Remembering A R Desai

Marxist Approach to Sociology

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This is an edited and abridged version of the keynote speech delivered at the National Conference on "Remembering A R Desai" organised on 20-21 April 2015 in Kolkata in association with the Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai.

In the history of the development of sociology in India, the contribution of Akshay Ramanlal Desai who was born on 16 April 1915 is indeed significant. He passed away at the age of 80 on 12 November 1994. On the occasion of his birth centenary, a relook at his contribution may be considered imperative in the light of the growing dominance of western imprints on social thought.

Schools of Social Thought

Classical Indian sociology had declined in the last 100 years of the discipline. Indian sociology was enriched by sociologists and social thinkers belonging to the Lucknow School—Radhakamal Mukherjee, Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee and D N Majumdar, the Calcutta School—Akshay Kumar Dutta, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Brajendranath Seal and the Bombay School—Patrick Geddes, G S Ghurye, A R Desai and scholars of subsequent generations. Apart from the geographical region-based schools of social thought, there were several approaches of studying society like the Diffusionist School, the Indological School, the Historical or the Marxist School which began to subside gradually since independence of India leading to a remarkable development of sociology under the aegis of western ideas and pre-occupations.

The department of sociology in the University of Bombay (now Mumbai) started to function since 1919—five years after the World War I began. Westernisation of sociological thought was found to be so profound in the department that many of the “little traditions” which could emerge in the course of development of sociology in the first part of this time period was unable to snowball to acquire further momentum. Instead, the sweep of Westernisation was so domineering that the indigenous traditions which had been an intrinsic feature of Indian sociology began to succumb and perish gradually. The historical or the Marxist approach of studying society as envisaged by Desai was no exception. As a result, despite his remarkable contribution, he is now an almost forgotten figure in the annals of Indian
sociology.

**Political Leanings of Desai**

Askshay Ramanlal Desai acquired inspiration to study and explore the facts of human society under the influence of his erudite father Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai who was a well-known writer. When he was in his teens, he joined various social and political movements in places like Baroda, Surat and Mumbai (then Bombay). When he was yet to reach the age of 20, the emergence of socialism and its aftermath in erstwhile Soviet Union especially with regard to the immense power struggle within the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) impacted him so much so that in the following years of his life, Desai became a well-known follower of Leon Trotsky. Ultimately, he became a well-known Trotskyite Marxist and devoted his life and contribution in line with his belief and passion.

In 1946 Desai graduated from Bombay University under the supervision of G S Ghurye. In 1947, he married Neera Ben Desai and became a faculty of the department of sociology in the University of Bombay. In 1948, the publication of his “magnum opus” titled *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* made him well known in the academic circles. In 1949, the publication of R P Dutt’s famous book titled *India Today* was able to introduce and popularise the historical or Marxist approach of studying society and many people across the country began to assume, these two books could well provide the road map to build socialism in India following the legacy of Karl Marx and V I Lenin. As a matter of fact, the decades subsequent to the emergence of socialism in Soviet Union in 1917 led to a significant spread of socialism in many parts of the world including countries of East Europe.

**Studying Indian Nationalism**

After the completion of World War II, about one-third of the world’s population lived in socialist countries. Apart from the remarkable emergence of socialism in several parts of the world, the weakening of the British monopoly power led to a remarkable growth of anti-colonial, anti-imperial struggles in many countries of Asia, Africa and South America. The deep interest of Desai with regard to the growth of Indian nationalism could snowball due to the contemporary social situation in the then India – after all, India also witnessed the weakening of British power over the colonies. In *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, he made a classical analysis about the genesis of Indian nationalism from a social perspective, by adopting the historical approach.

The politics of “mass-line” was Gandhi’s definite gift to India’s freedom movement, which was unable to come across prior to Gandhi’s appearance in the scene of Indian politics. But it needs to be borne in mind that the “politics of mass-line” did have its finest expression in the form of Bolshevik Revolution leading to the formation of socialism for the first time in the world in Soviet Union in 1917. Gandhi perhaps borrowed the idea from Lenin and implemented in the Indian context by following peaceful means.
Desai did question the fundamental motive of Gandhian politics and expressed his candid doubt whether the class collaborationist approach of Gandhian politics could rescue the common Indian masses from the abject exploitation and misery, which, capitalism is bound to inflict upon. Desai mentioned how Gandhi used to cajole the industrial workers to maintain peace and tranquility despite being mercilessly exploited by the factory owners ie the industrial capitalists. He used to say: “Look workers, you need to obey the factory owners as you obey your parents. It is your imperative responsibility to develop the consciousness of common trusteeship by joining the hands of the factory-owners to ensure higher yield of your toil”. However, Gandhi did not say anything about the rightful claim of the workers to get higher wage and perks in lieu of higher factory production.

Desai in his book *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (1948) did not discuss of the class-concerns of Indian nationalism that rendered the freedom movement elitist. He had limitless trust in socialism and believed that socialism is the panacea to allay all social problems plaguing capitalism. In his entire life, whatever he could write, his one-point obsession remained with the abolition of capitalism enabling the rise of socialism. In his another well-known book *Rural India in Transition* (1979) or in his book titled *State and Society in India: Essays on Dissent* (1975) he analysed how the path of development and planning followed in Indian society. In his yet another insightful work titled *India's Path of Development* (1984) he showed how the role of the Indian government proved to be miserable and coercive.

**Major Publications**

However Popular Prakashan, the well-known publisher who published most of his titles now publishes only two of his publications out of his large number of books. These are: (1) *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* (first published in 1948) and (2) *Rural Sociology in India* – the companion volume edited by A R Desai (first published in 1969). The following is a list of his major publications.

1) Social Background of Indian Nationalism (1948)
2) Rural Sociology in India (1969)
3) Slums and Urbanisation of India (1970, 1972)
4) State and Society in India (1975)
5) Peasant Struggle in India (1979)
6) Rural India in Transition (1979)
7) India's Path of Development (1984)

It is noted that some of his writings may appear too sweeping and over-generalised without
taking refuge in studying the minutest details of society. For example, I asked him once, why he would identify India as a capitalist country despite the presence of several stark features of colonialism and feudalism. Desai promptly replied those were pre-capitalist features that could be present. But these were on the wane and the economy was leading towards capitalism.

But there are reasons to argue that he described Indian economy with such a nomenclature in order to draw an easy and swift transition from capitalism to socialism. Moreover, many vital questions afflicting the life of an average common Indian was unable to find an incisive resonance in his writings. Instead, he preferred to incessantly portray pre-conclusive remarks by saying that since there were so many shortcomings in capitalism (the capitalist India), the obvious nostrum remained with socialism (socialist India). Perhaps, the limitation on the part of many Marxist scholars is the vital and vexed questions of national and sub-national perspectives, that get blurred and obscured. This might be one of the reasons, which had led to the gradual decimation of Marxism and Marxist analyses in the domain of sociology and social discourse.