

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

Dr. Santhosh R

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

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Lecture-56

Decolonialism in Sociology I

Hello all, welcome to today's class. My name is Dayal Paleri, and I am a PhD scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Madras. For the next two classes we will discuss the decolonial school in Sociology. We will be dealing with decolonialism and how Sociology was impacted or shaped by the recent rise of decolonial debates in Social Sciences. So, you have been listening to various sociological traditions broadly within Indian Sociology, but also I think that you will be familiar with the sociological traditions on a global scale as such.

You must be familiar with sociology as a discipline, which originated in Europe, in Western Europe, to be particular. The three classical sociological thinkers in the sociological canon are Marx, Durkheim and Weber, who come from France, Germany, and Western European countries. The idea of a society that early sociologists or the sociological canon theorized is largely the society in Western Europe.

But we know that when we study Sociology today, we more or less refer to these three European thinkers as the classical sociological thinkers. So I mean, if you think about the body of work, it is very clear that the idea of society they were dealing with or they were writing about was largely European society. So this is where decolonial Sociology becomes very important because it problematises the fundamental question of whose society was the subject of study of classical or even modern Sociology to a great extent. So, the decolonial school, in that way, becomes a mode of rethinking the sociological

canon itself.

I am talking about the context of decolonial Sociology. It also comes from increasing awareness of how Sociology as a discipline is inextricably connected with the process of colonialism. The knowledge production of knowledge or sociological or any other Social Science knowledge is taken more or less as regarded as nonpolitical.

But here in the decolonial thinking, the process of knowledge production itself is seen as a product of certain power dynamics. So this is a broader context of the decolonial intervention in Sociology that we will be talking about in this class and the next class. So the class will be broadly based on this particular article that appeared in the journal *Current Sociology* which is being published by the International Sociological Association. The article's title is *Sociology's Encounter with the Decolonial, the Problem of Indigenous versus that of Coloniality, Extraversion and Colonial Modernity*.

So as you can see, this article was recently published and tells us that the decolonial tradition is a very recent tradition within the sociological school. The author is Professor Sujata Patel, formerly Professor of Sociology at the University of Hyderabad and currently a fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies and Savitribai Phule University. She is a well-regarded sociologist globally renowned for her contribution to various aspects of Sociology. Recently she has been working, as part of a network of sociologists from the global south who are forwarding or formulating the idea of decolonial Sociology as a very coherent sociological school that critiques not only the classical sociological canon but also the modern sociological canon if you are familiar with the works that ranges from Ulrich Beck and the recent sociologists who have been highly regarded. So they also problematise the modern sociological canon.

Before we delve into the article, little bit of background here, I hope all of you are familiar with what we mean by the process and idea of decolonialisation. To understand decolonial Sociology, we should have a prior understanding of what constitutes decolonialisation. So, decolonialisation is the process through which the colonial imperialist states withdrew from colonized countries and was initiated soon after the end

of the Second World War. It is a very familiar process. In our country, India this particular process is particularly important for understanding Indian Sociology because even the idea of Indian Sociology was largely institutionalised only after the process of the British withdrawal of power from the Indian subcontinent. Decolonialisation is the process through which colonial and imperialist states withdrew from the colonized countries. So we know there are a lot of socio-political reasons behind it. It is not a very voluntary thing but also largely due to the social changes going on in the world, especially with the Second World War and the rise of anti-colonial movements within each colonies like the Indian National Congress in India. So these socio-political forces have given rise to this particular process, and this process is very important in understanding how Sociology as a discipline is formed not only in the colonies but also in the colonizer's context.

In the process of decolonialisation it is the Europeans largely who were the coloniser and the non-western countries such as African, Asian or Latin American countries who was the colonised. These particular geopolitical power relations continued even after the process of colonisation you must be familiar with various other ways such as the process of neo-colonisation and so on. So this particular power relations between the coloniser and the colonised is particularly important in understanding the decolonial critique. We know that the process of decolonialisation led to the formation of new nation states. India for example, even though there are condensions that idea of India has existed even before the arrival of British but India as a nation state as we know it today has formed only in the late 1940s, and 1950s with the adoption of the Indian constitution we formally became a nation state which is more or less the story in every other decolonised country. So, two important processes are particularly important when we talk about nation-building or the formation of a new nation-state. As this nation-state has been established as a young new nation, it must have two important pillars for its nation-building. The first is much talked about, including the idea of national development and the idea of having a sovereign economy. You are sovereign now in political terms but you should also be sovereign in a more economic sense. So that is where we talk about the industrialisation and development of the nation state. However,

a particularly important and associated process is the emergence of national social sciences and the need for sovereign theories about national reconstruction . While much has been written on national development and how development as a process is important for newly independent nations, we seldom talk about how the emergence of Social Science institutions is equally important in the imagination of the newly independent nation-state. We not only need sovereign national economics, but we also need sovereign theories to legitimise the independent existence of the nation state.

That is why soon after we became independent, the Indian government established a series of Social Science institutions, including the Indian Council for Social Science Research. And this also parallels other forms of knowledge, not just in Social Sciences. The Indian Institute of Technologies established across India is also part of this idea of sovereign nation, sovereign technology and so on. So, these two processes are particularly important to give context to sociology's emergence in India. So what are the imperatives of the newly formed nation state and the emergence of the sovereign nationalistic Social Sciences. As we already talked the decolonialisation and the emergence of new nation state has immediately led to the emergence of national Social Science institutions, it also corresponded with a need to produce not just national institutions but also a nationalistic Social Sciences and in our case a nationalistic Sociology that would in turn legitimise the existence and the boundaries and the legitimacy of the newly formed nation-state in our India. Therefore, the emergence of Indian sociology is very much connected to the question of national sovereignty itself. So this is the background of the emergence of nation state.

It is very clear that the process of decolonisation has also given rise to newer forms of nationalistic Sociology across the world. In that way how did it change Sociology is an important question that we will be dealing with. And then later, in this newly independent nation-state, very recently, a decolonised perspective of Sociology has emerged. How did that affect sociological tradition that has been largely centered on European experiences . As we all know, with the traditional sociological canon, the main role of the metropole or the center of Europe is to collate and process data and

produce theory .

Most of the theoretical concepts that we know in Sociology today, be it class, status, and our idea of gender, sexuality, and all those things, have been first theorised in the European context, and then it has been exported and used by sociologists in the periphery in the global south . This is a traditional power exchange, or this is the circuit of knowledge production in Sociology in traditional Sociology, and let us see how the decolonialisation perspective challenges the idea. So let us come back to Sujata Patel's article. She actually identifies two schools of decolonial Sociology that emerged in the global south. In her opinion decolonial perspective is not very new even though the decolonial perspective that she subscribes to.

There has been another form of decolonial perspective in Sociology raised just after the formation or the process of decolonisation itself, which she refers to as Indigenous Sociology. The first decolonial Sociology that emerged in the global south according to Sujata Patel is the indigenous Sociology. Indigenous Sociology questions the conceptual validity, political legitimacy and ethical grounding of the post-enlightenment western civilisation and its knowledge and asserts instead the difference, it is a key word here, the difference in understanding of the national social. It grounds this difference from Europe, West in a notion of belonging, a cultural identity defined within a locality, geography and territory. So the idea is that this Indigenous Sociology actually problematizes the idea of what constitutes the national social,? Whose society are you studying? Based on whose experience are you building the sociological concept? So they actually challenged that much of the sociological ideas, theories, canons that are being presented as the universal sociological theories is a very provincialised one which is largely derived on the experiences of the post-enlightenment western civilization in the 18th, 19th and early 20th century and they asserted an idea of the fundamental difference of experiences of empirical realities between the west and non-west and then they put forward a notion that one needs to produce their own sociological theories based on ideas or concepts that derive from the particular cultural identities, cultural atmosphere defined within the locality, geography and territory.

So if we say, if you have to produce an indigenous Sociology of Indian society, you need not look at the theories or experiences from Western sociology, but you need to look at how the society is organised, what indigenous concepts or theories are being used by the people of India to understand themselves in their own context. So you need to look at that and derive sociological theories and concepts from one's own cultural atmosphere or cultural belongingness and cultural identities. This is the fundamental claim or fundamental thesis of indigenous Sociology. But then, Patel identified a more sophisticated, more revisionist, more refined form of decolonial school that emerged from the global south very recently, which she more or less calls a neo-Marxist decolonial Sociology. It doesn't mean that they identify themselves as neo-Marxist, which only means that the later decolonial schools were more or less inspired by some traditions within the broad neo-Marxist tradition.

This is also not a coherent school; this is a term that Sujata Patel co-ends for an analytical purpose of different schools in decolonial Sociology. And she says in recent times, let us say after the last 20, 30 years, different scholars, very independently of each other without mutual exchanges, have used Marxist ideas on social structuring of knowledge to make a methodological and epistemic critique of European and Western Sociology or Social Sciences together with the nationalist indigenous knowledge system. They used the Marxist ideas on how knowledge is produced and how knowledge production is connected with the social structure or the unequal relation between the global north and the global south, the centre and the periphery. And they advanced not just an epistemic critique, a critique of the Western concept or Western theory of knowledge, but also the methodology of how the Western social science or Sociology has been constructed. They also advanced a critique of the first form of decolonial Sociology, a nationalistic indigenous knowledge system.

Those two points are very important in that they offered not only a critique of the sociological epistem, of the sociological knowledge but also the methodology of Western European Sociology, as well as critiqued the Indigenous Sociology that was immersed

soon after the process of decolonisation. So before going into the details of each two schools, Patel outlines five methodological aspects of the decolonial approach in Sociology. So, the first point to keep in mind is that geographically varied and intellectually diverse decolonial critiques are being formulated using sociological theory to critique the universals propounded by traditions of Western Sociology and Social Sciences. So even when we use categories like global north and global south, west and non-west, we should understand that we should not treat either global south or non-west as a very homogenous category.

For example, in our context, we often use sociological traditions from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and we know how heterogeneous each of these three regions is. Therefore, naturally, the decolonial critique that emerged from all these all these regions is also intellectually diverse. So even when we use the term decolonial Sociology, it does not mean that there are much internal agreements. It is as diverse and geographically varied as possible. So this is the first point to keep in mind.

The second point is this multiple current engaged with the heritage of academic colonialism in each specific nation-state region, territory and distinct time period and relation to a specific colonial state. So we know even when we use the term a coloniser, there have been different colonisers, Almost most of the Western European countries colonised different regions and countries like Japan were colonised. So, the experiences of each colony were very different depending on who the coloniser was. These differences in experiences also constitute a factor in the decolonial critique that emerged from each of these different regions.

So that is also another important point to keep in mind when we think about decolonial critique and Sociology.

Thirdly, some of these recent critics also interrogated their own native scholarship and questioned both colonial Western and native Indigenous scholars who propagate this. So, we need to understand the object of the decolonial critique was not only the West; it was also a self-interrogating critique, making it much more valuable. But we know that sociological concept has to be methodologically self critical. To evaluate any scientific

theory or scientific approach, it should be able to correct itself as we apply it to different contexts.

Similarly, the decolonial critique that emerged from various contexts was not only critical of the non-Western theory or the sociological canon, but it was also critical of the kind of indigenous or national Social Sciences that emerged from one certain context. And thirdly and fourthly it is a very important assumption about decolonial critique that the understanding that Sociology or Social Sciences in general even though it claims to be universal is actually constituted within the politics of differences organised within colonial, nationalistic and global geopolitics. The idea is that there are different understanding about differences that constitute the fundamentals of ideas about our society. For example, the difference between the West and the non-west, the spiritual and the material, the state and society, individual and society, structure and agency and so on. So this idea of difference, the difference which has been produced in the process of colonialism is fundamental, produced to the process of colonisation and persisting to the contemporary geopolitics is fundamental to the constitution of the discipline of Sociology or Social Sciences itself.

So this amounts to an understanding or awareness of how power plays an important role in the constitution of the Social Science discipline. So this is the question, this amounts to the politics of knowledge production that we alluded to earlier, this is the fourth important assumption or the premise of our decolonial critique. Finally, this difference, the idea of difference that constitutes the Sociology or contemporary Social Sciences, is reproduced in everyday knowledge practices and is structured through the political economy of knowledge. The idea of difference that informs every modern Social Science discipline is reproduced through everyday institutional knowledge practices as well as the larger political economy of the knowledge flow across the globe. These are some methodological aspects or assumptions of the colonial approach to Sociology that Patel outlines.

Now, we will come to the first current in decolonial Sociology that Patel identifies, which is Indigenous Sociology, which is informed by an assumption of methodological

nationalism. So we will come to that point in detail. So there are four concerns. This is a school of decolonial thought that emerged in the newly independent nations in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation in the 1950s or 1960s depending upon the context.

So there are four concerns for the nationalistic or the indigenous Sociology in this newly independent nations according to Patel. The first is the constitution of Social science concepts in local regional languages with the use of local resources; I told you before this corresponds to the need to have sovereign social theories, sovereign theories about national building or even national identity. So, there is a compulsion to produce social science concepts in local and regional languages using local resources. You need to build your theories from your own cultural and socio-economical surroundings and not look at the Western experiences or the Western theories.

The second is the promotional research by insider citizens rather than outsiders and non-citizens. So let us take the case of India. During the colonial time, most of the sociologists or even anthropologists of the time, or even any social scientists of the time were the British themselves or people who associated with the colonisers, All these Social Science disciplines emerged as part or very much connected to the process or the project of colonialism itself. So now, with the emergence of nationalistic Social Sciences or Sociology, there is a promotion to have native social scientists, Indians themselves. They might be educated in the non-west but they need to be attentive or they need to promote, they need to be Indians and they need to commit towards the emerging nation and this national building itself. So the idea of having social scientists who are insider to the society becomes particularly important.

Thirdly, the determination of research priorities in terms of national priorities that, in turn, can aid the nation-state in evaluating its development programs or national reconstruction. It is also very clear that the newly independent nationalist Sociology was not very autonomous in terms of thinking, but it should; it was prioritised based on national priorities. Let us think about the 1950s and 60s; the priorities that the Indian nation-building project had on development were largely in terms of building our

economy.

So all the social sciences should be able to assist that larger project. This was another important assumption.

Fourthly is formulating autonomous and alternative theoretical and methodological paradigms in terms of local, national, philosophical and cultural legacies. One could also say that this led to the idea of building a Sociology based on our civilization legacies. So here, this is connected to all the three points that we have discussed that the theoretical and methodological paradigms that this national sociology built should take its resources or should build about our own cultural paradigms.

So we will see how that actually played out by a few of the national sociologists in India and other contexts. We end this class here. So, in the next class, we will detail the two kinds of decolonial sociologies, specifically indigenous sociology and neo-Marxist traditions. We also present a broad discussion on the direction in which decolonial sociologies can take. Thank you.