

Social Science Research in Northeast India: The Position of Sociology

A.K. NONGKYNRIH*

Abstract

The present paper dealing with development of social science research at the national level, throws light on the development and challenges of social science research in general and sociology in particular in the context of northeast India. Apart from secondary sources, information is collected from teachers working in sociology departments of some of the colleges located in urban and rural areas and also from the post-graduate students in the department of sociology, NEHU, Shillong. It was observed that social science research in general and the discipline of sociology in particular have made some progress in the northeast. There have been some efforts to collect and analyze empirical data on some of the tribal societies. However, there are many tribal societies in the region which are yet to be scientifically studied. Further, the discipline of sociology is urban centric and majority of students pursuing post-graduate degree in sociology comes from urban areas.

Keywords: social science, sociology, under-graduate, research, teaching.

According to the report of the Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), 'social science research is chiefly driven by two forces: (a) interest in knowledge about the functioning of society in its diverse social, cultural, political and economic aspects, and in understanding the factors that shape them; and (b) the practical needs of policy makers and managers in government, civil society and the private sector for reliable information and professional analysis'(2007:5).

In India the development of social science research is directly an outcome of the processes of modern education, the setting-up of

* *A.K. Nongkynrih is Professor in Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.*

universities and the academic interests of Indian intellectuals in writing issues concerning the people of the country during the colonial period. In the pre-independence phase social science research was mostly university-centric and after the independence of India many institutes of research came up which have also contributed towards the development of social science research. Mention may be made here of the Indian Statistical Institute at Calcutta; the National Council of Applied Economic Research and the Institute of Economic Growth at Delhi. However, one of the most important initiatives in the promotion and development of social science research was the creation of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in 1969. Under ICSSR various programmes of research was undertaken and funded by the government of India. Over the years universities, research institutes, and other private research agencies have contributed to the establishment of the social science research in the country (Sharma 1992:2642-2643).

Today social science research in India has grown manifold and there are 567 universities with over 500 social science departments; 27 autonomous research bodies and 67 government training and research bodies. It also stated that the number of social science departments in universities has increased from 313 in 1971 to 516 in 2001 (ICSSR 2007:8). The establishment of social science research in India has not been an easy process because problems and challenges related with social science research continues even till date. According to Shamita Sharma (1992: 2643-2645), there are six such problems and broadly they can be put as follows:

- i. The dominance of western intellectual tradition in the study of India. The influence is not only in applying western 'concepts, theories and methods of study but also topics of study'. As a result of which many issues concerning India's interest were not adequately studied.
- ii. Majority of Indian social scientists are elites and thus research problems 'perceived by them are given priority over the problems of the masses'. There is lack of representation from the masses in social science research in India. The issue of representing women's issues and their problems in social science research is problematic.
- iii. The high concentration of social science research in cities and the lack of it in the rural areas. The gap between social science research

and public policy. Economists are an exception because they are engaged in debates with the government on issues concerning policy matters. In the case of other disciplines in social science the same is yet to happen.

- iv. The over emphasis on economic issues and the dominance of economists over other disciplines has created a gap in the development of social science research in India. Inter-disciplinary research continues to be a major issue because social science research continues to be discipline – specific. Social science research in India is mostly funded by government or international organisations. The dependence of social scientists on external support limits the scope of autonomy. By giving autonomy and freedom to the researchers, the ICSSR has contributed to the growth of social science research.
- v. The braindrain of the highly educated from India in search of better opportunities such as employment, salaries and living conditions, and conducive academic environment, also affects social science research in India.
- vi. Apart from the above, there are other problems which have been identified and are affecting social science research and particularly at the level of universities. Problems such as inadequate number of faculty in the social science disciplines; and the use of vernacular languages as the medium of instruction at the post-graduate level have also impacted social science research because from such centres of learning it is doubtful if ‘serious research scholars will be produced’(Nair 2002: 4079; Chalam 2002:4080). Some other factors identified by ICSSR (2007:20-23) include lack of ‘incisive and original analytical studies; poor quality of research proposals; and shortage of qualified researchers’. One can say that social science research in India has two dimensions: one, its implantation during the colonial period and subsequently its development to suit the Indian context; and the two, the take-off stage after 1950 and the challenges related with complex issues such as theoretical, methodological and the diversity of societies.

Taking into consideration the background and development of social science research at the national level, the paper focuses on the development

and challenges of social science research in the context of northeast India and examines the status of Sociology as one of the disciplines in social science. The paper discusses the subject-matter by making use of the secondary sources as well as the information gathered from the interactions with teachers of sociology from some of the colleges located in urban and rural areas and post-graduate students in the department of sociology, NEHU, Shillong; and the personal observations of the author as a teacher in sociology.

Development of Social Science in northeast India

One of the problems encountered while preparing the paper was limited information on the status of social science and social science research in northeast India. The only available information was few books and in the form of survey of literature. It seems that there has not been any comprehensive empirical study on the development and status of any disciplines under social science in northeast India or on social science. Due to limited information it is difficult for one to provide a holistic picture. However, the author has tried to address and overcome the problem by focusing on sociology and by utilising whatever information is available.

The development of social science research in northeast India can be said to be a product of three processes: the political integration of the region under the colonial administration; the entry of modern organisations such as the Christian missions (namely, the Presbyterian, the Catholic, the Baptist and other denominations), the Ramakrishna Mission and others; and the evolution of the modern state, that is, India from 1950 onwards. Under the colonial administration, the region was directly brought under the colonial authority and control. Depending on whether they live, various societies (tribes and non-tribes) residing in the region were divided into two broad categories - the plains and the hills. Different policies related with administration were formulated for the purpose of political regulation of such areas. Colonial administrators while working in the region, had also prepared reports and documented about the life of different societies in their areas of operation. Such records and documents provided first information or recorded text about tribes and other sections of the population, and those writings continue to be of academic relevance for scholars and others.

The beginning of modern education, that is, the starting of educational institutions from the primary school level to college education was the initiative and effort of modern organisations. Many educational institutions were set-up in many parts of the region by such organisations. In the initial phase, organisations opened primary schools and high schools. Although most of such schools were English medium, there were also schools that followed the vernacular medium. Most of the schools in the hill areas followed the English-medium. The colonial government did open some schools in the region and mostly in the district headquarters.

The beginnings of modern education in the region was also the period when Christian denominations working in the hill areas began to experiment with the Roman script and developed scripts for different tribal dialects. Such experiments in tribal societies became successful and the Bible and other texts were translated into vernacular languages. The introduction of Roman script among the tribes facilitated the emergence of local writers. Educated persons from the tribes began to write and produce literature about their own societies. Secondly, there were missionaries who had learnt tribal languages and they too began to write about tribes.

Literature in the vernacular languages provides raw material to social science enquiries. Most social scientists working in the region or conducting research in the region find it difficult to make use of literature in vernacular languages because of their inability to speak and read local languages and depend heavily on literature available in English. As a result majority of the social scientists have not been able to gather all available and relevant information about tribal societies in the northeast.

On higher education in the region, Guwahati and Kolkata used to be the only centres of university education. On account of high costs of higher education, only few had the capacity to pursue higher education. However, with opening of colleges in Shillong and in other hill stations students from the region had more access to college education (Downs 1992:196-207; Dutta 1983). Today, both in urban and rural areas of the region the number of colleges has increased manifold and such colleges are in the streams of Arts, Science and Commerce; engineering; medical; agriculture and veterinary (Table-1). It should be noted before 1948 colleges from the region were affiliated with Calcutta University.

Table – 1**Number of Higher Educational Institutions (2003-2004)**

Institution	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Meghalaya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Tripura
Arts/ Science & Commerce colleges	8	309	58	49	27	35	14
Engineering colleges	1	3	1	-	-	-	1
Agri-cultural colleges	-	2	1	-	-	1	-
Veterinary	-	1	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Basic Statistics of NER, North Eastern Council, 2006.

The development and transformation of higher education in the region started with the opening of the first university in the region at Guwahati in 1948, and in few decades many more universities were established and the universities are Dibrugarh (1966); North-Eastern Hill University (1973); Manipur University at Imphal (1980); Rajiv Gandhi University at Arunachal Pradesh (1985); Tripura University at Agartala (1994); Assam University at Silchar (1994); Nagaland University at Kohima (1994); Tezpur University at Tezpur (Assam) and Mizoram University at Aizawl. Most universities in the region started with the support of the central government of India. Today barring Guwahati and Dibrugarh universities, others are Central Universities under the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. The post-graduate education and research programme in Master in Philosophy (M.Phil) and Doctoral degrees in social science disciplines are found in most universities of the region. Consequently social science research has gradually expanded and grown in size in recent decades (Table -2).

Table – 2**Enrolment by Stages/Classes (2003- 2004)**

Stages/ Classes	Arunachal Pradesh	Assam	Manipur	Megha- laya	Mizoram	Nagaland	Tripura
Ph.D/ D.Phil	35	750	438	385	-	17	16
M.A	411	7504	408	1015	364	338	701
M.Sc	46	3976	351	279	-	97	200
M.Com	16	1085	80	66	-	27	88

Source: Basic Statistics of NER, North Eastern Council, 2006

One can point out that the history of modern education in general and higher education in particular in the context of the region has been the contribution of three factors, that is, colonial administration, modern organisations and the nation-state.

The opening of universities has brought about the development of learning in various social science disciplines and social science research in the region. B. Pakem (1988) rightly noted that the university system has contributed to discipline-centric and this could hamper inter-disciplinary studies. In the process, each discipline gets contented with its core issues and leaving out developments which do not fall within the disciplinary boundaries. He also underscored the fact that social science research cannot advance to its fullest intellectual capacity if we fail to take the vernacular language and the vernacular literature into account. These limitations affect the discipline of Sociology as well.

Development of Sociology in India and northeast India

Sociology has gained its place and is accepted as one of the social science disciplines in many universities in India. In the 1930s, Sociology was taught only in four universities: Bombay, Lucknow, Mysore and Hyderabad. In the last seventy to eighty years, Sociology in India has grown and today it is taught in many post-graduate departments. As a discipline it has built up a substantial body of information and knowledge. However, 'the quality of teaching and research in the universities today is highly uneven' (Srinivas 1994:9-10; Beteille 2002a:32). The development

of the discipline has also been due to the support of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) which promotes research in various fields including Sociology; and the formation of professional bodies such as the Indian Sociological Society and the starting of journals like *Sociological Bulletin* and *Contributions to Indian Sociology* have further enhanced the position and academic credibility of Sociology in India (Beteille 2002; Srinivas 1994; Singh 1996).

As a distinct discipline sociology covers wide range of sociological problems and sociologists working on Indian society have focused on sociological subjects such as caste, family, religion, polity, economy, health, gender, social development etc. The most distinctive has been the village studies. However, one of the basic problems of Indian Sociology is related with the aspect of theory and methodology. Beteille noted that Indian sociologists have not been able to be 'innovative both theoretically and methodologically because of their passive dependence on the work of western scholars' (2004b:43). This is one of the reasons Indian sociology has not been able to develop a theory and methodology of its own. Beteille's assertion may be true but it should be noted that the dimension of cumulative and substantive data is the basis of developing theory and methodology. Indian sociologists have been focusing on varied sociological issues and have conducted such works either at the village or regional levels. Most of such works do not provide sufficient data which could lead to generalisation or the basis of theoretical formulation. Another problem Indian sociologists' feel intellectually challenged is the issue of social change. Yogendra Singh (1996:10-13) pointed out that the processes of democratisation, secularisation and the market economy are affecting the Indian society. Such processes of change could affect the way we teach and research sociology in India.

Coming to Sociology in northeast India, the discipline can be said to be an extended family of the parent-universities located in the metropolis. In the opinion of Nikhlesh Kumar, (1998:93) the discipline of Sociology in the region started first in Assam at Dibrugarh University in the mid-1960s. This is the first University that taught post-graduate level course in Sociology in the region. The second department of Sociology started at the North-Eastern Hill University in 1976 at Shillong. Subsequently, with creation of universities in Nagaland, Silchar (Assam) and Tezpur (Assam), the number of post-graduate departments in Sociology offering PG courses

and research programmes has increased to five. Today these universities from the region are producing substantial number of post-graduates in Sociology every year.

With the opening of more departments in Sociology, students completing their under-graduate studies have a choice to opt for Sociology as a subject at the post-graduate level. Initially when the discipline started, it had to depend on students from other streams of social sciences, humanities or sciences to opt for Sociology. However, in the last two decades colleges both in urban and rural areas have started teaching Sociology at the under-graduate level, and the post-graduate departments are getting sufficient applicants for study. And such colleges have become the feeder-points of under-graduate students in Sociology to the post-graduate departments. The growth of the department of Sociology in North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) helps us to understand the matter further.

Earlier NEHU had three campuses - at Shillong (Meghalaya), Aizawl (Mizoram) and Kohima (Nagaland). Most of the colleges located in the three states were affiliated to NEHU. When the department of Sociology started in Shillong campus there was no undergraduate college in the hills that taught Sociology and the PG department had to look for students from other streams to opt sociology. It was only in 1982 the Pachchungga University College in Aizawl affiliated to NEHU started the under-graduate level course in Sociology. The author recollects that in 1986 when he joined the post-graduate programme in Sociology at NEHU there was only one student who had honours degree in Sociology and the rest of the students had honours degrees in other disciplines, like Khasi, Commerce, History, Political Science, Home Science, Zoology etc. Few years later, the under-graduate course in Sociology started in St. Edmund's College and St. Mary's College; and gradually, the Department of Sociology began to get students with honours degree in Sociology. In the last one decade more colleges have started Sociology and the number of students pursuing Sociology at the under-graduate level has increased and there has been a steady growth in the number of under-graduate students with honours degree in Sociology. Today, the department at NEHU admits only students with an honours degree in Sociology. The number of applications for PG course in Sociology far exceeds the number of seats prescribed. The increase in the number of applicants is also because many students

from other universities seek admission in NEHU. The demand that the students from affiliated colleges be given preference over the students coming from other universities led to a change in the policy of admission to the general post-graduate courses in NEHU. The policy of admission (NEHU 2007-2008a:6-9) that is followed by NEHU is as follows:

The distribution of seats in the Department of Sociology at NEHU is as follows:

- i) Open category – 40%.
- ii) Reserved for SC/ST – 50%. Other things being equal, preference will be given to domiciles of Meghalaya.
- iii) Reserved for physically challenged – 3%. Such applicants will be examined by a medical board.
- iv) University quota – 7%, earmarked for the following categories:
 - a) Educationally backward areas - The level of backwardness shall be determined vis-à-vis national level of literacy (base 2001 census). The literacy rate at the block level would form the basis of award of added marks. Certificate in this regard should be issued by the BDO.
 - b) Outstanding Sports women/men – Weightage shall be given as shown in the table below:
 - c) NEHU employees their spouse and children – a weightage of 10 shall be added to the marks obtained in the qualifying examination. Certificate of employment should be issued by the office of the Registrar.
 - d) Widows/wards of armed forces personnel killed/disabled in action or during peace time.

The admission policy also states that, *“in case of students who (a) graduated from colleges affiliated to or maintained by NEHU or (b) are permanent domiciles of Meghalaya (supported by SC/ST or Permanent Resident Certificate) graduating from other universities, the percentage of marks obtained in the subject concerned shall be raised by 10. In case of those candidates who have not offered the subject in the Honours no such*

weightage shall be given and their marks in the Honours subject without weightage shall be taken into account”.

Like any other Central university, NEHU follows the reservation policy of the government of India. However, it has also given more leverage to students from colleges affiliated to it and to students who are permanent domiciles of Meghalaya. The outcome from such processes of admission has led to admitting more number of students from affiliated colleges under NEHU and residents of Meghalaya than those coming from outside. The example can be drawn from the PG departments under the School of Social Sciences NEHU (Table -3).

Table – 3

Number of Students Admitted at the Post-Graduate Level (Social Science)

Department	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	General	Male	Female	Meghalaya	Other States
History	0	50	0	21	29	27	23
Political Science	0	46	1	20	27	32	15
Sociology	1	39	5	15	30	25	20
BA.LLB	2	29	19	14	36	25	25
Total	3	164	25	70	122	109	83

Source: Thirty-third Annual Report, NEHU (183-211), 2006-2007, Shillong.

As a consequence of the new admission policy, more students from Meghalaya are able to get admission into different courses. However, the number of students coming from the rural areas of Meghalaya is marginal. The department of Sociology hardly receives applicants from students belonging to tribal communities such as Garo, Biate, Hajong. The reasons are because the few colleges in the rural areas that have started the undergraduate course in Sociology offer only the pass-course, not honours. In Garo hills there are no colleges that teach Sociology at the under-graduate level. Since the under-graduate honours degree in Sociology is offered only in urban areas like Shillong, most students pursuing post-graduate degree in Sociolgy happen to be city-dwellers. The geographical and ethnic composition of students entering PG is likely to have an impact on academic engagement and vibrancy of the department.

Teaching and Research in Sociology

In the preceding discussion the aspects of development of sociology in the region has been outlined. To gain more insight and understanding of the position of sociology in northeast India, five areas have been selected: teaching sociology at the under-graduate level; sociology at the post-graduate level; research degree in sociology; sociological literature and the future of sociological research in northeast India. The observations are general and based on the illustrations from NEHU.

Being fairly a new subject, Sociology is often equated with social work or perceived as relatively an easy subject or a subject that can provide solutions to social problems. Coming to the issue of Sociology at the under-graduate level, the affiliated colleges of NEHU can broadly be classified into two groups: colleges that taught Sociology as a subject both for pass-course and honours degree level; and colleges that taught Sociology only as a pass-course subject. Majority of the colleges in the former category are located in the city of Shillong and the latter are mostly located in the rural areas of the state. The city-based colleges are the ones that supply students with honours degree in Sociology to the post-graduate department at NEHU.

The quality of students, teaching and research at university level depend considerably on the experiences of students at undergraduate level. Most students never had any introductory background in Sociology. Consequently many students find it difficult to comprehend the basic concepts and theory. This is more so in the case of those students who are weak in the English language. Some undergraduate teachers teaching in urban as well as rural colleges admit that they had to explain sociological concepts to the students in the vernacular language (Khasi). Even though students could capture the meanings of such concepts, barring few students from elite English medium colleges, most students find it difficult to articulate them in English. Another issue is the access to the study materials. It is found that most of the textbooks prescribed in the syllabi are not easily available in the city of Shillong. In general students do not have access to good text books and classics and also because most cannot afford to buy good books available in the market, they fall beckon on guides like “Sociology Made-Easy”, a commercial publication which claims to teach everything about sociology. According to one vendor in

the city of Shillong, the demand for *Sociology Made-Easy* is high. When the author asked one under-graduate student in Sociology if he had read any standard text book, his answer was in the negative. Another student said that he did not refer to text books because classroom teaching is based on dictation of notes and he used the lecture notes as ready-made reading materials for examination. It seems to be the pattern that teaching Sociology at the under-graduate level in most cases is providing notes in the classroom to students. Such notes are used as the basic academic resource for information and knowledge by students. Notes driven lectures seems to serve the purpose of clearing the exams. Due to time constraints, very few teachers in undergraduate colleges adopt discussions in the classroom as method of teaching.

Teachers at the under-graduate level face different problems. A teacher has to take four to five classes per day and each class is of fifty minutes duration. It is a challenging task for the teacher to handle different topics in one day. As per rules, minimum number of teachers in colleges that teach Sociology should be two, whereas in colleges that teach both pass course and honours degree, there should be four teachers. It is often found that even in colleges that have four teachers and all share equal workload, the remuneration differs from teacher to teacher. While one teacher gets the UGC scale, two teaching positions are declared as are college sanctioned posts and fourth teacher is hired on part-time basis. In most colleges the teachers' monthly remuneration is approximately Rs.2000/- per month. In such adverse situation, retaining and motivating the teachers and expecting them to inspire the students to opt / study sociology is a difficult task.

At the post-graduate level, the admitted students are those with honours degree in sociology. Students have to adapt and adjust to the semester system and include 'internal tests and assignments'. Since PG teaching is lecture-driven and discussions and not note-driven lectures, students have not been able to cope well and particularly in the first two-semester. When students are asked to share their views and opinions or raised questions hardly there is a response. The cause of the problem is not that students cannot speak but because they have been made to listen and copy notes and over the years this has affected their spirit of participation and the confidence to speak. Students informed that they fear to speak-out because they think that what they will say will be wrong

or raising questions means being disrespectful towards teachers. It is mindset-syndrome that students have been influenced right from school to the under-graduate level. A post-graduate level teacher has to make extra efforts to make them speak-up. On the issue of collecting and compiling of information students take time to learn and consult various text books or materials for any particular sociological subject-matter and have to spend time in library.

At the PG level, teaching of Sociology is at the advanced stage and teachers take for granted that honours degree students are well versed with the basic sociological concepts. It is found to be not so, a teacher has to provide explanation on basic sociological concepts and also link the discussion with the PG topic, this process takes lot of time and efforts. Such challenges at the post-graduate teaching raises some fundamental questions on how to teach the basic fundamentals of Sociology at the under-graduate level, enhance the level comprehension and self-expression of students or whether Sociology and teaching Sociology should be more course-oriented or student-oriented or compliment both the course and the student is an issue that deserves attention and discussion.

At the level of M.Phil and Doctoral Programme, the Department of Sociology has been admitting students and has produced positive results. However, in the last few years the research programme had undergone many challenges. When the department had more number of teachers who could supervise, the number of students admitted was more. At present, the department can only admit few students per session and the number of applicants has increased. The department cannot admit more students because the teachers on roll who can supervise are less in numbers. The reason is because of the failure to fill in the vacant teaching positions. Very few candidates apply for vacant teaching positions, especially at Associate Professors' and Professors' level. The lack of qualified teachers or the lack of mobility of teachers from other parts of the country and the lack of qualified teachers from the region impede teaching and research in the university. Considering these factors, one can say that the future of Sociology at NEHU or in northeast India or elsewhere in the country is not very promising.

Reviewing the sociological literature in northeast India, in his book, *Survey of Literature in Sociology and Social Anthropology in northeast India (1970-1990)*, Nikhlesh Kumar (1999:46) has made some pertinent

observations. According to him, ‘the number of empirical studies was less. The studies lack rigour in theory and methodology, and there is also an absence of empirical studies with a comparative perspective’. He pointed out that the sociological literature in the region focused on tribal ethnography; institutions in tribal societies; tribal beliefs system; land tenure systems; ethnic unrest and protest movements; status of women; change, development and impact of various developmental schemes. In the department of Sociology, NEHU, at M.Phil and Ph.D. level, studies have been undertaken on social structure of tribal societies; social movements; land and agrarian situations; village studies; women issues; unemployment; health etc. Most of the research thesis at the doctoral level are empirical, explorative and descriptive in nature. This is bound to happen because sociological research under the university system is at the inception stage and that there is hardly any comprehensive empirical data on any of the tribal societies in the region.

The future of sociological research in northeast India is compounded with many challenges. Nikhlesh Kumar (1999) identified language as one of the key barriers in conducting scientific field-based research. Different tribes have different languages and mere knowing of a language may not necessarily ‘facilitate’ fieldwork. On this aspect I would like to share my own experiences. As a researcher I can speak, write and understand the Khasi language with ease, and could manage to develop rapport with the villagers I was studying. By knowing the vernacular language I managed to distinguish kinship terminologies that are used in everyday life and what they mean to the residents of the village. For example, villagers in general would address and use the term ‘Bah’ (meaning brother) for adult males and ‘Kong’ (meaning sister) for adult females. Such terms are used as a respectful way of addressing adult members of the society. It is done so because, the Khasi society in general or the village in particular follows common social values and norms. Such terms do not suggest relations by consanguinity. When similar terms are used by siblings in the family the meanings signify real kin relations or consanguine relations. Thus merely knowing a language may not necessarily provide sociological understanding unless one is well-versed with terms and their meaning in the social discourse of any given society.

Another type of challenges that anyone conducting fieldwork encounters is the problem of interpretation. By and large the literature in

social sciences in general or Sociology in particular paid little attention this aspect. There are many cases where vernacular terms have been equated with some English words, or with acceptable terms used in social science literature. If the meanings of vernacular terms are not properly examined and contextually understood, one arrives at wrong conclusions. For example, which some social scientists working on the Khasi society have generally equated the Khasi term 'Bakhraw' with the English term lord or noblemen. It is misinterpretation of the actual meaning given by the Khasi society. When you equate such term with nobleman you are suggesting that the society is either feudal or aristocratic. If you examine closely with a scientific mind the Khasi society does not have any features or characteristics in its social structure that signify feudal or aristocratic social structure. When the Khasi use the term 'Bakhraw', the context is important and significant. This term is used while referring to persons of knowledge and wisdom or to persons who have done outstanding service to society or to persons of high esteem and whose life and works is above any normal persons or to those clan members who have played crucial role in the processes of chieftainship formation. Therefore, equating the term with nobleman or noblemen is sociologically incorrect in the case of the Khasi society. If anyone is studying tribal societies one will come across many terms and how such terms are translated or equated can provide either correct understanding or misinterpretation about the society. Social science research in northeast India requires not only proper application of theory and methodology, but also proper understanding of local languages.

Identifying the factors influencing social change in northeast India and understanding the emerging issues is another set of challenges for research in Sociology. Factors of change could be located in the social structure of the society or caused by external agencies or could be due to both factors. Emerging issues related to development policies and programmes, their impact on different sectors or different sections of the people, the issues concerning crimes, education, welfare, empowerment and democratization, etc., present immense challenges to research scholars and social scientists. Social science disciplines in general and sociology in particular are yet to collect sufficient and comprehensive empirical data on the tribal societies and on the other would also have to deal with emerging issues.

Conclusion

Establishment of different universities in northeast India has promoted the growth of social science disciplines, including Sociology. However, local-centric or state-centric nature of the universities has undermined the idea of university as a centre where students and faculty from diverse social backgrounds engage in learning and research. The quality of social science teaching and research is affected also by facilities and intellectual training that students receive at under-graduate level and the availability of qualified manpower at the university level.

Social science research in general and the discipline of Sociology in particular have made certain progress. By and large, the progress has been in gathering and compounding empirical data on some of the tribal societies. There are many tribal societies which are yet to be scientifically studied. Even in the case of those tribal societies which have been scientifically studied, the data available is sufficient enough to proceed to the next level of theoretisation. The other aspect linked with theoretical studies is having sufficient knowledge of the vernacular languages of the region. Majority of scholars are yet to acquire the knowledge of vernacular languages and discern the meanings of the vernacular terms and expressions. In this sense, the progress of social science research seems to be stymied by several factors.

Lastly, tribal societies of northeast India have been going through various processes of social transformation, giving rise to new issues. Absence of reliable data on these issues affects our understanding of the processes of change and the emerging issues in the region. The future of Sociology depends on how we overcome these challenges.

Thus, one can argue that the status of Sociology today and tomorrow would depend on how it can overcome these challenges.

I am grateful to Prof. Nikhlesh Kumar, Department of Sociology, NEHU, Shillong for the comments and suggestions – A.K. Nongkynrih

References

- Beteille, Andre. 2002a. *Sociology: Essays on Approach and Method*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Beteille, Andre. 2004b. Sociology: Concepts and Institutions, in Veena Das (ed.), *Handbook of Indian Sociology* (41-58). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Chalam, K.S. 2002. Social Science Research: The Social Context. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(39):4080.
- Downs, Fredrick. 1992. *History of Christianity in India* (Vol.V, Part 5). Bangalore: The Church History Association of India.
- Dutta, P.N. 1983. The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills 1824-1950, in B. Datta Ray (ed.). *The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in northeast India* (107-149). New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.
- Indian Council of Social Science Research. 2007. *Restructuring the Indian Council of Social Science Research*. New Delhi:ICSSR.
- Kumar, Nikhlesh. 1999. *Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology in northeast India (1970-1990)*. New Delhi: Regency Publications.
- Nair, M K. Sukumaran. 2002. Social Science Research in Universities. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(39):4079-4080.
- North Eastern Hill University. 2006-2007b. *Thirty – third Annual Report*. Shillong: NEHU Publications.
- North Eastern Hill University. 2007-2008a. *Prospectus*. Shillong: Registrar.
- North Eastern Council. 2006. *Basic Statistics of NER*. Shillong: Evaluating and Monitoring Sector.
- Pakem, B. 1998. Trends in Political Science Studies in North –East India, in J.P.Singh et al (eds.). *Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North –East India (1947-1997)* (1-9). New Delhi: Regency Publications.
- Sharma, Shamita. 1992. Social Science Research in India: A Review. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27(49/50):2642-2646.
- Singh, Yogendra. 1996. Sociology and the Emerging Challenge of Change, *Sociological Bulletin*, 45(1): 1-13.
- Srinivas, M.N. 1994. Sociology in India and Its Future, *Sociological Bulletin*, 43(1):9-19.