

Prajna Pravah:

A two-day meet on 'Role and Status of Social Sciences in India'
organized by the Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini at 'Keshav Srishti' near Mumbai
on May 10-11, 2008

Why Need We Indianise Social Sciences?

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I

Current paradigm of social sciences is based on questionable philosophical and methodological postulates

The study of social sciences began in Europe under a positivist paradigm designated as 'behaviouralism'. Its basic philosophical and methodological postulates were:

- A. The empiricist theory of knowledge,
- B. Analytic-synthetic dualism,
- C. Verifiability theory of meaning,
- D. Value-fact dichotomy and the doctrine of value-neutrality, and
- E. The notion of causal explanation or causality.

Even after the so-called post-behavioural, post-structuralist and post-modern revolutions, these postulates continue to characterize the philosophy and methodology of social sciences all over the world. This is abundantly clear from the book 'An Empiricist Theory of Knowledge' published online by Bruce Aune recently (in 2008) which is to my knowledge the latest work on the subject. However, these postulates are not only totally out of tune with Indian social psyche but also detrimental to societal interests of mankind in general.

The empiricist theory of knowledge

Empiricism, in its radical form, holds that all of our knowledge is derived from the senses. According to it, it is impossible for us to talk about that

which we have not experienced physically. So, the statements that are not tied to our sensory experiences are in this view meaningless. Since no observation could confirm religious and ethical beliefs, they are thrown out of social science discourse resulting in its complete dehumanization.

With increasing disenchantment with logical positivism, radical empiricism has been replaced by what is known as moderate empiricism which allows that there may be some cases in which senses do not ground our knowledge. But, such cases are taken to be as exceptions to a general rule.

However, as rationalists rightly argue, logical and mathematical knowledge is almost universally regarded as attainable a priori by the use of reason itself, that is, independently of sensory experience. And above all, according to traditional Indian thought, there is also trans-empirical, metaphysical knowledge or wisdom called 'Par Vidy'.

Three basic categories of knowledge are: (a) empirical, (b) rational, and (c) intuitive/transcendental. So, the empiricist stand that all knowledge is derived from the senses is obviously flawed.

Analytic-synthetic dualism

A distinction between analytical propositions and synthetic propositions was made for the first time by the well-known German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his Introduction to the 'Critique of Pure Reason' (whose first edition appeared in 1781), he defined analytical proposition as one in which the predicate entails the subject as, for example, 'a tall man is a man' or 'an equilateral triangle is a triangle'. To maintain that tall man is not a man or an equilateral triangle is not a triangle would be self-contradictory. Synthetic proposition, on the other hand, is one that we know only through experience.

Kant came out with another distinction, the distinction between a priori and a posteriori propositions. A proposition whose justification does not rely upon experience is a priori proposition; a proposition whose justification does rely upon experience is a posteriori proposition.

More than a hundred years later, taking clues from Kant --but not strictly adhering to them – the positivists propounded a new kind of analytic-synthetic distinction. While Kant believed that knowledge of mathematical and logical truths could not be obtained merely through an examination of one's own concepts, the positivists maintain that they could be so obtained.

However, ever since the publication of W. V. Quine's famous essay 'Two dogmas of Empiricism' in 1951, philosophers in general reject the Analytic-synthetic distinction.

Verifiability theory of meaning

Verifiability is the possibility of verification or falsification. Verifiability theory of meaning asserts that a statement is meaningful if and only if it is empirically verifiable. This view is opposed by rationalists who rightly argue that knowledge is both verifiable and non-verifiable.

It must be noted that the verifiability principle in itself is not empirically verifiable.

Value-fact dichotomy and the doctrine of value-neutrality

The notion of value-fact dichotomy is wrong. Of course, there is a distinction between fact and value, between descriptive and prescriptive, between 'is' and 'ought', but it is a distinction without dichotomy.

Facts and values are the two modes of reality. Facts qua facts do not exist. What appears to be a purely factual statement contains an implicit evaluation. A fact can only be understood in terms of a corresponding norm.

The notion of causal explanation or causality

This notion of causal explanation in which explanation is based on antecedent causes and conditions is inapplicable to social sciences. For, the central concept of social sciences is action, not behaviour. Behaviour is a

quasi-physicalistic, physiological and infra-rational category. Action, on the other hand, is a purposive, goal-oriented activity or conduct.

A human action may be reasonable or unreasonable, right or wrong, just or unjust and the like, but it can be interpreted only in terms of its reasons. Intentions, purposes and motives do not 'cause' actions, for, firstly, they are not identifiable separately from them, and secondly, they are semantically related to them.

II

Bringing social sciences in tune with Indian cultural context

The kinds of social studies, that currently go by the designation 'social sciences', need to be brought in tune with Indian cultural experience to make them effective, meaningful and fruitful. In my view, the two basic characteristics of Indian culture, that constitute its very foundation, are:

- A. Acceptance of the existence of an Ultimate Essence of which 'Rita', 'Satya' and 'Dharma' are respectively mental conception, verbal expression and practical application.
- B. Belief in the existence of ideas and objects simultaneously at the *Ādhibhautika*, *Ādhidaivika* and *Ādhytmika* levels.

The main postulates of the Indian paradigm of social studies are:

1. Social studies constitute a dimension of *Ātma-jñāna*. It is, therefore, wrong to model them on the analogy of natural sciences.
2. The nature and form of society is conceptual (*Pratyakṣa*) and idealistic (*Ādarśa*), not empirical-objective (*Vastu-tatva*).
3. Society and its structure depend on social consciousness; and social consciousness is an aspect of self realization.

4. Value-system, that is, the set of desired proper objectives, are central to all sorts of social studies. Without them any social study is meaningless and sterile.
5. The identity of Indian society is rooted in its cultural tradition; and, the basic characteristic of this tradition is a Dharmika devotion based on spiritual investigation. and,
6. Any positivist paradigm of social studies, including the Marxist one, is, therefore, totally unsuitable in Indian context.
