



The Cultural Turn in Indian Sociology: Examining Theoretical Approaches to Globalization

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Abstract. This paper examines the theoretical approaches to globalization adopted by Indian sociologists from the 1990s onwards, with a focus on the persistent emphasis on culture. It argues that the dominance of cultural explanations, stemming from earlier Indological and modernization paradigms, led to a neglect of political economy and structural inequalities in analyses of globalization. The paper traces how concepts from Western cultural studies were selectively appropriated, while engagement with critical political economy remained limited. It suggests this theoretical orientation contributed to overlooking issues like agrarian distress, labor precarity and the rise of cultural nationalism. The paper concludes by calling for more integrated approaches that can better capture the complex realities of contemporary India.

Index Terms- Globalisation; Culture; Modernisation

I. Introduction

The 1990s marked a significant shift in Indian sociology, as the discipline grappled with explaining the rapid changes brought about by economic liberalization and globalization. This paper examines the theoretical approaches adopted by Indian sociologists to understand globalization, focusing particularly on the persistent emphasis on cultural explanations. It argues that the dominance of cultural frameworks, stemming from earlier Indological and modernization paradigms, led to a relative neglect of political economy and structural inequalities in analyses of globalization.

The paper traces how concepts from Western cultural studies were selectively appropriated by Indian sociologists, while engagement with critical political economy remained limited. It suggests this theoretical orientation contributed to overlooking crucial issues like agrarian distress, labor precarity and the rise of cultural nationalism. Through an examination of influential works, syllabi, and classroom practices, the paper maps out the contours of what can be termed a "cultural turn" in Indian sociology's approach to globalization.



II. Theoretical Background

Indian sociology's engagement with globalization in the 1990s was shaped by its earlier intellectual traditions, particularly the Indological approach and modernization theory. The Indological tradition, exemplified by scholars like G.S. Ghurye, focused on understanding Indian society through classical Hindu texts and emphasized the continuity of traditional institutions (Upadhyaya, 2002). Modernization theory, which became influential in the 1960s-70s, posited a linear transition from "traditional" to "modern" societies based on Western models of development (Eisenstadt, 1966).

Both these approaches privileged culture as an explanatory framework, albeit in different ways. The Indological tradition saw Indian culture as relatively unchanging, while modernization theorists focused on cultural barriers to and enablers of social change. This emphasis on culture as the key to understanding Indian society persisted even as Indian sociology shifted to studying globalization in the 1990s.

III. The Cultural Turn in Globalization Studies

As Indian sociology grappled with explaining the changes brought about by economic liberalization in the 1990s, many scholars turned to new conceptual frameworks emerging from cultural studies in the West. Concepts like hybridity, flows, and deterritorialization gained currency, as exemplified by the popularity of Arjun Appadurai's (1996) work on global cultural flows.

These new approaches allowed Indian sociologists to move beyond the tradition-modernity binary of earlier modernization theory. They provided a vocabulary to describe the complex cultural changes happening in urban India - the rise of consumerism, new media landscapes, and changing lifestyles. The emphasis on fluidity and hybridity in these frameworks also resonated with long-standing ideas about Indian culture's adaptive capacities (Singer, 1972).

However, this turn to cultural explanations came at the cost of sustained engagement with political economy. While cultural studies scholars in the West were often concerned with questions of power and inequality, their Indian interlocutors tended to focus more narrowly on describing new cultural forms. This selective appropriation of Western cultural theory contributed to sidelining questions of class, labor, and structural inequalities in analyses of globalization.

IV. Neglected Dimensions

The dominance of cultural frameworks in Indian sociology's approach to globalization led to certain issues being overlooked or underexplored. Three key areas that received insufficient attention were:



1. Agrarian Distress

The 1990s saw the beginnings of a deep agrarian crisis in India, marked by falling incomes, rising debts, and farmer suicides (Vasavi, 2012). However, this received little attention in mainstream sociological work on globalization, which tended to focus more on urban, middle-class experiences.

2. Labor Precarity

Economic liberalization led to significant changes in labor markets, including the growth of informal and contract labor (Breman, 2013). While labor studies scholars did important work in this area, it remained peripheral to mainstream sociological discussions of globalization.

3. Cultural Nationalism

The 1990s also saw the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, culminating in the BJP coming to power in 1998. However, many analyses of cultural globalization failed to engage substantively with this parallel trend of cultural nationalism (Basu, 2022).

These blind spots can be attributed in part to the theoretical orientations dominant in Indian sociology at the time. The focus on describing new cultural forms and celebrating hybridity made it difficult to critically analyze the darker aspects of India's globalization experience.

V. Classroom Practices and Knowledge Production

The cultural turn in Indian sociology's approach to globalization was reflected in and reinforced by classroom practices and curriculum design. An examination of sociology syllabi from leading Indian universities in the 1990s and 2000s shows a preponderance of readings on cultural globalization, with limited engagement with political economy perspectives (Chaudhuri, 2018).

Popular textbooks and "guidebooks" (study aids) also tended to present globalization primarily through a cultural lens, often reducing complex theoretical debates to easily memorizable points about cultural flows and hybridity. This approach fit well with existing pedagogical practices that emphasized rote learning over critical engagement (Chaudhuri, 2003).

The composition of the sociological community also played a role in shaping theoretical orientations. Most Indian sociologists came from urban, middle-class backgrounds and were often more familiar with the cultural changes happening in metropolitan India than with rural realities. This social distance may have contributed to the relative neglect of agrarian issues in globalization studies.

Institutional factors also shaped knowledge production. The 1990s saw the growth of private universities and research institutes, often funded by corporate philanthropy. These new sites of knowledge production tended to be more receptive



to celebratory accounts of India's globalization, potentially influencing broader disciplinary trends (Deshpande, 2017).

VI. Exceptions and Counter-Currents

While cultural approaches dominated mainstream Indian sociology's engagement with globalization, there were important exceptions and counter-currents. Scholars like Jan Breman (2013) and Barbara Harriss-White (2003) produced critical studies of informal labor and rural economies in globalizing India. D.N. Dhanagare's (2003) presidential address to the Indian Sociological Society called for more critical approaches to globalization.

However, these more critical perspectives often remained marginal to mainstream sociological discourse on globalization. They were more likely to be taken up by scholars in other disciplines like economics or development studies, or by sociologists working outside India.

The relative marginalization of these alternative approaches can be attributed partly to the institutional and intellectual history of Indian sociology. The discipline's long-standing wariness of Marxist approaches, dating back to the Cold War era, made it less receptive to political economy critiques of globalization (Patel, 2021).

VII. Theoretical Implications

The dominance of cultural explanations in Indian sociology's approach to globalization had several theoretical implications:

1. A historical Understanding

The focus on describing contemporary cultural forms often came at the cost of historical depth. The long-term processes shaping India's engagement with global capitalism were frequently overlooked.

2. Methodological Individualism

Cultural approaches often privileged individual experiences and narratives, making it difficult to analyze broader structural trends.

3. Neglect of Power Relations

While cultural studies scholars in the West were often concerned with questions of power, these dimensions were frequently downplayed in Indian appropriations of cultural theory.

4. Disconnect from Public Discourse

The gap between sociological analyses focused on cultural hybridity and public debates about inequality and nationalism widened over time.



These theoretical limitations made it difficult for Indian sociology to offer compelling explanations for many of the contradictions and tensions of India's globalization experience.

VIII. Recent Developments and Future Directions

In recent years, there have been signs of a shift in Indian sociology's approach to globalization. The 2008 financial crisis and growing concerns about inequality have led to renewed interest in political economy perspectives. The COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed stark inequalities in Indian society, has further accelerated this trend (Bhambra, 2022).

There is also growing recognition of the need to integrate cultural and political economy approaches to better capture the complexities of contemporary India. Scholars like Satish Deshpande (2017) have called for a "new sociology of India" that can bridge these divides.

New research areas are emerging that promise to offer more integrated perspectives. Studies of digital labor, for instance, combine attention to cultural practices with analysis of new forms of exploitation (Qiu, 2018). Work on environmental sociology is bringing together cultural and political economy approaches to understand India's ecological crisis (Guha, 2022).

IX. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Indian sociology's approach to globalization in the 1990s and 2000s was characterized by a "cultural turn" that privileged cultural explanations over political economy perspectives.

While this approach yielded important insights into changing cultural practices and identities, it also led to blind spots in understanding crucial dimensions of India's globalization experience.

The paper suggests that this theoretical orientation was shaped by the discipline's intellectual history, institutional factors, and broader social and political contexts. It contributed to overlooking issues like agrarian distress, labor precarity, and the rise of cultural nationalism.

As Indian sociology grapples with explaining the complex realities of contemporary India, there is a need for more integrated theoretical approaches. These should combine attention to cultural practices with rigorous analysis of political economy and structural inequalities.

Only through such integrated perspectives can sociology hope to offer compelling explanations for the contradictions and challenges of India's globalization experience.



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