

Social Science Research in India: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: Universities like Nalanda and Takshashila were noted centres of higher learning and research, particularly in Social Sciences and humanities, in ancient India. Scholars from world over used to come to Indian Universities. But in the last decade Social Sciences and humanities have suffered a lot in India. Though not listed in the top 200 universities in the world, many science and technology institutions in India are known globally but institutions of social sciences and humanities are not. In the post industrialisation era, market driven and career oriented education took the top slots. The authorities could not realize that the social sciences only can tell us of our roots. One must realize that the social sciences frame us for the values, within whose parameters we shall use the newly acquired knowledge. There shall be a balance between natural sciences and social sciences. Almost all the Universities have departments in various specializations of social sciences. But over the time there is qualitative and quantitative decline in the standards of research in the social sciences due to various reasons such as lesser position in the hierarchy among disciplines, retirement of senior committed qualified social scientists, below average students opting for these disciplines, lesser opportunities for degree holders in these disciplines, lesser funding and less incentives, lack of support from industry etc. As a consequence, research output has become sub standard. The efforts of statutory bodies like UGC and ICSSR in association with UNESCO through provision of monetary support to encourage research in social sciences are giving results. Still there is a large gap. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse various factors for declining standards in social sciences teaching and research and remedies are suggested.

Key words: Social sciences, innovative minds, research culture, social scientist, research aptitude

1. INTRODUCTION:

Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramshila, Vllabhi, Ujjain and Benarus were popular centres of higher learning in ancient India. They attracted students and scholars from as far away as China, Greece and Persia. The then Indian universities Nalanda and Takshashila were noted centres of learning and research, particularly in social sciences. Scholars from world over used to come to Indian Universities. During the colonial rule, the indigenous system of education received a serious setback (Choudhary, 2008). Universities were set up for conducting examinations and awarding degrees. They are confined to produce graduates in various disciplines in large numbers aimed at entering into government service. This fundamental character of Indian universities has not much changed in independent India. The Universities are of affiliating type. Hundreds of colleges are attached to the universities for affiliation. In colleges main focus is on teaching and very few teachers in degree colleges do undertake research. Though universities are expected to undertake active research and provide solutions to many societal problems, but they are heavily focussing on teaching. In addition, majority of university teachers were burdened with additional administrative responsibilities in addition to teaching and research. As a result, research is taking a back seat in universities also. Therefore, research was confined to specialized institutions. Thus the challenges faced by the higher education institutions such as lack of innovation and research productivity have deeper roots and are traceable to the British rule

Higher Education sector has witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of Universities and colleges since independence. As per AISHE Report-2016, there are 799 Universities (mere 20 in 1950), 39071 colleges (just 500 in 1950). Among these 45 institutions are Central Universities. Total enrolment in higher education in India has been estimated to be 34.6 million. It is the third largest education system in the world by volume of students enrolled (after US and China) with a gross enrolment ratio of 24.5%. Among these, about two lakh students only enrolled in research programs, which is less than 0.4% of the total student enrolment. Majority of which were in the fields of Science, Engineering/Technology, Medicine and Agriculture. The fraction of students enrolled for research in social sciences is very less.

Day by day social sciences and humanities have taken back seat and physical sciences started occupying top slot in the hierarchy of departments in the Universities. In the last few decades the scenario has further deteriorated due to students' demand for professional courses in Physical Sciences, Technology and Management. With the presence of private players in Higher Education the situation has further worsened. They corporatized and commercialized the education and education has become a commodity in the market. Thus the education is opened

and left solely for market forces. Though not listed in the top 200 universities in the world, many science and technology institutions in India are known globally but institutions of social sciences and humanities are not. In western world social sciences, popularly called as soft sciences are given due recognition along with physical sciences. Harvard and Cambridge Universities are still very popular for social sciences. In India not even a single University including the Jawaharlal Nehru University cannot boast of such recognition.

2. CAUSES FOR DECLINING RESEARCH CULTURE IN SOCIAL SCIENCES:

During the 60s and 70s, social sciences and humanities research was given due attention. However, over the time there was a qualitative and quantitative decline in productivity and the standards of departments (The Hindu, 2014). According to Chaudhary, there are three reasons for declining culture in social sciences - structural, financial and managerial (Chaudhary, 2009). World Social Science Report (ISSC/UNESCO, 2013) identifies four important factors among other things for declining interest in social science research. They are: lack of funding, lack of institutional support, lack of incentives to do research, lack of interest among social scientists themselves. In addition to these factors social sciences have received a death blow by factors like brain drain, retirement of senior qualified social scientists, reduced opportunities to social scientists, lack of training for young faculty, commercialization and corporatization of education, hierarchy among disciplines and providing incentives to the branches of science and technology.

2.1. HIERARCHY AMONG DISCIPLINES:

The root problem for declining research culture in social sciences lies in the approach. There is a sense of inbuilt hierarchy among disciplines in education field within which social sciences remains marginalized and is at the periphery of knowledge ambitions of young generations (Reena, 2013). It is shocking that, there is a hierarchy even within the social sciences. For example, economics is preferred over history or political science. This is again due to commercial value of that course.

2.2. FUNDING TO SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH:

Government spends nearly 300 crores of rupees annually on an IIT. This is in addition to the donations received from alumni and grants from foreign agencies, business houses, industry and NGOs. Whereas universities and specialized institutes in social sciences have to depend only on government funds. Central universities may be well funded, but suffer from a crisis of governance. Even the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), which was ranked second best university on the HRD Ministry's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) has cut the seats for research programmes for the academic year 2017-18 (Uma Vishnu, 2017). Whatever may be the reasons this type of measures by the universities will adversely impact the productivity of the research. In majority of universities over 40 per cent of faculty positions lie vacant (Raj Kumar, 2014). The problem is even more serious when it comes to state universities. They solely depend upon the funding from state government with which they will manage to meet the salaries of the staff, forget about funding for research. Grants from UGC are not at all sufficient to meet the research needs. It is a fact that that day by day cost of journals is going up, while the budget for the same has not increased, resulting in the non-availability of important international journals in university libraries.

2.3. LACK OF AUTONOMY:

The level of autonomy enjoyed by the science and technology institutions (STIs) is not available for social sciences institutions. STIs have experienced little political interference. That is the reason why persons like Homi Bhabha, Vikram Sarabhai, Raja Ramanna, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, M. S. Swaminathan and Kasturi Rangan could bring laurels to the institutions they worked. But, hardly a humanist of the calibre of S. Radhakrishnan is available, or likely to be appointed Vice Chancellor, or even as a member of the university executive council today.

2.4. LACK OF INNOVATION:

The Universities must have a close contact with the society. In addition to creation of mere data they shall come up with the alternative models and solutions for the societal problems. But, a close observation of the present day research carried out in Indian Universities reveal that mostly it is an extension of the previous work done with little or no innovation. Not only that, the problems chosen mostly for research were either socially irrelevant or of a very poor quality. One of the specific reasons for this decay is that the teacher of higher education does not feel his obligation to update himself to the latest developments and information available on the chosen subject of his interest. As most of the senior teachers are engaged in administrative activities, they find little or no time to refer journals to expose themselves to global research work.

2.5. LACK OF CONTINUITY OF THOUGHT:

Continuity of thought is also very important in research. Usually, in science and technology a research student is attached to the senior student in the laboratory. In addition, research supervisor interact with the research student at regular intervals and monitors the progress of research in sciences (Bharat, 2008). The quality of postgraduate research supervision depends to a large extent on the ability of a supervisor to meet the needs of the student, and the students in turn should be desirous to learn as much as possible from his/her supervisor. Mutual understanding of each other's role is in fact crucial for the success of any research process.

3. REMEDIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

3.1. CHANGE IN ATTITUDE:

It is disturbing that the number of students opting for under graduate courses in social sciences is decreasing day by day. This is because of the attitude of the parents that their ward shall become either technocrat or doctor. This attitude has to change. Education shall not be viewed from the commercial view point alone. The education system shall have a space for ethical principles, sports and games right from the high school level. One must realise that higher education is the major contributing factor to the social, cultural and intellectual life of society by improving the quality of human life.

3.2. MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH:

Of the eight winners of the top awards in mathematics given away at the International congress of Mathematicians in Seol on August 13, 2014, Dr. Manjul Bhargava had his mathematician-musician mother to mentor him develop his skills in mathematics, music and linguistics. Can a parent be that liberal in India?

Indian universities need to be dynamic and adoptive to the changing needs and priorities of the society and should provide an arena of freedom to young innovative minds (Shetty, 2010). Choice based credit system must be evolved, so that a history student can study chemistry or a political science student can study physics or an economics student can pursue mathematics together.

3.3. COLLABORATION:

Indian universities are generally timid in seeking collaborations which are necessary for the development of new ideas and perspectives (Raj Kumar, 2014). Existing policies relating to research exploration both within and outside India need to be re-examined and made more progressive and inclusive. Government shall make efforts to identify innovative research methodologies in frontier areas of knowledge and assist in building a network for carry forward the research interests of institutions, scholars and teachers

3.4. PLANNED EXPANSION OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS:

Building world-class research-oriented universities involves a serious commitment to knowledge creation in the sciences, arts, social sciences and humanities. With unplanned expansion of higher education institutions aiming to enhance gross enrolment ratio (GER) is leading to mediocrity. Even in the surplus funded central universities more than 40 per cent of faculty positions lie vacant. This is not only affecting teaching learning process but research as well. Universities must be torch bearers of the society. They shall continuously observe the society, study the problems associated and shall come out with possible multiple solutions. At present there is no organised study either by the government or any higher education institution in the country on the needs of the stratified educational needs of the society. It is left to the society. That is the reason why mushrooming engineering colleges all over, particularly in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. There shall be a balance growth of universities and colleges without compromising quality. Until the crisis of lack of faculty and infrastructure is addressed, there should be a short moratorium on establishing new universities including.

3.5. MOTIVATION:

The universities should not become mere certification institutes. They must see to it that there shall be a regular academic activity both at the university level and affiliated colleges like conducting of workshops, seminars and conferences so that flow of knowledge takes place among the academic community. Students are motivated. It is important that the motivation of doing Ph.D. should not be a scholarship or food and shelter in hostels. Not only that the traditional lecture has to be supplemented with student centric and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) learning (Kurup, 2013). Research aptitude must be developed among the students. At present, data on many aspects is lacking in India. Here comes the role of social sciences institutions. The authentic and stratified data will become a very good instrument both for the government and critics.

3.6. FUNDING AND PRIORITISATION OF RESEARCH AREAS:

There is a need for high level of funding for research, including contractual research (Shetty, 2010). An indicative and guided research needs to be promoted by phasing out 'old wine in new bottle' type obsolete and stereotype research. It's time to shift from traditional incremental budgeting to a performance based one to arrest the erosion in quality and resource crunch.

4. CONCLUSION:

One must realise that it is the social sciences that will tell us of our roots. It is the social sciences which will drive us for the values within whose parameters we can use the newly acquired knowledge judiciously. Social problems are directly felt by the people. Research by offering solutions to such problems will provide us necessary guidance to live a meaningful and peaceful life. Both public and Government are responsible for declining research in social sciences. On the government side, the problem of under financing and under staffing of universities must be addressed. Like Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) that promote scientific and technological research in the country, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) shall become pro-active in promoting guided research in social sciences and humanities and incentivise the best performers. Hierarchical low importance given to social sciences right from school days is a big blow to the development of social sciences. This attitude has to

be changed for which increased opportunities are needed. Public opinion has to be mobilised to redefine the priorities of higher educational institutions. The social scientists must realise that they address the issues that affect the well-being of nations and global society. In the name of improving the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of higher education, quality shall not be compromised. And finally, the culture of research is to be cultivated in colleges and universities. Most importantly, the research shall not be isolated from living realities and policy making. The focus must be on the issues and problems of national and regional importance. Research to be relevant and meaningful, the social scientists have to identify the problems of people of that region and come out with probable solutions.

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