

**T. N. Madan**

## **METHODS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH: EMERGING TRENDS AND CHALLENGES**

An inaugural address is\*, of course, only an invitation to discussion on the theme of a conference — a set of general observations on the background and reflections highlighting select aspects of the theme, not a close consideration of any one of them. You are, I know, assembled here to discuss the time honoured and always relevant issue of Methods in Social Science Research in the context of emerging trends and challenges of our time. I will divide my address into two parts: first, I will say something about methods and then of contemporary challenges.

### **I**

Now a few words about the background. It is perhaps undeniable that the foundations of social science research methods, as we today generally practice them anywhere in the world, including India, were laid in the West by thinkers facing up to the challenges of their own time in their own countries. These challenges were intellectual as well as societal — a product of what is called the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century and later, in the eighteenth century, by the emergence of industrial bourgeois society.

In fact, the new intellectual climate began to be shaped earlier when the traditional doctrines of revealed knowledge and self-manifest truth, *doxa*, were questioned and sought to be replaced by observation-based knowledge of the external world, *episteme*, from which term we get ‘epistemology’. Francis Bacon, a late sixteenth and early seventeenth century English jurist, had called for the elimination of preconceived ideas and prejudices and the reading of ‘the open book of Nature’, using observation and experimentation to arrive at inferences by inductive logic, inferences that were, at first, provisional conclusions that had to be verified and then confirmed or rejected. Scientific knowledge of any kind was thus a slow cumulative process of systematization of knowledge as directly derived from experience.

Not that they had no critics or that of the role of the human mind, allegedly the source of prejudice, had no votaries any more. Almost a generation earlier, René Descartes, a French mathematician, had reasserted the

importance of what he called 'the natural light of reason' in establishing 'indubitable knowledge', such as is characteristic of mathematics. In fact, Descartes wanted all genuine scientific knowledge to be unified under mathematics. The preferred logic hence was deductive. Descartes is famous for saying that the only irrefutable proof one's existence was that one could think, 'I think, therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*).

In short, empiricism and rationalism were to become established as the twin foundations of all scientific methods, judiciously combined, not mutually exclusive ways of knowing. The capacity to reason was no less important than the ability to observe. By itself, empiricism confines itself to sense-data as the source of true knowledge; again by itself, rationalism considers reason as the primary source of knowledge, superior to knowledge derived from sense data. This is still generally true, notwithstanding dissenting voices, in the West itself and elsewhere, which characterize this conception of scientific method as hegemonic. In India, among sociologists, A.K. Saran of the University of Lucknow was an early critic of the received forms of empiricism and rationalism, but he ploughed a lonely furrow.

Having brought in the notion of social science, let me return to the Enlightenment. The most representative philosopher, it can be argued, was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant who, writing in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, wanted his fellow human beings, at least the thinking type, to 'Dare to know [and have] the courage to use [their] own understanding.' This was, according to him, 'the motto of the Enlightenment'. Dependence of any external authority was rejected, for it amounted to 'self-incurred immaturity'. Humanity should, indeed, take charge of its own destiny and reject unreasonable religious ideas such as fate.

In France, Kant's contemporary, Denis Diderot, asked humanity to 'have the courage to free [itself] from the yoke of religion'. Auguste Comte, who followed him, conceived of a positive (that is experience-based) science of society, with its own laws of statics and dynamics, grounded in empiricism, and the conviction that social institutions could be perfected, that societal conditions in the wake of industrialization and urbanization in Europe and elsewhere could be improved, and human misery alleviated. Extending earlier invitations to new thinking, he maintained that the objective of knowledge should be to 'predict' the future course of social processes and, indeed, to control them. He called his proposed positive science of society 'sociology', and converged with new orientations in political philosophy and the emergence of political economy. The idea of a social science is very much a product of the Enlightenment.

These, then, are very briefly the foundations of methods in social science research. Refinements have been under way ever since. Thus, building upon the logic of dialectics, Karl Marx conceived of 'revolution' as the means

of societal change to end class exploitation and achieve a kind of final state of societal perfection, at once ethical and practical. Social problems, he maintained, carried in themselves the seeds of their solution. The task of social analysis was to reveal the tension and, indeed, help to end it. Causal relations were as much the subject matter of social sciences as of natural sciences.

Coming after him, Max Weber widened the scope of social inquiry to investigate human understanding of historical situatedness to better reveal the causal relations. This could be called the phenomenological turn in sociology. Likewise, Emile Durkheim, working in the Comtean tradition, called for 'social facts' to be treated as 'things' for study and, at the same time, stressed the importance of 'collective representations' in the understanding of social action. He formulated 'the rules of sociological method', employing the physiological notion of 'function' to explain social coherence.

At the core of all these methodological advances, and those that came later, like the relatively recent social interactionism of Erving Goffman, the transactionalism of Fredrick Barth, or Pierre Bourdieu's notion of agential strategies of deployment of varieties of 'capital' (economic, social, cultural, symbolic), for status maintenance and enhancement, loomed large the figure of the rational, self-interest promoting, individual choice-maker, even when involved in collective endeavour. Individualism emerged as the reigning ideology of social sciences. The community, Radhakamal Mukerjee, at this university, bemoaned was being pushed aside; methodological individualism was the bane of social science methodology. The history and the accumulated wisdom of the East, of India and China, was being ignored, he said, to the detriment of the social sciences generally, and economics in particular. Using Max Weber's methodology of 'ideal types', he contrasted the individualistic and the communitarian social orders, to reveal their contrasting value orientations. He regretted the loss of the holistic approach in the study of society.

Both he and D.P. Mukerji were critical of disciplinary specialization and the resultant fragmentation of knowledge about human social experience. The solutions to this methodological predicament that they envisaged were not the same, however. But I cannot go into them here. I should add, however, that both of them, as well as D.N. Majumdar, an empiricist, were committed to an interventionist role for the social sciences. Mukerjee regretted the retreat from the original ameliorative spirit of sociology. D.P. Mukerji, speaking from a Marxist perspective, believed that a 'push' had to be given to history in its reach for the 'next' higher stage. And Majumdar was a strong votary of 'applied anthropology.' A.K. Saran, given his anti-positivist orientation, was of different mind.

As you know, the orthodox methodologies have been under vigorous attack in the West itself from the later half of the twentieth century. The

ideas of 'mirror theory of knowledge' and of objective, value-free, scientifically established truths about social behaviour are being questioned: ethnomethodologists emphasizing indigenous categories of thought, deconstructionists exposing inherent flaws in methodological paradigms, Foucauldians uncovering the power dimensions of knowledge creation, hermeneutics calling for interpretations in place of explanation which never are final, post-modernism questioning the certitudes of meta-theories, and so on. You know all this, and will surely discuss these methodological trends and others too. I can only mention them.

I also do not have the time here to go into research methods in the sense of data collection. These techniques too have undergone continuous elaboration and refinement, sometimes owing to intellectual reasons and often times in response to technological advances. Suffice it to say, the techniques often have to be freshly formulated depending upon the challenges of the times we live in. The new situations we face, and the new opportunities that such advances as computer and communication technologies create for our research. I am sure you will be discussing many of these advances also here. Let me, then, turn to the 'emerging trends and challenges' emanating from the fast changing societies of our time.

## II

We are now in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The deadline for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals is just a couple of years ahead. Much progress has been made but the ground yet to be covered is daunting. Poverty, poor health, illiteracy, etc., stare us in the face. The economists are still arguing how best to figure out how many people in this country live below the poverty line. Reliable estimates put the number of children suffering from malnutrition at half of the total. Except in states like Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu literacy levels, particularly among women, are below what is acceptable. High rates of GDP growth in some states do not translate into distributive justice. And so on. Needless to add, all these problems have a pronounced sociological dimension for us to uncover and interpret. Such interpretations are not policy recommendations, but certainly could be significant inputs to policy formulation and execution.

All these challenges and more to 'relevant' social science research will, I am sure, receive attention from you here. Let me turn to some emerging trends, illustratively rather than comprehensively, given the limitation of time.

First of all, let me mention the global threat to natural resources and the environment. The resources are being exhausted and the environment degraded. The atmosphere above us, the soils that we cultivate in, and the waters that are so essential to human survival are being depleted, and respectively polluted with carbon emissions, resulting in global warming, with

chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and with organic and inorganic wastes. There simply is not enough safe drinking water available. Let me remind you that more than a century ago, Max Weber had prophetically warned that in the building of 'the tremendous cosmos of the new economic order', namely the capitalist-consumerist society, mankind would proceed unstopped 'until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt'. We are today talking of not just fossilized coal, but all natural resources. Rightly did Gandhi speak of Western civilization as *kudharo*, 'the evil stream.'

At the root of this self-destruction lie life styles which are anchored in the belief that 'more' is the same as 'good'. The vital distinction between 'greed' and 'need' was, again prophetically, highlighted by Gandhi almost a hundred years ago. 'How much should we consume?' is one of the big questions of our time, a most urgent one too. How many of us, the sociologists and cultural anthropologists of India, have explored these questions, which call for macro-level as well as micro-level studies, sophisticated quantitative as well as refined qualitative research methods? And, as Radhakamal Mukerjee always emphasized, such studies must ultimately be embedded in a sociology of values. Do our social science syllabi pay any heed to such ethical issues? Perhaps not, because we are wedded to the notion of objective social science, to value neutrality. Has not the time come to evolve research methods that are sensitive to such issues, without yielding to ideological prejudices? Not easy, but we must respond to the challenge.

Let me turn to another major trend of our times, namely 'globalization', which is, of course, regarded as highly desirable by most intellectuals of our times. The question is not, it seems to me, 'Whether globalization?', for it seems unstoppable — the notion of the world as the global village is an ideal — but 'How much of it in which area?'

Globalization has economic and political aspects; it has cultural aspects too. Is globalization a threat to cultural diversity? Does the monotony of cultural forms — whether of architecture, music, popular culture, or sartorial styles — pose as serious a threat as the depletion of biodiversity because of genetic engineering? What kinds of social science studies and what kinds of research methods need to be devised? It is obvious that the core issue is the very same as I mentioned earlier, that of life styles. I trust this conference will devote some attention to it. In fact, it is the constitutive principle of all social sciences generally, and of sociology and cultural anthropology in particular.

If globalization pulls us away from relatively narrow economic and political moorings, does that pose new challenges? It does, for instance, the concern with cultural identity, a kind of return to roots, some of them newly fashioned, such as the notion of 'citizenship' with its rights and responsibilities, and some clearly old and even revivalist. For half a century or more, social scientists have argued for the recognition of 'interests' as the spring board of

collective action and the abandonment of primal bonds as these are inimical of modernity. But what do we see today around us? A reassertion of linguistic and religious identities not in some 'pure' form but wedded to the quest for power. Personal faiths become public ideologies: Clifford Geertz, the renowned cultural anthropologist, recently called it the distinction between 'religion' and 'religiousness'. And, quite some time ago, Louis Dumont warned, apropos of communalism in India, that when religion becomes 'a sign of distinction' between peoples, it becomes a 'shadow' of itself.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the belief that religion was on the way out was gaining wide acceptance in the West, but today we know that the world is as religious as ever although not always in the old ways. Religious revivalism and radicalism are manifest among all religious communities of the world. Radical Islam and radical Hinduism have entered our everyday vocabulary, even 'Islamist' terror and 'Hinduist' terror.

My question to you is, how much attention do our teaching courses in sociology and cultural anthropology pay to the sociology of religion? In how many universities is it a compulsory course as, I think, it should be because it is so much a part of our public life? How much research is done on religious beliefs and practices, as 'lived' traditions? Are religious traditions static or dynamic? Are these questions and others being sidelined because of our preoccupation with 'secularism', the political ideology, as distinct from 'secularization', the historical process?

What in any case is Indian secularism? Is it the same world view engendered by the Enlightenment which gave rise to the social sciences? A world view that put the human being in control of his future, and drove religion as Max Weber put it, into the privacy of our lives? Or, as Marx predicted, the end of feudalism and capitalism would lead to its disappearance? The fact that most of the people of India believe in some religion — according to the 2001 census, less than one per cent of the people said they 'had' no religion — and practice it publicly does not suggest that Indian secularism is a world view of either the liberal or the Marxian variety? Is the issue really not of totalizing world views but, more narrowly, of the character of the state? But, then, the Indian state is neither like the French, which prohibits the public display of religious symbols — the most recent expression of this is the refusal to allow Sikh students to wear turbans — nor the American which has not established a state religion but allows complete freedom of religion to the citizens? Is Indian secularism an adaptation of Gandhi's ideal of respect for all religions? If so, does it stand for the idea of equi-distance or of principled distance? And so on.

These are not abstract or academic questions for us in India? To formulate them right and attempt answers to them, what is the required methodology? Do we need an interdisciplinary approach, combining the

insights of history, politics, and social psychology — such as Radhakamal Mukerjee advocated? But, then, A.K. Saran found his interdisciplinary approach too loosely eclectic, and he found D.P. Mukerji's combining of insights from traditional and modern thought problematic.

Let me conclude. Not that I have touched upon all the challenges that our society, and indeed the wider world face today. Thus, I would have liked to talk about the crisis which urban middle class families faced in India today in the wake of spatial dispersal, entry of women into paid work of high status, weakening of the institution of marriage, redefinition of gender roles and patterns of authority, and so on. The scope of the sociology of the family is changing significantly and raises new questions about research methods. On a global scale, I would have liked to discuss the implications of double edged technologies such as nuclear energy, which can solve our energy problems but also destroy the world, or genetic engineering which too has a positive and a negative side, or cellular connectivity, which ends isolation but destroys privacy.

Obviously, I do not have the time for all this. All I have been able to do in this brief address, is that I have tried to underscore the importance of the theme of the conference, namely 'methods in social science research' in the context of 'emerging trends and challenges'. I am sure your deliberations will throw useful light on it. I wish you all a very fruitful conference, and thank the organizers for asking me to be with you here.

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