

# Ethics in Sociological and Social Anthropological Research: A Brief Note

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*While there is a considerable body of writing on ethics in social sciences in general, in India ethical issues need to be better debated and discussed. With over 320 universities and 30 social science research institutes it is well to ask why none of the social sciences have evolved ethical codes.*

Let me clarify that although sociology and social anthropology began as separate disciplines they are practically indistinguishable now, particularly in India. Some might view even this as an ethical issue. In this note, however, sociology subsumes social anthropology.

Whether sociology is a science or not has been a major issue since its inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sociologists realised over time that social behaviour is guided by norms and that every society is a moral community constituted of individuals who are moral beings. Ethical issues are, therefore, inevitable in the pursuit of sociology. This realisation led sociologists to give up the aim of creating a natural science of society with universal laws and cause-and-effect relationships. All the same, they continued with the belief that while they cannot conduct experiments they can pursue the experimental method of reasoning, which subsumes the comparative method. In other words, they should aim at establishing general propositions, of however limited applicability, and go on revising and refining them with new information and new ideas. Without this belief sociology loses its *raison d'être* and becomes solipsistic.

The literature on ethics in sociological research has grown, particularly after the Second World War. There is an excellent overview of general issues in John Barnes' little book (1977) and in his paper (1996). I will not go over this familiar ground here, but will deal mainly with issues in the Indian context, particularly after independence.

There are now about 320 universities and almost as many departments of sociology in the country. Research carried out here by doctoral students would be the largest component of the total corpus of sociological research done at any one time in the country. Moreover, research done by a sociologist for a doctorate is often her/his only good research, if not the only research. Although almost all universities are funded by the government, the doctoral research is relatively free from government control. Nevertheless, ethical problems arise at various stages of this research: student's enrolment; supervisor's appointment; choice of subject of research; student-supervisor relationship; supervisor misusing student's data and ideas; examiners' appointment; examiners' behaviour *vis-à-vis* student and supervisor; plagiarism; funding; publication; etc. Doctoral research is an ideal ground for sensitising the initiates with ethical issues in sociological research.

Since the Master's programme is expected to prepare a student for research, ideally a university teacher in a post-graduate department should be engaged in research. There should be synergy between teaching and research at this level. This norm is gradually getting eroded, particularly after the introduction of the personal promotion scheme.

We have now reached a situation in which only a small proportion of university teachers do research, and a considerable proportion of this meagre research is mediocre. This raises serious problems of professional ethic with wide ramifications, as I have pointed out in a recent article (2005). Moreover, at the time when the country needs good research in good measure it is has a decreasing volume of research, particularly good research, despite the increasing number of teachers.

There are about 30 social science research institutes in the country. Unlike the universities, they are expected to be engaged in research all the time. Most of them came into existence because the government wanted certain kinds of research to be done. This began with the Research Programmes Committee of the Planning Commission soon after independence. It was later replaced by the Indian Council of Social Science Research. A few institutes came into existence with funds from non-government sources, at the initiative of a few university teachers feeling that they could not engage themselves fully in research within the university. However, even these institutes soon accepted the ICSSR umbrella, and those in the states also accepted the second umbrella of the state government.

All the institutes have to address the problem of priorities of research. Once an institute has decided its collective priorities, it has to keep some space for research outside of them also. Every faculty member faces the dilemma of fulfilling her/his personal research agenda and institutional agenda. With the decreasing financial support from the government and the increasing dependence on non-government funds, this dilemma is becoming increasingly acute.

The relationship between a researcher in an institute or university on the one hand and the government on the other can pose the problem of conflict between the differing priorities of the two. The ICSSR has from time to time tried to fix its priorities for funding research, and keeps them in view while sanctioning grants. In this situation, an individual researcher might decide to do research in a field simply because funds are available for it, but this is likely to lead to poor research. Or, if a sufficient number of researchers do not seek funds for the priority themes, the funds allocated for them might remain unspent.

Not only the ICSSR, but also sociologists, have discussed at seminars and conferences the issue of priorities of research. Nothing really substantial emerges from these discussions. It is alright for an institute or a funding body to fix priorities for itself, but it is meaningless for a professional association to do so. In any case, there is no way of enforcing these priorities, and if any attempt is made to do so it would militate against academic freedom. After all, every discipline has a certain internal logic of development, and it is the individual scholar who should decide how to pursue that logic. This logic includes the problem of fundamental and applied research. While there is a place for both, a discipline that neglects fundamental research would not advance. In addition, there should be some room for a scholar to study an out-of-the-way problem. Some scholars might view sociological research to be an aesthetic experience, and pursue it only for the sake of it.

The issue of priorities is often linked with the complicated issue of relevance. We have to ask: relevant for whom, and who decides what is relevant? The discussions on

this issue often ignore the intelligent and concerned citizen as consumer of research, who is important in a democratic and open society.

Activists often demand that sociological research should conform to their immediate programmes of action. This demand can be self-defeating if fundamental character of the society is not taken into account. Several programmes for social change do not seem to make headway mainly because they have not taken into account the hard realities of society. It is necessary to realize that all social structures and institutions are not as malleable as they are often presumed to be. After all, if one wants to defeat an enemy one should understand her/his strengths and weaknesses. This is not an argument for status quo but for deeper understanding and informed strategy.

Nowadays not only UGC and ICSSR but many ministries both at the centre and the states fund research. Serious problems arise when these bodies try to pressurise an institute or an individual scholar to take a certain ideological line or to doctor results of research according to their wishes. These bodies might also try to influence research by favouring institutions and individuals in giving grants and fellowships. On the whole, it appears that social sciences have not suffered the same kind of battles with the government as has history. This, however, might be an appearance, and we need to collect information on governmental interference in social sciences. For example, since social sciences are now taught in higher secondary schools at the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> classes, we should examine how much of governmental prejudices have affected the syllabi and textbooks in social sciences.

Although India is by and large an open society, some researchers face problems in obtaining government permission to conduct research in certain 'sensitive' locations (such as those on international borders and even inter-state borders) and themes (such as communal conflict and Naxalite violence). It applies not only to foreigners but also to Indians. We should discuss how the government can prevent an Indian citizen from studying other Indian citizens. Connected with this is the issue as to whether there is any thing like aseptic social inquiry, and whether a citizen can claim to do research on any social theme as her/his fundamental right

Although India does not have as yet large foundations like Ford and Rockefeller to fund research, gradually a number of fund-giving bodies have emerged besides the government. The pressures from these bodies, however, can be subtle, and information on them also needs to be collected.

As far as I know, no social science in India has a code of professional ethics. Formulation of such a code seems to be a hazardous exercise due to the enormous diversity and complexity of the society. Also, who will enforce the code, and how? In any case, any attempt to do so must follow thorough investigation and deliberation on cases of violation of informal norms. Attention may be drawn to passages on this issue in John Barnes' paper (1996: 176-80).

There is an ethical dimension to ownership and publication of data. The funding bodies often do not allow results of research to be published without their permission. I have just learnt that the UGC has imposed such a ban on projects funded by it. The ownership problem is also raised by institutes when a faculty member migrates from one institute to another. It is difficult to understand how a person other than the

researcher would make head or tail of the latter's data, unless it is highly formalized like the results of the Census of India or the National Sample Survey.

All researchers doing intensive fieldwork, i.e. participant observation, face a variety of ethical problems in the field. A fieldworker encounters an ethical problem almost every moment because he has to decide tactics and strategies in dealing with individuals and groups in the field. There is a large corpus of literature on this subject world wide since Malinowski's writings in the 1920s. Barnes has summarised it in his paper (1996). He identifies four kinds of dilemmas: (1) conflict or consensus, (2) commitment or partiality, (3) science or citizenship, and (4) frankness or concealment. In the Indian context there are at least five books and many articles in this regard. A useful overview is available in the Preface and Introduction in *The Fieldworker and the Field*, edited by Srinivas, Shah and Ramaswamy (2002).

In the case of participant observation the ethical problems are faced usually by only the individual researcher. In the case of survey research, on the other hand, a team of researchers would face such problems. These problems multiply with the increasing size of the survey, culminating in nation wide surveys and censuses. While there is a lot of literature world wide in this regard, I have not come across a succinct overview in the Indian context. A major problem, of course, is the behaviour of the investigator at the ground level, and the implications of the quality of her/his work for the final outcome of research. It would be useful if practitioners of the fieldwork and survey methods enter into a constructive dialogue in this regard. Significantly, fieldworkers happen to observe the behaviour of investigators when the latter visit the same field to canvass a questionnaire or interview schedule. This experience may be shared in the dialogue.

A significant ethical problem has emerged with the growth of certain sectoral sociologies such as sociology of women and Dalit sociology. When these sociologies began three or four decades ago, a certain sense of guilt prevailed in the profession about neglect of research in these fields. However, with their growth a different issue has emerged, namely, whether research in these fields is conducted only with the aim of promoting sectional interests of the concerned section of the society or for cultivation of a scientific understanding of the society as a whole or even of the concerned section. Often a question is asked whether enthusiasm for what is called empowerment leads to neglect of study of certain aspects of social life of the concerned groups, and whether this neglect is desirable even for pursuing the goal of empowerment. I am fully aware of the discomfort this issue creates. Nevertheless, the issue should not be thrown under the carpet but must be discussed dispassionately.

## References

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