

Studying the Indian Society in Western Way: Evaluating the Theoretical Models Adopted by Indian Sociologist



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Abstract

The Sociology of Knowledge perspective demands and argues on the approaches and models adopted by Indian Sociologists and Anthropology to study Indian society. Most of the analyst adhered either to Functionalist perspective or to Marxian Perspective. However there were few scholars who adopted integrated approach .Some of these scholars came out with Ideological or Culturological approach, considering it as an effective replacement to western theoretical and methodological orientation. Nevertheless these approaches have their own limitations. Neither any universalistic or any particularistic approach nor any integrated approach is capable of understanding and analyzing Indian society. The society which has all shades of human interactions, throws a challenge to the intellect in discerning such theoretical framework/s which do justice in analyzing society which is so diverse and complex. There are integrating social institutions with conflict and dissensions underlying; it will be the fallacy on the part of the scholars to opt for any particular grand theories, simultaneously many social realities cannot be comprehended by any one micro theory. For each reality to be understood, corresponding methodological approach is to be adopted.

Keywords: Marxian Perspective, Culturological Approach, Integrated Approach.

Introduction

The understanding of Indian society is as complex as the society itself. The inherent complexities and the overlapping forces of social change have resulted in debates related to the methodologies and approaches adopted for the study of diverse Indian society. The epoch in which Sociology as an independent discipline for the study of society emerged, was the period when Indian society was under the British colonial rule, and this was the state of affair of various Asian and African countries. These countries were the colonies of some or the other European countries, consequently the paradigms and models for the study of the society adopted were predominantly European. As far as Indian society of that time period was considered, was experiencing lot of turmoil, due to inherent conditions of the society as well as the exogenous forces, which were constantly transforming the society. The intellectual tradition which was emerging in India of 19th century either had Ancient Indian philosophical moorings or were influenced and guided by the western intellectual traditions. Initial Anthropological and Sociological understandings of Indian society have reflection of western theories and thoughts.

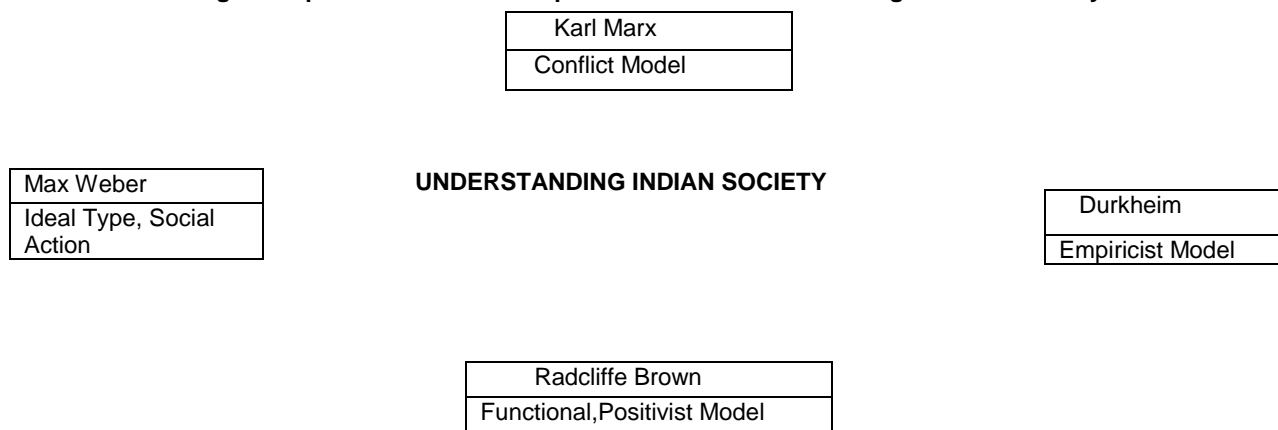
Ram Ahuja (2008:2) discusses three western perspectives which are used to designate Indian society as traditional society sociologically. These perspectives are functionalist, Marxist and social action. Ahuja delineates –Durkheim’s functionalist perspective is based on the approach that major social institutions and sub- systems (e.g., family, kinship, economic, etc.) exist to meet fundamental human needs (like procreation, social support, production, consumption). He further states –The Marxist perspective is based on the approach that class conflict is a fundamental social force and functioning of society is affected by classes with conflicting interests. Similarly the Weberian concept holds –that individuals affect and create society rather than society affects and makes individual, or that it is not society that forms and structures the self’s experience but the ‘self’ helps to create its own social experience. (Ahuja;2008:2-3).

According to Ahuja these above stated perspectives are primarily concerned about how society affects individual and group behaviour. These European perspectives have been dominant in studying religious beliefs, values, science and reasoning, caste, class, family and kinship in India. Though there are other indigenous theories and approaches which were adopted to study the Indian society, however functionalist and Marxist perspective have been predominant and popular among the Indian theorists. On the contrary to the western theories, some theorists have pointed out that "Ideological and Culturological approaches are the hallmark of several sociologists. They have hammered against the acceptance of theoretical and methodological orientations of western countries" (Ahuja; 2008:3).

The history of development of sociology in India has its roots in European Anthropological and

Sociological traditions. It can be well argued that thoughts and theories of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Radcliffe Brown had their impact on Indian sociology and sociological researches carried out in India. Beside these European models, the understanding of society in India is also influenced by Merton and Parsonian models, but definitely these models had their impact in the later researches. Many of the Indian scholars argue that Sociology in India has been shaped on the western pattern (Saxena; 1965:) though Indian society has some distinctive features and values of its own and cannot be fully comprehended by the European or American models. Neither the Grand theories nor the micro theories suggested by the western scholars can provide the theoretical as well as the empirical base to the methodologies and research techniques adopted to understand Indian society

Fig.1.1 Imprints of various European Models in Understanding of Indian Society



The contributors to the development of sociology in India have argued and demanded the examination of the continuity and discontinuity in the colonial approaches, concepts and methods of study (www.yourarticlelibrary.com). It is observed by the scholars that there is visible tension between master theory or general theory and conceptual schemes. In order to examine the theoretical models which have been imported from the west; it becomes necessary to analyze the whole issue from the sociology of knowledge perspective. As Mannheim (1960:237) opines – "Sociology of Knowledge.....seek to analyze the relationship between knowledge and existence." To augment this statement, Sharma (1985:18) opines, "Knowledge is related to social reality to discern its genesis. Role of historical and other forces could be seen to determine dynamics of knowledge vis-a vis dynamics of society". However it is observed that Sociology of Knowledge does not shape the theoretical and methodological frameworks of Indian sociology⁹, therefore the methodologies adopted to study Indian society are by and large based on western theoretical models or are somewhere or the other influenced by it.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to theoretically and critically evaluate the western models adopted by Indian Sociologists to understand and evaluate Indian

Society. The paper aims at applying these models to understand many political and social processes and **Methodological orientation of Indian Sociologist**

The history of development of sociology in India is contemporary to the development of sociology in the west. The history of development of sociology began during British colonial period. The department of economics and sociology was established by Patrick Geddes in Bombay University; in the year 1919. It was from Geddes, G.S. Ghurye an Indian sociologist and anthropologist, under his leadership and guidance department of sociology developed immensely. Similarly the department of sociology got established at Calcutta University and Lucknow University. These three were the pioneering institute of sociology in India, and from the works of most of the scholars (not all); there is reflection of western thoughts and theories.

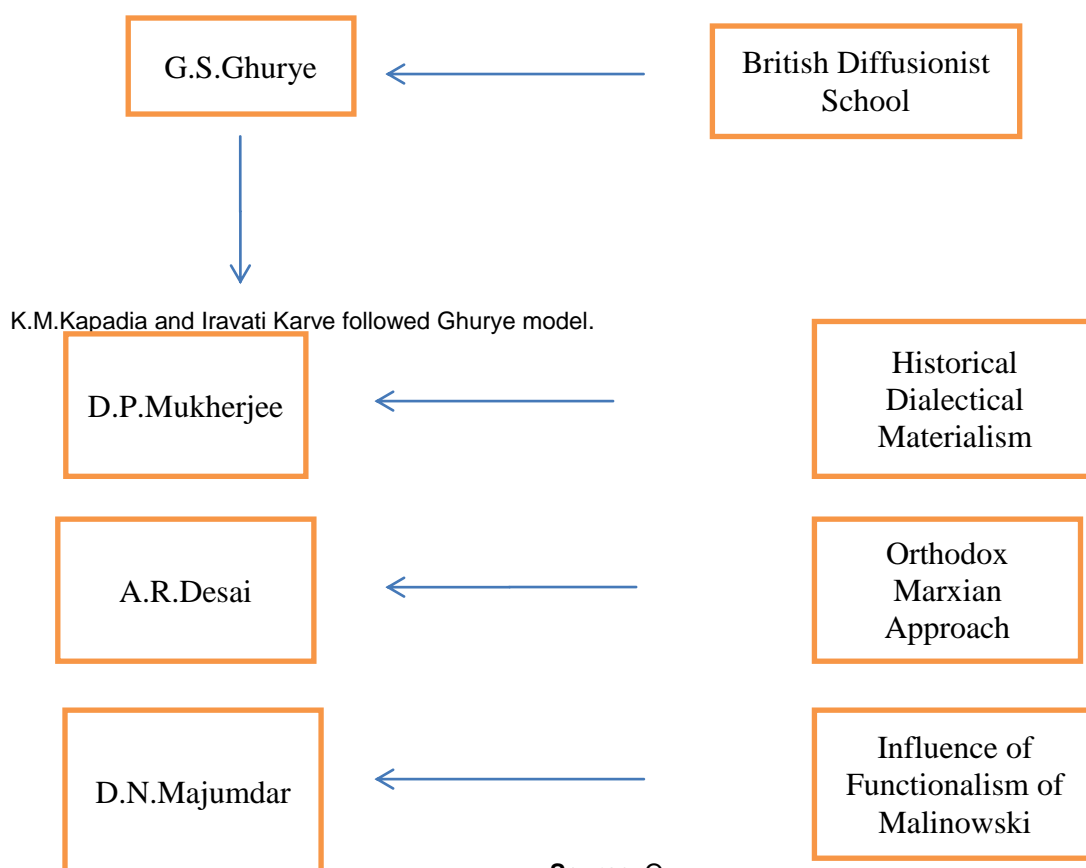
If we analyze from sociology of knowledge perspective, since establishment of sociology as a discipline in India, had a purpose to serve to the colonial needs of that era. The Britishers engaged scholars to collect information regarding the economic, social and religious life of the people. This task needed a systematic and complex method; hence it gave stimulus to the development of anthropology, sociology and Indology (Srinivas and Panini; 1973:184). The cultural and social knowledge

of people of India paved way for the development of sociology in India, nevertheless the discipline could not be established on any indigenous theoretical and methodological framework, it was immensely dependent on European theoretical paradigms. As Dhanagre points out – “The history of the early development of sociology and social anthropology in India is,thus,punctuatedby multi-level synthesis of western theories, concepts and models and indigenous social thought and ideas” (Dhanagre ;1985:318).

When we evaluate the work and writings of Indian sociologist and as it has been mentioned earlier in this paper that western models had dominant role in analyzing social –structural units like

caste, family, kinship and village community. There has been analysis of class relations in rural urban and industrial settings have also been studied. Even the political sociologists have made wide and in depth study on power, authority, elites, leaders, political parties and factions. One can find authentic and substantial work of sociological importance in these areas, however there is paucity of proper formulation of criteria of evaluation of such kind of research work. Even contemporary works and the writings of Indian sociologists and scholars have western orientation in adoption of methodology and approaches. The modernist and postmodernist influence of the European world (and America) is visible on the studies and writings carried out by the scholars.

Fig 1.2 European Influences on the Pioneers of Indian Sociology



Source: Own

The above chart represents the approaches adopted by the Pioneering Indian Sociologist.

There is list of Indian Sociologists and Anthropologists, (beside the above mentioned) who either based their work purely on the theories propounded by the westerners or are influenced by them. Since the early sociologists had their education of the discipline in general from European universities and were mentored accordingly, therefore they applied these theoretical frameworks in understanding Indian society. Most of these pioneering sociologist carried forward the legacy of the west, hence the sociology which was being taught in the Indian Universities got designed on western pattern. R.N.Saxena (1965:11) opines-“.....that

sociology in Indian universities has been shaped on the western pattern.”

While studying Indian society, the sociologists here adopted both particularistic as well as universalistic criteria. There was debate among the sociologist, which raised some fundamental questions regarding methodological orientations. These questions were:-

1. That whether we can do without western theories and models?
2. Can Indian society be studied by any Universalistic criteria?
3. Are Particularistic theories capable enough to study a phenomenon on macro level?

4. Do we have indigenous models which could replace western models?

These debates kept on growing among the intelligentsia. There were agreement and disagreement regarding the acceptance or rejection of western orientation in the studies being carried out in India. Y.B. Damle while giving his views on Indian Sociology, came out with the assertion –“In order to take cognizance of both stability and change I would suggest the use of the Parsonian frame of reference for the study of Indian Sociology.”(1965:32). Damle finds this model appropriate to study Indian sociology, as he argues further “Talking in terms of functional prerequisites, one finds in India that the greatest amount of premium is put on pattern maintenance rather than on adoption and goal attainment” (1968:47-48). There was section of scholars who advocated western models and theories, whereas few held that European models should be rejected. But to reject the European model was not easy, since British rule, the research which was being conducted had the western influence, and this legacy continued even after independence.

Indian Sociologists and their models

The structure of course and syllabus which is taught in Indian University comprises mainly western thinkers and theories. Though there are topics covered which deal with Indian Sociologists, but emphasis on them while teaching is less, in comparison to western scholars. The researches which are carried out are mainly based on the theoretical and methodological framework of foreign thinkers and scholars. It has been observed in Indian context that the surveys and research are generally based either on western model or the existent ideology of the government. The studies are mainly shaped on these two criterias. In such a situation its quiet hard to adopt those methodologies and theoretical frameworks which are completely indigenous.

Few sociologists like Radhakamal Mukherjee, A.K.Saran, and R.N.Saxena etc. reject western model. Radhakamal Mukherjee considers western

liberal model and Marxist model are not so capable to understand Indian society. He integrates social science model at meta scientific and meta anthropological level. A.K.Saran shows resistance to the sociology produced in the west. R.N.Saxena stresses role of the concept of Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha (Sharma; 1985:38-39). Saxena emphasizes on the synthesis of empiricism and intuition and advocates that spiritual values has an important role in our social life (Sharma; 1985:38-39). M.N.Srinivas and Yogendra Singh do not have any staunch stand on their preference of model. Srinivas studied at Oxford University and was also a disciple of G.S. Ghurye, therefore in his methodology there is a blend of both. He adopted culturological approach on one hand and simultaneously advocated ethnographic research based on participant observation.

Yogendra Singh is another renowned sociologist who advocates the use of general frameworks for studying Indian Society. He suggests that, when we use general framework, then there should be modification in them on the basis of India’s specific realities (Sharma; 1985:11). Yogendra Singh emphasizes on integrated approach, therefore he emphasizes use of theory in relation to context. One can observe that he has resorted to structural-functional, structuralism, structural –historical culturalism, Marxist orientation and construct in the analysis of social stratification. Similarly Yogesh Atal and T.K.Ommen, while observing on contributions to sociology, have their own viewpoint. Yogesh Atal had anthropological orientation, therefore he emphasizes on comparative research based on empirical studies. He was mainly influenced by S.C.Dube, B.R.Chauhan and R.K.Merton. He initiated and promoted communication research in sociology in India. T.K.Ommen, another contemporary sociologist, talks and emphasizes on ‘Perspective from below’ to study caste hegemony and the lives of dalits. He promoted this subaltern perspective.

The Sociology which developed in India can be summarized in a following manner:-

Fig.1.3. Sociology of Knowledge developed and used in India

Theoretical Perspective	Ideology to understand society	Approaches to study society	Application in real life/society
Indological Perspective	Holistic/Religious/Hinduism	Textual/Contextual	Religious/Philosophical value/Book views
Structural Functional Perspective	Ideology of Social Anthropology	System Approach	Holistic/Functional/Field views
Marxist Perspective	Conflict Sociology/Dialectical discourse	Negation/Contradiction in social structure(Historical Dialectical Materialism)	Class based analysis understanding material life from class in itself to class for itself.
Subaltern Perspective	Ideology from below-Dalits, tribal, women and radicals transformation of their consciousness.	Practical(educational and organizational)	Searching authentic ethnicity autonomy/identity/rights
Feminist Perspective	Critical Sociology of gender.	Gender approach(Feminist methodology)	Searching authentic identity /Rights.

Source: Beyond Structural-Functional Perspective: A Critical Heart Searching for Dalit, tribal and gender in Indian sociology: Dr.Rabindra Garada: IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol 16, Issue 6(Nov-Dec, 2013).

Challenges in adopting Indigenous Model

While analyzing the debates and argument regarding contribution to Indian sociology, one can easily agree to the fact that any single or one model is not capable to describe and analyze deeply, the vastness and complexities of Indian society and culture. Those thinkers, who suggest micro theories or particularistic criteria, overlook the fact, that these theories or criteria do not subsume all kind of phenomena or realities. They can be context specific. Unlike micro theories or particularistic criteria, macro or grand theories and universalistic criteria do not comprehend those realities and phenomena which are context specific and cannot be generalized.

Ideologies and Working Models

When any theory or methodological framework is evaluated, then it has to be substantiated by empirical evidence. There has been use of various models by various social scientists in the study of Indian society, but the most vehemently supported model is dialectical model in India. There may be many counter view to this argument but, the fact remains that Indian polity and academia often reflect Marxian overtones. It is evident from the fact that most of the north eastern states and south eastern states are in the grip of naxalism. The naxalism in India originated as a counter to the oppression of zamindaris in the Naxalbari village of West Bengal. Gradually this movement became a way of warfare among the tribals and the residents of economically backward areas. Naxalites are far left radical group, which is based on the political ideology of Maoist. The CPI supported the Naxalites group, which was initially based on Marxists and Leninist ideology, later on, with the formation of CPI (Maoist) in 2004, rebel group composed 'people war group' and this group is highly violent. This ideology subsumes almost half of the Indian states.

The states which are assumed to be 'Naxalite control territory' are Bihar, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. These groups frequently target tribal, police and government workers. The ideology which worked against the oppressors, itself started oppressing the tribal and the local people. These groups are 'anti-establishment' and are running parallel governments. The separatist tendencies are on surface, especially in those states which are under Naxalite control, or where Marxian ideology is rampant. The separatist and dissension tendencies are also visible in those states of India which are not in the grip of Naxalites, like state of Jammu & Kashmir. These separatist and insurgent activities are off and on explained and justified by the academicians, on the basis of relative deprivation and resource mobilization theory

Iqbal Narain (1977:194) while analyzing the problem of identity and regionalism, he categorized three kind of regionalism –

Supra state regionalism – It is based on expression of group identity of several states, with common stand on the issue. Ironically, many times the group identity is negatively forged.

Interstate regionalism – It is coterminous with state boundaries. Identity of one state or more states is threatened by another state.

Intrastate regionalism – A part of state is in quest for self-identity and self-interest.

On the basis of observation made by Narain, one can infer, that problems of the region are real, and ameliorative measures have been taken by the government and other agencies. However the left ideology prevalent in academia, encourage anti-establishment theory, which often works against the government. The issue of identity, resource mobilization, relative deprivation, political representation, military actions and is widely debated and criticized by the academicians of the universities and colleges. These discussions and debates, instead of resolving the crisis, have contributed in fuming the false identity and have jeopardized the developmental and modernizing process in these areas.

When we analyze the history of emergence of sociology, it is observed that, thoughts and theories which developed in 18th and 19th century brought revolutionary change in the thoughts and the lives of the people. In India also the theories which were framed initially, targeted to understand the Indian society. The school of thoughts like, Bombay university, Lucknow university and Kolkata university, which were the initial seat of learning in sociology, started losing their eminence, with the establishment of Jawaharlal Nehru University in the year 1970. The Centre of Social System, was established in this university, around 1971, with aim of studying social change and modernization and the main area of focus were gender, minority, dalits, tribals, etc. The era of 1970 and 80's in India witnessed Marxian ideology as a dominant ideology in academics and politics. The Marxian ideology proliferated in the campuses of JNU and other universities which had the leftist bent.

Everything which was being analyzed was in dialectical manner, and every social category and social relation was seen in binary opposition. Caste, class, family relations, etc. are antagonistic in nature; this view was upheld by the scholars and the analyst, who were influenced by Marxian thought. Yogendra Singh opines – "Marxian sensibility, however remain diffused in the thought pattern of modern Indian intellectuals. It dominates the minds of the leaders in the Communist party, and a large membership of the Congress and other liberal parties is also influenced by its ideology (Singh; 1996:18). This observation of Yogendra Singh is relevant even today.

Student Politics and Marxian Ideology

Any analysis and argument loses its relevance and validity in sociology and social sciences, if not illustrated by any real social phenomena. To validate the argument initiated in the later part of this paper, that Marxian thought is ruling Indian academia and politics (and even some media houses) by latest row of controversies erupted in two major central universities of India, i.e. Jawaharlal Nehru University and Hyderabad University. The Rohith Vemula case of Hyderabad university, is a glaring example of ideology and politics interplay.

Rohith was a dalit Ph.D. student, active member of Ambedkar Students' Association, was suspended by the university and his fellowship was ceased, as he was accused of demonstrating against the death penalty of a terrorist Yakub Menon and involved in anti-national activities, with other ASA members. On the other side, stern action and direct intervention of Human Resource Ministry is considered as the reason behind the suicide of the student.

Another university, which has come under the scanner, is Jawaharlal Nehru University, which is one of the premier institute of higher learning in India. Jawaharlal Nehru University is considered to be the bastion of left politics. SFI and AISA are the student political group, bagged by Communist party of India. The group of students associated with these political organization, protested against the death sentence of a terrorist Afzal Guru and execution of separatist leader Maqbool Bhat, simultaneously raising 'anti-India' slogans with the demand of 'freedom of Kashmir' from Indian state. All this lead to the arrest of student leader and those involved in this protest moment, they were charged with sedition.

These two illustrations cannot be considered as mere events or episodes which occurred against the state, or the action of the state against the voice of the students. These two events have raised some serious questions. The kind of political environment which is existent in the campuses and the way the government and opposition behave has to be scrutinized on one hand and on the other hand, can nationalism be debated, to the extent that protest against the execution of a terrorist can be justified! This controversy is not mere political or academic, which has ignited and invited debate on local as well as national level, but has pointed towards the shortcoming of an ideology and the fallacy to continue with the same. In the Vemula case one may argue, that it has nothing to do with the left wing politics, as it is a case of a dalit student who succumbed to the discrimination done by upper caste people or right wing government in the center.

Those who hold subaltern perspective, may argue, that the problems and issue of dalits are analyzed on the basis of ideology from below, which is capable of transforming the consciousness and bring social change for them. However, there may be disagreement among the supporters of this perspective, that it is aloof from Marxian perspective, but as may be observed, when any perspective speaks about the oppressed will automatically analyze the role of the oppressor, hence drawing antagonistic category, i.e. oppressed and the oppressor. The oppressor may be 'real' or 'assumed.' As there is a tendency of falling back on the Marxian perspective, the other perspective which take the issue of dalits or gender, easily get engaged into the grand theory, without assessing the fallout of a theory in areal time and space dimension. This is happening in the arena of politics, academics and to an extent in media. The real problem and the issue of dalits may not come into the forefront, if they falsify in adopting the theoretical framework and the approach to study those who are socially and economically backward. It

is visible that radical left groups hijack the issues of the dalits and start playing 'politics of opportunism.' This can be substantiated by the latest claim made by the general secretary of student union and the associate of Vemula. He resigned from SFI, saying they are not interested in getting justice for Rohith (Times of India; 2016).

The controversy of Jawaharlal Nehru University is more of a 'right' and the 'left' politics. Since the defeat of the UPA, particularly major loss to congress, the student supporter of SFI and AISA are in continuous loggerhead with ABVP (right wing political group of students). The anti-national slogans and support for the terrorist and separatist has raised serious doubts against left politics in India. This is happening because; again there is disengagement of theory from the actual phenomena. Marxian theory talks about the class consciousness, the objective and the subjective position of the class and the rule of the proletariat; but now here this theory justify the act of terrorism which takes the life of many innocent people. Marx criticizes capitalism, but in the name of communism he does not encourage a conflict or dissension which is based on false claim.

Relevance of Theory

Marxian framework was relevant in India after independence, as there was wage reform and land reform movement. There were dynamic relation in agrarian society, which were dialectical in nature, hence Marxian approach was appropriate. When any government or state take on ameliorative measures, gives rights and protection to the disadvantaged group, brings legislation and laws which punish and prosecute exploiters, in short, adopts welfare policies and endeavours to establish egalitarian society, then the adopting Marxian or communist approach may be a fallacy. When we fail to correlate the theory and pragmatism, then it perhaps result in wrong conclusions and serious fallacies, as for example - wrong theory or law cannot be translated into technology. The light we see coming through tubelight, is the result of infallible theory, used in the application. A false or inappropriate theory will never give a desired result. It will only satiate the political aspirations and ambition of those who use ideology only to justify their worldview. The ideology which cannot be translated into action is incapable of pursuing real interest or real good. The actors may pretend to act, but their action will only generate confusion, controversy and derailment of the path of the progress, as it is happening at present in India.

Moving further, ideologies are often considered as notion which justifies our interests and actions. Weber considers ideologies as notions that justify and motivate materially interested strata (Sharma; 1985:27). "Whenever interests are vigorously pursued, an ideology tends to be developed also to give meaning, reinforcement and justification to these interests. And this ideology is as real interests themselves, for ideology is an indispensable part of the life which is expressed in action. And conversely, whenever ideas are to conquer the world, they require leverage of real interests, although frequently ideas will more or less

detract these interests from their original aim" (Weber; 1970:42). Hence, it can be argued that no ideology or theory is irrelevant or inappropriate, but it is we who make it irrelevant by using or implementing in those areas or in the understanding of those phenomena for which they are perhaps incongruous.

Conclusion

As all through this paper the focus has been on the approaches and theories of the European scholars and how it has been adopted by Indian thinkers and scholars. There has been negation and acceptance of western models by various Indian scholars. The social thinkers came out with theories which did not have western connotation, yet there were many scholars who advocated European models to be used in understanding Indian society. As Indra Deva observes –"though Indian society has some features of its own, the distinctiveness about it is not so fundamental as to necessitate the development of Indian sociology in the sense of special conceptual and theoretical framework"(Sharma;1985:39). He further argues that western ethnocentrism must go from the existing theoretical and conceptual framework of sociology, and a theoretical system be evolved which can do justice to the structural and functional and the dynamic aspect of the society"(Sharma;1985:20).

The observation made by various scholars in support of devising indigenous methodology, argue that the diversity of Indian society, needs diverse models. There is not a single universal model which can do justice. The foreign models have their own limitations, whereas Indian models either lack universal applicability and comprehension or are too specific. There is a conceptual as well as definitional paucity sociological terms and terminology, as India has numerous languages. Sociology at higher level is learnt and taught in English; this jeopardizes the growth and development of concept and theoretical framework in Indian languages. Yogesh Atal(Gupta:2004) argues – "Even the definitional crisis has not yet been resolved.....a need exists to distinguish between endogenous development and indigenization and between universalistic and particularistic aspect of indigenization. Atal maintains that different countries are at different stage of social science development and this determines the extent of their readiness to accept "Ideology of Indigenization" (Gupta; 2004:16-17). Thus it can be concluded that since theories are few but approaches are many (Singh), and since Indian society is a pluralistic society hence integrated approach, as suggested by Yogendra Singh will do justice.

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