

Sociological Research in India The State of Crisis

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The crisis in sociological research in India has to be located in three institutional structures—the universities, the UGC and the professional bodies such as the Indian Sociological Society. The overarching framework within which the role of each of these bodies may be understood, however, is provided by the practices of politics.

RESEARCH in any field is sustained over a period of time not by the brilliance of a few outstanding scholars but by the patient building up of competence in the average researcher. What Thomas Kuhn called 'normal science' provides the backbone of research in any subject. While students cannot be trained to do brilliant research they can and must be trained to do competent research. One cannot plan for paradigmatic shifts in a discipline. When these occur they are, by definition, unpredictable. A result of the imaginative flights taken by unfettered minds these paradigmatic shifts are to be celebrated but they cannot be methodically replicated. What is a cause for dismay in the field of sociological research in India is not so much the lack of brilliance as the lack of competence.

I base my comments on my experience as a teacher in the University of Delhi for the last 25 years when I have had the opportunity to interview students from several universities and for the past few years to act as an expert member in selection committees for the positions of lecturers and research associates, both in universities and the UGC.

The number of students registered in the doctoral programmes in sociology has increased phenomenally in the last decade. For a position of Lecturer or Research Associate anything up to 100 applications may be received of which 40 may be of candidates who have obtained their doctoral degrees from any of the Central or State Universities. Another 40 may have an M Phil degree. It is on the basis of my experience of interviews with these candidates that I have found the following characteristics among several candidates who possess the highest research degree in sociology.

(1) In most universities students are not

expected to read any books systematically. To the question whether the candidate has ever read a book in the social sciences from cover to cover, the answer is usually in the negative. The level of competence in sociology is so poor that candidates with doctoral degrees have assured me that Malinowski conducted his fieldwork in India; that Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethic was based on his study of American society; that Calvin was the name of a place in Europe; that there was not a single ethnographic study of any tribe in India; and that they had temporarily forgotten the name of the theory associated with Darwin.

(2) The ignorance of elementary facts is matched by an eloquence on generalities. For example, the same candidates who could speak for 15 minutes on the importance of class conflict in Marxian Theory and the urgency of social justice for the downtrodden, was unable to distinguish between use value and exchange value or to tell me the meaning of the word *Brunaire* in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

(3) Every dissertation has a long list of references. However, candidates are unable to remember the argument of a research paper or a book although they have themselves referred to it in the body of the text. Some candidates make a candid admission that they did not feel the need to actually read the books and papers cited in the text or included in the list of references. Others state that they have forgotten what they have read. I want to emphasise that this ignorance or forgetfulness is with regard to books and papers that they have themselves quoted, not with regard to sociological works that I may consider important.

(4) The standard format of PhD dissertations in many universities now is for the candidate to prepare a questionnaire on

such topics as "Attitude of working women to marriage", or "Prevalence of drug addiction among youth". The questionnaire is administered to 100 or 150 respondents selected according to the convenience of the researcher. Each chapter is then organised around the specific responses received around a cluster of questions presented in the format of tables. This is followed by a description of these responses. The students are not required to learn how to use primary or secondary sources; they have no experience of library research; they conduct neither intensive fieldwork nor well-designed survey research; and despite the appearance of tables they do not learn the elements of statistical reasoning.

(5) Some of this research is published. Normally it is published in departmental journals or magazines in which there are no procedures for referring a paper. Some of the research also gets published in the form of a book usually by small publishers on the grant of a subsidy. In some cases, as for instance in the case of UGC Research Scientists, there is an individual contingency grant of the magnitude of Rs 2 lakh available to each incumbent. I have come across cases in which a subsidy of about Rs 80,000 has been given to a publisher. In one case, I found that the book published on the basis of a subsidy consisted entirely of materials copied from District Gazetteers. The reason why such publications escape all academic scrutiny is that a vicious cycle is built through availability of research funds leading to subsidy for publications and publications leading to more grants for research. Many publishers have now come into being who survive solely because there are bodies like the UGC and various Research Councils which provide financial support for substandard publications. Clearly, it is not my claim that all research published through these schemes is substandard but it is noticeable that very little of such research is published in national or international journals of repute and very little receives any critical attention in the book review sections of good journals.

(6) One consequence of this configuration of factors is that books are published which are plagiarised, bringing disrepute to Indian universities. About a year ago *Anthropology Today* carried a letter by Gustaff Houtman of the University of Manchester which stated that he had come across an astonishing volume called *Monastic Buddhism among the Khamtis of Arunachal* by one Dr Kordinya,

published by the National Publishing House of Delhi in 1986 "of which", to put it politely, "a substantial part seems to duplicate Melford E Spiro's *Buddhism and Society*". The letter went on to state, that, "There is no bibliography and no reference to Professor Spiro but a considerable number of paragraphs would appear to differ from Spiro's text only in the most minor particulars such as the substitution of 'Khamti' for 'Burmese'. Yet the author apparently has a doctorate from Delhi, has worked as a post-doctoral Fellow for the Ministry of Home Affairs of Indian Government." (See *Anthropology Today*, Vol 8, No 3, June 1992.)

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case and only a systematic survey of books published in recent years can reveal the extent of the malpractice. This tendency to plagiarism can be directly traced to the proliferation of publishers, subsidies for substandard research, and the refusal to apply academic judgment with honesty on the part of those who recommend these for subsidies. Before I discuss the factors responsible for the crisis, let me also add that a small number of students, located in different universities and research institutes continue to produce professionally competent research. The evidence for this is available in the fact that while in the 60s, reputed publishers were able to find only a few senior scholars whose monographs were considered worthy of publication, now there are young scholars whose monographs find a place in the list of books of the most reputed national and international publishers. What the cumulative work of these young scholars has done is to provide a plurality of perspectives on the understanding of Indian society. Clearly traditions of sound research need to be built up with care. Where certain departments and institutes have nourished sound research through their efforts at regular teaching, departmental seminars and involvement of senior faculty with the building of library resources, the institutional framework must be protected. Where talented young persons are located in institutions where such facilities are not available they must be provided the means to participate in the research programmes of such centres of advanced studies. However, the trend in policy-making is to treat all institutions equally without any regard to their academic record leading to the situation in which the profession is swamped with substandard research. I do not use the word crisis easily to apply to any kind of situation. In this case, however, I do believe that we are in a state of crisis requiring the immediate application

of sound judgment. Borrowing an analogy from medicine, the patient is in a critical state and there is every reason to believe that if critical interventions are not made, we will face the death of social science in India.

What are the factors responsible for this crisis? One would have to locate the crisis in three institutional structures—the universities, the UGC and the professional bodies such as the Indian Sociological Society. The overarching framework within which these may be understood, however, is provided by the practices of politics.

At the level of the universities, the proliferation of the subject has simply not been matched by the will to ensure competence in teaching and research. In several universities, textbooks such as that of Melver and Page, written almost 50 years ago, continue to be taught. These textbooks are available in translations in several regional languages. The combination of commercial interests and academic apathy leads to the dismal situation in which students are completely unaware of what has happened in the subject in the last 50 years.

Second, where teaching and research is conducted in regional languages, students do not acquire proficiency even in reading in the English language. I am afraid that rhetorical statements about national self-respect notwithstanding, neither the translations of competent sociological works in the regional languages nor original contributions add up to a sufficient body of literature that may be available in these languages. Thus a student fails to acquire competence in her subject on the basis of this literature. I may add that proficiency in reading in the English language for graduate students is considered necessary in most universities in the world now, even in countries which were known for their linguistic chauvinism a decade ago, such as Germany, France and Japan.

Third, the policies for recruitment and promotion of teachers increasingly sacrifice academic competence for political expediency. Even in the best of cases, universities find themselves caught in a double bind. Due to the fact that recruitment and promotion of teachers is increasingly subjected to political pressures, those who come to be in positions of responsibility are rarely men and women of towering intellectual stature. Unable to receive academic legitimacy through either their teaching or research, they seek self-confidence and legitimacy through either political patronage or through a mechanical routinisation of academic procedures.

The fear of populist pressures which represent the other side of mechanised bureaucracies has increased in the university campuses to such an extent that decision-makers internalise the imagined responses of populist, trade union bodies and direct their own actions accordingly. Most scholars of repute either withdraw in the face of this combination of bureaucratic and populist assault on their dignity, or they simply succumb. Even vice-chancellors and pro-vice-chancellors whose own academic stature and reputation for integrity are unquestioned find that in their efforts to tame the power of unscrupulous heads of institutions or departments they end up by discarding the idea of academic judgment itself.

Fourth, the examination of PhD dissertations is managed within a small coterie of scholars. There is real dearth of competent examiners within the country but a search for examiners from the international field is regarded with suspicion as a sign of a colonial subjugation of the mind. We are now in a situation when dissertations are approved on the basis of reciprocity rather than the application of academic standards. While differences in academic judgment can happen and even the best of universities once in a while produces a doctoral student whose dissertation does not meet high professional standards, it is the frequency with which this is happening in our universities that is a cause of concern. Where dissertations are written in regional languages, the availability of examiners is further limited.

If the universities are to take a share of the blame for the falling standards for research, the UGC cannot escape its major responsibility either. The decision-making bodies in the UGC seem to have completely misguided notions about the state of social science research in the country. Among the reasons for the proliferation of substandard doctoral degrees is the premium attached to a PhD for teaching posts at the level of Lecturer and Research Associate, regardless of the quality of research. The pressure to obtain a PhD on the part of the student is matched by the pressure on supervisors to accumulate credits for producing large number of students with doctorates obtained under his or her supervision. Such 'objective' (read mechanical) factors as the number of doctoral students enhance the prestige of the supervisor. This has led to the paradoxical situation in which the efforts to improve the quality of teachers has led to a further deterioration in standards of teaching and research.

The plain fact is that no amount of introduction of national testing schemes will

solve the problem. Every objective type of test introduced at the national level, produces its own corresponding tutorial schools and *kunji* type texts. Unless the UGC squarely faces up to the fact that with the exception of five or six departments in the country, others are simply not competent or equipped to provide facilities for advanced research and withdraws any accreditation from these departments, the problem will assume alarming dimensions. The need is to consolidate resources and see that good students are provided opportunities to study and conduct research under the guidance of competent scholars. Hence while undergraduate and postgraduate teaching should be strengthened across the country, facilities for research supervision must be limited to a small number of places with proven competence and reasonable resources provided for these departments to maintain a national character.

The UGC seems to work with a vision of a floating population of brilliant young scholars who are to be directly recruited by experts appointed by the UGC. As conceived, the schemes of the UGC seek to give support to young scholars who are seen as crushed by the faction-ridden politics of university departments. While it is true that many departments are ridden with factionalism and also that not all deserving young scholars get opportunities for research, it is equally true that in the overall context of deteriorating standards, the UGC ends up by recruiting scholars with rather poor skills in research. Once money is available for a scheme, such as that of Research Associateships, on Research Scientists, the UGC seems hesitant to discontinue it. In this, it receives the support of senior scholars who are aware that resources for social scientists are shrinking and who do not want to contribute further to this decline.

I do not wish to suggest that the problem of declining resources does not pose a serious threat to the survival of young scholars. However, there can be no quick fix solution for the kind of problems I have described here. While it is very important to nourish talented young scholars, the search for such talent cannot be through the mechanised procedures evolved by the UGC and the universities. It may be necessary to appoint search committees which would seek professional opinions on the sample of the research work of a young scholar and to draw up a list of accredited journals to which such scholars are encouraged to submit their work. All of this can be accomplished

much better if the UGC takes a supportive role towards the well recognised departments and charges them with the task of fulfilling national responsibilities rather than taking the indifferent or even adversarial approach that it has been taking vis-a-vis established universities in recent years.

Finally, the professional bodies have done little to salvage the situation. The interests of the profession lie not only in producing greater number of jobs for sociologists but in ensuring that ethical practices in the discipline are maintained. The Indian Sociological Society should take upon itself the task of preparing a serious report on the state of sociological research in the country so that we can face the situation squarely. A discipline that has been nourished by such eminent scholars as Radhakamal Mukherjee, G S Ghurye, N K Bose, D N Mazumdar and M N Srinivas now stands in a position where there may not be a next generation.

In the general clamour of voices that are calling for universities to act more responsibly, I want to state as strongly as I can that this can only be done if practices of politics become more responsible. It cuts little ice to speak of financial responsibility on the part of universities when the government itself sets rather high standards of financial irresponsibility. New universities are announced in a game of political one-upmanship committing major resources towards infrastructure while existing universities are kept on tenterhooks even about availability of salaries. Universities are urged to raise their own resources but the minimal changes in budgetary practices and bureaucratic control that would enable universities to retain these resources are not permitted. A case in point is the insistence of the UGC that all extra resources raised by a university would be deducted from the overall budgetary allocations, despite the fact that detailed evidence of the impossibility of retaining the minimum infrastructural facilities for teaching and research under present allocations has been provided to all decision-making bodies.

Once we consider the practices of political parties that are not transparent, the situation appears even more alarming. Every political party aspires to control and use the university as its experimental ground. There is not only the effort to use the university as a recruiting ground for political parties (which may be legitimate) but also to recruit students who can help in the conduct of the night life of political

parties. One has to only consider the phenomenal amounts of money poured into students' and teachers' elections to realise that university politics provides a far quicker route to social and economic mobility for many students than the laborious task of attending lectures and tutorials and reading books. It would not be fair to add that there are several teachers who also find it easier to build a reputation through participation in university politics rather than their teaching and research. When we further consider the money poured into sponsored agitations, crowd management, and instigation of violence in the campuses, we get to understand the night battles for control of universities waged by political parties all over India.

How can universities stand up to such moral corruption? It seems to me that the first thing to realise is that the so-called representatives of students and teachers are the ones who in the name of representation are devouring those they claim to represent. Research can only flourish in an academic environment in which academic honesty is not discounted. But academic honesty first requires that we face up to our predicament, to curtail the rhetoric of academic brilliance and restore a dignity to dull, honest, plodding research. It also requires that we recognise the enormity of our responsibility in saving what little is left of critical reflection in our society.

One may question my whole argument that in order to save critical reflection we need to save the tradition of professional competent research despite its incapacity to suggest paradigm shifts. I shall conclude with two observations on the relevance of such work within the accepted paradigms of a discipline. First, it is important to build up a critical mass of empirical data on the society on the basis of which alone does it become possible to pursue arguments within a rational discourse. Second, as I stated at the beginning, paradigmatic shifts cannot be methodologically replicated. Most of us are intensely aware of the mediocrity of our own efforts. Speaking on a personal note, if I find it necessary to continue my efforts with writing despite my disappointment with myself, it is because I am aware that I am simply doing a hold operation till someone comes along one day and transforms the understanding of those sociological problems that I find intractable. Meanwhile I can only transmit certain skills to my students so that when that person arrives, she does not find a complete vacuum of thought.