

## SOCIAL SCIENCE, SOCIAL REALITY and SOCIAL RELEVANCE

By Y. B. Damle.

A very fruitful debate has been going on about the nature of social science studies in India and their relationship to social reality. In fact very rightly a question has been raised as to whether social science research in India is socially relevant. Several symposia have been held pertaining to different disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology etc. and various trend reports have been prepared taking a stock of the work which have been done in various areas, particularly since independence. It is not possible to generalise about the various social sciences and yet there is an unmistakable common trait which is pronounced viz. there is very little significant addition or contribution to theory building. It is commonly mentioned that social scientists in India imitate theories and formulations as advanced by thinkers abroad. There is ~~any~~ hardly any attempt made to evolve a suitable theory and frame work which will take into account the special characteristics of Indian society. Some years ago there was a debate as to whether any kind of formulation of theory outside the country would be of any use in the Indian context. Recently, however, it has been pointed out that one of the major factors responsible for the lack of theory building is the delinking of social theory from social reality. Similarly, the kinds of problems which are chosen for study also tend to be influenced by what is going on outside the country than by their social relevance. In this brief paper attention will be pinpointed on the relationship between social science and society, applied and pure research, historical perspective and to the discussion of the hurdles in social sciences

## The Role of Social Sciences in Sociology.

There is no denying that all knowledge including scientific is derived in society. According to sociology of knowledge categories of thought and analysis are significantly related to social structure. Moreover, in the case of social science in particular, there the aim is to understand the nature of society, its processes, structure, stability and change it becomes all the more important that pursuit of social science will certainly affect not only the understanding of social reality but it will also help alter it at least to a certain extent. In a way, it can be said that the pursuit of social science is not a mere academic exercise but it also involves social diagnosis, social prescription, and even social engineering. It would be difficult to draw a very sharp line between the various aims and purposes of social science. Avowedly the aim of social science is claimed to be understanding and analysis of society. However, it is but natural that such analysis is ~~analysis of society. However, it is but~~ ~~that such analysis is sought to be used not only to understand society~~ but to manipulate it, control it and also to change it in the desired direction. It is not for nothing that social sciences are called upon to give advice and consultation in respect of certain pressing problems, e.g. the entire study of American Soldier emerged out of this felt necessity on the part of the American nation to make use of the expertise of some sociologists like Stouffer, Merton, Lazarsfeld,. It is indeed very well known, that economists like Keynes, Gadgil, Arthur Lewis have been

requested to provide guide-lines in respect of various economic problems confronting their respective countries. However, sociologists and social-anthropologists have also been called upon to provide guide-lines which have policy implication, e.g. Gunnar Myrdal, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, S.C. Dube etc.

One of the major characteristics of developing societies is the intense consciousness about the various kinds of deficiencies such as economic, political, industrial, technological and cultural which have been plaguing them. It could be said ~~xxx~~ that the developing societies, such as India, are confronted simultaneously with problems of economic development and prosperity as well as various kinds of technology, industrial, and scientific problems, as also the problems of national integration in the sense of involving its population in the task of nation-building and national development. Economics, social and scientific revolutions have to be worked out simultaneously in order to make a meaningful impact on the existing state of affairs. It is but natural that a great deal of premium is put on utilisation of existing social science knowledge for the solution of pressing problems. Of course it must be mentioned at the outset that the amount of such knowledge which is readily available is fairly meagre and that is why efforts are made by various developing societies including India to promote social science research. It could be stated that in the Indian case its constitution provides a set of goals which are cherished by the Indian people. On the other hand one knows only too well that a statement of goals does not mean that one is anywhere near the attainment of such goals. In fact, one wants to know as to how and why these goals which have been accepted in the Indian context such as

democracy, equality, economic prosperity, secularism, rationality, scientific temper, etc. are not being realised. Therefore, it is in the context of the cherished and accepted goals that social scientist can raise various questions and seek to answer them in terms of their theoretical and methodological sophistication. It is not enough to have a feel of the problems, but it is necessary to formulate the problems in theoretically meaningful terms and evolve appropriate methodology. Otherwise perceptive journalists can have intuitive judgement about the nature of social problems and can also offer suggestions towards solution. But what is needed is a greater degree of certainty and validity of both, analysis and understanding as well as the plausible solutions. There is no denying that sociological research should have social relevance as well as theoretical and methodological rigour.

#### The Role of Social science research in National Development :

There are two types of problems with which India has to deal, viz. nation-building and national-development. It has been rightly observed that countries like India even though they have been old societies are new nations. The concept of nation is fairly recent in India's case and even now it is difficult to say that the process of nation-building is anywhere near completion. Of course, in all societies, the process of nation-building goes on continuously in response to the various changes. But in the case of India, it is difficult to carry on with desired changes for want of nation-building. All kinds of linguistic and regional rivalries are a case in point of turmoil and problems of nation-building in India. It is observed so many times that India needs

an external threat to galvanise the people into a nation. Apart from the fact that India is such a large country, there is also the fact that there are diverse elements in the population with racial and ethnic differences, cultural differences, social structural differences, religious differences, which have posed special problems for the integration of the various elements. In fact, the problem of tiers of loyalties, such as family and kinship, caste religion, language, locality, subregion, region, state, provide a meaningful challenge to the analysis of Indian society. Everyone knows that there is a concentric circle of group loyalties, but the question is as to how to ensure that a minimum sense of national loyalty is engendered in the minds of the people, so that other loyalties can be kept in check and would not be allowed to conflict with national loyalty. This ~~is~~ in itself provides important challenge and opportunity to social scientists in India. Then as regards national development, as mentioned earlier, there is not only the problem of economic development and prosperity, but also the problem of distributive justice. Attitudes to work and wealth as well as what are the motivations to ensure sustained work and involvement in the programmes of reconstruction provide a very important area of enquiry. To what extent the existing notions of hierarchy and the institution of stratification militate against full utilisation of human intelligence and energy is also another important area for investigation. Some authors have pointed out that the Indian man is essentially a believer in hierarchy. If so, what are the chances, of his acceptance of equality, as a value and a norm of social interaction. It is also said that the concept

of humanism in India tends to be very particularistic. It is really so, what can be done to change it. As the level of practical policy various experiments have been designed for inter-regional and inter-state exchanges of population. Of course, migration in search of livelihood and prosperity has always promoted inter-regional and inter-state experience in living and interaction. Education is promoted to ensure rationality and the preparation of its trainees for absorption in the occupational system. To what extent does education fulfill these two aims needs also to be properly gone into since education is conceived of as an instrument of modernization. To what extent does the traditional structure as exemplified by family kinship and caste militate against the ~~inertia~~ inculcation of new values is also another important problem to be studied from the point of view of national development. Then again, various measures including legislation adopted to bring about change and with what success is also a matter of vital concern for national development. In fact, the entire analysis of patterns of stability and change in India would promote a better understanding of the problems of national-development.

#### Claims of pure vs. applied research.

The purpose of all knowledge ultimately is its utilisation. Knowledge is not to be looked upon as an intellectual frill but it should be capable of being applied whenever found necessary. If one regards research as an enquiry into the truth, whether one pursues pure theoretical problem or an applied problem is irrelevant in the sense that one would employ sophisticated theoretical framework and methodological procedure at one's command to arrive at the

truth. When one engages oneself in research, one wants to increase correspondence between ideas, concepts and theories and the facts. However, as one knows all facts are propositional in the sense that they talk about the relationship between phenomena. If this is so, whether one engages in pure research or applied research should not make much difference. Moreover, if knowledge is to be utilised, efforts must be made to so design the research that the results of such research can be put to some practical view. Of course, it is said and very correctly so, that it would be very difficult to suggest very concrete solutions to an existing problem since there are many lacunae in our knowledge of human affairs. While precise solutions may not be available and feasible certain hints would be provided which may have practical implications. As mentioned earlier, the work of certain sociologists and anthropologists was put to good use for understanding the problems and even to derive certain solutions from such analysis for solving practical problems. It should be mentioned here that Dr. Dube's work on 'India's changing villages' has been also found to be useful for understanding practical problems in the field of community development. Damle also made a study of 'Auxiliary Nurse Midwife' with a view to understand the problems of institutionalised change in the field of public health and medicine. Damle's study was conducted with a view to provide basis for meaningful discussion for the problems of Auxiliary Nurse Midwife in the south-east Asia region and to suggest certain remedies in the light of the discussions that took place the study was found to provide certain hints for the solution of the problem. As a matter of fact even from studies which are not intended for direct use one



could derive great amount of implies hints and suggestions for the resolution of the various problems. To cite an example one could mention the study of 'Immigrants and Neighbourhood in Bombay'.

In a poor country like India it would be very difficult to insist on pure research only. Even in prosperous countries <sup>h</sup>substantially large funds are available for applied research in comparison to those available for pure research. Sometimes it happens that research designed and conducted for use never sees the light of the day and languished in pigeon-holes. Sometimes information based on research is deliberately withheld if it does not validate the official line and decision. Research is search for truth and as such it should be made available to all and sundry who are likely to benefit from it. If a study is made of the educational system, its results should be made available to all the interested parties and components such as Government, Teachers, taught, parents and the overall citizens. In fact, deliberate efforts should be made to publish summaries of research findings, for the consumption of the wide public. Two types of reports should be prepared one for the professional community and the other for the lay public. In so many cases timely publication and availability of research findings can help alleviate the existing problems. Whatever social and national issues are bothering the people, effort should be made to carry out research on these problems and also to ensure availability of such findings without too much of a time gap.



### Historical perspective :

As a consequence of the confrontation of Indian society with British rule in particular and western civilization in general, Indian intellectuals tried to analyse social reality. While doing so, they did not hesitate to start with theoretical formulations, postulates and concepts which have been developed in the west and tried to test them with reference to the Indian scene. In fact M.G. Ranade was described as the Indian Frederick List. Apart from the writings available in English, one comes across prolific writing in Marathi which tries to analyse the impact of the British rule and western civilization on Indian society in all its ramifications. Thus books were produced dealing with the problem of rural social structure, village panchayats, origin of the caste-system and its present inequities, stagnant system of social stratification, various kinds of social injustices, importance of rational and scientific outlook, necessity of putting an end to all kinds of exploitation of the masses etc. As mentioned earlier these writers did not hesitate to start with western formulations but were always very keen to test them in the light of new information and knowledge. As a result of this endeavour, in the first instance, significant contribution was made to the understanding of social reality. Likewise attempt was made to use theory in a discriminating manner. There is ample evidence of the firm relationship between social science studies and social reality. In fact one could even mention that such endeavours had social relevance. During the independence movement various social scientists applied their minds to the existing problems and tried to suggest solutions.

Broadly speaking one can mention that these endeavours not only reflected social reality but also raised important questions regarding the utility of formulations which were advanced abroad. It was stated that however sophisticated such formulations may be, there tended to be a lack of fit between them and the Indian situation.

After independence however, in many instances an attempt was made to utilise such formulations without adequate critical scrutiny. If one were to review social science studies in India since independence, certain trends are unmistakable. There has been a plethora of informative articles and studies, while there have been very few articles and studies dealing either with analytical problems or problems pertaining to policy formulation. This trend is reported in a study of the social science press in India. It was increasingly felt that the main job of a social scientist was to resort to fact finding. In the pre-independence period, on the other hand, social studies tended to be, both diagnostic and prescriptive. Some how or the other, there was a feeling that social science should be value free and it should concern itself only with the presentation of objective facts. In their endeavour to do so social scientists in India ~~refused~~ thought shy or both theoretical formulations and the task of diagnosis and prescription.

Some factors responsible for the snapping of link between social science and social reality and the relative absence of its social relevance.

I am deliberately pinpointing attention on some of the factors

responsible for the inadequacies from which social science has been suffering from. In the first place it is due to the lack of social sensitivity and the sense of involvement on the part of social scientists. A great deal is happening in the country which needs to be very sensitively understood and appreciated so that one could meaningfully analyse the processes and problems of change. It is necessary that a social scientist should feel involved in the entire programme for bringing about change in the desired direction. However, it would not be enough to have empathy. It is equally necessary to have a discipline mind which would enable one to use theories and formulations in a discriminating manner and suggest not only modifications but even radical revisions. Social reality is so complex that it defies a simplistic explanation. I would, therefore, suggest that theoretical sophistication should be of the highest order, which can be neglected only at a great peril. The general attitude which disdains any kind of utilitarian/<sup>approach</sup>to knowledge is another factor which is responsible for the present malaise. Unless a social scientist combines in him theoretical sophistication, methodological vigour and social sensitivity as well as a sense of involvement, social science research in India would tend to be sterile.

---