

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Theoretical Traditions in Sociology and Anthropology

Welcome back to the class. In the previous two classes, we had a very broad overview of two related disciplines, one sociology, the other one is anthropology. And in this class, I am going to discuss some of the very important and broad theoretical traditions in these two disciplines. And as I mentioned in the earlier class, though we, our central focus of this course is the sociological studies or sociological perspectives on Indian society, I thought that it is prudent to spend some time trying to introduce these two disciplines, as there could be people who have not studied these disciplines formally. So, that is why we are discussing this kind of a background material. So, in this class, we are trying to understand what were the kind of a theoretical orientations or theoretical traditions of these two disciplines.

And as we mentioned previously, these are very closely connected disciplines, very, to a large extent, very difficult to make complete separation between these two. In many places, they were practiced as interchangeable terminologies and then practices, but of course, they are very related yet distinct disciplines. And theoretical traditions, what does it mean theoretical traditions? See in social sciences, especially in say, in almost every stand of social sciences, you will feel that there are multiple theoretical traditions or multiple theoretical orientations in each disciplines. Some of them might have been there from the very beginning, or some of them might have come after some time, some of them must have lost their significance and have become kind of, must have disappeared, or some of them must be there, must have originated from the beginning, but might continue to be relevant even now.

So, it is a very fascinating exercise to look into these theoretical traditions, because they offer very, very interesting multiple perspectives to a given social reality. Many of these perspectives are kind of a, you know, competing with each other to provide different explanations. And some of them might be even contradictory in that sense, their argument might look contradictory to the theoretical orientations or something else. So, in that sense, it is very interesting to see how scholars develop theoretical framework to explain a particular situation at hand. And as a student of sociology or anthropology, you are confronted with so many, or so many competing and complementary or even

sometimes contradictory frameworks and to make sense of this huge complex is a very, very challenging task.

Yet, it is important that as students of social sciences, we have some familiarity with these frameworks. And this will be even more important when you, when you, when we discuss further down the line, when we look into how, say, Indian society was studied by different perspectives. For example, caste, caste has been studied through so many different perspectives by so many different people. So, all of them, you know, enriches our understanding about caste as a social phenomenon. So, yeah, this is the first point.

It is a continuous evolution of theoretical frameworks and methodological orientations of these disciplines. So, these theoretical contestations or theoretical, you know, orientations of these disciplines are never static. They are never kind of, you know, rigid. They evolve over a period of time. And of course, they are very specifically connected with their methodological orientations.

Maybe we will discuss sometime later the kind of a very organic link between the methodological connection and with that of the theoretical framework. So, they are quite adaptable. And they respond to these theoretical frameworks are very much influenced by the kind of contingent social and political, you know, context of a given time. A host of frameworks will become more fashionable. They will become more popular.

And some of them might die down after some time. Some of them might will, might continue to be important. So, that looking into the trajectory itself is something very fascinating. A host of reasons including intellectual, socio-political and technological transformations play a very important role in defining this, the fate of this theoretical orientations. And one of the most important things that we need to keep in mind that it is not intellectual traditions, intellectual factors alone that contribute for the emergence or demise of a particular theoretical tradition.

So, usually we have that very naive understanding that, you know, people think intellectually and then they come up with a particular theory. But more important, you are more, you know, obviously a host of extra intellectual factors like say social and political, economic or technological transformations might play a very important role in making a particular theory more relevant or contemporary in a particular period. A host of political factors, a host of, you know, social factors or cultural factors will play a very, very important role. And we will see that later. So, the kind of connection between intellectual factors and the socio-political factors is something very important.

And you will never understand the intellectual context of a particular theory without

understanding its corresponding socio-political context. And, you know, there are diverse theoretical frameworks with specific ontological, epistemological and methodological frameworks. So, this is a very important point to keep in mind that each of these theoretical frameworks, they come with a specific ontological, epistemological and methodological framework. And I think this is something that we very briefly mentioned in the, in one of the previous classes. So, a theory in an ideal sense, a theory must be able to have a very distinct ontological foundation followed by a distinct epistemological foundation, followed by a distinct methodological framework, which would provide you with a set of methods.

So, that is a kind of a link from ontology to epistemology to methodology to methods. So, there is an organic connection between the kind of method that you use in particular research to the kind of an ontological understanding that you, that is a part of your larger theoretical framework. And it is imperative that you, that somebody, the student understands the kind of a connection between these two, three, two or three important factors. Now, what is ontology? For example, its definition, I have taken it from Webster's dictionary, is that a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence. So, ontology is a, is a, is a term in philosophy which tries to understand or is a theoretical take on the nature of being.

The question of what is there, what exists out there or the kind of things that have some kind of an existence. Now, this might look very, very oversimplified. What is so much of to debate about what is the questions about things that are existing there. But this has a very, very deeper philosophical implications, this whole question of what is there. Now, the thing that is out there, is it real? And how do you define something is real or not? Can we, does everything that is palpable to our senses, does it mean that they are real? Or are there things that are not amenable to your senses? So, the way a human being comprehends the reality is always through the senses.

So, to what extent can you completely keep your faith on your senses to understand reality? And also, is a reality irrespective of the observer? So, there are quite a lot of fundamental questions. Or is there an objective reality out there? As we mentioned in the previous class, the positivist school believes that there is an objective reality out there, irrespective of the people who observe. Irrespective of the researcher, there is an objective reality out there. And the task of the researcher is to comprehend that. But there is another very important school within sociology, which completely rejects this argument.

So, this ontology is a much larger philosophical question about the whole question of what is? That the nature of its existence, the nature of its very, very existence. Then

second one is the kind of an epistemology, is about epistemology. The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its method, validity and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion. So, epistemology is the theory of knowledge. That is how it is, it is generally understood, generally made sense of.

So, this is epistemology is about how do we make sense, how do we theorize, how do we conceptualize the, how do we conceptualize about the thing that we are talking about as having a kind of a particular existence. How do we create knowledge about it? And what is the nature of this particular knowledge? What is the boundary of this particular knowledge? What kind of knowledge system is required in order to understand a particular kind of existence? So, these are very, very related, but very different set of enquiries. The first one is more philosophical concerns about its existence. Second one is given a kind of a particular kind of existence; how do we create knowledge systems for that which are amenable to capture to understand this particular existence. So, that is about epistemology, theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity and scope and the distinction between justified belief and opinion.

So, whether you are you are the kind of a you are going by a kind of your justified opinion or justified belief or is it opinion. So, all these things come under as part of this epistemology. The third component is methodology. So, research methodology or methodology in general and this is usually referred to or understood as a coherent body of frameworks about conducting the study about a subject. So, there is a difference between methodology and method.

Methodology is more theoretically heavy. It provides a kind of a theoretical understanding about how do you study a particular reality? What are the theoretical foundations on which you set out to study a given so called understanding of social reality? And again, there is so much of variation, so much of divergent views about the methodological orientation. There is no singular or there is no single given methodology even within sociology. There are so many different methodologies. As I mentioned earlier, this methodology draws directly from epistemology which again is heavily influenced by a kind of a particular ontology.

So, methodological arguments or methodology is a kind of a theoretically informed, theoretically nuanced understanding about how to capture the reality. So, for example, if a particular phenomenon is to be captured, a social movement is to be captured or for example, a violence, an incident of violence has to be captured, has to be researched, then you must be clear about what is the methodological premises on which you set out to study that. How do you theoretically understand this particular phenomenon and how do you plan to capture that? How do you plan to evaluate or capture that reality? And from

here, from methodology draws this idea of a method, the kind of a specific tools to collect data or facts or capture the so-called reality. So, research methods and methodology are different, they are interrelated, but method refers to the specific tools. For example, an interview schedule is a tool or a questionnaire is a tool or a say a focused group discussion is a tool.

Okay? So, these are the specific tools which you use to understand, to capture the data or to collect the data. But as I mentioned earlier, this tool will be heavily informed and defined and decided by the methodology, which is a kind of a theoretical explanation about why should you use a point of a particular method and not the other. For example, whether you have to use a questionnaire and conduct a survey or you have to do an in-depth interview will depend upon or it will be defined influenced by the kind of a methodological understanding that you have about the question at hand, the research problem at hand, which will draw from your larger epistemological understanding of that, which would actually address this question of ontology. Now, theoretical frameworks from early evolutionism and functionalism to poststructuralist, postmodern frameworks and corresponding methodology. So, again, this is something that we have mentioned in passing in the previous classes.

If you look into the history of sociology, it again has a very complex trajectory. It started off with evolutionism and a kind of a positivist understanding and functionalism. And then, of course, it came to structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodern frameworks and corresponding methodology. So, you will be able to see this kind of a transformations in methodological orientation and corresponding, sorry, epistemological orientation and corresponding methodological orientations. And of course, an influence of a host of ideologies including Marxism, liberalism, feminism and so on.

So, as we mentioned, of course, these are intellectual initiatives, but they are also deeply political. As social science theories, these theories cannot be separated from political ideas, because political ideas not only offers you important insights about understand a certain thing, but also it has a normative concern. It actually prescribes a certain kind of a society in future. It has that kind of a normative commitment. So, these political theories also, ideologies as well have influenced the kind of theories and methodologies.

And that is what the point normative orientation of these ideologies, what ought to be along with what is. So, usually we say that a theory is used to explain what is. It is the kind of a, the question of a kind of positivist explanation, what it is. Whereas, these ideologies mostly come with a what ought to be, what should be or what should be the kind of a normative position. Especially, say, Marxism or feminism or even liberalism has a kind of a normative orientation.

It comes with the idea about how the society should be. So, it offers a critical perspective about the existing system. At the same time, it also offers a kind of a normative, it also offers a kind of a prescriptive imagination about the society. And a shift from the positivist methodological orientation. This again, we briefly touched upon that from an earlier insistence on sociology as a positive science, which uses a so-called scientific method.

It shifted completely into a kind of a non-positivist or even anti-positivist orientations. Now, there is a critic of a completely objective, unbiased and true depiction of society. This again is a corollary to the kind of a shift from positivist position because positivist position again affirms an idea that what you are presenting is an objective truth or it is an unbiased depiction of a reality out there. So, there is a kind of a complete unambiguous and equivocal understanding about what is truth, what is reality, what is objective there. And the research is supposed to present this objective unbiased truth about certain things.

And these claims have come under severe criticism from social sciences and we will discuss that them in the coming classes. Because there is a realization that such a claim is untenable and not required. First of all, the argument is that social science need not be something similar to physical science or natural sciences. And even natural sciences cannot make this kind of a claims. And first of all, it is untenable that no social science researcher will be able to claim that what she is presenting is a completely unbiased objective truth about a reality.

Nobody makes, nobody in their sound mind will make such kind of a claim. The impossibility of rationality, objectivity and grand narratives, celebration of plurality and multiplicity. And this is again, this has come to the other extreme, especially in the post modernist narratives. They believe that this rationality is impossible, a complete rationality is impossible, complete objectivity is impossible, there is no singular grand narrative. It is all a kind of a celebration of plurality and multiplicity.

These are the features of postmodern thinking, postmodern theory. I am not going into that, but keep it in mind that there is a huge paradigm shift from a very positivist, normative and positivist understanding of social science into a kind of a postmodernist understanding. And it also is followed by a kind of a crisis of representation. The argument that reality is a reflection of language and science, hyperreality of both will act. So, there are a lot of very deeply philosophical arguments about the question of representation.

The question of representation, how do we capture the reality and how do we represent

that? And for example, scholars like Baudrillard, they talk about how science and language actually presents you with a kind of a hyperreality. So, how reality itself is constituted through language and science. Again, I am not going into the details, but just to flag these important theoretical developments, so that you can keep in mind that social sciences in general and sociology in particular has developed a much more complex and nuanced understanding about what is reality and other stuff. And the argument that social science data are already interpreted data, the uninterpreted data does not exist. Again, a very powerful argument that the data as such as if a neutral data is irrespective of our understanding exists for it to go and then collect and come back, that does not exist.

Data is already interpreted. The moment you define certain things as data, it is already infused with your own ideas and your own assumptions. So, the uninterpreted data does not exist. Then, there is a huge shift in the last 20 years about globalization and the emergence of the new social. Because what is social in the conventional sense was something that was seen as limited in a given geographical, in a place, in a given geographical within a boundary at a given time. And this spatio-temporal dimensions of the social is very significantly challenged or scrambled in the era of globalization.

Again, that is a very fascinating theorizations about what has globalization done to this our understanding of global. So, again, that is a set of fascinating discussions. I am not going into that. And from a methodological nationalism to methodological cosmopolitanism. For example, scholars like Ulrich Beck, a very important German scholar, he argues that globalization has necessitated a shift from methodological nationalism to methodological cosmopolitanism.

Because methodological nationalism believes that this nation state is a kind of a boundary of your social processes. For example, you talk about Indian economy, you talk about Indian society. So, we believe that Indian society is something that is there within the boundaries of Indian nation state and is influenced by the factors within. So, that we think that the nation state function as a boundary within which these societies work or these economies work.

And according to Beck and others, this is an old story. The new story is that of globalization which necessitates a kind of a methodological cosmopolitanism. Now, nation state is no longer the container or nation state is no longer the boundary within which these social relationships take place. It has become quite porous, it has become quite flexible, amenable and then the kind of a social or the economy that happens is heavily influenced and then inflected by processes from outside. An interesting argument which requires other things.

So, then emergence of cyber sphere and cyber sociology. It is a very, very recent development, but very interesting thing. What is social is being heavily influenced by the kind of a cyber sphere and then study of that is the kind of a cyber sociology. So, because you know that our social interaction has gone online and the notions of community in the usual sense, usually community was understood as a geographical place in which you live or your neighborhood was considered as a place in which you live along with your physical neighbors, neighbors who are living in your adjacent, in the adjacent houses. But globalization or the cyber sphere has completely changed this understanding.

You can be a member of an online community. You may not even know the person who is staying next to your door, but you may be intimately knowing people who are from across the globe. So, our understanding of social and our understanding of social relationship has fundamentally changed. And hence, the kind of sub unit of sociology, cyber sociology has emerged and a host of new methods like internet research, online ethnography, netnography, computer mediated discourse analysis, social network analysis. All these things have come into the practice because the conventional research methods are incapable of understanding and explaining the cyber sphere or the kind of a, the social dimension of the cyber sphere. And still these age-old questions about the community and identity, all these things are important.

And the debate is again raging about the material dimension of all these things and virtual dimension of all these things. Because no society, no social interaction can subsist only on its virtual platform. It has to have a materiality. Now, any research or any methodological orientation that kind of dismisses or discounts this material dimension and only focuses on the virtual dimension is bound to fail. So, how do we strike a balance between these two are that is something important.

So, there are also a series of discussions about emerging discussions about decoloniality and decolonization, about emic categories, frameworks, indigenous intellectual traditions. So, this is another set of very more recent initiatives from scholars from the erstwhile colonies to say that the existing social science frameworks are heavily Eurocentric. They are developed by the European nations and thereby they betray the ideological and theoretical notions of Europe and they are incapable of capturing the realities of non-European societies. So, that is its argument about decoloniality and attempt to decolonize social sciences. So, they are talking about the kind of an emic categories, categories from within the colonial societies and emic frameworks and indigenous intellectual traditions, traditions which are not influenced from the so called foreign, but those who have kind of emerged from within traditions.

And again, you know that the process of globalization has revitalized the kind of interest

in the kind of indigenous intellectual traditions that you see across the globe. And the claims of indigeneity and the issue of universalization and transmissibility. So, this also, it is again, it is not a solution, because many times you find that the claims about indigeneity and the kind of indigenous intellectual traditions are capable of explaining everything highly problematic. And many times, it also has the tendency to slip into a kind of a more chauvinistic expression. For example, a particular religious group believes that the kind of a concept emerging from their own religious tradition that alone is capable of explaining that society.

And this can be attributed to Hindu religion or Christianity or Islam, while all other things that are foreign will not be able to understand in society. And these debates are very much active or very much raging amidst us. And to what extent these categories, these emic categories and frameworks can be translated to other context. For example, if every community says that this is our framework is capable of explaining our society, then and if it, and because of that very reason that framework will not be able to explain some other context. So, at the end, there is no questions of transmissibility possible, there is no communication possible, everybody will be harking back on their own understanding of what their tradition means.

So, these are some of the points, some very broad stroke descriptions of some of the important concerns and trends that are influencing sociological and anthropological theories. I know that it is a very broad and vague description, but I thought that it is important to spell it out in the beginning, so that we have some kind of a better understanding about the discipline. So, to talk about how each of these disciplines have multiple theoretical orientations and how they are influenced by different factors, extra intellectual or extra theoretical factors. And how these factors provide you with very fascinating multiple understanding about social science and how especially recent phenomena like globalization has fundamentally altered this practice of an understanding of social sciences.

So, let us stop the class here and we will meet in the coming class. Thank you.