

Sociology in North East India

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North-East India is known as the boiling pot of cultures in view of its tremendous heterogeneity of its peoples. From that point of view, the North-East region of India presents a fertile field for sociological study and research. The formal teaching of Sociology in this region was first started in 1967 with the establishment of Dibrugarh University. Since then, Sociology has come a long way. This paper attempts to make a descriptive enquiry along with a critical analysis of the origin, development and the current state of Sociology as a discipline in North-East India.

Key Words: Sociology, North-East India

Sociology, at present, is a very popular discipline among the students as well as academicians of the North-Eastern region of India. This article attempts to trace out the origin of the teaching of Sociology in the North-East region of India and also to record the contributions of sociologists of this region, particularly of Assam. It may be stated here that while Sociology as a distinct discipline was introduced in Dibrugarh University at the post-graduate level then in Eastern India, the universities of Kalyani, Bhagalpur and Patna also started teaching of Sociology.

Prof. P.K.B. Nayar, a well-known Indian Sociologist, played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Department of Sociology in Dibrugarh University. He joined the department of Sociology as a Reader sometime in 1967. Unfortunately, Professor Nayar did not continue his job for long time. After Prof. Nayar, another sociologist, S.M. Dubey, joined the department in 1968 and he led the department with much enthusiasm for promoting the subject in North East India. He realized that there were several misgivings about Sociology in North East India. The academics in particular and the common men in general often confused the study of Sociology with Ethnography and Social Work. As the North-East India is a mosaic of cultures of diverse ethnic groups inhabiting in the region at different times; studying these groups and their cultures was viewed to be one of the essential subject matters of Sociology.

A number of monographs have been written by scholars belonging to the departments of Sociology and Anthropology of the different universities of the North-East India. On the other hand, in the pre-independence period, Christian Missionaries and some other voluntary organizations also got involved in social work. The practicing social workers encouraged the idea of tribal and social

welfare which took an organized shape in the post-independence period (Dubey 1981). These two things encouraged the development of anthropological studies in North-East India which culminated in opening of the Department of Anthropology at Gauhati University in 1948. The status of Sociology at that time was not in strong footing so is to assert its own identity. As a result, the discipline of Sociology had to depend on Anthropology to survive. Even students enrolled in Sociology were from other disciplines

like Anthropology, Political Science, Economics, History etc. However, Dubey argued that, "Theoretically, such an interaction is assumed to lead to the 'cross-fertilization' in academic fields and 'multi-disciplinary understanding between the different social sciences'" (Dubey, 1981. Page- 3).

Of course, academicians were sceptical of initiating this interaction without proper planning. In this situation, Dubey strived to evolve a harmonious interaction with distinct focus on sociological theories, Indian social institutions and research methodology. He has also tried to develop the Sociology of tribes with emphasis on the study of social structure, change, development and modernization. The department introduced some significant papers at post graduate level which were: Political Sociology, Sociology of Economic Development, Industrial Sociology, Criminology, Sociology of North-East Region, Rural-Urban Sociology and Social Demography. The department also adopted a fruitful perspective for effective teaching and research in Sociology and to this end, held discussions with some of the most distinguished social scientists namely M.N. Srinivas, S.C. Dube, S.K. Srivastava, Y.B. Damle, Andre Beteille and Yogendra Singh. As a result, the department of Sociology developed its strategy for research activities mainly keeping in view its academic requirements (Dubey 1981). The faculty members of the department started to focus on some selected areas for research such as ethnic study, rural life, urban life, social demography, industrial society, social stratification, mobility, social development and modernization etc.

At the same time, the research in the field of Sociology was boosted up by the introduction of Ph.D. programme and other collaborative research work in the form of seminars and workshops. In the beginning, the researchers mostly adopted the techniques of interview schedule and observation for data collection. But, later on, they started to apply historical method, comparative method, in-depth case studies in fieldwork. But again it turned to new era and approved new areas of research and teaching in the department of Sociology. The new areas are Social Psychology, Gender Studies, Sociology of Movement, Medical Sociology, Sociology of Art, Literature and Music. As a result, since inception, more than hundred research scholars have obtained Ph.D. degree and about another hundred scholars have received M.Phil. degree from the department. It is worth noting that some of these doctoral dissertations have been published and are highly acclaimed in the academic world. Besides these research activities, the department of sociology started publication of an annual research journal titled, "The North-Eastern Research Bulletin". The first issue of the journal was published in 1970.

Another milestone programme of the department was the formation of 'North-East India

Sociological Association' in 1973 under the leadership of Prof. S.M. Dubey. The first conference of this Association was held on September, 1973. In March, 1978, Prof. Haimendorf talked about his research experiences under the auspices of the NEISA. On 12th September, 1978, a discussion was organized in the department of Sociology on 'Socio-economic life of the tea-workers of Assam' where Roger Jeffery of Edinburg University participated. On 30th October, 1990 the Association organized a discussion in which Prof. Abe of Patiala University and Mr. Melhotra of the Centre for Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, participated.

The scribe desires to record here the publication of the research papers presented by the distinguished scholars in the NEISA conferences held in 1975 and 1977. The papers presented in the 1975 conference were published by a Delhi based publisher called Concept Publishing and the title of the book was North-East India: A Sociological Study which was edited by Dubey. The papers presented in the 1977 conference were also published in book form under the name and style 'Family, Marriage and Social Change on the Indian Fringe' and this book was edited by Dubey, Bordoloi and Borthakur. Besides these two books, another book entitled 'Flash from North-East India' edited by S.V. Borbora and J.P. Saikia was also published in 2011 by the department. It would be unethical on the part of the author if he does not mention here the efforts of the faculty members of the Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University in writing text books in Assamese language for the undergraduate students. Here, we may refer the names of D. Doley, B.N. Borthakur, P.K. Bordoloi, C.K. Gogoi and J.P. Saikia.

After Prof. Dubey, Professor Durgeswar Doley provided academic leadership in the department of Sociology. He wrote a quite good number of textbooks in Assamese. Doley's academic leadership is proved by the fact that during his career as many as 22 research scholars received their Ph.D. Degree under his mentorship.

Another key person in the Department of Sociology, who with his extra-ordinary acumen brought a vivacious and indelible change in the department, is Prof. B.N. Borthakur. He conceived the idea of formation of the 'Assam Sociological Association' with some enthusiastic teachers of Sociology working in various colleges under Dibrugarh University and the first conference of the Association was held at Demow College of Sivasagar district in 2000. Prof. B.N. Borthakur was a true academician and inspired young scholars and students to develop Sociology in North East India. He is an astounding personality in the department of Sociology and contributed a lot for the promotion of the discipline of Sociology. The national seminars held under the banner of Assam Sociological Association under the leadership of Prof. Borthakur provided platform to the college teachers and research scholars for writing research papers and presenting the same in the seminars and thereby make them competent in effectively marking their presence in the academic field. A few notable seminars, among many were organised to focus on themes such as 'Challenges of Terrorism with Special Reference to North-East India', 'Emerging Issues of Concerns in Contemporary India', '35 Years of Teaching and Research in Sociology in Dibrugarh University' and 'Rural Development: Issues and Constraints' etc. A number of UGC sponsored Refresher Courses were also held in the Department of Sociology during the tenure of Prof. Borthakur's

headship. Another remarkable achievement of Prof. Borthakur was inclusion of Sociology as a subject in State Level Eligibility Test (SET) through the platform of the Assam Sociological Association. He has also achieved distinction in supervising the first foreign Ph.D. Scholar enrolled in the Ph.D. programme of Dibrugarh University. He has written a quite good number of books for the students and researchers. He is the first recipient of UGC Emeritus Fellowship Award in the department.

Next to Dibrugarh University, it is the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong which started Sociology in 1976. This university has offered courses leading to the degrees of M.A., M.Phil. and Ph.D. Since the date of starting, the department of Sociology of North Eastern Hill University has been striving to upgrade Sociology as a separate discipline in North East region. The department has also undertaken several research projects. The faculty members of this department have written a good number of books on Sociology. Prof. G.S. Aurora was the pioneer of the department. He was also instrumental in bringing other active sociologists like Prof. A.C. Sinha, Prof. C. Nunthara and Prof. M.K. Rao. But Prof Aurora and Prof. Rao did not work in the department for long. Prof. Rao left the department in 1978 and Prof Aurora in July, 1980. After them, a group of well-known faculty members joined the department and worked for the development of Sociology in North East. They are Prof. M.N. Karna, Prof. V. Xaxa, Prof. Nikhilesh Kumar, Prof. C.L. Imchen, Prof. A.K. Nongkynrih, Prof. P.M. Chacko and Prof. I.L. Aier.

Tezpur University, another central university in the region, established the department of Sociology in 2006, with a Master Programme under the leadership of Prof. Chandan Kr. Sharma. Subsequently, it launched a Ph.D programme in 2008. The vision of the department is "to become a leading centre of sociological learning in pursuit of a just and humane society". Prof Chandan Kumar Sarma has so far written a few books on Sociology which are well received by the academic circles.

On the other hand, the Assam University, located at Borak Valley in Assam also established the department of Sociology in July, 1995. The department admits students to M.A., M. Phil. and Ph.D. Programmes. It gives more emphasis on promotion of Sociology and promotes interdisciplinary studies and researches vis-à-vis enhancing an understanding of the people of the Barak Valley and their Socio-Cultural matrix.

The department of Sociology in the Nagaland University was established in 6th September, 1997 with intake capacity of 25 students. Of course, now the enrolment of students is increased. Prof. A. Lanunungsang Ao, Prof. K.R. Sing and Toshimenla Jamir had initiated to open the department. The Department has Ph.D. research programme also.

The Gauhati University also started M.A. programme in Sociology in 2009 under the auspices of Department of Political Science. The course content of Sociology at post graduate level is designed in this university to provide to the learners an intensive orientation on sociological perspective. Presently, it is a full-fledged independent department.

The Rajib Gandhi University of Arunachal Pradesh also started Sociology as a separate department in 2011 under the guidance of Prof Tamo Mibang, Vice-Chancellor, and Prof. M. Hussain. Initially the department began its academic programme with an intake capacity of fifteen (15) students which has increased later on. The department also provides M. Phil and Ph.D. programmes.

The Mizoram University opened the department of Sociology on 15th December, 2014. Dr. R.K. Mahanty, along with two other young faculty members i.e. R. Lalhrualiiana and Shettal S. Kumar initiated to open this department. Significantly at present, the department offers some interesting papers of Sociology such as Social Pathology, Sociology of Marginalized Community, Sociology of Mass Media, Sociology of Organization, Environment and Sustainable Development etc. Even before that, Tripura University located at Agartala has also started teaching of Sociology at M.A. and Ph.D.levels since 2012. The Assam Women University, located at Jorhat, since its establishment in 2015 introduced department of Sociology and offered M.A. programme with an intake capacity of 25 students. Of late the Manipur University has also introduced the teaching of Sociology at the post-graduate level.

Besides these state and central govt. sponsored universities, the private universities of this region namely The Assam Kaziranga University and Mahapurush Srimanta Shankardeva Viswavidyalaya have also offered teaching of Sociology at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. Thus these universities and other affiliated colleges of the region have been significantly contributing to the expansion of Sociology.

After portraying a brief account of teaching and research in Sociology in the North-East region of India, I now wish to highlight the following points. It is true that every subject has logic of its own existence. But in the context of Sociology, some critical questions did crop up in the minds of academicians associated with teaching and research in Sociology in the region. Let me share some of these. First, what would be the contents of sociological discourses? Some of the sociologists argued that any kind of issue or phenomenon related to human society may be discussed in Sociology. They even talked about multidisciplinary approach in Sociology. But contrary to them, another group of sociologists expressed that Sociology in India is facing an identity crisis. Prof. D.N. Dhanagare also expressed that, "Though teaching and research in Sociology had expanded enormously, Sociology seemed to have lost (for never managed to find) its identity as a discipline" (1980: 24). In the North Eastern region, it is noticed that sub-disciplines like Criminology, Social Psychology and many subjects are incorporated in the syllabus of Sociology which have their own identity as separate disciplines.

Second, Sociology in North East also emphasized on Social Anthropology introduced as British intellectual heritage. In research work, it is very difficult to find out the difference in between Sociology and Social Anthropology. Both subjects are similar in terms of research strategy. Sociological perspective is unique in researches in Sociology. But no absolute interpretation of 'Sociological' is found in the available research reports. Even Andre Beteille, in spite of his major

contribution in the sociological field, American and European academics consider him as anthropologist (Nayar 2007). In North East India, it is also one of tensions for sociologists and they feel that “Sociology that was introduced through U.S. involvement in the reconstruction of post-colonial India, and Marxist theoretical persuasions...” (Mukherjee 2006).

Third, Sociology has been taught in regional language at undergraduate level in North East India, especially in Assam. It is realized by intellectuals and sociologists that teaching in regional language is one of the hindrances for the students to get exposure at national level. Prof. P.K.B. Nayar clearly opined that teaching Sociology in the regional languages also has added difficulties for the subject and its takers (Nayar 2007). On the other hand, absence of quality text books in regional language and lack of terminology have failed to ensure standard in teaching of Sociology in this region.

Fourth, though the teaching and research in Sociology in North-East India have completed a long journey, yet could not make much imprint in regard to diffusion of sociological knowledge. Very less number of thesis, which have been submitted for Ph.D. degree or M.Phil. degree, provides insightful findings and comprehend societal phenomena and social reality with novel approaches. On the other hand, doubts are expressed about whether proper theoretical, methodological and pedagogical innovations have been introduced in teaching and research in Sociology in North East India. No doubt, the enrolment of students in Sociology at both post-graduate and undergraduate graduate levels have been increasing, but question that still haunts us is: “Can we attract the best of students to Sociology and give them an assurance for a bright professional future?” Therefore, like eminent social scientist Partha Nath Mukherji we have to raise the question that “Is it limited to the puritanical pursuit of knowledge at the level of long question, basic, fundamental, theoretical research unadulterated by social problems?” (Mukherji 2006).

Considering these questions coming into our mind, it is a true realization that those of us who are working in the higher learning institutions as teacher or researcher in Sociology, must come to consensus for redesigning our course curriculum and approaches towards our teaching-learning methods to improve teaching and research in Sociology in the North East India. The department of Sociology in all the universities of the North East India must come forward to develop Sociology by incorporating the pressing domestic problems of this region. For this, we need a staunch professional ethic for the department of Sociology through which the discipline of Sociology will receive its due status in the North East India. The task is not easy; but we should try to accept the responsibilities of the profession and do justice to it. Finally, it is true that in spite of many lapses, Sociology in the North East India is still occupying a distinguished position

as discipline. At the academic level, the illustrious sociologists and teachers have been trying to interpret the reality of this region. In the end, the scribe invites the academics and sociologists of the North-East region to offer critical comments with regard to the status of Sociology in the North-East.

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