

## Persisting Questions

**Social Movements, Old and New: A Post-modernist Critique** by Rajendra Singh; Sage Publications, 2001; pp 367, Rs 550 (hardcover).

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The world has undergone significant changes since the end of the cold war. Recent developments such as the collapse of Soviet Union, disappearance of the socialist bloc, emergence of uni-polar world, scientific and technological changes, especially in the field of communication and media, and the ongoing process of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, etc, have added new trajectories to historical processes. The world has seen the politicisation of different suppressed groups and communities and the rise of new forms of resistance of the people for protection and preservation of their identities and interests. Alongside the inclusivist, humanistic and predominantly non-violent forms of resistance such as movements for the protection of peace, environment, women's rights, dalit identity and human rights, the modern states have been experiencing violent exclusivist assertions of different religious and ethnic groups. The social scientists all over the world have been trying to comprehend and interpret these rapid changes taking place in the structure and dynamics of society and social movements. While some, who look at these changes as quantitative, have tried to analyse them within the existing intellectual paradigms, others, like the post-modernists, who believe that the world has undergone qualitative change and hence the old paradigms are not useful to understand and interpret the contemporary societies, have begun to look for the new paradigms for the study of social movements. The book, *Social Movements, Old and New*, by Rajendra Singh, belongs to the second category. The book seeks to offer a postmodernist critique of social movements studies in India. It presents an

outline of the social representation of Indian society and discusses some of the major transformational thrusts such as the movement from modernity to postmodernity, society to post-society, and sociology to post-sociology (p 21).

### Methods of Study

In the book, Rajendra Singh (RS) raises questions on some uncritical conceptions and notions of society and social movements. Opposing the static and mechanical interpretations of society and social movements predominant in the discipline of sociology, RS claims that society and movement are two sides of the same coin – 'social'. The society and social movements are not static entities, but processes, which validate the authenticity of each other's existence. Each of them can be conceptualised as the expressive continuation and extension of the other (pp 27-28). If society is a collective social entity, it is so because it is always defined by collective social actions. Stripped of actions, the conception of society disappears. RS treats social movements and collective actions as 'autopoietic' actions which society applies upon itself for survival and continuity. In a larger perspective, social movements conserve the society (pp 304-05). Universalism of society presupposes the universal existence of social movements, articulating the claims and contestations of people in society (p 40).

The author, himself a sociologist, believes that sociology, in its struggle for seeking a place as 'objective science' at par with the natural sciences, has failed to comprehend the dynamic character of society and social movements. Being a modernist project, sociology sought to comprehend social relations on the bases of science, reason and rationality. In its attempts to make social relations amenable to the rules of scientific analysis and explanation, sociology developed macro concepts such as society, social system, social organisation, class, status and role. While doing that, the traditional sociology excluded subjectivity and consciousness

from the domain of scientific social analysis and successfully abolished the individual. RS says that the classical conceptions of society and social order have overlooked freedom and autonomy of individuals, groups and communities. RS rejects the views of Durkheim, Levi Strauss, Althusser, Michael Foucault, etc, on the ground that they were excessively worried about subjectivism in the study of social relations and saw the possibility of social science only in the retreat of man from the scene of his relations (p 75). With the breakdown of modernity and the movement from modernity to postmodernity, from industrialism to post-industrialism and from society to post-society, all the traditional assumptions and techniques of sociology, argues RS, have come under critical scrutiny. The postmodern phase expresses growing loss of faith in the deterministic model of the irreversible evolutionary conception of history, in the reificatory functionalist conception of society without individuals and status and role without occupiers and actors (p 65). It abandons the idea of society as a totality (of social relations) in favour of the conception of society as a plural (or assembled) social entity from which the centrifugal nature of social conflicts, opposing contestations, claims, and demands emerge and operate. The postmodernist model of post-society lays emphasis on the affirmation of the relative personal liberty and individual autonomy of the citizen in society and valorises ethnic identities, cultural symbols and the cultural practices of primary societies vis-a-vis the other groups of secondary society (p 70).

RS relates the development of new social movements (NSMs) to the birth of post-modernist post-societies. To him NSMs mirror the image of new society in the making. They project the need for a new paradigm of collective action, an alternative model of culture and society, and a new self-consciousness of the communities about their future (p 98). In his view, the new representation of societies defines itself by 'new' types of movements and collective social actions (p 88). The waning influence of Marxism as the ideology

of class struggle, as a global phenomenon, developments in communication and technology on the one hand and on the other, the increasing contradictions of the capitalist social formations driving a wedge between the civil society and the political order provide a historically new space for most of the oppressed groups to rise and fight for social justice (p 274). Reviewing different postmodernist studies on NSMs, RS maintains that NSMs are defined by plurality of pursuits, and purposes, goals and orientations and by heterogeneity of their social bases. NSMs are not interested in the idea of revolution and in the overthrow of the system of governance of the state (p 96). They go beyond the class paradigm and abandon both the industrial workers' model of union organisation and the political model of the political parties. According to him contemporary struggles are not for seeking material gains such as the ownership of land or a share in industrial products, as about redefinition of norms and values; acquisition of cultural goods and collective symbols; political rights and social justice and a contest for seeking a public space to act and to be recognised as actors (p 16). They aim at reorganising the relations between state, society and economy and seek to create a public space in which democratic discourse on autonomy, freedom of individual collectivities, their identities and orientations are discussed. NSMs evolve a grass roots politics, grass roots actions and initiate micro-movements of small groups, targeting localised issues with a limited institutional base. NSM actors are drawn from social base cutting across the social categories of gender, education, occupation and class. RS contends that NSMs basically struggle for autonomy, plurality and difference without rejecting the egalitarian principles of democracy, parliament, political participation and public representation of judicial structures.

According to RS, the NSMs are not confined only to the developed nations, which have already exhausted the fruits of modernity and entered into postmodernity. He argues that although India lags behind the west on the path of modernity and development, it has already produced the cultural conditions of the early emergence of postmodernity and postmodernist struggles in society (p 16). The social contradictions of modernity and postmodernity in India release a wide range of conflictual forces leading to two types of social movements: movements of modernity on the one hand, the movements of postmodernity on the other (pp 17-18).

Alongside the movements led by the peasants, the working class and the tribals, who are viewed as old social movements, India has been witnessing new social movements in the form of dalit, feminist, ecological, human rights and sub-national movements. In this new emerging representation of India, RS sees the emergence of an aggressive and restless consciousness of people about their 'rights', their claims and their share in the resources of the nation, and their growing awareness of their ability to collectively contest, compete and even enter into conflict and confrontation (pp 192-93). While some of these conflicts tend to become transnational, pan-humanist and global in magnitude and scope, others remain typically localist, nativist, communitarian, regionalist and insular in nature. Such 'two facedness' of the Indian NSMs, in RS's view, symbolises the contradictions of the contemporary Indian society, characterised by the premature arrival of postmodernity before modernity had run its course (p 206).

### Emerging Contradictions

RS feels that in the main, the sociologists working on social movements have failed to understand the emerging contradictions of contemporary India. According to him, most movement studies in India show disdain towards either developing an understanding of society as a system of actions or viewing movements as the expression of society in collective actions (p 140). They are yet to catch up with the contemporary debates and theories of NSMs, such as resource mobilisation and identity-oriented theories. In a comparative perspective, the Indian tradition of movement studies, according to RS, remains in the neo-classical phase (p 152). RS contends that neo-classical theories, wherein he includes both functionalism and dialectical materialism, suppress the identity of individuals and their actions and subjectivities in favour of a formalised non-human structural image of society. They freeze the real lived actions and interactions of the humans into unreal analytical social units and components and deny the reality of the plural manifestations of different groups (p 156). RS holds that contemporary social data, especially data from NSMs, question the relevance of both functionalist and dialectical materialist models (pp 155-56).

Despite his claims that he is opposed to both functionalism and dialectical materialism, like several other postmodernist critics, who start with the criticism of

modernity and end up criticising Marxism, RS also makes Marxist scholars as his prime targets. No doubt, RS talks about the contributions of M S Gore, Yogendra Singh, TK Oommen, Parthanath Mukherji, Andre Beteille, and T N Madan, etc. Although these sociologists might have started their writings as functionalists, there is hardly a known sociologist in India today, who claims that he/she continues to be a pure functionalist. The author himself recognises this and even appreciates the changes that have taken place subsequently in their theoretical frameworks and interpretations. But he has altogether different story to tell when it comes to the analysing the contributions of Marxist scholars like A R Desai, Dhanagare, Gail Omvedt, etc, (pp 157-73). At one level, he concedes that the Marxist framework can be applied to study workers' dispute in the industrial system, to peasant and lower caste collective assertions and uprisings and even to gender issues. But he feels that Marxist method suffers from several limitations. He says that the notion of immanence and historical inevitability, a specific kind of fatalism, is inherent in the logical structure of Marxism itself (p 201). Foreclosure of ideas and the unitary system of knowledge and practice are its the major weaknesses (p 179). The Marxist framework, according to RS, pre-structures and predetermines not only the use of a type of social data but also the method of interpreting the data. The data then tend to yield predestined conclusions. Because of these limitations, the Marxist enterprise mars the creative identity and autonomy of the scholar's worldview (p 186). He expresses all his opposition to Marxism while reviewing the works of some known Marxist sociologists. Of course, there is some truth in RS observation that the Marxist sociologists in India did not take note of the emergence of certain new contradictions in the Indian society. Because of their inability to be consistently dialectical, some intellectuals and the left parties claiming to be Marxist could not properly understand and analyse the rapid changes taking place in the nature and dynamics of society and social movements in India. Instead of attacking the limitations of these scholars and their parties, RS holds Marxist philosophy responsible for their failure. If the author's target is Marxism, it is essential that he first refers to the relevant works of Marxist thinkers on dialectical materialism and shows how materialist dialectics is fatalistic or pre-deterministic and where Marxist method obstructs the scholars from

understanding the social reality. But it is interesting to see that RS attacks Marxism without making any reference to classical Marxist literature. For this reason, to arrive at a correct perspective, a discussion on all points raised by RS becomes essential. RS reduces Marxist dialectical materialist approach to what is crudely referred to as historical materialism in the college textbooks. He contends that Marxism does not take note of any other social categories, other than classes. Here he does not seem to be aware of classical Marxist writings on tribes, nationalities, language, family and religion, wherein they recognised the autonomous role of these non-class entities. The practice of looking at modernity only in terms of reason and rationality and its inability to see the epistemological breaks within the modernist tradition, prevents the postmodernists from recognising how Marxist dialectical approach is qualitatively different from the metaphysical notions of bourgeois modernist philosophies. Seeing superficial similarities, the postmodernists club Marxism with other modernist philosophies. RS does the same thing when he says that functionalism and dialectical materialism have many similarities and are not opposed to each other (p 172).

RS's ignorance of Marxism further becomes evident in his review of Omvedt's works on dalit movement. He criticises Omvedt for treating dalit movements as also class struggle and including them as part of 'democratic revolution'. He blames Omvedt for drawing certain ideas from postmodernist scholars like Laclau and Mouffe, but for not accepting their understanding of democratic revolution (pp 185-86). In Marxist jargon, democratic revolution refers to the revolution directed against feudalism and colonialism. When the bourgeoisie lead such revolutions, they are identified as bourgeois democratic revolutions, but when the proletariat and its allies lead them, they are called People's Democratic or New Democratic revolutions. The democratic revolutions are distinguished from the anti-capitalist socialist revolutions, where the proletariat leads the revolution against the bourgeoisie for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this sense, Omvedt was right in characterising the dalit movements as part of the democratic revolution, as they are basically movements directed against pre-capitalist social structures and practices. But RS who does not seem to be quite conversant with Marxist understanding of the stages of revolution, innocently questions, "In what way was the

democratic revolution democratic?". He seems to think that just because Omvedt has borrowed certain things from non-Marxist scholars, she should also subscribe to their conclusions. If his logic is accepted, even Marx who has borrowed dialectics from Hegel and Lenin who depended on Hobson's work for developing his ideas on imperialism should also be accused of theoretical eclecticism and methodological arbitrariness. When RS does not have any objections to the functionalists borrowing ideas from others, one fails to understand why he should find Omvedt's approach objectionable. On the one hand, RS himself talks about the interrelatedness of different social movements, but on the other hand opposes Omvedt's contention that caste and class are related. He bemoans that Omvedt failed to make a break through in the movement studies because of her inability to come out of Marxist framework. But what new things that the postmodernists, including the author himself, did say about dalit movements are not clear at least from the book.

### **Doubts over 'Revolution'**

The anti-Marxist bias of the author becomes more apparent in his ideas on revolution. RS makes sense when he says that while revolution refers to the total recasting of the economic, social and political order by introducing fundamental changes in the structure of the society, social movements generally mobilise the members to seek redressal of a grievance or to struggle for specific goals and objectives (p 36). He reiterates several times in his book that social movements are essential for self-production and reproduction of the society. But he does not appear to be comfortable with the Marxists who say that revolution is indispensable for resolving the basic contradictions in the society and for giving birth to a new society. On the one hand he talks about universalism of society and social movements, but on the other hand, argues that revolutionary society would put an end to all social movements. To quote the author, "Revolutionary society abolishes democracy, robs the people of liberty and personal freedom, chokes the channels of free communication and in the end, it closes in upon itself a regimented society, abolishing all possibilities of the emergence of social movements. Revolution then marks the end of social movement" (p 37). When the author talks of revolution does he mean French revolution or American war of

independence? It doesn't appear to be so. For the author must be having enough data to get himself convinced that the world has witnessed several social movements after these revolutions also. He does not seem to be referring to fascist regimes and military dictatorships either. From this it becomes clear that when RS talks about 'the dead end of revolution', he is actually referring to the socialist societies led by the proletariat and its other radical allies. Does RS accept socialist societies also as societies? If he does, he is opposing his own thesis that society and social movements are inseparable, if he argues that socialist societies suppress the social movements. It is not difficult to understand that RS is unconsciously expressing his bias and contradicting himself. Here the author is not just explaining the nature of old and new social movements, he is also stating his preferences. He is for social movements, not social revolution. But what kind of social movements, he seems to be supporting? Not the one led by classes (read proletariat) and political parties (read Communist Party). Definitely not the ones, which are opposed to capitalist-imperialist rule! He is for those new social movements, which are identified as non-class (meaning multi-class), non-political (not led by political parties), non-materialist (not economic), self-defensive (not 'utopian') struggles of the communities and groups, which do not oppose liberalism, market, parliamentary democracy, i e, in other words, accept the ideological, economic and political supremacy of the bourgeoisie, and work for changes within the system without questioning the authority of the ruling classes. It is here that the petty-bourgeois character of the postmodernists gets revealed. Their talk of fighting against multiple oppressions and his defense of pluralism ultimately ends up as rationalisations of the liberal bourgeois society, which is increasingly becoming irrelevant even to the bourgeoisie themselves.

No Marxist thinker has ever claimed that all social movements are class movements. Within the given economic structure, there can be several movements of different oppressed groups and communities for protection and promotion of their rights and interests. The emergence of new contradictions within the given socio-economic structure may give birth to new social groups and to new social movements. The rise of new social movements does not necessarily imply that all the old class contradictions in the society are resolved and overcome. Howsoever long might be the list of changes that the

postmodernists might present for other's consumption, that cannot succeed in convincing us of the irrelevance of classes and class struggles, as long as capitalist-imperialist exploitation persists and the state continues to be the instrument of the propertied classes. It is erroneous to present social movements as something opposed to social revolution. Far from diminishing the role of classes, most social movements – old as well as new – help in maturation of the conditions for class struggles in the society. The classes and class struggles, on their part, facilitate certain social movements achieve their goals partially or fully within the capitalist system itself. But few oppressed communities and groups, despite leading the movements for their particular demands, fail to achieve their goals within the given economic structure. Transforming the relations of production then becomes essential precondition for the success of those movements. But can the economic structure of the society be ever overcome without class struggles and revolution? Overcoming the existing relations of production then becomes indispensable not only for the exploited classes, but also for protecting the interests of certain other oppressed social groups and communities. Ignorance of this dialectical relationship between class struggles and non-class social movements lead the postmodernists, including RS, pit class struggles and revolution against the new social movements.

The challenges of a post-society, says RS, call for a post-sociological perspective, aiming at restoring the actors to their actions, structures to their processes and the representation of post-society to the plural forms of the new social movements. In his view, the development of sociological schools of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and phenomenological sociology in the field of micro-sociology indicate the evolution of post-sociology. RS speaks of the need for abolition of the separation between the observer and the object of observation. He contends that the idea of the subjectivised nature of social reality has the potential to liberate the creative impulses of sociology from the fetters of neutrality and objectivity. Only then can sociology take up the task of interpreting society and social relations in the context of symbols, subjectivities and self-expression of human beings. Since RS argues that his understanding of the post society and post-sociology are validated by new findings in quantum physics (p 310), let us devote some time to examine briefly the recent developments in the field

of quantum physics and see how far his claims are tenable.

### Science and Sociology

Quantum physics represents a giant step forward in the development of sciences. It marks a decisive break with the old stultifying mechanical determinism of 'classical' physics. Different findings in quantum physics, such as Einstein's theory of relativity which proved that mass and energy are equivalents, his discovery that showed that light can be quantised in the form of photons and the Louis de Broglie's theory that all matter has the wave/particle character, validated the Marxist dialectical materialist theses that everything in this universe, including energy, is material and the matter and motion are always inseparable. But when RS talks about recent developments in quantum physics, he does not refer to the contributions of Albert Einstein, Erwin Schroedinger, Louis de Broglie, Max Planck and David Bohm. His main obsession is with Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty. Werner Heisenberg, a German physicist, argued that it is impossible to determine, with the desired accuracy, both the position and velocity of a particle (electron) simultaneously. The more certain a particle's position, he observed, the more uncertain is its momentum, and vice versa. It is indeed very difficult to establish precisely the position and velocity of a particle that moves at 5,000 miles per second in different directions. To decide on the position of an electron, one should first be able to look at it. But Heisenberg contends that when we use a powerful microscope to watch the position of electron, it would mean striking it with a particle of light, a photon. But because light behaves like a particle, it will inevitably disturb the momentum of the observed particle. In other words, we change the position of electron by the very act of observation. The dilemma that Heisenberg explains is indeed real at this stage of development of science and technology. But to conclude from this that the scientists could never be able to determine the position and velocity at the same time appears to be like the assertions of the earlier physicists who argued that atom was the last particle that cannot be cut further. Instead of seeing this principle as a special aspect of quantum theory at a particular stage in its development, Heisenberg started postulating it as a general philosophy, as if indeterminacy is a fundamental and universal law of nature and all forms of matter are indeterminate

by their very nature. From this confusion arose the Copenhagen School, which began to question the causality and objectivity of electrons. The Copenhagen School used the practical difficulties that we encounter in determining the position and velocity of the particle to claim that the particle does not have a definite position or velocity. According to this school of thought, reality only comes into being when we observe it. Following this interpretation, some physicists also took the view that the idea of material reality without consciousness is unthinkable. From the positivist idea that it is meaningless to discuss the existence of something which cannot be measured, came this subjectivist conclusion that since position and velocity cannot be measured, the particle is an unreal, causeless 'possibility' which only achieves actuality upon observation.

These philosophical conclusions of Heisenberg and Copenhagen School was opposed by many scientists such as Einstein, Max Planck, Louis de Broglie and Erwin Schrödinger, who are no small names in the field of quantum physics. These scientists showed that not only in the macro world, even in quantum physics, there are many things, which can be determined with mathematical precision. That Heisenberg explained the level of uncertainty with mathematical formula actually indicates that there is determinism even in the dynamics of uncertain micro particles. But RS, identifying quantum physics with Heisenberg's philosophical outlook, claims that since social reality is not entirely objective, the question of objectivity has become a lost cause (p 77). Arguing that social reality is 'socially constructed', RS says that most of our perceptions are constructed from inferences and imputations of meanings to actions and situations. He suggests that what happens depends on our way of observing or on the way facts are observed. Social realities reflect the fusion of the researchers' observation and the issues tend objects he or she is observing. All social realities need to be understood and shared as participatory realities. This realisation makes RS conclude that the conventional methods and techniques of social science research methods are now becoming symbols of shams. He expects old methods of enquiry should be substituted by phenomenological and ethnomethodological methods. He claims that he made use of the method of expressive empiricism, which assumes that the act of observation simultaneously introduces alterations in the nature of reality being observed and questioned (p 84).

No doubt conventional sociology suffers from mechanical and metaphysical notions and they need to be overcome. But what Heisenberg's theory of uncertainty has anything to do with it? The problem of uncertainty that RS is talking of refers basically to subatomic particles, not to the macro world. The society that we live in is not akin to the subatomic world. Hence one need not assume that the social scientists' techniques of observation or their actual acts of observation would produce interferences and obstruct our objective understanding of the social reality, the way light rays disturb the position and velocity of the electrons. The difficulties that social scientists encounter in understanding the social reality objectively have nothing to do with Heisenberg's principle. At least the postmodernists, who repeatedly talk of differences, should realise that macro world of social relations is qualitatively different from the micro world of electrons and photons. Just as classical physics cannot be put into operation in the subatomic world, the principle of uncertainty should not be crudely applied to the macro world

of social relations. The dynamics of electrons or the nature of the genes (RS considers Richard Dawkin's *The Selfish Gene* as another great contribution that has the potentiality to transform the nature of social sciences) cannot account for the complexity of the society and social movements. The works such as James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* have great potentiality to comprehend how the human beings behave and react under different circumstances. The phenomenological and ethno-methodological methods help us in grasping the feelings, aspirations, expectations, frustrations and subjective reactions of different groups and communities. But these methods cannot help us much in identifying and understanding the structures of exploitation – whether it be patriarchy, caste, capitalism, imperialism or internal colonialism – which exist independent of people's subjective perceptions. The conflicts in society are not just communicative in nature. All social movements – old as well new – have their objective roots as well. The

scholars working on social movements have the responsibility not only to examine the social dynamics and the subjective perceptions of the actors involved in these movements, but also to identify the material roots of these social movements. The success or failure of the social movements to a considerable extent depends on the location of these groups and community at given space and time. When we give up our search of objectivity, there is every possibility that that instead of supporting transnational, pan-humanist, biophilic, universalised moral social movements, we end up rationalising the most reactionary societies and social movements. The philosophy of uncertainty gave scope for Heisenberg to justify his flirtations with the Nazis. The biological determinism allowed Dawkins' to condemn the welfare state experiment as something against the very nature of human beings. Hope RS keep these elementary facts in mind, whenever he gets tempted to say that his understanding of post-society and post-sociology is based on developments in quantum physics and life sciences. **EPW**