
UNIT 3 RADHAKAMAL MUKERJEE*

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- describe the contribution of Radhakamal Mukerjee to Indian sociology;
- outline the biographical details of Radhakamal Mukerjee;
- explain some of his central ideas and their contribution to sociology in India; and
- list some of his important works.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Radhakamal Mukerjee was pioneer in the areas such as social ecology, interdisciplinary research and the social structure of values. We will first describe the biographical sketch and then discuss his central ideas. Some of his central ideas revolved around the relationship between economic and social behavior, social ecology, conservation of forests, urban social problems, theory of values, Indian culture and civilization, and notion of universal civilization. We will discuss each of these issues in detail here.

3.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Radhakamal Mukerjee was born in 1889 in a large Bengali Brahmin family, in a

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small country town of West Bengal called Berhampur. He spent the first sixteen years of his life in this town. His father was the leader of the bar, that is a lawyer and was an accomplished scholar with a great interest in history.

Mukerjee, while describing his early years, says that his home was full of books on history, literature, law and Sanskrit (Singh 1956:3). The general atmosphere in which he grew up was scholarly. His elder brothers were always reading books from which he, being a child, was kept at a distance. His father used to have long meetings with clients throughout the day and long intellectual and religious discussions during the evening. The interior of the house, where the ladies of the house presided, there were rituals, ceremonies and devotional songs. Mukerjee remembered that his house used to be full of pet animals, especially a golden-hued cow which yielded milk throughout the year. He wrote that these early years were marked by “peaceful tenor of life with its play and schooling, piety and devotion punctuated by the periodic celebration of fasts and feasts, rituals and sacraments, story telling from the Epics and Puranas and visits of ascetics and saints and guest of the household” (Singh 1956: 3).

Mukerjee’s early memories, which left an imprint on his mind, consisted of the picture of sorrow and misery of a large population devastated by famine in Madras and Orissa during the early years of the twentieth century. He was deeply moved by the pictures of human skeletons on the verge of starvation and death published in the newspapers. This was further deepened by the Bengal famine of 1942-43 which he had witnessed in Calcutta. He also vividly recalled the childhood experiences of Muharram processions, Durgapuja festivals, and so on.

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It was during the same period of his life that Bengal saw its socio-cultural and intellectual renaissance. In 1905 every city in Bengal was in a state of intellectual and political fervor. The partition of Bengal into East and West Bengal, introduced by Lord Curzon, led to a mass uprising against this event. Political meetings, street processions and singing parties, boycott of British goods and propagating swadeshi products introduced him to the mass movement of time.

Mukerjee had his early education in Berhampur. He went to the Krishnath College in Berhampur. He got an academic scholarship in the leading educational institution in India, the Presidency College in Calcutta. He took

his honours course in English and History in this college. Here he came in contact with such scholars as H. M. Percival, M. Ghosh, brother of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, and linguist Harinath De. He admired these scholars very much. It was here that he read books by Comte, Herbert Spencer, Lester Ward, Hobhouse and Giddings, besides many others, from cover to cover. As you must be aware by now many of these scholars are the leading men of sociology in Europe and America.

During this period of his life, Mukerjee launched himself into the area of adult education which remained his interest till the end. The country was going through a political and cultural upheaval during this period which, according to Mukerjee, completely changed the scale of values. This change was seen far more outside the Governmental institutions, taking the form of a literary and artistic renaissance. This renaissance slowly took the form of a mass movement. It was in order to help the process that Mukerjee started an Adult Evening School in 1906 in the slums of Mechaubazar of Calcutta. He wrote simple texts for adult education which sold in thousands. This school became a Community Centre and even the local physicians started taking interest in this movement of social education. They treated without charging any fee the adults and children of the slums (Singh 1956: 5).

Mukerjee valued his early training in the slums of Calcutta” turned the focus of his interests towards the disciplines of Sociology and Economics. He wrote that there was a definite call in the country for the tasks and responsibilities of education of the masses, and that call could be answered by an Indian student best through the knowledge of the social sciences (Singh 1956: 5). Social sciences during Mukerjee’s time in Calcutta University included the disciplines of Economics, Politics and Sociology at M.A. level.

It was during this period that Mukerjee came in close association with Benoy Kumar Sarkar (We have mentioned Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s contributions to sociology in the previous unit.) Mukerjee and Sarkar shared the same flat and B.K. Sarkar was at that time Professor at Bengal National College, an institution which had given support to such leading thinkers of Bengal as Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh.

Mukerjee, like many other Indians of his time, was impressed by the fiery political speeches of Bipin Chandra Pal, one of the Congress extremists. But the main interest of Mukerjee was at that time educational rather than political. He and his friends called themselves “Ministers of the Poor” and dressed poorly, giving up western dresses like shirts, coats and shoes (Singh 1956: 6).

In 1910 Mukerjee went back to his old college in Berhampur as a teacher in Economics. He says that this was the busiest period of his life and it was during this period that he wrote his early works in Economics, such as the *Foundations of Indian Economics*. His interest in social ecology and the study of regions also originated during this period. The Principal of his College, Rev. E. M. Wheeler, was deeply interested in the sciences, especially

Botany. Therefore, the teachers, including Mukerjee, spent a lot of time collecting specimens of plants and insects of all kinds and studying them. This experience developed Mukerjee's interest in ecology and he became aware of its link with human community.

At this time Mukerjee also became the editor of the renowned Bengali monthly, *Upasana*. He wrote for this monthly regularly and kept in touch with the literary development in Bengali literature. He was a voracious reader and his interest in literature was very deep.

During 1915, when there were persecutions by the British Government, Mukerjee was once arrested for a day and all his adult schools were liquidated. The charges against him were that he was a "terrorist" or had sympathy with terrorism under the disguise of adult education. Thanks to his lawyer brother he was released very soon. He was offered a position in Lahore College in Punjab and he went there thus, nipping in bud any interest in politics.

He went back to the University of Calcutta where Asutosh Mookerji had established in 1917 the Post-Graduate Council of Arts and Science. He stayed here for five years and taught Economics, Sociology and Political Philosophy. In 1921 he went to the University of Lucknow as Professor and Head of the Department of Economics and Sociology on the very day when the university started functioning (Singh 1956: 10). He introduced an integrated approach in Economics, Sociology and Anthropology in both research and teaching in Lucknow University.

According to Mukerjee, using comparative methods in the study of social sciences in India, we must aim at the scientific study of the race and culture origins. In his intellectual career he was deeply influenced by three social thinkers. First was Professor Brajendra Nath Seal; second was Professor Patrick Geddes; and the third one was an old, intimate colleague who died early, Narendra Nath Sen Gupta. The first two, Prof. Seal and Prof. Geddes contributed to the establishment and development of sociology as a discipline in the Indian Universities. Mukerjee always consulted Seal in all his works. His stress on comparative method in cultural sciences was due to Seal's influence on his work. Patrick Geddes too, influenced Mukerjee's work on study of regions, ecology and population while Narendra Nath Sen Gupta helped generate Mukerjee's interest in Social Psychology.

Besides these Indian thinkers there were many Western social thinkers with whom Mukerjee worked and who influenced his writings. Some of these were sociologists like, Edward Allsworth Ross, Robert Ezra Park of Chicago, McKenzie and P. Sorokin. Most of these Americans sociologists were interested in the study of region, urban disorganisation, human ecology, social change and so on. The friendship and intellectual interaction with these sociologists stimulated Mukerjee's own efforts in social sciences to which he gives due credit (Singh 1956: 3-20).

Mukerjee taught economics and sociology in Lucknow University for nearly thirty years. He also became the Vice-Chancellor and Director of the J.K. Institute of Sociology and Human Relation of the University. He wrote erudite volumes on several issues. The basic nature of his writings is the integration of the social sciences and he has been a path-finder in many fields. Many of his students and associates reflect this approach in their writings (Singh 1956: 3-20). He died in the year 1968 but his contributions have left a deep imprint on the students of sociology.

3.3 CENTRAL IDEAS

In the Indian universities, the compartmentalisation of disciplines has dominated the scene. Disciplines such as sociology, psychology and statistics have existed side by side in the same college or university but there has been very little interaction between them. In his teachings and writings, Mukerjee emphasised the need for mutual interaction between social sciences on the one hand and between social sciences and physical sciences on the other. For example, Indian economics, modeled on British economics, mostly neglected the traditional caste networks in indigenous business, handicrafts and banking. Economic development was mainly viewed as an extension of monetary economics or market phenomenon. The Western model in economics focused on the urban-industrial centres.

3.3.1 Relationship between Economic and Social Behaviour

In a country like India where many economic transactions take place within the framework of caste or tribe, the “market model” has a limited relevance. Mukerjee tried to show the relationship between traditional networks and economic exchange. The guilds and castes of India were operating in a non-competitive system. The rules of economic exchange were derived from the normative Hinduism, in other words, according to the norms of Hindu religion wherein interdependence between groups was emphasised. Hence, to understand rural India, the economic values should be analysed with reference to social norms. Religious and/ or ethical constraints have always lent a direction to economic exchange. Values enter into the daily life of people and compel them to act in collectively sanctioned ways. For example, a hungry upper caste Hindu would not eat beef; likewise, an orthodox Muslim or Jew would not eat pork, however urgent may be the need for food. Therefore, it is wrong to always treat economic behaviour as separate from social life or collectivity.

3.3.2 Social Ecology

Social Ecology was another theme which preoccupied Mukerjee. He wrote a number of books on the theme. For him social ecology was a complex formulation in which a number of social sciences interacted. The geological,

geographical and biological factors worked together to produce an ecological zone. In its turn, ecology is conditioned by social, economic or political factors. For example, in the past many Indian ecological regions were opened up for human settlement and agrarian development through political conquests. As there is a definite link between ecology and society the development of ecological zones must be seen in terms of a dynamic process: that is, challenge of the environment and response of the people who establish a settlement.

Ecological balance is not a mechanical carving out of a territory and settling people thereon. Such an attempt weakens or destroys social fabric. For example, in building irrigation dams in India, very often people of the concerned locations are moved to new settlements. The lack of a proper perspective on involuntary resettlement and rehabilitation has often caused damage to social life of these people. In many parts of India, there is a traditional system of interdependence known as *jajmani* in the north or by its equivalents in other regions. If people are moved into other locations such arrangements abruptly come to an end. Only by planning suitable alternatives in advance, can this disruption be overcome. For example, the cooperatives can help people, in the absence of old social patterns of interdependence. Hence, social perspective is necessary for orderly and systematic transformation of India into an urban-industrial economy.

In his works on social ecology, Mukerjee took a point of departure from the Western social scientists. In the USA, the Chicago School of Sociology gave importance to empirical studies of such social problems as social disorganisation, urban deterioration, etc. To this school belonged sociologists like Park and Burgess, Louis Wirth, Giddings and so on. This school emphasised the study of human ecology. Here, the focus was on social engineering involving transfer of slum dwellers to new settlements, improvements in living conditions, better prospects of employment, etc. But, according to Mukerjee, social ecology was the better alternative to the havoc caused by rapid industrialisation. India, with its long history, was a storehouse of values. Therefore, in building a new India the planning must not be confined to immediate and concrete problems but must be directed towards value-based developments.

As part of his interest in social ecology, Mukerjee developed the regional sociology. He argued for a better understanding of regional dimensions of national development. If the regions in modern India were developed so as to make them self-sufficient, then the nation as a whole would stand to benefit. Otherwise, some regions would dominate the rest resulting in a lopsided development. As India was a country of diverse regions, each with a distinctive ethno-history, i.e. the history of its various ethnic groups, it was imperative to coordinate the developments schemes for maintaining ecological balance. In sum, he stood for a balance between economic growth and ecological fitness. In achieving this end, many skills, such as weaving,

engraving etc., were inherited by caste groups in India. These crafts could be well incorporated into the modern cooperatives. In other words, the modernisation of Indian society should not neglect its traditional economic networks. Incidentally, in the post-Independent India, the traditional crafts have been organised into handloom cooperatives, etc. in Tamil Nadu and other states. Likewise, the Khadi Gramodyog has also used the traditional skills for modern production.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Fill in the blanks in the following sentences:

- a) Radhakamal Mukerjee was a pioneer in the areas such as social interdisciplinary research and the social structure of values.
- b) He was against the of social sciences.
- c) In his writings he combined sociology and history.

2) Describe in about two lines what is meant by an ecological zone.

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3.3.3 Plea for Conservation of Forests

Mukerjee wrote extensively on the danger of deforestation. The cutting of trees subjects the soil to the fury of floods and reduces the fertility of soil. The topsoil which is washed away by floods or excess rainfall cannot be replenished. Therefore, the forest and woods of India were an ecological asset. His plea for conservation has been taken up at present by a number of activists, voluntary organisations such as Chipko and Apko, which focus on halting the destruction of trees. Mukerjee also referred to the danger of mono-cultivation, that is, raising a single cash crop (such as cotton or sugarcane) to the detriment of rotation of crops. Such practices as deforestation and mono-cultivation disturbed the fragile ecosystem and gave rise to severe environmental problems. Every year some parts of India especially in the north suffer either from floods or from droughts. Of course, cyclones of the coastal regions are beyond human control, but the man-made disasters, such as the depletion of natural resources through deforestation can be slowed down or prevented.

Mukerjee advocated the integration of village, town and nation into a single, broad-based developmental process. Urban development at the expense of the village should be kept in check. Agriculture should be diversified and industries decentralised. A more equitable distribution of wealth and resources, not only between sections of people but also between regions, would bring about a more balanced development.

3.3.4 An Ameliorative Approach to Urban Social Problems

Mukerjee was also interested in the ameliorative approach to the problems of working class. The industrialisation in India, which has been taking place during the last several decades, succeeded in bringing together people from diverse regions and languages. But the living conditions of workers in the urban centres such as Mumbai, Kanpur, Kolkata and Chennai were adversely affected by slum life. In the early days of industrialisation, urban slums gave rise to vices such as prostitution, gambling and crime. It was, therefore, necessary to bring about drastic changes in the lives of workers to improve their economic and moral conditions.

Today, many private industries and the public section units have provided facilities for the social welfare of a number of workers. Besides, the central and state governments have promulgated legislative acts which are binding on the employers. However, unorganised workers (i.e. who are underemployed, or temporarily employed) continue to live in slums. The rampant problems in the Indian slums at present are consumption of illicit liquor and drugs, crimes, and worsening housing conditions and civic facilities. Therefore, Mukerjee's analysis of the working class is relevant even for the present industrial organisation in India.

3.3.5 Theory of Values

As noted previously, Radhakamal Mukerjee had a sustained interest in the impact of values on human society. In the middle of the twentieth century, the notion of a value-free social science became dominant in academic circles both in the West and in India. Mukerjee held that a separation between "fact" and "value" was arbitrary.

Activity I

Note down at least five types of social behaviour that you perform in your daily life and state the values related with them. Some examples of social behaviour are wearing a sacred thread, going to the mosque, temple or church, touching the feet of elders, and so on.

Do you agree or disagree with Radhakamal Mukerjee's opinion that we cannot separate facts of social behaviour from the values which are associated with them? Write a note of one page about this and compare your note, if possible with those of other students at your Study Centres.

The facts and values could not be separated from each other in human interactions. Even a simple transaction like taking food, wearing dress or greeting others was a value-based or normatively conditioned behaviour. Each society has a distinctive culture and its values and norms guide the behaviour. Therefore, the positivistic tradition of the West, which (on the analogy of

sciences) wanted to separate facts from values, was not tenable to R.K. Mukerjee, especially in the study of a society like India. In the West, there was a compelling need to free scientific enquiry from the hold of church theology. Hence, it was perhaps necessary to hold that facts and values were separate.

Mukerjee underlined two basic points in relation to values. Firstly, values are not limited only to religion or ethics. Economics, politics and law also give rise to values. In other words, human needs are transformed into social values and are internalised in the minds of members of society. Older civilisations such as India and China were stable. Hence, values were formed and organised into a hierarchy of higher and lower levels. Secondly, values are not a product of subjective or individualistic aspirations. They are objectively grounded in humankind's social aspirations and desires. In other words, values are both general and objective i.e., measurable by empirical methods. In general, the great civilisations of the world have subordinated instrumental or materialistic goals to intrinsic or spiritual goals.

To sum up, there are three salient points in Mukerjee's theory of values. Firstly, values satisfy the basic impulses of men and women in an orderly fashion. This means that the selfish desires and interests are modified by collective living, wherein people give and take from each other. Secondly, values are generic in scope and include both individual and social responses and attitudes. This means that the values are shared by all through their symbolisation. The national flag, for example, is a common symbol for all individuals and groups who constitute a nation. Thirdly, in spite of diversities of human society, some universal values are discernible. The major religions of humankind are repositories of these universal values and norms. A dynamic approach to society will aim at an adaptation of inherited values to the needs of contemporary times.

3.3.6 Indian Culture and Civilisation

Mukerjee also wrote extensively on Indian art and architecture, history and culture. Mukerjee (1964) believed that Asiatic art aimed at collective developments and wrote, "Art in Asia became the torch-bearer of social and spiritual upheavals for millionsOriental art is most intensely charged with community feeling and is thus chiefly responsible for the historical continuity of Oriental Cultures". In contrast, such artistic endeavour in the West had been dominated either by individualism or the feeling that art was an end in itself. This was just not conducive to either social solidarity or spiritual development.

Indian art was embedded in social or ethical sphere. R.K. Mukerjee wrote "The myriad temples, stupas and viharas of India bear witness to the link between art and ethics, religious and social values. Art in India is an enduring component of people's interaction with each other which shows in concrete forms the active relationship between people's aspirations and their artistic creativity".

Indian art was constantly associated with religion. In his historical study of India Mukerjee was impressed by the non-aggressive nature of Indian religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. The remarkable quality of Indian religions was their insistence on ultimate truth rather than on a particular set of beliefs or rituals. The Indian influences spread to many countries not through war or conquest but through friendship and goodwill. Right from the time of Ashoka, the peaceful “colonisation” of Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Tibet, and other countries of Outer India took place. Indian art and religion enriched the local cultures and by doing so gave rise to a new culture. For example, even today, different styles of Ramayana, the Hindu religious epic, are performed in these countries and several others such as Indonesia, Sumatra and Trinidad. Thus, there was the harmony between foreign and indigenous elements. In India itself, the Hindu legal texts such as Dharmasastra are flexible codes to accommodate the ethnic diversities of India. Correctly interpreted, these texts provide a framework of values and norms for the orderly living of diverse groups. Thus, art and religion in India have been tolerant of diverse forms and styles.

3.3.7 Mukerjee’s Concept of Universal Civilisation

Mukerjee’s general theory of society sought to explain the values of a universal civilisation. He used the term “civilisation” in an inclusive sense; culture was part of it. He proposed that human civilisation should be studied on three inter-related levels. These are:

i) Biological Evolution

The biological evolution of human beings has facilitated the rise and development of civilisation. They have the capacity to change the environment as an active agent. The animals can only adapt to an environment; but human beings can mould it in different ways. The human beings, as a biological species, are capable of overcoming competition and conflict and attain cooperation (symbiosis).

ii) Psycho-social Dimension

There is a psycho-social dimension. In social psychology the people are often depicted within the framework of race, ethnicity or nationhood. Human beings are seen as prisoners of little selves or egos, whose attitude is parochial or ethnocentric. On the contrary, human beings have the potentiality to overcome the narrow feelings and attain universalisation that is, to identify oneself with the larger collectivity such as one’s nation or even as a member of the universe itself. In the process, common values help to subordinate the particularistic values to universal values. According to Mukerjee, ethical relativism which means that values vary from society to society) is not helpful in the present times; there is need for ethical universalism which affirms the

unity of the humankind. In the new perspective, men and women become free moral agents who are capable of recognising the common strands binding the humanity. They are no longer dictated by divisiveness or relativity.

iii) Spiritual Dimension

In Mukerjee's views, the civilisation has a spiritual dimension. Human beings are gradually scaling transcendental heights. That is, they are moving up to the ladder of spirituality by overcoming the constraints of biogenic and existential levels, i.e. the physical and material limitations. In this endeavour, art, myth and religion provide the "impulsion" or the force to move upward. As the social sciences have hitherto ignored these cultural elements, they are incapable of providing a spiritual perspective. Incidentally, a similar observation was made by Karl Mannheim, a German sociologist, who wrote on sociology of culture. Mannheim noted that the Western social sciences had neglected cultural dimensions (arts, myths, symbols, etc.) under the rigid code of positivism or structural functionalism. This resulted in a lopsided view of social reality. According to Mukerjee, humankind's search for unity, wholeness and transcendence highlight the spirituality of civilisation. In this respect, he commended the Indian and Chinese civilisations which had endured as stable entities since sixth century B.C. Their strength is derived from their universal myths and values which foster spiritual quest.

Mukerjee noted with satisfaction that the search for universality was embodied in the Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations Organisation (U.N.O) in the twentieth century. These rights upheld liberty and dignity of people, in whichever country they might be living. Mukerjee's emphasis on spirituality was not an escapist dream. He stated that human progress (in the ultimate sense) was possible only if glaring disparities of wealth and power between countries were reduced. So long as poverty persisted or political oppression continued, further integral evolution of mankind was not a practical proposition. The persisting human awareness of misery in the world had stimulated the search for universal values and norms.

3.4 IMPORTANT WORKS

Some of Radhakamal Mukerjee's important works in sociology are:

- i) *The Regional Balance of Man* (1938)
- ii) *Indian Working Class* (1940)
- iii) *The Social Structure of Values* (1955)

- iv) *Philosophy of Social Sciences* (1960)
- v) *Flowering of Indian Art* (1964)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is ‘regional sociology’, according to Radhakamal Mukerjee?

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- 2) Discuss in about five lines Radhakamal Mukerjee’s opinion about “facts” and “values”.

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt about the contribution of a pioneer of Indian Sociology, namely Radhakamal Mukerjee.

You learnt about his biographical details. We have described some of his major ideas in the field of sociology. He has dealt with the study of society in a distinctive way. Finally, we have listed some of his important works.

3.6 REFERENCES

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Mukerjee, Radhakamal 1984. *The Culture and Art of India*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers: New Delhi.

3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) ecology b) compartmentalization c) economics
- 2) An ecological zone is a result of the combination a certain kind of geological, geographical and biological factors.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Radhakamal Mukerjee’s interest in social ecology led him to the study of regions in India. He caled this study regional sociology. According to Mukerjee, if the regions in modern India were developed to the extent that they became self-sufficient then India will benefit as a whole. But if some

regions lag behind they will be dominated by the developed regions and this will result in a lop-sided development of India.

**Radhakamal
Mukerjee**

- 2) Radhakamal Mukerjee was against the Western trend of separating “facts” from “values” as done by the positivists in sociology. According to him “facts” and “values” are inseparable elements of human interaction and such behaviour as taking or giving food, wearing a dress, etc. are value-based and normatively determined by the society.

