

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**

**Dr. Santhosh R**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

**Week-09**

**Lecture-44**

**Feminist Challenges to Sociology in India**

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing the discussion on feminist theory and Indian Sociology. In the previous class, we had a discussion on an essay by Prof. Aparna Rayaprol. In today's class, we are going to discuss an essay written by Professor Sujatha Patel, a very important and eminent Indian sociologist, titled, The Feminist Challenges to Sociology in India, an essay in the disciplinary history. So, if the previous essay by Aparna Rayparol looked into the contributions of feminist epistemology in research, Prof. Sujata Patel's essay is more on the impact of feminism on Indian Sociology and the changes that it brought. So, it is again published in Contributions to Indian Sociology, one of the very eminent journals in Sociology.

She begins this essay by looking into some of the important recent debates in the international scene about how some of the recent debates and scholarly interventions have brought renewed attention to questions of gender and reflexivity. By the 1980s, it was obvious to the new generation of sociologists that there was little to gain by discussing sociologists' study of a sui generis system of society. Sui generis. It is a French term made popular by Durkheim, who believed that society is sui generic, that has its own existence and it has to be studied.

It was revolutionary and path-breaking because till then, the social was never recognised

as having its own individual existence. So, that is how the Sociology as a discipline emerged. But now, that assumption that society has somehow automatically come to its own independent existence is no longer accepted, or it is no longer productive. Rather, it was argued that Sociology should now be presented as a specific intellectual project emerging out of the process of modernisation, put in place in Europe and was reimagined to be a study of the negativities and the discontinuities that organised modernity's emergence and consolidation. And this is a very interesting way to reimagine the history or the very relevance of Sociology itself because Sociology is seen as a product of modernity.

Why Sociology emerged in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries has to be answered by looking into the larger picture of the emergence of modernity itself. This definition of sociology as an intellectual is critical because it allowed contemporary sociologists to question the perspectives and the overall oeuvre of European thinkers, called classical sociologists, who were thought to have originally defined the discipline's conceptual frame, orientation, and research question. This questioning led them to relook at some thinkers and the theories, such as George Simmel and Norbert Elias, together with the early debates on Frankfurt schools and reframe perspectives regarding modernity. This new conceptual architecture accepted the fact that there are many differences in pre-modern structures within Europe.

And thus, there may be similar differences across the world and, by implication, in various projects of modernity emerging across the world. Because when you talk about European modernity, the Europe moving from feudalism to capitalism or from medieval period to modern period, from tradition to modernity, we all tend to assume Europe as a singular, similar homogenous entity. But the experience of European modernity is quite diverse. If the experience of European modernity itself is diverse, then it is quite natural for us to understand that the experience of non-European societies could be equally diverse. You might know that it has created a lot of discussions and debates about multiple modernities and alternative modernities.

So, some suggest that this latter process manifested itself in forming liquid identities,

she is invoking Bauman, thereby promoting transient, unstable and fluctuating projects of agency. So, she brings the centrality of modernity into the whole debate. This trend, sometimes termed governmentality and biopolitics, has enhanced, according to some, the increasing use of legitimisation or violence of citizens by the state and between citizens and across states. This is again how modernity also brought in the mechanisms of the nation-state, which brought in the era of governmentality and biopolitics, Foucault's argument about biopolitics and all these things. These theorisations were associated with two further developments, one of which can be characterised as methodological.

This led to the epistemological and philosophical questions of sociological practice such as how best to study humans. Do we need evidence from all aspects of society to understand social life and Is Sociology inherently interdisciplinary? What counts as evidence? Are social sciences argument of the same weight and validity as of natural science? How does one marry methodologically, the particular with the universal? What is explanation? What is the relationship of science with normative and moral question? These are some of the important debates within methodological and other aspects. The other development can be called the critical and praxiological, which asks how social science helps to transform society and provide a good life. What is a good life? So the kind of questions about what is the use of the discipline and other things. So, in this section, she is talking about some of the larger debates about Sociology, which has kind of revised some of the early modernist positions. In this article, I wish to analyse the changes that took place in the field of Sociology in India in the late 70s and particularly in the 90s and 1990s.

It is my contention that the discipline of Sociology in India has gone through catalytic changes in these decades in a fashion similar to, but not the same as, the narrative given above, the case of North America and Europe. I suggest that in India, the feminist integration of the analysis of the domains associated with the Sociology of family, caste and religion has played a critical and important role in redefining the field. Before this interrogation, Sociology in India conceived itself as investigating the structures and institutions of family, caste and religion, which is defined as being traditions and so itself

studying the changes occurring in them as a consequence of the introduction of modernity. So this is her core argument that from the 1970s onwards, the feminist intervention has redefined discipline because till then, Sociology was preoccupied with the study of family, caste and other things and the changes were seen as the transformation of traditions in that. My argument is that feminist studies in the guise of women's studies presented a theory of modernity, thereby displacing the existing perspectives regarding tradition and modernity in India.

By establishing gender as a category and linking into the theory of patriarchy, it made visible the dominant class and caste orientations of the Indian project of modernity and argued that modernity was not value neutral, suggesting thus a need not only to interrogate conceptualisation of traditions, that is the representation of the institutions such as family, caste and religion, but also to develop a critical language to examine this. So this is a very important claim that she is making that women's studies brought in gender, as we mentioned in the previous classes, as an explanatory paradigm which wanted to look at these social structures. So it is not only a mere transformation from tradition into modernity, but how these structures themselves kind of constitute. Feminists argued that these traditions were invented and not inherited from the past. Rather, they were contemporary, and character had been articulated and organised during the colonial period, both by the colonial state and through legal interventions and nationalist movements.

These were reasserted in post-independence policies and programs. So the argument, so it is a questioning of the presentation of certain things as traditional, as immemorial, as unchanging and so that these very basic assumptions themselves were a kind of question by these feminist scholars who very critically looked at the period of colonial intervention and how certain certain categories were crystallised, were made more tangible through their interventions. Before I frame the particulars of my argument, let me present some caveats. I use the phrase feminist studies very deliberately, although I recognise that in India feminist studies were presented to its audience as women's studies. For me, feminist studies are studies that include reflection, research and teaching about

the way power organises the relations of gender as they intersect with caste, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nation and region, ability and other differences through its structures and institutions. So this is her, Patel's own take on how she defines feminist studies.

The practitioners of women's studies in India in the mid-1970s conceptualised women's studies in this way and thereby distinguished it from the pre-mid 1970s perspective that engaged with women's questions. The post mid-70s focused squarely on women's subordination, unlike the earlier position, which highlighted their evolutionary inclusion in the process that made modern India. The practitioners of women's studies have noted many of these achievements as being steps of formulation of this discipline and its institutionalisation in India, Neera Desai and Krishnaraj, Mazumdar. However, I would like to suggest that these achievements also reframed the discipline of Sociology in India and shook it out of its slumber, particularly its epistemic location within the colonial discourse.

I am not suggesting this only because the main actors organising women's studies in India were, by and large, sociologists or anthropologists or were influenced by sociological concerns. Neither I am arguing that this was because, in a large number of cases, women's studies departments found their homes in the department of Sociology at various universities in India. So, She is putting forward the argument that Sociology underwent a significant transformation with the introduction and infusion of feminist ideologies and feminist scholarship. An entire generation of sociologists and anthropologists grew to view themselves as feminists and as sociologists and anthropologists. This work of the first and increasingly the second generation has slowly and surely changed the discipline of Sociology initially through the unobtrusive and silent steps and in the last decade or more through their extensive publications and roles played by them as leaders of and in these departments.

She considers the mid-1970s as a point of departure in which the discipline of Sociology itself underwent a significant transformation by the influence of feminist scholars. Now, feminist challenges to Sociology. When its precepts started chipping away slowly at Sociology's self-defined boundaries, the latter started incorporating some aspects of

gender analysis. She talks about how Sociology faced immense pressure from the women's studies to look into this important dimension. Srinivas's sudden interest in the dowry question can be cited as an example of such incorporation.

However, the fact the radical content of women's studies provoked one male sociologist from the discipline to make a frontal attack. I think we came across this point even in Sharmila Rege's thing where she talked about how two very important Indian sociologists including Dipankar Gupta and Andre Beteille were actually, were rather, especially Gupta was kind of dismissive of the potential of women of feminist studies and she and that his writing created a lot of uproar and backlash from the women scholars. Whereas Beteille was of the argument that this, excessive focus on women or a kind of feminist focus would render Sociology more ghettoised that you look into them exclusively without having broader position. Before we proceed any further, it is needed to make another caveat. It is important to accept that the field of Sociology as in other disciplines through referred to in singular. She talks about how sociology is different and diverse.

There is a diversity in integrating the feminist concerns within these different perspectives. While some perspectives, such as Marxism, have been more open to feminist concerns, others, such as structural functionalism, have been less so. To reiterate, this theory argued that the capitalist social change was inaugurated in and through colonialism.

And these changes brought about new forms of inequalities between various groups and between men and women in India, the colonial state with the help of the indigenous middle class elites reconstituted these inequalities by creating new discourses of traditions and traditionalism that legitimised new hierarchies and this discourse came to be inscribed in law and various policies of the colonial state and also ironically became part of the consciousness of the nationalist Indian elite, thus getting legitimised as a way to present women's question in pre-independent India. So, this is her central thesis that the feminist scholars were able to present or question this uncritical acceptance of certain things as traditional. This theory of modernity, She argues has changed the epistemic concerns of what constituted Sociology in four different ways. So, that is her central

argument. It introduced a notion of power as central to the assessment of all relationships and argued that the women's question should be located and understood in terms of the distribution of cultural, political and economic resources.

As a consequence, Sociology in India had to grapple with the concept of power, which was not even recognised, let alone theorised. Even today, the specialisation of political Sociology, she says, is more or less absent. This is something important, and I think it may not be fair to look at Indian society alone because power as a central category in social science was recognised again globally much later, especially with the intervention of Foucault and Gramsci. Of course, there was understanding about the Weberian notion of power existed, but a preoccupation with power and the realisation that power and knowledge are very intrinsically connected. They are all the products of post 1980s scenario with Edward Said and other people.

This concern that social institutions are not automatic or social institutions are not naturally constructed, they are not natural, not given, rather they are the reflections of very specific power relations was almost absent in the imaginations of scholars of the initial periods in India. They looked into tradition, change and ancient India. They looked into transformation, but how each of these categories constituted by power was almost absent from their arguments. Feminist studies have intervened in the domain of power on three levels. At the substantive level, in terms of an assessment of the structures of distribution of resources and assessment of the political system that organised formal power, its most important contribution was in laying the nature of power in the private invisible domain, in the family, household and kin system in the organisation of sexuality. So, these work looked into not only the larger structures of power, but also the places where this micro power works in like, inter family, intra-family relationships within the domestic spaces and others.

Secondly, by connecting power and knowledge, feminist theories gave a theory of relating everyday ideas and practices with ideologies and consciousness. Again, say, for example, there is a lot of criticism about how many of our textbooks are extremely sexist.

The examples given in the textbooks reinforce gender stereotypes. You must have seen quite a lot of such examples, where the house, the picture of a household is presented as father reading newspaper and mother washing the dishes or different sex roles assigned to boys and girls. So, these kinds of questions came under increasing criticism because the connection between power and knowledge was recognised.

Third, it argued that knowledge itself is power and interrogated the epistemic and methodological moorings in the field. As a consequence, not only were there methodological assumptions of value neutrality and that of ethnographic distance promoted by Sociology and Social Anthropology questioned, but the framing of the entire corpus of sociological knowledge and its assumptions was also questioned. So, this is again something that we mentioned earlier, how knowledge is produced itself is an articulation of power. So, the claim that certain knowledge is pure, certain knowledge is objective, certain knowledge is scientific, as if it is not influenced by extra scientific concerns or extra intellectual concerns is only impossible, it never happens in that way. So, those understandings, the Foucauldian, Saidian understanding of knowledge production heavily influenced this particular dimension as well.

The second aspect related to the first, whereby a sense of time and that of its theory and methodology was introduced. An engagement with the theories of Marxian history and historiography was central to the quest of feminist studies in their endeavor to comprehend women's subordination in India. Wherein lies the most significant challenge that feminist studies presented to the contemporary sociological discussion in India which promoted ahistorical epistemology. So, how a kind of historical consciousness is something important was again a product of this intervention. Although a sense of history and a form of evolutionism was something that was always present in the sociological discussion, whether on caste, religion or family and kinship, this was enmeshed in Orientalist methodologies and thus the notion of the past, which was located in ancient India.

And she gives the example of Ghurye as representing the image of India having a a



distinct past as a concrete entity. And how Ghurye and host of scholars of that particular age presented pictures like that. Ghurye's sociological overview was located within what is now known as a traditional nationalist discourse. A discourse that valorised the ancient past as a way to construct and understand the present and thus build a new future for India. So, again you must know that this is a part of a larger discourse which has become more powerful now, saying that we had a glorious past and that past got ruined in between due to external influences and external aggression and the immediate task at hand is to regain that lost glory.

So, these voices are becoming more and more louder and forceful now. For the traditionalist nationalist intellectuals from which mainstream Sociology drew, including Ghurye and others, it is precisely the present given the colonial experience from which we feel we must escape. As a result, they decided to be creative and search for new principles of modernity that were now transposed to the past of India. A past ironically organised in and through the orientalist methodology. So, this is again part of a larger debate that this imagination of the past is a very modern idea.

It is realised through the tools and techniques and discourses that are available in the era of modernity. So, our imagination of an unchanging past is specifically a modern imagination enabled by modern vocabulary, modern technology and modern tools within modernity. No wonder Chatterjee suggests that these intellectuals construct a picture of those days when there was beauty, prosperity and healthy sociability. This makes the very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity. So, that is something of a very specific thing that India has to deal with, and India still is dealing with.

In a different way, historian Sumit Sarkar makes a similar argument when he suggests that while western and modern history writing has generally been state-oriented with an understanding of the nation as a reflection of the nation-state, the historical consciousness of Indian intelligent India in the late 19th and early 20th century was oriented to the valorisation of culture against the state. So, Indian nationalist scholars have a very problematic association with the notion of state, especially the Mughal period, which is

seen as an era of decline of a very prosperous ancient Hindu tradition that declined during the Mughal period and also during the colonial period. So, that contradiction emerges here. As argued earlier, feminist studies in India questioned and demolished the silo tip of valorised traditions and exposed their moorings in covert and overt violence. Feminists made critique of the late 19th century reform movement and argued that this was limited to the discussion of the religious basis of these practices and on the fine points of scriptural interpretation and legitimised the civilising mission of colonialism and evangelism.

So, there are very fascinating works by a host of scholars who looked into the nature of social reformism of the 19th and 20th century and how certain social reformist attempts were made and what was the basis of such intervention and and ironically all of them agree that it was very limited in its ambition. To a large extent, it helped in reifying Hinduism modeling Hinduism after Christianity or after Christianity as if every social custom and culture of people are defined and decided by a religion. There are very fascinating studies by feminist scholars. One of the studies that comes to my mind is the work by historian Latha Mani who looked into the controversy associated with the banning of sati. So, she can clearly tell that the interventions of the colonial state, the involvement of Indian scholars, and Indian reformist leaders, were all revolved around the whole question of the religious legitimacy of sati.

In that way, essentially they were imagining Hinduism as something identical to that of Christianity. The criticism here also follows that argument. More particularly, the discussion on women's entitlement within the family system brought out a deep organic relationship between modern laws, the colonial construction of religion and the framing of family in India. For Sociology, this was a revolutionary intellectual intervention. These are the studies that looked into a host of colonial interventions at the familial and religious levels.

Not only did the orientation displace the thesis of modernity of tradition, but it also simultaneously recognised the fact that Indian modernity was inaugurated with colonialism. Feminists were asserting an argument which some Marxist have presented

earlier. The discourse of tradition and the valorisation of the principles of purity and pollution were organising and legitimising material and were constitutive of the social process of inequalities within India. Even today, a significant number of sociologists find it difficult to state that India has been a modern society since colonialism. And possibly even before that, where traditions have been reconstituted in many ways to legitimise control of women's bodies, actions, agencies and representations of themselves.

So, this is a very important argument. The discourse of tradition and the valorisation of principles of purity and pollution were organising and legitimising material and was constitutive of social processes of inequalities within India. So, this whole discussion about tradition, notions of purity and pollution and a host of other interventions were the reasons why the inequalities got perpetuated and constituted in India. Thus, feminist studies have interrogated the intellectual insularity and had a structured Sociology as a discipline. After independence, sociologists in India had affirmed a need to have a sociological language that can comprehend the uniqueness of Indian nation and its culture and civilisation. Sociologists in India saw their project as that which analyses one's own society and nation in one's own terms without colonial and neo-colonial tutelage.

This project followed the institutionalisation of a particularistic problematic, namely an assessment of the changes occurring within India's characteristic institutions such as caste, kinship, family and religion. So, a quest for an, unmediated access to Indian society was something that was kind of required. This particularistic problem had much in common with the notion of India embedded within the elite and this mainstream nationalism. Hence, sociologists examined modernity and modernisation and the changes occurring within the institutions of caste, family, kinship and religion as part of the analysis of which they termed structure and change. So, that was a preoccupation with which they kind of worked.

Against this, the feminist studies opened up its theoretical discussions on new intellectual trends organising contemporary social sciences such as structuralism and

psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and post-colonialism and showed awareness of the comparative process of subordination taking place in various parts of the world, particularly in the global south, something the sociologists and anthropologists have rarely examined. Sujata Patel is always a very important advocate of comparative Sociology, not focusing exclusively on a particular domain and then trying to generalise, but trying to see how similar processes take place in different regions and to benefit from the kind of a comparison that is emerging. So, additionally, as a consequence, a window to new ideas opened up because they were looking into Indian society by using very innovative theoretical ideas. Additionally, feminists have also made a comparative analysis of the regional and local variations of women subordination within the country, again a methodological innovation which contemporary Sociology and social anthropology have not addressed. Some are looking into a comparative analysis of the regional and local variations of women subordination, the different comparative framework.

Because as we know, Indian Sociology has been heavily influenced by British anthropology which heavily depended on participant observation and extended ethnographic study to make sense of that. As a consequence, the third point, feminist studies argued that everyday practices organise women's subordination and that these were expressed and legitimised in and through various norms, values, ideologies, institutional structures and that is intersected differently with class, caste, ethnicity, nation, religion and religion. Certainly, Sociology in India had a notion of cultural diversity, but it had little to no intellectual resources to comprehend the diversities in an intersectional subordination. So, her argument is it was the feminist intervention that brought in the point that we discussed earlier, the possibilities of intersectionality that brought in the myriad diversities of Indian experiences. Sensitive to this multiplicity, this diversity is something specifically a contribution of women's studies according to Sujata Patel. The fourth point is that, as we know, sociological enquiry brings together three elements, order, change and action, when it analyses the dynamics that interrelate action with order and change. Action becomes redefined in feminist thought when it linked subjectivities and experiences to agency.

So, to what extent is an individual an owner of her own actions? she has ownership of her own body, sexuality, actions, and dreams; these are important questions. In feminist studies, these subjectivities, also called narratives, were initially given epistemic privilege. However, when feminists interrogated women's involvement in dowry deaths and in communal riots or in other kind of things, you realise that women, because they are women, do not really possess any any emancipatory or progressive or any other kind of anti-oppressive position. She talks about how feminists had to encounter women's involvement in dowry, harassment of other women, and women's involvement in communal riots.

So, it all kind of really challenges certain taken for granted essentialist ideas that women have, women always stand for justice, women stand for emancipation, women stand for peace, love, all these things. This has led some feminists to use post-structuralist analysis, while others have reframed the problem of agency. And yet others have raised fundamental issues regarding the organic connection between knowledge and power and agency and critical social science.

In the conclusion, in an earlier contribution, Sujata argued that Sociology in India had gone through major upheavals in the 1980s.

In this article, I am suggesting that without feminist studies dethroning the main foundations of received sociological practices, the subsequent changes in the discipline that took place in the late 1980s would not have been possible. The displacement of traditional paradigm of family, kinship, caste and religion led sociological tradition in India to reframe the discipline and introduce interdisciplinary ways of doing theories and new methodologies, allowing reflections on both the nature of modernity and contemporary institutional domination that organised social processes. This interrogation also created conditions in the late 1980s for the subaltern perspective, such as Dalit and tribal studies, to mark their presence in the discipline and allowed India-oriented sociological tradition to open itself to a dialogue with international and global traditions of social sciences. She looks at it as a very decisive intervention and how this, was something very, very fundamental in complicating India's engagement with modernity

and how this involvement of feminist scholarship in Indian sociology enabled India's sociology to come out from its very narrow worldviews and then be sensitive to the larger idea.

You may not find much of a difference between the arguments we discussed this week but they are all important interventions trying to chronicle and critically evaluate the relationship between feminist scholarship and Indian sociological tradition. We will discuss one more essay on a similar topic in the coming class. See you then. Thank you.