



Challenges of Social Science Research in India

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Abstract

Social science research in India has had a chequered history. While the country has the highest volume of research in the region, and is significantly ahead of other countries in south Asia, there is wide disparity in research activity and output across the country, both in terms of quantity and quality. Social Science Research concerned with a systematic investigation of the behavior of man in society with the aim of formulating a body of relevant theory. Social scientists also attempt to explain some aspect of human action and interaction, and the social world, through their research. The decline-steep decline in the race and role of Social Sciences Research has led to the back siding of the teaching and of the employment prospect for young men and women. The loss to the academic integrity of Higher Education itself when the status and dignity of social science research is lowered and made irrelevant to higher education. This paper detailedly discussed about the various challenges of social science research in India.

Key words: Challenges, Social Science Research, India,

Introduction:

Social science is the collection of academic disciplines which study any aspect of social behavior and the functioning of society. This fluid term is generally used to describe any field of scholarship outside of the hard sciences. The narrowst definition is simply the study of human interaction and organization.

Social science research in India has had a chequered history. While the country has the highest volume of research in the region, and is significantly ahead of other countries in south Asia, there is wide disparity in research activity and output across the country, both in terms of quantity and quality. While a handful of premium universities located in the major cities do foster academic research cultures which include disciplinary or interdisciplinary work, particular kinds of expert knowledge and knowledge

production with a focus on peer review and engagement with internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies, the quality of research in a large majority of institutions neither conforms to international academic standards nor have they been able to make a significant contribution to social science research, either theoretical or applied and policy-oriented, in the country.

Concept of Social Science & Social Science Research:

Before defining Social Science Research we should know about the concept of Social Science. Social Sciences may be defined as the discipline, which deal with humans in their social and behavioral references. Edwin, R. A. Selegnian (in the 1st chapter of Encyclopedia of Social Sciences) has defined Social Sciences as "those mental and cultural sciences, which deal with the activities of the



individual as a member of a group”.

Social Sciences as we can observe now are of recent origin. The idea of Social Sciences developed from Philosophy and did many other branches of knowledge. What is now stated as Social Sciences was formerly known as „Social Discipline“, but with the advancement of time, due to the distinctive achievements of the scientific method on our way of life, the term „Social Discipline“ was taken over by the term „Social Sciences.

When we talk about Social Science Research, it means, research conducted by social scientists following a systematic plan. Social Science Research refers to any scientific study of human action and interaction focusing on elements of thought and behavior that are in some sense social. Social scientists employ a range of methods in order to analyze a vast breath of social phenomena. Social Science Research concerned with a systematic investigation of the behavior of man in society with the aim of formulating a body of relevant theory. Social scientists also attempt to explain some aspect of human action and interaction, and the social world, through their research.

Social science research in India:

The Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) has made recommendations on the future organization and funding of the ICSSR itself as well as of the institutes within its network.¹ But since the time the report was submitted in March 2007, official statements have announced a massive increase in the outlay for higher education in the Eleventh Five Year Plan and the setting up of several new central universities. This comes in the wake of the

recommendations of the Knowledge Commission for the establishment of 1,500 universities in India in the next decade. Whether social science research will be affected by this enormous increase in state expenditure on higher education has not been considered, for understandable reasons, by the ICSSR Review Committee. But it must be borne in mind today in discussing the report, because it indicates a significant change in the background conditions. Research in the social sciences in India has been dominated by particular disciplines. Economics has traditionally attracted greater funding than others. While sociology seems to have greater attraction among postgraduate and research students, apparently because of the rapid growth of the NGO sector, the demand for higher education in disciplines like history and political science seems to be declining, due to their limited career opportunities, although they, and especially history, is perhaps the oldest and most taught discipline throughout India and often, as in JNU, attract among the best students.

Key Areas of Focus

The Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR 2007) reports that social science research is driven by two factors: an interest in the functioning of society in its diverse social, cultural, political and economic aspects and in understanding the variables that influence them, and the practical needs of the policy-makers and managers in government, civil society and the private sector for reliable data and professional analysis.

In the past two decades, social science research has grown beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries into



areas that are pertinent to the current socio-economic and political context in the country. Globalization and development have emerged as major areas of focus. Education and health are being researched across various institutes. A number of research organizations like the Institute of Economic Growth (IEG), Centre for Developing Societies (CDS), Madras Institute of Developing Societies (MIDS) and the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) have carried out various research projects in areas related to equitable and sustainable development. Poverty studies and urbanization have also emerged as key areas for research. New directions in feminist studies and women's and gender studies are found across research carried out by universities, research institutes, and NGOs. Research on environment has largely been focussed on indigenous knowledge systems. Although industrial development and its related concerns constitute an important area of research, agriculture and rural development remain focus areas for both researchers and policy-makers. A discourse on

'inclusive development' has emerged as an important theme.

Unlike the other social sciences within the context of a 'developing' nation, economics as a discipline has often been described a more utilitarian function and seen to contribute directly to the growth of the State. The past decades has seen more focus on applied empirical research, often commissioned by various stakeholders including the Government, rather than theoretical economics that straddles the other social sciences and addresses a wide range of themes from the philosophical basis of the discipline to the question of culture, gender or the politics of globalization.

Caste has always been a central category in social science discourse in India and there is a significant and growing body of work on its economic, political and social implications. The issue of reservation for disadvantaged caste groups in higher educational institutions and government jobs at the central and state levels has led to major upheavals and unrest between the pro and anti-reservation movements over the last decade. With the emergence of cultural studies, a specifically Indian school, known as subaltern studies, has developed. Represented by post-colonial and social historians, subaltern studies have contested the strong elitist bias that characterized the writing of modern Indian history, and has provided an alternative framework.

Main challenges in social science research

1. Research Quality: difficult to assess:

Assessment of quality of social science research in India is complicated. A bibliometric study conducted by Gupta, Dhawan and Singh (2009) led to the identification of 19 'high productivity institutions'. However, a quantitative analysis of research output is not an accurate predictor of the quality of research that is carried out by these institutes. Further, a bibliometric analysis is not an adequate measure as most of the journals for instance in India are not registered in the international citation databases. Although Scopus covers around 15,000 journals, its coverage of social science journals from India is limited to 15. Similarly, the coverage of the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) published by Thomson Reuters is not as comprehensive as that from North America and Western Europe. This is a particular problem as many Indian academics make a conscious



decision to publish in Indian journals to reach an Indian audience, often driven by the subject matter of their research.

2. Lack of proper institutional support and funding:

Driven largely by the huge volume of undergraduate enrolment in the social sciences, as mentioned earlier in the report, less than 20% of Indian universities combine teaching and research with most universities emphasising teaching over research. This limits the scope of research opportunities within universities. Consulting firms are often attractive career options but there is a preference to produce policy papers or briefs with no incentives to publish academic articles in refereed journals.

3. Multidisciplinary approaches are seldom used:

Even within the various social science disciplines and the policy research field is largely dominated by economics. The 2007 ICSSR review reports that while the scale and range of social science research in the country have been expanding, the quality of research output of a majority of institutions, as well as their contribution to a better understanding of socioeconomic processes and shaping public policy are widely perceived to have fallen short of expectations and also not commensurate with the resources spent on them.

4. Language Problems:

The problem of language was highlighted by most of the resource persons consulted for this report. The medium of instruction upto the undergraduate level in most provincial colleges is a regional language while most postgraduate education and almost all advanced research (with the exception of language

studies) uses English as the language of communication. With the critical vocabulary of disciplinary and interdisciplinary research conducted primarily in English, a large majority of students find it difficult to make the transition. Much of the primary research itself is conducted in local dialects and languages used in the field. Unlike the natural sciences, social science research, especially in those disciplines where description and the written essay are primary, this necessarily means that a lack of felicity with the English language acts as a fetter.

The Way Out

Enough of the troubles and travails of our social science research. Admittedly, we exhibit a lot of self-pity. We are intensely jealous of Sciences, Engineering, Management and almost admit by the way we neglect our reading habit that we deserve to be the least lore of the academia. Yet, we think that our academic parentage of immortal reverence and hence of relevance. Have we become schizophrenics, the therapy lies in trying to repair ourselves and our self-respect.

Conclusion:

The establishment of social science research in India has not been an easy process because problems and challenges related with social science research continues even till date. One of the main reasons for the variable research quality is the lack of proper institutional support. Although a number of Indian social scientists have achieved eminence in the international social science community, a majority of the institutions are yet to make a mark in the international academic community. Research organizations recruit university



graduates, but do not invest in further research capacity building and training. Applied research organizations and consulting firms are increasingly becoming attractive career options but there is a preference in these organizations to produce policy papers or briefs with no incentives to publish academic articles in refereed journals. While the bulk of social science research is undertaken in universities and public-funded research organizations, the university administration is not research friendly and there are no incentive structures – either financial or professional – to encourage teachers to undertake research. Some NGOs and policy research initiatives such as think tanks have also produced specific development focused research products but generally do not have longer term interest in research and the quality of their research is not yet established. Thus, the future of Social Science Research depends on how we overcome these challenges.

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