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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
IN GLOBALISING INDIA
Historical Development and Recent Trends

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Historical Development and Recent Trends*

T.S. Papola**

[Abstract: Social science research in India has under come serious criticism in recent years for not having met expectations in terms of analysing some basic structural aspects of the economy and society that have emerged, particularly in the wake of the India's quest for globalisation, meeting some internationally set standards of quality and providing inputs for policy and teaching in higher education. Some of these failures are attributed, for example, by the Fourth Review Committee of the ICSSR, to the increasing trend of lack of resources, commercialisation and privatisation of social science research in recent years. Was social science research meeting these expectations in earlier years? Has there been a qualitative change in the scenario in the recent years? What factors are responsible for this change? What major changes are required to remedy the situation? Are some of the 'reforms' being currently advocated likely to improve the situation? These and related issues are examined in historical and contemporary perspectives in the paper.]

An editorial column of Economic and Political Weekly some time back echoed the common concern when it commented that “social science research in India has in recent years been falling short of expectations” (EPW, 2007, p. 3519), endorsing the view expressed by the Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), in its report (ICSSR, 2007). In fact, one commentator in the discussion on the Report organized by the Weekly considered the description of the current state of Indian social science as ‘crisis’, “well merited” (Guha 2007). The obvious question to ask with while examining this comment is: what are the “expectations” from social science research?” In general, social science research is expected to enhance understanding of the society, its functioning and changes; provide inputs for policies for socio-economic management and development; and, generate ideas and information that could be used for teaching at various levels of education. As such social science research renders vital

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services to the society and, therefore, deserves to get adequate public support and funding. Social scientists, on their part, are expected to carry out research on themes and in a manner that could best fulfil the above expectations.

Were these expectations being fulfilled adequately in earlier years? And how and why are they not being fulfilled by social science research in 'recent years'? The present paper makes an attempt to answer these questions. It starts with a historical narration of developments during the first three decades of Independence, mainly drawing upon a review exercise undertaken by the author earlier (Papola, 1984). It is followed by a description of the developments during the past three decades updating and contrasting the propositions and observations made in the earlier exercise. The final section briefly outlines the danger signals and possible remedial measures to augment quantity and quality of social science research. Three points need to be made here by way of limitations of the paper. One, it is based primarily on author's own observations, experience and discussions as during a period of over four decades of association with teaching and research in social science, and not on any extensive documented research. Two, observations made in the paper are mainly based on developments in the subject of Economics with which the author is more familiar. Three, most points made have been made earlier, particularly in the ICSSR Review Committee Report and comments made on it (EPW, 2008), but bear repetition. As the paper is based on a keynote presentation in a Conference (Papola 2009), it is more in the nature of a statement rather than a well documented and evidence based research.

1. Historical Evolution

Teaching and research in social sciences started in India with the introduction of the modern university system in the later half of the nineteenth century. Social sciences formed a part of the higher education system in line with the British tradition of liberal education. In the beginning, education in social sciences naturally aimed primarily at dissemination of the concepts and theories in vogue at the time in European, specially in British Universities. Simultaneously with the emergence of national movement for independence, however, a limited yet significant trend developed to question the application and usefulness of Western theories and concepts in the Indian context. Such a trend, however, did not gather much strength due to the colonial government's hostility to anything that resembled protest against the British dominance. Yet, along with the growth of a positivist – theoretic tradition, a significant body of thought and literature exploring new path for India's socio-economic regeneration after the impending political independence emerged particularly during 1930's and 1940's. This development was substantially influenced by the academic and political exposure of Indian intellectuals to

the ongoing socialist development in the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the rise of Mahatma Gandhi on the political and intellectual scene in India, on the other.

1.1 Growth of Discipline Based and Technique Oriented Research

Social science teaching and research grew at an unprecedented rate after Independence. Higher education system expanded at a rapid rate as a part of the programme of planned socio-economic development. Management of development at various stages and levels required increasing number of educated and trained people not only in technical and scientific fields, but also in social and economic disciplines. Development process threw up numerous and diverse problems that required research and analysis to arrive at strategies and solutions. Approaches to study, however, became more discipline-based and specialized, as against the holistic and interdisciplinary approaches of studies earlier, both because of the more specific nature of the problems requiring study and discipline-based specialization that grew with expansion of higher education.

At the same time, availability of more experience – based data and empirical material which cast doubt upon the validity of received theories, led some researchers to raise questions on the application of Western concepts and propositions for explaining the socio-economic phenomena in India. A large volume of empirical research resulted in this process, which quite often helped in examining certain accepted propositions on relationship among socio-economic variables. Most research attempts, however, stopped short of formulating alternative hypotheses, propositions and theories. The nature of research was also shaped, to a large extent, by the dominant methodological framework utilized in most studies. By 1960's, Indian social science, influenced by the contemporary American tradition to which many Indian social scientists had been exposed, had imbibed a strong positivist and quantitative approach in its research. It, no doubt, helped bring precision and specificity in research work, but at the same time, promoted an approach in which the method (the means) became more important than the result (the end). Greater the 'sophistication' used, better was considered to be the quality of research! Contribution to understanding and policy became secondary to the exercise of research itself. Technique virtually triumphed over theory. Rigorous efforts were made to improve identification and specification of variables with useful but still inadequate results. But emphasis on quantification led to the neglect of non-quantifiable, structural and institutional variables, which have a vital role in economic and social processes in India.

Methodological innovations and the ascent of quantitative approach nevertheless led to rapid increase in the quantum of research, particularly in Economics. Availability of new data, specially with large scale surveys on different aspects such as consumption and employment (by National Sample Survey Organisation – NSSO) also aided significantly

in the quantitative increase in research output. Also, increase in the number of social scientists with expansion of university departments and setting up of new institutions was another significant factor in leading to a boom in social science research in 1970's and 1980's. Increasing importance given to research publications in selection and promotion of teachers in the universities added its own contribution to this quantitative spurt in research output. Empirical research using quantitative techniques got preference over historical-deductive research, due to its quick yielding nature.

1.2 Research-Policy Interface

Research based on empirical data and material also yielded results and implications that could be used for short and medium term strategies, policies and programmes for development. Some research was undertaken to evaluate the ongoing policies and programmes and its findings were used to revise, modify and change them. Both autonomous research by social scientists and that sponsored by government agencies with specific objectives of examining the performance of policies and programmes found use in decision making. Most research was, however, what the policy makers termed as 'academic', meaning not of use for policy making. On the other hand, many researchers often also did not care to work on subjects and choose questions of direct relevance for policy: in fact, such research was treated as of inferior variety. Thus the idea of an inevitable and direct relationship between analytically sound scientific research and rational policy formulation was often lost and a false dichotomy between 'academic' research and 'relevant' research developed.

This dichotomy notwithstanding, there occurred a vast increase in the quantum of empirical research during the 1970's and 1980's. There were two basic reasons for this expansion. First, the social and economic transformation that was taking place under the planned process of development threw up issues not only relating to the effectiveness of the government programmes and policies, but also concerning the structural changes, inequity and emerging social and economic distortions. Many social scientists obviously found challenging themes for research in these developments. Second, even though primarily interested in promoting research of direct relevance to policies and programmes, the government in the process also provided support for 'academic' research. Availability of larger funds for social science research and establishment of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) are testimony to government's interest in promoting social science research of both variety.

1.3 Clearage between Research and Teaching

Side by side the vast expansion in social science research, there developed a cleavage between teaching and research both because of the nature of themes that got importance

in research and location of research away from the teaching departments in the universities and colleges. Most researchers, as noted earlier, examined specific questions of short-term nature relating to a specific phenomenon or a programme or a policy with limited goals and objectives. There was not much research that contributed to secular long term questions of structural relationship in society and economy which could have contributed to the development of propositions and conclusions of more general and lasting nature to be included in the syllabi and teaching. Findings of the large variety of empirical research, each with limited scope did not lend themselves to some definitive conclusions and generalizations so as to easily form parts of the course contents, textbooks and classroom instructions.

A more important reason for widening cleavage between teaching and research was the separation of the personnel and location of the two activities. Till about the middle of 1970's, most research took place in the teaching departments of Universities. It was undertaken by teachers and, therefore, could get incorporated directly and quickly, if not spontaneously, in teaching and reference material and class room instructions. A system of encouraging research among teachers by making 'contribution to knowledge' as an important criterion in appointment particularly at higher than the initial level, had been in place in the Indian university system from as far back as 1920's (Shah, 2005). Separation of teaching and research had taken place in physical sciences rather early as an unintended but inevitable and undesirable consequence of the establishment of a large number of research laboratories outside the university system soon after Independence with the objective of strengthening the scientific research system in the country (*ibid*). It started in social sciences during 1970's when a number of non-teaching research institutions came up either under the auspices of ICSSR or, independently induced by the availability of larger research funding. An increase in teaching load, which was also formalized as 'norms' by University Grants Commission around that time, in any case left very little time for research for teachers in most university departments and colleges. Those interested and able to put in extra effort also found it difficult to carry out any sponsored research on a project mode due to rather rigid bureaucratic financial and administrative procedures in the universities. University research got mostly confined to doctoral degree dissertations the quality of which also deteriorated due to lack of adequate rigorous supervision.

1.4 Ideological Parameters of Indian Social Science

An important feature of social science research during the first three decades after independence that needs to be noted is its ideological orientation. Research foci and themes mostly endorsed the basic ideological premises of social and economic development that evolved during the independence movement and got incorporated in

the philosophy of socio-economic development followed after independence. The basic tenets of democracy, freedom, secularism, equality and social justice, as enshrined in the Indian constitution, specially the Directive Principles of State Policy were accepted by the mainstream social scientists as desirable goals; they were rarely questioned and were taken as given parameters of research in economic, social and political issues. Planning as a system of management and development of the economy was also, by and large, endorsed: researches were carried out on the need and ways of improving and reorienting the planning system and effectiveness of its implementation, but the necessity and desirability of planning itself were rarely questioned. It was recognized and accepted that the traditional social structure based on caste system is unjust and needs to be abolished and, in any case, discrimination based on caste must be eliminated; and, that untouchability is a social evil and must be eradicated. Objective studies were undertaken to expose these distortions in the social system and to examine how they were changing and could be removed. Researches were also undertaken on nature and causes of communal and regional tensions with the underlying idea of establishing harmony and national integrity. Modernisation of the social and economic structure of the country had similarly been a common cause both of development agenda and social science research though there have been differences among social scientists as to what 'modernisation' should mean.

While the basic parameters of the national ideology of development were accepted by social scientists in general, there was, however, no similar endorsement of the means and actions through which the nationally accepted goals were to be achieved. Social scientists, in fact, constantly questioned through their research, publications and discussions, the routes and strategies adopted by the government irrespective of which political group constituted it. There was hardly any major policy initiative of the government that did not evoke critical comments from social scientists. With the exception of instances under emergency during 1975-77, critical and dissenting views were heard and often accommodated by the state. It can be reasonably argued that to a certain extent, the dissenting voices, including those of the social scientists, contributed to the balanced character that most social and economic policy measures in India obtained. Thus, ideology of industrialization was pursued along with emphasis on agricultural and rural development; large scale industrialization was sought to be counter balanced by special attention to the development of small scale industries; positive discrimination in favour of disadvantaged groups was combined with efforts at integrated development; tribal development programmes have been a mixture of preservationist and modernizing measures; and, public sector hegemony of 'commanding heights' was combined with encouragement to the growth of private sector – the so-called 'mixed economy' strategy. Such balance in policy may have been primarily necessitated by the objective conditions prevailing in the society and also

resulted from the political compulsions of a democratic polity, but significance of public debate, including that from the social scientists based on their research and discourse, in bringing it about, cannot be denied.

1.5 Primacy of Economics

Different social science disciplines, however, did not get equal space and importance in public discourse on development. Major concerns of India as a politically independent nation were seen to be economic in nature, and it was assumed that economic development would lead to resolution of most social problems as well. Social scientists, by and large, accepted these propositions, notwithstanding some questioning of this 'deterministic' approach. Sociological and anthropological research did throw up some evidence to suggest that economic growth not only does not solve all problems, but could also lead to emergence of some new problems. The dominant view, however, continued to be economy-centric; resolution of social problems of inequity and exclusion were sought within economic domain, by reorienting the pattern of growth to make it more equitable and by adopting special measures, mostly economic, favouring the poor and the disadvantaged.

As a result, Economics attained the major importance among social science disciplines, in terms of relevance for identifying, diagnosing and treating the problems of Indian society. It was mostly the economists who were involved in official bodies in policy making as experts, advisors or consultants, and it is they who were in demand for undertaking research for policy making. As a consequence, Economics experienced the fastest expansion in multi-disciplinary institutions and universities, in terms of faculty and enrolments as well as resources available for research. While there may have been no grudge from other disciplines against the disproportionate share Economics received in public visibility and resources, the relative neglect of study of other disciplines and specially, the decline in interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach in research constrained the development or a fuller and integrated understanding of the complex problems of the Indian society.

Within the discipline of Economics, however, different approaches and schools of thought prevailed. Thus in spite of a dominance of neoclassical, marginalist and positivist tradition in the West, there occurred a resurgence of classical, institutional and Marxist traditions as they were often considered to be better suited to explain and devise solutions to the problems faced by Indian society. Yet, research and writings with different approaches and ideologies grew and received encouragement and support from the state and civil society. Different conclusions and opinions arising out of research and studies with different approaches were welcome and often accommodated in public policy making.

2. Recent Developments and Concerns

Most of the trends and features of social science research described above have continued in recent decades as well. But there have been both quantitative and qualitative changes that have given rise to new features some of which do not appear to auger well for the future of social science research in India. More important of these developments and concerns are described in the following paragraphs.

2.1 Narrowing of Space for Social Sciences in Rapidly Expanding Higher Education System

The quantitative expansion of higher education system, which provides the basic source for development of social sciences, has taken place at a much faster rate during the last two and half decade than in the earlier years. In 1950-51, there were 27 universities, 370 general and 208 professional colleges; their respective numbers went up to 184, 4862 and 886 by 1990-91 and 350, 11698 and 5284 by 2005-06. The number of university level institutions is reported to have gone up to 450 by 2010. There are, however, changes in the composition of these institutions that have reduced the share and importance of social sciences in higher education. A large number of the new institutions have come up in the professional and technical fields. Many, and, in fact, majority of them in recent years, have been started by the private actors where again 'paying' and 'self-financing' courses have precedence and social sciences have limited scope for offering such courses. Research, in general, and social science research, in particular, finds hardly any place in most of such new private and professional institutions. Thus it appears that the rapid expansion of higher education system in the new phase coinciding with India's quest for globalisation, is marked by a narrowing down of space for social sciences in the institutions of higher education as well as the scope of research in social sciences in the higher education system. This may be contrasted with a strong positive association between expansion in higher education and social science development during the first thirty years of Independence.

2.2 Declining Demand for Social Scientists and Social Science Research

Similarly, the use of social sciences in development planning and policy making which saw an upsurge during the first three decades after Independence seems to have declined. Development planning was seen as a complex process involving economic, social, political and spatial dimensions, for which it was necessary that inputs from different social sciences were used. In recent decades, the importance of planning itself has declined and whatever planning is practised is supposed to be market – centered, mostly involving linear rather than structural relationships (GDP growth can solve all problems, no need to bother about structural and distributive aspects in development! Or

at best, let growth be 'inclusive' i.e. let the poor also gain from it!). The role of social scientists and social science inputs is limited in such a policy environment.

Economists, who held the sway, even in the earlier context, now seem to be the lone social science community to be seen of relevance by policy makers. But even among them those conforming to official thinking are in demand, those with dissenting views are kept at a safe distance. Researches that justify official policy are referred to with approval while those critical of it are ignored. Usefulness of research is seen in terms of the support of the government action, not of constructive criticism which often tends to make powers that be rather 'jittery'. As a result, support for balanced and diversified research is becoming increasingly constrained.

2.3 Questioning Mode on a Decline

The new policy perspective and attitude towards social science research with different outlooks have also influenced the selection and treatment of research themes by researchers themselves. Thus the longer term structural issues are generally ignored while short-term causes and consequences of sporadic events and phenomena attract most attention. Concerns about poverty persist, but more research is done on how NREGA programmes are functioning than on how the high economic growth of the past decade is distributed. 'Inclusive' rather than 'pro-poor' growth becomes the rallying point for researchers because the former has replaced the latter in official development strategy. In a globalised world, it may look stupid to talk of 'self-reliance', but the long-term sustainability of a growth that is led by export of services is not seriously examined. Nor is the sustainability of a growth pattern in which the services constitute 55 per cent of total production but 75 per cent of the consumption basket of the people consists of commodities, and 56 per cent of the people engaged in agriculture produce only 17 per cent of national output thus resulting in an agriculture to non-agriculture per capita income ratio of 1:6, is questioned.

The function of social science research is to enhance the understanding of and critically analyse the pace and pattern of development and change. This task was performed by social scientists very credibly during the first three to four decades of Independence as pointed out earlier in this paper. The same cannot be said with confidence for the past two decades. As noted in the EPW column referred to in the beginning of this paper "It is an irony of sorts that at a time when far reaching changes are taking place in India's society, economy and politics, we have an inadequate understanding of the underlying processes and larger trends". Social scientists have not been able to explain contradictions in economic and social development that have emerged over the past decades. Growing socio-economic inequality, stickiness of caste labels and persistent dominance of primary relationships despite rapid changes towards 'modernisation', and

increasingly extreme and violent forms that social conflicts have taken in recent years, have not found adequate explanation in social science research. In fact, not many social scientists have ventured to study these phenomena. There are more studies evaluating the processes and impacts of government programmes that are expected to alleviate poverty and backwardness than those attempting to identify social and economic causes and processes that result in and tend to perpetuate poverty, inequality and deprivation. Thus the studies, at best, point out the weaknesses in implementation as the cause of ineffectiveness of programmes, but do not examine whether the programmes really strike at the root of the problems.

2.4 Increasing Commercialisation and Privatisation of Social Science Research

Like all other aspects of society, social science research has also seen a sharp rise in commercial orientation and increasing role of private enterprise. Financial support for research has become more motivated by specific, short-term and often commercial concerns. General support for academic research for advancement of social sciences, and particularly support for institutional capacity building, has declined. Most research funding is project-based where the objective, scope and often even methodology is specified by the sponsors. And sponsors, irrespective of whether they are public agencies, private foundations or international organisations, have their own agenda and goals that the researchers have to pursue. Increased use is made of 'tendering' or 'bidding' to award research projects, in which a scholar, an agency or institution with best research credentials need not necessarily be selected. And among the actors in research, a new breed of organisations, private consultancy companies, have emerged as an important addition to the previous three, namely, the universities, research institutions and government agencies — all supported by public funds and operating on a non-profit principle. Research is thus being "driven by the interests and concerns of sponsors as distinct from public interest" (Vaidyanathan, 2008).

It is natural and perfectly justified for a funding agency to support or sponsor research that it could directly use to advance its goals. So a government department or ministry supports research that helps better formulation and implementation of policies and programmes in the areas in its jurisdiction. A private company gets researches carried out to increase its business and profits. Even so-called charitable endowments and foundations have specific objectives to achieve through research they support. The problem is not with the expansion of research in these categories as such. It lies in the shrinkage of funding for research that could enhance knowledge in all aspects of social science disciplines, so as to improve overall understanding of socio-economic development and its processes and which could also be used to upgrade the contents of teaching in social sciences. The cleavage between research and teaching which was noted

to have taken place earlier because of the compartmentalisation of the two activities between different institutions and scholars, is bound to increase with the above trend in the nature of research funding and consequent contents of social science research.

3. Future of Social Science Research

The trends described in above paragraphs obviously do not auger well for the future of social science research in the country. For healthy and balanced development of social sciences it is imperative that adequate space is available for independent and diversified research. In other words, there should be enough scope for the social scientists to be able to undertake research on the themes of their choice and with the scope and method they consider appropriate. That is possible only when adequate support is available for social science research that is not tied with any particular theme or approach. Such support should consist both of the block financial assistance for institutional development and capacity building and for research projects and programmes proposed by individual or groups of social scientists.

At the same time it must be ensured that the social scientists, individually and as part of institutional teams take serious interest in pursuing research in themes of larger and long-term concerns of society. For while lack of funds could be one reason for a decline in social science research, “inability or unwillingness of individuals and institutions to forge long-term inter-disciplinary research programmes and strategies” could be another equally important reason (Guha, 2008). For, “In the hierarchy of numerous problems in social science research, the lack of good research proposals has always ranked much higher in recent times than lack of funds per se”. It is also important that social scientists have a strong sense of social accountability so as to respond to the challenges that the problem of the society throw up to them for study.

The role of the Indian Council of Social Science Research is certainly very crucial, as the apex body for promotion of social science research in the country. The Council needs to be strengthened in order to perform its role as the saviour of social science development in the country with greater support from social science community and the government. It is currently seen by the social science community as a government agency capable of providing patronage and by government as a sub-ordinate office of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It is in complete contrast with the perception in the first couple of decades of its inception when social science community looked at it as a body ‘owned’ by them and by government as an autonomous body to promote social science research that needed protection from its bureaucratic tyranny. ICSSR acted as a buffer between social scientists and the government ensuring autonomy and independence of research; and, social science community also stood by the Council to support it against

any erosion in its autonomy. Such a positive and constructive relationship does not seem to prevail between the social scientists and ICSSR today. And it is necessary that this relationship is restored in the interest of development of independent social science research in India.

The proposal of the Fourth Review Committee of ICSSR to replace it by a larger Indian Academy of Social Sciences deserves serious consideration, in this context. The new body can ensure autonomy in so far as it proposed to be governed by a collegium of eminent social scientists. The recently floated proposal for an omnibus authority, such as National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER), however, requires to be viewed with caution. Besides becoming a huge monolith, such a body is likely to marginalise social science disciplines, in so far as in terms of importance conventionally attached and allocation of funds, natural sciences will dominate its approach and functioning. If it is considered necessary to constitute such a body, there should be clear earmarking of the funds for social science research in its budget. The Review Committee's recommendation to enhance funding for social science research to 0.1 per cent of the domestic product also needs to be seriously pursued with the government.

Finally, it is time that serious thought is given to bridge the gap between teaching and research. In the first instance, it is important that the teaching departments in universities and colleges are strengthened to undertake research. Not only more funds need to be made available to them, but the university administration should also become more research friendly and suitable incentive structure – both financial and professional should be evolved to encourage teachers to undertake research. Second, mechanisms should be found out to forge active links between research institutes and university departments so that teachers in the universities can participate in research programmes of institutes and those in research institutes get opportunities to teach in the universities. In fact, it would be most desirable to develop a system of deputation of scholars from one to another type of institutions on a regular basis. It is often observed that the statutes, traditions and political dynamics of old, specially state, universities come in the way of forging such links. Suggestions, in this regard, to connect the research institutes with the new central universities (Chatterjee, 2008) deserves very serious consideration.

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Trade, Investment and Technology: Trade policy reforms, WTO, composition and direction of trade, import intensity of exports, regional and bilateral trade, foreign investment, technology imports, R&D and patents.

Employment, Labour and Social Sector: Growth and structure of employment; impact of economic reforms and globalisation; trade and employment, labour regulation, social protection, health, education, etc.

Media Studies: Use of modern multimedia techniques for effective, wider and focused dissemination of social science research and promote public debates.

ISID has developed databases on various aspects of the Indian economy, particularly concerning industry and the corporate sector. It has created On-line Indexes of Indian Social Science Journals (OLI) and Press Clippings on diverse social science subjects. These have been widely acclaimed as valuable sources of information for researchers studying India's socio-economic development.

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