Book Review: *Writing Social Science: A Personal Narrative* (2019) by Paramjit S. Judge

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BOOK REVIEW


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C. Wright Mills, in his well-known book *The Sociological Imagination*, while pondering over the question that how a young researcher may feel ‘impatient and weary’ by elaborate discussions of method and theory, would yearn for an account by a working student rather than dozens of codification of procedure by specialists. He writes that it is ‘(only) by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual ways of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student’ (Mills, 1973, p. 215). This book could aptly be considered as belonging to this line of thought within the Indian sociological research tradition.

This is an insider’s account that provides a roadmap to navigate the path of academics following the inductive logic, i.e., from particular to universal, in the sense that the author resorts to his personal experiences to give the reader a sense of the larger world of social science research. As the title itself suggests that it is a ‘personal narrative’, the text is full of personal anecdotes that are very much relatable to the problems that one comes across while taking up a research endeavour.

The text begins with the first step of any act, i.e., ‘Making a beginning: By way of Introduction’, which suggests the aim of the book which is to provide guidelines so ‘that it may prove beneficial to young people writing research papers, theses, monographs, books, and reviews’ (Judge, 2019, p. 1). So if one has chosen social science as one’s area of research then one needs to learn the art of writing and this book deals with that aspect. The chapter titled ‘What should you have before venturing to write’ (chapter 2) tells the reader that one requires two things to write: the first is ‘a reasonable linguistic skill’ (ibid., p. 7), so either it has to be English or one’s mother tongue; but given the conditions we live in, one needs to know the English language for varied reasons which are enlisted, and the author prophetically clarifies that to practice social science in India ‘the knowledge of English seems indispensible’ (ibid., p. 9) (emphasis added). And the second is reading, but then the next question is what one should read and for this his answer is simple, read whatever and anything ranging from literature to popular culture to ‘pulp fiction’, provided one is able to make sense of it. The Durkheimian dictum that he swears by is interesting that ‘there is unity of knowledge,
and specialisation of knowledge without unity is a state of anomie’ (ibid., p. 11). But our academy is guided by specialisation and compartmentalisation of disciplines, and one question that a student of social science would often come across in any introductory book of sociology is: what is the difference between science and social science? The author makes it clear that since the task of the social scientist is different from a natural scientist, who can conduct experiments which can be further replicated leading to universalisation, which is not the case in social science; as such the acquisition of knowledge in the latter has to be different. Hence, according to the author, reading gives one a pool of knowledge or ‘critical mass of knowledge’ (ibid., p. 18). Developing reading habits provides one ‘familiarity with concepts and theories (which) is a necessary condition for writing social science research’ (ibid.). Some of the best guidelines in the book are prefixed with a phrase ‘please remember’ like ‘please remember that reading has many consequences, most of them positive, for your mental development, social life and professional life’ (ibid., p. 21) or ‘(p)lease remember perfection is elusive but perfectibility is a process and all researchers should aim at achieving perfection’ (ibid., p. 104).

Some underlying qualities of a social science researcher are also enlisted, the foremost being the need to plan and maintain regularity, consistency and proper schedule for professional writing and so does exploding the myths about dietary and dress patterns and their relationship with writing.

One of the pre-requisite of a social science researcher is to write or convey one’s findings in an organised yet logical manner, and locating or contextualising it in the larger theoretical paradigm of the research area. The author emphasizes on the need that a researcher should understand social phenomenon from multiple perspectives while mentioning the three important perspectives commonly held in sociology i.e. positivism and functionalism, Marx and Marxism, and ‘action, consciousness and objectivity’ adds the category of ‘non-perspectives’, which is quite evocative.

The academy itself is a very competitive domain like any other profession and is guided by certain compulsions and idiosyncrasies of individuals. The author never minces words while talking about academic working in India, like when he writes about the undercurrents of who frames and generates rules, and the eccentricities and irrationalities of the people running the affairs. As he says, ‘(m)ost of them have done nothing in life excepting building contacts and networks so as to be included in the national-level decision-making bodies’ (ibid., p. 53), or when he writes about the jargon of impact factor which is still incomprehensible to a social science researcher and why it is irrelevant to social sciences.
Another common problem faced by a researcher is while choosing one’s area of research when one is always confronted with situations like either to follow one’s inclination or to do what is the demand of one’s times. ‘(W)hat one should write’ (chapter 4) reminds one to develop orientation towards an area of specialisation and stick to it and to work further into its related areas and ‘to go slow in the beginning of one’s career’ (ibid., p. 64). ‘(W)here to publish one’s work’ (chapter 5) tells a researcher to have some sort of strategy in place in terms of what one thinks of the possible journals available for publication. This is important given the fact that publication is a long-term and gruesome process with many possible rejections coming one’s way. But one should take one’s chances, and indeed – ‘somebody who is smart and makes contacts and develops networks is likely to have his/her work published at the right places’ (ibid., p. 69).

Social science as an academic discipline clearly follows certain canons of research which requires training; and some of the most complex things about research methodology are made easy by the author when he writes some clear guidelines. For example, in the case of research design, the most emphatic statement is that it can be broadly of two types, ‘descriptive or experimental’, or about objectives that the ideal number of objectives is five for a thesis or monograph, or about references that having too many references may be seen as making unnecessary attempt to impress the reviewer (ibid., p. 81), or about research questions that research questions are nothing but the statements of objectives turned into interrogative sentences (ibid., p. 97). What strikes the most is the explanation about hypotheses and the question raised is: Do we need hypotheses in social science research? and the answer given by author seems quite plausible (ibid., p. 100).

Chapter 8 titled ‘Discussion of data’, talks about the primacy of fieldwork in social science research and also cautions the researcher against preparing schedule and working out methodology without even visiting the field (ibid., p. 107), to just believe in some of the errors of scholars as fact simply because they are big names, and to keep eyes/ear open while doing fieldwork (ibid., p. 109).

What is new is the category of imaginary facts; they are facts which are not true but have the highest probability to be true, and in social sciences imaginary facts are often accepted as true without further investigation (ibid., p. 116). This is often related to the larger question of fact and its interpretation which is guided by subjectivity and at times may lead to wrong conclusions.

Most recent and contemporary issue is taken up in chapter 14, i.e., ‘Ethics and plagiarism’. Although research ethics has always been an important aspect of research, there has been of-late an increased awareness or attention that is being paid to
this in the Indian academia, given the situation that now all the research work submitted has to go through the plagiarism test, which was not the case earlier. As Indian universities and researchers are becoming more engaged with the global network of universities, there has been an increased pressure on institutions to come up with stringent norms with respect to research ethics, and especially if one’s language of expression in social science (which in most cases) is English, then plagiarism is a real concern for a researcher. This chapter lists out the reason why students in India resort to unfair practices, such as, too much emphasis on memorising and reproducing content of the syllabus, the way the examinations in India are oriented, etc. which discourage creativity among students with its emphasis on scoring marks. Lack of command over English language also forces one to adopt such unethical practices and with the access of information through internet things have become much easier. Plagiarism is not just limited at the level of researchers but is profoundly found among the faculty members too, although here the ‘typology’ (list of the typologies of plagiarism given are quite emphatic and clear) may vary. Detecting plagiarism and punishing the erring person may not go a long way in curbing such practices, but identifying the real reason may help and one such method is the norms of UGC that force teachers in regular faculty positions to do research compulsorily in order to fulfill the new criteria set up for promotions, which is popularly known as the API (Academic Performance Indicator) score card. But that is only for people who are into regular faculty positions; what about the nascent research scholars, and as pertinently noted by the author, that at this level the ethical conduct of the supervisor/advisor can go a long way in curbing unethical practices.

The two articles in the form of appendix pays head to the quintessential question, i.e., the idea of subjectivity or how to be objective, not only while doing one’s research but also while evaluating work of one’s peers. The personal anecdote explores the multiple realms of consciousness that are involved in establishing oneself as an ‘authority’ in an area of specialisation and to what extent an individual can go to cover the same, putting all sorts of ethics at stake.

Although all of us know that every discipline or academic activity is located in the larger network of ties and political affiliations or ideological apparatuses of individuals and institutional heads who tend to acquire and fill faculty positions accordingly, but to say the obvious needs courage and an up righteous moral standing which is earned through lifelong practice. Reading this personal narrative also evokes the potential that pedagogical processes hold in creation of young researchers who value ethics. This also comes as vindication of the fact that there is no shortcut to success and a social scientist has to work one’s way with perseverance and hard work.
REFERENCE:


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