'If this is Tuesday... it must be Social Roles'

Sociology and Challenge of Gender Studies

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THE discussion that has followed Veena Dass analysis of the 'Crisis in Sociology *in* India' [Giri 1993, Murthy 1993, Deshpande 1994] encourages me to react and comment on the state of the art in Maharashtra. I see this comment as a step in collecting data from different regions and towards forming a base for what G B Venkatesha Murthy has called reorientation workshops [Murthy 1993]. These will have to be different from the 'refresher' courses and will have to be consciously guided towards building a community of discourse [Giri 1993], To avoid centralisation and metropolitanism in building such communities of discourse, a series of local and regional level deliberations would be necessary as a preliminary step. Such a strategy has been adopted by the all-India network of women's organisations and has led to more participatory and democratic proceedings at the national conferences. Satish Deshpande has aptly expressed our 'collective ineffectiveness' and most of us would agree with him that 'brilliance' or 'innovation' is collectively and institutionally reproduced [Deshpande 1994]. The preconditions of innovation require a further analysis of the state of our syllabi, our pedagogical practices and our responses to challenges from within and outside the academia.

Sociology al the 'general' and 'special' levels is offered in 19 colleges in Bombay university 10 in Pune and 62 in Marathwada [Dhanagare 1993]. D N Dhanagare has shown how student enrolment drops at the level of specialisation in sociology [Dhanagare 1993]. Discussions with students reveal that on the college campus sociology majors are perceived as inferior students. Many of those who opt for sociology as major reveal that it is a soft choice. ("Syllabi are general, marriage, family and all that sort, and do not require rigorous study as in economics or practical lab-work as in psychology.") For some sociology was preparing ground for the civil services or a Master's degree in social work. The few who had made a 'conscious choice' in opting for sociology complained of thinly constructed courses which they argued were weak—both on intellectual achievement and critical reasoning. For students coming from the mofussil areas, majoring in sociology widens their chances of acquiring a clock-hour basis lecturership in non-grant colleges which have been mushrooming in Maharashtra. Most students con-

fessed that they did not put in any extra reading at the MA level and could manage easily with their 'BA notes'. Those who did put in extra reading were troubled about the lack of links in the syllabi between history, theory, contemporary issues and their personal lives.

A review of the syllabi of Nagpur, Bombay, Marathwada and Kolhapur universities reveals that in all these universities there is a course on concepts (usually covering structure, society, culture, stratification, deviance, social control, etc); one on 'Indian Society[1]' or 'Indian Social Problems' (usually covering joint family, caste, social reform, with some units on 'Muslim and Hindu view of life') and compulsory courses on Sociological Thought and Research Methodology. Most courses give a reading list of prescribed textbooks dated between 1950s and 1970s. There is a dearth of reading material in Marathi and what one often has are translations of a mix of the mass-marketed American textbooks. These mass-marketed American textbooks attempt to cover an array of topics with concepts, statistics, graphs and attractive photographs drawn largely from white, middle class American contexts with 'conscious attempts' to 'include' blacks and natives at places. [See, for example, the very popular Broom and Selznick 1955.] When basic sociological concepts are read from these texts, they emerge not as expressions and critiques of lived situations but as abstractions which become even more abstract when supported by illustrations that are remote from lived contexts. It is no surprise then that most of us who crammed Maclver and Page's definitions of 'marriage' and 'family' and supplemented them with a 'Hindu view' and 'Muslim view' never really thought of these institutions as sites of contestations and struggles. Compulsions of brahmanical patriarchy become naturalised within these course structures and this is only one example of such naturalisation. The point I am making is that there are hardly any intcrlinkages made between the basic concepts and the trajectories of their development in sociological thought and their utility or otherwise in our lived contexts. The different courses offered at both the degree and post-graduate levels would therefore appear as disjunct circles if represented in a venn diagram. In the absence of courses on social history of the region and social thought

in India, all that we are left with are half-hearted pleas for indigenising theory. It is not very shocking then that in the midst of the violence that followed the 'Naamantar issue' of the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, many students shrugged their shoulders and flippantly commented that much more noise has been made about a name and 'a rose by any name... etc'. Such comments pose the challenge of Sociology lor what and whom ?

One such challenge to the social sciences comes from Women's Studies. Women's Studies initiates a critical dialogue, a dialogue arising out of the realisation that one is at once immersed in and alienated from one's discipline. As Marcia Westkott comments, "The personal struggle of being both an insider and outsider is not only a source of knowledge and insight but also a sense of self-criticism" [Westkott 1988]. Feminist debates in sociology have been mainly directed at issues of content and method. In calling attention to women's invisibility and rejection of the notion of women's natural inferiority, the assumption that self and society arc mutually reflective and supportive was questioned. From these criticisms of content were derived feminist criticisms of sociological methods, feminist methodologies in sociology addressed themselves to consciousness-raising through research, challenging the dichotomy of subject and object of research and the complex questions of power in writing and research [Reinharz, Wright, Bombyle 1983). Indian feminists have been struggling against the parasitism of academic agenda to the first world [Uberoi 1993]. Use of such methodologies in the Indian context requires shift from 'woman's standpoint' to a standpoint that bears in mind the complex collusions and contestations between castes, class, gender and communities.

The UGC responded to these challenges by granting 22 Women's Studies Centres to different universities. In the usual style, evaluation committees were set up and the centres graded, the metropolitanism being apparent in this grading. Located in one such Women's Studies Centre which is a part of the Department of Sociology, I would like to highlight the critical impulses and self-reflexivity that the 'gender challenge' 'could offer to sociology in India. However, universities have answered the challenge by formulating 'optional' courses on 'Women and Society' (only offered in Pune University and Goa in the western region) and letting the 'mainstream', 'foundational' courses go unchallenged. Though a few sociologists viewed this challenge as having critical and emancipatory potential, by and large this challenge got translated into 'pub-

lishing gender' (series of books on ' Women and.. came up, lacking in critical reflections) or into a strong opposition and defensive stance ('do you mean to say participatory research was not undertaken by any sociologist?', etc). The ' All India Sociological Conference' 1993 had a panel on 'Gender and Society'. Barring a few papers, most focused on 'Status of Women' or reiterated the existence of patriarchy (Abstracts, Panel IV), thereby ignoring both the theoretical and methodological challenges posed to sociology. In fact in her theme paper, Gujata Patel points out the importance of gender-sensitivity in the studies on caste and kinship and comments that sociology in India has not integrated these critical issues in its discourse in a cognitive manner [Patel 1993].

"If this is Tuesday, it must be Social Roles" [Baker and Rau 1990]. This statement aptly describes the state of pedagogy in sociology. Rethinking of these practices is one of the major challenges posed by feminist pedagogies. Feminist pedagogies legitimise personal experience, recognise that both teachers and students bring 'texts' of their own to the classroom and that 'common vocabularies' are not 'given' and need to be developed. This is not an easy experience as this pushes us from positions of authority into vulnerability but it is healing as it infringes emotionality into intellectuality. Self-reflexivity and critical impulses cannot seep down from above, they have to be rooted in conscious praxis in the classroom.

[My sincere thanks to D N Dhanagare for sharing with me the findings of the Status Report of the western region on 'Sociology: Teaching and Research in Universities', 1993]

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A Sceptical Note on 'Secularism'

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THE philosophy of secularism is organically linked with the discourse of modernisation. So it is quite natural that the 'modern' elites of post-colonial India preached 'secularism' in their respective domains as a civilising mission. On the other hand, the Indian state embarked on a process of nation-building that did not take into account the mentalities and aspirations of the masses. This elite-mass cleavage has been successfully appropriated by the proponents of Hindu nationalism in recent years to get a foothold in Indian politics. The present crisis of the Indian state calls in question the vague and pragmatic notion of secularism which it used as a hegemonic concept in the management of the polity. Rethinking the concept of secularism on the part of the Indian intellectuals is an attempt to grapple with the present crisis in the theoretical domain. Very recently, one scholar has given the call to integrate the 'question of faith' in the discourse of secularism so that it can capture the minds of the people.'

In his discourse on secularism *(EPW,* March 5) Andre Beteille has made a distinction between normative and empirical questions. And *he* has defended secularism from a normative standpoint. The Indian university has also been empirically defended in his discourse as a secular institution. But the problem with this secular institution is that it does not have any dialogue with Islamic educational institutions. Muslim youth educated in the reputed Indian *madrasas* often go to west Asian Islamic universities to obtain an MA in Islamics. But they are not generally regarded as 'degree holders' in India, These 'MAs' cannot get registration as PhD candidates except at the Aligarh Muslim University.[2] According to Beteille, "the presence of the Aligarh Muslim University and the Benares Hindu University might appear somewhat anomalous in contemporary India". But it should be kept in mind in this context that without the presence of the Aligarh Muslim University many Muslim youth in India would have been deprived of the present privilege of higher studies in Islamics. One can question the releviyice of studying Islamics in contemporary India from a 'secular' standpoint. What subject will get priority in the field of higher education is a question of state patronage. My point is that the opinions of Muslim intellectuals should be taken into consideration in the education policy of the state in order to ensure a secular management of our polity.

In his normative defence of secularism, Beteille, as a sociologist, argues that "there exists a close affinity between secularism as a general orientation to the world and sociology as an intellectual discipline". In this context, he laments that "our two leading sociologists have recently expressed themselves either negatively or in sceptical terms about secularism". But it is quite logical if one doubts the efficacy of a western category of knowledge in explaining the dynamics of Indian society. I would like to mention here that the word "secularism' has been translated in Urdu, the *lingua franca* of Indian Muslims, in a derogatory sense as irreligion.[3] It is quite impossible to integrate the question of Muslim faith in the concept of secularism.

The rise of the BJP and other aggressive anti-Muslim forces in Indian politics poses a direct threat to the survival of Indian Muslims. But the 'secular' rule of the Congress Party did not ensure security to the Muslims in their everyday life. The following episode gives an idea of the nature of suspicion that gripped the minds of the Muslims about the intentions of the Congress Party in the mid-70s. The number of pilgrims at the *urs* festival in the holy city of Ajmer came down from 3,00,000 to 1,00,000 during 1975-76. One reason for such low attendance in 1976 was "a general fear among Muslims in India that they were subject to victimisation in the sterilisation campaign during the political emergency".[4] Such deep-rooted suspicion in the popular Muslim mind about 'secular' state politics in India should be kept in mind before offering a normative defence of the philosophy of secularism.

Notes

1 Rustom Bharucha. *The Question of Faith* (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1993).

2 *Mushir-UI-Haq,IsIam in Secular India* (Simla, 1972), pp 32-33.

3 Ibid, p 2

4 P M Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu in al-din Chishti of Ajmer* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992), pp 118-19.