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978-1-107-06545-1 - Towards a Knowledge Society: New Identities in Emerging India

Debal K. SinghaRoy

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**TOWARDS A
KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY**
New Identities in Emerging India

Debal K. SinghaRoy



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With love

For Purbali and Anirudha.....

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Preface

The progression of human society has remained intrinsically linked to the production and application of knowledge that has paved the way for its civilisational journey bringing in the spirit of rationality and scientific thinking, political liberation and social justice, material progress and economic development in society. The higher the quantum of production and application of knowledge, higher has been the degree of spread, sustenance and rejuvenation of such societal progression. Significantly the site of production of knowledge has invariably remained the human mind that possesses the potential to be developed infinitum unlike those of the other productive resources which are circumscribed by inherent limitation (UN, 2005). Human beings stand for cultivation and exploration of this potential that could be harnessed at a large scale for mass use for varieties of social, economic and political purposes. However, for long the processes of exploitation of this potential for the production, accumulation and dissemination of knowledge have remained strictly confined to limited few as these were considered to be the task of designated specialists and the philosophers (Machup, 1962; Drucker, 1968). The knowledgeable were thus a limited selected section of society and to be knowledgeable was a privilege that in many parts of the world was decided by birth and lineage. Moreover within these arrangements knowledge was viewed as the finest moral manifestation of humanity having a non-commoditised precious essence of human ontology. The relation between knowledge and market has conventionally viewed as disembedded and contradictory.

Since the second half of the last century, humanity has been experiencing phenomenal proliferation of knowledge, knowledgeable and of the application of knowledge in all domains of lives rejuvenating the course of societal progression. Against the pre-existing popular perception, knowledge has gradually emerged to be the key crucial economic resource for employment and its production, dissemination and use have acquired added significance in the backdrop of declining importance of agriculture and industry in the national economy. It has simultaneously emerged to

become the major source of power and authority, social network and cultural capital, and agency of change and human capacity building at a large scale. These have made knowledge to acquire conceptual refinement and redefinition behaviourally (Machlup, 1962; Lane, 1966; Drucker, 1968; Bell, 1974), and substantially to obtain the place to be major contributors to the gross domestic product of the developed nations and most of the developing ones paving the way for the emergence of a new order and society widely designated as the knowledge, information or networked society. This society has evolved on the declining foundation of agrarian and industrial society by recognising knowledge, the brain power, as its main economic resource.

The foundation of this society has got strengthened and has been burgeoning very fast in most parts of the globe in the wake of the revolution in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), triumph of the state philosophy of neo-liberalism and unprecedented expansion of the forces of economic globalisation in every nook and corner of the globe. This society has engineered the emergence of new forms of industry, work participation, social relations, socio-cultural milieu, produced new identities and interests, domination and hegemony, marginalisation and protests affecting a vast part of pre-existing social realities, and a sense of collective existence. It has brought new flow of life, new opportunities for integration with the globalised world, produced new varieties of wealth by harnessing the creative potential of human being. Though widely described to be a new society that is presumed to promote equality, justice and dignity for all by privileging human brain power over the brawn, knowledge society however has emerged far from being an egalitarian one. Rather, it has produced new conditions for breeding marginality and formation of multiple identities by redefining the major resources of production, by imposing western values and cultural ethos over the rest, commercialising education, promoting consumer culture as to suffice the design and interests of the multinational corporations, and bringing de-contextualisation in many of the pre-existing arrangements and practices. Notwithstanding these contradictory images, knowledge society with its new technological and economic arrangements have produced significant space for intense use of knowledge, which travels not only from above, but also moves above from below, for employment, mobility, migration and formation of alternative social collectives. Thus,

within the emerging socio-cultural flow of the economic interests of the neo-liberal market forces are being consolidated on one hand, and new varieties, fragmentations, disorientations and fluidity are being transported on the other in the emerging societal arrangement. It has definitely ushered a bold new world (Castells, 2006; Webster, 2006) from which the humanity can't shy away, but must face it. It also invites serious engagements of social scientists to explore, analyse and compare the emerging dynamic of this bold and smart society with new perspective.

Though India has got a knowledge-based past, traditionally the process of production, dissemination and use of knowledge has neither been made mass based nor was it commercially harnessed to be a core economic product or reserve. The traditional process of acquiring knowledge and education has remained restricted among the upper castes. The colonial administration though brought in western education, and printing press, telegraph and telephone and radio, their access was limited only to the upper strata of society. Independent India inherited from the British a predominantly agrarian society widely characterised by economic stagnation and backwardness, illiteracy and poverty, unemployment and ignorance and a slow pace of education and skill development. Immediately after independence, the Indian state initiated a host of measures for rapid industrialisation, agricultural modernisation, expansion of education and mass media to put the nation in the path of fast economic development and social transformation. Though India experienced Green Revolution in selected areas of the country, it missed the industrial revolution (Knowledge Commission of India, 2006). In areas of education and mass media, the transformation widely remained far from expectation. India started reeling under the wheel of low rate of economic growth, high rate of concentration of workforce in agriculture, low rate of capacity building and under-utilisation of its human resources. The Five Year Planning process was to be suspended by initiating annual planning in late 1980 due to increased social upheaval and resource crunch. However, in the wake of the end of Cold War, collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and the emergence of economic neo-liberalism as the dominant economic force across the globe, India has introduced itself to the path of economic globalisation by accepting the Structural Adjustment Programme of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and a fundamental shift in the developmental

perspective of the state from socialism to economic neo-liberalism, market protection to market liberalisation can be noticed. This paradigm shift has been accompanied by increasing flow of foreign direct investment and investment by Indian private business houses in telecommunication, mass media and education. Since the mid-1990s, India has been experiencing phenomenal penetration and usage of ICTs, new and mass media, fast expansion of education and quantum increase in the pool of educated and trained man power, increasing rate of migration and mobility of vast section of people, emergence of alternative avenues of employment even in rural areas and increasing shift of the labour force towards the service sector and the emergence of the service sector to be the prime contributors the GDP of the nation. Along with these changes India stands today in the threshold of an emerging of knowledge society wherein knowledge has emerged to be the central resource for wealth and employment, power and status, mobility and interconnectivity and the key means to organise social, economic and political order of vast section of Indian population. The Indian state has now framed elaborate strategy to usher a smart knowledge society to overcome economic stagnation, to reconcile with the failure of industrialisation, to shift vast section of its work force from agriculture and industry to knowledge economy by imparting appropriate education, skill and training and to convert the twenty-first Century to be the century of India. With the vast pool of young population in its command, India is posited to emerge as the knowledge hub of the world to yield its 'demographic dividend'. However, the emergence of knowledge society in India has not been uniform, rather eclectic across the space and nor has it been a discreet process autonomous of its traditional past. Herein the new economic arrangement and socio-cultural milieu as set in motion by the emerging knowledge society has thrown open lot of new challenges and opportunities in the society by shaping its own dynamics that need a through study both methodologically and conceptually. Despite having emerged as a distinct phenomenon the emergence of knowledge society has received little attention from sociologists in particular and social scientists in general in India.

As against this backdrop, the central focus of this book is on the broad socio-historical contexts and the processes of emergence of knowledge society in India; patterns of proliferation of new economic momentum and socio-cultural milieu as set in motion by the emergence of knowledge

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society; their impacts on the pre-existing facets of social identity and marginality; and construction of new social identities in this emerging society. Based on empirical data collected from four metro cities, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, four district towns and seven villages located in four different directions – north, south, east and west of the country and a vast body of secondary sources of information, this study examines the interrelated processes leading to the emergence of knowledge society in India and its critical dimensions. Positing itself within the contemporary socio-economic realities, that have emerged to be part agricultural, part industrial and part service based, this study delineates the influence of pre-existing spatial (village, district towns and metro cities), caste, ethnic and gender divides in conditioning the shaping up of knowledge society in India. Conceptually grounding itself on the works of Machlap (1962), Drucker (1968), Bell (1976) Castells (2006, 2007), Toffler (1970, 1980, 1990), Evans (2004), Black (2003), Melucci (2006), Giddens (1984, 1999), Friedmen (2005), Hornby and Clarke (1996), Webster (2006), Dijk, (1999) Porat (1977), Touraine (1981) and many others, this study analyses the dynamics of knowledge society in India that have produced an era of both hope and despair in the interconnected world. It shows that despite being circumscribed by the pre-existing caste, ethnic, gender and spatial divides and marginality, knowledge society has brought into being new occupational momentum, mobility and choice, new scope of breaking the barriers of marginality, developing criticality against domination, and curving out space for construction of praxis of knowledge for liberty. Though the milieu of the redefined state along with its emerging thrust for commodification of knowledge and consumerism relentlessly try to condition knowledge as a means for expansion of economic interest of the neo-liberal market forces in contemporary society in India, the praxis of knowledge creates its own space for liberation for a vast section of marginalised people who develop multi prong strategies and articulate an alternate identities to curb out a space for livelihood security, dignity and justice in this emerging society using knowledge as their key resource. A large part of India's population is connected through a network of knowledge and information technology. The cover page of this book depicts this momentum, hope and integration of people in the emerging knowledge society in India.

My craze to research on the dynamics of knowledge society in India emerged out of my intellectual engagement both with the conceptual

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and with empirical issues of social development and social movements in India. The inadequacy of rural/agrarian and urban studies in addressing the transitional phase of contemporary society in India, the increasing tensions between tradition and modernity, globalism and locality, secularism and primordiality, identity and fluidity and fuzziness of emending identities, sustained poverty of the majority and flash prosperity of limited few and host of other issues and their interconnectedness with the wider world, increasing significance of service and knowledge sector in the economy, the shifting perspective of the state on economy and social welfare and the increasing flow of ICTs and globalisation have significantly provoked me to look into the issue of transition of Indian society concretely from the viewpoint of the proliferation of knowledge society in India.

My fluid thinking got consolidated out of a series of interaction with my professional colleagues in Indira Gandhi National Open University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, University of Edmonton and Athabasca University Canada, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, The Open University and London City University, United Kingdom, the Open Universiteit, the Netherlands and in many other places. I am thankful to Peter (Jay) Smith, Professor of Political Science, Michael Gismondi, Professor of Sociology and Global Studies in the Athabasca University, Canada, for helping me to consolidate my early research on ICTs, distance education and globalisation. My ideas and thinking got a good degree of precision as I received the Commonwealth Fellowship in United Kingdom in 2006-07 to work on social movements in knowledge society. In fact, this fellowship has given me ample opportunities to get access to up-to-date bodies of literature on knowledge society and also to interact extensively with a large number of scholars working in this area of research. Here I am highly grateful to Ellie Chambers, Emeritus Professor of Humanities Higher Education, Institute of Educational Technology, the UK Open University, Professor Andy Northedge, Chair of Foundation Course Team Institute of Educational Technology, Open University, Dr Tim Jordan, The Open University United Kingdom, Professor Frank Webster, Professor of Sociology London City University, United Kingdom for reflecting on my thought and giving valuable suggestions to my research on knowledge society.

I got an added opportunity as I received the Australian Government Endeavour Fellowship in 2010 to look into the issues of knowledge society very closely even though I was engaged on a research on the

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Environmental Issues in the Indigenous People's Movements in Australia. The emerging nature of knowledge society in Australia has helped me a lot to comprehend the Indian scenario from an additional point of view. I am thankful to Professor James Goodman, University of Technology Sydney and Professor Stuart Rosewane, University of Sydney, for providing me the platform to discuss my ideas with a lot of scholars. Their comments have been of great help in developing an insight in my research.

I am thankful to Professor Maitryee Choudhary, Professor of Sociology, Centre for the Study of Social System, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and Professor Uma Kanjilal, Professor Library and Information Science, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi for encouraging me and finding sense in my talking about a research in knowledge society in India. Professor Uma Kanjilal was liberal enough to share with me a lot of literature on ICT revolution and expansion and usage in India. This early encouragement has helped me a lot to get a sense of purpose in this research. I am deeply thankful to them for their liberal gesture. I am also thankful to Professor Anand Kumar for inviting me to present parts of finding of this piece of research in symposia held in Jawaharlal University under the auspice of the 60th Sociological Conference of Indian Sociological Society, held in Jawaharlal Nehru University in December 2011.

I owe my gratitude to my colleagues in the Indian Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi. I am thankful to Professor M. Aslam, the Vice Chancellor of IGNOU for his continuous interest in my research and his encouragement. I am also thankful to Professor Darvesh Gopal, Professor Pandav Nayak, Professor E. Vayunandan, and Dr Ajay Mahurkar and Dr Subha Gokhle, for their encouragement. I am sincerely thankful to the Indira Gandhi National Open University Teachers Association (Teachers) for providing me the opportunity to examine the dynamics of higher education and its politics from a close quarter.

I am thankful to the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi for accepting this research project and giving me the required grant to undertake this research. In fact without financial support from ICSSR it would have been highly difficult for me to undertake this piece of research that involved a large-scale survey and data collection from different parts of the country. This research needed the collection and analysis of a vast body of these data coherently and consistently from

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across the country. Such endeavour has been possible only with help, cooperation and encouragement of a series of experts, friends, colleagues and the respondents of this study. My sincere thanks are due to all the respondents of this study for their cooperation and willingness to spare their valuable time and information for this study. Thanks are also due to all the field investigators who have helped me to collect this vast body of data from the field. Here I am thankful to Dr T. Jitha, New Delhi, and Mr Manoj Kumar, New Delhi, Swapan Kumar Day Sarkar, Dangarhat, West Bengal, Mr Nitin More, Mumbai, Mr Sudhir Kumar, Meerut, Hemlta Kheria, Delhi, Mr Subrata Bhattacharjee, Kolkata, Mr Arun Gucchai, West Bengal, Mr Anupam Pal, West Bengal, Mr Manas Nanda, Odisha, Mr Mano, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu for rendering their support in collecting information for this study. I am thankful to Mr Karunakar Singh and Valarmati, PhD scholar in the department of sociology for their support.

I was to undertake additional field work and to consult new sources of information to convert the research report into a full-fledged book. The book would not have been possible without selfless dedication from my support staff in the faculty of Sociology especially from Mr Shailendra Kumar, Mr Yashwant Raj and Sonia. Mr Shailendra has played an important role not only in the additional data analysis and tabulation, but also in introducing series of corrections in all drafts of this book that went on for more than two years. Mr Yashwant Raj has played a big role in developing the charts, introducing corrections in the final draft very committedly. I am extremely thankful to them for their commitment to this piece of work.

I am thankful to my daughter Purbali SinghaRoy and to my son Aniruddha SinghaRoy for their sustained encouragement and for sacrificing their several personal demands for this research. They have been of great help not only to generate an intellectual appetite in me of contemporary social reality but also to correct my technological deficits in using ICTs. My wife Dr Prava Debal has always been the best companion and critic of my work. Her suggestions have always been fruitful to get an intellectual direction in my wisely casual life. I am ever grateful to her.

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