

## Rethinking the debate on the 'crisis' in sociology

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This paper is an attempt to take a re-look at the recent debate on 'crisis in Indian sociology' – primarily of the last decade. What appears to be constitutive in such constructions of a 'crisis' is a sense of despair about, if not hopelessness or even abandonment of, the discipline. The paper seeks to question some of the assumptions that inform such a construction of 'crisis' and moves on to suggest the need to 'own up' the discipline and begin to think about Indian sociology in a far more positive manner. It concludes by arriving at the question 'Why is it still worth doing sociology/social sciences?' and argues that the sociological community in India needs to make this question constitutive in its efforts to (re)-imagine the discipline.

In the first section, certain protocols are taken note of in order to position this note vis-à-vis the debate on the crisis in Indian sociology. Second section would attempt to outline the important arguments of this debate and seeks to argue that the perceived 'crisis' of contemporary Indian sociology has, in fact, been quite constitutive of the discipline throughout its history. Then, Section Three attempts to create a different register on which the contexts and the practice of Indian sociology need to be mapped. The contemporary state of the discipline is also problematised and the paper concludes by suggesting the necessity to think about our discipline(s) far more positively by consciously avoiding the imperatives imposed by the perceptions of 'crisis'.

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## CRISIS:

A stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, *esp. for better or for worse, is determined*; turning point; the point in the course of a serious disease at which a *decisive change* occurs, *leading either to recovery or to death*.

Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 1994 (italics added).

Sociology has been a discipline that has exhibited a rather unique ability or tendency to be reflective about itself and its constitutive practices.<sup>1</sup> While the works of C. Wright Mills (1959), Robert Nisbet (1966), Alvin Gouldner (1971) and Bottomore (1975) have been foundational in Western sociology, the Indian sociological community has caught on, rather early in its life, with such attempts to build a sociology of its self - the pioneering contributions being those of A K Saran (1958) and the participants in the *for a sociology of India* debate, a forum provided by the journal, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. During the last two decades or so, the *margins*, so to say, have begun to raise uncomfortable questions regarding the ideological predilections that inform the 'pathways' of the so-called mainstream sociology.<sup>2</sup> (For a detailed bibliography, see Seminar 495, November 2000). In the last ten years or so, the idiom of 'crisis' has captured the imagination of the Indian sociological community. It is this debate that we turn our attention to in this 'note'.

In the first section, certain protocols are taken note of in order to position this note vis-à-vis the debate on the crisis in Indian sociology. Second section would attempt to outline the important arguments of this debate. Final section will try to bring in a set of new questions into the framework of the debate so that some rather foundational issues that have been erased shall be frontalised.

### Section I: Terms of Dialogue

Here, we shall note the terms of reference that are set for the participants of the debate on crisis. This is necessary not merely to help us ask questions about its politics of exclusion, but, more importantly, to critique the co-ordinates of the debate even from within.

Firstly, the simple, but never taken note of, point that the debate on the crisis<sup>3</sup> a) talks only about and of the 'research community'; and consequently b) does not seek to include within its ambit the undergraduate course and even, a significant proportion of the post-graduate students of sociology and the questions that such an inclusion would frontalise. The second, but equally constitutive, reminder is that this debate appears to work with an imagination of sociology as being a craft that is solely restricted to and, thus, working within the academia. That is, it does not understand *sociological imagination* to be at work and of use outside the academia.

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<sup>1</sup> Why this should be so has been debated. While many like Deshpande (1999) and Jayaram (1997) are quite certain that it has to do with the discipline's (inherent?) tendency to nurture an "ability to turn its critical gaze back on itself" (Deshpande, 1999), I am perhaps a little wary about imposing such a responsibility on the discipline primarily for the reason that we do not appear to be quite certain about not merely the contents of that practice called 'self-reflexivity' and its co-ordinates, but also what constitutes this 'sociological self'. For instance, the discipline of sociology, particularly in India, has often tried in vain to define its self vis-à-vis other social sciences. Consequently, the question that confronts us is what are we reflexive about and even who is this 'we'. This point becomes stark if the exclusivising tendencies of the Indian sociological varieties of self-reflexivity, whose elaboration in fact contains the central argument of this paper, are taken note of. The wariness is also the result of having got to know many an 'uncritical' sociologist myself!

See also Uberoi (2000) for an interesting dialogue among sociologists on this question.

<sup>2</sup> The attack mounted by feminists has been singularly impressive in this respect.

<sup>3</sup> This statement is true not merely of this particular debate but generally of the whole enterprise of self-reflexivity that Indian sociologists have undertaken.

Third, following from the above, except for a negligibly few interventions (like Deshpande 1999 and EPW April 28, 2001) the entire debate is by, for and of the sociological research community. That is to say, the community that draws its identity from sociology and, in turn identifies itself with sociology. Thus, it is primarily about sociologists in university departments and research institutions comprising of teachers, researchers and a varying number of research students who, as a category, would keep their option of accepting/discarding this identity for themselves 'open' till the last moment.<sup>4</sup> It is even debatable to what extent even this motley 'sociological community', in India at least, would happily own that identity. This necessarily raises questions of professionalism, vocation et al to which we shall return to in the third section.

Fourth, an implicit hierarchy is sustained between what can be grossly called as 'academic/pure sociology' and 'project/applied sociology'. University departments (particularly those that are the 'torchbearers') of sociology usually argue for a commitment to doing 'pure' sociology that either refuses to answer or, altogether, dismiss queries on their immediacy, utility value and 'relevance',<sup>5</sup> and, instead, point to the "self-reflexivity that is built into the sociological imagination", which resists attempts to instrumentalise it. This position leads them more often than not to either a) dismiss research work that takes place in institutions that primarily survive on taking projects from different sources as being insufficiently sociological, if not non-sociological; or b) become suspicious about their motives on grounds of either nationalism (accusations of furthering academic colonialism) or of opposing imperialist designs.<sup>6</sup> The point that concerns us here is that almost all the participants in the debate on crisis in sociology have been from university departments. This, coupled with the point that our second reminder made, has defined the boundaries of this 'sociological self that is in crisis'.

To put it differently, the sociology that is supposedly "in crisis" is not the undergraduate sociology. Or, rather, we have no idea whether it too shares a sense of crisis and if it does, is it the same crisis or different and so on. Neither have post-graduate students (even from 'torchbearer departments'), who could be called the *undecided practitioners* of sociology, as against the teachers, the *assured practitioners*, have articulated a sense of crisis (except, as far as one's information goes, the workshop conducted by the research students of the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad). Thus the debate not only inhabits, and speaks about, a different world, but also, more crucially, refuses even to acknowledge the existence of the space of undergraduate sociology and of the *undecided practitioners*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We will get back to this point in the Third Section. This exclusivising tendency was very visibly demonstrated during the XXIV All India Sociological Conference held at Osmania University, Hyderabad in 1997. These conferences, as you know, seek to provide a forum for sociologists in India to come together and primarily imagine themselves as a community. The 24<sup>th</sup> Conference, apparently in response to the debate on crisis in Indian sociology, organised a symposium titled 'Challenges to Indian Sociology'. The panelists were all old, that meant no student; if one's memory serves right, there was just one woman panelist; apparently, all the panelists were upper caste. The entire range of presentations did not include a single statement on the very material 'crisis' that the students faced. Even during the discussion that followed, it was only after some research students 'brazenly' intervened that a student was allowed to talk about 'mundane issues' of jobs, prospects etc. The point here is not so much that of representation as it is of standpoint.

<sup>5</sup> The issue of 'relevant sociology' has occupied the minds of many sociologists. See, for instance, Seminar issue 157, September 1972 and Uberoi, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Seminar issue 112 on 'academic colonialism' December 1968, Bhambhri, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> In this debate, if at all there is any reference to the sociology that is taught at the undergraduate level or, in general, to the students as a category, it is only to either note the low level that it occupies "in the pecking order" in the undergraduate *choice* list (Deshpande, Sundar and Uberoi, 2000) or to make despairing, if not disparaging, statements about 'leftovers' or 'dregs' joining sociology during under-graduation (Jayaram, 1997). Or to indulge in some unabashed elitism: "since there is no attempt to restrict admissions on the basis of

- Very little inter-disciplinary orientation.
- Factors responsible for crisis:
- Reservation Policy and/or growing political interference and expediency
- Teaching and research in regional languages.
- Incompetent pedagogy and unsatisfactory training in research.
- Politicisation of the university.
- Academic colonialism.
- Muzzling voices from the 'margins' (Rege and Uberoi).
- Solutions/suggestions offered:
- Centralisation of research resources.
- Write up-to-date textbooks.
- Primary and sole importance to 'merit'.
- Raising the competence level of English or the regional language (Das or Giri).
- Wait for the 'knight in shining armour' to give Indian sociology new directions.
- Need for self-reflexivity (Deshpande, Rege – Deshpande wants us to be self-reflexive so that we can point out the 'institutional failures', so to say, of Indian sociology while Rege argues for a self-reflexivity that would locate the 'ideological failures' of Indian sociology).
- Gather data to even begin making claims on the state of sociology in India (Deshpande).
- Follow the principle of "following a vocation".

*What do they all agree upon?*

Primarily that sociological research in India is in crisis. Second, a sociologist is one who is a) a 'left over' that the other, more 'happening' disciplines have rejected and thus largely incompetent; b) ill equipped in most senses of the term – in facility over English, in mathematical/statistical ability, in knowing elementary facts in/of sociology; c) largely unprofessional and, consequently, not committed to the discipline.

Note that this 'sociologist' has no other socio-economic markings on him/herself. S/he does not have a context, apart from that of being an 'Indian' sociologist. In addition, this universal subject does not seem to be affected by contexts and histories.<sup>11</sup>

### Section III: Some Questions

In this Section, we will try to ask some questions that have been left out, in order that the debate tends towards being more inclusive and thus be in a position to ask larger questions of context and location.

We need to ask constitutive questions as to who constitutes sociology; what constitutes sociology; what are the larger socio-economic contexts that sociology finds itself in; what are the significations that sociology stands for both for its practitioners and for the outsiders who could be the eventual users of sociological knowledge – the state, media, industry, civil society/NGOs, political society/social movements, economy and so on; how do we, the sociological community, restructure those significations in order that the discipline survives this 'crisis'?

We shall begin this section with certain simple but crucial and often missed gestures of contextualisation. While it is obvious that any statement on *Indian* sociology is already contextualised as it is a statement on sociology in a particular space, the attempt here is to

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<sup>11</sup> See note 10 above. Particularly, Deshpande and Rege, but also Murthy do move towards contextualising the issue.

show how they have been largely off the mark, as they have tended to be elitist and even knee-jerk and ahistorical.

Taking even a cursory look at the history of sociology in India (available mainly through many richly detailed auto-biographical accounts/references of the pioneers like Ghurye, M N Srinivas, Andre Beteille, T N Madan, Patricia Uberoi, J P S Uberoi but also in many more efforts at documentation and analysis) will lead us to a few curious observations.

Most of the Indian sociologists are sociologists by default. To put it more frontally, the discipline of sociology in India has always been a *discipline by default!* At the undergraduate level, sociology has never been a preferred subject, for:

The most important signification that sociology had was (and, perhaps, still has is) that it studied something that was obvious and thus easy. Consequently, it was/is not for an ambitious, 'competent'/'brilliant' student who would rather pursue more 'challenging', perhaps 'manly' career.

It studied family, kinship, caste etc., which are part of the 'private' and thus fit for women. Consequently, the 'feminification' of sociology began rather early in its history.

Then, for an immense majority of the sociologists it was never a choice that they made. This appears to have been the case all through the history of Indian sociology. But what is perhaps more important is the fact that even the three years of under-graduate sociology did not perceptibly increase the number of students who would *choose* sociology as their career. The suggestion here is not that these students remain/ed 'passive' subjects of such choices. However, their negotiations with sociology were/are<sup>12</sup> always-already framed within the available significations.

Thus, when they enrol/ed for a post-graduate degree in sociology and even during their post-graduation in sociology, most of the students did/do not imagine themselves as sociologists. This continued/s even until many years into their M Phils and Ph Ds. A large percentage of them still dream/t of and work for Civil Services', Bank and other Recruitment Board examinations. Sociology, even at this stage, stayed/s low in "the pecking order". Finally, after exhausting all the 'chances' that the Civil Services and other such tests offer, one sat/sits down to write the thesis. Consequently, whoever were/are thus "left behind twice" came/come to constitute the Indian sociological community.<sup>13</sup> But even until the late 1980s, this 'community by default' had nothing to be scared about because the state, by the standards of a third world country, was quite generous in setting up departments all over India which meant that there were quite a few teaching jobs available.

For this 'cast away' but largely middle class (i.e., coming from families which could sponsor extended years of education) community, social sciences (perhaps with the exception of economics) and humanities thus offered rehabilitation sites. This character of being 'cast away', coupled with its unsuccessfulness to persuade the outside world to accord it the status of a science/profession, had/has largely been responsible for sociology's inability to imagine itself as a profession, particularly in an increasingly mathematised and scientised imagination of a newly emerging national community.

What primarily follows from this is that if this is the 'crisis' that sociology is facing (as following Das many have tried to argue) then it is an eternal crisis and, in itself, is neither new nor recent. One cannot construct a 'glorious past' for Indian sociology and feel sad for its demise for there was none. However, still many are wont to do it.<sup>14</sup> If the analysis of the

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<sup>12</sup> Note the simultaneousness of the 'tenses' that are employed. This is to suggest that many of these processes were not really different in the 'golden age' that is sought to be constructed for Indian sociology.

<sup>13</sup> The number of people who *chose* sociology was, and continues to be, minuscule.

<sup>14</sup> For a representation, see Swarup (1994). In complete agreement with Das's initiating paper (1993) in the EPW, in a response titled '*Excellence Relegated to Mediocrity*', Swarup states "Until about four decades ago, ... teaching jobs at the universities were not so lucrative but the profession was considered noble. Teachers

state of sociology stops at this, then it is fundamentally flawed. The emphasis should be on understanding who is coming into sociology in the recent times, why are they coming in, how is this *choice* structured, what are the different uses that the 'space' of sociology is put to in today's context.

Two new processes are set in motion during the contemporary history that should concern us here. First, the rather phenomenal changes that processes of liberalisation brought in during the 1990s. Second, the changing caste-gender-class composition of the discipline, from the late 1980s.

What has primarily changed during the 1990s is the increasing refusal of the chief, if not the only, patron of higher education in India, the state, to fund the academia – centrally located in the university. Universities, apart from a few 'centres of excellence'<sup>15</sup>, are increasingly facing severe financial crunch leading them to cut down expenditure on recruitment, research and the like. On the other hand, the other state-run sources of employment have also begun to shrink – primarily the Civil Services and other Recruitment Boards. That is, the traditional sources of employment have begun to dry up while the numbers are increasing rapidly. Thus, the crisis of sociology (as indeed of higher education) today is *a very substantive and material crisis*. The crisis, put very bluntly, is that if there are less and less recruitments at the university and college level for which there are more and more applicants, if the general commonsense does not understand what the fuss about sociology is all about, and in an increasingly market-driven economy, if the market does not see a point in employing sociologists, what do we do with ourselves?

While this state of crisis is not unlike the crisis that higher education as a realm faces in India today, what is peculiar to sociology (like other traditional social science disciplines) is that the discipline has been unable to shrug off its negative significations and has shown a remarkable unwillingness to prepare itself to meet head-on the newer demands that the outside world was placing on it.

Couple the above point with the social composition of sociology today, and the crisis becomes much more real and politically urgent. Until the early 1980s, Indian sociological community drew its members quite constitutively from upper castes. While the majority among them were men, the number of women who did post-graduation was not insignificant. For these men, as suggested earlier, sociology was primarily a 'rehabilitation ground'. For upper caste women, sociology was within that range of 'acceptable' range of choices<sup>16</sup> about whose 'femininity' they could convince their kin networks. However, this composition has changed quite irrevocably today. Departments of Sociology in Indian universities, definitely the regional universities,<sup>17</sup> 'attract' a determinant number of its recruits from rural, dalit

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commanded high respect in society *and that alone* used to be the great attraction of the profession.... [But now] the national aim of giving full and equal opportunities for higher education to all could not distinguish the '*really interested*' from those who believed in '*something better than nothing*'" (1994: 208; emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Such ranking procedures smack of elitism and further the vicious cycle of making metropolitan 'centres of excellence' richer and regional universities cash-strapped.

<sup>16</sup> For these women, this *choice*, even when determined, worked as an enabling space not merely in the marriage market, but also in terms of their self-esteem.

<sup>17</sup> There are still pockets of sociology that are different from this trend. For instance the Department of Sociology at the University of Hyderabad has its majority number of students coming from largely upper caste women community. But such departments appear to be few and do not really contest the pattern. Even if one take such departments into consideration, the discipline appears to be drawing its constitutive population from 'lower' caste males and upper caste women. This appears like the case at present in all the spaces inaugurated by modernity and thus one can clearly see correlation between the raging debates on 'crisis in modernity' with the more specific debates on crises in sociology, English studies and so on.

and OBC communities.<sup>18</sup> This is true to such an overwhelming extent that one can metaphorically call Indian sociology a ‘dalitised discipline’. Added to this, since ‘sociology’ is so easily available, it has become a ‘mass discipline’, so to say. And for a large number of them, any such space – whether sociology or any other discipline, whether under-graduate or post-graduate level – by itself is a space of mobility. A majority of them are first generation literates, carrying hopes of an entire family (or even a kin network) in them, looking at a post-graduate (even under-graduate) degree as a passport to better living conditions, elevated sense of self-respect and so on.

But even here, they do not come to inhabit this space of sociology (or indeed, of higher education) for any great love for and romance with the discipline (which, as suggested earlier, was not the case earlier too, i.e., prior to articulations of the crisis). Neither is the primary hope that of getting a teaching job and the like, and becoming a sociologist.

But then this is nothing to be ashamed of. As Sudha Seetharaman (2001) states “The crisis seems to be felt more than ever when there is a substantial reconstitution in the composition of the students coming into the discipline. That the reconstitution of the students necessarily means reconstitution of the discipline is a truism not taken up by those who deplore the lack of competence in the practice of sociology” (7). Thus, it should plod us to ask the following question – what are the needs that such a space provides for, for this community?

To answer this question, some observations on the way in which under-graduate sociology gets structured are in order here.<sup>19</sup> Firstly, an overwhelming number of the students come from rural areas, are from dalit and OBC communities, most of them are first-generation literates, are coming into an urban setting for the first time, and finally have probably not even dreamt of imagining oneself as a sociologist. Secondly, for most of them what is primary is that they have had an access to an urban space, wherein they can explore different agendas, than the course itself.

Thirdly, even while many of them want to take sociology for they think that it is easy, more often than not they are not the ones who make the *choice* to do sociology. Various factors, particularly the eagerness of the faculty to not loose the required work-load so that one is not shunted out to some other unwanted college in some unwanted place, are at work. Even when a student decides to do and finally gets to do sociology the choice is arrived at not because of any “great love for the discipline” but because of factors like the flexibility of the faculty in giving attendance for a student even when he is absent so that he could take up a job outside, whether the teacher dictates notes which makes it easy in examinations or even some vague notion of the ‘goodness’ of the teacher et al.

Fourthly, many of them take up full-time jobs during the first year of the course itself, and if they find a teacher inflexible about it they would rather change the subject than quit the job.

Fifthly, the subjects in themselves do not matter in any substantive manner.<sup>20</sup> What does matter the most is whether one has adequate ‘notes’ and has access to some ‘trustable’ guide and finally, whether one has got ‘good’, marks, whether one has at least primary comfortableness with English language and so on.

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<sup>18</sup> Data concerning Bangalore University, a regional university and University of Hyderabad, a central university for the last five academic years has been collected, coupled with the gross estimates that Sudha Seetharaman (2001) provides for the under-graduate departments in Bangalore are available.

<sup>19</sup> Information regarding the under-graduate sociology course is primarily drawn from Sudha Seetharaman’s paper (2001) *Who are Sociologists? And what is Sociology?: Self-Reflexivity in the Making of Graduate Employable Students* presented at the workshop *Rethinking Disciplines* organised by Christ College and the Centre for Studies in Society and Culture, Bangalore. Her paper primarily draws from her experience as an under-graduate teacher at different government colleges in and around Bangalore wherein one would get to see the most ideal-typical student of sociology – a ‘left-over’, ‘dreg’, ‘incompetent’ but predominantly male student.

<sup>20</sup> This is even while having clear positions about what each ‘subject’ would signify, which remains an unexplored source for self-reflection for the *assured sociologists*.

All this would seem like a reiteration of the most constitutive signs of the state of 'crisis' that our discipline is supposedly in. That this scenario is not unique to Karnataka is evident, as all those participating in the debate on crisis appear to be noticing similar processes. But should we go ahead and write the obituary of Indian sociology?

This, grossly, appears to be the case in most of the regional post-graduate departments too. Thus, for most of these *undecided practitioners* of sociology, sociology is still not their primary identity. But sociology, as any other subject/discipline, serves other needs of this community.

They are primarily those of a) the realisation of their 'right to city'; b) a subsidised accommodation; c) some 'mobile' money through scholarships, though a pittance; c) greater access towards enhancement of skills and, even, information; d) a greater self-confidence etc. Thus, even here, sociology does not capture their imagination. However, quite crucially, it offers them a liberatory space. But this is no 'charity' argument, for they are also bringing in a certain different set of concerns and competencies into the discipline. It should be obvious that sociology, as any field of human interaction and meaning-making, gets to be constituted and re-constituted by its practitioners and thus the primacy should be accorded to sociologists and not some idealised notion of sociology.

It is in this context that the contemporary Indian sociology has to structure its possible moves. Instead, to impersonate as a sociological observation the rather typical upper caste anxiety regarding the 'loss of merit', 'growing political interference in university affairs, particularly in appointments', 'increasing incompetence' and so on in universities amounts to indulging in politicking rather than sociologising the phenomenon.

It is primarily in this sense that we need to understand the state of sociology more in terms of, and irrevocably from that of, higher education. While Deshpande (1994) is definitely right in asking us to be more sensitive to the specificities of the discipline of sociology<sup>21</sup>, it is also equally, if not more, important to keep its larger, contextual spaces when one is talking about the state of art.

Here, let us see what have been the general responses of the discipline to this articulated sense of crisis. Usually, the most immediate response has been to think in terms of initiatives to restructure the curriculum.<sup>22</sup> (See for instance, EPW 2001). This is a crucial step but cannot be our first step. How much ever one makes the syllabi up to date with recent theories, works, methods and equipment, and begin offering papers in the 'most happening areas' if one does not attempt to make sense of the changing contexts of sociology that structure its possible moves, the sense of 'crisis' will not be addressed meaningfully.

Some of the more alert gestures of contextualisation that have been made during the debate have tended towards making the discipline "political". Of course, this phrase is used here in a radically different and positive manner unlike Das, Murthy, and Swarup. It is important, as Rege and Deshpande suggest, to view the space of the classroom as "a site of interrogating power" in the sense that it critiques the ideological predilections of the mainstream sociology and prods it towards "turning the critical gaze back on itself". However, it also has a tendency to emphasise the task of making sociology "a politically correct" discipline and retaining the auratic value of sociology as being a "profoundly disenchanting discipline" and of a *vocation* at the expense of making sociology a craft, a specialisation, a skill, a profession, and thus a livelihood. If the previous generations of sociology have failed crucially anywhere, it is on this front. We have not become a "happening" discipline, and "we are still waiting for our

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<sup>21</sup> As he himself begins to point to some such specificities, there is much of a ground to be covered. But that is something that I would not get into in this paper.

<sup>22</sup> This is true not only in the case of post-graduate departments but also of under-graduate Board of Studies for instance, the Bangalore University's initiative. This point presents itself more starkly if we look at the debate on the 'crisis' in English studies, particularly the debates and initiatives in Bangalore University.



voices to be taken seriously, for students to flock to our courses, and for employers to queue up to hire our students” (Deshpande, Sundar, Uberoi 2000) primarily because the preceding generations of sociologists have not exerted themselves in making themselves professionals who have concrete skills to offer to the potential users of sociological knowledge.

When a student enrolls for a program in sociology<sup>23</sup>, he would be primarily looking at the space of the university as an opportunity, a space enabling upward mobility and so on. Department of sociology is a passport (i.e., a medium) to try different options available. That sociology has a lowly, or even incidental, place in that list is due to the fact that it does not usually promise its practitioners employment. Thus, simply put, the task before the sociologists is to translate that ‘passport’ into a ‘degree’ that can sell. One way of dismissing such concerns is to ask, “why should, at least theoretically, even if one has political sympathies with such a project, sociology enable such aspirations if the subject him/herself is not willing to identify with the discipline?” But it should be obvious that making sociologists “employable” is to simultaneously make sociology employable and thus viable.

Decrying those concerns as trivial and being disparaging about them<sup>24</sup> will not help us to negotiate with the sociology of today. If sociology in India today is a democratic space since it has made itself ‘easily’ available, the challenge will be to make this space more powerful in socio-economic terms. There is no point in constructing a phenomenon that has always characterised sociology into a crisis of today.

Most importantly, the contemporary historical moment demands that we articulate ourselves as an inevitable contributor in the task of building a democratic and egalitarian society and stake our claims, with an unprecedented assertion, in such a task instead of perceiving ourselves to be crisis ridden. Such posturings are crucial in making the world around us give us a fair hearing. What has characterised the debate regarding Indian sociology, sadly, is a sense of despair. Such a position, not only disallows one from not understanding the ‘structure of practices’ that are possible within the realm of Indian sociology, but, more crucially, it does not enable one to move towards offering prescriptions for the ‘crisis’ that sociology is supposedly in.

While the ‘massification’ of the discipline in itself offers ‘inherently democratic’ possibilities to be tried out, it also asks us to become more suspicious towards the whole idiom of ‘crisis’ that gets implanted onto sociology in India. For, as already observed, not much has changed in terms of the ‘in/competence’ and ‘un/professionalism’ of Indian sociology since its inception. And if one was inclined to speak about this crisis, then the sociological community need not have waited until the 1990s. Interestingly, most of the hitherto attempts at “turning the critical gaze” upon itself have satisfied themselves in talking about issues of academic colonialism<sup>25</sup> and the like, which drew a greater middle class and upper caste sympathy!

This takes us to the question of what is sociology. Much of the sociology that has happened in India since its inception has tended to resist ‘immediate instrumentality’. This could be due to the dominant influence of European sociology on its pioneers. But that this resistance is not an innate quality of sociology is borne out in the trajectories that American sociology has taken wherein it has been rather successful in anchoring a utilitarian value in its market economy and thus a positive public imagination.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The masculine gender is used because the most typical student in the department of sociology today will be a male.

<sup>24</sup> “Students who are seriously upset by such wage differentials [between say management and sociology] would do well to forget about sociology and start preparing for the CAT or GMAT examination; they will in any case make poor sociologists if they can’t understand such phenomena.” (Deshpande, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> I have still not understood why the issue of academic colonialism eats up a great deal of our intellectual energies.

<sup>26</sup> See *The Problem in Situating Sociology: A Symposium on Knowledge, Institutions and Practices in A Discipline*, November 2000, Seminar

Many frontline university departments have all through harboured a condescension towards making their sociology answer questions of policy, for instance. The second and third generations of sociologists have failed in the task of bringing in newer significations for sociology. As Deshpande (1994, 2000) repeatedly points out, in a newly emergent nation-state like India sociology should have stood in the forefront of policy/applied research. That this has not happened is primarily due to those generations of sociologists who ought to have begun working towards 'reimagining', 'relocating' and thus 'resignifying' sociology. The 'lost opportunity' is even more frustrating and painful when we keep in mind that the state was willing to fund even 'fundamental/pure research'. This is precisely why I would make Veena Das to stand on her head in suggesting that the 'crisis of Indian sociology' today is primarily so because the five or six departments, where she believes 'competent research' is taking place, failed to take up the responsibility that the future generations of sociologists vested with them.

Lest it be misread, the argument for a 'reimagination' of sociology does not in the least bit proposes to make sociology less self-reflexive or critical so that it can become a knowledge-producer for the powers that be – market, NGO etc. The point is not even to make sociology less rigorous, less academic so that we all could become like management institutions or 10-seconds media experts. It is obvious that any modern or aspiring modern social formation needs 'fundamental/pure' sociological knowledge produced about itself.

Nevertheless, 'fundamental/pure research' does not exhaust all the possibilities of sociology. 'Utilitarian' sociology has great value for a society like ours. Certain major spheres that sociologists should have naturally claimed as their area of expertise have evaded them. Witness the claims of management studies and the proliferation of Non-Governmental Organisations and their phenomenal success in convincing the 'patrons' of their worth to be patronised and the point about the 'missed opportunity' becomes clear. The fear that that we will be corrupted by becoming utilitarian rests on the wrong assumption that sociology/sociologists are mere tools at the hands of the users of this knowledge. But contrary to that, the negotiation with the diverse users will be a dynamic process. For instance, the ideal way of structuring a post-graduate course in sociology will be to, after a sufficient and thorough grounding in theory and methodology, offer different specialisations, which, once mastered, should translate into concrete skills.

In this regard, the research students at the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad thought of an idea of bringing sociology face to face with its possible users. Called 'Sociostakes, a Festival of Sociology: Interactive sessions on the promise of sociology', the idea was to primarily look at the ways in which sociological skills could be employed in diverse spheres such as media, civil services, NGOs, industry and so on. Students of sociology made presentations to gatherings of representatives from the industry, NGOs, media, government officials on the promise of sociology in their fields. What was constitutive in that attempt was, contrary to the usual shamefacedness and despair that marks much of the debate on the 'crisis', an assertion of a *stake* in the society in which we create our sociology and the reciprocal contribution of that society to its sociology. We need to spend our energies in making such *organic* relationship work. It is only with such initiatives that we can even begin to work towards making sociology acquire newer positive significations.

However, these suggestions again largely crase the existence of sociology at the under-graduate level. In this regard, one fundamental question that needs to be resolved is whether one conceptualises under-graduate course as a specialisation or not. While for the upper castes and the middle class, that too in urban areas, an under-graduate degree is seen as 'basic' education, for a majority of the dalits and the OBCs it is still out of reach and, consequently, if attained represents an achievement. However, this struggle is rendered useless at the end of their graduation because their degrees do not mean much in the job

market. The primary task, obviously, of any education is not merely to make 'citizens' out of individuals but also to ensure them an honourable livelihood.

The challenge lies precisely here. Since sociology as a discipline has already built an impressive network and reached many a college in the hinterlands and constituted largely by those who cannot spend more years in education, and given that the liberalised economy appears to offer exciting possibilities for putting sociology to use, the challenge lies in making sociology that is taught at under-graduate level translate itself into a specific set of concrete skills that are in demand, while, of course, keeping the student's options open to pursue a higher, specialised degree in sociology. Thus, the classroom becomes the most decisive space that teachers of sociology will have to use in order to 're-invent' the discipline. Thus the space of the classroom acquires a crucial importance in our contemporary context. For instance, even as the fields of social work and management command a great deal of market imagination they are structured to remain exclusive. Sociology, at both the under-graduate and post-graduate levels, gets students from such backgrounds wherein the classroom, the college and its infrastructure are the only spaces that are available to make a difference. If the sociologists are serious about addressing the crisis that is supposedly dogging their discipline, they need to take these spaces rather more attentively instead of complaining about the 'quality' of the new entrants.

What is to be done?

1) The first task is to collect data on the 'practice' of sociology, listen to the sociology that is outside metropolitan centres. As is evident from the debate, there is an absolute paucity of data on even basic data like what is taught in different departments, what are the aspirations of the students who come into institutions of learning, what is the socio-economic compositions of the teacher-student community, the larger contexts in which sociology gets practised and so on. Encouraging some M Phil projects in this area should not be too difficult.

2) Interact with the new, probable patrons of sociological knowledge including the differently positioned state.

3) Converting 'sociology' at the under-graduate level into some primary skills.

Teaching minimum computer applications, statistical methods, preparing questionnaires, data collection techniques, techniques of report writing, proposal writing (which will include teaching of English that is used in those spaces) etc.

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Note: Some of the above-cited references contain a caveat of “Not to be quoted”. While one understands the spirit in which that rider is attached, some of the ideas presented here have found inspiration from such efforts, particularly Deshpande’s paper presented at the University of Hyderabad. Hence, the compulsion to over-ride the rider.