, a kind of a, yeah, theoretical basis to basically understand how these Indian institutions work. The text basically included the classical ancient literature of ancient Indian society, such as Vedas, Puranas, Manusmriti, Ramayana, Mahabharata and others. You know the kind of things. So, this is also called as the textual view or textual perspective of social phenomena as it depended upon the text.

So, another term that is used is book view. Okay? So, we will come back to this particular topic when, in the coming classes we will have a, you know, chapter where we discuss M.N.Srinivas extensively. So, there are sections in his work where he criticizes this book view and then, you know, argues for something called as this field view. We will discuss that in detail later in the coming classes. But here it is important to note that this Indological approach is seen as textual view because it understands the ancient text or scriptures as the fundamental source and it believes that by reading this text, by understanding this text, a social scientist or a historian derives or he is able to gather insights about Indian society and that is the most important, most profitable way of conducting study about Indian society. So, these are the important assumptions. Now, if you go back into the history, when did it start and who were the people who were

important? It goes back to the establishment of Asiatic society of Bengal in 1787 by William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke and who started a journal called as Asiatic Research.

The journal was devoted to anthropological and Indological interest such as the study of Sanskrit, comparative jurisprudence, comparative religion, etc. So, this establishment of this institute, this Asiatic society of India is considered to be a landmark because it is much earlier 1787, much earlier in the colonial period and this center and the subsequent interest of scholars into the study of Sanskrit and the way in which they made connections between European language family and then Sanskrit and the way they made sense of the composition of Indian civilization by talking about Aryan invasion. All these things provided very important foundation for the emergence of Indological approach. The members of Asiatic society of Bengal were the first European scholars to recognize the common ancestry of Sanskrit with Greek, Latin and other European languages. William Jones work generated a renewed interest among the Indian people about their own rich national and literary heritage.

So, this is again something very interesting, as we have seen that why the kind of very distinct connection that the Sanskrit language has with many of the European languages including Greek and Europe and Latin. How that spurred an interest among many Europeans because they see that a completely different ancient language called as Sanskrit being spoken in South Asia, in India and the people live very, very differently. So, it actually opened up quite a lot of inquisitive studies about the transmission of culture, transmission of language, movement of people, migration of people, the emergence of new civilization in India and how their ethos and ideas are very different. So, it actually was one of the most hotly discussed and debated topic during that particular time. The Indological writings dealing with the Indian philosophy, art and culture are reflected in the works of Indian scholars like A.K. Kumaraswamy, Radhakamal Mukherjee, D.P. Mukherjee, G.S. Ghurye, Louis Dumont and others.

Airavathi Karvey and K.M. Kapadia also followed this trend. So, these are the names of some of the important Indian scholars who were largely impressed and influenced by this intellectual movement, and it includes Kumaraswamy, Radhakamal Mukherjee, D.P. Mukherjee, G.S. Ghurye. Our next lecture is on G.S. Ghurye and then you see how Ghurye really represented a more complicated, he was not a typical Indologist. So, how he represented a kind of a more complicated picture about you know, Indian society. And Louis Dumont, Louis Dumont, a French sociologist, which whom we will have a very detailed discussion, we will see that how his argument is something very important.

The Orientalist took textual view of India offering a picture of its society as being static,

timeless and spaceless. In this view of the Indian society, there was no regional variation and no questioning of the relationship between perspective, normative statement derived from the text and the actual behavior of groups. So, now if you come into the kind of, maybe the critical points or the kind of the characteristic features of Indological text, many of their assumptions are quite problematic. Many of the basic foundational assumptions on which Indological perspective is built are quite problematic, some of them are here. And the Orientalist took a textual view of India offering a picture of its society as being static, timeless and spaceless.

So, their understanding of Indian society was that it is a society, one of the older civilizations, still living civilization. And so, they would consider the past and the present as a continuum, as a kind of a being static, nothing much has changed. The eternal essence of Indian civilization is presented as something unchangeable or something that is spaceless, something that is timeless, being static. And in this view of Indian society, there is no regional variation and no questioning of the relationship between perspectives. So, this particular Indological approach really provides, it hardly provides or it is more or less incapable of looking into the vast diversity within Indian society, in terms of the geographical orientations, in terms of the population growth, population categories, in terms of its cultural variations, but rather it puts forward a story of a homogenous Indian society.

And also, many times they were unable to differentiate between a normative statement and a kind of a actual behavior of people. This is a very, very important argument. For example, you come across a particular statement in one of the texts. Say for example, one of the most widely discussed and debated topics text is Manusmriti. Manusmriti has a very infamous lines or verse which talks about the freedom of women, which says that, which ends with the argument that, “Naa sthri Swathanthryam arhathi”, “pitha rakshati kaumare, putro rakshati youvane, bhartro rakshati vardhakye, naasthri swadhanthriyam arhathi”.

That is a full text. So, it says that the women are taken care by their fathers in their tender ages and then by husband in their youthful ages and by sons in their elderly period and naasthri swadhandhram akhari. Now, this particular statement in Manusmriti and we are not very sure whether this particular statement really reflects a normative statement, which says that, this is how women should be, women should not be given any freedom or was it kind of reflecting the then existed scenario or was it again a positive statement or was it again if a statement, a factual statement, a statement that was there to describe the existing situation. So, Indologists are ill-equipped to make this distinction. Indologists are to a large extent unable to make this distinction to see whether they were value loaded or very morally loaded normative statements or were they kind of simple

description of the actual behavior of people. And again, if you come back to Dumont and Pocock, they say in principle sociology of India lies at the point of confluence of sociology and Indology.

This point we will come back later. So, another point of criticism is that the Orientalists tended to be better educated and from the upper class of Great Britain, same as William Johns were trained as scholars before their arrival in India, sorry and this is a mistake, it should be Indian. And they wanted to treat Sanskrit and Persian learning with the same method and respect as one would treat European learning. So, the whole Bernard Cohn's argument, the whole argument that this particular study was carried out by a particular class of people, particular class of people and they were from the upper classes of Great Britain and also when it comes to the Indian society, they were also the upper classes of Indian society that is mostly from the Brahmin class because Brahmins were the most learned group, most of the scholars. So, we know that larger story about how scholarship for a long time was concentrated in the hands of the elite sections in Indian society and Brahmins were seen as the, as a group of caste who have a kind of a natural inclination for knowledge gathering and then being expertise, scholarship in different fields of time. And then in the Indological perspective, the knowledge becomes fixed with categories of caste, race, tribe, ritual, custom, law, political institutions, occupations having a timeless essence especially in text of Hinduism written in tact in Sanskrit, the same point that we discussed.

And little attention is paid to the actual lived reality of people in the society. So, keep in mind again that sociology began to develop in India and unlike say William Jones who came from Europe and who wanted to study India or Max Muller who came from Germany and wanted to study India, the people in India, the people, the scholars in India, they were following you know Indology not as part of this colonial project of understanding a society but they were following Indology as a part of a sociological tradition. But still they were heavily influenced by the centrality of this ancient text and very less attention was given to understand how the lived reality, how people actually live in a society. So, this is a very interesting set of debate because in every religion you have the kind of an ideal typical prescriptions about how to live. Every religions tell you that how humans must live, what are the kind of ethical and moral principles that you must follow.

So, if you read a religious scriptures you get an impression that everybody would lead like that and that is how it becomes a kind of a perfectly moral society. But it is a common sensical knowledge that people do not live accordingly. People lead a more complicated life; nobody follows just like a robot what is written in their religious scriptures. So, in that contradiction or in that disjunction is what interests sociologists.

But Indology as a perspective hardly has any opportunity to look at it.

And it also failed to take into consideration the role of Islamic influence in reshaping Indian society and the role of western colonialism. And this is another thing because they were dismissive of the role of Islamic influence or they were of the very strong opinion that Indian society, Indian civilization is exclusively Hindu. And Islamic influence came through invasion, Islamic influence was a foreign influence and they would tend to or they would still want to understand Indian society in a kind of a so-called uncontaminated way, not contaminated by external influences. And this itself is a very problematic statement because if you want to understand contemporary Indian society you will have to look at the actual historical processes through which different influences came to Indian society. And if you were to go by this Aryan invasion theory or their own argument you see that how external influences came.

So, this idea that a particular civilization was cocooned in a geographical area, it was excluded from any other external influences and it thrived on its own, on the basis of its own resources and ideas. It is a very, very problematic idea. So, Indological perspective per se was least interested or incapable or both of looking into the Islamic influence of reshaping the society and the role of western colonialism. They are often criticized as a perspective propounded by upper-caste Brahmins as it suited their sense of superiority and justified their world view. Again, understandably because most of the people who worked in Indology from India were Brahmins and they were reading the text and scriptures written by the Brahmins and this text had a circulation mostly among Brahmins, except maybe these epics and other things which had taken very, very vernacular forms.

But most of the Smritis and other texts, Vedas and other things were confined within the upper sections of Indian society. So, it was criticized for being very exclusivist in its nature, very closed group of discourse that a group of upper-caste Brahmins creating about a set of texts that had currency in their own sections. And again, the idea that, idea of a singular civilization essence of Indian society is problematic. As we know that, to look for a core you know essence of Indian society is heavily problematic and less attention to more localized societies, localized societies who are at the bottom of social stratification in India. And a major constraint or a major issue regarding Indological approach is that, it is incapable of explaining how there are huge sections of Indian population who are outside this typical perspective that they put forward about Indian society.

Because the caste who are considered to be lower in the social hierarchy, the tribes who are considered outside the fold of Hindu religion. So, how do they make sense of this

group remained a kind of an unresolved question. But we will continue the class, but this important insight or this important practice which was started with colonial scholars which became very popular during 1920s, 30s, 40s. It then, it had to retreat or it lost the significance with the rise of structural functionalism. But it makes a comeback in the 60s with the work of Louis Dumont.

That is a very, very fascinating set of arguments which we will discuss in the coming class. So, let us stop here, see you in the coming class. Thank you.