

## Chapter Three

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The 'history of social science' is much younger than the history of the disciplines like History, Economics, Anthropology, Political Science and Sociology, which are the five disciplines primarily subsumed under 'social science' (Immanuel Wallerstein *et al.* 1996, *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences*, Stanford: University Press, p. 14). However, as Wallerstein *et al* note, the inclusion of History and Anthropology under this rubric is contested both from within and from outside these disciplines. Truly speaking, while each of these disciplines has its own history the history of 'social science' is just being written and the report by Wallerstein *et al* (1996) contains one of the best but very few accounts of social science history. The Social or Human Geography is perhaps more a social science than Physical Anthropology, but such intra-disciplinary matters are ignored while categorizing a discipline as 'social', 'physical' or 'life' science. Such categorization also depends on how a

discipline is locally constructed at a given point of time. For instance, certain universities in India categorize Anthropology today as a biological science; others categorize it as an environmental science and still others as a social science.

Categorization of any discipline, which in itself has a complex history of development, often depends on the leading practitioners of the discipline at a given time and space. They bring in their own orientations, own biases and idiosyncrasies into moulding the identity of a discipline at a local level. They resist any radical change in the discipline and jealously guard its boundaries. In short, in the absence of any clear definition of any extant discipline, they are the ones who define, or at least negotiate, what should be the nature and structure of a discipline.

If social science is defined as a search for universal laws of society not all that goes in the name of social science is science. The scientific spirit, the scientific attitude, and the scientific aptitude, no matter how loosely they are defined, are often believed to be missing or ignored in social science practices. Objectivity – a hallmark of science – is often jeered at by some social scientists who tend to believe that this is not humanly possible. In other words, the scientificity of social science is not uncontested, and a life or physical scientist, left to him or herself, is rarely ready to accept Political Science or History as science. While

Physical Anthropology may be grudgingly accepted as science-like, scholars outside social science rarely accept the Social Anthropology as a science. In the absence of exact concepts, precise units of measurement, clear indices for collection of data, and the need for laboratories for repeated experiments most social science disciplines fail to convince their counterparts in more exact sciences that their researches can also be called scientific because they are based on collection of data through what they claim to be scientific methods, classification of data, and generalizations as much as the so-called scientists do. They also have methods to minimize bias in their samples, classifications and generalizations as much as the life or physical scientists perhaps have.

The question that may be asked at this point is: Is it necessary for social science to be science in the sense physical science or life science is? Is it possible to do with human beings all that one does with plants, birds and animals? Or with clay, water, and chemicals? The answer is certainly a big no. The subject matter of social science – people – is therefore different from the subject matter of physical and life sciences, which make it both difficult and questionable to extend the theories and methodologies of those ‘more exact’ sciences to social sciences. A mechanical extension of the same to social sciences will be risky as well as faulty.

Social science therefore needs to evolve its own scientific personality and character, different from that of life and physical sciences. A large part of social science can indeed be called 'science' but that need not be the same kind of science as zoological or physical science is. And a large part of social science fortunately remains engaged with arts, aesthetics, philosophy, literature, etc. The ultimate purpose of any science after all is to unravel the most complex and most mysterious depths of human experience. There is no guarantee that this can be achieved, at least about human beings, only through what is called the "scientific method". One of the problems with social science in Third World countries is its awe for science. The emphasis on theory and methodology is simply inspired by a desire to be recognized as a science, which fetches a higher position in the galaxy of disciplines and also commands a lot more attention and patronage of funding agencies than a discipline that is not recognized as a science does. The aura of science is still the most important goal for most disciplines in social science: the post-modernist movement has hardly had any impact on social science thinking and practices in India. Despite much disillusionment with science and whatever it stands for, India and the countries like it still pin their hope in science for taking care of their myriad problems like poverty, unemployment, over-population and degrading physical environment.

In a brilliant essay published in 1993, P. R. K. Rao, a professor of mechanical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, brings out the oppressive aspect of science, or how it engenders epistemic violence rather than liberates the human mind which is its avowed role. Rao writes: "A great deal of mystification of the truth claims of modern science and the consequent epistemic violence that is unleashed in our times can be avoided if only we are careful enough to recognize what Hans Jonas has called the primary ontological reduction that is intrinsic to the programmatic activity of modern scientific enterprise" (P. R. K. Rao, 1993, "Situating our Sciences", *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 46(3), p. 233). And, commenting on the so-called scientific methods, he says that they "have proved themselves to be inadequate in respect of important epistemological and ontological concerns, and are at variance with the actual historical practices of science" (P. R. K. Rao, 1993, "Situating our Sciences", *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 46(3), p. 237).

Abraham Kaplan, a philosopher, argues that of all the social sciences Anthropology is the least subjected to the "myth of methodology" (Abraham Kaplan, 1984, "Philosophy of Science in Anthropology", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, p.25). Quoting Emile Durkheim and Claude

Levi-Strauss, Kaplan further argues that there is no such thing as *the* scientific method and no inquiry is free from presuppositions. He demonstrates this in *Anthropology* on the basis of his readings of the best known anthropologists in the world and concludes by saying that "Methodological uncertainty is not necessarily a symptom of scientific malaise" (Abraham Kaplan, 1984, "Philosophy of Science in Anthropology", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, p 38).

Calling science "an essentially anarchistic enterprise", Paul Feyerabend discusses at length the idea of science in his book *Against Method* (Paul Feyerabend, 1975, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, London, New Left Books, 1975). The crux of what he argues is found in the following words:

Thus science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without having ever examined its advantages and its limits. And as the accepting and rejecting of ideologies should be left to the individual it follows that the separation of state and *church* must be supplemented by

the separation of state and *science*, that most recent, most aggressive, and most dogmatic religious institution. Such a separation may be our only chance to achieve a humanity we are capable of, but have never fully realized (emphasis in original).

I now turn to a recent debate on social science research in India between Ramachandra Guha (Ramachandra Guha, 2003, "The Ones who Stayed Behind", *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 22) and Anant Kumar Giri (Anant Kumar Giri, 2003, "Social Science Research: Call of Home and the World", *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 23). The debate hovers around the merits of self-culture studies vs other culture studies, empirical research vs theoretical research, and home scholars vs diasporic scholars. The debate between the two scholars rages because the positions they have taken in matters of these issues are almost polar, and both the scholars, brilliant and highly productive as they both are, have been polemical. However, I think there is more merit in the word 'and' than in 'versus' for there is no real justification why we should choose one and not both, especially when the latter is possible. Do we need to promote Indian studies on western societies at the cost of Indian societies? Do we need to celebrate theoretical research at the cost of empirical ones? Or condemn the works of those who have left the Indian soil and eulogize the works of those who have stayed back? I think they

complement each other – not replace each other – and are often inseparable, even conceptually.

Interestingly, both Ramchandra Guha and Anant Kumar Giri have overlooked an earlier, and perhaps more substantive, article by M. N. Srinivas, which has important bearing on the issues raised by them and which was also published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (1996). In this article, Srinivas talks about sociology and social anthropology in particular and social science in general while commenting on the tradition of studying ‘Other cultures’, which unlike the sense in which Guha and Giri have used above, refer to faraway, inferior, ignorant, and most importantly, non-white people who need to be redeemed with western knowledge, technology and civilizing missions. But he writes that the rationale for studying other cultures was, however, to understand one’s own culture better. Srinivas also refers to the issue of resource-crunch that earlier most Indian scholars faced compared to their western counterparts. He writes: “Luckily, the situation with regard to funding social science research has improved considerably since the 1970s, but even now no Indian scholar gets enough funding to do anthropological fieldwork in Africa, Latin America or west or south-east Asia” (M. N. Srinivas, 1996, “Indian Anthropologists and the Study of Indian Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 16, p 670). Giri forgets this fact

while arguing how important it is for Indian scholars to study other (like European, African, and Latin American) cultures. He also forgets the other point that Srinivas has beautifully brought out, which is this: one need not go to Africa or Latin America in search of other cultures or what he prefers to call “self-in-the-other” cultures; they are very much found in our own backyards, as he himself did in the urban shepherds called Kurubas behind his College Road street home. And, unlike what Giri advocates, Srinivas advocated a shift from “self-in-the-other” studies to “the self” itself (M. N. Srinivas, 1996, “Indian Anthropologists and the Study of Indian Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 16, p 671).

- T B Subba