

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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D. N. Majumdar

Welcome back to the class. In this class, we are going to discuss another very important pioneer of Indian sociology known as Professor D. N. Majumdar, born in 1903 and passed away in 1960 and was one among the three very important and influential sociologists of the Lucknow School.

And let me also make it clear that though we are discussing D. N. Majumdar, after discussing G. S. Ghurye and Iravati Karve, he does not really belong to the typical Indological study perspective. And we also mentioned the similar point in the last class when we discussed about Ramakrishna Mukherjee as well. The reason why I am discussing all these people together, maybe except D.P. Mukherjee whom I am going to discuss in the coming week is because they are all contemporaries and then they all are considered to be important people who founded one of the very illustrious sociological departments in the country that is the Lucknow School. So, in this, for this particular class, I will be making use of this book by Professor T. N. Madan, 'Pathways', Oxford University publication published in 1995. And let me just close the PowerPoint and directly go into the book which I find very important.

So, here is the book as you must have seen, this is a scanned copy of the book, Oxford India Paperback, Pathways, Approaches the Study of Society in India. And this is a very useful book for students of sociology who wants to study the disciplinary trajectory and the contributions of different people. If you can have a quick look at the table of contents, you will realize that how important this work is. And I will be using this book extensively in my coming lectures as well, especially when we discuss Louis Dumont, M.N. Srinivas and others. The part one of the book has this section on pathfinders which talks about the individual contributions of scholars starting with D. P. Mukherjee, D.N. Majumdar and this is the essay that we are going to discuss today. And this has another essay on M. N. Srinivas, then another essay on Louis Dumont. So, these two, I think almost all these essays we will be discussing extensively for this lecture.

So, let us get into the essay D. N. Majumdar on the Development of Cultures. Yeah, this is the second chapter D.N. Majumdar on the Development of Cultures by T. N. Madan and this essay begins with a very interesting, very, very confident statement by D. N. Majumdar with his expert knowledge of social relationships, the sociologist can help, predict, control, direct social change and speed up social progress.

A very interesting statement when maybe it might have looked very innocuous or innocent when he made the statement, but now, you know, we are less certain about what it means to be, to control and direct social change and the, you know, very, very emphatic role of sociology or sociologist in this endeavor seems kind of quite not that convincing anymore. So, I am going through the essay. It is not a very long essay; it is a short essay. We will kind of focus on, you know, D.N. Majumdar's engagement with the concept of culture and how he looked at the role of sociology and role of anthropology and how the fundamental question about how, say, the cultures of different communities needs to be governed or administered or how they are supposed to usher in the era of progress, very, very contentious issues of say 1950s and 1960s. So, Dhinendra Nath Majumdar in 1903, 1960 began his career as an anthropologist at Calcutta University where he received his master's degree in 1924 and was later awarded the coveted Premchand Roychand Scholarship. By the time he joined Lucknow University in 1928 and then he stayed there the rest of his life as lecturer in primitive economics, he had already acquired a conception of the scope of anthropology as the comprehensive study of man from the biological and cultural points of view.

So, D. N. Majumdar is known as an anthropologist, as a cultural anthropologist and also as a physical anthropologist and this is in direct contrast with other people who, you know, occupied very prime position in Lucknow school including D. P. Mukherjee and Ramakrishna Mukherjee whom we discussed yesterday. So, Madan also talks about very divergent ideas about role of social sciences, very divergent ideas about, you know, the whole idea of western modernity and what should be the path of Indian development. It is very interesting to look at how three leading, you know, scholars who occupied position in a given university had very, very different kind of perspectives.

D. P. Mukherjee for example kind of adopted a rather Marxian framework and he was almost convinced about or he was quite enthusiastic about the possibilities of a revolution and the kind of changes that it can bring in. Whereas Ramakrishna Mukherjee as we discussed in the previous class was extremely weary of the western imposition of ideas and then who believed that India needs to look back into her own civilizational ethos and cultural resources in order to, you know, build a kind of a new society and anthropologist B.N. Majumdar took a very different course of action. So, let us see how it unfolds.

Yeah, so Madan is saying that by the time, you know, B. N. Majumdar came to be known as a proponent of anthropology. Anthropology has been institutionalized in the colonial, you know, regime as a way of collecting material, documenting the life states of people. So, he talks about how in 1807 itself, much before Majumdar's time, the Francis Buchanan was appointed by the Governor General to undertake an ethnographic study of the conditions of the inhabitants of Bengal and their region.

People outside the government including the Intelligentsia had also contributed to this stream of scholarly work of a descriptive factual nature. Second, with the introduction of anthropology in the curricula of Calcutta University in 1920, a formal theoretical underpinning for ethnographic work had come to be provided by its being linked to theories of culture and social organization then prevalent in the academic circles of the west, particularly Britain. The concept of culture that appeared to have been dominant was that of Tylor's celebrated formulation of it as a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, laws, art, moral, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. So, Madan is trying to understand how T.N. Majumdar's understanding of culture was heavily influenced by the then existed discourses, especially about culture in the British anthropological tradition. And again, you know, in the academic circles, especially in anthropology and then culture studies, culture is one of the most, you know, elusive term for definition. If you look into the transformation of the definitions of culture, it is very interesting. This particular definition by E. B. Taylor is one of the most widely accepted one which he, you know, provided in 1871 and later it had undergone substantial divisions. Also, the distributionist and diffusionist theories of Clark Wissler, W. H. R. Rivers and others seem to have appealed to many including Majumdar as these represented an advance upon the dogmatic, unilinear, evolutionist theories of the late 19th century.

We also discussed that how these ideas of diffusionism kind of influenced people including, you know, G. S. Ghurye because Ghurye also had trained under W.H. R. Rivers in Britain and he was also kind of very much fascinated by this story of cultural diffusion rather than looking into the model of a kind of a unilinear evolutionary model. When we look at Majumdar's earlier cultural anthropological publications, what appears to be noteworthy is them, in them. Among other things, he sees interest in the study of cultural traits. As far as I have been able to find out, the first three papers he wrote were published in 1923, all of them in *Man in India*, a journal dedicated to the study of anthropology and dealt with the custom of burning human effigies, 'Kali Nauch' and 'customs and taboos' connected with the pregnancy and childhood. These are the, you know, kind of a typical ethnographic studies characteristic of that particular type.

The data came from East Bengal where Majumdar had been born and brought up. The

concern with cultures as whole which became conspicuous in his later work is not prominent in these papers. It is, he rather looked into very specific aspects of community life or tribal life. But soon we find him writing about social change particularly in situations of cultural contact. It was to become, as I will try to show, a lifelong interest and even more than that a lifelong concern.

The basic premises appears to have been that while some cultures grow or evolve others stagnate and die. So, this was his, one of his major concern about how different cultures are able to endure while certain cultures die out very soon, certain other cultures seem to be thriving, certain other cultures seem to be imposing themselves on others at the cost of the cultural ethos and cultural life of other communities. So, this became one of his major important issues. In this regard, it is worth noting Majumdar anticipated the formulation of the nature of the dynamics of culture change by Bronislaw Malinowski who regarded development as being the result of the impact of advanced upon simple and passive society. So, this imbalance in the power relation was something that deeply influenced D.N. Majumdar. So, he also looked into the specific Indian cases. He bothered about what he called the decline of the primitive types in India and the doctoral dissertation which he wrote at Cambridge University on the basis of field work among the Hos of Shingbhum in Bihar dealt with the problems faced by a tribal in transition. The teaching of Malinowski whose famous seminar at the London School of Economics Majumdar attended when he was at Cambridge provided him with a framework which brought together all the interests that unified his theoretical perspective. So, this is the reference about the kind of a functionalism as a very important theoretical frame. Just to quote him, the emphasis on functional study has been on a culture rather than on cultures.

From this point of view, the functional approach is surely significant. We have also been told that the functional approach is not anti-historical or anti-distributional. So, he talked about how this idea of functionalism as propounded by British scholars of that particular time heavily influenced his ideas. In the context of the present discussion, it is important that I locate within the above broad framework Majumdar's conception of the contact of cultures of unequal level of elaboration or growth and his view of the contribution that anthropology could make to easing the tension inherent in such situations. So, as we mentioned, his lifelong concern was about how cultures occupying different levels of progress come to contact with each other and what happens after that.

So, the notion of unequal elaboration or growth of cultures explicitly and evolutionary one was given precise definition by him. So, he looked into this whole idea about how unequal elaboration among the cultures happened, how certain specific or different parts of the cultures develop differently or there are differences in the evolution of cultures themselves and how interaction between them can lead to complications. He wrote of the

base of a culture which he considered to be the resultant of the interaction of the four crucial variables which arranged in the order of importance were man, area, resource and cooperation. So, these are the four, it is something like he building a model by keeping these four crucial variables that is man, area, resources and cooperation. Cooperation he clarified, comprise the cultural responses to bio psychological needs which are essence of man.

He also envisaged variability in the nature and magnitude of these variables. Maybe we can look at how they might have used or not only Majumdar, lot of other people must have used man as a term that represents human beings and it really kind of reflects that particular time. So, then how does he go about it? It is very interesting to see that. Two elements of the foregoing formulation seems noteworthy. First, there is an explicit acknowledgement of the gradation of cultures.

So, Majumdar is quite unequivocal in his argument that there are cultures can be placed differently in a kind of a gradient in the sense you will be able to clearly label certain cultures as advanced as opposite to that of a certain primitive culture. So, Majumdar did not subscribe to any of the exaggerated notions of cultural relativism which were made popular by certain American anthropologists which would invoke context of justification for all kind of customs and practices. He referred to cultures as dominant and decadent without hesitation and emphasized that decadent cultures could hardly hope to survive except by surrendering their values and even identifying completely with the dominant cultures. Again, very interesting set of discussion because one of the very important criticisms against anthropologists or in particular and sociologists in general is that they are kind of very Eurocentric understanding or Eurocentric tendency to classify certain cultures as primitive and certain other cultures as advanced. And this has been accused as a reflection of their ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is that you evaluate other cultures only on the basis of your own values. And opposite argument, a counter argument is what is known as this cultural relativism which kind of dismisses this kind of a comparative framework and which argues that every culture has its own justification, every culture has its own legitimacy, every culture has its own logic. So, it actually asks not to compare different culture and then come to kind of ethical or moral conclusion rather to evaluate a culture on the basis of its own ethical values and other things. But as Madan says, D.N. Majumder was not impressed by this kind of an argument rather he went for a very clear idea that cultures are different objectively and they need to be identified in a kind of a hierarchical manner. At the same time Majumder advocated an approach and this is the secondary noteworthy point that the tribal problem which was based on a concept of creative or generative adaptation.

He was against the wholesale cultural invasion from the outsider but feared that unless helped weaker people would fail to withstand external pressure. For him, Verrier Elwin's crusade in favour of leaving the tribals alone and G.S. Ghurye's counter campaign to treat them as indistinguishable from the backward Hindus represented a Rousseauian romanticism on the one hand and a political posture on the other rather than the fruits of an objective scientific enquiry. And this is again, indicative of a very interesting kind of debate that raged during, immediately after maybe independence where there were discussions about the policy of isolation, policy of integration and policy of acculturation.

So, policy of isolation is a group of scholars including Verrier Elwin who argued that the tribal people need to be kind of just left alone. There should not be any kind of intervention in their life and they have been living their life for the past so many centuries and modern state or modern government has no business to intervene in that. On the other hand, idea of the argument about acculturation is something maybe represented by G.S. Ghurye talks about that the tribals need to be seen as underdeveloped backward Hindus and they need to be mainstreamed.

They need to be brought into the mainstream or they need to be brought into the mainstream in terms of their culture, in terms of their development, in terms of their every other aspect to say that there is nothing distinct about it. They need to be brought into the larger level of development. And the policy of integration is supposedly a kind of a golden mean between that which argues that the tribals must be encouraged to preserve their culture and there should not be any interference in that. But at the same time their physical infrastructure, their physical health, their education and other kind of things must be protected by the state. So, there have been serious debates among the scholars by then but as we realize these debates had not much of a kind of an effect on the ground.

The kind of a trajectory of tribals went into a very, very different direction having not much influence by the kind of debate that was happening at a much higher level. And this trajectory was characterized by poverty or improvisation, displacement and a series of structural changes that led to their further marginalization. Optimistically he designed the avowed policy of the Indian government after independence to be one of the contacts and understanding rather than laissez-faire and segregation. He further wrote the two axioms of cultural rehabilitation should be, we cannot be civilized unless every one of us is civilized and every people however primitive or civilized has the right to its own ways of life and to the development of its own culture. To reconcile these two unique complete grasp of in the detail a sympathetic understanding of the realities of tribal aims and aspirations is required.

So, he is kind of taking a kind of a middle path by recognizing the distinctiveness of

their tribal group on the other hand, on the other hand the imperative of development. And Madan says that he did not kind of elaborate what specific strategies to be adopted in that and other things. So, Majumder had earlier enumerated the process through which tribal cultures are usually transformed or modified. These were first simple adoption, secondly acculturation involving acceptance and adaptation and thirdly social commensalism or plural association. Again, no questions about the desirability of the civilized ways of life were asked beyond them being regarded as available for adoption indicating his clear preference for acculturation.

But the same time acknowledging the risk of reaction or contra-acculturation of which he himself recorded evidence among certain tribes he wrote. So, he was a rather strong proponent of the argument that the tribals need to be accultured while he also kind of expressed sensitivity and understanding about their needs to kind of preserve their cultural identities. So, it is elaboration about how he developed some of this argument based on some of these specific tribes including the host. The emphasis on unfolding, one presumes the reference is to the unfolding of the potentialities of a culture, its spontaneous development and synthesis is interesting. But it would be far-fetched to read into it any deep ideological or Hegelian or Marxian significance or interest in macro theory or social development.

So, while Majumder talks about an unfolding of the culture, Madan says that it has to be seen as a very limited exercise not to connect it with the kind of larger philosophical and metaphysical theories propounded by Hegel or Marxism about the unfolding of human species and other kind of arguments. Majumder was essentially a field worker interested in attending to concrete problems like a 'clinician'. He derived his research interest from the realities of life around him rather than from any special concern with sociological or cultural or anthropological theory. And this is a very, very interesting point as we mentioned. It contrasts him with a person with a very specific, very limited point of enquiry compared with say people like D.P. Majumder or Ramakrishna Mukherjee who had much larger intellectual concerns and philosophical anxieties. The early 1950s saw the launching of the community development program in India and the commencement of the plant development, the five-year plan programs. Majumder's response to these initiatives was positive and at the same time dramatic. His numerous publications on the types of India had underscored his conviction that anthropology could offer useful knowledge and usable advice to the policy makers, administrators and the social worker. So, he very strongly believed in the potential of sociology or anthropology to offer very policy-oriented suggestions to the tribal problems.

Anthropology and Sociology at Lucknow University. This particular section as I mentioned, Madan is making a kind of a comparative analysis between the standpoints

and positions of Radhakamal Mukherjee, D.P. Mukherjee and D.N. Majumder. So, these are considered to be the trinities of Lucknow School and all of them occupying very different and distinct theoretical and cultural overviews and perspectives. So, this particular section looks into that and how Majumder was kind of had to deal with this kind of very divergent views among his colleagues. So, we discussed about Ramakrishna Radhakamal Mukherjee yesterday. We looked at how, one of the essays was T.N. Madan himself and the other one was Manish Thakur, how Radhakamal Mukherjee's concerns were very different and how he was very skeptical about the imposition of a western culture and also the kind of western framework to understand in his society. So, I am not repeating that this particular section is specifically that.

It is obvious that though Radhakamal Mukherjee accepted the modern notion of self-directed humanity, he was not wholly in tune with the times. He had in fact never been a modernist, having always stressed that the task of modern India was to seek a renewal or rather than a break with the past. So, this is something that we discussed extensively in the previous class and how he believed that there are certain value system has to be maintained and Indian society is very distinct from that of the west and Indian society is characterized by the collectivity rather than the kind of an individualist hedonism as he described as that is characterizing the western society.

So, this is a discussion on D.P. Mukherjee which we will take it up in the coming class. So, this section I am just skipping.

The study of development problems and processes. Returning to D.N. Majumdar, it is noteworthy that in his writings we find no sympathy either for Radhakamal Mukherjee's idealist speculations or D.P. Mukherjee's socialist aspirations for or fears about the future. As an anthropologist he had always concerned himself with the here and now of the people that he has studied.

So, as we mentioned he had a very limited agenda. It was precisely in the same spirit that he turned to the study of the problems of rural and urban development, and he did so with immense zest and confidence. Noting the long-lasting interest of economists in rural studies by castigating them for preoccupation with the perfection of techniques of quantitative analysis and for neglect of the cultural background and the interrelation that exists between different set of social phenomena. He too like Mukherjee called for a holistic approach to the problems of the development. And this is a very familiar argument that many of these social scientists, especially sociologists were very, very critical of economists at least in the initial periods of the planning where they accused the economists of completely ignoring the kind of social and cultural background and then going ahead with a very decontextualized understanding of society. Majumdar was

obviously confident of the usefulness of sociology as some of its European founding fathers.

Accordingly, he pressed for an active association of sociologists and anthropologists with the planning process. So, he did not hesitate from that and then he wanted to be a part of that. In his village studies Majumdar undertook to examine both selected problems calling for immediate relief such as water scarcity in hillside villages of Janusar Bawar are showing in this impact of some of this work of American anthropologists on the problems and the process of development. A persistent refrain in the conclusion he derived from the studies was that villages were apathetic and immured in the timeless inertia and therefore changes had to be included externally. Such interventions he wanted could meet with the resistance from the powerful caste and communities if it led to the erosion of their privilege.

Very, very interesting set of arguments. He also can subscribe to the argument that Indian villages are characterized by the kind of inertia and they will not wholeheartedly accept any change that is or any development initiative that is given to them by the government for their fear that they might lose their clout. So, he was even of a proponent of kind of a forceful development interventions in the lives of these people. The attack on these relations with a view to changing them had to be multi-pronged and had to include the key factors of education and technological innovation. In the absence of such a broad-based strategy, the villages would soon reduce developmental personnel to being as he quoted some villages near Lucknow telling him 'Tamasha-walas' or entertainer. So, he is, I do not know how do we characterize that but it was his very important observation that the state has to have a more multi-pronged approach or more sophisticated approach about how to deal with the village, the rural development and it needs to be interfered with very, very decisively.

Majumdar identified several factors which impeded the ability of backward villages to benefit adequately by community development and other programs. The villagers past experience had made them generally distrustful of outsiders who often came pretending to be a friend but stay only to exploit them and to rob their habitat of its natural wealth. Government officials and agents had also been traditionally known to seek villages, submission and money. We are familiar with that kind of a situation even during the pre-colonial or colonial period and in the post-colonial period. Majumdar did not however consider villages, villages or tribesmen had to be irrational or unchangeable.

The issue was of right approach of focusing on genuinely felt and not imputed needs and for carrying conviction to them. In achieving this, Madhudnagar believed that the social scientists had much to offer in tribal, rural and urban settings. So, as we mentioned

he was a person who had immense faith in the actual intervention of the state. So, we are coming to the concluding section. So, I have relied on Majumder's published work to bring out both the continuity of interest and approaches in it as also the responsiveness to changing social environment that it displays.

He began in the 1920s among the tribes with the conception of levels of culture which entailed a notion of the historical development of cultures. By the time of the coming of independence he had refined his notion and formulated it as the concept of acculturation which provided scope for both the retention of selected elements of traditional cultural heritage as also the adaptation of assimilation of new elements from the other culture. We discussed that how there was these three major strands of thought. So, he represented the middle one which believed that while enabling them to keep some of their cultural elements that the tribal must be brought into the mainstream developmental story. His evolutionary views of cultural development committed Majumder to the notion of convergence of cultures as a result of development.

Modern western culture based on science and technology was the model for him and he advocated interventionist social policy backed by applied social sciences to achieve modernization but with due regard to the specific character of India's societies. This is a very maybe the most accepted kind of official policy. As I mentioned there is a huge difference between, there is a complete break between what has been the official policy and what the ground realities have been and that is a very very tragic situation about Indian society. So, he while there was so much of discussion and debates among the policy makers about what should be the nature of Indian tribal policy, the ground was shifting, the ground was, the ground realities were very very very different, and these policy discussions were not kind of reflective of the rapidly changing ground situations. Majumdar's view on the nature and process of development might appear unduly uncritical today, but it should not be forgotten that he was a representative or social scientist of his generation.

Many more Indian social scientists shared Majumder's confidence during the early years of planning than the anxieties of D.P Mukherjee or the dismay of Radha Kamal Mukherjee. It should also be added that there are many social scientists today who hold the same views as Majumder did on development and role of the social sciences. Though they are likely to state them in a more sophisticated phraseology and with greater caution being the wiser of the experience gained, a very pertinent observation because many times the social scientists make very categorical opinion, very confident opinion only to realize much later that their prescriptions do not really hold the weight or the kind of things that they really expect. So, what is, while the kind of confidence with which they intervene in societies has been tempered, so that is the kind of an argument that he is

talking.

When Majumder was able to prescribe very specific sets, a set of action for social development that was characteristic of that particular time and he says that now many sociologists, anthropologists will know to do that, though there could be very few who might continue to show that much of courage. So, this is why it is worthwhile to have an exposition of his views and of other intellectuals of his generation in our effort to underline, outline the course of development of thinking on the problems and process of modernization. So ultimately it is all revolving around whole question of modernization and D.N. Majumder being an anthropologist had a very particular take on that. So, we are stopping here, we are concluding this particular section and also, we are concluding this section on Indological approach and we will begin with the conflict or the Marxian approach in the next class. Thank you.