



Mapping The Changing Context And Orientation of Social Science Research In India: Some Observations

KEYWORDS

social science, interdisciplinary research, research-policy interface

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ABSTRACT *Social science research in India is increasingly assuming an interdisciplinary orientation and becoming relatively more collaborative in its approach. Periodic reviews of trends, perspectives and orientations in social science research have largely sought to identify the recurring and dominant themes within the domain and the outcomes in terms of funding related priorities set by both government and private funding agencies. While there is an emerging and active orientation towards research-policy interface, no doubt due to the demands posed by liberalization and the market and the increasing competition from non-governmental entities for funds, the relation between research and pedagogy remains ambivalent. Also, the new contexts of social science research are yet to acquire novel and comprehensive theoretical and methodological discernment in terms of unpacking changing Indian social realities.*

Introduction

Social science research in India is increasingly assuming an interdisciplinary orientation and becoming relatively more collaborative in its approach. In the recent past, it has been marked by collaborations across disciplines and between institutes and individual researchers. Mapping the trends and patterns in social science research assumes importance for various governmental, non-governmental and policy-making institutions, given that they undertake their institutional research within the framework of its postulates and generalizations. Such periodic reviews of trends and patterns in social science research have primarily sought to identify the emerging, recurring and dominant themes in social science research in India and the outcomes in terms of funding related prioritization by both government and private funding agencies. These periodical reviews have also broadly assumed the form of commissioned studies by various funding bodies, grant agencies, government institutions or the reflections of practicing social scientists. (DFID 2011, Krishna & Krishna 2010).

In such reviews, the focus of social scientists has largely been on various theoretical perspectives and approaches influencing diverse themes in social science research and the commissioning agencies have been mainly interested in how various themes are prioritized within social science research. These reviews have also been broadly structured according to various themes such as milestones, ideologies, focus areas, regional patterns, clusters, schools and theoretical traditions (Chatterjee 2002, Giri 2003). Certain patterns can also be discerned based on the context, time, scope and objectives of such reviews. The scope and objectives of such reviews reflect the nature of interest that various agencies evince in social science research.

Approaches, Themes and Focus of Social Science Research in India

Social sciences in India have evolved, both through a process of mutual interdependence and the independent growth of subject matter, theoretical and methodological approaches within disciplinary traditions. In the process of cooperation, completion and collaboration, various social sciences disciplines have also acquired a distinctive identity. The same is evident in reviews and reflections on status of research in social sciences by practicing social scientists

in India. Some broad patterns in social science practiced in India, moreover, also demonstrate a cultural hierarchy between empirical social science and theoretical pursuits (Guru 2002). Most of the research papers by Indian researchers are published in Indian journals (Goel et al 1994). A few researchers have also sought to determine the status of social science research in terms of annual average publication rate vis-à-vis global publication share, research priorities, share and international collaborative papers, to mention a few of the aspects explored in such studies. (Gupta et al 2009).

Papola (2010), while tracing the growth of discipline based and technique-oriented research, observes that there is an emerging and active orientation towards research-policy interface. However, the relation between research and pedagogy remains ambivalent and possibly needs to be examined further for more conclusive observations. Further, he examines the role of ideological leanings within Indian social science, in addition to recent developments and concerns like narrowing of the space for social sciences in a rapidly expanding higher education system, the declining demand for social scientists and social science research, the decline of the questioning mode and increasing commercialization and privatization of social science research.

Krishna and Krishna (2010:81) observe that social scientists are united in their opinion about the decline in the quality of teaching and research standards in South Asia. They attribute it to the decline in accountability and weak peer evaluation systems in publicly funded research institutions and universities. They also draw attention to the concerns expressed by eminent social scientists in this regard. All of the above mentioned factors could perhaps account for the decreased interest in the production of incisive and analytically significant empirical accounts of changes in Indian social realities.

Comparisons with ongoing research in natural sciences, made in such stock taking accounts and reviews, are drawn more in terms of public funding priorities in India, which reflect increasingly that social science research is receiving less and less state patronage as compared to the natural sciences, though such studies also point out that within Asia, India has had a relatively lengthy and robust tradition

of public funding for social science research.

The reviews by senior social scientists in this regard have primarily focused on reflections about and the need to reorient present research focus and scope by the practitioners in the domain. The status reports concerned with these reflective exercises are largely commissioned by funding agencies and predominantly stocktaking exercises, mainly to identify gaps in research areas and reprioritize future research in social sciences. The immediate context, objective and resources available at the reviewer's disposal determine the scope of such reviews. It is noteworthy that very few commentaries, review studies and status reports have achieved their divergent objectives. Others have merely inspired further reflections and more status reports along similar lines. The broader conclusions drawn in such reflections are that though social science research in India has largely succeeded in outlining India's social structure and mobility patterns, several unanswered questions remain about the precise nature and process of social change in India.

New Institutions, Contexts and Scope of Social Research

It has been observed that social research has acquired new meaning and purpose with the increasingly direct involvement of development based funding agencies in reorienting the research focus of conventional universities and research institutes and patronizing new research institutes that largely depend on their funding for sustenance and growth in recent decades. Joshi (2001:5) observes that in the last two decades, in addition to social science research institutes, non-governmental organizations have established themselves as significant actors in the arena of social science research. years, especially during the last two decades.

The interest of NGOs in social research may be understood in terms of their involvement in social action, especially in the development sector. Joshi also observes how involvement in social action, at the grassroots level, brings the NGOs in direct contact with the social, political, economic and cultural realities and complexities of India. This new research setting or context is significant as it marks both the evolution of social science research in India as well as the challenges it faces today in terms of competing with new entities for limited funding opportunities outside of government sponsorship and funding opportunities. On the other hand, the research carried out through new research institutes is more specific in terms of its mandate and addresses the overall objectives and focus areas of the funding agencies. This, however, poses a real challenge given the increasing number of specialized research institutes and dwindling government funding for social science research.

Conclusion

Various reviews and stock taking activities and reports on the status of social science research in India show that such research is at once encountering new opportunities and even more challenges in the changing environment of limited funding and sponsorship. This becomes even more complicated given the research gaps and methodological limitations that persist in terms of analysing the structural aspects and barriers in Indian society. The new contexts of social science research are yet to acquire novel and comprehensive theoretical and methodological acumen in terms of unpacking changing Indian social realities. This is what renders both the status of social science research in India and existing analytical tools and techniques

of assessing Indian society precarious and inadequate.

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