Benoy Sarkar’s Involvement with Social Sciences: The Integration of history and sociology

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Abstract:

Benoy Kumar Sarkar is truly a forgotten intellectual by now in his own motherland. Born in the last years of the nineteenth century, Sarkar earned his distinction by topping the university examinations and through his subsequent involvement with the nationalist projects on education in undivided Bengal. His period of grooming during the Swadeshi days and after convinced him that there had to be a reading of diverse intellectual traditions present in India as opposed to the blind support for the Occidental knowledge system. Sarkar’s idea to find the truth in discourses on social science did reach a point of culmination in the course of his stay in Europe in the 1920s. As opposed to the intellectual preferences of many of his contemporaries in India, Sarkar did not evince much interest in the Marxian discourse on social transformation, since he had great reservations on the western philosophical discourses on development and progress. In his writings, resembling tones, he fervently argued that the ancient Hindu texts had a different version on materialist progress, which hardly created much opportunities for social conflict. He believed the secular aspect of Hindu philosophy had to be studied to prescribe the trajectories of India’s economic development, imitating in some ways the model of Japan. However, he strongly opined that the ritualistic and religious dogmas had to be given up, if the Indian experience was to match its ancient greatness.

Key words: Sukranti, Pedagogy, Shakti yoga, Socialisation, Marxism, Handicraft.

Benoy Kumar Sarkar who is by now almost a forgotten intellectual had been one of the founders of sociology in modern India. As Andre Beteille had once observed that Benoy Kumar Sarkar was a polymath with a vast repository of knowledge in many subjects and one who knew Bengali, English, French and Italian. Sarkar was also a Sanskritist and had published an annotated translation of the Sukranti. Sarkar propounded a range of ideas in the intellectual circles of Calcutta wherein he was credited with a philosophy of his own known as ‘Sarkarism’. The interesting part of his intellectual interventions is that he anticipated most of the ideas as doctrines related to the study and research of sociology as a discipline in India though he continues to be ignored in the classrooms.¹

Sarkar was born on December 26, 1887 in Maldah district of undivided Bengal. At the age of 13, he was placed first in the entrance exam of Calcutta University and was a student of Presidency College between 1901 and 1906. In these years as a student, Sarkar
studied English and History and in 1905 was awarded the ‘Ishan’ scholarship for the highest marks secured by him in the B.A examination of the University of Calcutta. In 1906, he took his M.A degree in English and he was nominated for the state scholarship for the government of India and was also selected for the post of a deputy magistrate. But he did not take these offers, because as a Bengali his mind rebelled from receiving felicitations from the government or serving as an official under a foreign government. He was drawn to the Swadeshi movement and he preferred to work in the field of education related activities. Thus for the next eight years between 1906 and 1914, Sarkar was actively engaged with the nationalist initiatives for education and pedagogy. He was involved with the National Education Movement in Bengal and the National Council of Education in Jadavpur. Swapan Bhattacharya describing the activities of Sarkar in this period had stated that Sarkar was by no means was confined to Calcutta rather he made towards of the district towns of Bengal to create an awareness about the philosophy of national education. He established several national schools in his home district wrote books in Bengali furnishing the guidelines for national education and advocated the use of the vernacular for imparting instructions in the schools and colleges of India. Satish Chandra Mukherjee, the founder of the Dawn Society and the person whose name was associated with the philosophical discourse on national education remembered as Bhagabat Chatuspathi had a great deal influence on Sarkar in his initial years. However, as many have pointed out, it was Vivekananda’s ideas that had a deeper imprint on his thought process.

By the time the First World War had started, Sarkar had embarked on a new phase of life. In 1914, Sarkar undertook his first world tour and this tour finally ended in 1925. In course of these years, Sarkar delivered lectures in different parts of Europe, Japan, China, Korea, Munchuria and the United States. A polyglot and a person possessing encyclopaedic knowledge in economics, history, politics, sociology and literature; Sarkar could endear himself to an international audience. In fact, these lectures publicised a comparative culture study in the diverse perspectives of the world in terms of diverse intellectual traditions, apart from those of the Anglo-Americans. In these lectures, he emphasised on east west unity, trying to secure the balance between the two and this was much in evidence in his monograph *Futurism of Young Asia*.

Finally in 1925, Sarkar returned to India and was appointed as a lecturer in the department of economics, University of Calcutta. He was raised to the position of professor and head of the department in 1947 and he finally relinquished his office two years later in 1949.
various European universities. In 1931, he attended the International Congress of Population in Rome and adorned the position of the president of its economic wing. As a faculty of the University of Calcutta, Sarkar tried to build up an intellectual outside the ambience of the university circles. He was in favour of building up a pool of talented researchers whose ideas and writings could lead to a countywide movement. Possibly, such initiatives did come to the fore with the opening of seven research institutes in Calcutta, the most important being the Bangiya Dhana Bigyan Parishad and the Bangiya Samaj Bigyan Parishad. These institutes attracted a number of research scholars who received guidance on various subjects and several important books on economics were published in Bengali.6

After his retirement from the university service, Sarkar left India for the United States of America. In the US he delivered about 150 lectures and he delivered the first of these lectures at the Harvard University. During the course of this tour, the lecture series revolved round the theme The Dominion India in World Perspectives. However, Sarkar could not complete the full lecture programs and died in Washington on 24th November 1949. His sudden death, definitely created a vacuum in the intellectual circles of Calcutta and he for sometime continued to inspire a younger generation of scholars because of his emphasis on apparently two different set of ideas; one reflected in unity between the East and the West and the other in terms of esoteric India.7

In his entire active academic life, Sarkar showed a great deal of eagerness in attacking all points of view, sometimes consistently, sometimes inconsistently. But in his own ways he remained consistent because he was always guided by a great passion for India and he devoted most of his intellectual energies towards the regeneration of Indian society and culture. In his young days, he was avowedly attracted to the spiritualness of Indian traditions which he later gave up, when he started working on the Sukraniti and the positive background of Hindu sociology. Thereafter he argued that positivism, materialism and activism were also inherent in the Hindu tradition and that India should embrace modernity through industrialisation. The question remains whether this modernity at all could accommodate spiritualism. To Sarkar it did not matter as long as India reached the apogee of nations.8

Sarkar’s philosophical system had an essential element that was based on constant assimilation of Vishwha-Shakti (world forces) and this made Sarkar to undertake
comparative and international investigations (based on his surveys and travels abroad). Sarkar’s philosophical system which was reflected in the assemblage on the form of the bibliography of “sarkarism” introduced his readers to the thoughts and activities of the scholars all over the world. Sarkar tried to make his readership aware of the intellectual thought currents and movements which were gaining popularity in countries other than India. Sarkar followed a very complicated route by sometimes translating, paraphrasing or summarizing the writings of economists, culture historians, sociologists, moral and political writers and jurists with the objective of educating the “cultured public”.9

Too many, Sarkar was an iconoclast, who was always keen to refute the assertions made by the western scholars. Some of the critics would argue that this was a natural tendency for anyone who came from the oriental world or a region which had been subjugated to the political authority of the western power. Sarkar tried to set aside the ‘orientalist and imperialist’ views that would always emphasize on the mystical and metaphysical achievements of the east Indians. On the other hand, he would take a great deal of pride in stressing the abilities of the Indians to make material progress and the abilities of the occidentals to gains successes in mystic and metaphysical achievements.10

Sarkar’s ideas are very neatly expressed in one of his observations: ‘It is not Nature, region, or geography that in the last analysis determines man’s destiny. It is the human will, man’s energy that recreates the topography and natural forces, humanizes the earth and spiritualizes the geography. Then, again, it is not the group, the clan, the nation or the society that ultimately forces the individual to submit to the social milieu, the group mores, the tradition, and the status quo. It is rather the individual personality that compels the mores to change and the milieu to break, that subverts the status quo and reforms the tradition’.11

Banesvar Das in this context observed: ‘Both anthropologically and psychologically it has been the factual nature of man to function as a “transformer” and recreator. The ideal of man, historically and inductively considered, is not peace but restlessness. The Hindu Aitareya Brahamana caught the right view of progress and culture when it taught in so many words that nanasrantaya srirasti (prosperity is not for the person that is not tired with movements and wanderings)’.12
In many of the writings of Sarkar, particularly those dealing with social philosophy there is no reference to a particular geographical zone. Sarkar believed that every continent and every nation had been going through stages of modernised development, which differed from one and another. He did not blankly place his arguments in terms of west versus east but he was more concerned about the conflict between medievalism and modernism. Given such an understanding Sarkar looked upon Japan in a position which was similar or equal to some advanced countries in Europe whereas the Balkan states and Latin America stood at a plane which was identical with India. Though the fact was these Eur-American countries were politically free and India was still a colonised nation. Sarkar introduced an idea which was shared by many historians of the later period that Indian and European culture and accomplishments were not fundamentally so different at least till the early years of the nineteenth century. The divisions became evident with the introduction and application of steam power to production and transportation sectors. It was this modernity that sealed the prospects of India while parts of Euro-America went ahead.

Sarkar was close to European philosophical systems despite having differences in accepting their ideational proclivities. He had read Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Tonnies, Marx and other western social theorists. But, he was critical of their overt singular interpretations of social phenomenon. Comte was a believer of positive knowledge and scientific experience and this he believed was something of an anti-thesis of religion or philosophy. Such a one way evolutionary model was found to be unacceptable by him.

Sarkar believed that imagination and experience complemented one another. In fact imagination and experience could not be isolated. Sarkar’s analysis, viewed from the point of view of anthropology and psychology, imagination belonged to a genre of an anti-diluvium mindset and had less to do with reason that was seen as the sole ingredient of the modern mind. Sarkar found that Comte positive determinism was as much in error as the economic determinism of Marx’s theory of political economy, based on the changing modes of production and ownership of production.

Sarkar did try to comprehend Ferdinand Tonnies’ on community (Gemeinschaft) and society (Gesselschaft). Tonnies was of the opinion that there could be an element of personal interactions in the community where as the society would essentially be confined within an ambience of business, law and public life. Sarkar was undoubtedly influenced by Tonnies.
but found this distinction between community and society to be a problematic in terms of his own beliefs and assumptions.

In his monograph *Villages and Towns as Social Patterns*, Sarkar took up the ideas of the French social theorist Emile Durkheim and these were integrated to his own ideas related to *Samuhas* (corporate bodies) and *Srenis* (corporations) in ancient and medieval India. He disagreed with Durkheim and dismissed the latter’s ideas as to individualist and rather based on an overtly psychologically interpretation of social occasions. Likewise Sarkar also found Max Weber’s sociology based on interpretative understanding *verstehen* as something which failed to establish the linkages between religion and economic life. Sarkar criticised Max Weber’s view points on Hinduism and Buddhism too mechanistic and one which was not based on a proper reading on sociology. However, as Swapan Bhattacharya has pointed out, Sarkar was appreciative of Weber’s work and the types of social authority.15

Sarkar believed in objective methodology and remained steadfastly committed to the positivist method of the social sciences. His reliance on the positivist method on the social sciences is clearly borne out in one of his observations: ‘In order to achieve this viewpoint the preliminary procedure should be to acquire altogether new angles of vision, and this would be feasible only if a good few of the scholars got interested in studies and investigations that have absolutely no Indian bearing. In other words, we have to proceed to the historical, philosophical, economic and political studies exactly in the spirit in which the archaeologist or rather the students of positive science have been attacking their problems’.16

Sarkar was a firm believer in the logic that expressed its preferences of a gradualist approach that was seen in the ascent of the individual to the general. In one way this was an accommodative method which accommodated simple facts to abstract ideas. Moreover, there was an element of collectivism in Sarkar’s methodology. He believed that in any form of social development, there were individual responses and also institutional preferences.17 The interaction of so many diverse agencies proved the point that there could not be a single or a monistic interpretation rather it was the ‘plurality of causes’ which had to be given importance in understanding a particular social event.
In Sarkar’s understanding of society, human being was at the centre because the humans who were the embodiment of Shakti Yoga alone possessed the power to confront all the forms of unrealism or obscurantism. In April 1936 while addressing the conventions at the religions at Ram Krishna mission in Rangoon, Sarkar provided a hint to such an understanding, ‘Man as an individual or in groups has had but one function, and this is to transform the gifts of the world into which he is born, namely, Nature and Society, into the instruments of human and social welfare. It is not Nature, region or geography that in the last analysis determines man’s destiny. It is the human will, man’s energy, that recreates the topography and natural forces, humanizes the earth and spiritualizes the geography. Them, again, it is not the group, the clan, the nation or the society that ultimately forces the individual to submit to the social milieu, the group moves, the tradition and the status quo. It is rather the individual personality that compels the moves to change and the milieu to break, that subverts status quo and reforms tradition’. 18

The individual is not helpless as it is often believed by social theorists. The individual has the ability to change the environment in which he or she is located. Sarkar is less convinced of the Durkheimien model Socieatisation and even less by the determinism of Marxian logic. Sarkar’s difference from Marx’s position that an individual is always subservient to economic forces as had been enunciated by Marx. In the opinion of Durkheim, individual had the power and the authority to shape or transform the social boundaries. But Sarkar claimed that both the positions hardly gave the individual autonomy of their own. He further argued that humans could not be defined in terms of binaries of good, bad, rational or irrational. Sarkar argued that every human being was a combination of opposites. There were reasons as well as unreason that were present in a single individual. Sarkar made the following observation, ‘Man is generally taken to be rational, reasonable or logical animal. But it should be untrue to reality to believe that the rational, the reasonable or the logical in man has crushed the irrational, the unreasonable or the illogical in himself out of existence. The unreasonable, illogical and irrational features of his personality and co-existing in the Gestalt with the opposites as his physical fact. Very often, maybe, even normally, those are more powerful than the others.’19

In Sarkar’s views, man was the pivot in all social processes and social institutions. Sarkar believed that there could not be a single definition which could define the social qualities of human beings.20 He believed that human beings were torn between cooperation and conflict. Sarkar made an interesting observation in this respect, ‘The inter-human reactions are not always those of fellow-feeling, attachment, concord, amity or attraction.
They may as well be marked by rivalry, jealousy, envy, malice, enmity, hatred and repulsion... The processes that connect man with man are antipathy no less than sympathy. Even the collectives like the group, class, nation or state are by nature capable of mercy as of violence’.

Sarkar believed that conflicts essentially constituted the mental and moral side of human beings. As is clear, he was less drawn towards the western ideas of reason and logic and his studies of human beings in the context of India made him believe that irrationality had a role to play as much as reason. In other words he stated that human beings involved in a struggle between ignorance and knowledge were stood to definitely reach a point of improvement in their lives.

Sarkar believed that the life of a human being was essentially guided by four basic instincts. He defined them as kama, the sexual instinct, kanchana which stood for proprietary instinct; kirti which stood for domination and karma which was the creative instinct. He gave a vivid description that how these instincts played their roles in human lives. This is clear in Sarkar’s observations, ‘Kama’ leads to family (and society and social organisation). The results of ‘Kanchana’ instinct are economic (as well as social) activities and institutions. The state, law, politics, society and allied forms and relations of human life and deprived from the ‘Kirti’ urges. And the instinct of ‘Karma’ is responsible for the arts and crafts... etc., items that generally go by the name of culture.

In fact, Sarkar believed that conflict was the most creative agency which defined the contours of social progress. He further stated that progress could hardly be defined in terms of finite. Thus he criticised all theories of progress since they all ended with the notion of good in their final analysis. Sarkar was a critic of Marxian theory and did not believe that class conflict would result in a radical transformation of the society. But he believed that in any give, situation, there would always be a thesis and anti-thesis conflict, though it might not always lead to a good end. The most important point behind this thought of theoretical formulation was the idea of a creative disequilibrium which had no finality or end. Thus Sarkar believed that, ‘Progress consists in the fact at every stage there is a deliberate and conscious conflict between what for the time being is supposed to be good and what is supposed to be bad and that it is a result of this conflict that the next stage make its appearance. There is the play of the creative intelligence and will of man at every stage’.
However, in course of time, Sarkar’s ideas of progress indirectly influenced him to undertake a critique of western modernity. Sarkar’s translations of the Sanskrit text ‘Shukraniti’ made him believe that it would be futile to talk that India mind which was encapsulated in metaphysical speculations was one of the most important causes which acted as a deterrence to progress. He argued that the western advances in science, technology and industrialisation had all come in a period less than a century. Undoubtedly this led a question where did the Hindu and Occidental cultures stand in matters related to material development. He argued that Hindus possessed scientific intellect and materialistic genius which were no ways inferior to the western ideas. Sarkar believed that to label Hindu society in terms of its overt links with philosophies relating to other worldly affairs was an error which was based on biased interpretations. He argued that there was little doubt that transidental always acquired prominence in the life of Hindus but it did not mean that the Hindus were ignorant of the secular and material aspect of life. Hindu literary compositions, fine arts, political organisations and social connectivities established the point that there was always an attempt to reach a level of synthesis by combining the worldly with the other worldly. The four volume translation titled ‘The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology’ which appeared between 1914 and 1937 reflected his eagerness to demolish the Orientalist versions to which he had once fallen a victim that there were make a fundamental distinction between the institutions and ideals of the west and the east. Sarkar came up with a new thesis by stating that human beings were same everywhere and that they would prefer the same time of institutions and would display the same sort of attitude whether they were in the East and the West.25

Sarkar criticised the Indologists for pursuing a faulty methodology. He criticised their views on three different grounds firstly, for their inclination to ignore the positive materialistic secular institutional frameworks and theories of the Hindus, secondly, to see India living in the past when comparing with those of the modern in Euro-America and finally for overlooking the distinctions between the institutions and ideas that is the disjunctions between what were achieved and what were expected. Such ideas made him to stand for a different version of Hindu living. Sarkar was incessant in his opinion that the Hindus had never neglected the economic political and other secular aspects of life. There was no real difference between the progress made by the Hindus and that made by the West until the advent of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. The industrial revolution formed the dividing line between the east and the west but it could never be a permanent phenomenon since despite lagging behind the Hindus had the potentialities for material progress. Such ideas were summed up by Sarkar in one of his observations,
‘The literature, fine arts, religious consciousness, industrial life, political organisation, education system, social economy, etc., of the Hindus—all have sought to realise this synthesis and harmony between the eternal antithesis and polarities of the Universe: the worldly and the other worldly, the positive and transcendental, the many and the one, the Form and Spirit, Culture and Faith, Science and religion, Caste disunions and Vedantic oneness, Image worship and the realization of the Infinite (Brahma).’
Thus Sarkar tried to establish the view that even if social systems differed, social theories would not differentiate human beings on the basis of race, religion or other factors. Human beings were same all across the globe and their behaviour was not conditioned by geographical factors. In this context, there was an assertion but though the west had excelled in terms of industrialisation, India no sooner would also embrace a path towards technical progress and a higher standard of material life. Such a stage according to Sarkar would lay out a trajectory for a capitalist society. He categorically stated that banks in India should be established for the growth of capital and investment, introduction of private property in land and heavy industries. There should also be economic legislations along the lines of the West. The advocacies of such policies were definitely at cross roads with the nationalist opinion of the times in which Sarkar lived. Nonetheless, Sarkar believed that large scale industrialisation, mechanisation of agriculture and the growth of trade and commerce would redeem India from its economic degradation.

In order to explicate his ideas, Sarkar came out with elaborate guidelines related to educational reform, economic learning and national welfare. His educational reforms $\textit{Siksa-Vinjan}$ series emphasised on the intellectual and moral progress of children. There had to be an emphasis on self-sacrifice and devotion. Finally the educational institutions had to be free from all political, commercial and religious propagandas. In his economic planning Sarkar’s main emphasis was to get rid of unemployment which summed up the issue of poverty in India. He believed that industrialisation through the deployment of capital both foreign and Indian was necessary. He had also specific suggestions for improving the conditions of the peasants, artisans and petty traders. He favoured larger land holdings and wanted the rural primary classes to be employed in the cottage industries. He also supported the policy of supplying the artisans with improved tools and wanted them to be given specialised training. He favoured bank support to the petty traders and also felt that they should receive some bit of training. He wanted trade unions to be promoted and workers be vested with the right to strike and for the acceptance of their demands by the capitalists. He also felt that banks would benefit the big businessmen. At the same time commercial news bureaus had to be established for the dissemination of information related to business. Though he favoured the establishment of banks and insurance companies by the moneyed classes, he was definitely against usury. Finally, there was a suggestion that scholarships should be provided to people trained in the universities to visit foreign countries for to acquire training in different spheres of economic development.

The range of ideas that Sarkar had both in terms of education and economic development were grand in terms of scale leaving a wide difference between what was envisioned and what could be implemented. However, Sarkar’s philosophy which commonly went by the name of Sarkarism remained a problematic for both his supporters
and critics. The dilemma that often overtook them was the contradictions that were embedded within his ideas. For example, he would vouch the opinion that British imperialism was not something of an imposition, because it had not been done without some democratic ‘consent’ of the people. However he would favour an international policy for India which would protect her and supply her with foreign capital required for her industrialisation. Furthermore, Sarkar despite upholding the rich diversity of India’s heritage opposed the alleged assumptions of many western political scientists that a state ideally should consist of people of one race, one language, one religion and one culture.

He had a very different idea of India’s rural world. He believed that over population did not result in poverty and there was hardly any reference for birth control. He felt that the solution to poverty was to be found in the message of industrialisation. He criticised Gandhi’s handicraft program which to him was one sided and utterly inadequate. Furthermore, he was critical of the Indian National Congress which he believed was a stooge of the Indian bourgeoisie who were financing leaders for their own private ends. Such ideas were extremely debatable though that fact is that it brought the Indians closer to the thought current that was prevailing in the West. It also proved beyond much doubt that the distance between Occidentalism and Orientalism was not one which could not be breached. Yet it was the failure of Sarkar to build a systematic theory that ultimately led to the lack of interest over Sarkarism despite the fact that it could be a major plank of discussion for social theorists in India.

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