

TK Oommen, *Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs: Life and Times of a Sociologist*, (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2018), Rs.690, pp. 304, (ISBN:978-93-220-0888-8).

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The book under review is of 304 pages and in three parts outlines what probably is a new genre in Indian publishing history. It is neither an autobiography nor a pure memoirs of institutional life but rather a combination of the biographical trajectory of an individual within the institutional spaces he has occupied. In and through the narration in 12 chapters in part I titled as "Torments of Sociology" and another 10 chapters in part 2 titled as "Beyond Sociology" and five appendices, TK Oommen traces what an individual has contributed to the development of a field of knowledge within its intellectual trajectory, in his case, sociology, in India and to some extent globally.

Knowledge production and the role of education within the scheme of affairs is increasingly under critique globally and yet it is the universally recognized means of transformation and course correction for its very lack has proved to be the cause of demise of civilizations and cultures. He traces his own academic journey, from 'entering sociology' and passing through 'tumultuous path to a PhD' and how he enters the 'academic and political milieu of JNU'

and narrates how 'the social and academic formation of the Centre for the Study of Social Systems' took root. In each of these steps he outlines specifically his own role and the nuances of academic structures in their making. The book under review thus becomes besides being a 'work-o-graphy' as he terms it, equally a resource to understand how through individual players, developments have happened within the framework of higher education in India.

'The Organization of the XI World Congress of Sociology' wherein he won global acclaim for his professional performance among the world professionals. It is recorded in detail, though with some regrets for the non recognition of the good initiated and instead being lambasted by 'local vilification' and mudslinging. The Presidency at the International Sociological Association' he regards a 'crowning glory' to his career dedicated to intellectual work paving the way for such recognition for the country and its sociologists manifested in the 'XIII World Congress of Sociology' that he chaired bringing international visibility. It was an occasion to showcase his talents and accomplishment in non-home ground (Bielefeld, Germany) and highlight the contribution of Indian sociologists on the global arena. He continues to narrate the 'academic accolades' that came his way and the 'agonizing experience' of 'getting elected as the President of the Indian Sociological Society' justifying the title he has chosen for the book, 'trials, tribulations and triumphs'.

He was the President of the International Sociological Association even while he was the secretary to the Indian Sociological Society, a step that probably initiated the kind of critique to his presence other than from the ideological stance of neutrality within the supposedly leftist thinking university and academia. He goes into the details of the contestations and persons involved and the dynamics that operated, giving hint to the human side of organizational leadership and terms it as 'agony' on his part to have stuck through with the association for the love of sociology. It is interesting to see how Oommen converts even this agonizing experience into an academic discourse by writing a paper on 'Professionals without Professionalism: Situating Sociology' in a special number of *Seminar* (495:24-28) on 'A Symposium on Knowledge, Institutions

and practices in a Discipline' in 2000. this also forms, in a revised version, the very last chapter and as an 'epilogue'.

The stature he held as an academic and scholar is revealed in the kind of 'foreign visiting assignments' that came his way during the tenure as the President and thereon. These were occasions where in he nurtured friendships and academic contacts within the institutions visited. He narrates how these encounters were also self created as the cultural difference in foreign universities of being reticent and not being forthcoming in seeking out colleagues and experts came as a surprise to him. (p115) These visits were also occasions for him chalk out, prepare and deliver lectures, and have articles published in reviews of repute. It also gave insights into the unique character of nations and peoples, as he describes about the situation of USSR in the 1970s (p.126).

The chapter on 'the travails and triumphs of publishing' is a very insightful one for those in academia to read firsthand the point of beginning and the trajectory of the reputed author that he became for more than one publishing house with over 30 books to his credit, 200 research papers (110 in research journals and 90 as chapters in edited works). Besides being academically sound and rigorous he has also been contributing to the popular papers and for a wider audience of generic interest. The credibility of an intellectual actualizes when one becomes a public intellectual. It happens when one intervenes to comment on the happenings in the country and the direction policy should take as averred from the research provided knowledge of the state of affairs.

National Fellowship of the Indian Council of Social Science Research which came his way in 2010-12 as the twelfth sociologist to be so honoured led to the completion of the research project on 'social inclusion.' Though brought out by a renowned publisher, Orient Blackswan it has been insufficiently reviewed is rued by him and again as characteristic of his studied stance on every significant observation of sociological nature, sees in it a foreboding not too good for a democracy that ought to be becoming vibrant in public discourse on issues of 'inclusion and exclusion' and its reasons.

An observation which becomes truer by the day as we witness his prescient words coming to project a present which he foresaw as a possible future.

In the second part which looks 'beyond sociology', he narrates the circumstances of the 'sundry assignments and responsibilities' that came his way, engaging with YMCA, the Churches and Ministries, WCC, and NCTE. These are examples of how he places his intellectual capabilities at the service of social agents engaged in societal transformation at various levels. The willingness to learn from what others have accomplished and bringing it to the public eye was something that he relished doing in his academic career. It could be seen as another side to the guiding of research scholars in the inside space of a research institute or university scholar's library. This leads to 'the planning commission project on poverty among religious minorities' in which he played a significant role along with other scholars. His observations on completion of this task, comparing the status of people in various religious community cohorts, is worth quoting:" In contrast, SC converts to Islam and Christianity are subjected to double discrimination as the benefits of reservation are denied to them. Since conversion does not lead to the diminution of caste discrimination caste and not religion ought to be basis of policy formulation by the state." (p.188).

'The Global Studies Programme' (chapter 15) was a fall out of the international connections built during the Presidentship of ISA and came to benefit students and faculty in JNU(India), KNU(South Africa) and ALU(Freiburg, Germany) wherein students could do courses in three different campuses and get a joint degree and faculty could collaborate in research across the continents and universities. 'Chairing the Gujarat Harmony Project' (GHP) is like a fitting tribute to the Mahatma whose 150th birth anniversary is celebrated this year showing the deterioration of the state of affairs - as regards communal harmony is concerned - ever since 1951 and arriving at 2002 riots having prepared its way through 1969 riots and the awakening of the anti-Muslim sentiments among the Hindus and the Youth in particular to be virulent to resist the attempt to eliminate Hinduism. This plan of the preservation of religion

through violence, a path rejected by Gandhi (who has been recently and even then compared with Lenin), now seems succeeding with the onslaught of Hindu right wing nationalism gaining massive ground in many a pocket across the country. The GHP he chaired attempted a longer lasting strategy of creating 'social reconciliation between the estranged communities' as an innovative intervention. His realism comes to fore again in acknowledging that where the state and market seemed silent in intervening significantly the chance of making a mark as a civil society project seemed pretty little.

Moving 'Beyond Sociology' is yet again highlighted in chapter 17 'venturing into security analysis', unusual for a sociologist, especially as it is a domain specific to the political scientist and international relation expert. The Ford Foundation initiative led to his being requested to chair a Delhi Policy Group initiative to comprehensively analyze security policies. The findings came out as his book *Understanding Security: A New Perspective* (Macmillan, 2006). A second initiative of this nature came with the invitation to be on 'Prime Minister's High Level Committee' in 2005. Though initially meant to work only on three chapters out of the 12, given his acumen, energy and the fact that on most committees (as he succinctly notes) all do not work equally he ended up being almost its copy editor. He also perceptively notes how there was varying degree of reception accorded by the chief ministers while visiting them on the project and the bias and preconceived notions of individuals implicitly change little over the years and even with additional responsibilities coming one's way is visible in the case of the Chief Minister turned Prime Minister (p.219).

One of the features of the work-o-graphy that Oommen has written is that through the narrative of how books and articles got written, one also gets to know the trajectory of social sciences in general and sociology in particular in India especially and even in the neighbouring states. Chapter 19, 'Social Inclusion Research Fund, Nepal' is one such inroads into the transition from socialist states to

welfare states wherein the welfare programme for the needy and poor got diluted, and, ever since, we have the situation aggravating with the onslaught of capitalism and capital driven modern empires making their way. A country like Nepal bordering on India, both with the unique feature of caste system and its inbuilt exclusionary mechanism deserve comparison and calculated interventions. Acknowledging this deficit the Norwegian government came forward to address the question of social inclusion through its SIRF (social inclusion research fund) which into its second phase (2009-12) invited as an expert Prof Oommen to be on its seven member committee. Analysing the Nepal society he avers:

The plurality of Nepal is embedded in two dimensions - cultural and territorial. Cultural insiders in Nepal are the inhabitants of the hill territory where life is conditioned by Sanskritic Hinduism. In contrast, those who inhabit the plains (the Terai region) are cultural outsiders who follow the folk versions of Hinduism. Hill people are subjected to certain hostile ecological disabilities,.... In contrast, if the plains people are socially inferior they have economic advantages. (p. 223)

The former while they suffer from the hostile ecological disabilities, whereas the plains people though socially inferior have economic advantages is perceptively noted by Oommen, drawing out the demographic and territorial features from the research data. The National Inclusion Commission (NIC) of Nepal and the inclusive and egalitarian approach as taken in the new constitution are some of the fall out of the research initiatives led by this project. He ends the chapter with a note that "although independent India took numerous policy measures some even decades ago to uplift the disadvantaged - SCs, STs, OBCs, religious minorities and women - it cannot be said that India has a well thought-out social inclusion policy." (p.237) Whether this sweeping observation would stand the test of the inclusive vision of the Indian constitution is doubtful, whereas its truth cannot be negated by way of the non-implementation and success of the application of the constitutional vision in India.

In 2002, as he retired from JNU he became the chairperson of the Schumacher Centre, Delhi (SCD), a registered society with a nine member team and retains the status to date. It envisages 'an India without chronic poverty where all its citizens have the opportunity to live with dignity, freedom from hunger and deprivation'. This vision is channelized into its mission of promoting 'harmonious and sustainable development through application of appropriate technology'. Even as Schumacher was influenced by Gandhiji, it carries forward the notion of 'antyodaya' focusing on the weakest in society in measuring the quality of the 'good society' based on 'state, market/business and civil society'. Even this platform of societal intervention for addressing the grass roots poverty issues and quality enhancement of the lives of the poor through intermediate technology, Prof Oommen did not lose time nor energy in converting those strategies of intervention and its learning outcomes into research papers in sociological journals. The chapter ends with a poem of appreciation by none other than DK Giri, the Founder Director of SCD, (2000-2013).

The story of how he came to be awarded the Padma Bhushan on 5 May 2008 is narrated in Chapter 21. Having prefaced his narrative with the cautionary note that in a multi-party democracy these award nominations are never 'impartial', he goes on to describe how the award that came his way was accorded as a genuinely deserved acknowledgement of his meritorious performance as a sociologist in the Indian and International scene. Even here his penchant observation that among the illustrious awardees of the day, the attention went solely to those from the entertainment industry and the sports and least attention went the direction of the one from the academia is not with regret but as a statement of disappointment for the society which he has been studying and closely observing not without attempting to transform. It is emblemized even further while recording the poor acknowledgement of the event and accomplishment from his own institution that he served for more than three decades.

The penchant that Oommen had to court controversy, as hinted in the first part with especially the JNU status and the Sociological

association leadership, is culminated in the 'turbulent presidency' he held 'at the National Media Centre', recorded in the penultimate chapter 22. The history of how he came to occupy a residence in the prime location of Gurgaon, and how the Media related occupants of the enclave and the non-media occupants had a tussle over the management of the affairs of the residential society gets quite a detailed narration. It is done, again as a record of facts as a sociologist observes the behavioural patterns surrounding the status and roles of individuals in a human environment. Persons with responsibilities, rights and duties, having to discern and execute as a cohort for the welfare of all have to be often reminded of the spirit of democratic citizenship having to be guiding principle in big or small decision. In this sense, what might have become an acrimonious divulging of internal operations of the Board and the dynamics that operated in order to settle scores, instead, turns out to be a case study meant for the students of social sciences to gauge and ruminate as to derive a discourse on the individual vs group interactive dynamics of a real time situation.

The appendices again are written records of the 'farewell speech at JNU, on 22 October 2002'; the 'vote of thanks at the inaugural session of the XI World Congress of Sociology, New Delhi, 18 August 1986'; the 'welcome speech at the XIII World Congress of Sociology, at Bielefeld, Germany on 18 July 1994; and Presidential Address to the ISA Council Meeting Held in Gavle, Sweden during(sic) 10 August, 1993. The last one being the record of all the published 'books, monographs and reports by TK Oommen'. On a minor but significant note, one would wonder as why a strictly chronological order was not followed for the first four of the documents included in the Appendix. Probably it would have given an additional insight into the transitions in the thought pattern of the author and protagonist in his self revelation, even beyond his own reckoning - as words have a life of its own when seen in an evolutionary perspective. It would be interesting to have a response on this very choice, as Prof. Oommen, one who leaves little to chance has probably an explanation. Meanwhile, one cannot but applaud Prof TK Oommen's *'Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs:*

Life and Times of a Sociologist' even if one may pick bones with him as to the intensity of the 'trial and tribulations' in comparison to the 'triumphs'. We can be hopeful that this is not his last work, and can rightfully look forward to a complimentary volume in the form of a full scale Autobiography.