



# **THE PLURAL SOCIAL SPHERE**

**INSIGHTS FROM CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY**

Edited by

Sakarama Somayaji, Ganesha Somayaji  
and Joanna P. Coelho



# The Plural Social Sphere

This book reiterates pluralism as the basic feature of the Indian social sphere. It highlights challenges to the continuity of the plural fabric of India's society and culture. Acknowledging that socio-political concerns on women's issues do not always find adequate representation in social science texts, the book explores issues and policies related to gender. It locates the roots of feminist fundamentalism, studies the reactions to it, and brings forth the demands relating to new agendas and strategies for feminism. The authors also present empirical studies on issues faced by minority communities in India.

An important contribution, this book will be of interest to scholars and researchers of sociology, political sociology, gender studies, exclusion studies, South Asian studies, Affirmative action, and political science.

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Sakarama Somayaji, Ganesha Somayaji and  
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To Professor T. K. Oommen



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# Preface

Among the social scientists who spent their intellectual life studying the plural Indian social sphere for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Professor T. K. Oommen stands apart due to his pioneering contributions to such varied areas as social movement, the sociology of education, and political sociology. His erudite, intellectual demeanour and pluralistic study of the Indian social sphere have been the source of inspiration to his students and admirers. As a token of our gratitude to the now-octogenarian Professor Oommen we planned a celebratory volume and invited select scholars who are familiar with his intellectual career and works. After receiving an astounding response we decided on two volumes which we hope will enhance the nuanced study of the Indian social sphere and be a fitting tribute to Professor Oommen. When Sakarama approached him with our plan, Professor Oommen blessed us with his consent for which we are indebted to him.

We are presenting this book entitled *The Plural Social Sphere: Insights from Contemporary Indian Society*. We take this opportunity to thank the anonymous referees whose suggestions have been invaluable in editing this volume. Our thanks are due to all the contributors who have been waiting with patience throughout the pandemic. We thank the Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group for accepting the responsibility of publishing and bearing with our inordinate delay in submission of the manuscript.

Sakarama Somayaji  
Ganesha Somayaji  
Joanna P. Coelho



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# Introduction

One of the hallmarks of modernity, at least for Europe, was a homogeneous nation-state. Cultural homogeneity has been inextricably linked with the nation state. Modernity saw the transition of political governance from empires to nation states. The cultural plurality and fluidity of empires gave way to a more permanent and well-defined state where a congruency between polity and culture was sought. While Western countries today pride themselves on being culturally homogenous, the homogeneity was contrived and was arrived at after doing away with the inherent heterogeneity of their societies. France for the French, Germany for the Germans – the model of one nation one state was the essence of geopolitical formations in Europe. Heterogeneity, and by extension pluralism, was associated with less developed third world countries. One of the earliest and most prominent theorists of a plural society was Furnivall (1948). As an economist working in British Burma, Furnivall drew attention to the well-known fact that in certain countries different sections of the population live side by side and mix, but do not combine (Furnivall, 1948). He called such societies plural and argued that they were a distinctive form with a “characteristic political and economic constitution” (Furnivall, 1942). The newly independent territories of Asia and Africa imagined and constructed their polities keeping the European idea of one nation, one state as the ideal. Given their burgeoning plurality, this was impossible to sustain, and post-colonial states like India embraced their heterogeneity. “Unity in diversity” was the mantra by which the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru, sought to consolidate the newly formed plural nation state.

With the rise of the assertive hegemony of majoritarian polity in various parts of the world, there is now a push, often coercive, towards homogeneity. Majoritarian ideology in India firmly believes that pluralism is detrimental to the unity of the nation state. This view is shared by one of the most prominent theorists of nation and nation state, Ernst Gellner. For him, cultural homogeneity is integral into the very substance of the nation state. To Gellner (1983/2006, p. 44), homogeneity is not an ideology or a primordial collective sentiment being awakened to “fulfil its duties”, but an objective need for the benefit of progress and growth. It is only through homogeneity that a society can become modern and advanced. For Gellner (1983) post industrialisation, which heralds the rise of the nation state, a polity of multiple local cultures will be



replaced by a culturally unitary one. Gellner's prediction, however, has not come to pass. Even in Europe, this neat, if not artificial, congruence of culture, polity, and territory could not sustain itself beyond the mid 20th century. With the large scale, often forced, migration following the Second World War and the predominantly voluntary migration post globalisation, even the most homogenous nation states have today become plural.

Despite myriad challenges, pluralism as an ideology is still in currency. In India for instance, the last quarter of the 20th century saw the rise of Hindu majoritarian ideology. Essentially anti-pluralist, Hindu nationalism got a tremendous boost after the rise of the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014. The charismatic leadership of Narendra Modi, coupled with the divisive ideology of the hard-line version of Hindu nationalism that has percolated into various institutions of the nation state, has led to clashes with civil society wanting to uphold India's pluralism. Pluralism, after all, has been the glue that binds the disparate nation state. When India gained freedom from British rule in 1947, there were a number of naysayers to the idea of India. Limited by a narrow vision of cultural homogeneity of Western nation states which saw a coterminality between the nation and the state, Western oriented scholars, couldn't fathom how India, with its burgeoning diversities, could ever manage the challenges from its disparate parts. The mantra of unity in diversity became the pluralistic model on which the present and future of the nation state was sought to be built. Especially given the hostilities of Partition, an acceptance of a plurality of religion and culture wasn't a given. While state formation in a number of post-colonial states suppressed diversity in a bid to strengthen the unity of the new nation state, India consciously vowed to hold on to pluralism as a policy of the nascent nation state. The fact is that pluralism is not a foreign ideology for the Indian subcontinent. In many post-colonial states, the response has been to suppress difference in the name of unity, however an attempt was made in India to conceive of the nation. Long before India existed as a modern state, various forms of state power in the subcontinent, including empires and regional kingdoms, favoured the accommodation of societal diversity. Indian history shows that its ancient heritage is deeply rational and diverse. Diversity and plurality can be found in the existence of various religions. The most well-known religions of the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism originated in India while other religions Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism coming from outside have grown and still remain in India after nearly 2,000 years.

Furnivall defined plural society as a society arising as the result of the extension of commerce and trade, so that a market situation of a new type emerges in which those who participate do not share common values, customs, and social institutions, but live for other than economic activities, apart from one another in separate groups (Furnivall, 1942). Oommen (2001) further elaborated on Furnivall's conceptualisations. He opines that there should be a transition from plural society to pluralism. For Oommen pluralism could be conceptualised as "the dignified coexistence of different socio-cultural segments as equals in the polity" (Oommen, 2001). In Oommen's (2001) view heterogeneity is a social fact and pluralism is a value orientation to that social fact.

While continuity of the plural fabric of society and culture of the Indian sub-continent is experiencing formidable challenges today, the celebration of the ideals upheld by pluralism is articulated in this volume which is a tribute to T. K. Oommen. In the chapters organised around three parts, ideas on the aspects of plural Indian social sphere have been brought together. Part One elaborates on the disciplinary explorations with reference to the plural social sphere. The volume opens with a chapter by Stig Toft Madsen, entitled “Radha Kamal Mukerjee: Social Ecology and the Malthusian Legacy”. Madsen undertakes a comparative review of a book that Radhakamal Mukerjee published in 1946 entitled *Races, Lands and Food: A Program for World Subsistence* and Oommen’s Fifth Radhakamal Mukerjee Memorial Lecture published in *Sociological Bulletin* in 2015 under the title “Radhakamal Mukerjee on Social Ecology: Filling Up Some Blanks”.

In Chapter 2 Khurshed deliberates on the sociologists’ dilemma on whether to pursue local or global sociology. Sociologists from South Asia have to face twin demands of interpretation of local issues while they also feel pressure to follow global sociology. Some expect that sociologists must develop grand theories while others feel that they must produce something for the local people to use to understand their everyday problems. In Alam’s view Oommen, former president of the International Sociological Association and a noted Indian sociologist, in his writings tried to highlight this issue and attempted to suggest a solution.

In Chapter 3 entitled, “Women and Local Knowledge System: Understanding inter-linkages in the process of knowledge construction”, Sunita Dhall opines that the systematic study of indigenous knowledge and resource management as subsistence strategies are not only significant for the livelihood of the Adivasi and local communities, but also it has the potential to contribute towards effective resource management in the areas of agriculture, health-care, and livestock management. She elucidates how the dissemination of Indigenous Knowledge occurs in the economic-ecological framework of the agricultural workers. The adoption of modern knowledge is facilitated within the socio-economic construct.

Sanjay Roy in Chapter 4 “The Ontological and Aesthetic Crises” fears that the combination of neo-liberalism and right-wing nationalism in the present-day world threatens the livelihood of a large majority of the population in one way or another, destabilising their livelihood rights, disenfranchising them, constricting their freedom, and imprisoning their creative faculty in its efforts to enforce a homogenous culture. He asserts that the prime challenge before the citizens in these countries, therefore, is to defend individual freedom and agency and the right to collective resistance, making use of their critical faculty.

M. V. Nadkarni, in Chapter 5 entitled “Ethical Dilemmas in Social and Economic Policies”, problematises the issue of ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma is complex; it is essentially a problem of choice in the face of a conflict between one set of ethical values and another. This chapter discusses a few ethical dilemmas facing social sciences, especially with reference to economics.

Sushmita Dasgupta in Chapter 6 “Developing a Method for the Study of Amitabh Bachchan”, writes that in the study of the media, perhaps because we do not have the academic instruments to construct it as an independent conceptual

category, we flout yet another major rule of sociology which is to regard as normative those facts which should be studied as positive. She argues that from the days of myths and stories of origin, the advent of media and social media must be seen in the sociological context of increasing specialisation, individuation, rationalisation, and the intensification of the organic solidarity.

In Chapter 7 Dr Prakas Dessai reiterates that philosophical foundations are indispensable for research in the study of social, economic, and political phenomena. The chapter mainly attempts to locate social science research in India with regard to its orientation to socio-political issues. The chapter argues that democratisation of our individual psyche and societal psyche can be an agency in making our social research more inclusive and humane.

Acknowledging that socio political concerns pertaining to women's issues do not always find adequate representation in social science texts, Part Two of the book is devoted exclusively to exploring issues and policies related to gender. In Chapter 8 entitled "Looking beyond Feminism: The Dynamics Behind and the Demands Ahead", Navaneeta Rath makes an attempt to locate the roots of feminist fundamentalism and the reaction to that, and raises demands relating to new agendas and strategies for feminism. While the first section historicises feminism; section two locates the possible lacunae; section three urges the need to re-examine and even look beyond feminism co-opting new agendas and developing new strategies; and the fourth section locates how looking beyond feminism has brought transformation and success to India and what the resulting demands are.

In Chapter 9 Tapan Mohanty examines the impact of law, social transformation, and the consequently changing contours of human interaction in relatively deprived and marginalised sections of a hierarchical and highly differentiated tribal society. Freedom, liberty, and autonomy enjoyed by tribal women which was given to them by the Constitution of India have come under serious threat from many quarters. For example, the developmental model adopted by the state has not only alienated them from their land, water, and forest but also displaced them from their homeland and means of sustenance. The resultant "anomie" – a by-product of push and pull factors – has unleashed untold misery for them. The trauma of tribal girls in hostels and shelter homes is rarely called out as the trafficking across the country that it is. Poverty, destitution, and displacement have driven tribal groups to a hapless situation and women become the easy target of exploitation and suffering of this tragedy.

One of the themes of Chapter 10 entitled "The Changing Position of Women in STEM: The Context of Indian Society and State" by Namrata Gupta is the shifting contours of women's education in STEM with the changing socio-cultural context. The change and continuity in patriarchal notions of women's centrality in the domestic domain, universality of marriage, age hypergamy in marriage, and significance of women's education in the Indian patriarchal structure need to be examined. One of the questions asked here is: Does women's education in STEM imply greater gender equality in society?

In Chapter 11 Baharul Islam Laskar acknowledges that there are various patterns in the growth rate of the elderly population across nations and regions. The

issues and challenges posed by the growth of this section of the population are also diverse, mainly due to multiple socio-cultural, economic, and political factors at work, both on them and on the nation. Therefore, the chapter analyses the elderly and their issues which need to be looked at from global and local perspectives.

Part Three of the book presents empirical studies on those who occupy the margins in society. In Chapter 12 entitled “Food Security and Markets: Understanding the Protests over India’s Changing Social Contract with Farmers”, Sukhpal Singh decodes the set of three legislations, collectively called the “Farm Laws” in the popular narrative. The chapter points out the inherent weaknesses in the arguments behind the laws, and the inconsistencies and redundancies between the intent and the legal provisions. He opines that although there is a need to revisit existing laws, it would be unwise to proceed with haste and, in effect, dismantle systems that provide safeguards, for instance, against food inflation and food insecurity. He suggests that the way out of this impasse would be to chart out policies that are consistent with India’s federal framework and be consultative in nature.

Anirban Banerjee in Chapter 13 entitled “Human Rights Violation in India” has focused on human rights violations by the Indian state that have taken place since 2014. He has limited himself to the study of five areas: the violation of the right to life; the violation of the right to freedom; the violation of the right to nationality; the violation of the right to marriage; and the violation of the right to freedom of speech and expression.

The chapter entitled “Educational Situation of Muslims in India: A Study of Some Villages in Malda District of West Bengal” by Moinuddin is based on primary data and supported by ethnographic observation from six villages of the Malda district in the state of West Bengal, India. The chapter argues that educational disadvantage varies across the country. In some places, Muslims are not in as poor condition as we generally perceive. This chapter also tries to discuss the importance of village studies in sociology which is declining in contemporary sociological enquiries. It also attempts to explore the educational situation in the district across different communities. It is evident from this study that rural Muslims are lagging behind the Hindus. The chapter suggests that the increasing trend of higher participation in primary level education discontinues in the secondary level as a result of a higher rate of dropout.

Annappurna Devi Pandey in Chapter 15 “The Fabric of Life on the Edge: The Endangered Handloom Weavers of Odisha” looks into the ethical challenges posed by the state and corporate industries. She analyses the weavers’ struggles due to the monopoly of the corporate industries in marketing cotton and silk thread, and the state supporting the corporate sector rather than the craftsmen in manufacturing the handloom saris. The chapter focuses on the ethics on the part of the corporate sector and the state to ensure progress and prosperity of the craftspeople in promoting handicrafts and handlooms. This chapter is based on ethnographic insights.

All 15 chapters elaborated upon in this book are a step towards exploring the plural social sphere in India.

# T. K. Oommen: Reminiscences of a Student

I deem it as my privilege to fondly recollect and objectify my impression of Tharailath Koshiy Oommen (referred to by his students as T.K. Sir) and narrate how he continues to be my source of intellectual inspiration ever since I became his MPhil student at Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) in 1986 in Sociology at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems after obtaining my graduate and post-graduate education from Mangalore university, which was a mofussil and nascent university at the time . Both the college where I studied for my BA and the university where I studied for my MA started in 1980. I was in the first cohort of students of Saint Mary's Syrian College, Brahmavara, Udupi and the third cohort of students of the Department of Sociology of Mangalore University where I was told about JNU and T. K. Sir by my teacher G. K. Karanth who had completed his PhD under his guidance.

I am not venturing to present here a biography of T. K. Sir, because two works on his life and intellectual accomplishments critically documented by himself have been published and well received (Oommen, 2017, 2022). Oommen's non-conformist and independent intellectual dispensation are evident in the style in which he writes about himself in both these books. His concept-building and theorising acumen are evident in all his writings, including the ones which contain his ideas on himself. I will quote the opening paragraph of the preface to his 2018 book which outlines the circumstances that made him a sociologist:

*Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs* is not a biography but narratives about the vicissitudes of an academic; it is conceived as a different literary genre; it is a workography. Born and brought up in Kerala the author became a sociologist thanks to a natural calamity. He became a full professor at a young age at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he faced stigmatization because he was perceived as a non-leftist.

(Oommen, 2017)

T. K. Sir's style of walking with an umbrella to the Centre not only for protection against the rain but also against the sun during the summer is a distinct one. At a distance one could clearly make out that T. K. Sir was on his way to class. He was very punctual and strict. While conducting the classes, he was

always thorough and well-prepared. No one could afford to be late to his class. His acceptance of pluralism as his guiding principle was evident in the opinions he expressed in class. He did not impose his ideas on his students and there was always a free and fair atmosphere in his classes. Students could ask any questions related to the subject without any hesitation, which was why most lectures had about 60 students. Although there were only about 20 sociology students, others attended from different social sciences spheres, such as political science, economics, and even some from the school of languages and life sciences. His classes were simply of a different “class” altogether. Whether they were about social science research methodology and/or Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, a class on sociological thought, they were simply superb. I don’t think I will ever forget these lectures in my lifetime. They were extraordinary. I distinctly remember when our freshers welcome programme was held, he came and sat with all of us and his colleagues in our Centre’s canteen. When students asked what he wanted to drink he just gave us a “thumbs up” indicating that he would like a drink.

He didn’t interfere in what his students were doing outside the classroom. When correcting our answer scripts, assignments and dissertations, his standards of evaluation were very high. He used to write his comments categorically with red ink which used to make us think and improve.

A thorough gentleman, he was very conscious about his duties. Once I took some bills of purchased books to get his signature under the UGC contingency grant and he not only cross-checked physically all the copies of the books mentioned in the claim but he also commented about one book saying: “This book will not come under reference books and is hence not eligible for the contingency grant.” I could not get reimbursed for that book.

After completion of my MPhil, I became actively engaged in students politics on campus. He never asked about what I am doing, instead telling me only one thing was important, and that was to work on my PhD regularly. He was not only a very efficient and effective teacher but also a well-wisher. Whenever I met him, he never failed to ask about the well-being of my family back at home with all genuineness and sincerity. His sense of humour is unparalleled in the academic field. He used to address trainees, students, and his colleagues or the audiences in the seminars with great wit. Later, when I started organising social science research methodology courses as part of my assignments in the Council for Social Development, I used to invite him. It was always a pleasure to listen to him. He was kind enough to come and address the students in spite of his demanding schedule. With his hand-written research cards, black and white transparencies, and a typical Oommen style of presentation, his examples were lively and lovely too. He never minced words and he had the guts and stature to phrase his subject in a direct manner. He always used to say, “I have come here to deliver this lecture because of my student Sakarama and not for anything else.” That is the way he used to encourage and appreciate his students. His way of pronouncing his own name itself is unique. He wanted everyone to correctly spell and pronounce his name. He was very particular about it.

I was fortunate to be part of the World Congress of Sociology held at Ashoka Hotel, New Delhi in 1985. T. K. Sir was the Secretary General of the Conference, and we, all students of that cohort, were lucky to be part of the core committee. I became a Life Members of the Indian Sociological Society during that time.

T. K. Sir's testimonials are really a treasure to preserve. He used to write very simple, short but most effective recommendation letters for his students. These testimonials have carried a lot of weight and his students have now established themselves across the globe. Until 2012, he used to persuade me to submit my thesis. He even suggested revisions of my old field work data and guided me to some current faculty members of the Centre to go and work under. I always had a respectful fear of him. I used to feel guilty also for not being able to submit my PhD thesis until now, despite being lucky enough to work under such an outstanding sociologist of our times. Certainly, I alone am responsible for not completing my doctoral studies. But the intellectual and personal turn my life took at JNU under the inspirational guidance of T. K. Sir is my life-long treasure. Whenever I used to visit and present the books edited by me to him, I could see the pleasure and happiness on his face. He always used to tell me, "You are one among those categories of my students who had every quality to submit their PhD thesis but did not do it". T. K. Sir has been a very affectionate teacher for me and in my opinion has always been a votary of welfare-based inclusive society. This volume is aimed at celebrating the pluralistic ideals conceived and vociferously advocated by T. K. Sir.

## References

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Part I

**The Plural Social Sphere:  
Disciplinary Explorations**





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# 1 Radhakamal Mukerjee<sup>1</sup>

## Social Ecology and the Malthusian Legacy

*Stig Toft Madsen*

### Introduction

My knowledge of Professor T. K. Oommen works may be less than that of others, who have come together to congratulate him by way of this publication. However, as a student of sociology in Meerut University in the mid-1970s, I read his book about the Bhoodan Gramdan movement not long after it was published (Oommen, 1937). Much later, we both contributed to an anthology on *Social Movements in Development* that was the result of a conference organised by Staffan Lindberg and Árni Sverrisson at the University of Lund in Sweden in 1993 (Oommen, 1997; Madsen, 1997). In 1994, Professor Oommen was the President of the XIIIth World Congress of Sociology held in Bielefeld, Germany. I benefitted from several events at this mammoth congress, which spoke to his organising capabilities as well as to his ability to handle unforeseen events as recounted in his autobiography (Oommen, 2018, p. 90). More recently, I have had the opportunity to read the report of the High-Level Committee on the social, economic, and educational status of Muslims in India, which was co-authored by Prof. Oommen (Oommen, 2018, p. 214). I think that many would agree that the Rajinder Sachar Committee Report published in 2006 is one of the most substantive, yet lucid, policy-papers produced in contemporary India (Ashraf, 2018).

Notwithstanding Oommen's interest in social movements, minorities, and inequality, which he shares with many others, this chapter will deal with a topic that is peripheral to most contemporary sociologists of India, i.e., the sociology of Radhakamal Mukerjee. More precisely, I will discuss a book that Mukerjee published in 1946 entitled *Races, Lands and Food: A Program for World Subsistence*. I will discuss this book with reference, *inter alia*, to T. K. Oommen's Fifth Radhakamal Mukerjee Memorial Lecture published in *Sociological Bulletin* in 2015 under the title "Radhakamal Mukerjee on Social Ecology: Filling Up Some Blanks". In Oommen's opinion, Radhakamal Mukerjee (1889–1968) was "the most prolific and versatile sociologist of India" (Oommen, 2015, p. 15). However, Oommen also pointed out "blanks" in Mukerjee's writings as well as in the reception of his writing among contemporary sociologists. My aim will be to fill in some more of these blanks. To this end, I will draw on Alison Bashford's book *Global Populations: History,*

*Geopolitics and Life on Earth* (Bashford, 2014) and an article of hers specifically on Mukerjee (Bashford, 2012). They both detail the neo-Malthusian intellectual and political currents that informed much of Mukerjee's work.

*Races, Lands and Food* was published in New York, and it addresses a Western public. I mentioned this book to Professor D. N. Dhanagare, who delivered the Radhakamal Mukerjee Memorial lecture at the 36th All India Sociological Conference held in December 2011. He responded in an email to me dated 1 November 2011, writing that “[T]his book by R. K. Mukerjee, published back in 1946 is quite unknown to social scientists in India”. I got to know about the book when I came across a review by Burt W. Aginsky published in *American Anthropologist* in 1947. When I obtained the book on inter-library loan, the copy came from the Knox College Library in Illinois, USA. Apparently, no one had borrowed the book from the library since 1964.<sup>1</sup> Although Mukerjee was one of India's most distinguished intellectuals of his time, he did not have a school of followers. In what follows, I shall argue that his legacy, nevertheless, is important. He fashioned some of the arguments about social ecology, migration, and global justice that maintain traction in contemporary debates. Mukerjee was an integral part of the neo-Malthusian movement that may appear quaint, or even embarrassing, today, but which, on closer inspection, has maintained a common-sense view. Revisiting Mukerjee makes sense not only to fill in some blanks in intellectual history, but also to understand today's controversies regarding ecology, climate, and migration.

### **Races, Lands and Food**

In this book, Mukerjee made a plea to the world to open the doors to Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Javanese farmers to colonise empty lands in Africa, Eurasia, and the New World to relieve population pressure and, thereby, to achieve social justice and secure world peace. The book presented the population problem not principally as an issue of reproduction and health, but as an issue of the political economy of food (Bashford, 2012, p. 607). Food production was also central to the discipline of ecology. The book, therefore, was a geopolitical treatise as well as an applied social ecology.

Mukerjee's point of departure was that Asian farmers, at the time of writing, were about 20% short of land to farm. They needed new land to farm, and such “unoccupied arable lands of the earth lie mostly in the hot climates where only the Asiatic groups can toil in the fields” (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 6). Hence, Asian farmers short of land should be given an “Open Door in the Pacific” in order secure peace and “global justice” (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 7). The Pacific islands, “including the subcontinent of Australia and New Zealand”, were “largely uninhabited” and, therefore, “the doctrine of Asiatic *Lebensraum* cannot be easily dismissed offhand nor the doctrine of the White Man's reserve taken for granted”, he argued (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 7). The White Australia policy should be revised as should the policy towards Indians in South Africa. The native people living on the land under European colonisers should not

necessarily be protected to the exclusion of others better able to cultivate the land. Land should be cultivated by those physiologically best adapted to labour efficiently in particular environments (Bashford, 2012, p. 612). Lands under white control should be opened for systematic, scientific resettlement of Asian farmers, even if that land was otherwise reserved for indigenous populations.

Mukerjee was not impressed by the development brought about by European planters, entrepreneurs, traders, missionaries, and rulers. It had led to “dis-organisation, demoralization, and dismay of the indigenous populations” (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 8). Therefore:

In the coming epoch, such development will have to be initiated by the peasant who is the lover of peace, justice, and neighbourliness, and who, whether an Asiatic migrant or a native, must be given every possible governmental aid and encouragement. It is through the recognition and enhancement of the status of the peasant-proprietor, neither under the compulsion to grow crops at the behest of the planter, middle man, or money-lender, nor under the fear of being squeezed out by the immigrant [European] farmer, that the native populations will obtain their birth rights of freedom, peace, and security.

(Mukerjee 1946, p. 8)

The Europeans, Mukerjee averred, would have to live with diminishing populations following the Second World War. Only the USSR would be able to stall this trend partly “by adopting the practice of vernalization<sup>22</sup> in respect of wheat and other crops”, argues Mukerjee (1946, p. 19).<sup>2</sup> As the West dwindles, Indians, among others, would be the new colonisers. As an example of his desired form of colonisation, Mukerjee mentions the ongoing colonisation of the Indus valley and of the Brahmaputra valley. He noted about the latter:

The total number of new colonists in Assam is now over half a million. Without much capital, without fuss, and without any burden to the government, half a million people have carved out holdings from thick forest, reared large herds on sandbanks and riverine tracts, and established prosperous villages in the virgin wilderness, contributing materially to the wealth and prosperity of the entire region.

(Mukerjee, 1946, p. 21)

Mukerjee – somewhat inconsistently with his view that lack of land may cause global conflict – did not see this colonisation as a source of conflict because for him the Asiatic peasant, unlike the European farmer, was basically a benign creature:

The European colonist, whether in North America, Argentina, or Australia, is a farmer. The Asiatic colonist is a peasant. He belongs to the land. No title is more accurately given. In the West, to belong to the land means

to become a serf or a slave. As the European farmer has migrated to the New World, he has cared only for what his land would buy for him. He has not scrupled to dissipate his land capital, his soil, grassland, and timber resources for his profit. It is often by exporting the assets of the land to foreign markets that he has kept up his standard of living. At the beginning of his colonization, he has had no scruples about even displacing, demoralizing, and destroying the former inhabitants of the land. With Asiatic agricultural colonists, soils will be less likely to be depleted, for soils are part and parcel of the religion of the ancestor worship and the tradition of good neighborliness that have to be bequeathed to the generations unborn.  
(Mukerjee, 1946, p. 32)

Altogether Mukerjee speaks warmly for the planned scientific resettlement of Asia's poor peasants elsewhere. The peasant will benefit economically, some of their old traditions will be discarded, and they will become more self-confident owing to "the lessening of the stringency of natural selection in the new environment" (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 79), i.e., Asian farmers living under more generous conditions would be able to dispense with traditions designed, or evolved, for more demanding conditions. The white men, on the other hand, will be able to leave the hot climates, where they suffer

... a terrible nerve exhaustion, which has been the most important factor in preventing the northern races from settling and procreating their line with the full share of the nerve vigour their parental stock possessed. The prevalence of psychoses or psycho-neuroses among the Westerners, whether in East Africa or India, the Netherlands East Indies, or Indo-China, amply testifies to this.  
(Mukerjee, 1946, p. 80).

This is the win-win situation, defined by racial physiology and serving global social justice, that the book outlines.

Not everyone would readily agree with that assessment. Myron Weiner's book *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* from 1978, which details the resistance to migrants by local sons of the soil in India, includes a telling chapter on Assam. In 1983, tribesmen in Assam killed about 2,000 Bangladeshi immigrants in the so-called Nellie massacre. Mukerjee did not see this coming. Already in his 1947 review of Mukerjee's book, Aginsky cast doubt upon Mukerjee's postulate that Asian peasants will settle "without fuss" and remain welcome wherever they settle: "[T]he reviewer feels that the real lack in the book is the scanting of the cultural differences" (Aginsky, 1947, p. 485). What strikes me also is the faith Mukerjee places in Indian migrants to remain forever peasants. Some Indians have gone abroad not as peasant farmers, but as entrepreneurs. As Tulasi Srinivas has noted regarding India's Emergent Agro-Industrial Complex, "many Indian companies are entering the food production and retailing market in a big way through the consolidation of land holdings and buying of cheap agricultural land in Africa and other developing countries"

(Srinivas 2012, p. 232). She mentions Karuturi Global Ltd., an Indian investor in agriculture and food-processing in Ethiopia, Kenya, and India for the global market. The laborers working its 250,000 acres in Ethiopia are Ethiopians, but the owner, Sai Ramakrishna Karuturi, is an Indian who was able, until 2021, to raise enough cash to tie over a fall in the share prices of the company by selling property on MG Road in Bangalore (Balasubramaniam, 2013; National Company Law Tribunal, 2021). Whether Karuturi Global Ltd is exceptionally exploitative, as McLure indicates (McLure, 2009), or not, it's way of farming evidently does not correspond to Mukerjee's view of Indian family farmers abroad. Rather the opposite: This Indian firm is akin to the European planters, entrepreneurs, and traders whom Mukerjee lambasted. Mukerjee also did not seem to be much worried about the psychological effects of migration. Settlers abroad often have to deal with generations-long doubts about their true identity. The Indian peasants, who came to Fiji to grow sugarcane as indentured labourers, are an example of that (Basu, 2021).

What further strikes the reader is the scale of resettlement that Mukerjee envisaged in this and other publications. According to Bashford (2012, p. 614), Mukerjee argued in 1963 at the Asian Population Conference in New Delhi that “[M]illions of acres of rice lands can be carved out from virgin tropical and sub-tropical areas of the earth”. Ultimately, South American tropical rain forests could support no fewer than 2.4 billion rice growing farmers, and Africa's savannas and forests could be cleared for another 2.3 billion settlers (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 28). Similarly, millions of Asian peasants could be settled in North America and Australia, pushing rice cultivation “further towards the earth's poles” (Mukerjee, 1946, p. 29). This vision of Asian peasants growing rice across the globe received a critical response from the sociologist and demographer Kingsley Davis who, in 1951, asked:

If Asiatics settled there at their customary standard of living, these areas could hold additional hundreds of millions. But in this case what would be the purpose of settling them there? Professor Mukerjee never clearly states the goal he has in view, other than equalizing the world's wealth between Asiatics and non-Asiatics. One is entitled to suspect that there is an implicit imperialistic aim. He seemingly wants to see Asiatics spread over the world because he prefers Asiatics to Europeans... As the *sole* relief to population pressure, emigration is a palliative rather than a solution.

(Heer, 2005, p. 278, from Davis, 1951)

Incidentally, Professor Brij Raj Chauhan, under whom I studied in the mid-1970s, was a student of Mukerjee in Lucknow, and Chauhan later studied under Kingsley Davis at the University of California. Evidently, a disagreement between Mukerjee and Davis on the importance of emigration did not prevent Mukerjee from sending one of his students to study under Davis in California. Chauhan, however, did not return as a pucca demographer. He was in no way adverse to demography (Munshi, 2018, p. 201), but he did not foreground either Mukerjee or Davis in his teachings. Chauhan was first and foremost a Rural Sociologist.<sup>33</sup>

Mukerjee's intellectual horizon spanned from art history and religious studies to economy and social ecology. Already in the 1920s, Mukerjee conceptualised human ecology as the study of "plant, animal and human communities" in a regional context. In 1930 he wrote:

There is a balance between the natural and the vegetable and the animal environment, including the human, in which nature delights. It is maintained by chains of action and interactions, which link man with the rest of his living realm, reaching up and down and all around as his invisible biological and social destiny. Such balance assumes great significance in old countries like India and China.

(Mukerjee, 1994, p. 23)

Mukerjee pursued this line of reasoning in the book *Social Ecology* published in 1945. According to Manheim, this book further subsumed plant, animal, and human life under "culture" as a consensual communicative system (Manheim, 1946). Oommen acknowledges Mukerjee's pioneering work but maintains that some of his postulates are "not admissible" due to lack of credence. Thus, Mukerjee overstated his point: Caste society does not seamlessly integrate ecological, social, and moral space. Human habitation patterns are not necessarily conditioned by ecological factors. Centuries old adaptation does not necessarily result in stable cultural types. According to Oommen, Mukerjee's discussion of technology had several blanks and insufficiencies (Oommen, 2015, p. 28). When Mukerjee wrote *Races, Lands and Food*, the Green Revolution was still two decades away. He was not able to foresee that progress in agricultural sciences would secure India's self-sufficiency in rice and wheat in a matter of decades. Despite a fourfold growth in India's population since independence, agricultural intensification made India able, in 2021, to account for 45% of global rice exports (Jadhav, 2021). This clearly shows that Mukerjee was wrong to argue that migration was a *sine qua non* for Indian peasants to escape the Malthusian trap. According to Bashford (2014, pp. 15, 274–276), the relationship of food production to family planning was, in fact, being theorised at the time Mukerjee wrote *Races, Lands and Food*. Kingsley Davis was key in understanding this demographic transition.

Mukerjee aimed at making a general theory, but his conceptual framework remained loose or open-ended (Oommen, 2015, p. 21–22). This may explain some of the hesitance with which Mukerjee's work has been received in India. As Oommen notes regarding Ramachandra Guha's edited volume on *Social Ecology* in the prestigious "Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology", it is only Guha himself who refers to Mukerjee's writing. Mukerjee is only allotted seven pages out of 398 pages (Oommen, 2015, p. 33, note 11).

### **Malthusian Roots**

For a deeper understanding, or explanation, of Mukerjee's position, it is helpful to turn to the detailed intellectual history of neo-Malthusianism by Alison

Bashford. Bashford's book from 2014 starts out with a meeting of the Malthusian League, which celebrated its first 50 years in 1927. Those present included the economist John Maynard Keynes, the theosophist Annie Beasant, and the writer H. G. Wells. The gathering shared an interest in world population and birth control, which was formulated both as an issue of women's rights, or biopolitics, and as an issue of geopolitics. Space, as well as numbers and fertility rates, mattered. The idea of a "global carrying capacity" (Bashford, 2014, p. 46), the idea that the world's population should be distributed to achieve "optimum density", and the notion of *Lebensraum*, originally coined by a zoologist, were part of the intellectual and political vocabulary at the time. According to Bashford (2012, p. 621), German and Anglophone theorists of population shared a common language and common presumptions about population and land, as well as a geopolitical argument about population pressure and war. This explains Mukherjee's untroubled use of the German term *Lebensraum* in a book published several years after Nazi ideologues had started to portray Germans as a people unjustly held back in a restricted space (Bashford, 2014, p. 6). Mukerjee could have avoided using this tainted term. He did not avoid it because the idea of *Lebensraum* played a significant part in his conceptual framework. Consequently, Mukerjee described Indians and other Asians suffering from restrictive immigration laws as similarly held back (Bashford, 2014, p. 285). What intrigues Bashford is the way in which neo-Malthusianism for decades accommodated some, who had fascist leanings, as well as others, who were liberal internationalists, pacifists, or socialists. Bashford uses the example of Mukerjee to exemplify the surprising inclusiveness of Malthusianism.

As shown by Bashford, this intellectual stream of thought was rooted in both Malthus and Darwin, and it, therefore, bridged the social and the natural sciences. The study of "ecology", dating from 1866, was devised to link the two. In effect, ecology was "biological economics" (Bashford, 2014, p. 157). As a multidisciplinary scholar with a global outlook, Mukerjee's thinking, as it took shape over many years, reflected these intellectually pioneering waves. Bashford sums it up:

Mukerjee freely participated in the Indian Malthusian-eugenic class and caste discourse of "excess humans." Yet as I understand Mukerjee, he was also, as an ecologist, quite literally and genuinely interested in how humans breed "like rabbits." This is not just a conceit. Mukerjee's learned head was filled with the new animal ecology and the biology of density: Charles Elton's lemmings, Raymond Pearl's fruit flies, not to mention Charles Darwin's rabbits. They were all thinking about animal ecology. This is the less familiar, certainly less popular intellectual history on which I focus. Moreover, it is often the unexpected and counterintuitive politics that most interest me, precisely because the tradition of critique has very little political room for it. To pursue this particular example, the usual criticism of Mukerjee begs explanation of how he came to be a eugenicist population planner at the same time as he was an anticolonial, antiracist, and ecological opponent of the global colour line. All these positions formed his vision of world population growth (Bashford, 2014, p. 24).



Mukerjee's considered view on social evolution included not only the geopolitics of *lebensraum*, but also considerations of increased social efficiency. Mukerjee supported the Indian National Congress and served as chair of the Population Subcommittee of its National Planning Commission. Bashford sees a clear connection between his political conviction and his academic life.

As civilisation progressed, Mukerjee wrote, natality and mortality would become both more controlled and more effectively controlled toward an optimal population. This would be assisted by good government policy and economic planning; precisely his role in the Indian National Congress. In less advanced societies, the average expectation of life is low and "there is great waste of people." By contrast, "in advanced and well-organized societies, the agencies of social control effectively keep down numbers as well as the death-rate, resulting in better economy of reproduction and higher physiological well-being." ... it was this efficiency that defined the most civilised societies, biologically, economically, ecologically, politically, and socially (Bashford, 2014, p. 233 quoting Mukerjee 1933, pp. 698, 696).

Mukerjee and Davis were not far from each other in this analysis. They agreed that the goal, ecologically speaking, was to increase efficiency and avoid waste across the globe (Bashford, 2014, p. 360).

One may compare the way Bashford positions Mukerjee to the way Ramachandra Guha did. Guha explicitly foregrounds Mukerjee as the prime mover of the study of social ecology in India. In his assessment of "our premier social ecologist", Guha tries to strike an even-handed balance: "... Mukerjee's prose style is both unwieldy and wooden, but he was working towards an integration of ecology with the social sciences that was considerably ahead of its time" (Guha, 1994, p. 12). Guha makes this assessment without acknowledging Mukerjee's Malthusian roots. In fact, Guha admits that he was not able to include *any* readings in population and Malthusianism in the anthology on Social Ecology that he edited (Guha, 1994, pp. 13–14). In effect, Ramachandra Guha chose to disarm Mukerjee, rather than to weaponise his Malthusian intellectual legacy.

## Contemporary Legacy

There is no gainsaying that scholars in the field of historical demography have typically paid little attention to Mukerjee. Thus, Tim Dyson's important population history of India does not mention Mukerjee at all, while Kingsley Davis is mentioned. Davis seems to have a longer shelf-life than Mukerjee (Dyson, 2018; Tumble, 2020). Such omissions notwithstanding, Mukerjee, to my mind, still stands today as a pioneer in at least two respects with which I will be concerned with for the remainder of the chapter.

Firstly, Mukerjee *did* aim to link demography and the natural sciences into sociology. When I started studying anthropology at the University of Copenhagen in 1970, I was given to understand by fellow students that demography was to be of minor concern. Contemporary anthropologists and sociologists elsewhere are

often equally poorly attuned to think in terms of populations. Lately, however, the social sciences have started making amends by aligning with the natural sciences to study the “demands and controls”, so to speak, that humanity places on other species in an evolutionary perspective under the heading “The Anthropocene”. In Mukerjee’s perspective, sociology was not only the study of Durkheimian social facts, but also a study of society’s ecological infrastructure (Guha, 1994, pp. 4–5). This view of life greatly expands the horizon of not only sociologists, but also of historians, whose time perspective may be longer than that of sociologists, but still short in evolutionary terms. Climate change has played the key role in this re-orientation. Take the example of the prominent historian, and die-hard Marxist, Dipesh Chakrabarty. By his own admission, he has come to sense that history does not start with the Enlightenment or the rise of capitalism. Reading the biodiversity theoretician and myrmecologist Edward O. Wilson and other biologists has made Chakrabarty see history in a species perspective:

The word that scholar such as Wilson and Crutzen use to designate life in the human form – and in other living forms – is species. ... It is a word that will never occur in any standard history or political-economic analysis of globalisation by scholars on the Left, for the analysis of globalisations refers, for good reasons, only to the recent and recorded history of humans. Species thinking, on the other hand, is connected to the enterprise of deep history (Chakrabarty, 2018, p. 180).

In a similar vein, the equally prominent writer and anthropologist Amitav Ghosh in his book on the climate crisis as an “unthinkable” event takes inspiration from the palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould (Ghosh, 2016, p. 19). Gould’s grasp on biological evolution, as well as on the history of science, made him influential and widely read. If Mukerjee’s head was full of lemmings, fruit flies, and Darwin’s rabbits, leading contemporary biologists have been able to infuse a new spirit of inquiry into the minds of Chakrabarty and Ghosh by deploying the natural and social sciences in the quest to understand climate change in age of human dominance. For Mukerjee population was the main driver; for Chakrabarty and Ghosh climate change has been the main driver, but all three have extended the Durkheimian playing field.

Secondly, Mukerjee devised arguments, associated with Western dominance, to derive Asian advantage by deploying biological essentialism and environmental determinism to argue that Asians should rightfully possess lands otherwise held by non-Asians. His way of using the weapon of the strong as a weapon of the weak may be considered a lasting contribution. However, according to Bashford, Donna Haraway has pointed out that such argumentative reversals do not work: “[T]he move of reversal is epistemically weak” (Bashford, 2012, p. 602, note 41). A hegemony is not displaced by simply creating an alternative: “The powerful move is to displace and destabilize what may count in the relevant discursive community as knowledge” (Schneider, 2005, p. 45). Haraway may prefer that one discursive formation dismantles and supersedes an opposing formation without the veneer of a Hegelian synthesis, but Mukerjee’s aim was to reframe the Malthusian argument about the poor Asian peasants into a political issue of global responsibility. He wanted to provincialise and not dismantle Malthus.<sup>44</sup>

I think that Mukerjee here foreshadows the way in which the environmentalists Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain<sup>5</sup> reformulated the question of who should pay for climate change mitigation into an issue of the West owing the Rest a historical debt. In the early 1990s, when the Indian government was in dire need of fashioning a policy on climate change, Agarwal and Narain argued that emissions should not be calculated on a country-basis, but on a per capita basis. Agarwal was an IIT engineer. He was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Gunnar Myrdal, and the Stockholm Conference in 1972, rather than by Malthus, but he was able to refashion India's demography into a weapon of the weak in a manner comparable to Mukerjee's reversal.<sup>5</sup> The report became a real eye-opener to the world at large and for the Indians officials, who started to argue that the responsibility of the industrialised world differed from that of developing countries. The rich world produced "luxury emissions" from burning fossil fuel, while the poor produced "survival emissions" from cows and rice fields (Jakobsen, 1998, pp. 22–23). India's aggregate emissions were of a different sort than the emissions from the West. As a matter of social justice, the international community was to assist the poor, who were presumably better stewards of the environment than the West. Until today, the Indian government maintains that the responsibilities for global climate action, while "common", are "differentiated".

Both Chakrabarty and Ghosh devote several pages to Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain. Ghosh develops their argument further to the effect that it was imperialism that held back India in a state of poverty. Had India not been held back, it would have been able to grow faster with resulting higher emissions. The country now deserves a discount for having been held back then. "The argument about fairness in relation to per capita emissions is, in a sense, an argument about lost time", argues Ghosh (2016, p. 110). Even so, Ghosh ends up accepting a common responsibility because "every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 115). If each human counts, the size of populations also counts. As Chakrabarty writes, the question of population is "the real elephant in the room". It is the reason that India and China build as many coal-fired power stations as they do (Chakrabarty, 2018, pp. 208–209). Demography counts, and not in a way that relieves India or China of having to pay. According to International Relations theorists Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, the Paris Agreement in 2015 solved the issue of large carbon dioxide emitters, such as China and India, dodging their responsibility with reference to past and present poverty when "it was agreed that voluntary emissions targets would apply to all" (Acharya and Buzan, 2019, p. 213). Sunita Narain, who now heads the Centre for Science and Environment that she created with Anil Agarwal, would not agree. For her, the Paris Agreement "removed the last vestige of historical responsibility from the text. Climate justice was relegated to a footnote" (Narain, 2021). In her neo-Malthusian worldview, international collaboration has not been able to fairly assess the responsibility for climate mitigation measures.

As we saw, Ramachandra Guha preferred a "non-weaponized" Mukerjee bereft of his Malthusian roots. Agarwal and Narain, as well as Ghosh and

Chakrabarty, each take subaltern positions that turn Indian poverty into global entitlements. Today, they have been followed by others, such as Sonia Shah, who sets out the case for the right to migrate/colonise. Shah criticises both Malthus and Kingsley Davis (Shah, 2020, p. 167), but she does not draw on Mukerjee to make her argument for a right to migrate. Still, her book entitled *The Next Great Migration* unwittingly derives mileage from Mukerjee's work. This also shows the continued relevance of Mukerjee. Clearly, T. K. Oommen made a judicious choice in selecting "Social Ecology" as the topic for his Radhakamal Mukerjee Memorial Lecture.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Rajsekhar Basu, Department of History, University of Calcutta, for inviting me to the conference in Vilnius from which this chapter springs (Madsen, 2013). I also want to thank the CAST seminar participants at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, and in particular Olaf Corry for nudging me to read Alison Bashford.
- 2 Vernalisation, i.e., the soaking and cooling of seed before planting, was a keystone in Lysenko's catastrophic holistic agronomy, which stressed nurture over nature. Lysenkoism rose to prominence under Stalin and lasted well into Khrushchev's rule (Ridley, 2004, pp. 185–188).
- 3 Thanks to Abha Chauhan, Department of Sociology, University of Jammu for reviewing this argument.
- 4 For more on discursive strategies of acceptance, reversal, and displacement, see Nanda (2021).
- 5 Taped interview with Anil Agarwal in possession of author, Copenhagen, 3 October 1992.

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## Ethical Dilemmas in Social and Economic Policies

### 1

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