

Traditional Indian Knowledge System and Practices: A Sociological Study

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Abstract: Sociology refers to the study of society its structures, interactions, relationships and process that influence human behavior. It seeks to understand how societal norms, values, institutions shape individuals actions and collective phenomena. This field emerged in the 19th century particularly through the thinking of thinkers like Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbart spencer, Max Weber etc who laid the foundation of modern sociology and social thought.

On the other hand Indian Knowledge System or tradition is a broad concept that encompasses a variety of ideas, practices and wisdom passed down from ancient Vedic hymns to modern writings. It includes religious beliefs like, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism etc, and philosophical thought, scientific knowledge, arts, culture and spirituality rooted in ancient texts, like the Vedas, Upanishadas, Puranas and more. This study has been attempted to know how Indian Knowledge System embraces holistic perspectives of life; with a deep connection to nature, ethics and self realization.

Keywords: vedic hymn, veda, upanishada, purana, ethic.

Introduction:

Sociology as a science of social relationship, gives importance on the study of society its structures, interactions, relationships and process that influence human behavior in social context. It seeks to understand how societal norms, values, institutions shape individuals actions and collective phenomena. This field emerged in the 19th century particularly through the thinking of thinkers like Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Herbart Spencer, Max Weber, Karl Marx etc who laid the foundation of modern Sociology and social thought.

On the other hand, Indian Knowledge System or tradition is a broad concept that encompasses a variety of ideas, practices and wisdom, passed down from ancient Vedic hymns to modern writings. It includes various religious beliefs like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism etc and philosophical thought, scientific knowledge, arts, culture, meditation, yoga and spirituality rooted in ancient Texts like, the Vedas, Upanishadas, Manusmrities, Puranas and more. The Indian Knowledge System embraces holistic perspectives of life with a deep connection to nature, ethics and self realization.

Social Construction of Indian Knowledge :

Sociology in India as a formal discipline began to take shape during British Colonial Rule, but the roots of Sociological Knowledge and ideas can be traced back to ancient Texts and Practices. It refers to the vast and diverse body of knowledge that has developed in India over millennia. It spans philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, art, culture and social organization etc. It includes indigenous beliefs, practices and systems that address society, nature and the cosmos in unique ways.

Ancient Indian Texts, Beliefs and Practices, and Social thoughts :

Vedas : The four forms of Vedas are the core of ancient knowledge, covering diverse aspects like rituals, cosmology, purusharthas, sankaras, ethics and metaphysics. The ancient text contain insights into the structure of society, its duties and the concept of social order. While they do not have a systematic sociological framework, they reflect early ideas about the roles of individuals and communities in society.

Upanishadas and Bhagawat Gita : Both Upanishadas and Bhagawat Gita are central to Indian spiritual wisdom; offering insights into the nature of the self, reality and the universe. The Upanishadas focus on knowledge and identity of the self with Brahma, while the Bhagawat Gita focuses on devotion and the worship of Krishna. Both Texts discuss concepts such as the soul, reincarnation and Karma.

Manusmriti : It outlined social ethics, laws and the principles of justice. It is a significant text that provides a code of conduct for different classes (varna) and stages of life (ashramas), shaping Indian social hierarchies and norms. Its concept of the social order deeply influenced caste-based stratification and Indian sociology.

Buddhism and Jainism : Buddhism and Jainism share many features, terminology, and ethical principles. Both are Sramana Ascetic traditions that believe it is possible to attain liberation from the cycle of re-births and deaths (samsara) through spiritual ethical disciplines. These religious traditions provided alternative perspectives too on social organizations, focusing on ethics, equality and individual responsibility. For instance, the Buddhist's rejection of the caste system and its emphasis on social welfare influenced Indian Sociological Knowledge.

Social Reform Movements : The Bhakti movement, which was started in 8th century in south India, aimed to bring socio-religious reforms through devotion. It encouraged simple and ethical living as a path to salvation, challenging immoral societal norms, evils like untouchability. Bhakti saints popularized religious teachings in vernacular languages, enhancing social awareness. The movement vocally opposed societal evils like infanticide, sati, adultery, and substance abuse, contributing to the gradual erosion of these practices. Music and dance forms such as kirtana, sattriya flourished, enriching India's cultural heritage and performing arts.

On the other, Sufi movement emerged as a response to the formalism and rigidity of institutionalized religion, focusing on inner spiritual experience and the purification of heart. Sufism deeply influenced Indian music, especially with the development of Qawwali, a devotional music form that originated in Sufi Sama, focused on the themes of divine love, suffering and longing.

Movements like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, prarthana Samaj, Ramkrishna Mission, Dalit empowerment movements etc engaged with both traditional Indian Knowledge and modern Sociological thought to challenge inequalities and promote social justice.

These movements challenged social hierarchies, promoting egalitarianism and spiritual equality, which contributed to the development of more inclusive social philosophies.

Colonialism and Post-Colonialism : In the colonial period, the Indian thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, V R Ambedkar, Rabindranath Tagore etc re-interpreted the European Sociological thoughts in the context of Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi focused on the concept of non-violence, self reliance and social justice, particularly for the marginalized and untouchables. Tilak and Ambedkar focused on the social and legal liberation of Dalits and the critique of the caste system.

In the post-colonial period Indian sociologists like, G S Ghurey, M N Srinivas, A R Desai etc sought to address the complex social structure of post independence India, examining issues like caste, village, modernization, urbanization, nationalism etc.

Philosophy and Epistemology : As a branch of philosophy epistemology studies the nature of knowledge and its validity. It was often framed in terms of 'Pramana' (means of knowing) which is a theory of knowledge that discusses how to gain accurate knowledge. It is a systematic reflection

concerning knowledge, and which takes knowledge itself as the object of science. The means of knowledge or Pramanas which are accepted by the schools of Indian thought including pratyaksa(direct perception), anumana(inference), upamana(comparison and analogy) etc.

Ancient Indian philosophy includes Astika(orthodox) system, which rely on the authority on the Vedas. These includes Nyaya (rule or method), Vaisesika(particular), Samkhya(number), Yoga(union), mimamsa(critical investigation), Vedanta(conclusion); each of which offers a distinct understanding of the self, society and the universe. Brahma (universal consciousness) in Vedanta, and Atman (individual soul) shape the understanding of human life and societal roles.

Ayurveda and Medical Knowledge : The traditional system of Ayurveda is a sophisticated understanding of health and wellness, focusing on the balance of diet, lifestyle and the use of herbs for healing. It is based on the balance of three doshas (vata, pitta and kapha). Its knowledge includes the categorization of diseases, remedies and wellness practices tailored to individual constitutions(dosha). Ancient texts like the Charaka Samhita and Shusruta Samhita outlined medical practices, surgical techniques and treatments for various ailments. Yoga(meditation) and Pranayama (breathing exercise) are also integral to health and wellness, focusing on mental and physical well-being, focusing on body, mind and spirit.

Mathematics and Astronomy : Indian mathematicians made significant contributions to mathematical knowledge . Scholars like, Aryabhatta and Brahmagupta made significant contributions to mathematics, including the concept of zero, the decimal system and infinity, Algebra, geometry; and Bhaskaracharya's advancement in calculus, including the concept of differential calculus.

Indian Astronomy was highly advanced with text like the Surya Siddhanta, development of early models of planetary motion and the solar system in the effort of Aryabhatta and Brahmagupta, proposal of heliocentric model, calculating planetary positions and eclipses etc.

Social Knowledge and Practices : India's social knowledge is reflected in its vast diversity of customs, rituals, practices often tied to religious beliefs. These includes systems of governance e.g. (Kautilya's Arthashastra provide detail knowledge on economics, governance, diplomacy and statecraft), family and kinship structures and community institutions and organizations.

Literature and Language : The history of Indian literature is ancient and vast. It had been an instrument of instruction since antiquity. Sruti (heard and revealed) and Smriti (remembered and later recorded), Sutra literature, Panchatantra, Thirukural, Kathacharitsagara, Athichudi, Vachanas are examples of traditions of literature which have enriched human life encouraging them to follow the human values and living in harmony with nature. Epic texts, such as the Mahabharata, The Ramayana, are the representation of cultural, religious and political lives of the people of Indian sub continent which combine myth, philosophy and history. The epics are the reflection of heroic age embedded with value and moral teachings for human beings. These epics have been an enduring part of visual and oral traditions of transmitting knowledge system in India. The Puranas, Aranyakas and Agamas further enrich Indian knowledge, preserving history, legends, ethics and social practices and moral lessons that inform societal norms and relationships. Notable works of Indian literature including Raghuvamsha and Kumarasambhava, Meghaduta, Abhijyana Sakuntalam by Kalidas, Mrichhakatika by Shudraka, Buddhist philosophical work like Dhammapada and educational stories like ' Jataka Tales' are in Pali

Indian literature, writings of the Indian subcontinent, produced there in a variety of vernacular languages including Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, Hindi etc. have played a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting knowledge. Sanskrit grammar codified by Panini is considered one of the most sophisticated linguistic systems in the world. Apabhramshas, which is used by Lord Mahavira Jain to disseminate his teachings the various spoken languages that developed from the Prakrits formed the basis of modern Indian languages.

Cultural Heritage : The plurality and multiplicity of the Indian culture is evident to the whole world as India has one of the world's largest collection s of songs, music, dance, theatre, folk traditions, performing arts, rites and rituals, crafts, sculptures, paintings and writings that are known as the Intangible Cultural Heritage reflect not only artistic excellence but also a deep connection to social, religious, ethical, spiritual, political and cosmological concepts. These arts also played a significant role in the transmission of knowledge across generations.

Educational System : Ancient India had a well developed system of education. Gurukulas (traditional schools) system in ancient India was famous for its all time access to teachers and abundant knowledge resources with students living on the premises to pursue their education. The institutions like Nalanda is considered the world's first residentisl university. It was center for learning Buddhist priciples, logic, mathematics and medicine. The Takshashila was known for its Vedic science, medicine and the arts. It also taught secular subjects like Archery and astrology were attracted scholars from around the world.

Intersection of Sociological Thought and Indian Knowledge System : Indian sociology has often engaged with and been shaped by the indigenous knowledge systems; For instance, Caste and Social Stratification; the Indian knowledge System, particularly the idea of Varna(class) and Jati (caste) has historically influenced social thought in India. The caste system remains a major focus of sociological inquiry, as it is embedded deeply in India's social fabric and influenced by religious and philosophical beliefs.

Conclusion : Indian Sociological Thought and the Indian Knowledge system are deeply inter connected. While modern sociology has drawn heavily on western thought, it has also been profoundly shaped by India's indigenous traditions. The blending of these two domains creates a unique and rich intellectual tradition that continues to evolve, seeking solutions to contemporary social challenges while drawing on centuries of accumulated wisdom from India's diverse knowledge systems. This integration of sociological thought with Indian traditions offers the potential for a broader perspective on societal dynamics, combining both modern analytical approaches and ancient wisdom. The vast and much of its holistic, inclusive approach to understanding the world has influenced global thought, and there is growing interest in reviving and integrating these ancient insights into modern science, technology and societal development.

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