

Research Programmes for Engaged Social Sciences

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A report on a national consultation on the state of social sciences and future directions that was held recently at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

Significant transformations of the Indian economy, polity and society over the last two decades raise one important question: Have the social sciences in India been able to understand and adequately interpret this change? Some of the superficial signs are not entirely encouraging. If the Nehruvian Second Plan strategy was built around the work of academics like Mahalanobis, the intellectual inspiration for the liberalisation process has largely come from within government. Indeed, there are even some signs that the gap between the social sciences and the demands society is making of them is being filled by those outside Indian academia.

The report of the fourth Indian Council for Social Science Research review committee looked at the books published by the top eight academic publishers in India. A third of these books were written by foreigners or non-resident Indians. More important, of the remaining, well over a fifth was accounted for by independent researchers.

The very real gap between social sciences in India and the demands society is making of them has caused some introspection among social scientists themselves. But no matter how intellectually rigorous such an exercise is, it still reflects only one side of the picture. It raises, and answers, questions social scientists think are important. It is just possible though that these questions are not always the ones that are at the top of the mind of others in society who are looking to the social sciences for insights. It is important then to look at the issue not just from the point of view of social scientists but also from the perspective of those who engage with the social sciences, whether they are policymakers, industry, non-government organisations (NGOs), or anyone else. To this end the National Institute of Advanced Studies organised a consultation, 'Towards Engaged Social Sciences' in Bangalore on

October 29 and 30, 2007, which brought together social scientists and those who engage in the social sciences. At the end of two days, the consultation came up with a number of recommendations that pointed to an alternative way forward.

Different Voices

The road to these recommendations was not the usual one. As was only to be expected, the social scientists and representatives of NGOs, industry or government did not always speak the same language. On the question of corruption, in particular, the differences were quite striking. The social scientists tended to treat corruption as an externality, even if a debilitating one. Corruption for them was a major reason why effective policies could not be implemented. Those outside the social sciences, on the other hand, tended to place corruption at the centre of their analysis, repeatedly beginning their analysis with an attempt to understand this phenomenon.

The wide range of the issues covered and the sheer diversity of the views expressed made it quite futile to seek complete unanimity among the participants. At the same time any consistent ground that emerged from such a diverse set of views would clearly be well worth carrying forward. In the search for such common ground, the participants were requested, in the concluding session after listening to each other for two days, to come up with specific suggestions pointing to the way forward for social sciences in India. They then came up with a variety of suggestions which, despite all the diversity in opinions and backgrounds, appeared to have a degree of consistency. Indeed, the suggestions could fit quite easily into a consistent framework of recommendations.

Research Programmes

The main thrust of these recommendations was that social science research should be organised in terms of research programmes that could be financed by the government, private sources or a combination of the two. This was based on the recognition that social science research is becoming increasingly dependent on project funding. These projects, whether they are from the government or industry, typically come with specific questions for

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which the social scientist is expected to provide the answers. These questions, more often than not, are focused on issues of immediate concern. Important as these issues are, the healthy growth of the social sciences as well as a meaningful understanding of society, requires us to also raise questions before they become matters of immediate concern. Social scientists thus also need to raise questions and develop theories which they might not always be able to do under conditions of project-based research alone. The way out would be to focus on broad research programmes built around specific issues. Such programmes would address not just matters of immediate concern but also theoretical and other related issues.

Each programme would have to be managed by a core group. Researchers from across the country would then be able to approach the programme for support for individual projects including theoretical ones. As long as the core group believes that the individual project is consistent with the overall aims of the programme it would be financed. Such programmes would thus be able to draw on research talent from institutions across the country, and can address broad issues in a more comprehensive manner. The knowledge generated by these programmes would be of use to all those who engage with the social sciences.

Policymakers, NGOs, industry and others will be able to find not just answers for questions on their minds, but also to questions that are important for their work but had not occurred to them. Since such programmes would benefit all those who engage with the social sciences, they are likely to find financial support from the government, private sources or public-private partnerships.

Strengthening Institutions

The success of these programmes would depend on the talent they can draw from institutions across the country. Thus rather than programmes replacing institutions, the two would have to grow together. The programmes would thus have to be accompanied by measures to strengthen institutions. This would have to begin with measures to recognise successful social science institutions. This could be done by

institutionalising the practice of providing substantial corpus funds to institutions with a proven track record. The government has given substantial grants to individual institutions that have gained reputations of their own. This process could be institutionalised by laying down predetermined criteria that will make institutions eligible for such corpus funding.

Institutions that meet a specified minimum standard can be eligible for a specific corpus funding; those that have established higher standards can be eligible for a larger corpus. Institutions that have demonstrated an ability to function on their own will then gain greater autonomy through a larger corpus. Such a mechanism could also be related to periodic reviews of the functioning of institutions so that they are aware of just how close they are to achieving the prescribed norms.

Better Compensation

The problem with institutions is however not a matter of finances alone. There is also a need to put in place a system that generates high quality social science research professionals in the required numbers. Here again the first step could be in the form of recognition. This could be done by increasing the amounts paid to national professors and offering it to younger social scientists who have established research credentials. There is a need to encourage social scientists between the ages of 40 and 45 who have demonstrated an ability to do high quality research and could benefit by being given a free hand for a fixed period of time. The category of national professors could be used to provide them the resources needed to work on issues of their own choice for a period of, say, five years.

Beyond providing recognition, there is a need to improve the quality of researchers as well as their numbers. The quality of research in research institutions as well as teaching in universities today is negatively affected by, among other factors, the substantial and growing distinction on the ground between institutions that teach and those that do research. This sharp distinction ensures that the latest research findings are not known to teachers, and researchers do not have the benefit of having their ideas challenged by young minds.

This gap could be bridged by cross-deputation. Researchers could be deputed for fixed periods of time to teaching institutions in exchange for teachers being deputed to research institutions. Such cross-deputation should have the effect of improving teaching, or at least making it more in touch with the latest research. But this process alone would not be enough. There is a need to substantially alter the textbooks so that they reflect the latest developments in each field.

Bilingual Research

The quality of research and teaching is also adversely affected by having a purely English-based social science while society functions in other languages. This directly affects the dissemination of the research to a wider audience. More importantly, there are insights to be gained by engaging with society through the local languages which are not always captured by a unilingual (English-dominated) research process. This difficulty has grown in recent years as in earlier decades there were social scientists who wrote in more than one language. There is thus a need to expand the scope of bilingual research and teaching.

In addition to providing the finances and the talent for research programmes, there is also a need to improve the quality and availability of data. A recurring theme during the consultation was the existence of a data crisis. Agricultural economists in particular were worried about the quality of the data that was being generated by surveys. With satellites now generating images with one metre resolution, it was felt that the use of satellite imagery for crop and land use data needs to be explored urgently. If satellite imagery can provide accurate data for smaller areas, it will also help crop insurance by providing at least a preliminary idea of the production on the land of individual farmers. There is thus an urgent need to explore the potential to use satellite imagery for data on agriculture.

Concerns about the availability of data were also raised in the health sector. While hospitals had a large amount of data, this was not available to social scientists, possibly because of concerns about the privacy of patients. If privacy is protected through effective guarantees of anonymity, it should be possible to provide this data to social

scientists. There is thus a need to create a system where health records maintained by hospitals are used to generate data that could be used by social scientists with the guarantee of anonymity for patients.

There was also a concern expressed that the data that are currently being generated are not being utilised to their full potential as they are not made available to the larger fraternity of researchers. ICSSR institutions today generate a substantial amount of data through projects of their own. This data needs to be put into a sharable database so that it can be shared by a broader set of social scientists. There is thus a need to create a sharable database of information on research data across all ICSSR institutions. Such a database can also be tapped by those who engage with the social sciences from industry, government and NGOs.

An effective research programme that expects to attract research talent from institutions spread out across the country will also have to improve communications among social scientists themselves. To this end it becomes important to establish a Social Science Network. The consultation reflected the gaps in the awareness of the social scientists themselves of the research being done in different parts of

the country. This was particularly true of research being carried out at the MPhil and PhD levels. It was felt that an online Social Science Network would help reduce this gap. The online nature of this network would also provide an effective link for researchers in the more remote parts of the country. This would help Indian social science as a whole engage with issues in remote areas in the country.

Online Dissemination

Since one of the main objectives of the research programmes would be to make available high quality social science inputs to those who engage with the social sciences at least some of its success would depend on it being accessible to those outside the social sciences. This could be helped by establishing an online mechanism for the dissemination of research results to a wider audience. The lack of information and accessibility was highlighted as a key concern by all participants. Those who were not social scientists in particular emphasised how difficult it was for them to access research findings. It was felt that information about research findings should be provided to those who could use them whether they were in government, industry, NGOs or in any other field.

In short, the recommendations are: (i) Social science research should be organised in terms of research programmes that could be financed by the government, private sources or a combination of the two. (ii) Institutionalise the practice of providing substantial corpus funds to institutions with a proven track record. (iii) Increase the amounts paid to national professors and offer it to younger social scientists who have established research credentials. (iv) Depute researchers to teaching institutions in exchange for teachers being deputed to research institutions. (v) Substantially alter textbooks so that they reflect the latest developments in each field. (vi) Expand the scope of bilingual research and teaching. (vii) Explore the potential to use satellite imagery for data on agriculture. (viii) Create a system where health records maintained by hospitals are used to generate data that could be used by social scientists with the guarantee of anonymity for the patients. (ix) Create a sharable database of information on research data across all ICSSR institutions. (x) Establish a Social Science Network, and (xi) Establish an online mechanism for the dissemination of research results to a wider audience.