

# An Apostle of Sociological Theory

## Yogendra Singh (1932–2020)

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A student and fellow sociologist reminisces about Yogendra Singh, a distinguished scholar and theorist, and a founding member of sociology centres at the University of Rajasthan and Jawaharlal Nehru University.

It is not easy to believe that Yogendra Singh is no more. He passed away peacefully while having breakfast around 10.15 am on 10 May 2020. His daughter Neerja Singh, her husband Hulas Singh and two grandchildren were with him when he breathed his last after a massive cardiac arrest.

I was his student when I enrolled in the MA (Master of Arts) programme of Department of Sociology of the University of Rajasthan in 1961. Yogendra Singh taught there from 1961–70. In 1970, Singh moved to University of Jodhpur as its first professor of sociology, and in 1971, he was invited by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi to establish the department of sociology, named as Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS). He superannuated from JNU in 1997, and thereafter he was designated as Professor Emeritus. In JNU he also served for several years as dean of the School of Social Sciences as well as rector of the university.

I completed my PhD (doctor of philosophy) under his supervision in 1968. I was his first PhD student. N K Singhi and I P Modi were others who pursued PhD under his supervision at the University of Rajasthan. At JNU, Dipankar Gupta, Pradip Bose, J S Gandhi, C N Venugopal, Jag Bandhu Acharya, Pushpendra Surana, Nirmal Singh, Poornima Jain, Savita Bhakri, Kameshwar Chaudhary, Manish K Verma, and Madhu Nagla, to name a few, were Singh's doctoral students. Singh supervised more than 50 PhD students.

Singh obtained his MA and PhD degrees from the University of Lucknow. He studied under eminent intellectuals like Radha Kamal Mukherjee, D P Mukerji, D N Majumdar, Baljit Singh and A K Saran. After obtaining his PhD degree in 1958, he taught for three years at the Institute of Social Sciences, Agra, before moving to Jaipur in 1961. T K N Unnithan, Indra Deva and Yogendra Singh together established the Department of Sociology at the University of Rajasthan.

Singh was born in a zamindar family in village Chaukhara in the then Basti district of Uttar Pradesh. He sensed the wave of social change coming over India after independence in the wake of zamindari abolition. He decided to go for higher education, for he was eager to learn of the transformations taking place in the wider world outside.

Singh remained a teacher throughout his professional career. He taught in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi for four decades, out of which he was at JNU for 27 years. The Department of Sociology at Jaipur and the CSSS at JNU were known as “Yogendra Singh's departments.” While at Jaipur (1961–70), he was also a visiting faculty member at McGill University, Canada for one year and at Stanford University, United States for one semester.

### An Incurable Theorist

In my opinion, Singh was an extraordinary person; he was both a scholar and a fine human being. He was an excellent speaker and communicator of knowledge. Not only students of sociology benefited from his scholarship, but several scholars of other disciplines also used to attend his lectures at JNU. He had sound knowledge of classics and of original texts. He moved between theories and theoreticians with equal facility. At the University of Rajasthan, his students would call him George Lundberg one day, when he lectured on the foundations of sociology; the next day, he would be likened to Talcott Parsons, who, like him, was “an incurable theorist.” And at other times, we would call him C Wright Mills, Peter L Berger, Karl Marx, Max Weber, V Pareto, etc, so comfortable was he with all the building blocks of sociology. Singh's understanding of theory was profound and he constantly emphasised the triple alliance between theory, method and data. With ease, he presented concepts through empirical realities and made reality come alive with theoretical substance.

Singh was a supreme synthesiser of complex ideas and frameworks. He pursued a “middle path” approach based on pragmatic eclecticism. He drew from all major sociologies from diverse provenance, which included scholarship from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and India. Not just Marx, Weber

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and Durkheim, but the contributions of Parsons, Merton, Dahrendorf, Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown, Bottomore, Levi-Strauss, Alain Touraine, Bourdieu, and Louis Dumont, are also deeply embedded in Singh's writings and teaching. His admirers, consequently, also come from a cross-section of academics.

### Analysing Indian Society

Singh has written on a wide array of themes with deep understanding and concern. These include: theory and method, social stratification and mobility, tradition and modernisation, professions, Indian Sociology as a discipline, culture, society and change. His book, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, provides a path-breaking paradigm shift in the understanding of social change and development. It is also an invigorating critique of the cultural explanations of social change.

Lately, Singh analysed Indian society in terms of caste, class and community, where he examined caste in terms of class and power. This allowed him to view this phenomenon as a social resource, and as a means for accomplishing a variety of mundane activities as well. His treatise on modernisation is clear evidence of an "integrated approach" to the study of social change. This explains why his book, *Modernization of Indian Tradition*, has made an everlasting impact on both teachers and students everywhere.

There are five major theoretical orientations in Singh's sociology. These are: (i) the comparative historical approach, (ii) philosophico-sociological approach, (iii) logico-philosophical approach, (iv) structural-functional approach, and (v) statistical-positivistic approach. Together they tell us how wide Singh's lenses were when he studied social reality and also how distant he was from dogma.

One could perhaps also see Singh's career as it developed through various phases. In the first phase (1961–1970), he gained instant recognition at the University of Rajasthan, which was a major achievement given that this institution had luminaries like G C Pande, Satish Chandra, Iqbal Narain, Daya Krishna, and Raj Krishna in its ranks. The second phase began in 1971, when he joined JNU. This period is also coterminous with the publication of his book, *The Modernization*

*of Indian Tradition*. From this time on, Singh remained a significant academic voice campaigning for a cross-fertilisation between structural and cultural approaches and for a commitment towards a holistic and integrated sociology. He gave substance to this academic dispensation in succeeding years when he wrote on a variety of themes such as on theory and method, on the functional metaphor, and also on the larger theme of the relevance of social sciences in India.

For Singh, Indian Sociology can be best understood in terms of four stages: (i) 1952–60; (ii) 1960–65; (iii) 1965–70; and (iv) 1970–77. He did not separate them on the basis of scholars or area of study but on the fact that each phase bore distinctive theoretical orientations. The first phase, he classified as philosophical; the second, culturological; the third, structural; and the fourth, dialectical historical. Since the 1970s, Singh further observed that Indian sociology had witnessed a multiplicity of discourses, ranging from "dialectical–historical" to the "critical" to "symbolic–phenomenological."

In his writings and lectures on social change, Singh often emphasised the important point, namely, theories are different from ideal types and the presentation of continua. This comes through very clearly in his scholarship, but more particularly in his writings on globalisation, information society, and social identity. For example in his essay, "On the Social Conditioning of Indian Sociology: The Perspective," written in 1986, he examined the extent to which theoretical and cognitive systems of sociology are socially conditioned.

At JNU, Singh was widely considered as a highly respected teacher and thinker. His lectures were mesmerising for their fluency and for their rich content. He was an inquisitive researcher even in his later years. In one of his more recent writings, on the basis of the contemporary changes in villages, Singh argued for the need to rethink the conceptual categories of community, caste and social class. He based this argument on his long-term analysis of social change in rural India from 1955–2007.

Any assessment of Singh, coming either from his students, colleagues or academics in general, will agree that he was a thoroughgoing liberal, in the best sense of the

term. The range of his scholarly interests is also stunning, for it covers such a wide number of topics from village society, to crime, to non-violence, to youth culture, to factions, and to social change and modernisation, of course. Nowhere is there what Stanislaw Andreski would term as "manipulation through description" nor "the smokescreen of jargon." Also, there was no "camouflage" or hidden agenda in the name of theory, method and objectivity. Singh was successful in freeing himself from dogmas as he ably crossed both the substantive and theoretical bottlenecks. In this connection it must also be mentioned that he always strived for sociology devoid of, and unencumbered by, colonial trappings.

As a person, Singh was a thorough gentleman, well-mannered, unassuming and unpretentious. He used to express even his dissenting opinion in a very polite way, and would always strive for a consensus. One also saw this in the way he conducted faculty meetings and discussions in JNU. He was a true democrat in letter and spirit. Even a day before his demise, Singh was intellectually alive. He animatedly discussed the need for new concepts to study the post-COVID-19 world. Till the very end the "why" question drove Singh's research agenda.

The setting up of the CSSS under his stewardship was his greatest institutional contribution to social sciences. The CSSS became a recognised department the world over and a trendsetter in the study of social mobilisation. Twice, it has been ranked internationally as a centre of excellence. His students, colleagues and admirers, in a condolence meeting held by the Babasaheb Ambedkar Central University, Lucknow, observed: "Besides his academic excellence, he enveloped all those around with his scholarly persona, calm composure, and his ever smiling, warm demeanor."

Lastly, for me, it has been a great personal loss. I have learnt a lot from Singh. He will always remain my guiding light and spirit. In 1994, Singh was honoured by the CSSS in his superannuation in the presence of a galaxy of scholars from all over India. Already, six volumes have been published in his honour by his students. This is a very rare academic honour and one that Singh richly deserves.