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Social Science Research in India: Basic Challenges

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Abstract

Social science research in India has had a chequered history. Today social science research in India has grown manifold and as of 2014, there are 677 universities in India with more than 500 departments of social sciences as per the latest statistics from the website of India's HRD ministry. Some NGOs and policy research initiatives 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. Therefore, finding out the major challenges of social science research in India is the theme of this article.

Key Words: Social Science, Social Science Research.

Introduction: Social science research in India has had a chequered history. In India the development of social science research is directly an outcome of the processes of modern education, the setting-up of universities and the academic interests of Indian intellectuals in writing issues concerning the people of the country during the colonial period. In the pre-independence phase social science research was mostly university centric and after the independence of India many institutes of research came up which have also contributed towards the development of social science research.

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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"¹.

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'².

Generally speaking, the Social Sciences like Sociology, Economics, Anthropology, History, Psychology, Political Science etc cannot be kept within the limitations of demarcated boundaries. This is because; every human activity is a multifaceted activity. Therefore the Social Sciences overlap other disciplines and also relates to Natural and Human Sciences along with the Arts. In totality, Social Sciences study the structure and properties of human groups, the way of individuals interact with one another and within other environmental groups.

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 social³. Social scientists employ a range of methods in order to analyze a vast breadth 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: An overview: The fourth review committee (March 2007) of The Indian Council of Social Science Research , New Delhi ⁴ claimed that social science research is chiefly driven by two forces: (a) interest in knowledge about the functioning of society in its diverse social, cultural, political and economic aspects, and in understanding the factors that shape them; and (b) the practical needs of policy makers and managers in government, civil society and the private sector for reliable information and professional analysis. According to the committee, in the pre-Independence period, the scale and scope of both these was quite limited: universities and other academic institutions, the main canters of scholarly research at that time, were relatively few. The requirements of information and analyses for government were also quite limited. The post Independence period witnessed a vastly expanded role for government in engineering economic development and social change. It also saw the rapid growth of modern industrial and commercial enterprises. Political controversies and public interest in issues relating to public policy and their social implications generated an economy and society. All this led to a rapid increase in the demand for both information and research on developmental issues. The fifties and sixties saw an unprecedented effort at expanding and restructuring the statistical system, and in promoting research. Several new universities with departments for teaching and research in different social science disciplines were established. The Planning Commission initially played a leading role in (a) involving social scientists (mostly economists) from the university system in preparing plans, monitoring their implementation and impact; and (b) encouraging and supporting research by scholars in universities through a large number of projects on diverse subjects. Government departments began to show increasing interest in establishing or expanding specialized institutes under their control. They also began sponsoring research projects in universities and funding units in existing universities and institutions to conduct research on specified subjects. The number of university departments and research institutions in the field of social sciences has since grown manifold. Besides funding the creation and expansion of social science faculties in universities and colleges, the University Grants Commission initiated a programme to fund Centres of Advanced Studies in university departments with outstanding faculty, and Special Assistance Programmes to nurture and support promising university departments in different social sciences to expand and strengthen their research capabilities. The funding for fellowships for doctoral and post doctoral research was increased. Government departments and public sector organizations and, more recently, UN agencies, aid agencies of foreign governments, international financial agencies, and private foundations have also shown increasing interest in funding research on socio- economic

development and policy issues. This has led to a mushrooming of non-governmental 'research' institutes and an increasing presence of private consulting firms and NGOs in surveys and 'research'. This trend has gathered momentum with the progressive liberalization and globalization of the economy.

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. Today social science research in India has grown manifold and as of 2014, there are 677 universities in India with more than 500 departments of social sciences as per the latest statistics from the website of India's HRD ministry⁵.

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 focused 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.

Constraints in Social Science Research in India: Social research is at cross-roads in developing countries like India. 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. Some premium universities located in the major cities foster academic research cultures which include interdisciplinary work, knowledge production with emphasis on peer review, and engagement with internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies. Members of faculty in many of these institutions are scholars of national and international repute. However, 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.

In India the situation is different, as compared with developed countries, in the field of social research. According to Saravanavel⁶, it is because:

1. In India, social problems are many more and much complex, as compared with developed countries.
2. Country like India cannot spare funds for social research because needs of money in other walks of life are much pressing and require immediate attention than research.
3. It is not easy to raise additional resources for research because a vicious circle of poverty, capital formation, taxation etc., is going on.
4. Most of the researchers in India are not well equipped with latest research techniques.
5. Universities and research organizations in India practically have no infrastructure to produce trained and qualified social researchers, at short notice.
6. The number of qualified, trained and devoted social research workers is already much less than what is needed to investigate and research social problems. Etc.

Shamita Sharma⁷ also pointed out six such problems in social research in India and broadly they can be put as follows:

- i. The dominance of western intellectual tradition in the study of India. The influence is not only in applying western ‘concepts, theories and methods of study but also topics of study’. As a result of which many issues concerning India’s interest were not adequately studied.
- ii. Majority of Indian social scientists are elites and thus research problems ‘perceived by them are given priority over the problems of the masses’. There is lack of representation from the masses in social science research in India. The issue of representing women’s issues and their problems in social science research is problematic.
- iii. The high concentration of social science research in cities and the lack of it in the rural areas.
- iv. The over emphasis on economic issues and the dominance of economists over other disciplines has created a gap in the development of social science research in India. Inter-disciplinary research continues to be a major issue because social science research continues to be discipline – specific. Social science research in India is mostly funded by government or international organisations. The dependence of social scientists on external support limits the scope of autonomy. By giving autonomy and freedom to the researchers, the ICSSR has contributed to the growth of social science research.
- v. The brain drain of the highly educated from India in search of better opportunities such as employment, salaries and living conditions, and conducive academic environment, also affects social science research in India.
- vi. Apart from the above, there are other problems which have been identified and are affecting social science research and particularly at the level of universities. Problems such as inadequate number of faculty in the social science disciplines; and the use of vernacular languages as the medium of instruction at the post-graduate level have also impacted social science research because from such centres of learning it is doubtful if ‘serious research scholars will be produced’. Some other factors identified by ICSSR include lack of ‘incisive and original analytical studies; poor quality of research proposals; and shortage of qualified researchers’.

Structural Problems:

- 1) One of the fundamental shortcomings of social science research in India is the lack of proper institutional support and funding. Social science research in India is largely funded by the Government of India and its agencies such as the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the University Grants Commission (UGC). While India has had a relatively stronger academic tradition in the humanities and social sciences, India’s budget expansion in higher education focuses on science and technology. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a significant increase in the number of non-state funders of social research in India. While this share is still considered to be very small compared to that of the government, it is a rapidly growing field. There is no comprehensive or accurate data, however, on how much these agencies contribute in numeric terms to social science research in India. The multiplicity and wide range of players in this category, and the significant duplication of work across these agencies make it virtually impossible to estimate the amount of money that is spent on research by these agencies⁸.
- 2) The second issue relates to the emergence of a rapidly growing private and business enterprise sector, which has created a new demand for social science research for business management, commerce, marketing, media and other fields. This has had a negative impact on the conventional social science fields. New actors like corporate bodies, industrial

associations, NGOs, and private trusts have entered the research field to conduct specific goal and mission-oriented research. They provide social scientists with better research capacities and often wean the best of them away from the university system, thus contributing to an internal brain drain⁹.

- 3) The third issue concerns the autonomy of social science research vis-à-vis political interferences. Major research projects and funding for politically loaded subjects such as religion, caste, ethnicity, etc., are subjected to political steering.
- 4) Multidisciplinary approaches are seldom used even within the various social science disciplines and the policy research field is largely dominated by economics.
- 5) 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. A majority of doctoral theses in regional universities cannot be published due to their poor quality.
- 6) Another problem in Social Science Research is the problem of language .The medium of instruction up to 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.

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 organisations recruit university graduates, but do not invest in further research capacity building and training. Applied research organisations and consulting firms are increasingly becoming attractive career options but there is a preference in these organisations 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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