Conversation: Yogendra Singh in conversation with Dev Nath Pathak and Biswajit Das

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[Transcript of the interview held on January 15, 2018]

Introduction

Yogendra Singh (1932-2020), the founder Professor of Center for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, and author of a well-known book titled Modernization of Indian Tradition, passed away during the pandemic lockdown in 2020. Two sociologists from varied generations namely Biswajit Das and Dev Nath Pathak had conducted an elaborate interview with Yogendra Singh in 2019. The edited interview brings forth the issues that were central in the intellectual journey of Yogendra Singh. Nostalgia, reveries, repartees, defense, and moments of self-critical realisations are milestones in this conversation. Many questions were tangentially answered. And many others were left unanswered. The key takeaway was however the re-affirmation of the dictum: sociological practice of the professional sociologists is a product of historical encounters and it would be adjudged for the vision it entailed.

This conversation is more than a mere tribute to an institution builder and one of the original thinkers in Sociology in India.

Biswajit Das (BD): What kind of vision did you have initially when you came to Delhi and you were asked to setup the center (CSSS, JNU)? What was the idea behind it?

Yogendra Singh (YS): Actually various centers in JNU were envisioned as multi-disciplinary centers. The focus of the disciplines in the school of social sciences was regional studies. Prof. Moonis Raza and his team emphasised geography and regional area studies; and at that time economics did not exist. Economics comes later but scholars with interest in it were there.

Dev Nath Pathak (DNP): How do you come into picture?

YS: The second important center was of course CSSS, and the science policy center and regional center had already come into existence. My coming was an interesting story because I was not in Delhi. I was in Jodhpur and G. Parthasarthi, the Vice-Chancellor was looking for someone to head the center dedicated to sociological studies; the JNU ordinance provided for founding new centers in the
university only if there was a competent group. There was no selection committee at that time. There had to be a Head of Department to chair such a selection committee. There was none, so it was not through a selection committee. This was around 1971, or perhaps 1972. Before that I was at Jodhpur University.

**DNP:** What was the vision with which you joined?

**YS:** G. Parthasarthi sent me a postcard saying he wanted to see me. When I went to meet him, he had all my books on his table. Parthasarthi was a very meticulous person. He was recommended about my name, but meanwhile he wanted to explore and ensure that eligibility. So I think he had talked to half a dozen of scholars in India about me, which I got to know later.

**DNP:** *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, your famous book, had come already?

**YS:** Yes it had come. *Modernization of Indian Tradition* was a product of my frustration with the social sciences at that time. It was very interesting. I was teaching social change in Jaipur, in Rajasthan University for four to five years; I used to look for material to teach about India; most of the available materials were from America!

**DNP:** This must be late 1960’s.

**YS:** Yes, the village studies and community studies were the important areas. There was no single writing which could encompass the entire country as a unit; as a result, a long standing understanding was that India was a fragmented reality, not an organic whole. This was perpetuated by the colonial influence; primarily, the British influence and the Census of India only enhanced this mistaken idea (of fragmented India). In Census, there was some rethinking. In a seminar in Delhi, Prof. VKRV Rao read a paper, and so did I, followed by a group discussion. Prof. Rao edited the discussion in a book form later. In that discussion, during the seminar, there was a division between the Chicago orientation and the Left Liberal orientation. The Chicago approach was purely laissez-faire approach and the Indian approach was of planned development. Anyway, in the discussion a Professor in Economics, who joined as a member of planning commission later, vigorously pleaded for giving up planning in India. Raj Krishna criticised it and I delivered a long defense of Raj Krishna’s criticism of the Chicago approach to India.
DNP: Some of us feel that it’s only today that one gets frustrated with sociology but it’s nice to hear that even in 1960s and 70s it was frustrating, and you responded to that creative frustration!

YS: My orientation was from the Department of Economics at Lucknow University. There was no exclusive department of sociology at that time. There was however a Department of Social Anthropology which Prof D.N. Majumdar was heading. So sociology was taught as a part of economics.

DNP: Since Radhakamal Mukherjee’s time at Lucknow University?

YS: Yes. Sociology unfolded through Rural Economics and village studies. My own interest was in literature. It was my first preference.

DNP: English literature?

YS: As a subject for study, for creative work, literature appealed to me right since early graduation days. I did my Bachelors in Arts in English literature, Hindi literature and Economics. In fact, I joined Department of English at Lucknow University as a student in Economics and started listening to lectures in English department because I had read critical Greek writings, Shakespearian tragedies, etc. I was hardly excited by lectures in my own department, the Department of Economics.

DNP: Was it ever dry and boring Economics?

YS: Yes, in English too within a week I got frustrated because most of the literature of the teachers was more dramatic than intellectual. They would excessively dramatise, that made me a little unhappy. So what could I do? I was not happy in literature, which was my first choice. A floor down was where D.P. Mukherjee, the famous sociologist, was the Head of the Department of Economics! I came down, figuratively, and told Prof. Mukherjee all my travails and he said, ‘Ok young man, I will admit you, but I will admit you not to pure Economics’. It is because Economics had two branches, Pure-Economics and Economics with Philosophy and Sociology. It was called B-Stream. The former was called A-Stream.

DNP: That’s the layer in the story.

YS: So he said, ‘I will admit you to B-Stream’. ‘Thank you sir’, I said. So I joined Economics, with Sociology as my major. That time in sociology, the main
primary teachers were Dr. A.K. Saran, other than D.P. And Dr. Saran was a Philosopher and Sociologist at once; he was the most philosophical and tradition oriented in his lectures. The other courses were purely on the economics side. Lucknow University permitted the students to go to the other departments and to take courses. So I took a course taught by Prof. D.N. Majumdar in anthropology, as well as another course with Dr. Kali Prasad in psychology.

**DNP:** So if I can bring you back to the first question, you came from Lucknow school, if one can call it a ‘School’, since T.N. Madan in some of his essays considered it a problematic usage. Be that as it may, Lucknow sociology was vibrant and you imbibed an idea about what sociology should be doing in India. You also interjected and read about the debate on Indology and Sociology. If I am not wrong, you defended Dr. A.K. Saran’s seemingly nationalist ideas. And that explains your commitment to the idea of planned economy in India.

**YS:** The important factor was that British Anthropology was taught an approach to sociology was which was ambiguous; for example, Oxford and Cambridge never started sociology as a department. It was only in London School of Economics that sociology happened. The Cambridge and other older institutions had a bias against sociology; it influenced the Lucknow University too. So we were oriented to a combination of sociology and economics.

**DNP:** With philosophy and psychology?

**YS:** Yes. My own orientation was in empirical studies. I remember after my coursework, when I had to plan for Ph.D. I was confused as what to do and where to work? The only other person I could approach was Dr. A.K. Saran. However, he was not interested in empirical studies. He believed in philosophical approach and particularly in a very conservative manner, the *Sanatan Dharma* (a Hindu social ideology). The *dharma* became an important factor in his views if one wanted to study social structure and ideas; the study of tradition was important. I wanted to do empirical work with my experience of growing up in a village-based joint *zamindar* (landowning) family.

**DNP:** Where is the village?

**YS:** It is in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh called Chaukhara. And I saw how change took place in the village, how the old regime of landlords was replaced and new forms of leadership emerged through elections. Like many others, we witnessed the emergence of the Congress leadership, and other leadership
replacing them, and how a conflict situation stemmed in the village. The older order and new order, the Congress party and the other political party, gave a sense of dynamics. I wanted to further explore it in systematic study. I told Dr. Baljeet Singh because he was the only man in the department with an orientation in sociology and economics both. His first reaction was, ‘Go and meet Dr. Saran’. I said, ‘No sir. I do not want to work on theoretical or philosophical areas. I have come to you because you have done empirical field work’. He laughed and consented. That was how my study of the village started; I chose six villages based on the land settlement pattern. Sociology to me is a very challenging discipline and that is why Indian Sociology came through the British and American influences.

DNP: A village study, then, was also inspired by the American community studies?

YS: Well, that did not penetrate into India. Only much later the community studies came. Village studies as community studies and community development projects.

BD: The person who promoted village studies was himself a community studies expert at Cornell University and he became the first Ford Foundation Chief in India. (Unable to recall the name) he became a close friend of Pundit Nehru, the Prime Minister, and through him actually he pursued the idea of community development projects in India!

DNP: I wanted to know that in those initial years at CSSS, how was it for you to establish a brand new sociology? How was the collegial environment and how could you pursue your own orientation? Was it difficult?

YS: I joined as a Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences when CSSS was an idea. Subsequently, I was appointed the Chairperson of CSSS. The important thing was how to start the courses? How to formulate the courses and how to have a faculty which is collectively oriented enough; there were very few people at that time. J.S. Gandhi and T.K. Oommen were there in the school. Others joined too. They were not like-minded because their orientations were different and they had autonomy. As the chairman, I gave them full autonomy. Diversity in methodology, courses and empirical traditions of work influenced the faculty. However, we were free to formulate courses under the framework of the overall development of India. India had a vision and the vision about intellectual progress. All interpretations of India were colonial as the only source was the
census. I was aware of that limitation and the idea was to liberate it. Liberation to me, and to our small group, meant not disassociation, but creative association; that is, we have to offer you something and you can offer us meaningful things. It is not only one way that you give us knowledge and we go out peddling and saving it.

India must generate its own sociological tradition, intellectual orientation in social sciences and it must relate this knowledge to the actual problems in the country and offer solutions.

**DNP:** Safe to say, CSSS at that point was by and large positivist in methodology, approach and its contributions. It was a positivist tradition that came from somewhere else?

**YS:** It could not come from outside. Most of the American writing about India was community studies, because it was haunting them in the US. In India, the British tradition was trying to continue and they had an advantage. Yet another was the German tradition, the Weberian and Kantian influence in India. By the time I came to sociology, all these orientations had begun to be visible. More particularly, they influenced the ideas of Sociology in India. The idea of sociology emerged from this multiplicity.

**DNP:** But French tradition then benefitted Indian Sociology more than any other, given that Louis Dumont became a sublime ghost for most of the sociologists!

**YS:** Well indirectly, Durkheim and the following practices in sociology, and alongside, the German tradition came through Kant and Max Weber. So the Indian Sociology had the influence of the German as well as other traditions.

**BD:** The American influence perhaps cannot be denied. Your writings inform us about the pre-sociological terrain. Even the idea of inter-disciplinarity is owed to the American social science.

**YS:** The problem is that when you look at sociology and intellectual tradition, Britain does not offer a model. The British universities laughed at sociology as a discipline. If at all, they only taught *sexology* (about sex and marriage). These were the only two realities that sociologists dealt with. The only help that came from the British to sociology was London School of Economics.

**BD:** Not anthropologist like M.N. Srinivas?
YS: It was only London School of Economics, and the influence was that of Karl Mannheim. Sociology thus became an economics-oriented pursuit. D.P. Mukherjee was deeply interested in the ethics.

BD: What about D.N. Majumdar?

YS: Prof. Majumdar joined the Department of Economics at Lucknow and he ironically taught monetary economics to other graduate students. Acharya Narendra became the Vice-Chancellor, and noticed the problem. Prof. D.N. Majumdar was known for empirical studies, tribal studies and he was the only anthropologist who mapped the tribal life in India. He had a few volumes of published works, and one of them was Tribe in Transition. It is a very important work. So Acharyaji created a Department of Anthropology and shifted D.N. Majumdar from economics to anthropology department. I was an M.A. student at that time. He was a humorous and non-serious teacher. A teacher who was very learned in empirical analysis fieldwork data, but not oriented towards the theoretical framework and issues of sociology and anthropology.

BD: Why was that sociologists in India emphasised on village? As a result, anthropology more or less collapsed. Today if you look at India, there is hardly any proper anthropology department, so to say.

YS: The main problem was about pedagogy, of teaching and learning anthropology in India. In fact, anthropology departments do not want to have any relation with sociology. If you are an anthropologist, you will be so busy doing your field work and this is what Prof. D.N. Majumdar did. He was the only man who started studying the tribes and the Jaunsar Bawar became a very famous area for gender studies; gender and tribal groups became a burning topic. I remember I was a student. But D.N. Majumdar was not a great teacher. He was not very articulate.

DNP: Whereas D.P. Mukherjee was a legendary teacher?

YS: He was a very good teacher. D.P. Mukherjee was a contrast because I used to attend his lectures and I was his student in anthropology. Whatever we expected from Prof. D.N. Majumdar, we used to get from D.P. One only expected fun from D.N. Majumdar. He would come with a big book by the anthropologist called Herskovits. It was a big-fat book on anthropology. He would bring this book and put it on the table, and open and read one and a half page. Then he would go to
his anecdotal social sciences and we would have lot of fun. That is what Majumdar was. We liked him because he was a great field worker.

**DNP:** At some point, you engaged with the idea of South Asia in social sciences. Was there some kind of regional consciousness at CSSS that one had to go beyond India in sociology? I am not referring to the hollow claims of internationalism.

**YS:** Well, I think the idea of taking sociological studies beyond India did not gel much in India because here was so much within India itself that anyone who was engaged in the studies in India, did not think of communities beyond India.

**DNP:** So there was a regional blindness prevalent in sociology in India? Did sociologists ever engage with the scholars from Sri Lanka, Pakistan who were very important at that point of time; any engagement even with Nepal?

**YS:** One reason that I can easily think of is the politics of partition of the country. It is because that biased the mindset of how one looked at the region. Region, instead of being seen as a sociological entity, began to be seen as a communal entity; so this communal orientation of the Hindu-Muslim distorted the trajectories of integrating regional realities with all India national sociological reality; the language was another issue, one has to know so many languages. It is very difficult to study so many languages for anthropologists as some had to learn tribal language in order to study them.

**DNP:** That is a valid challenge, but one can expect academic partnership with like-minded scholars from other university in South Asia!

**YS:** I told you about the partition and communal tension. Dhaka for instance is close to west Bengal. The Bengalis hardly like to associate with non-Bengalis.

**DNP:** But even non-Muslim countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka (if we can consider them so looking at majority-minority demography) did not attract Indian sociologists and anthropologists.

**YS:** Sri Lanka has a very different problem and because I have worked in Sri Lanka, I know the coastal areas.

**DNP:** Colombo! Candy?

**YS:** Beyond Candy, the Buddhist area, you see the great Buddha statues if you travel further. There is different orientation. The coastal Sri Lanka is more
westernised. The Candian area is typically Buddhist and beyond Candy, you have Buddhist-tribal mix, which goes up to the end of Jaffna side. There is variety of orientations and the self-consciousness among the scholars of Sri Lanka; they look at India as a big brother. They were extreme isolationists. When I worked for one week in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan radio Ceylon published an editorial, something like, *What are the Indian anthropologists doing in Sri Lanka?* Such suspicion; why have they come?

**DNP:** It could be the case. So, it means there was some kind of sociological nationalism at CSSS, a territory-bound intellectual consciousness!

**YS:** I don’t think that way. Sociology is a circumscribed by other factors. For instance, if we think of Sri Lanka, Indians were looked at with suspicion.

**DNP:** But did researchers in sociology take up various thematic issues showing any interest in region beyond India at CSSS?

**YS:** Yes, right from the beginning, when I was given the freedom to appoint people at the centre. There was an idea of multi-disciplinary interest. Gradually, it has weakened but not disappeared at CSSS.

**DNP:** Weakened in what sense?

**YS:** Weakened in the sense that the depth of studies of region, and varieties (of issues), has not happened to the expected extent. I hope it will change.

**DNP:** It has become too politically correct, too safe. Nobody wants to take an intellectual risk. Why is that?

**YS:** No, I don’t think intellectual tradition and politics are two different streams of thought. They become more creative and productive (when correlated). Politics immediately gets stratified as soon as it enters into the intellectual tradition because it means multiple boundaries. There is a contradiction between the two, to my mind, and I don’t think one spills negative consequence on the other. They exist independently.

**DNP:** I hope you are not simply defending the centre you founded?

**YS:** No, that is not the case.

**DNP:** Did you see much value in the writings by the scholars at CSSS? Could they all further the intellectual departure that you envisioned?
YS: One reason that I can think of is that each generation is oriented to knowledge and studies in a different manner. For instance, when I was writing *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, I was bothered about the uni-modality of interpreting India in the western writings. We witnessed this in British and American writings. This was a limited vision, and I revolted against it. Now there was a generation oriented to this phenomenon sensitively. But when you become independent country and have your own system, you become a little lazy and cocksure about yourself. You don’t feel bothered about anything! That is what is happening with the later generation; it is not bothered about anything.

BD: When we say we indigenise, we try to develop a sense of Indianness and the Indian identity; if at all, in the name of South Asia, it is actually India all over the world. It is because India is relatively more documented. Other countries such as Sri Lanka and Nepal are less documented in comparison with India.

YS: Yes it is less significant for them.

BD: This is why institutions will collapse; every institution undergoes ups and downs.

DNP: Even the individual publications lack the requisite risk in formulating refreshing propositions. Nobody wants to take up the devil’s perspective unless it pays back, instantly, well.

YS: I think it is very speculative situation. But much of this is because of the dynamics of social science knowledge itself and its relation with the society. I think the relationship with social sciences, with society is changing because of the changes in the economy, market, employment structure and over all orientation. There are the new institutional areas that we did not anticipate at that time, but they are the challenge today. The social scientists will have to come together and work out some models and methods so as to understand how to accommodate this reality. Market is such an important force that no one can reject. Unfortunately it is not being done. It will have to be done by some committed and concerned people, and that is what we need.

DNP: So you are hopeful that one can still continue to believe in the dream of decolonising sociology in India?

YS: Well, two or three things happened which did not happen in my time. One thing was that what we call colonial influence has weakened so much that they...
really do not matter and secondly, they are not interested. They themselves are indifferent because there are other major factors, which have come into play.

**DNP:** But there can be new colonial masters who can re-colonise the former colonies, intellectually and academically?

**YS:** I don’t think any new colonial master can emerge because of the dynamics of change, movement, market and mobility – all these new factors are there. So these liberate individual from control.

**BD:** What I am trying to say is that at least there was a purpose to contest the colonial claims so as to develop a counter narrative, a nationalist claim. That category has weathered away. What we find now is that there are various kinds of indifferences masquerading as schools of thought. What is happening in India at the moment is that the academic celebrities are only translating the previously formulated ideas and re-selling them as original or counter-narrative. There is a lack of substance. They are sellable as they are accepted in the West as if they were true representatives of the Indian scholarship.

**YS:** There were always such scholars accepted by the West as per the western interest. Now even that is declining; as they have so many other issues to resolve. For example, nuclear issue is there. Issue of distributive justice is there. These issues are taking new shapes, and hence some motives and patterns of thought are self-limiting in nature. It fails to penetrate or touch the heart of the matter. It marginally touches our mind, but hardly overwhelms. I think there should be a group of like-minded scholars, working out the thematic areas and write.

**BD:** Why is it not happening?

**YS:** It should; in case it does not, intellectuals can alone be effective.

**DNP:** Lastly, how did you individually as a scholar respond to the political situation in which JNU was implicated in the early years? What kind of response emerged from CSSS? Was JNU considered anti-national even then?

**YS:** JNU was never anti-national. It could not be because right from the beginning, JNU has been built on the base of nationalism and internationalism. The political situation in JNU during the National Emergency of 1975 was interesting. During that time my faculty and staff were very supportive of me and felt that whatever I was doing was in the goodwill of everyone and they were very cooperative of it. I was in the administration at that time. I was given the
Deanship and there was a problem in terms of admission of the students. The protest was due to the involvement of the government in the selection of the students for admission purposes. The students started protest and house-arrested the registrar and the VC and many others. I made sure during my time that both the students and the administration reconciled and agreed to re-admit the students because of which the protest was taking place.

**DNP:** Else, for all practical purposes, JNU was thoroughly nationalist, and that may have impacted the sociological agenda too, which we have discussed in this conversation. We thank you Prof. Singh for your time and wonderful conversation.

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