

Indian Sociological Imagery - By B.K. Nagata (2008)

Ramkrishna Mukherjee

227

12

Ramkrishna Mukherjee



Ramkrishna Mukherjee has been a distinguished scientist of the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta, and an adjunct Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York, Binghamton. Born in 1919, he was educated at Calcutta University (M.Sc., 1941) and at Cambridge (PhD, 1948). He then moved to London to become the Chief Research Officer to his Majesty's Social Survey, London (1948-49) after which he went to Ankara as Consultant, Government of Turkey (1949), and also as Consultant, School of Economics (1952). He began his career as guest Professor of Indian Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin (1953-57). From 1957 through 1979, he functioned as Research Professor at the Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta.

Mukherjee has also been a member of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (1974) and advisor to many institutions and the journals in the social sciences in India and abroad. He was the President of the Indian Sociological Society (1972-74) and the member of the Executive Committee of the International Sociological Association (1974-78). His research experience includes

work in India as well as Bangladesh, U.K., France, Germany, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Turkey and Uganda.

Methodology

Mukherjee's main concerns are systematic and inductive sociology, diagnostic research and related methodology. He recommends the use of the diagnostic mode to get the best possible explanation of social reality. Among the Indian sociologists, like D.P. Mukerji, Ramkrishna Mukherjee also emphasized the significance of dialectical model for the study of Indian society. In his later works, Ramkrishna has changed from dialectical-historical to a probabilistic nomological approach for the study of social reality (Singh, 2004). He calls his approach 'inductive inferential' which is neutral to the type of propositions, (Marxist or non-Marxist, that one chooses to test and verify. The role of history and dialectics in the sociological thinking and research, according to Mukherjee, stops at the level of formulation of proposition; these may help in even a taxonomic formulation of categories (see Mukherjee, 1970, 1975) or social indicators, but beyond this the logical principles of test and verification would have to operate independently.

In his rigorous study, Mukherjee (1972, 1977) used systematic quantitative methodology to measure kinship distance and extent of change in family structures in West Bengal.

Works

Mukherjee's research interests include historical sociology, studies in the classification of families and rural society, problem of acculturation and social indicators. He wrote more than a dozen books and over hundred research papers for internationally reputed journals. His major publications include: *The Problem of Uganda* (1956), *The Dynamics of a Rural Society* (1957), *The Sociologist and Social Change in India Today* (1965), *Six Villages of Bengal* (1971), *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company* (1958), *Social Indicators* (1975), *Family and Planning in India* (1976), *West Bengal Family Structure: 1946-66* (1977), *What will it be? Explorations in Inductive Sociology* (1978), *Sociology of Indian Sociology* (1979) etc.

Two Fallacies: Concept of Rural-Urban Dichotomy or Rural-Urban Continuum

According to Mukherjee, two major fallacies commonly found in India today, namely, urban and/or industrial development bring in new values in society commensurate with the social transformation we desire in our country. Cities and towns are growing or emerging. Also that increasingly improved means of transport and communication are bringing the villages nearer the urban centres is an accepted phenomenon. Therefore, at whatever pace it may be, urban development and urbanization are gathering momentum in India. But, what is their effect on the social transformation of the people involved?

On Urbanization and Social Transformation

This is a moot question. Because, in whichever way the process and the degree of urbanization may be interpreted, the underlying assumption is that: "The differences between rural and urban populations represent contrasts between the old and the new, and in a sense they provide us with insights into the character of man's social and cultural life prior to urbanization" (Gibbs, 1961). How far, and in what manner, then, the rural-urban differences and inter-relations can be so explained in India? The question implies an examination of two aspects of the problem, which may appear to have no conception between them but are in fact closely associated: (1) as a consequent to the process and degree of urbanization, whether changes in the social organization and/or in the ideological orientation of the people are evident, incipient, or absent; (2) in the first two of the three enumerations, whether the course of changes conforms to the concept of rural-urban dichotomy or of rural-urban continuum.

If a particular course of urbanization is to be nurtured or destroyed, how is it taking place in society has to be ascertained beforehand, namely, as between two conceptually exclusive entities of urban and rural? or, in terms of a spectrum, which registers the influence of the urban sector on the rest of the country in a gradient of physical distance, transportation time and cost, etc., as "city-large towns-small towns-neighbouring village-remote villages"?

The first process would subscribe to the concept of rural-urban dichotomy, whereas the second to that of rural-urban continuum. And, the respective process would have an important bearing on the strategy and tactics of implementing any planned programme for India's social development.

Mukherjee has done his study in the state of West Bengal and Giridih sub-division of the district Hazaribagh in the adjoining of Bihar. He has examined the pattern of migration to urban areas so as to ascertain whether it would facilitate the operation of the concept of rural-urban dichotomy or rural-urban continuum or none. Therefore, an examination of exact process at work with respect to rural-urban differences and relationships has been looked in.

Focus on Social Organism: Diagnosis of Soft Spots

Mukherjee found that the social development of the people cannot be answered in terms of rural-urban differentials, or for that matter, from a formal examination of various forms of social stratification. It requires looking into the soft spots in the social organism, irrespective of its rural-urban or other forms of formal stratification. Such as, if the educated persons are to be the torchbearers of progress in this respect, the content of the education offered to them and their consequent reactions would require examination so as to determine the soft spots through which the desired course of change may be implemented in the society under reference. Or, if the Hindu high caste people are to be the precursors of a new way of life, to take another hypothetical case for purpose of illustration, the potentiality of germination of such a life among them would require careful investigation with the same aim in view. Either way, or in more ways than the above two, the soft spots in the social organism require careful and sustained exploration. After that, their relative occurrence in, and/or their relative importance to, city-town-village stratification of society may decide whether rural-urban dichotomy or rural-urban continuum would be the suitable concept to formulate and execute relevant policies for social development and whether the small towns would have role to play in that context. The examination of formal associations

between patterns of migration, administrative and political divisions, cross-cultural factors, and occupational and industrial profiles of settlement of social groups and individuals, etc., does not lead us to a fruitful inference; although this is undoubtedly the primary stage in the course of our researches into the problem under reference, Mukherjee concludes that (1) there is not yet any evidence of social development, and (2) a causal or concomitant relation between cultural changes due to urban living or urbanization and 'social' development cannot be legitimately deduced, and so (3) the concept of rural-urban dichotomy or rural-urban continuum need not be meaningful in the context of urbanization and social transformation in India at the moment.

Trends in Indian Sociology

According to Mukherjee, an assessment of the development of sociology and social anthropology in India cannot be attempted without examining the overlapping of the various theoretical, methodological and ideological influences on the growth of these twin disciplines, sociology and social anthropology. In a comprehensive review of "Trends in Indian Sociology", Mukherjee (1979) discusses diagnostic perspective about Indian sociology. The main questions are:

- (1) What is it (enumeration of the phenomenon)?
- (2) How is it (classification)?
- (3) Why is it (causality)?
- (4) What will it be (possibility)?
- (5) Why should it be (desirability)?

These five questions should interact in sequential manner with a dialectical appreciation having both positive and negative points in regard to reality of phenomena. Mukherjee sharply focused on the links between theory, ideology and praxis or between the questions: what is it? How is it? Why is it? And, what will it be and why should it be? (Mukherjee, 1977b: 2-4).

The perspective related to these questions has been discussed by Mukherjee in *What will it Be? Explorations in Inductive Sociology* (1978). Since that perspective is applied here to the phenomenon of

Indian sociology which has been entitled, *Sociology of Indian Sociology*.

Mukherjee employed in a paradigm these fundamental questions in order to distinguish three modes of social research, viz., descriptive, explanatory and diagnostic. He has shown that the three modes are sequentially related, and that the crucial demand of contemporary social research is to adopt the diagnostic mode. This will lead to evaluation of the best possible explanation of social reality at the existing state of knowledge and thus, social research will proceed from description, and beyond explanation, towards prediction.

He also discusses the principles of the three modes of social research and drawn a systematic relation among them. Basically, he has distinguished diagnostic research as *inductive-inferential* from the descriptive and explanatory research as *deductive-positivistic*. Because of this fundamentally different perspective, diagnostic research calls for concept formation in a different manner, and requires an appropriate methodology. Therefore, Mukherjee has discussed how mutually distinguished but homologous phenomena of social change, social development and nation-building should be conceived, giving indication to their appropriate methodology.

He has also discussed the most crucial aspect of contemporary social research, viz., the treatment of the objective 'information' and the subjective 'value' as confounded variables to denote facts, and how this can be efficiently done by diagnostic research in contradistinction to the descriptive and explanatory research.

Studies in Indian Sociology

In a 1979 publication, *Sociology of Indian Sociology*, Mukherjee identified growth points in terms of its practitioners who he classified as pioneers, modernizers, insiders, and pace makers and non-conformists. He has made by scholars belonging to these categories, and identifying the 'insiders' emerging in the late sixties and seventies as those who were the product of the system rather than entrants from other disciplines.

Studies in Indian sociology, as it is for similar place- and people-bound studies, are usually oriented towards recording the

topic-wise proliferation of the subject and its specialization and diversification, with some relative comments on the nature and direction of changes in the thematic field. While these essentially descriptive studies are necessary to take stock of the current stage of development of the discipline in one place and in the world perspective, they cannot fully explain the reasons behind the changing course of the discipline in the given societal context. A search for this explanation would not only diagnose the soft and hard spots in the discipline towards further changes but also provide the base to predict its course in the immediate future. Mukherjee has tried to examine the development of Indian sociology systematically. He also suggests "what should it be" of Indian sociology in the contemporary Indian and world perspectives.

According to Mukherjee, from the very beginning, sociology as a body of knowledge has been founded upon a deductive and positivistic basis; inductive sociology has made little headway too far on both the ideological grounds and due to practical considerations. And, while lately mathematical reasoning and statistical principles are employed more and more as the building bricks of sociology, its foundation is not affected thereby; eventually, social causation is explained in terms of one or another 'theory' whether or not this theoretical orientation - be it Weberian, Durkheimian, Marxists or any other - its distinctly spelt out. The concern for a meta-theory is of course noticeable in present times but since its methodological requirements are not usually given adequate attention, it is still thought to consist of another theory rather than of a transmission engineered through the consolidation of all available and possible theories which is its objective.

It may not be fortuitous, therefore, that 'research methodology' is thought of as a distinct aspect of sociology in particular, and of the social sciences in general, but is not regarded as being an independent element for, say, physics in particular, and the natural sciences in general. It may also be of significance that while value is regarded to be an inextricable component of sociology and, at the same time, that an objective appreciation of the 'social facts' is seen to be of the supreme objective of sociology, the two are seldom

treated as confounded variables - conceptually and methodologically. Hence, it is readily accepted for sociology as a 'social' or 'humanistic' science that "there appears to be an inherent gap between the language of theory and research which can never be bridged in a completely satisfactory way" (Blalock, Jr., 1961).

The above statement, of course, acquires a substantive meaning in relation to conceptualization for, ultimately, knowledge forms an asymptotic relation with reality, so that, we may continually advance our understanding of social reality but can never comprehend it fully and finally. Nevertheless, the scope and the course of comprehension of reality are spread out in an infinite but enumerable space. Therefore, a cautionary note is in order: "there are no limits on the non-scientific use of mathematics in sociology, unless it be the reluctance of its scientifically minded to tolerate pseudo mathematics as well as the metaphysics which would reject mathematics in principle" (Martindale, 1963). Also, in the course of continual advance in sociological knowledge, it is not less relevant to bear in mind that none of methodological difficulties often alleged to confront the search for systematic explanations of social phenomena is unique to the social sciences or is inherently insuperable (Nagel, 1961).

Mukherjee's Framework Summarized

Background

1. Educated at Calcutta University and Cambridge.
2. Academic career at Berlin (Germany), London (UK), Ankara (Turkey), and Calcutta (India).
3. His interests include historical sociology, studies in the classification of families and rural society, problem of acculturation and social indicators.

Aim

Main concerns are systematic and inductive sociology.

Assumption

To get the best possible explanation of social reality through the diagnostic mode of investigation.

Methodology

1. Historical sociology
2. Marxism: Dialectical approach
3. Inductive sociology

Typology

Historical/Dialectical Approach

Issues

Different aspects of Indian society, namely,

1. Rural society
2. Family structure
3. The rise and fall of the East India Company
4. Social indicators
5. Sociology of Indian sociology
6. Explorations in Inductive sociology
7. Sociologists and social change

■ **Select Bibliography**

- Blalock, H.M. Jr. (1961), *Casual Inferences in Nonexperiment Research*, Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press.
- Madan, G.R. (1972), *Western Sociologists on Indian Society*, Mumbai: Allied Publishers.
- Martindale, D. (1963), 'Limits to the Use of mathematics in the Study of Sociology', in Charlesworth, J.C. (ed.), *Mathematics and the Social Sciences*, Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Sciences.
- Mukherjee, Ramkrishna (1957), *The Dynamics of a Rural Society: A Study of the Economic Structure in Bengal Villages*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- (1958), *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company*, Berlin: Verlag der Wissenschaften.
- (1965), *The Sociologists and Social Change in India Today*, Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India.
- (1974), 'The Sociologist and the Social Reality', *Sociological Bulletin*, 23 (2):169-92.

- (1975), 'History and Tradition in Indian Society: Null and Alternate Hypotheses', *Sociological Bulletin*, 24 (1): 95-107.
- (1979), *Sociology of Indian Sociology*, New Delhi: Allied publishers.
- Nagel, E. (1961), *The Structure of Science*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Oommen, T.K. and P.N. Mukerjee (1986), *Indian Sociology: Reflections and Introspections*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.
- Singh, Yogendra (1986), *Indian Sociology: Social Conditioning and Emergent Concerns*, New Delhi: Vistaar.