

The Universal in the Particular: Universalising Social Science^{*}

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Introduction

The origin and institutionalisation of the social sciences in the West followed the institutionalisation of science. The conflict between the feudal-ecclesiastical structures (divine authority) and the new wave of Enlightenment based on science and reason provided the historical context of the evolution of science. To seek accreditation as scientific disciplines, the social sciences emulated the Newtonian-Cartesian model of natural science. Auguste Comte, considered as the father of sociology, regarded Newton's Law of Gravitation as an exemplar for the social sciences. In the classical sense science meant the pursuit of universal laws that held true irrespective of time and space.

Concurrently, the industrial revolution was taking place and with it, capitalist development. The dismantling of the feudal structures was accompanied by the process of industrialisation and modernisation. The social sciences, particularly history, economics, political science and sociology, were concerned with the empirical realities of the Western world. Consequently, the theme of Western modernity pervaded the social sciences. For example, Giddens forthrightly stated that sociology was all about "institutions and modes of life brought into being" by "the massive set of social changes emanating first of all from Europe (and which today have become global in scope) creating modern social institutions".¹ Nedelman and Sztompka, the distinguished Polish sociologists, with a sense of legitimate pride observed: "Sociology, like so many other things, is a European invention ... It provided self-understanding of the triumphant modernity and gave intellectual bearings to experience of rapid and fundamental transition toward entirely new economic, political and cultural order."²

Today, coexisting, competing, even conflicting paradigms that owe their origin and development in the West find speedy dissemination in the world through institutions of learning, journals, books, and Western and Western-trained native scholars who set the course of discourse in social science. The contribution of the founding fathers of the social sciences is undeniable. Nonetheless, the dominance of the West over social science knowledge constricts the space for the genuine voices of indigenous social science knowledge to be heard. The *rites de passage* into Western publications require that every problematic be linked with Western scholarship in the

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1 A Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987), p 25

2 "Introduction: Sociology in Europe", in B Nedelman and P Sztompka (eds), *Sociology in Europe: in Search of Identity* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1993), pp 1-23

relevant substantive areas and theoretical positions to the satisfaction of editorial boards. Western hegemonic control over social science is palpable. Given the historicity of the evolution of the social sciences it would indeed be surprising if it was otherwise.

Wallerstein questioned this hegemonic position. He observed that the social sciences were based on the “presumed intellectual problematic of ‘modernity’ that was the underlying objective of intellectual inquiry in the social sciences: what it was, what ‘social’ problem it caused, how we might better understand its evolution”.³ He argued that the distinction between the modern West and the non-modern “rest”, with an explicit or implicit determination or assumption of linear evolution, could “no longer be stated as a truism, but must have to be defended as a controversial intellectual position”. This Eurocentrism, he contended, had been under severe attack for the last three decades and “if social science is to make any progress in the twenty-first century, it must overcome the Eurocentric heritage which has distorted its analyses and its capacity to deal with problems of the contemporary world”.⁴ He reminded the social scientists that “if we were to implant the story of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in a longer duration, from several centuries longer to tens of thousands of years ... the European ‘achievements’ ... thereby would seem less remarkable, or more like a cyclical variant, or less like achievements that can be credited primarily to Europe”.⁵

Posing the Problematic

I have raised two epistemological questions relating to the universalisation of the social sciences, which indeed I consider to be the goal of science. First, the social sciences that originated in the West are indigenous to the West, but are they necessarily universal for the rest? Second, can the universal always explain the particular, unless the universals in the particulars contribute to the construction of the universal?⁶ The very presence of parallel paradigms attests to the inability of any single overarching paradigm to explain the complexities of social changes and transformations taking place the world over. Social realities around the world tend to be perceived through the prism of concepts and theories in one or other of these paradigms, quite often without adequate consideration of their applicability to different socio-historical contexts.

My position in this regard is that while universal generalisation in the social sciences is a complex epistemological problem, our efforts should be to look for the general in the particular and attempt to generalise beyond the context. I am sceptical about the paradoxical view in which generalising beyond the context is considered valid, but not the quest for universality of generalisations.⁷ Generalisations can be at

3 I Wallerstein, “Letter from the President”, *International Sociological Association*, April 1997

4 I Wallerstein, “Eurocentrism and its Avatars”, *Sociological Bulletin*, 46, 1, 1997, p 22

5 Wallerstein, “Eurocentrism and its Avatars”, p 24

6 P N Mukherji, “Introduction: Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science”, in P N Mukherji and C Sengupta (eds), *Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science: a South Asian Response* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004), pp 15-65

7 This is in response to the position taken by one my reviewers, from whose comments I have benefitted greatly. He argues: “And I doubt that ‘universality’ – a fairly totalising idea – is a valid aspiration even in the physical sciences. Let me illustrate. It is generally believed that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius (actually 99.61°C, but who is measuring?) However, this is not *universally* valid as water will boil at this temperature only under standard pressure of

different levels of abstraction – conceptual, empirically validated propositions and theoretical frameworks, and paradigms. If we restrict ourselves to generalisations that are specific only to their respective contexts, we run the risk of being parochial. When we attempt to generalise beyond the context we are already in the act of *abstracting* from the particular context that which can be hypothesised for a wider social/ geographical space. It follows that we have to ascertain to what *extent* the generalisations hold. The problematic then becomes to carry on with researches that attempt to go on widening the area of generalisability till it attains the claim to universality.⁸ Often the quest is likely to be never-ending and ever-accumulating as objects and subjects of research do not necessarily remain constant over time and space – they are continually subject to endogenous and exogenous sources of change.

I suggest that we search for the universals in the particularities of the non-Western world that are generalisable, to begin with, as hypotheses for the respective regions. If we claim to be doing social science, we need to draw discerningly from the vast body of social science knowledge that already exists, *no matter where in the world they have been produced*. Through a constant dialectic of confirmations, refutations and conjectures involving competing theoretical and methodological orientations (research programmes) we can move towards universal generalisations. As the world globalises under the impact of advancing technologies, compressing time and space, this process is likely to be facilitated. The important epistemic problem will be to decide whether “universals” should be formulated in the singular or plural, probabilistically or deterministically. I shall deal with these issues later in the text.

Powerful paradigms act as guidelines and stimulus for policy actions on the assumption that they have universal validity. The two, therefore, cannot be delinked. Given the limitations of space, let me briefly illustrate my position (a) with reference to the paradigm of Western modernity and (b) multiculturalism that have had, and continues to have, a pervasive influence in the non-Western developing world. I shall take recourse to the experiences in the South Asian region, especially India.

The Paradigm of Western Modernity

The modernity paradigm that claimed to embrace the whole of social science, initially counterposed tradition in opposition to modernity in the linear progression from tradition to Western modernity. The roadblocks of tradition had to give way to the march of successful modernisation. In India, this was contested in sociology and in

1 bar Change the environmental pressure and the boiling point of water changes. The same ‘kettle’ of water at the top of Mount Everest will boil at 65°C. The point here is that while the argument of the boiling point of water being 100°C may be valid, it is only so under conditions of atmospheric pressure; it is not valid in a *universal* sense. This point of disengaging ‘generalisation’ from ‘universality’ is even more important in the context of ‘sociability’. My counter argument is: If the *relationship* between boiling point and atmospheric pressure is found to be invariant, it is universally generalisable; it matters little in what kettle the water is boiled.

8 For example, the monocultural Western concept of the nation state does not apply to the plural non-Western world. By definition, the multi-ethnic countries disqualify. Currently, by the same yardstick Western European nation states are facing the challenges from “multiculturalism”. It is possible to conceptualise the nation state with experiences from culturally plural, post-colonial countries such that it better embraces realities of both: the Western and non-Western worlds in an era of rapid globalisation of the labour market and immigration.

the political arena. Nonetheless, the post-colonial countries in general, including India, were overwhelmed by its impact.

D.P. Mukerji (who preferred to designate himself a Marxologist rather than a Marxist), while addressing the All India Sociological Conference (1955) as its first president, made two significant points that would prove to be of relevance. He argued that traditions were not necessarily inert and change-resistant, and that the boundaries of the individual social sciences would have to dissolve. Interrogating the paradigm of Western modernity, he exhorted the sociologists “to study the social traditions to which we have been born and in which we have had our being”. He argued that traditions changed through “internal and external (economic) pressures”. He warned against the deterministic fallacy that made it out as if external pressures acted like “a mechanical force moving dead matter”. Unless a given mode of production is totally replaced by another – a far-fetched possibility – “traditions survive by adjustments”. The capacity for such adjustments is the measure of vitality of traditions. Furthermore, traditions grew through conflicts and were not just inert citadels of conservatism. Symbols were central to the study of traditions, which “under certain conditions and on particular levels [were] explosively creative and dynamic”.⁹

Mukerji, whose influence on some of the top sociologists of the country (Ramkrishna Mukherjee, S.C. Dube, T.N. Madan and Yogendra Singh, among many others) was profound, made four very significant points that potentially had universalising power. First, he provided for a universalistic framework of social change in which “external pressures” were negotiated by internal contradictions within established traditions. Second, he underscored the paramount importance of traditions that are multilayered and culturally plural (including the coexistence of different religions and linguistic cultures). Third, he pointed out the imperative need for the study of symbols embedded in cultural traditions. Fourth, and most importantly, the clear implication of his formulations was that directed social change and development should follow mainly from the inherent capacity of traditions to change.¹⁰

The impact of the Western modernity paradigm registered conspicuously at the political plane. During the national movement for independence, Mahatma Gandhi crusaded for an indigenous national polity (*panchayati raj*¹¹) that would be structured in the pattern of democratically decentralised power exercised through political institutions arranged in concentric circles, with the self-governing villages and the individual at the centre. This was opposed to the supposedly pyramidal structure of the Western representative forms of democratic governance. The element of direct democracy was strongly factored into the envisaged system in the form of the general assembly of all citizens at the village level enjoying sovereign power of

9 D P Mukerji, “Indian Tradition and Social Change”, in T K Oommen and P N Mukherji (eds), *Indian Sociology: Reflections and Introspections* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1986), pp 1-15

10 P N Mukherji, “Sociology for What? Rethinking Sociology in an Era of Transformatory Changes”, *Sociological Bulletin*, 55, 2, May-August 2006, pp 172-200

11 *Panchayat* is the native expression for the traditional decision-making council of village elders that used to operate in the villages of India through the millennia. Mahatma Gandhi sought to model an entire secular-legal polity, the *panchayati raj* (literally the rule of the panchayats), after the traditional panchayat system, giving the village panchayats the status of local self-governing units of power

self-government within its local jurisdiction. The concentric circles would have successive layers of representatives from the village-level onwards such that from the local to the national level the representatives would have come from one village panchayat or the other. The Gandhian vision was innovative, indigenous and utopian,¹² not without extreme complexity. It would have required a much more rigorous and ingenuous constitution framing for which there was little patience and not enough political will.

The “modernisers”, however, held sway as they went for the easier option of inheriting the “modern” British institutions of governance and administration that were set up to serve the goals of colonial rule. The administrative and governance aspects of the sovereign state (born on 15 August 1947) retained more than half of the colonial Government of India Act of 1935. After independence, the traditionally derived panchayati raj model was set aside in favour of an imported “modern” programme, the centrally administered Community Development Programme, modelled after the Tennessee Valley Authority of the USA. It promised rapid rural transformation through multi-purpose irrigation dams and hydel projects, and an extensive rural extension service network covering agriculture, irrigation, health, education and animal husbandry. Paradoxically the ambitious project was inaugurated on 2 October 1952 by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, commemorating Gandhi’s birth anniversary.

According to Taylor, sociologist and Ford Foundation consultant associated with the programme, the Community Development project was the “most gigantically planned and governmentally administered programme of its kind in the history of the world”.¹³ As a government programme expecting people’s cooperation it failed to evoke public enthusiasm, particularly among the poorer sections, for whom the programme carried very little meaning.¹⁴ The swift and conclusive failure of the programme removed all doubts from Nehru’s mind that Gandhi’s “primacy of village-centred development and village-oriented polity was what needed to be pursued relentlessly”.¹⁵ In 1993, the panchayati raj system was finally accorded the constitutional status of the third tier of the national government at the substate (subprovincial) level by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of the parliament. Since Nehru established the Ministry of Community Development in September 1956, the course of rural development has largely been driven by endogenous trial-and-error efforts.

12 Immanuel Wallerstein distinguishes utopia from utopistics. He defines utopistics as “the analysis of possible utopias, their limitations, and the constraints on achieving them. It is the analytic study of real historical alternatives in the present. It is the reconciliation of the search for truth and the search for goodness. Utopistics represents a continuing responsibility of social scientists. But it represents a particularly urgent task when the range of choice is greatest.” I. Wallerstein, “Social Science and the Quest for a Just Society”, in P N Mukherji and C Sengupta (eds), *Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science: a South Asian Response* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004), p 80

13 C C Taylor, *A Critical Assessment of India’s Community Development Programme* (The Community Projects Administration, Government of India, New Delhi, 1965), p 4

14 P N Mukherji, “Participatory Democratisation: Panchayati Raj and the Deepening of Indian Democracy”, *ISS Occasional Series 34* (Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 2007), pp 1-35

15 Mukherji, “Participatory Democratisation”, p 18

The introduction of the third tier of government, at the substate level (of the district-and-below), in addition to the national and state (provincial) governments, is bringing about qualitative, albeit uneven, changes in the polity. The constitutionally empowered three-tier panchayati raj system of governance comprises the district-level committee (Zilla Parishad [ZP]), intermediate block-level committee (Panchayat Samiti [PS]) and the grassroots village-level assembly of the Gram Panchayat (GP). The principle of subsidiarity¹⁶ is expected to guide democratic practice in the panchayati raj system. Elections at five-year intervals in these bottom-up decision-making panchayati raj institutions (PRIs) are mandatory. As many as 504 ZPs, 5 912 PSs and 231 630 GPs elect 1 581, 145 412 and 2 971 446 – a total of 3 132 673 – representatives, respectively. The total number of elected representatives in the country, including the national parliament and the State legislatures, is a staggering 3 137 754! Through affirmative action one-third of the number of panchayat elected representatives (about one million) are women, as members and office bearers; more than 800 000 belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes who enjoy protective discrimination in the Constitution since independence.¹⁷ The introduction of the third tier of governance has released contradictions between established forces of elitist representative democracy and the newly released forces of participatory democracy. The process of institutionalisation of the third tier is evolving through this dialectic with all the attendant complexities.

The hegemonic sway of the post-World War II modernity paradigm led the dominant political elite to adopt and adapt the colonial institutions of power and development models, derived from received wisdom. The misadventure of the US-inspired (with the best of intentions) Community Development Programme not only exposed the fallacy of mechanically transplanting models from advanced “modern” countries, but, more significantly, demonstrated that the existing centralised system of governance and administration (a colonial inheritance) was not in a position to deliver development to the deprived rural masses. The “leaking” centralised system had very little “percolation” or “trickle-down” effect, thereby neutralising or negating the national commitment to the speedy eradication of poverty. Marginalised groups, including women and deprived castes and tribes, suffered from social exclusion.

Political economy and political sociology of governance and development witnessed the radical introduction of the panchayati raj system, and an evolving development model that sought to introduce target-oriented, need-based programmes in addition to growth-oriented projects. It is significant that these far-reaching changes were brought about by the national parliament itself. Even as the handed-down colonial institutions of democracy face the Indian complexities, these too are being impacted by indigenous forces. Few will any longer buy a singular linear path to Western-type modernity. There are multiple paths to evolving modernities in Asia and elsewhere in a globalising world.

16 The principle of subsidiarity holds that the central authority in any society/state should not exercise such functions as can be carried out competently by lower sub-State levels of authority, but rather the former should support the latter and help to coordinate their activities for the benefit of the society/state. See J. Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralisation* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Washington DC, 1999), pp 4-6.

17 G. Mathew and A. Mathew, “India: Decentralization and Local Governance – How Clientelism and Accountability Work”, in A. Harderius (ed.), *Decentralization and Democratic Governance: Experiences from India, Bolivia, and South Africa* (Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, 2003), pp 13-61.

Multiculturalism of the West

Multiculturalism is yet another conspicuous, more recent example of a paradigm that is indigenous to the West but is being proposed as universal for the rest. Based on ideology, theory and public policy, state adherents of multiculturalism endow distinct cultural groups to enjoy *equal* status within the country. It is noteworthy that up to the 1960s and early 1970s the concept that prevailed was that of *pluralism*. It was comprehensive enough to include the evolving pattern of structural and culturally plural institutions and organisations within a polity. Ever since Canada adopted multiculturalism as a state policy in 1971, there has been a trend in the West (particularly in some European countries) to follow suit.¹⁸

Multiculturalism in the West is largely a response to the challenges posed to their monocultural nationhood in the face of increasing cultural heterogeneity of their polities. *Immigration* is the key variable that has brought about this culturally heterogenising trend. Major movements of populations “across borders” began taking place with the establishment of European empires and the settler white colonies of North America and Australia in the nineteenth century. During the age of Pax Britannica, “[i]mmigration from the Indian subcontinent into Africa and South Africa, as well as Pacific Islands such as Fiji”, within “the British empire, is well-documented”. They basically served “the economic needs of colonial overlords”.¹⁹ In Britain, for example, post-World War II labour shortages led to immigration from its former colonies, transforming “the country into a multi-ethnic and multiracial society”. More recently, cultural heterogeneity has been accelerated through the logic of progressively integrating a global labour market in an era of globalisation.

A bastion of liberal democracy, it will be useful to discuss the experience of the United Kingdom (UK). The UK has the highest immigrant population among the European Union countries. Through successive legislations – the British Nationality Act (1948), the Race Relations Act (1976) and the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) – the UK seemed to have proceeded reasonably well with a policy of “integration without assimilation”. Before, the UK was following a broad pluralist policy. With the takeover of the government by the Labour Party, multiculturalism as state policy was adopted in 1997 by Prime Minister Tony Blair to further facilitate the model of “integration without assimilation”.

Even before the London bombings, the tensions released by the policy were becoming evident. Trevor Phillips (the London-born, powerful, black, British Labour politician of Guyanese origin) expressed the need for “a mature lexicon and a positive tone in which to seek out ways of dealing with *difference*, developing a better public policy and encouraging better personal behaviour”. Ruling out assimilation, he advocated a better management of “tensions that naturally flow from aspects of differences so we can all live more harmoniously” and movement towards achieving “an integrated society based on ‘shared values’ and ‘shared loyalties’ which follow from diversity and differences”.²⁰

18 The Canadian House of Commons under the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau of the Liberal Party adopted the Announcement of Implementation of Policy of Multiculturalism within Bilingual Framework. The Canadian Multicultural Act received royal assent on 21 July 1988

19 P Kelly, *Multiculturalism Reconsidered* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2002), p 2

20 T Phillips, “Deal with Difference through Integration”, International Conference on Multiculturalism, Italy, 24 September 2004 www.cre.gov.uk/Default.aspx?LocID=0hgnew00sRefLocID=0hg00900c001002Lang-EN.htm Emphasis added

Then the London bombings of 7 July 2005 took place, leaving fifty people dead. The UK had spawned home-grown terrorists of different ethnic origins. Phillips followed up with a warning on the dangerous drift in the multicultural situation. He asserted that there had “to be a balance struck between ‘anything goes’ multiculturalism on the one hand, which leads to deeper division and inequality; and on the other, an intolerant, repressive uniformity ... We need to be a nation of many colours that combine to create a single rainbow”. This meant “recognising diversity and rejecting assimilation”. He cautioned that the country had “focussed far too much on the ‘multi’ and not enough on the common culture. We have emphasised what divides us over what unites us. We have allowed tolerance of diversity to harden into effective isolation of communities ...”.²¹

Coming as it did from within the Labour Party, the criticism triggered a vibrant discussion in the media and in the cyber world.²² Anthony Giddens described it as “rivers-of-blood speech from the left”. He also picked up the rhetorical question posed by Ruth Kelly, the new Communities Secretary, as to “whether multicultural policies are encouraging separateness”.²³ He acknowledged that things were “far from perfect”, that there have been “racist killings” and “urban street battles”, but it was also true that no other EU state “has been more successful than the UK in managing cultural diversity”. He cited the failures of Denmark, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. The debate on multiculturalism within the country, he found “crass, ignorant and misconceived”, declaring that the UK needed “more multiculturalism, not less”, concentrating “upon developing further links between ethnic and cultural communities, and upon dialogue even when on the surface it seems to create problems”. He reminded that the original home of multiculturalism is Canada, where the “multicultural policy” was adopted officially in 1971 and was having a good run.

Tariq Modood joins the debate from a deeper understanding of the predicament of the Muslims, and the weakening of “Britishness”. In common with Giddens, he believed “that multiculturalism [was] still an attractive and worthwhile political project: and that we need more of it than less”. Responding to the integrationist argument of Trevor Phillips, he found multiculturalism and integration to be complementary ideas. The moot point was that “integration should take a multicultural rather than an assimilative form”. Even as he supported the policy of multiculturalism he expressed a conceptual uneasiness preferring the term “pluralistic integration” over multiculturalism. The social requirement that these identities be treated with respect prompted a “redefinition of the concept of equality”.²⁴

This conceptual ambivalence between multiculturalism and pluralist integration seems to have troubled even Bhikhu Parekh, political philosopher and a leading proponent of multiculturalism. He described the multiculturalist perspective as “composed of the creative interplay of ... three important and complementary

21 T Phillips, “After 7/7: Sleepwalking to Segregation”, speech delivered at the Manchester Council for Community Relations, 22 September 2005 www.cre.gov.uk/Default.aspx?LocID=0hgnew07sRefID=0hg00900c002Lang-EN.htm

22 Trevor Phillips is the Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality in the UK

23 A Giddens, “Misunderstanding Multiculturalism” (1987), p 25 Accessed in 2006 at commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/anthony_giddens/2006/10/tony_giddens.html

24 T Modood, “Rethinking Multiculturalism after 7/7”, 2005 http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/multiculturalism_2879.jsp Emphasis added

insights – namely, the cultural embeddedness of human beings, the inescapability and desirability of *cultural plurality*, and the *plural* and *multicultural* constitution of each culture”.²⁵ Yet he went on to argue that not “all cultures are equally rich and deserves equal respect, that each of them is good for its members, or that they cannot be compared and critically assessed”. “All it means,” he suggested, “is that no culture is wholly worthless, that it deserves at least some respect because of what it means to its members and the creative energy it displays, that no culture is perfect and has the right to impose itself on others, and that cultures are best changed from within”. Besides, cultures could be ordered on a scale of their “worth” in which there is no zero value. These observations only complicate the notion of “cultural equality”. Parekh’s formulations do not distinguish between multiculturalism and pluralism, the latter sometimes getting conflated with the former.

Parekh perceptively observes that in a culturally plural society, the sense of belonging to the whole society could not be premised singularly on an ethnic-based shared culture. This is where the concepts of the citizen and the political community evolving out of a common historical community had to fit in. This involved “a shared commitment to a political community”, to its continuation, implying “that one care[d] enough for it not to harm its interests and undermine its integrity”.

Unfortunately, empirical reality does not necessarily follow the sane logic of thinking philosophers. Parekh was sufficiently puzzled by the hiatus between actual and expected behaviour of multicultural societies to observe that the theoretical and political problems thrown up by multicultural societies “in their current form” had no parallel in history. Consequently, existing “political theories, institutions, vocabulary, virtues and skill that we have developed in the course of consolidating and conducting the affairs of a culturally homogeneous state during the past three centuries are of limited help, and sometimes even a positive handicap, in dealing with multicultural societies”.

The question arises: Don’t the age-old culturally heterogeneous societies have anything to offer conceptually and theoretically for the recent culturally heterogenising societies of the West? Modood and Parekh seem to be making what would appear to be a pluralist argument to score a multiculturalist point. Undoubtedly, Britain is faced with formidable challenges. The policy of multiculturalism is under serious interrogation. Will it undergo a reversal? Or will it evolve more vigorously? These questions will preoccupy the concerns of the academia and the British right, left, and centre.

Meanwhile, the reversals that the multicultural policies have encountered in Denmark, Belgium, France and the Netherlands cannot be wished away as just “failures”. There are European countries that have not felt the need to declare themselves votaries of multicultural policies and yet have maintained stable plural systems. Social science academia will have to figure out the causes and consequences of alienative trends of ethnic minorities, and how best they could be addressed.²⁶

25 B Parekh, “What is Multiculturalism”, Seminar No 484, 1999
www.india-seminar.com/1999/484/484%20parekh.htm Emphasis added

26 For a more detailed discussion on this theme see PN Mukherji, “Western Construction of Multiculturalism and Challenges to Nation-State Building in Nepal and India”, in K N Pyakuryal, B K Acharya, B Timseema, G Chettri and M D Upreti (eds), *Social Sciences in a Multicultural World: Proceedings of the International Conference held on 11-13 December 2006* (Sociological/Anthropological Society of Nepal (SASON), Kathmandu, 2008), pp 20-36

In summary:

- the concept and policy of multiculturalism is of recent Western experience, largely in response to influx of immigrant populations in settled and settler countries;
- prior to the adoption of multiculturalism (which subscribe to the principle that all cultures deserve “equal” recognition by the state as a matter of cultural right), the Western democratic polity and society had, in fact, been evolving within the pluralist framework;
- a new situation has arisen from an initial situation of relative cultural homogeneity, which is perceived as under threat from an increasingly heterogenising immigrant population;
- ethnic-nationalistic and transnationalistic sources of conflict directly affect the classical modern Western nation state.²⁷

Pluralism and Multiculturalism Distinguished: a South Asian Perspective

The world of multiculturalism is fundamentally different from the contextual realities of South Asia and many other parts of the developing world. South Asian societies have had coexistent multiple cultures for millennia as one of the oldest civilisations of the world. The challenges to their monocultural “nationhood” confronting the multicultural West are incomparably different from the challenges to the culturally heterogeneous nation states in post-colonial South Asia.²⁸ The countries in this region are *not becoming* “multicultural”, in the literal sense of a multiplicity of coexisting cultures within their sovereign space, they *are already so and for a long time*. They are not, in the foreseeable future, going to be inundated by an influx of immigrants from “other alien cultures” prompted by the demand for labour, threatening their native cultures and multi-ethnic nation states. The “pitfall” of Eurocentrism needs to be avoided. I have argued elsewhere that Eurocentric conceptualisation of the monocultural nation state cannot be universalised. If for no other reason but to distinguish the Western from the South Asian historical experience, it is necessary to distinguish between Western *multiculturalism*²⁹ and (South Asian) *pluralism*.

Pluralism, too, is an affirmation and acceptance of diversity – of religion, of language, of customs and manners, of ideologies, and so on. It also structurally manifests in federalism; democratic decentralisation; economic, political, and voluntary associations, institutions and enterprises in the public and private sectors; multiparty democracy; and so on. It accepts the coexistence of a plurality of interests within a framework of processes of conflict, dialogue and negotiations in pursuit of *common good*. The main distinguishing feature of a pluralistic framework is that “the

27 Mukherji, “Western Construction of Multiculturalism, p 27

28 This is not consistent with the nation-state of the classical conceptualisation

29 Paul Kelly describes the “circumstances of multiculturalism” as referring to the existence of “more than one culture in the public realm”, even if “one may find themselves subordinated to another culture”. This is incontrovertible. The problematic is how to go about this fact of “circumstance of multiculturalism”. The ideological positions range from: (a) the enforcement of “coerced uniformity” of the monocultural nation state; to (b) “a robust application of egalitarian or libertarian principles of justice and rights such that the consequences of group differences and conflict ... can be dealt with”; to (c) “rethink our categories and values and offer a new form of theoretical language or ideology” Kelly, *Multiculturalism Reconsidered*, p 4

common good is not given a priori ... the scope and content of the common good can only be found out in and after the process of negotiation (a posteriori)”.³⁰

What constitutes *common good* is not the understanding of any given group, although a single group can succeed in establishing its own views and ideology (hegemony). Whatever the case, outcomes are achieved through the processes of negotiation. Such negotiations can take place as part of a non-violent process of conflict resolution or can follow from violent non-institutionalised modes of social and political interactions. What is important is that outcomes are ostensibly directed in search of common good. Further, in this search for common good, the commonality pertains to a people marked by diversity of subordinate groups with their varying interests and cultural backgrounds cohabiting a common sovereign space, the nation state.

The respect for diversity, the tolerance for institutionalised expressions of different cultures “does not conflate all cultures as more or less equal (multiculturalism), nor is it indifferent to some cultural differences that are unacceptable to social standards of decency, e.g. genital mutilation (cultural relativism), nor is it without cognizance of the need for social institutions to provide ‘space’ for diversity to meet minimum standards of decency and order (anarcho-capitalism), nor is it silent or uncritical of inferior standards and values (post-modernist), but engages different social and personal values in a critical, but respectful, dialectic of reciprocal evaluation”.³¹

Pluralism is guided by the *principle of subsidiarity*, in which the space outside the *regulated domain* of the nation state is left free for the subordinate groups and, in turn, for individuals to pursue their values within the framework of common good. I would submit that South Asian countries such as India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are attuned to the pluralist, rather than the multiculturalist model.

Pitfalls of Social Science: Parochialisation and the Captive Mind

Theoretical knowledge based on rigorous empirical research conducted through “legitimised” methodology constitutes power that pervades. Modernity, the nation state, multiculturalism, pluralism, neo-liberalism, globalisation and similar formulations are sterling examples of conceptual-theoretical constructions by which the world tends to be perceived. These contributions of Western social science, generally based on the indigenous Western experience and interests in a changing world, are believed to have universal validity and have acted as drivers of change in many parts of the world. Having illustrated how the two paradigms of modernity and multiculturalism have created conceptual-theoretical confusions leading to possibly avoidable consequences, I have raised four test questions that need to be asked with reference to concrete contextual realities while critiquing any paradigm:

- Are the realities in the non-Western world getting *refracted* when perceived through the prism of Western theorising?

30 Pluralism (Political Philosophy), *Wikipedia* Accessed 28 January 2009 at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pluralism_\(political_philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pluralism_(political_philosophy))

31 Pluralism (Political Philosophy), *Wikipedia*

- Are such perceptions of realities introducing new confusions and contradictions, dependencies and symmetries, new sources of deprivations and conflicts?
- Are the non-Western societies, in the process, getting induced to reconstruct their reality to be consistent with the logic of the dominant Western paradigms, with unanticipated consequences having critical implications for their social development?
- Is it not urgent that the non-Western developing and least developed countries now focus on these questions and respond indigenously, that is, by anchoring themselves more firmly in their historical-contextual realities and wisdom?³²

Wallerstein attests to the ethno-centrism and hegemonic dominance of the West over social science knowledge while upholding the universalising goal of social science. He observes that even if “universality, however sincerely pursued, has not been fulfilled ... [and] even if up to now social science has been unacceptably parochial”, barring the more extreme of the critics, it is still regarded as “a worthy and plausible objective”.³³ Social power is at the source of a hegemonic position of social science. Those who wield social power, he asserts, “have a natural tendency to see the current situation as universal since it benefits them”. The scientists themselves rooted in an unequal, asymmetrical world of power, call into question the “neutrality of the scholar”, who as “measurers intruding on the measured”, espouse “competing particularistic views of what is universal”. “Scientific truth is itself historical” and the issue is “not simply necessarily identifiable with progress”.³⁴ The way to extricate ourselves from this situation is to “open the social sciences so that they may respond adequately and fully to the legitimate objections to parochialism and thereby justify the claim to universal relevance or application or validity”.³⁵

The other side of the coin of “hegemony” is the problem of the *captive mind*. Syed Hussein Alatas, the distinguished Malaysian sociologist who conceptualised the “captive mind”, was able to capture the sense of alienation among many Asian sociologists between the late 1960s and mid-1980s, who felt disillusioned by the manner in which the social sciences were being introduced to the Asian institutions of teaching and research. Although Alatas introduced the concept in 1972 and elaborated it in 1974, and much has happened in the social sciences from then till now, it is still worth recapitulating what he had to say. Preferring to confine himself to the Asian context for convenience, he defined the captive mind as “the product of higher institutions of learning, either at home or abroad, whose way of thinking is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner”.³⁶

32 Mukherji, “Introduction: Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science”, p 32 Emphasis added

33 I Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences* (Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 1996), pp 49-50

34 Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences*, p 58

35 Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences*, pp 59-60

36 S H Alatas, “The Captive Mind and Creative Development”, in P N Mukherji and C Sengupta (eds), *Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science: a South Asian Response* (Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004), pp 83-95 Reproduced from *International Social Science Journal*, 26, 4, 1974

He identified the following characteristics of the captive mind:

- A captive mind is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems.
- It is incapable of devising an analytical method independent of current stereotypes.
- It is incapable of separating the particular from the universal in science and thereby properly adapting the universally valid corpus of knowledge to the particular local situation.
- It is fragmented in outlook.
- It is alienated from the major issues of society.
- It is alienated from its own national tradition, if it exists, in the field of its intellectual pursuit.
- It is unconscious of its own captivity and the conditioning factors making it what it is.
- It is not amenable to an adequate quantitative analysis but it can be studied by empirical observation.
- It is a result of the Western dominance over the rest of the world.

The first Asian Conference on Teaching and Research in Social Sciences held in India in 1973, attended by scholars from fourteen countries, was extremely critical about (a) teaching materials in the social sciences that were mostly available in the foreign languages; (b) imported books that carried illustrative and research materials that made little sense to students; (c) researches done within their countries that were reported or published in foreign languages; and (d) researches, whether carried out by native or foreign scholars, that followed the “models and methods developed in the West”.³⁷

The Chairman of the conference, M.S. Gore, leading Indian sociologist, regretted that we knew “a great deal about countries of the developed world and their problems and so little about our neighbours and ourselves. Besides, whatever we do know about each other’s countries we seem to learn from Western scholars”.³⁸ The Sri Lankan experience showed that scholars chose “to pursue their research work in England in preference to any other country in the world” and that “the study of social sciences has been an academic exercise unrelated to the development needs of the country”.³⁹ The conference concluded with a consensus statement that was marked by moderation and cautious optimism:

Efforts should be made to develop new methods and techniques suited for the investigation of different questions and of a variety of peoples to derive ground-level generalisations, to reconstruct middle-range theories, and to prepare macro profiles of the societies. In doing so, Western theories and concepts may be used. The validity and applicability will, however, have to be examined in the Asian context.⁴⁰

37 Y Atal (ed), *Social Sciences in Asia* (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1974), pp 20-22

38 Cited in Y Atal, “The Call for Indigenization”, *International Social Science Journal*, 33, 1, 1981, p 11

39 D R Rajalingam, “Sri Lanka”, in Y Atal (ed), *Social Sciences in Asia* (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1974), p 239

40 Cited in Atal, *Social Sciences in Asia*, p 21

Almost a decade later the second Asian Conference was held in India, organised by the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils (AASSREC) in 1983. The reaction against Western hegemony in social science was even more strident. Gore, who also chaired this conference, indicated the discrepancy between the professed universality of Eurocentric theories and concepts, and their mismatch with the contextual realities, which were well within the realm of the social sciences to resolve. The demand for indigenisation remained at the level of a radical protest.⁴¹

S.C. Dube, distinguished Indian sociologist, observed that “social scientists demonstrating the captive mind syndrome could evidently not produce emancipatory research”.⁴² He drew attention to four mutually non-exclusive options: (a) “creative adaptations” of classical theorists, while at the same time, guarding against “mindless imitation”; (b) decolonisation of the social sciences, involving “critical heart searching as well as careful analysis of manifest and latent traits of colonialism and neo-colonialism”. This did not mean that all social scientists in the West were “hostile to the aspirations of the Third World ... but like all scholarships even their contributions must be objectively and critically assessed”. In the same spirit of objectivity it needed to be ensured “that nativistic overtones and chauvinism [did] not overpower our capacity to assess objectively the social reality of the present times”; (c) the demand for indigenisation rejected “borrowed consciousness” and sought to promote “in its place an authentic self-awareness”, which could be accomplished by the rejection of “the false universalism of Western social science and by investing historical and cultural specificity into social science research and education”; (d) collective self-reliance of post-colonial countries in a more or less similar economic and social position was the desired way of advancing social science research which would have contextual relevance.

Indigenisation and Universalisation of Social Science⁴³

In the twenty-first century the social science community in the non-Western world is much more alert and critically *reactive*. It has yet a long way to go to establish that many of the correctives to Western parochialism in social science lie in the non-Western world. Modernity is not just Western modernity. The nation state is not just a fragile monocultural entity that has to feel threatened by increasing cultural heterogeneity either in the West or anywhere else. Multiculturalism as theory, concept, philosophy, public policy has to do specifically with the anxieties of the culturally heterogenising West; there is no reason to extend it to countries that have been a part of resilient civilisations with a coexisting plurality of cultures over the millennia, nor to all Western contexts.

I disagree with Charles Tilly that social movements “had never existed anywhere in the world three centuries ago”, that it was the “Western Europeans and North Americans” who developed “the elements of a new political form” in the late eighteenth century, which became available to the “ordinary people” in these countries in the first half of the nineteenth century even “as it began spreading to the

41 See Mukherji, “Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science”, pp 19-20

42 S C Dube, “Social Sciences for the 1980s: from Rhetoric to Reality”, *International Social Science Journal*, 34, 3, 1982, pp 497-500

43 This section draws substantially from Mukherji, “Introduction: Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science”, pp 33-35

other parts of the world".⁴⁴ I find Wallerstein's classification of social movements also limiting and European. He distinguishes between "social" and "national" movements, the former referring to the class struggles primarily conceived by the socialist parties and trade unions, and the latter to national liberation struggles for the creation of new states.⁴⁵ Nor is the distinction between "old" (class) and "new" (identitarian) movements sufficiently comprehensive.⁴⁶ There is a need to conceptualise social movements within the framework of social mobilisation, conflict, structure and change that will not be constrained by the boundaries of space and time. I have attempted this elsewhere at a modest scale while studying social movements in India.

The basic problematic that needs to be attended to is: How then do we move towards universalising the social sciences, or is it at all possible? I have already stated that it is a complex epistemological question. Let us accept that if science is incapable of generalising, it cannot qualify to be science. At the same time, the nature and extent of generalisability is a complex proposition in the social sciences. Very simplistically, I would consider primary concepts, rather than theoretical generalisations, to be more amenable to universal application. Thus concepts such as norms, values, institutions, class, caste, family, community, state, power, government, bureaucracy, elites, national income, gross domestic product and many others do communicate fairly uniform acceptable abstractions. Universal generalisations of higher-level abstractions that are historically-contextually conditioned and theoretically-empirically derived, such as modernity, the nation state and multiculturalism, are contested areas that would have to congeal through a process of formulations subjected themselves to the indigeneity tests in a variety of different contexts. These are the concepts-in-motion. Can *indigeneity* in principle be made compatible with the goal of the universalisation of social science? My position is that this is not only possible; it is a necessary condition.

This raises the epistemic question as to whether universalism in the social sciences has to manifest itself in the *singular*, or is there scope for a *plurality* here. Wallerstein projects this problematic succinctly:

If universalism, all universalisms, is historically contingent, is there any way to construct a relevant single universalism for the present time? Is the solution to contingent universalism that of ghettos or that of social integration? Is there a deeper universalism which goes beyond the formalistic universalism of modern societies and modern thought, one that accepts contradiction within universality? Can we promote a *pluralistic universalism*, on the analogy of the Indian pantheon, wherein a single god has many avatars?⁴⁷

For universalisation to be possible, certain major assumptions underlying indigenisation have to be clearly explicated:

- Indigenisation is not the parochialisation of social science. Science and parochial knowledge are incommensurate. The process of indigenising

44 C Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006), pp 182-183

45 I Wallerstein, "New Revolts against the System", *New Left Review*, 2002, p 29 Accessed on 29 April 2008 at <http://www.newleftreview.org/A2420>

46 M Edelman, "Social Movements: Changing Paradigms and Forms of Politics", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 2001, pp 285-317

47 Wallerstein, *Open the Social Sciences*, pp 59-60 Emphasis added

social science has to be consistent with the process of universalising social science.

- Just as concepts and theories emanating indigenously from the West can and may have relevance beyond the West, likewise, concepts and theories originating from contexts other than the West can and may have relevance for the West. It is only when knowledge generation from different societal and cultural contexts contributes to the pool of social science knowledge that social science will genuinely be moving towards its proper universalisation.
- Since theory and action are inextricably linked, it is expected that action issuing from indigenous knowledge will release processes of change with continuity more consistent with the system's own propensity for change, thereby making enduring development and change more probable.
- One of the important assumptions underlying indigenisation is that social reality is best comprehended if it is analysed, inferred, explained and interpreted with the help of conceptual abstractions that are either deeply rooted in its structure, culture and historical process or sufficiently efficient in capturing the complex realities, even if they are formulated in contexts other than their own. Such contextualisation of conceptual and theoretical formulations, it is contended, makes for a more precise grasp of social reality and its dynamics.

The indigenisation of the social sciences can be understood at three different levels of abstraction – the *original*, the *innovative mix* and the *universal passing the indigeneity test*. When extant concepts and theoretical formulations generated indigenously at one place fail to capture adequately or satisfactorily the social reality of another, there arises the need for a creative and original search for additional or substitute abstractions that do so. This may lead us to *native concepts* that express the contextual reality more efficiently. The scientific task is then to develop further *abstractions or codifications of the native concepts* so that they can capture social reality in contexts beyond their own.

Indigeneity may lie in formulating problems by an uninhibited, innovative mix of existing paradigms and blending this with an intuitive-creative grasp of social reality, consistent with the scientific-methodological spirit of the logic of inquiry. This, in effect, is an argument against social scientists getting paradigm-and-methodology-fixated.

Finally, if concepts and theories originating in the West, or elsewhere, adequately comprehend the contextual reality elsewhere or in the West itself, passing the *indigeneity test* under scientific rigour, it would mean that they have demonstrated their capacity to generalise beyond contexts in which they were formulated. Such concepts and theories have the potential to become universally accepted as they continue to evolve from one context to another. This is the *generalisability test*. More often than not, indigeneity is likely to be a product of an imaginative and innovative mix of conceptualisations and formulations from existing paradigms. All three situations follow from the logic of inquiry.

In this framework, concepts and theories that have the potential for universality are not necessarily conceived as static or frozen, adequate or inadequate; they are in motion, capable of transcending their inadequacies through reruns over different contexts in time. In an era of technology-driven, rapid, irreversible globalisation the pace of social changes is awesome. Social science, more so in developing regions, faces the challenge of studying the swift changes that have already been set in motion, particularly by economic globalisation, and anticipating the changes ahead in all their implications.⁴⁸ It must be able to debate the changes that were intended and those that were not; those that were desirable as against those that are unacceptable. It should be in a position to foresee the possibilities in the immediate and the distant future with a certain measure of clarity. Armed with the power that such knowledge would provide, the agents and forces of change can take positions consistent with their own political orientations, with the satisfaction that they are close to reality.

In the absence of such continuous generation and flow of knowledge, persons in power (or those competing for it) will by default tend to define reality in ways that best serve their own narrow political or self-interests. In such a context *power* is posed as the repository of knowledge. The vacuum of authentic knowledge is vulnerable to mindless acceptance or rejection of untested knowledge, which could, intentionally or unintentionally, subserve agendas detrimental to the country and its people. Ever accumulating knowledge, therefore, should become the basis of power.

Abstract

Two epistemological questions relating to the universalisation of the social sciences have been raised in this article. First, the social sciences that originated in the West are indigenous to the West, but are they necessarily universal for the rest? Second, can the universal always explain the particular, unless the universals in the particulars contribute to the construction of the universal? An argument is made for the indigenisation – as opposed to parochialisation – of the social sciences in the non-Western world in reaching out to the goal of universalising the social sciences. The way to go about it is to design researches that are able to generalise beyond the context. Indigenously designed research has to emancipate itself from the “captive mind” syndrome and follow the “logic of inquiry” driven by theoretical-methodological rigour. The argument is illustrated by critiquing the relevance of the concepts and theories of Western “modernity” and “multiculturalism” in the Indian, South Asian context.

Opsomming

Die Universele in die Besondere: Die Universalisering van Sosiale Wetenskappe

Twee epistemologiese vrae met betrekking tot die universalisering van die sosiale wetenskappe word in hierdie artikel gevra. In die eerste plek kan aanvaar word dat die sosiale wetenskappe wat in die Weste ontstaan het, inheems aan die Weste is, maar is hulle noodwendig van universele waarde vir die res? In die tweede plek, kan die universele altyd die besondere verduidelik, tensy die universele in die besondere

48 With the market meltdown this has become true even of the developed world

bydra tot die konstruksie van die universele? 'n Argument is te make vir die inheemsing – teenoor die parogialisasie – van die sosiale wetenskappe in die nie-Westerse wêreld vir die bereiking van die doelwit van die universalisering van die sosiale wetenskappe. Die wyse waarop dit bereik kan word, is om navorsing te ontwerp wat buite die konteks daarvan kan veralgemeen. Inheems-ontwerpte navorsing moet homself bevry van die “gevange gees” sindroom en die “logika van die ondersoek” volg, aangedryf deur teoreties-metodologiese nougesetheid. Hierdie argument word geillustreer aan die hand van 'n kritiese ontleding van die betekenis van die konsepte en teorieë van Westerse “moderniteit” en “multikulturalisme” in die Indiese, Suid-Asiese konteks.

Keywords

Assimilation; captive mind; common good; community development; Eurocentrism; generalisability; globalisation; indigeneity; integration; multiculturalism; nation state; panchayati raj; paradigms; parochialisation; pluralism; subsidiarity; tradition; universalisation; utopistic; Western modernity.

Sleutelwoorde

Assimilasie; Eurosentrisme; gemeenskaplike welsyn; gemeenskapsontwikkeling; gevange gees; globalisasie; hulpmiddels; inheemsheid; integrasie; multikulturalisme; nasostaat; *panchayati raj*; paradigma; parogialisme; pluralisme; tradisie; universalisme; utopisties; veralgemening; Westerse moderniteit.