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Benoy Kumar Sarkar's Theory of Social Progress: Creative Individualism and Creative Disequilibrium

Introduction

Benoy Kumar Sarkar was an extraordinary scholar, a thinker with boundless energy and vigour. He dominated social sciences for nearly half a century, not just in India but worldwide. He was said to have written more works and words than any other contemporary Indian scholar. He was a polymath and polyglot with a wide range of knowledge who wrote and lectured in Bengali, English, German, French, and Italian. (Beteille 1991:205). Satadru Sen (2015: 3) rightly pointed out that 'Sarkar matters not because his scholarship has stood the test of time: much of it is dated. That, of course, is where its value lies.' However, it is a sad picture of Indian sociology that this stalwart of sociology and his encyclopaedic scholarship have long been nearly erased from the memory of students and scholars of the discipline. In this context, it is most appropriate to quote the words of Radha Kumud Mookerji:

"When he finally returned to India, I got a vivid impression that he brought with him the German analytical mind, the French intellect for comparative study and the American spirit of methodological work with his varied talents and remarkable linguistic equipment. It is a pity that these were not properly utilised by the country and I feel sad to think that in a sense, like most great men of the world, he did not get his dues in life which was somewhat marked by a subdued sense of frustration. But that is of no consequence to his intrinsic greatness which is independent of outer public recognition. I take consolation from the words of truth uttered by the poet Taylor: 'The world knows nothing of its greatest men.'" (Foreword in Mukherjee 1953).

Benoy Kumar Sarkar rejected the concept that there exists an inherent distinction in the principles between the Eastern and Western regions. The idea of humanity is inherently unified. The Western notion that India can only offer profound contemplations of a spiritual kind was

vehemently criticised for its inability to withstand historical analysis or scientific examination. Sarkar contested the idea that the East and West have inherent and irreconcilable differences. He strongly rejected the idea that one civilisation was established on a foundation of profound spirituality while the other was based only on materialism. Being a positivist, he could not see any justification for asserting the presence of any fundamental or inherent distinctions between or among various populations across the globe. By challenging the widely accepted conclusions of Max Muller and Kipling, Sarkar provided a more thorough and meticulous examination of topics previously explored by Sir Brojendra Nath Seal. He challenged the prevailing notion of "biogenetic" races, which posits that the human race is composed of various "nationalisms" or "nationalities," by arguing that any cultural, behavioural, or spiritual disparities observed between Eastern and Western societies primarily stem from historical contingencies and unequal advancements in science and technology across different regions of the world (Frykenberg 2001: 200).

Benoy Kumar Sarkar held the uncommon distinction among India's intellectuals of having established a scholarly tradition that bore his name during his lifetime. The tradition, commonly known as "Sarkarism," represented an unorthodox approach to the social, economic, political, and cultural problems of India for both his adherents and admirers as well as his detractors (Bandyopadhyay 1984: 119). Sarkarism is unquestionably 'a doctrine of energism and progress.' According to Sarkar, man is the world's most powerful transformative force. The dynamic nature of the concepts of *shakti-yoga* (energy), *charaiveti* (progress), and *digvijaya* (world conquest) are one of the fundamental tenets of Sarkar's philosophy (Ghoshal 1939: 5-6).

Sarkar's Theory of Creative Individualism

The challenge before the Sarkar had to provide an alternative discourse to the existing views regarding the static nature of oriental societies over time, the knowledge system of the East had been inferior to the West, the mental and psychological faculties of the West were superior to the East. Therefore, he wanted to sensitise the Indian people to their vibrant secular and positive socio-cultural history. The Indians should know their 'capacity for changing themselves in response to the demands of the exigencies. They did not and would not, he assured, lag behind their western counterparts in this respect' (Bhattacharyya 1990: 317). Benoy Kumar Sarkar rejected all the theories which proposed the difference between the people of the East and the West. According to him, the structure of human personality cannot be comprehended in terms

of exclusive types. He believed that 'irrational, illogical and emotional in men coexist with the 'rational, logical and reasonable' in him. He considered monistic interpretation as unwarrantable in culture, progress or social metabolism. Sarkar stated his theory of progress as:

"In every social pattern of today as of yesterday, - in the rural areas as well as the urban, - it is not the 'haves' but the 'haves-nots' who create culture or civilisation, i.e., the 'as-ifs,' fictions, ideals in progress. The 'haves' represent the status quo, the 'haves-nots' embody the creative disequilibrium that challenges the status quo. In the 'haves' the world sees the fatigue of age and the inertia of tradition. The 'haves-nots,' on the contrary, exhibit the creativities of youth and the dynamics of adventure.... It is the triumph of the have-nots over the haves that constitutes progress in every region or race as well as in every epoch." (Sarkar 1941: 647 as cited in Sinha 2017: 325).

Sarkar claimed that human personality is constituted of a complex interaction between intuition and intellect. Sarkar, thus accepted the pluralistic make-up of the mind or individual personality and claimed that, "normal mental *Gestalt* as the complex of more than one category, instinct, intuition, intellect, reason, logic, *Wesenwille*, *Kurwille*, emotion, passion, unreason, irrationality, pre-logic, pre-religion, and what not functioning simultaneously" (Sarkar 1941: 25). According to Sarkar, in case human urges or instincts are to be considered as primary elements of the psychic *Gestalt* then it can only be understood as a complex of four different urges or instincts. These are *Kama* (sex), *Kanchana* (wealth), *Kirti* (domination), *Karma* (creativity). These four instincts, ambitions, urges or drives lead to four different spheres of creation. *Kama* leads to family; *kanchana* instincts are economic activities and institutions; *kirti* urges leads to domination, politics, power, law and state; and *karma* instinct is responsible for the arts, crafts, inventions, discoveries, philosophies etc. Sarkar thus presented a pluralistic make-up of the human personality and proposed the following equation based on instincts or urges (ibid.: 80-81):

Instinct-complex

$$= Kama \text{ (sex)}^x \times Kanchana \text{ (wealth)}^y \times Kirti \text{ (domination)}^z \times Karma \text{ (creativity)}^w.$$

Benoy Kumar Sarkar further stated that, however, human reactions and responses are determined by all four. It should not be implied that an individual is by instinct or nature co-operative or friendly. Both associative and dissociative social processes mark human relations. As Sarkar wrote (ibid.: 81):

"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. Competition is not less a feature of inter human relations than co-operation. Peace is not

more normal or natural an action with man than war or organised violence. The processes that connect man with man are antipathy no less than sympathy. It would be misleading to establish any one as the dominant or the exclusive process in social relations or society building.”

He believed in the fundamental unity of humanity, which derived from man's struggling nature. According to Sarkar, Man's essence is creativity; by nature, he is the re-maker of the world. Man has always had an insatiable need for fire, energy, and life, and according to Sarkar this was the *Shakti-yoga* or energistic cult of man. This *energism* in man makes him a fighter against all sorts of social hindrances (Bandyopadhyay 1984:12). Sarkar (1938:15) wrote:

“There is thus no mystical absoluteness or inalienability to the limits of a state. The ‘scientific frontiers’ may advance or recede with every generation according to the dynamics of inter-social existence. The only architect of the world’s historical geography from epoch to epoch is the *shakti-yoga* or energism of man.”

Sarkar believed that every Indian was a fighter against some social obscurantism, and ‘in such fight lies the emancipation of his soul. These subversions constitute his perpetual *sadhana*. Verily *Shakti*, energy or force, is the very deity of India’s men and women’ (Sarkar 1939: 302). Sarkar (ibid.: 302), further wrote:

“And this energism (*Shakti-yoga*) is but normal with the genius of the people. For, what else is Indian culture but successful consummation of the Promethean strife, - from epoch to epoch? And of this, as the folk-mind learns it from Bhartrihari’s (c 800) *Niti-shataka* (Century of Verses on Morals, stanza 80) the most typical land mark is bodied forth in the cosmic struggle of the gods for the acquisition of nectar, *amrita* (immortality or deathlessness).”

The notion of creative individualism and the dynamic personality of man is a vital aspect of Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s social theory. He believed manhood comprised dynamism, power and creativity (Sarkar 1942:239). According to him, “human psyche or rather personality is essentially a dynamic entity, ever on the go; and by nature, it is a differentiating organism, - carrying within itself the mechanism of a “transformer”” (Sarkar 1905:2). Sarkar claimed that the creative individual’s dare-devil experiments are responsible for the social transformation. This phenomenon could not be explained either by the monistic economic determinism of Karl Marx or by the omnipotent ‘society-cult’ of Durkheim. As Sarkar (1941:127) wrote:

“The individual is not perpetually at the mercy of the economic forces as the Marxist believe. He can control them, combat them, influence them and transcend them too. The relation is not one-sided. Similarly, the individual cannot be postulated to be invariably dominated by the society, as Durkheim suggests in *Regles de la me'mode sociologique* (1904) and *Formes*

elementaries de la vie religieuse (1912). The society itself can be moulded, re-shaped, transformed by the individual. There is a mutual determinism between the two. The creativity of the individual, -his creative will and intelligence, -is a force like other forces.”

Benoy Kumar Sarkar was influenced by the categories of Kantian ‘moral person’, Espinas *l’impulsion vitale* and Bergson’s *elan vital* for describing his ‘creative individual’s liberty of choice and freedom of action, which is independent of society, the environment, the so-called objective circumstances’ (ibid.:128). According to Sarkar the dignity and importance of the creative individual are rightly stressed by Spranger’s doctrine of the “inner powers of the individual, William Hocking’s “incompressible individual”, and Haushofer’s rejection of the “mechanical subjection of the will to the forces of space” (ibid.:129-130). Various factors have shaped an individual’s personality. It cannot be understood in terms of exclusive types, and rather, it is a ‘mixture of the rational and the irrational, the logical and the illogical is an integral part of the human psyche. Herein is to be found the eternal duplicity of man, as Pascal maintained’ (as cited in Sinha 2017:329). Human relations are shaped by the associative and dissociative social processes, which led to plurality in human personality. Sarkar states:

“The human psyche is the field for the tug of war between the Devil and the Divinity. The *dvandas* or conflicts constitute the eternal make-up of the mental and moral personality. The role of the irrational is no less constructive than that of reason. In Pareto one may, therefore, easily discover the dictum of Manu who observed that *durlabho hi suchirnarah* (rare is the man that is good by nature)” (1942: 28-29).

In the eyes of Sarkar, the role of creative individualism might be considered the primary component in developing socialism in India. In any case, it is imperative to acknowledge and consider the creative capacities in bringing about social transformation and social progress in society. Sarkar has an increased belief in the possibility of the function of charismatic individuals in triggering 'creative disequilibrium'. He discusses the concept of "world conquerors" or *avatars* who propagate beliefs across different societies. According to him, only persons of exceptional calibre, such as Buddha, Chaitanya, Christ, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, and Gandhi, can exert influence over historical forces, thereby assuming an active role in shaping historical imbalances rather than being just recipients of their consequences (Chatterji 2007: 124). Therefore, such creative individuals filled with *shakti-yoga* represent civilisational expansiveness and stand for the contradictions in their societies (ibid.: 123).

Sarkar's Theory of Creative Disequilibrium

Benoy Kumar Sarkar argued that conflict between good and evil is continuous, and it is impossible to create a society free from all evils because ‘neither morality nor spirituality can flourish without some doses of evil to be counteracted and overpowered by man’s creative intelligence and will. But it is in these doses of “the brute, the ape and the tiger” that are to be found the permanent possibilities of progress. No evil, no morality. No evil, no progress’ (Sarkar 1941: 498). He stated that perfection is not the destiny of man and “it is not possible to believe that a day will come when man will be without a touch of evil.” (ibid.: 516). He further claimed that evil is essentially creative because it leads to conflict in society, and there is disequilibrium in society, resulting in the formation of a new society. This process of stability and conflict is an ongoing process that is, by nature, creative. Sarkar has named this process a state of ‘creative disequilibrium’, which means a state of disequilibrium that is inherently progressive.

At each stage, advancement necessitates a deliberate and reflective discernment between moral and immoral actions and between *dharma* and *adharma*. Progress as a dialectical process is not merely a mechanical manipulation. Individuals with creative aptitude use cognitive abilities as the spiritual substance or *shakti-yoga* underlying all forms of movement, dynamism, transformations, and metabolic processes. The individual can be regarded as a conscientious moral agent. The individual's responsibility and ethical obligations encompass not only the establishment of the *social contract* but also the ability to violate it when necessary. Consequently, indeterminateness provides an environment where individuals can exercise their creativity and freedom (Sarkar 1941: 540-41).

Sarkar's concept of creative disequilibrium was an essential and original contribution to the theory of social change and progress. He assumed a different position from Bankimchandra, Sorokin, Spengler, Marx and Hegel. For him, disequilibrium in the social system is creative and constructive, moving humanity towards an improved and more perfect society and becoming the basis for social change (Sinha 2017: 324). The theory of progress proposed by Sarkar allows for changes in literary or artistic style and economic, political, and religious forms. In this process of transformation, the old style or form disappears not only with undesirable or evil elements but also with some good (*shiva*), beautiful (*sundara*), and true (*satya*) elements. Likewise, the arrival of the new is a mixed package. With positive aspects in

the new style or form, undesirable elements also emerge (Bhattacharyya 1990: 418). In the words of Benoy Kumar Sarkar (ibid.: vi-vii):

“In regard to progress it has been the tendency among thinkers to have faith in a goal. This goal is almost universally taken to be the overthrow of evil by good or the triumph of *dharma* over *adharma*. In my view a definite goalfulness cannot be maintained as the nature of human remakings or societal transformations. Nor can a final annihilation of evil or *adharma* be demonstrated to be in the nature of social evolution or human destiny. I have therefore argued as much against the Hindu *Gita* and *Upanishads* theories of progress as against the western theories from Condorcet, Hegel, Marx and Comte to Lenin, Spengler, Hobhouse and Sorokin.”

Benoy Kumar Sarkar was influenced by the Hegelian dialectics of thesis and anti-thesis as methodological tools while constructing his theory of social progress with the help of the concept of creative disequilibrium. He believed ‘in the doctrine of creative disequilibrium synthesis is more apparent than real’ and ‘the two orders of antithetic phenomena go on eternally from phase to phase’ (Sarkar 1941: 522). He presented the dialectic of creative disequilibrium in the form of the following formula (ibid.: 523):

1. A¹, Not-A¹ -> 2. A², Not-A² -> 3. A³, Not-A³ -> 4. A⁴, Not- A⁴ ->.

In this formula, ‘A’ denotes thesis and ‘Not-A’ indicates anti-thesis, and according to Sarkar the process of thesis and anti-thesis conflict is ceaseless and passes on into a new conflict. He stated further that “in the world-evolution of creative disequilibrium A and Not-A are eternal. Both simply change their forms (implying also substances and contents) or degrees as A¹, A².....Aⁿ and Not-A¹.....Not-Aⁿ.” (Sarkar 1941: 523-524). Therefore, progress is eternally evolving and finality-less. He firmly believed in the conscious activities of creative individuals with *shakti-yoga* in hastening the process of social progress. Sarkar (1941: 525) clearly stated when he argued that:

“Progress consists in the fact that 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 as a result of this conflict that the next stage makes its appearance. There is the play of the creative intelligence and will of man at every stage. It is the operation of this intelligence and will that render each stage of operations moral or spiritual. Hence the subsequent stage is to be taken as representing a progress. But that stage in any case is but the theatre, again, of a fresh conflict between good

and evil. Under these circumstances it is doubtful if one would like to call this series of conflicts an improvement-dynamics. But progress cannot imply anything else. It is all the time a dynamic series of good-evil complexes.”

Sarkar believed that human is capable of improvement but not capable of perfection. Human life is always full of problems and shortcomings, but due to creative intelligence and will, they always overcome all the obstacles in life. Each moment and every stage of human life is full of conflict. Thus, ‘the man is the theatre of struggles between the polarities, *asat* (unreality) and *sat* (reality), *tamas* (darkness) and *jyoti* (light), *mrityu* (death) and *amrita* (immortality), *avidya* (ignorance) and *vidya* (knowledge)’ (Sarkar 1941). This struggle or fight against dilemma is eternal in human history and an ongoing process that never ends. Humans can progress only through struggles because struggles challenge old ideals and institutions and pave the way for social transformation. Therefore, according to Sarkar, ‘progress is ultimately nothing but creative disequilibrium. It is a condition of perpetual unrest and eternal conflicts between what is and what is not. No *dvanda* (conflict), no progress’ (Sarkar 1941: 522). Humans, historically, aspired for something desirable and important and the struggle to achieve it led to creative disequilibrium. Thus, the solution that emerged from creative disequilibrium was not the ideally best. Still, it was the best under the circumstances, and the final solution could never be achieved. The process of creative disequilibrium would go on and on (ibid.: 534) and Sarkar further stated that, ‘creative disequilibrium has been constantly functioning in order to ascertain the next higher amalgams of good and evil in the socio-economic and economico-political pattern’ (ibid.: 536). Progress, in terms of Sarkar, does not follow a unilinear path from bad to good or undeveloped to developed stage. There is a plurality in the forms of development. There could be as many development models as races, regions and countries worldwide. Therefore, the functioning of creative disequilibrium is essential to achieve the next higher stage in the progress of society. In Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s (ibid.: 536-537) own words:

“It is also postulated that from time to time the very standard of evaluation and judgement changes. There is no fixity or finality as to what is to be called *dharma*, good, just, true, reasonable, moral or spiritual. Similarly, the very definition of *adharma*, evil, unjust, untrue, unreasonable, criminal, unspiritual etc. is taken for granted as changing with the intermental processes and interhuman relations. It is the eternal privilege of creative, inventive or world-remaking human intelligence to establish new standards of moral and spiritual judgement, new measures of social justice, rational good, human welfare and world-progress. Indeterminateness, insecurity and

uncertainty, as Dewey might say, in the standard as well as the ideal, - and neither the divine or rational freedom of Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800) nor the harmony, justice and rational good of Hobhouse, - is the objective reward of man's *digvijaya* (world-conquest) from one socio-culture adventure to another socio-cultural adventure."

Therefore, Sarkar believed there was no fixed goal or destination before human beings. Human beings, based on their human intelligence, pragmatically select what is desirable and make a constant and continuous struggle towards this desirable. This ongoing struggle against the existing situation constitutes the progress of the moment. These desirable goals are relative because they may change from situation to situation. At one moment the desirable goal can be *laissez-faire*; at the next moment, it can be socialism. The course of human destiny does not have a goal-directed quality, nor does it have a constant, continuous, or evolving nature. This non-fixity and ever-changing desirable goals serve specific purposes for Benoy Kumar Sarkar. Primarily, it assisted him in debunking the belief that the creation of culture and civilisation is the product of any particular race and demonstrated the boundless potential for advancement for all humanity.

Further, it provided a multifaceted approach towards progress. It suggests that any single country or culture cannot universally determine the measurement of progress but rather should be tailored to the specific context of each country or culture. Hence, the criterion of progress should be different for the different regions. The objective conditions and subjective capability of the people concerned determine it. Consequently, the progress criterion should be distinct for each region, as it is contingent upon both the objective circumstances and subjective capacity of the people involved (Bandyopadhyay 1984: 19).

Conclusion

Benoy Kumar Sarkar's conceptualisation of the 'creative individualism' notion of 'creative disequilibrium' constituted a novel and distinctive contribution to scholarly discussions about the origins of historical transformation and the trajectory of human advancement. While Sarkar recognised the influence of historical events on future outcomes, they also understood the potential for external forces to shape history independently of past events and processes. This perspective underscores the significance of chance, accidents, and unforeseeable circumstances in determining historical developments (Sinha 2017: 324). Thus, progress varies across regions and depends on people's objective situations and subjective abilities. It is a never-ending process, and the conflict between good and evil has created disequilibrium. According to

Sarkar, progress is no longer a series of rational-irrational, *dharma-adharma*, or good-evil complexes that inherently follow a sequence. The younger generation resembles the creative energism o and the embodiment of creative disequilibrium has the potential to reshape and remake humanity. Sarkar preferred the creative individuals to serve as an agent of creative disequilibrium rather than being solely regarded as a holder of rights or a vulnerable entity requiring protection. Sarkar's extensive and comprehensive work, together with his unconventional and groundbreaking ideas, has been overlooked by successive generations of sociologists in India, and it is the appropriate time to recognise his unconventional and encyclopaedic contribution to the discipline of sociology and social sciences.

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