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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

Merton—and Research Methodology. I was also asked to conduct classes for students of Social Work. Such an environment offered an excellent opportunity for me to develop as a social scientist rather than a narrow specialist. It was here that I undertook a major research project for the Planning Commission to study the 1967 General Elections thereby contributing to the new specialty that is now known as Psephology -- a sub - specialty in the field of Political Sociology. When I moved over to the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi I had to work out a syllabus that would meet the needs of those students who were training to be technologists. And finally, as research administrator, first at the ICSSR and later at UNESCO, my role was different – as promoter of the culture of social sciences.

Social sciences in India, as also in several developing countries, are recent entrants to the academe. In the middle of the last centuries, they were struggling to gain recognition. While the importance of economics was well recognised in a milieu of development, other social sciences were not even taught in most of the universities. One could easily count the number of departments of sociology and social anthropology in the country at that time. In fact, Bombay, Lucknow, Calcutta and Delhi were the key centres which were later joined by Pune, Sagar, Rajasthan, and Chandigarh. For example, sociology was divided into two schools—the Bombay school and the Lucknow school. The Bombay school leaned heavily on Indology in the initial stages when G S Ghurye led the Department. The Lucknow School had its lineage in Economics: the two Mukherjees –Radhakamal and D P - introduced teaching of sociology in the department of economics. They even involved D N Majumdar - an anthropologist - in the teaching of the new subject by recruiting him in the faculty as lecturer in Primitive Economics. As these two instances indicate, introduction of new disciplines in the area of social sciences followed different routes not only in India but also in various other countries.

Social Sciences in India are thus not only recent; they are part of the Western import. They came with the colonization: the concept of a university, the curricula, the textbooks, and even the teaching staff, the entire academic culture in the modern sense of the term was borrowed

from the outside. Social sciences were also a part of this package. By saying this I am not denying the existence of writings and thoughts of natives that are of social science relevance; I am only suggesting that they cannot be regarded as social science in the sense in which we use the term today. Those writings were normative in orientation and had a tone of prescription. Modern social sciences, in contrast, lay emphasis on empiricism and theory building. These social sciences arrived during the period of colonization. The influence flow was one way and through a single aperture: colonies opened out to the wider world via the aperture of the colonial rule and got exposed to the culture of the country of the colonial master. The colonial rulers performed the gate-keeping function and brought in their own scholars—including the social scientists—to assist them in the understanding of the local cultures and also to teach the natives in modern institutions of learning.

The first phase of the social sciences in India can thus be described as the phase of the “outsider” studies of so-called “native” cultures and social structures. The second phase of the development of social sciences is characterised by the establishment of tertiary level teaching and training of “locals” abroad in metropolitan centres. In the third phase, these returnee migrants joined the pool of teachers and researchers as junior partners working under the guidance of expatriate social scientists—thus creating stratification among outsiders and insiders and also dividing insiders into those who were trained abroad and those who graduated locally. In the post-colonial phase, the demography of the social science profession changed drastically with the number of outsiders gradually reducing, but also becoming diversified in terms of their nationality. Moreover, the outsiders started coming mostly as researchers rather than as teachers. During this phase, many insiders also went to Western countries—mainly to the United States—for higher studies, including research. But their researches mostly related to India. Similarly, foreign social scientists other than anthropologists began showing interest in changing India and made it a site for their empirical work. Social science activity became more visible as India began its march towards

development soon after attaining independence in 1947.

Elsewhere I called this period a period of credibility crisis. Social Sciences were struggling to gain recognition within the universities and from the developmental agencies within the government. On the one hand, the struggle was to gain independence from the “parent” department that introduced the subspecialty. On the other, they had to prove their utilitarian value in a climate of social change.

The challenges that social sciences faced in the 1950s and 1960s were vastly different from the current challenges. Being recent in origin, social science manpower in India at that time was minimal and was ill equipped to handle the challenges. Many aspects of Indian society had not been studied, and those studied during the colonial regime were largely anthropological—that is related to the tribal communities that constituted a small percentage of the total population. Even these ethnographies became dated. The social scientists were trained to do the empirical work but were not prepared to answer all the queries posed by the bureaucrat-in-hurry. With meagre resources available for research and only a few universities supporting the teaching of social sciences there was dire need for creating a suitable climate for the social sciences. At that time social sciences could only lay their claims on what they could do, rather than provide ready-made solutions. Untested theories imported from the West and dearth of data on Indian society characterised Indian social science of those days.

Our universities adopted the Western model of “disciplinarization and professionalization of knowledge, that is to say, by the creation of permanent institutional structures designed both to produce new knowledge and to reproduce the producers of knowledge”.¹ As an aside, let me say that in the West there were five main locales for social science activity, where five principal disciplines were included in the social science category. The locales were Great Britain, France, the Germanies, the Italies, and the United States; and the subjects were history, economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology.² Leaving aside anthropology that focussed on the study of “other cultures”, the “quartet of history, economics, sociology, and political

science, as they became university disciplines in the nineteenth century (and indeed right up to 1945), not only were practiced in the five countries of their collective origin but were largely concerned with describing social reality in the same five countries”.³ These disciplines were nomothetic but they generated theories that were not universal; however, we unquestioningly borrowed them.

However, there were differences between Western social science and the social sciences in the developing world. Compared to the latter, the recognition crisis was already over in the West by the time they gained entry in the colonies, and good stock of empirical knowledge about the “present” had been created. They had well-developed infrastructure and adequate manpower. Social sciences in the West were already engaged in the battle of paradigms and were becoming autonomous in terms of funding support. On all these indicators, social sciences in the developing world, including India, had a contrasting profile. In such a milieu, social science promotion in the non-West meant a different agenda. The focus was on introduction of social sciences in the university curricula, gaining recognition in planning and decision-making bodies, carrying out empirical researches on themes of national relevance and on un-researched territories, and publication and dissemination of research findings. Quite naturally, the West served as the positive reference group, and the natives trained abroad took the leadership of the profession and encouraged use of theory and methodology developed in the West.

It is during this phase of initial expansion, and somewhat unquestioned replication of outside paradigms, that scholars began to feel a bit uncomfortable. They discovered inadequacies of the conceptual frameworks, inapplicability of several research techniques in the non-western context, and inability of Western theories to explain the non-western phenomena. This gave rise to debate and discussion and raised a call for *Indigenization*. In a separate essay I have tried to capture that trend. The call for *Indigenization*, I maintain, was not for creating a separate social science for each individual country, but for the *de-parochialization* of the Western theory that was claiming to be universal. Let me quote myself to elaborate this point: “While there is

too much iconoclastic talk about the ‘domination’ of alien models and theories and their inappropriateness, there is very little by way of an acceptable alternative...Efforts are still needed to test the alleged universality of established theories and models in a variety of settings. It is not so much an alternative which is really needed if one is to pursue the goal of a universal science—and not the setting up of ‘schools of thought’, like sects, creating priesthood and a blind following. Genuine efforts, which go beyond reactive rhapsodies, are rare.”⁴

The situation of social sciences in India today has changed. From a situation in the early 1950s when there was a desperately small number of active social scientists, social science enterprise today has an impressive presence: more and more universities are opening departments of social sciences; research institutes have been set up both within the universities, and outside, to specially focus on social science research; research cells have been created within various ministries, and in the corporate sector; and professional and technical institutions have recognized the importance of social sciences in the training of professionals. Social science culture is diffusing in the public domain: frequent employment of social science vocabulary and methodology in public and political debates and discussions, and in journalistic writings; Public Opinion polls, market research, and psephological analyses and forecasts are all indicators of increasing acceptance of the social sciences. Not only this, even the natural and physical sciences have acknowledged the significance of a social science orientation in their own work.

It is no longer necessary for the social sciences to beat their own drum. The vocabulary of social sciences, and the methodology used by them, is becoming part of common parlance amongst the intelligentsia. The growing demand for management sciences, the use of survey research techniques in gauging voting behaviour and predicting election outcomes, and now the debates surrounding demographic data generated by the Census Organization are clear examples of spread of social science culture. Social scientists have also begun writing for the media, and they are being invited for debates and discussions in TV

talk shows.⁵

Alongside the growth of social sciences - measured in terms of number of social science institutions, social science practitioners and students, volume of social science publications—the social and political scene has also drastically changed. Worldwide the literacy percentage has gone up, but also the figures for poverty and unemployment have risen. There is rise of indigenous scholarship. Politically, a new world order is in the making with the end of the cold war and the collapse of Communist states. We are witnessing the spread of liberal democracy, dominance of market forces, integration of global economy, transformation of production systems and labour markets, spread of technological change, and media revolution and consumerism. These developments question the relevance of both the Western and the Marxist paradigms of development. There is a universal acknowledgement that deficits in the field of social development mark every country irrespective of its level of economic development. It implies that neither the capitalist nor the communist model of development has been able to bring about social development. There is, therefore, a search for doable strategies to address to the common problems that defy common solutions. The new concern has brought the social sciences to the fore and given culture a central place in developmental thinking.

The challenges of population growth, environmental crisis (caused by depletion of resources, and pollution), globalizing influences of dramatic revolution in the technosphere and infosphere are all influencing the architecture of human civilization. For the continuing and emerging crises in the social sphere, it is now widely realised that mere technological breakthroughs are not enough. Both for handling the existing crises of social development and resolving the problems created in the social, political, cultural and economic spheres, and for fashioning the future, the need for effective involvement of the social sciences is universally recognized. It is now clear that the future growth of knowledge depends on the ability of science and social sciences to rediscover areas of convergence. They will have to innovatively combine different disciplines and different modes of

enquiry to understand the ever-increasing complexity of our universe. This would require opening out of the sciences by breaking disciplinary boundaries and effectively pursuing not only interdisciplinary but transdisciplinary orientation in our research and thinking. It is a call for decolonization of the mind-set and for a search of alternative models to organize knowledge. In the changed context, social sciences need no longer play the second fiddle to science and technology. In fact, the spectacular achievements in the sphere of science and technology, which resulted in IT Revolution, and moved the world toward an information society, have created enormous ground for social sciences. The newly created hardware and software demand a new focus on *humanware*.

It is not only science and technology that impacts humans and the human society, the culture of the humans also affects the growth of science and technology: the acceptance or rejection of innovations and their multiple uses depends on the culture in which they are introduced. Mere arrival of technology is not enough; it must reach its destination and receive welcome from its potential users. It is here that the social sciences play the key role. Investigation of this terrain is the responsibility of the social sciences.

Indian social science has reached a take-off stage. Meeting the challenges of development, the social scientists in this country have willy-nilly followed some form of interdisciplinary approach, at least in research. Now that there is a general call for *opening the social sciences*, as articulated by the Gulbenkian Commission, I feel that Indian social science stands in a better position to create interdisciplinary—even transdisciplinary structures within the academe.

There are five major challenges that we face today, namely that of

1. Updating teaching curricula and providing them with an interdisciplinary orientation, and introducing social sciences at the school level;
2. Consolidating the findings of research done hitherto and systematising contributions to theory, methodology, and to the

understanding of Indian society and culture;

3. Immediately attending to the current and pressing problems of the society through empirical research and participation in policy making and plan implementation;
4. Identifying the lacunae and setting an agenda to complete the unfinished tasks; and
5. Participating in the preparation of blueprints for the future.

There are three important growth points in the teaching of social sciences in India: *one*, more and more universities are introducing the teaching of individual social science disciplines and at higher levels; *two*, interdisciplinary orientation is being introduced through the inclusion of sister social science disciplines in the teaching curricula of a given social science discipline; and *three*, social science courses are made compulsory for students opting professional courses such as engineering, medicine, and agriculture. While the first trend is indicative of the expansion of the conventional student clientele, the latter two trends make new demands on the social sciences for interdisciplinary orientation and for justification of their relevance to those specializing in other fields.

Such growth demands a careful review of courses in all the teaching streams. This has to be done with a view to: indigenising social sciences; incorporating interdisciplinary orientation; and updating their contents by introducing recent developments in theory, research methodology, and integrating findings of contemporary research.

Reacting to the prevailing dominance of western paradigms and perspectives, the demand for the indigenization of social sciences is continuously being raised. But not much has been done to provide an alternative. Advocates of indigenization had different emphases: localization (replacement of foreign faculty by the local), language shift (from the foreign language to the mother-tongue), paradigm replacement, return to the native categories of thought, highlighting non-applicability of Western research techniques and methods, and overall condemnation of the foreign academic colonialism. For some,

indigenization meant glorification of tradition, reducing the demand to some sort of national narcissism. I regard Indigenization as:

1. A plea for self-awareness and rejection of a borrowed consciousness. It emphasizes the need for an insider view so as to promote thoughtful analysis of our own society to replace the existing trend of knowing ourselves via the West.
2. An advocacy for alternative perspectives on human societies with a view to making the social sciences less parochial.
3. A pointer towards historical and cultural specificities and a call for the redefinition of focus, with a view to developing dynamic perspectives on national problems.

Viewed this way, indigenization should not be seen as a plea for narrow parochialism, or for fragmentation of a universal theory into several insulated systems of thought, based on geographical boundaries. It is opposed not only to false universalism but also to false nationalism. The word indigenization connotes the process of *indigenising* something that is exogenous; this should be differentiated from the word indigenus, *which* refers to something that has originated from within. There is a need for both: borrowed models and methods will have to be suitably indigenised to be relevant and applicable in the Indian setting; and new concepts will have to be developed indigenously, where needed, to properly understand the Indian reality. Social science research has to move from being merely imitative to becoming innovative and rooted in Indian culture.

While social science research is already moving towards interdisciplinarity, teaching of social sciences in higher education remains uni-disciplinary and does not allow much cross-fertilization that is very essential for the growth of knowledge. Such an orientation is a must for those who will be joining the faculties of professional and technical institutions and contributing to the training of the professionals. Multidisciplinary orientation in social sciences is the need of the day. The development of a highly differentiated job market in the wake of liberalization and globalization, and the demands of socio-economic development necessitate such reorientation.

It is sad that the teaching of social sciences at the school level remains fragmentary and ill conceived. What is taught as social sciences is history, geography and some aspects of Indian polity. Very little effort has been made to produce social science textbooks that are really interdisciplinary and that incorporate findings of recent research. It is also regrettable that very little linkage exists between the system of school education and higher education.

Current research in social science in the country is highly diffused, underrated, and generally ignored by the potential users. While there are sporadic attempts for identifying the *thrust areas* for research in social sciences, there is a need to make this a serious and a coordinated exercise. We need to promote both micro-level studies and large-scale surveys. The good work done by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSS), through its various rounds of surveys at fixed intervals, has provided useful databases to compute trends in economic behaviour. There is enormous scope for the use of census data and their re-analysis and reinterpretation. The large number of individual village studies carried out by the Census Organization in the 1961 Census provide useful material to draw up national profile of the Indian Village; that work still remains to be done. Similarly, large number of village studies and empirical studies on caste that marked the Indian social sciences of the 1960s and 1970s need to be carefully reviewed for drawing nation-wide generalizations. Similar work on other human settlements, and on specific ethnic communities will be extremely useful.

There is great scope for doing comparative research involving more than one region of the country. Scholars from one region should be encouraged to carry out studies in another region. This would provide better insights in the nature of the social phenomena as the researchers can easily place themselves in the category of relative “outsider” vis-à-vis the native “insiders”. Such exercises can also be conceived as team researches involving people from different social science disciplines and belonging to different regions.

There is an urgent need to explore and strengthen action research

potential. This would entail strengthening research facilities of institutions engaged in such research programmes and also by enhancing the skills in this field. Issues relevant to the Indian society must get the central place in teaching and research.

The urgent need is to develop a fresh prioritisation of agenda for research. Such exercise was undertaken by the ICSSR in its formative years when priorities were identified for each social science discipline and also research themes were highlighted that deserved priority attention. That process was facilitated by the ICSSR surveys of Research in various social science disciplines, published in 25 volumes. Such periodic surveys were undertaken later with irregular frequency. This programme is now being revised by the ICSSR, which should help the aspiring researchers to locate the gaps that need to be filled, and also assist the fund giving agencies to draw up a roster of topics deserving priority attention.

Social scientists often complain that their findings are not utilised by the planners and policy makers. The latter retort by saying that social scientists, particularly economists, are always associated with the planning process; but they also complain about the non-utilizability of the social sciences.

There exists a general feeling that social science research is not sufficiently relevant to national needs and government policy. This is mainly due to the gap that exists between the producers of research and its consumers. Even when the government department funds the research, the findings remain unutilised. Furthermore, not only the government agencies do not utilize the findings of social science research, even the professional community shows relative indifference towards research carried out within the country. Research published in the national languages reaches, if at all, other countries after considerable delay.

A corrective in this regard is establishment of suitable mechanisms for interactions between social science researchers and their users – the senior bureaucrats in the government, legislators and parliamentarians, the managerial staff in the corporate sector, and the

officials working in NGOs.

Let me Conclude:

As we stand today, in the midst of the first decade of the new millennium, we have a different vantage point. In the last fifty years, social sciences in India have attained certain maturity. During these years, social sciences engaged themselves both in the investigation of the past by way of researches in history and archaeology, and in documenting the processes of change that are altering the present. Now is the time when they should reorient their work in the light of the coming tomorrow. Rather than letting autonomous forces to lead us to an uncertain future, social sciences should participate in the process to determine the country's future destination and to devise desirable paths to reach there. Social scientists are called upon not only to anticipate the demands that the future society will make upon them but also to assess the totality of needs of society in the coming years. The future of social sciences is linked to the future of our society. The way social sciences will shape themselves, and rise or decline in their popularity, will depend on the manner in which they will attend to the future needs and demands of society.

Notes:

1. The Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, *Open the Social Sciences* (chairman: Immanuel Wallerstein). Stanford University Press, 1996. Page 7.
2. Ibid. Page 14.
3. Ibid. Page 20.
4. My article, "The Call for Indigenization" was first published in the *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. XXXII, No.1, 1981, pp.189-197. It has subsequently been reproduced in other publications including my own book, *Indian Sociology: from where to where*, Jaipur, Rawat Publications (2003). This quote appears in this book at page 111. Other two notable anthologies

that carry my article are: *Indigenous Psychology* edited by Virgilio G. Enriquez, 1990, Philippine Psychology Research and Training House, Diliman, and *Indigeneity and Universality in Social Science* edited by Partha Nath Mukherji and Chandan Sengupta. 2004. Sage Publications, New Delhi.

5. The latest example is about the use of the word “indigenous”. The Delhi Edition of Times of India of 30 September 2004 has an item on page 13, titled, “We are tribals, not indigenous”. The Report says: “The government’s decision amounts to a rejection of the demand by certain groups that tribal people should be classified as “indigenous”, a term popular with Western sociologists and anthropologists.” In my discussion on *Indigenization* of Social Sciences I have distinguished between indigenous and indigenized.

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Intellectual Interest, Ideas and Social Science Research: Trends and Perspectives

Amitabh Kundu

I consider it honour and privilege to be invited to speak at the annual conference of the Indian Social Science Association, paying a tribute to the work and life of Professor Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji. This nonetheless also gives me a feeling of challenge and responsibility as I find myself inadequate in several ways to rise up to this occasion. This great legendary figure who could transcend barriers of different branches of social sciences and link its quintessence with that of arts and aesthetics could provide a vision and perspective on the evolutionary process of culture and civilization in India. This perspective I believe must be kept as central in any effort at developing methodology for analyzing the process of contemporary social development.

Decades ago, Professor Mukerji had regretted the fact that "Sociology of knowledge does not go much beyond the statement of a tenuous connection between the weather of social change and climate of intellectual opinion". The understanding of this linkage nonetheless is extremely important in the context of the evolution and dramatic changes in the methodology of social science research in our contemporary times. This assumes still greater importance as interests of the global capital market have come to dictate and even determine the methodology of social analysis that currently feed into the policies and strategies of development at national and local levels. It is in this context that I have chosen in this lecture to examine, in the words of Dr. Mukerji, the role of "the verbalisers, the scribblers and the