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Social Science: Quest For Relevant Research**Rajeshwar Prasad**

The objective conditions of Indian society are changing fast, the social scenario is getting blurred, the comprehension of social reality is becoming more challenging and that perhaps, is the reason for a re-appraisals of social science research. The questions which I propose to raise may not be new; the context perhaps, is new. Frankly, in this area it is a *Rondo* - a piece of music with leading theme to which return is continually made. So, even if the issues raised here are old but the thematic and contextual angle may be fresh and new.

The infancy of social science(s) is continually emphasised to cover up the gaps in their teaching and research. And particularly, the literature of social science research is full of the arguments that the research apparatuses, scales of measurement, tools of data collection, are not perfect because the social sciences are young. But the natural and physical sciences too are not 'old' yet their tools, techniques and processes of research are fairly standardized. So, it is not the infancy of social science(s) that accounts for the 'inadequate' and 'imperfect' research tools, rather it is the basic problem of 'borrowing the natural science model' and a tendency to quantify the otherwise qualitative material - social facts. This applies also to the inadequacy of application of 'scientific method' and other related questions of subjectivity, objectivity, value loaded study and value neutrality etc., which we will discuss later.

There is no doubt that it is difficult to set limits for quantification and/or becoming 'scientific' particularly for some disciplines like psychology and economics, which have gone too far in 'quantification

and scientification' of their 'subjects' of study. At times the understanding of social situation gets buried in the debris of 'figures and formulae' 'models and paradigms' and the end-result again, is not the true understanding of the phenomenon, and ultimate failure of the grand model, yet it has a value for government, administration and industry. However, the issue may be discussed as to how much 'quantification' is needed; why should there be a craving for opting for 'natural science model' lock, stock and barrel, and how to 'mature and attain adulthood' for the social science(s) which inspite of good 'chronological age' have a regressive tendency to relapse to 'infancy' or, at the most, have 'adolescent fixation'.

Another important issue that needs serious attention is about the very nomenclature of 'social science'. Do we call it *social science*, or still maintain the existence of branches and accept plurality - *Social Sciences*, even at the research level. Attempts were made by certain Universities at carving out courses for unified *Social Science* in U.K. and other countries, and in India the University of Madras first, gave a degree of Master of Social Science. It is now wound up for many constraints, above all being the problem of securing employment of graduates of an 'amalgamated course' in 'specialization-based academic employment environment'. Although it has not happened to 'Life Science' or 'Environmental Science' which in the realm of natural / physical science have been able to establish independent identity with an amalgam of botany, zoology, chemistry, agro-forestry etc.

There is no denying the fact that one starts learning *social studies* - history, geography, civics, elementary sociology, at the lower level of school education and then specializes in Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science, Sociology etc., at the university level. But at the research level again, perhaps there is need of 'gestalt'. I am sure this needs serious consideration by the professional researchers who honestly know the limitations of 'holistic study' at the hands of 'specialist-researchers' steeped in one 'branch' of social science but destined to deal with research problem which may have many ramifications across disciplinary bounds.

Fads, Foibles and Mystification again are detrimental to the development of honest, relevant and comprehensible research. Fads, foibles and mystification are added to make a research piece 'hi-fi'; it gives 'prestige' to the research report and the researcher. Pitirim A. Sorokin had long warned about the dangerous consequences of this 'fadism' and mystification. In the name of new 'laws and novel theories, new models and 'unique paradigms', new 'terminologies and fascinating vocabulary', enough confusion has been added to the existing trash of social science literature. In science the conscientious scientists and well-meaning people realised that knowledge is not meant only for the specialists, it is rather meant chiefly for the consumption and benefit of people hence, there is a world-wide movement of *de-mystification of science*.

Unlike the research in the fields of natural sciences, the researches in social sciences are by and large, by-passed and ignored by the political outfit and policy makers in the government. The comparatively greater participation of Economics/ Economists may be a cause of jealousy for other social sciences/scientists yet, a closer scrutiny of the nature of this participation shows that the broader framework of economy is dictated by the State machinery (and now the international funding agencies like the World Bank, IMF etc.) and the 'good-fit-model' is prepared by the economists. As consultants, experts, advisors again, the role of social scientists is to largely tow the official line. One would recall the plight of social scientists attached with the Mandal Commission and the consequent embarrassment they faced later on. Professor D P Mukerji in the context of participation of sociologists in the planning process had cautioned against such participation, and particularly accepting stringed state-sponsored research, at the second All India Sociological Conference at Agra as far back as 1958-59. Otherwise too, the argument that social science research has not made any visible impact on the making / remaking of social environment in India (or for that matter any Third-World society) in the same manner as the science and other technological researches have made world-over, need to be seriously pondered upon. It does not belittle the importance of social

science research as such. The need certainly is to give a new direction to social science research selecting subjects that are relevant to people, their needs and aspirations, people's empowerment, desirable and meaningful social change.

It may be realized that science - natural, physical and biological - through discovery and research, mostly produce technologies, create new dimensions of applied sciences that are useful (or dangerous and detrimental) to people. Social science does not produce any 'technology' of sorts. The 'application of social science' to human welfare and social development need serious research-attention of our social scientists in such a way so that the appropriate modalities are evolved to reshape society free from inequity, inequality, atrocities, exploitation and fear.

Core Questions:

The first and foremost question is the 'value orientation' of the researcher that invariably affects the research study. The values have both individualistic and collective forms and content. Religious, social and cultural values are collective and act as tools of social control. These values, as may be seen, are authoritarian for the masses and influence their worldview. On the other hand, the individualistic values that are libertarian, and sometimes at variance with the mass / collective values, belong to the elites. No doubt the intellectuals, scholars, teachers and researchers are a kind of 'elite' and infested with individualistic, libertarian values yet, the authoritarian, collective values do influence their thoughts and deeds in many ways. For example, with one set of values (individualistic) they 'judge' the actions of 'others' who are governed by collective authoritarian values. This generates conflicts; first is the conflict between the two sets of values; second, it is the conflict of 'elite role' and 'mass aspirations'; and thirdly, it is the conflict between the perceived role of 'value-free' researcher and the actual camouflaged and compulsive class, caste, gender, ethnic biases in research endeavours. As an individual the value orientation of a researcher is libertarian, but as a member of a class / caste or other special group he is consciously or unconsciously

guided by the vested interests, and thus the results of most researches get tainted yet, the claim always remains that it is value-free.

In basic/natural/physical/biological sciences the object of research is external, hence, 'value freeness' in research, but in society it is not so. The researcher is part of the phenomenon. He influences and gets influenced from the situation / field of investigation; hence, the interplay of values, ideologies and other socio-cultural idioms must not only be honestly accepted but boldly stated by the social scientist.

Instead of the old 'value free' social science, now there is a copious mention in literature about 'value-neutral' research; it is again a veil to cover one's biases, prejudices and the real hidden-agenda of research. Societal issues and appended research questions are value-loaded questions. Take for example, the *Ram Janma Bhoomi - Babri Masjid* issue, or for that matter the question of reservations in education, employment and legislature for certain groups of people: these are highly value-loaded questions. Most of the social scientists got exposed and showed their true colours of religious and caste loyalties on these issues. The rise of Naxalism, the organisation of high-caste-Senas, the upsurge of the Dalits, the question of gender equality and even the issue of child-rights, are all heavily value-loaded issues. And, most analyses depend on researchers' own ideologies, biases, prejudices, commitments and value-orientations. Some of the so-called value-neutral researchers are branding 'caste-Senas' as "emergence of higher-caste identity" in Bihar; the conflict between Naxals and old zamindars and other caste conflicts are seen as 'ethnic conflicts'. Though preposterous, all this is done in the name of social science and under the garb of value neutrality!

There is an alternative. If the social, cultural, economic and political questions are all value-loaded, and if 'value-free researcher/ social scientist' is only a hypothetical entity, then, one might 'unload the load', i.e. declare or make open the personal value-orientation and personal convictions. If one says that he subscribes to socialist, secular, democratic, cosmopolitan (in the sense of its value and not the local-specific), universalistic, scientific, libertarian, humanistic

values, and cherish equality, equity, justice - social, economic and political in society, and certainly craves for classless and casteless Indian society, then his intentions and writing will be honest, humble and simple. And if he further clarifies that Karl Marx, Mao, Lenin, Laski, Nehru, Gandhi, Radhakamal Mukherji, D.P. Mukerjee and host of other progressive, revolutionary, humanist thinkers and makers of modern societies have influenced his mind set, the arguments that he takes and the logic that he applies in his writings will be more clear to the readers. For, instead of interpreting higher-caste-Senas as upsurge of higher-caste identity, or the communal and caste-conflicts as 'ethnic conflicts', he would look into the question of land alienation, failure of the State to implement land reforms, marginalisation of the tribals due to emerging consumerist-capitalistic economy and the *unholy* alliance between the economically powerful castes/classes and the State.

Take for example, the case of 'child labour'; there is no doubt that the phenomena of child labour is obnoxious; it is inhuman, in some cases it is unconstitutional, in some other cases it is illegal. Thus, there is cause for its abolition but not at the cost of 'child's life' itself. The hue and cry against child labour by the State and other voluntary sector, if motivated by WTO and social clauses thereof, and if so supported so as to damage the Indian domestic market by German importers, and if the so called activism is maliciously financially supported by American and other monopoly groups, *then we will certainly finish our product and the poor child, rather the child labour*. One may see it also as a clandestine attempt to destroy the family - based production, large scale when pooled, say, in the handmade shoes of Agra, so that the competition at the international market may be eliminated.

The above comment should not mean that child labour must not be abolished; it must be abolished but with pragmatic policy options; not by by-passing the poverty nexus unscathed but by recognising it as the real challenge. In effect, how to eliminate child labour without eliminating the child is the real challenge before the social activists, social scientists and socially concerned social researchers.

No direction of any social science research can be properly pointed out unless existing social context and changing social milieu are properly mapped out. The contemporary world scenario inflicted with technologisation, free-marketisation, consumerisation, liberalization, globalization, industrialization and urbanization, and the withering-away of established natural, social, cultural and political institutions, call for a greater role of social science in socio-economic, psycho-ethical, politico-administrative and cultural arenas. The economic liberalization and globalization have, however, exposed the weaknesses of social science (including classical economics), particularly as an intervention-tool and policy-plank. The fairly stable civil society, most established social institutions, societal cultural strengths and social policy perspectives, that have long supported the under-privileged and sustained the struggles of the down-trodden world over, are getting blurred and virtually thrown overboard. The otherwise house-maid social science is now virtually made slave of the economic masters and neo-imperialist powers.

All these processes referred to above and the mega-institutions - MNCs, TNCs, Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank, IMF), have eclipsed the nation - States and all societies have been negatively affected by them in a major way. The pervasive influence is due to the expanding media and electronic communication. The information revolution has greatly affected the local social, economic, political and cultural institutions and people's life and living. How effective is the role of social science in measuring this far-reaching change, and directing it for common good, is a serious matter to be pondered and discussed.

The Indian social situation is fast changing due to the pressures of international forces and internal contradictions. Some new social problems have fast emerged and the old ones have taken new shape. For example, there is a growing nexus between the foreign and local bourgeoisie; locally, the expanding bourgeoisie, rich feudal-kulaks, unscrupulous businessmen, dishonest civil and police administrators, greedy and cunning politicians and the mafia of hue are all aligned against the common man and the very vital national interests of India.

There is growing violence in all walks of life, including family violence (child beating, wife battering, husband bashing, dowry deaths, aged-neglect etc.), narco-terrorism, insurgency and armed caste-wars that is shattering the social and political unity of the nation. The whole social fabric is torn to pieces. Social Science research needs to take-up these emergent problems urgently.

Research problems of Indian social science would thus emanate from the existing Indian reality. From what has been described above we can briefly hypothesize that in (1) contemporary India there is a wide gap and perhaps a sharp value conflict between the personality system, culture system and social system. They are contradictory in some respect to each other, and this contradiction accentuates host of other problems that need deep study and analysis. (2) In spite of modern forces of change there are static customs, stagnant traditions, petrified value-system, frozen philosophies, archaic beliefs, outmoded attitudes, and decadent culture. Most of our research problems emanate from this objective reality too and need sophisticated tools for proper analysis. (3) There is an attempt to foist a value system, in the name of mainstream that has generated a peculiar conflict in Indian society, which need proper study at all levels. (4) So far, the interaction between tradition and modernity was not as sweeping as it is evident now; the new economic compulsions, political forces, scientific and technological revolution, unbridled commercialization and consumerism have changed the very face and facet of modernization. The old forces could be checked and controlled but the new forces are so powerful and so engrossing that instead of controlling them, the local elite not only welcomes them but in fact, enters into partnership. We need to seriously examine this situation and include it in our research agenda. (5) Increased criminalization, dehumanisation, splinter-group insurgency and State terrorism need serious study with improved tools and techniques. There are other problems that need to be identified individually and collectively by serious and concerned social scientists.

This takes us to other important issues related with the nature of social science research, and the role of social scientists. Borrowing from the

positivistic paradigm, and craving for 'being scientific' most researches are analytic and dwell in theory building/ model construction/ paradigm development. Beyond conclusions, 'suggestions' are forbidden for inclusion in these. For long, social scientists have been analysing the 'social reality' from the positivistic angle and assigned the role of changing society to 'social reformers' and other social cultural and political activists. There is indeed an unending debate on this point as to whether the social sciences/ social scientists should assume any role of an agent of change or not. There is general disapproval of 'changer's role' for social scientists. It is for this reason that the social sciences have been dubbed status-quoist. In the old tradition of social science knowledge, it is the search for social equilibrium to ensure stability and overcome 'social deviance' that is the ultimate goal of social science pursuits.

Although we have discussed value-neutrality and its appended problems but one of the chief problems is '*inaction of social scientists*' thus opting for reactionary value-set. It is rightly observed that refusal to take any side would mean supporting the capitalist, dominant, powerful lobby in society at the cost of the under-privileged. I hope that this vexed issue will certainly be debated so that the social science research could be properly directed, and the role of the social scientists may be charted out.

Other Structural Problems:

At the level of research endeavour particularly in the institutions of social science research, there is a dilemma as to whether there is a need for Theoretical, Fundamental research or Applied and Action research. This flows from the issues of 'prestige' that a particular type of research gives to the researchers, as also the individual preference of the researcher. Both the theoretical and applied researchers are not diametrically opposite as is usually projected; both in fact, supplement each other. However, in the process of planned change, development and social reconstruction, applied research, though considered not very respectable, may be more 'fundamental and necessary'. The existing social science institutions in the country need to examine the

areas where fundamental research is imperative, and also identify the fields that need applied and/or action research. All these categories are not exclusive but complimentary.

The predicament of social sciences is that all of them are used to viewing the reality from their own narrow discipline-based perspectives. 'Social reality is a complex whole whereas the insights are dependent on single discipline, quite fragmentary; hence in analysis, in diagnosis, in policy formulation (or prognosis) there is no synthetic approach. Although people have talked quite eloquently about *Interdisciplinary Approach* to understand social reality, and also of *Multi-disciplinary Action* for policy formulation, implementation and developmental action, yet none of these could be realized due to die-hard 'commitment' to one's own discipline and outmoded values of professional social scientists. This is possible only when one's biases for his own specialization and one's prejudices against other disciplines melt and vanish, and an understanding derived from wider and varied knowledge bases and sources is accepted and internalized. This can be achieved again, through an intensive dialogue between the professionals belonging to different branches of knowledge and specialisations. The University Grants Commission has initiated a scheme, wherein there is a provision of funds to initiate preliminary contacts between the academics belonging to different disciplines □□ Science, Social Science, Humanities, to dilate on problems of society from varied and different perspectives. I wish it was possible for the ICSSR also to initiate such an interdisciplinary interaction at different levels. For, a wholistic comprehension of social reality there is a need of an *integral social science*.

Professor Rajeshwar Prasad was Director, Institute of Social Sciences, Agra; ex-Chairman, Indian Association of Social Science Institutions, and Professor Nurul Hasan Senior Fellow, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

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Indian Social Science: Tasks And Challenges In The Coming Years

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For me this occasion is very significant. Yesterday was the day of my birth when your Association conferred upon me the ***National Social Science Academic Award***; the city of Agra, where I have been given this prestigious accolade, is the place where I spent nearly eight years of my early career; and the topic on which you have asked me to speak is the one that engaged me for several years, first as the Director of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and then as UNESCO's Regional Adviser for Social and Human Sciences in Asia and the Pacific – in both these assignments, my task was to promote social sciences and to develop plans for the future growth of these disciplines.

I began my career as a trained Anthropologist who was required to teach not only social and cultural anthropology but also physical anthropology and prehistoric archaeology. It was a perfect training in interdisciplinarity. Also, while traditional anthropologists were still engaged in tribal ethnographies, I was asked to carry out fieldwork in a non-tribal village for my Masters degree. The village at that time was the meeting ground for sociologists and anthropologists.

After having taught anthropology at Sagar and Chandigarh for the first two years of my teaching career I was recruited by the Institute of Social Sciences of the Agra University as Assistant Professor of Sociology where anthropology was not taught at all. In fact, I was assigned to teach Advanced Sociological Theory–Weber, Parsons and