

Towards  
Engaged  
Social Sciences

Report of the consultation at  
**NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES**

# TOWARDS ENGAGED SOCIAL SCIENCES

Report of the consultation held at National Institute of  
Advanced Studies, Bangalore on October 29 and 30  
2007

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# INTRODUCTION

Significant transformations of the Indian economy, polity and society over the last two decades raise one important question: Have the social sciences in India been able to understand and adequately interpret these changes? Some of the superficial signs are not entirely encouraging. If the Nehruvian Second Plan strategy was built around the work of academics like Prof Mahalanobis, the intellectual inspiration for the liberalization process has largely come from within government. Indeed, there are even some signs that the gap between the social sciences and the demands society is making of them is being filled by those outside Indian academia. The report of the Fourth ICSSR review committee looked at the books published by the top eight academic publishers in India. A third of these books were written by foreigners or Non Resident Indians.

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More important, of the remaining, well over a fifth was accounted for by independent researchers.

The very real possibility of a gap between social sciences in India and the demands society is making of them has caused some introspection among social scientists themselves. But no matter how intellectually rigorous such an exercise is, it still reflects only one side of the picture. It raises, and answers, questions social scientists think are important. It is just possible though, that these questions are not always the ones that are at the top of the mind of others in society who are looking to the social sciences for insights. It is important then to look at the issue not just from the point of view of social scientists but also from the perspective of those who engage with the social sciences, whether they are policy makers, industry, NGOs, or anyone else. To this end National Institute of Advanced Studies organized a consultation, 'Towards Engaged Social Sciences' at its campus in Bangalore on October 29 and 30 2007, that brought together social scientists and those who engage with the social sciences. At the end of two days, the consultation came up with a number of recommendations that pointed to an alternative way forward.

The road to these recommendations was not the usual one. As was only to be expected, the representatives from

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academia, NGOs, industry, and government did not always speak the same language. On the question of corruption, in particular, the differences were quite striking. The social scientists tended to treat corruption as an externality, even if a debilitating one. Corruption for them was a major reason why effective policies could not be implemented. Those outside the social sciences, on the other hand, tended to place corruption at the centre of their analysis, repeatedly beginning their analysis with an attempt to understand this phenomenon.

Among the social scientists too there were significant differences. Dr Ramachandra Guha listed three forms of engagement of the social sciences with society: the soft, the hard and the harder. Soft engagement involved answering questions society threw up, hard engagement was when social scientists also played the role of activists, and the harder engagement was when social scientists acted at the behest of someone else. This classification was itself not explicitly debated, but the presentations and discussions certainly reflected the diversity of what social scientists saw as meaningful engagement, with both the soft and hard approaches being in evidence.

The diversity in tone, content and argument was seen to varying degrees in each of the six sessions that followed the



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initial overview. The sessions themselves were designed to be comprehensive and interdisciplinary in nature. Rather than looking at conventional disciplines within the social sciences, the sessions were organised thematically on Governance, Education, Health, Rural Development, Political Economy and Gender. Care was also taken to ensure that each session brought together academics with practitioners who engaged with the social sciences.

The interdisciplinary nature of the sessions as well as the presence of social scientists alongside those outside formal academia resulted in similar issues being seen through different lens and the resultant perspectives were therefore varied but holistic. What is more, at times even the specialised concerns of social scientists reappeared in only marginally different form in more than one session. This was particularly true of the data and institutional crisis as well as the role of the state. In order to provide a better focus to the presentation of the discussions held at the consultation, this report is not divided mechanically into the sessions of the consultation. Instead, it focuses on the various themes that emerged from the discussions over the two days. It begins with an overview of the issue of engaged social sciences, it then goes on to the assessments of the relationship between social sciences and the state, followed by the discussion on the institutional crisis. It then

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captures the areas that many felt were often ignored by social scientists, before finally listing the recommendations that were thrown up in the final session of the consultation.

# AN OVERVIEW

Providing an overview of the task of engaged social sciences requires addressing at least three questions: Why must social scientists engage with those outside their field? What are the challenges before such an engagement? And what forms can that engagement take? Coincidentally, Dr Kasturirangan focused on the first question, Prof Satish Deshpande on the second and Dr Ramachandra Guha on the third.

## THE NEED FOR ENGAGED SOCIAL SCIENCES

In his inaugural address Dr Kasturirangan said, "On the face of it, the social sciences should not require any prompting to be concerned about everyday activities. The very purpose of social sciences is to understand how society works. Alfred Marshall even defined economics as

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'a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life'. And yet, as the social scientists here may agree, things have not always quite worked out that way. The perceptions of individual social scientists have often been much narrower than Alfred Marshall would have liked. Each social science has tended to work in isolation, often developing methods and preoccupations of its own. While sociologists swear by ethnography few economists are comfortable with that methodological technique. And sociologists, with a few notable exceptions, some of whom are here today, still tend to shudder at the use of quantitative statistical techniques. To make matters worse, specialization has led to these perspectives becoming even narrower.

"The price we pay for this narrowness may well have increased over the last two decades. Globalization has brought in changes that are far too wide-ranging to be captured by any single social science. And as each social science looks at individual parts of the process, important connections in the overall picture are easily missed. The pace of globalization has not helped either. The rapidity of the change around us has meant that those social scientists who are not in continuous touch with reality can be left behind very quickly. The danger of being left behind is even greater if we don't listen to those who are deeply involved in the process of change around us. Industry, for

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one, is at the heart of the process of globalization, and yet the communication lines between industry and social scientists are not always open.

“In fact, one could see this in Nandigram where an industry has to come up, where you have fairly large fertile agricultural fields, and the question being asked is what the traditional people who have been associated with those fields are going to do once the industry takes over. There are solutions which are available but there seems to be no meeting point between the people who are affected and the people who want to develop that region. This is just one example of how this disconnect could lead to difficulties.”

Dr Kasturirangan however acknowledged that even as the challenges have grown there have been a number of initiatives to address them. “Industry has begun to take a more direct interest in the sphere of knowledge generation. NGOs too have begun to link their activism to the search for fresh ideas. Social scientists themselves have begun to introspect about their practice. A number of social scientists have recognized that since reality does not come compartmentalized in terms of its mathematics, politics, or any other area of concern to a specific science, the questions we ask must have an interdisciplinary dimension. And yet even such an interdisciplinary approach may not be

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enough. There are perspectives from outside academia that could add new dimensions to thinking in social sciences. A truly broad-based approach would take these perspectives into account as well. The process of knowledge generation has a better chance of success when it is not confined to academia or, for that matter, industry or NGOs working on their own. It is only when we all learn from each other that we can see the rapid development of relevant knowledge. I believe it is when specialists look beyond their specialization and interact actively with those who use what the specialists have to offer that the results are most rewarding. The benefits of such an interaction are very evident in an area where I can claim some expertise: space. You know that the space programme started with the idea - this is within five years of the launching of the Sputnik - that space could be of a very special use for this country, something one pioneer called leapfrogging stages of development. This leapfrogging obviously meant on the social front, and there was this very interesting experiment that was conducted - the satellite instructional television experiment, one of the largest sociological experiments ever conducted where a space system was employed for communication and broadcasting. This experiment involving 6 states, 2400 villages, and about 2 lakh participants - this was in 1974-75 - really provided a kind

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of benchmark for what kind of modern technology could be used for grassroots level development. The programmes that were created and transmitted to several locations included those related to literacy, environment, healthcare, agricultural practices, etc and they had a challenge to meet: to be local-specific, language-specific, region-specific and culture-specific. But then it worked and that paved the way for a very broad approach, using space for what we call developmental communication. And this developmental communication today reaches many districts across the country, particularly places like Jhabua in MP, which are not so well-developed and which certainly need a knowledge base which is based on modern developments. This is only one example. There are also areas like telemedicine, distance education using Edusat, watershed development, groundwater exploration, wasteland identification and development, particularly culturable wasteland, and fishery advisory that benefits fishermen by providing timely information which involves the use of satellite information on the biological productivity of the oceans."

Concluding his address, Dr Kasturirangan underlined the importance of broader collaborative research agendas, an issue that was raised by subsequent speakers and which congealed as a recommendation in more specific details in

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the course of the two days of deliberations. "We are thus in the midst of interesting times when there are fresh challenges emerging for both social scientists and those who engage with the social sciences. If we were to ignore them, or even insist on responding only from each of our own narrow perspectives, I would not be surprised if these challenges turn into threats. But if we - both social scientists and those who use what comes out of the social sciences - were to jointly put our shoulders to the wheel, these challenges could turn into opportunities."

### CHANGE IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Prof Satish Deshpande began by acknowledging the difficulties involved in "getting different people from different sectors to speak to each other, sectors which, given the complicated society that we are, march to the beats of several different drummers.

"So much of what I'll be saying will be already known to you, but it has to be put out at the start of a venture such as this. What have been the main changes that have taken place in the setting within which questions such as engagement and the social sciences, or an aspiration towards more engaged social sciences, could be expressed? To borrow one of Ram's [Ramachandra Guha's] titles, this



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could be expressed as what have been the major changes that have happened in India after the other Gandhi - Rajiv Gandhi; roughly speaking the last twenty years or so. I am going to just point out a few of these major changes, and try to lay out how these changes have affected, so to speak, both the supply side as well as the demand side of the issue we are facing today; namely, how are the social sciences themselves formed, what are they able to do, that would be roughly speaking the supply side; and the so called demand side would be what are they required to do, what is asked of them, what kinds of problems and challenges have been thrown up by these changes. In a sense these changes affect both sides; they affect what the social sciences themselves are or have become, and they affect the kinds of challenges that are placed before the social sciences.

“The first and in my opinion perhaps the most far-reaching change that has happened in the last 20 years is the democratic upsurge in Indian society. This is the empowering, the acquiring of a voice, and say, by large sections of our population which were hitherto without voice, or were not able to make their presence felt, or known to be around. The social dimensions of this democratization have perhaps been more important or have been more momentous than the economic dimensions

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though democratization has happened at both these levels – both economic as well as social. But India being a complicated, and as Ram [Guha] says, ‘the most interesting place’, one of the reasons why it is the most interesting place in the world is because everything and its opposite are true at the same time in very complicated ways. So while it is true that democratization is one large truth of the last twenty years, it is simultaneously true that there are many countervailing, contrary tendencies as well and the most important aspect of this contrary tendency is perhaps the increase in the aspiration gap. Even as democratization has proceeded, the relative capabilities, so to speak, of the elite are now far superior to what they were 20 years ago; capabilities understood in the broadest sense in terms of their wealth, in terms of their power, and in terms of the kinds of things they are able to achieve. So the gap between the elite and the non-elite has in fact increased, and this has increased in a context where much more is known about the elite so that there is a significant aspirational overhang, a gap between aspiration and what seems to be possible in the near future. So these are the two contradictory or contrary tendencies within the broad rubric of democratization.

“A second major change, and this is an overused and almost a meaningless word in many contexts, is

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globalization. I would personally want to emphasise that this word leads us towards thinking in terms of transnationalism, but that is a temptation we should resist. It is perhaps better and more useful to think of globalization as a kind of new regime of space, a new kind of era where the connectedness and linkages across different sectors, different communities, different questions, make themselves felt in hitherto unexpected, unknown ways, and that the density and intensity of these contacts is at an unprecedented level. So if we think of globalization in these terms, not necessarily in terms of national boundaries as such, but as creating new fields where perhaps coherent fields did not exist, creating audiences, creating publics. The countervailing aspect of this is that much of this connectedness need not necessarily be enabling or a good thing for the people to whom it is happening. It can be enforced connectedness. Large sections of the world, whether places or people, can in a sense be quite literally sitting ducks in a context, in a metaphor of globalization, which emphasizes mobility, movement, and so on. There are sectors which do not have this mobility, and, therefore, are at the receiving end of all that is mobile and all that is connected. We need to pay attention to these sectors as well; those who don't move or those whose movement is enforced, or who feel the

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consequences of connectedness in ways that are profoundly disabling. At the same time, of course, there are the enabling aspects of these connections and linkages of which we are being told quite incessantly.

“A third broad aspect, major change, since Rajiv Gandhi, in the last 20 years, is the media saturation of our social world. This is true in an unprecedented way for Indian society at any rate. And this is not only television or electronic media but the coming of television and electronic media have had some synergistic effect on all the media. So the media are now more intrusive, their coverage or their saturation of our social life is much more intense, and they now seem to play an almost constitutive rather than merely representative role. There is a feeling as though if anything exists it must be visible in the media. And there is the countervailing side of it as well in that precisely this mediated world – this saturation of images and texts and so on that circulate – produces dark shadows so that something that is not in the media, it is as though it does not exist, it is not there. And this kind of an effect is also extremely important today, what is and what is not there. Another sub-aspect which I won't get into in detail is that the media are now playing a more successful didactic role. We all know from the days of All India Radio that it was meant to play a didactic role. In fact the government

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owned media was one large sort of lesson that was being offered constantly, from Krishi Darshan to all sorts of other programmes. But that was at a very unsuccessful level, and it was very easy to caricature that. Today the media is playing a didactic role in terms of telling us how to live, telling us what to consume, and it is doing this in ways that are very much harder to resist, that are, broadly speaking, much more successful or at least appear to be much more successful. And this too is a change we need to think about.

“Finally, the obvious one, that everyone here will be more than aware of is the big change, the change in the role of the state. We are now quite definitely in a post-developmental ideological paradigm, whether or not we are so in fact or in terms of the objective economy is a whole different question. But in the earlier era, the Nehruvian era, development was a kind of religion, state religion so to speak; that era is definitely gone. And the state is in the new situation of having to share the stage, so to speak, with different kinds of actors whether they are the NGOs, the market, the corporate sector, and so on. In field after field it is this stage-sharing aspect that comes across to us now as something relatively new. The countervailing aspect to this of course is that the state continues to be an extremely important player and in many, many contexts it

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even continues to be the most important player, even though a lot has changed.

“So, broadly speaking, if these are the major changes that have occurred, how do they affect, so to speak, the supply-side of the social sciences and the demand side of the social sciences? I will concentrate more on the supply side, on how these have affected the social sciences themselves since I think only a small minority of the speakers scheduled to speak represent the supply side or are from universities. The majority are naturally enough from the demand side, what is expected of the social sciences, the kinds of uses they need to be put to or what is being asked of them. So let me take this opportunity to talk more about this side. Democratization, globalization, media saturation, and change in the role of the state...how have these affected the social sciences?

“Democratization is changing the social composition of higher education in a way that is completely unprecedented. This is for the higher education sector, the single most important change that has happened in independent India, and it is something that we are still coming to terms with. It is not always a happy story; there are challenges and difficulties involved. But how we deal with it in the next decade or so is going to be quite decisive.

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The old elite had particular kinds of needs and aspirations and ambitions with regard to the social sciences. They are no longer the key players or are choosing not to be the key players. So the segments that are taking the place of that elite will have their own aspirations, their own things that they want from the social sciences and how this plays out still remains to be seen. Globalization is extremely important for the research sector. To cut a very long story short let me simply say, research on India, or India as a site of research, is in no danger whatsoever; it's prospering, but the extent to which this research will be done by 'Indians' or will be located in India is now open to question. The older certainties, moral certainties, of what is indigenous and what is foreign, those certainties now are eroded. We now have a very complex spectrum of positions, of locations available where you cannot easily say that there are people who are located in India but may be associated with institutions abroad and so on. So where your address is, so to speak, does not tell you anything about your linkages and connections. This need not necessarily be treated with alarm, nor is it necessarily a subject of uncritical welcoming. It is to be thought about and this is one major aspect we have to consider. The media - once again to cut a long story short - has removed the previous impunity or insulation of the social sciences

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from their subjects. So now when you produce a text, it is immediately available to the native, and it is available not necessarily in the modes of your choosing, and consequences follow which did not follow before. We enjoyed, as a community, impunity, or we enjoyed certain insulation or protection from the perceptions of those whom we studied. The social sciences the world over studied down, it's not just in India. But the mediatization is now making this a much more fraught relationship. Once again this need not necessarily be simply a good or simply a bad thing.

Finally the state. Clearly the state is now one among many players. And in some contexts it is perhaps not even the most important player when it comes to the social sciences. How this is affecting things is something that we need to think about very carefully, particularly when it comes to credentialing in poor countries. And in countries with a large population like India, there is some inevitable credential inflation that goes on. Because of that higher education has to meet social mobility aspirations. Much of the activity in higher education is devoted to social mobility, not necessarily to research, and this happens to some extent in all countries. But it happens more in poor countries because more credentials are the route to middle class lifestyle which need not necessarily be true in more



advanced countries to the extent that it is here. So given that that is the case, state involvement raises its own issues, and the presence of other players also affects these issues.

“Finally at very end let me speak about the demand side, and each of these changes constitutes a challenge to the social sciences themselves. Let me talk about one area on which I myself have been working, and which is one of the challenges here. And this is the question of dealing with social inequality or social inclusion, a major issue as many of you will be aware. The social sciences have a key role to play here. One major role is in trying to understand, something which we have not been very successful so far, in attempting to understand and to describe the continuing ways in which ascriptive identities or social identities, identities of birth, continue to function as capital, function as a resource, encashable resource, of a particular kind, in a way that has become less and less visible to us. As social scientists are typically drawn from a particular segment of society we have tended to be not as sensitive to this issue as we should have been. A second issue here is the new and welcome receptivity of the Indian state towards evidence-based ways of dealing with contested, difficult issues of social inclusion or discrimination. The landmark in this case is the Sachhar committee report which is something of a first in India, because for the first time on a specifically

social issue, an issue that has to do with communities, rather than purely with economic development, the government took the initiative to set up a committee whose job was to produce evidence. So if we are going to be moving in that direction as the setting up of other commissions recently also shows, this a clear area of overlap between the social sciences and public policy.”

### THE NATURE OF ENGAGEMENT

Dr. Ramachandra Guha sought to unpack the notion of engaged social sciences. What does this mean? “There have been other terms used in the past, activist social sciences, urgent social research, applied social research, relevant social science, what does engaged mean?”

“Satish quoted a line which I used which is that ‘India is the most interesting country in the world’. When I am saying this I am not saying this as a jingoist or a chauvinist. Anyone who tries to get to NIAS in time in the morning would conclude that India is the most exasperating country in the world. A Dalit who lives in a village in south Bihar may conclude that India is the most degrading and most hierarchical country in the world. So this is not a chauvinistic judgment but an objective detached judgment of a scholar. And what makes it interesting -- for the

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scholar, for the social scientist, for the analyst and since Mr Ramakant Rath is here, also the most interesting for the creative artist, for the poet, the writer, the dramatist -- is three things. First, its subcontinental size. Second, its staggering diversity of ecology, language, religion and so on. Indians sometimes like to claim that we have more Muslims than Pakistan, a country that was constituted as a Muslim homeland. But on a visit to Australia recently my eminent colleague Robin Jeffery, who has written outstandingly on the Indian media, pointed out that there are more Christians in India than Australia, professedly a Christian country.

“Thirdly, most importantly, the fact that in the last century India has been simultaneously undergoing four major social revolutions. These revolutions are the industrial revolution – the shift in the economy from agriculture to industry and services; the urban revolution – the move of more and more people living in rural settlements to living in towns and cities; the national revolution – the transformation, the coming out of the situation of colonial subjecthood into national independence; and finally the democratic revolution – the adoption of universal adult franchise, the free press, an independent judiciary, freedom of movement and all the other attributes that go with being a democracy. The key word here is simultaneously; that

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these four revolutions are happening in India simultaneously. The United States became a nation before it began to urbanise and industrialise. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the US became a nation; in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became an urban industrial society; by the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most Americans lived in the cities. But most Americans did not have the vote, women did not have the vote till the 1920s, most African Americans did not have the vote till the 1960s well after Indian Dalits had the vote. In Europe the onset of these four revolutions varied greatly between different nations. But in all cases the national revolution preceded the democratic revolution. That's also true of China. Dr Kasturirangan mentioned Nandigram. Now Nandigram is happening daily in China which means peasants are being displaced from their lands to create highways, or factories or military installations or whatever. But they have no voice of the press so their concerns are never reflected. China has not yet undergone a democratic revolution. What is unique about India and what makes it so interesting for the social sciences is that all these are happening simultaneously and the churning and the conflicts produced by these four revolutions that provide as it were the agenda, the raw material, the subject matter for the social sciences.

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Social sciences as we know it was born in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe as a response to the urban and industrial revolution. And the social scientists in India are in theory more blessed than the Marxes and Webers and the Durkheims because we have two more revolutions to analyse and study. In a sense, the research agenda of the social sciences has been determined by the course of these four revolutions. We look at the distributional impacts of the urban and the industrial revolutions, we look at the social conflicts that have resulted or we study the inclusiveness or the non-inclusiveness of the national and democratic revolutions, which social group, whether represented by religion, region, caste or class, have been represented, over-represented or less represented in the national revolution, which were excluded, how has the democratic revolution reversed or modified this as in the gradual assertiveness of the previously disadvantaged social groups - people who did not find a voice in the national revolution but are now finding a voice in the democratic revolution. In 1975 the journalist James Cameroon, who wrote extensively on India, said 'the women in Indian political life all come from English speaking upper caste affluent families.' He was thinking of Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, Indira Gandhi, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyay. 'There is no women from an

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underprivileged background in Indian politics and it is hard to think when there will be one.' Thirty years later we have someone from a Dalit background who is chief minister of the largest state - UP. So as social scientists we are blessed because we live in a society that is the most interesting in the world because of its scale, diversity and because of profound, manifold and diverse changes that have been taking place through the onset of the four revolutions.

"I now want to move from this broader macro context to the more micro one. It is not so easy to think of an engaged natural science, an engaged physics or an engaged mathematics. There is talk sometimes of relevant scientific research. The latest issue of Current Science has an article on 'science for sustainable development' but it is hard to think of a symposium on engaged natural science in the same way. So what do we mean by an engaged social science? What we mean is - the question posed by the title of the symposium is - should social scientists simply study and analyse what is happening in the world around them which is in a sense their professional duty or should they seek also to intervene in order to reshape the world even as they interpret? Every social scientist faces this question - am I merely doing this out of curiosity to crack open a puzzle or am I doing it to, in some way, reshape the society

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I live in? Different social scientists may provide different answers but it is a dilemma that has been at the core of the social sciences enterprise since Marx wrote his famous *Thesis on Feurbach* where he said 'Hitherto philosophers have only interpreted the world, the time has come to change it.'

"Now what precisely should an engaged social science mean? I am going to offer three possible meanings of this term. The three interpretations can be called soft, hard and harder of being engaged.

"For the soft interpretation of engaged social science I will take my clue from the distinguished MN Srinivas. He liked to make a distinction between the field view and the book view. The distinction was used by Srinivas in a slightly different way than I am going to use it. Srinivas used it as a way of saying if we want to understand Indian society we must not look at the classical texts such as the Manudharmashastra or the Arthashastra but we must look at what the field tells us. I am adapting the distinction to say that the first definition of a soft social science would be a social scientist looking for a research problem must not get the idea of the research problem from academic debate in professional journals but from the society she lives in. Society throws up research questions all the time. So an

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engaged social science in the mildest, first possible use of the term would be that a social scientist takes her clues from the society she lives in rather than choosing it because it is fashionable or likely to get her tenure or promotion.

“Then there could be a hard interpretation for the word engaged – which would be, the social scientist is also some kind of an activist. This goes back to Marx. We are not simply interested in interpreting the world but also in changing it – social scientists should seek to intervene in directing and modifying the course of these different revolutions that I have talked about. The sociologist Andre Beteille whose preference is for the first kind of social science once made a distinction between policy analysis and policy prescription. Beteille argued that the sociologist could certainly analyse policy but should she then go on to prescribe policy? Based on the research the sociologist or the anthropologist can lay bare the different implications in terms of welfare or equity or efficiency of different policy options. Hard interpretation would be that she must take forward the implications of her research.

“But there is a harder interpretation of the word engaged; that is the social scientist is working at the behest of someone. Or let me put it this way, the social scientist can be engaged on behalf of herself or on behalf of someone



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else, that the social scientists must help industry or the State if they are funding his research, or help NGOs or political parties. I will end with the example of environmental social science, the field I know well.

“I certainly subscribe to the first definition of an engaged social science. Social scientists must not be swayed by intellectual fashion by what will get the best job or what seems to be the most hotly discussed topic in the academic journals but by what society throws up. Environmental social science was born not because of internal thinking within the disciplines or debates in environmental journals but was born because of the questions thrown up by environmental conflicts and movements. Had there been no fishery struggle in Kerala, had there been no Chipko, Narmada Andolan or rural energy crisis we would not have had environmental social science. What is an engaged environmental social scientist? Does she seek solutions that mitigate conflicts, does she take an activist role on behalf of protesters and movements, or does she merely analyse and convey the findings as widely as possible and leave the task of changing society to someone else?

“There cannot be a single meaning of the word engaged. Each of us has to work out our own methodological credo.

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But we should be clear of the different meanings of the word engaged – the softer to the hardest.”

# SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE STATE

Given the significant role that the state plays in the Indian economy, polity, and society, in addition to its prominent role in social science institutions, it was no surprise that the relationship between the social sciences and the state was a recurring theme during the consultation. There were frequent references to the inadequacies, and even failures, of the state. This ranged from concerns on macro issues such as poverty and corruption to more specific issues like the role of the state in education.

One of the more eloquent descriptions of the co-existence of poverty and prosperity came from Mr Ramakanth Rath. "I have not been able to forget some incidents I was witness to long, long ago. As Collector and District Magistrate of a district with a large tribal population, I found, while

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inspecting a Taluk office and a Sub-Treasury, that inmates of the sub-jail were moving about in the compound with hardly any precaution against their decamping. On asking the jailor why he had dispensed with the prescribed security arrangement and why he was oblivious of the risk of some prisoners escaping, he assured me that he was sure such a contingency would not arise. On being pressed to explain his confidence, he said that the prisoners who had assured supply of food in the jail would certainly not forgo this facility which they would if they absconded. He added that access to food was especially difficult in the monsoon months and that he had known cases where a man, sentenced to a month's imprisonment, begged the Magistrate to enhance the sentence so that he did not have to worry about his food which was hard to come by during the rainy months.

"The second incident occurred in a village where quite a few children had died of diarrhoea. I entered a hut and tried to advise the mother that she could save her child's life by giving it, at frequent intervals, water with some salt and some sugar to drink. This, I explained to her, would replenish the loss of fluids from the child's body and can be depended upon as a lifesaving method. She looked at me for some time and asked, "Sir, what is sugar?" I did not

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know what to say and came away, feeling lost and defeated.

“It may be argued that India has moved on since those days. Does not India today have the largest number of billionaires in Asia and does it not have more than one lakh millionaires? These indicators of affluence co-exist with enormous rural and urban poverty. During the last three months, more than 200 deaths due to cholera have occurred in some tribal areas of South Orissa. There have been incidents of mothers selling their children so that they could feed themselves and other members of their family, of starvation deaths, of thousands leaving their homes to work as bonded labourers outside the state. Poverty, destitution and preventable mortality have clearly been more powerful than all the countermeasures we have planned and implemented.

“Alleviation of rural poverty, it seems to me, requires a political culture we seem to have lost somehow. Would a person have died of starvation or sold a new-born child had a modest quantity of food been available? This did not require much effort or expense and could have easily been obviated had redressal come in time, but then the blame-game that our politicians cannot live without couldn't have gone on. How many of the issues they are obsessed with

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are addressed to the everyday problems of the poor? Low income, although deserving of urgent remedy, is not the only problem. To take an example, high maternal mortality is preventable by the state without requiring the poor to bear the cost of saving a mother's life. A few days ago, the hospital verandah at the District Headquarters Hospital of Puri, a large and important town in Orissa, was the only accommodation available to nearly fifteen expecting mothers, one of whom had her delivery there.

"Not long ago, free health care was a responsibility the state took seriously. The money the poor would have had to pay was, in effect, their income. Consider the effect on the poor, especially the tribals, of neglecting such services."

The theme of corruption too found repeated mention from a broad set of perspectives, ranging from a journalist's contemporariness in the comments of Mr TK Arun to Mr Chiranjiv Singh's attempt to explain the phenomenon making use of his experience as a former senior bureaucrat. Mr Singh argued that the "increasing cost of fighting elections does not leave much space for intellectual contributions to policy making and governance beside the space occupied by those whose contributions are monetary. It is generally admitted by politicians that the cost of winning an assembly election is more than a crore of

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rupees. Those who give money to successful candidates have a say in policy making and governance. Heavy cost of elections is changing the complexion of politics and affects governance. More than thirty years ago when the present president of the Karnataka state Congress party, Mr. Mallikarjuna Kharge, then a young first time MLA, suggested the name of a rich contractor for a by-election to the then Chief Minister, Devaraj Urs, who believed in Lohia's dictum that in India caste is class, he said, 'Look here, there is money power and there is political power. Never combine the two in the same person.' The rich contractor was not given the ticket. But costly elections have brought about the convergence of political power and money power. They have also led to an increase in the magnitude of corruption."

The views on what social scientists could do to alter this reality ranged from skepticism to specific criticism about the functioning of the state. Mr Chiranjiv Singh was, arguably, the most skeptical. "Karnataka is one state where efforts were made to involve scientists and social scientists in policy making more than in any other state. In the 70's it was thought that science and technology would solve our problems. Chief Minister Devaraj Urs was himself a science graduate and he set up the Karnataka State Council of Science and Technology under the Chairmanship of

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Prof Satish Dhawan. It made no difference to the administration.

“In the 80’s it was thought that social sciences would solve our problems and a think tank (called the Economic and Planning Council) was set up by the Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde. The advice of the distinguished social scientists about involving MLAs in postings and transfers because that was a symbol of people’s power was followed by Mr Hegde and grave damage was done to the administration, from which the state has not recovered.”

Some of this skepticism, though not to the same degree, did extend to others who took a more specialized view of the issue. Dr Samuel Paul argued that governance has to be a site for engaged social sciences; but one also has to keep in mind the fact that the social sciences cannot have all the answers to governance related issues. He said the discourse surrounding governance is very confusing, and there is no consensus regarding what it is supposed to mean. There has been a lot of research on corporate governance; but there is a paucity of research institutions that focus on public governance. Most such institutions studying governance related issues are captive institutions of the government (like the Indian Institute of Public Administration). They do not have much independence.



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On the other hand, civil society organizations working on the issue operate with a limited knowledge base. There is an urgent need to bridge this divide. To understand public governance we need to get a process-oriented perspective back into the discourse. One can delineate three different aspects of governance related issues: the macro aspect, the institutional aspect and the quality aspect. Due to the rapidly changing socio-political context in India, governance can no longer be conflated with the government.

The changing context has resulted in a change in the role of the state itself, which was particularly evident in the field of education. Prof Vasavi noted that over the past two decades there was an expansion of the state machinery in education combined with a withdrawal of the state's involvement in 'education'. There was extremely limited coverage of the adolescent and youth population in terms of secondary education. Increasing privatization of higher education with specific emphasis on science and technology had contributed to the emergence of specialized institutes rather than composite centres for higher education. There was also very little research in education on institutions and institutional culture. At the same time there was an entry of new private agencies in education

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that seemed to hold the government accountable for education delivery.

The changing trends in the role of the government had its impact on primary education. Ms. Anjali Noronha, who brought an NGO perspective to the discussion, underlined the multiple problems plaguing the government schooling system. The increase in mass demand for elementary education was matched by decreasing per capita investment in public education systems at the elementary level. The drastic decrease in quality of public education particularly due to de-professionalisation of teachers, and the increasing privatization in elementary education, especially in North India, was laying out the terrain for increasing differentiation in schooling systems which, Ms. Noronha cautioned, would lead to more societal differentiation.

Listing other reasons for the inadequate attention of social scientists to the role of the government in education, Prof. Raghabendra Chattopadhyay underscored how university education departments have become distanced from current issues in education. This led them to ignore ongoing programmatic interventions of the government. For instance, the initial successes of the Adult Education efforts of the early 1990s (the Total Literacy Mission

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campaign) was subsequently successful only in pockets. And this success too was because of contingent factors. For example, in Kerala the National Literacy Mission was able to align delivery with the decentralised governance structures. The inability of the social sciences to capture such trends was accentuated by a lack of collaboration across disciplines as well as a lack of rigour, particularly with respect to empirical research.

The growing distance between social scientists and the government was of course not confined to education. At various points in the consultation there were interesting insights into the changing nature of this relationship. In some cases the state could take over existing research and bend it to suit its interests. Ms V Geetha argued that the state adopted the terms and tenor of the language of feminism and women's studies but this was done without paying attention to the details involved. The state took over the critical categories but then it bent them to its own purpose which was fundamentally political. She also noted that women's studies scholars have not made significant contributions to major government reports. She implied that this is not necessarily because they are marginalised but also because women's studies as a discipline has become ossified, producing routine studies, and has lost its radical edge.

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There was also concern about the absence of spaces for social sciences to engage with government. State interventions are often deployed without much public debate. Dr Shubashis Gangopadhyay dwelt at some length on the reluctance of government to demand independent research that could feed into policy. The government was increasingly relying on insiders to come up with research reports. Once the policy makers and those doing the research were the same there would be a tendency for the research to focus only on what was convenient and easy to do. This limited the effort to try out new ideas. Indeed, every new idea came with an inbuilt disability as it would be confronted with the question, 'Has this been tried before?' Obviously, if it had been tried before it would not be new. To make matters worse, there was excessive skepticism captured best by the phrase, 'In India this will not work'.

The tenor of the discussion made it quite clear that even in an era of liberalization where the state is seeking to reduce its role, it retains a significant role in determining not just the transitions in the Indian economy and society, but also in the way social scientists interpret these changes.

# INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

*T*he institutional dimension of the crisis in social science research in India takes a number of forms. At a macro level there are institutional issues such as the efficiency of those generating data. There is also the question of whether social scientists are allowed to tap all the data resources that are potentially available. At a micro level there is the question of the functioning of social science institutions.

The data crisis at the macro level generated a lot of debate. It formed a significant part of Prof VM Rao's larger theme of a disintegrating society. He asked whether the crises facing the Indian economy and society were effectively reflected in the social sciences research so that they could be communicated to policy makers. And one of the reasons he doubted this was the case was that the data situation

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was unbelievably bad. He agreed with the statement of a Central minister who called land records 'garbage', even if that was a very strong word. "There are horrendous variations in land records, and NSS estimate tell us that only about 8 percent of land is under tenancy while field investigations show that 30 or 40 percent of land is under tenancy. Nobody can really find out how much tenancy is there. Definitely, it is much more than what is revealed by official data and it is certain that there is no scope for regulating them. This is our situation with data." Prof Rao went on to give other examples to emphasise this point. "When remote sensing came and they started to find out our land situation, one interesting fact came out which many have not taken notice of. Our official statistics on land under cultivation were wrong compared to what remote sensing showed." Acknowledging that he has not really made any attempt to reconcile the figures, he left it open as to whether remote sensing too could be less than accurate as there may have been some speculation when deciding what exactly the different colours in those images showed.

The need to integrate space technology into the social sciences was also endorsed by Dr VS Hegde. He argued that the Indian Space Programme had over the past four decades developed assets in communications, weather and

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meteorology, and earth observations. These assets today facilitate a variety of applications in natural resources and environment monitoring, infrastructure development, fisheries, agriculture, education, healthcare, disaster management, etc. He believed the social sciences should take an integrated approach and in the process utilise technology tools, such as space technology applications. Prof Chattopadhyay too believed the possibility of using satellite generated data for social scientific analysis of rural issues needs to be explored in detail.

Beyond the technological barrier there was also the question of whether social scientists were allowed to generate data from all the areas where information was already being collected. This was seen as a particularly serious issue in the area of health. Dr Shubashis Gangopadhyay pointed out that it was impossible for the social scientists to get data on public health. Pointing out that public health is not about incidences of diseases but about health, he said in this area there is a severe lack of data. Also, more research is happening on cancer than on malaria or reproductive health. This crisis could be eased if social scientists were given access to the records of individual patients maintained by hospitals. But allowing access to these records would bring to the forefront the

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issue of the patients' right to privacy, leading to a possible conflict of interests.

The conflict of interests when providing access to data took on a rather more heated note when it came to corporate data. It was pointed out that there are huge gaps between the information available on government and publicly funded institutions on the one hand and on private institutions on the other. If the right to information was to be a complete right, one needs to have comprehensive information regarding publicly traded companies. Dr Gangopadhyay however disagreed quite strongly. He felt information sharing in the processes of governance has to be conditional. A social scientist cannot simply demand information. In terms of governance, private limited companies cannot be forced to disclose information unless and until it affects some third party.

Similar differences also emerged on the issue of scrutiny of NGOs. Prof Nagaraj said there is a need to look at issues of corporate governance as well as the governance of NGOs and not merely issues of 'public governance.' NGOs also need to be scrutinized, and should be made accountable to the public. But others were not so sure. Prof Chattopadhyay argued that corruption and misgovernance



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by the NGOs is in its magnitude and impact not comparable to state corruption.

Inevitably the discussion on institutions turned the spotlight inwards. Prof SL Rao said there is a need to look at issues of institutional failure and governance of social science institutions as well. He made out a case for transparency as well as reviews of faculty performance. Pointing out that there are around 1,400 management institutions in India he felt there was a need for transparency in their functioning. He argued that both access to information and proper institutional procedures are necessary to ensure transparency and good governance. He recognised that on the issues of both faculty performance and transparency there would be a need, in practice, to take on board local concerns. Prof Chattopadhyay added that student feedback in educational institutions must be made compulsory. That will go a long way in improving the governance of our social science institutions. There is a need to make educational institutions more democratic by devolving powers at every level.

Taking a 'worm's eye view' of the state of affairs of research in economics in India, Prof R Nagaraj highlighted several organisational and practical problems facing the

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academic community. Noting that a lot of Indian work is considered descriptive, he pointed out that although the organizational model is similar for the physical sciences and social sciences in India, public resources available for the latter is lower. Prof. Nagaraj expressed concern over the duplication of infrastructure across institutions leading to insufficient resource usage. Most research in India is empirical in its orientation and this has made it the home ground for testing various models (from a professional perspective) without adequate and attendant theory generation. Prof. Nagaraj also pointed out various fiscal constraints facing academic institutions, such as freeze on library budgets and retrenchment of faculty positions. This, according to him, has led several academics to take recourse to 'training'. Research is increasingly taking on a form of 'quick inquiries' by think-tanks where the funding is directed more by external agendas. Hence, Prof. Nagaraj noted, there was a need to build programmatic research around researchers and themes, as against short project-based research that occurs around institutions today. He advocated a tripod-model for research institutes resting on the three activities of research, consultancy, and teaching.

There was also concern that the unevenness in the spread of research institutions had its impact on the issues that were researched. Ms Anjali Naronha pointed out that there

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are huge swathes of the country, like MP and Chhatisgarh, where there are no social science research institutes. These areas are also predominantly rural. This leads to a lack of focus on regional rural research and has contributed to a fire-fighting attitude towards rural issues.

Prof Vasavi concurred that over the last decade, the study of rural areas has lost a certain amount of academic space. A significant part of India is still rural but the focus of social science research has shifted away from rural and agrarian studies. There is a need to reclaim 'the rural' as a site for social science research.

Prof N Jayaram focused on the need to conduct rigorous social science research into rural traditions of resource use and management, like sacred groves etc, especially in areas like Coorg. In the context of coffee plantations in Coorg one has to realize that Coorg has a very diverse population and has an extremely complex socio-political landscape. But there have been very few social scientists from Coorg leading to the region being understudied.

More than anything else the discussion on the institutional dimensions of social science research in India brought out the extent of the crisis both at the macro level, especially in

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the realm of data, and at the local level, in terms of the functioning of social science institutions.

## IMBALANCES IN COVERAGE

*I*t takes little more than a quick glance at social science research in India to recognise the imbalances in coverage. There are issues and regions that attract a great deal of research, while others struggle to gain attention. At various points in the consultation concern was expressed about the lack of adequate research in several areas. There wasn't always unanimity about the areas that needed more research. Some even argued that many of these gaps in research did not really exist and was only the result of inadequate information about the research being carried out. But while the lack of information could be a factor, there was no denying that certain worldviews resulted in underemphasizing, if not blacking out, some areas of research. Research in areas like Ayurveda was affected by this trend. Dr GG Gangadharan argued that over the last two decades or so there has been a

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change in the epidemiological profile of the Indian population. India now bears a double epidemiological load; one is that of the older communicable diseases and the other one is that of the increasingly important life-style diseases like hypertension, heart diseases etc. For the newly emerging lifestyle diseases, non-Western systems like Ayurveda hold a lot of promise. And in India (unlike, in the West) there has always been a tradition of plurality of health systems. But the mainstream health delivery system has generally marginalized the non-Western systems. Social scientists can play a key role in foregrounding the importance of these systems and advocating a greater role for such alternative practices in our public health delivery system.

The divide was not only between Western and non-Western systems. Dr Rama Baru focused on the challenges posed to public health by the different perspectives of social scientists and natural scientists. She pointed out that biomedical practitioners looked down upon the idea of health as a socially produced phenomenon. This has led to a situation where epidemiologists ask for variables from the social sciences only for associations, and not for causality. She pointed out that the social sciences have always been considered as soft sciences and have rarely partnered with medical practitioners. Strongly advocating

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an integrated and holistic approach to understanding public health related issues, she argued that social sciences, epidemiology, clinical medicine, biology, biomedicine and other branches should not function as discrete sciences. She highlighted four different streams of research undertaken by social scientists in the area of public health - operational research, descriptive studies, policy oriented and advocacy research, and interpretation. She remarked that the last stream is the weakest, as social sciences cannot do this alone. She argued that this situation calls for a need to move away from methodological individualism and adopt a more interactive, dialogical and integrated approach of methodological holism. Expressing concern over the recent research trends that demand quick associations instead of enduring causalities, she stressed that this trend has to be stemmed.

The value of research can also be constrained by confining its use to relatively limited objectives. Ms V Geetha said most of the research in women's study groups and NGOs is happening in the advocacy model, from field realities to policy making. Excellent empirical research using gender as a category of analysis is produced but this is pressed into the service of narrow policy forums. Hence, it is important at this point to recall the original context of women's studies and take it forward. History has to be pushed into a

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direction where a reformulation of ideals can take place. For those who are trying to engender their disciplines, the school can also be an important place to make available the findings of social sciences to the lives of students through classroom interactions.

Alongside these constraints posed by differing worldviews and disciplinary practices, there was also the difference between social scientists and those involved in the practice of social sciences. Dr Meenakshi Sundaram spoke of certain categories that were considered taboo when approaching rural development, though practitioners were repeatedly confronted by them. For example, the positive roles of moneylenders and contractors are never properly examined. There is this naïve belief that one can somehow do away with moneylenders and contractors. There is a need to factor in their contribution and regulate their activities for rural development. There is also a need for social scientists to urgently engage with the studying of the impact of government programmes and policies. Dr Gangopadhyay agreed that the scholarly community also needs to be self-reflexive. Some Indian economists tried to deal with the positive role of money lenders and contractors. But they were academically marginalized.



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The gap between academia and practice can also grow due to a rapidly changing economy. This was evident when Ms NS Rama brought her practical, rather than research, experience to the table. She saw a number of issues in the workplace that were not always high on the priority list of social scientists studying women's issues. Women try to manage the work-life balance where they undertake multitasking to manage both. Some women have a certain level of guilt on whether the other aspect is being taken care of when they are at work or at home. Given that primary responsibility for children still lies with women, individual capability to multi-task is important. Women rarely get time to network like the men who get together at boys' clubs in the evenings. The changing lifestyles also affect women tremendously. The social acceptance is low for night shift jobs. Women often quit BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) jobs after marriage or childbirth. Women also find no time for activities related to career progression. Another issue for women at work is safety. Harassment at work can be an area of trouble for certain women. Issues such as gender stereotyping, male manager support, working mothers, women travelling abroad were also important. Ms Rama called for greater interaction between sociologists and industry.

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Another grassroots identification of issues to be researched emerged from Mr Bose Mandana. Taking the specific case of Kodagu district in Karnataka, he focused on the implications of the coffee industry becoming less remunerative. This has resulted in the steady conversion of coffee plantations into resorts for the tourism industry. There has been an increasing rush of tourists into Kodagu. This has resulted in the erosion of local culture. Tourism is also being promoted at the cost of local environment. In places like Kodagu whose economic base has traditionally been the plantation industry, there is an urgent need to refocus attention on the industry not merely because of economic reasons, but also for social and cultural reasons.

In addition to these gaps that can be traced to differing perspectives there were a number of issues listed that were being missed out simply because social scientists were concentrating elsewhere. These issues included the need to investigate the role of corporate hospitals and monitor various NGO research activities that often lack adequate baseline studies. Dr Padma Prakash listed tracking prices of medicines, medical ethics, public/private divide in health care, demographic composition of the medical profession and the history of medicine. Mr TK Arun, stressed on the need to look into why corruption is

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tolerated or accepted as legitimate by large sections of the society.

Dr Padmini Swaminathan felt there has not been much effort to study the bureaucratic structure. For example, in the informal sector in Tamil Nadu almost 60 employments have been brought under the schedule of the Minimum Wages Act. But only twelve were operationalized because they were yet to appoint the Deputy Inspector of Factories who would operationalize the rest. Policies need to be seen along with the bureaucratic infrastructure that makes them operational.

Ms V Geetha pointed out that there has been a shift in interest from labour, migration or land rights to issues such as the functioning of Self Help Groups. Again, migration has not been studied from a gendered perspective. Work has focused on the working of Panchayat Raj institutions, but here too there has been no focus on the fundamental changes that affect women working in them. There has also been no real work on the impact of insidious practices related to woman's body and its impact on the sense of bodily integrity of women.

In listing the large number of areas that were in need of greater research it is also important not to miss the

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relationship between these diverse areas. Prof CT Kurien expressed his concern about the fragmented approach in rural studies. He called for the development of interconnections between the political, economic and social aspects of any social phenomenon and saw in political economy the possibility of building such interconnections. Describing the two decades from the mid 80's till the present as a period of 'rapid transformation', Prof Kurien called for two initiatives. First, he advocated a set of micro studies that would capture the nuances of this process. He felt that what he had heard about Kodagu in the consultation provided an excellent opportunity. Similarly one could look at a local area which was noted for traditional industry of some kind and which has undergone rapid change, or the neighbourhood of a location where a new large-scale industry has come up. These case studies could be conducted by teams consisting of an anthropologist/sociologist, an empirical economist and a political scientist with special knowledge in Panchayat Raj institutions. A second initiative would be to form teams of scholars to work on major aspects of the transformation. The actual process of liberalisation needs to be documented; liberalisation of the economy at the all-India and State levels; the pattern of liberalisation at the bureaucratic level; and so on.

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The consultation thus confirmed that despite the large volume of research that has been generated there remain imbalances in coverage that need to be urgently addressed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As is apparent from the preceding report on the discussions, the structure of the consultation served the basic purpose of capturing the diversity of opinion both within the social sciences and among those who engage with the social sciences. The task then was to track the common ground that may have emerged from the discussion. To this end after the participants were exposed to these diverse views for two days they were requested, in the concluding session, to come up with specific suggestions pointing to the way forward for Indian social sciences. The participants then came up with a variety of suggestions which, despite all the diversity in opinions and backgrounds, turned out to be quite consistent with each other. Indeed, the variety of suggestions could fit quite easily into a consistent framework of recommendations.

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The main thrust of these recommendations was that **social science research should be organized in terms of research programmes that could be financed by the government, private sources or a combination of the two.** This was based on the recognition that social science research is becoming increasingly dependent on project funding. These projects, whether they are from the government or industry, typically come with specific questions for which the social scientist is expected to provide the answers. These questions, more often than not, are focused on issues of immediate concern. Important as these issues are, the healthy growth of the social sciences, as well as a meaningful understanding of society, requires us to also raise questions before they become matters of immediate concern. Social scientists thus also need to raise questions and develop theories which they might not always be able to do under conditions of project based research alone. The way out would be to focus on broad research programmes built around specific issues. Such programmes would address not just matters of immediate concern but also theoretical and other related issues. Each programme would have to be managed by a core group. Researchers from across the country would then be able to approach the programme for support for individual projects including theoretical ones. As long as the core group believes that the

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policy maker would throw up more alternatives. The policy maker could then choose the alternative she prefers. But the fact that other alternatives are available, and widely known in a democratic framework, would make it a little more difficult to simply give in to expediency. There is thus a need to **ensure the practice of social sciences is not absorbed into the government.**

The success of these programmes would depend on the talent they can draw from institutions across the country. Thus rather than programmes replacing institutions, the two would have to grow together. The programmes would thus have to be accompanied by measures to strengthen institutions. This would have to begin with measures to recognize successful social science institutions. **This could be done by institutionalizing the practice of providing substantial corpus funds to institutions with a proven track record.** The government has given substantial grants to individual institutions that have gained reputations of their own. This process could be institutionalized by laying down predetermined criteria that will make institutions eligible for such corpus funding. Institutions that meet a specified minimum standard can be eligible for a specific corpus funding; those that have established higher standards can be eligible for a larger corpus. Institutions that have demonstrated an ability to function on their own



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will then gain greater autonomy through a larger corpus. Such a mechanism could also be related to periodic reviews of the functioning of institutions so that they are aware of just how close they are to achieving the prescribed norms.

The problem with institutions is however not a matter of finances alone. There is also a need to put in place a system that generates high quality social science research professionals in the required numbers. Here again the first step could be in the form of recognition. **This could be done by increasing the amounts paid to National Professors and offering it to younger social scientists who have established research credentials.** There is a need to encourage social scientists below the age of 45 who have demonstrated an ability to do high quality research and could benefit by being given a free hand for a fixed period of time. The category of National Professors could be used to provide them the resources needed to work on issues of their own choice for a period of, say, five years.

Beyond providing recognition, there is a need to improve the quality of researchers as well as their numbers. The quality of research in research institutions as well as teaching in universities today is negatively affected by, among other factors, the substantial and growing distinction on the ground between institutions that teach

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and those that do research. This sharp distinction ensures that the latest research findings are not known to teachers, and researchers don't have the benefit of having their ideas challenged by young minds. This gap could be bridged by cross-deputation. **Researchers could be deputed for fixed periods of time to teaching institutions in exchange for teachers being deputed to research institutions.** Such cross-deputation should have the effect of improving teaching, or at least making it more in touch with the latest research. But this process alone would not be enough. There is a need to **substantially alter the textbooks so that they reflect the latest developments in each field.**

The quality of research and teaching is also adversely affected by having a purely English-based social science while society functions in other languages. This directly affects the dissemination of the research to a wider audience. More importantly, there are insights to be gained by engaging with society through the local languages which are not always captured by a unilingual (English-dominated) research process. This difficulty has grown in recent years as in earlier decades there were social scientists who wrote in more than one language. There is thus a need to **expand the scope of bilingual research and teaching.**

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In addition to providing the finances and the talent for research programmes, there is also a need to improve the quality and availability of data. A recurring theme during the consultation was the existence of a data crisis. Agricultural economists in particular were worried about the quality of the data that was being generated by surveys. With satellites now generating images with one metre resolution, it was felt that the use of satellite imagery for crop and land use data needs to be explored urgently. If satellite imagery can provide accurate data for smaller areas, it will also help crop insurance by providing at least a preliminary idea of the production on the land of individual farmers. There is thus an urgent need to **explore the potential to use satellite imagery for data on agriculture.**

Concerns about the availability of data were also raised in the health sector. While hospitals had a large amount of data, this was not available to social scientists, possibly because of concerns about the privacy of patients. If privacy is protected through effective guarantees of anonymity, it should be possible to provide this data to social scientists. There is thus a need to **create a system where health records maintained by hospitals are used to generate data that could be used by social scientists with the guarantee of anonymity for patients.**

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There was also a concern expressed that the data that are currently being generated are not being utilized to their full potential as they are not made available to the larger fraternity of researchers. ICSSR institutions today generate a substantial amount of data through projects of their own. This data needs to be put into a sharable data base so that it can be shared by a broader set of social scientists. There is thus a need to **create a sharable database of information on research-data across all ICSSR institutions**. Such a data base can also be tapped by those who engage with the social sciences from industry, government and NGOs.

An effective research programme that expects to attract research talent from institutions spread out across the country will also have to improve communications among social scientists themselves. To this end it becomes important to **establish a Social Science Network**. The consultation reflected the gaps in the awareness of the social scientists themselves of the research being done in different parts of the country. This was particularly true of research being carried out at the MPhil and PhD levels. It was felt that an online Social Sciences Network would help reduce this gap. The online nature of this network would also provide an effective link for researchers in the more remote parts of the country. This would help Indian social

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science as a whole engage with issues in remote areas in the country.

Since one of the main objectives of the research programmes would be to make available high quality social science inputs to those who engage with the social sciences, at least some of its success would depend on it being accessible to those outside the social sciences. This could be helped by **establishing an online mechanism for the dissemination of research results to a wider audience.** The lack of information and accessibility was highlighted as a key concern by all participants. Those who were not social scientists, in particular, emphasized how difficult it was for them to access research findings. It was felt that information about research findings should be provided to those who could use them whether they were in government, industry, NGOs or in any other field.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Social science research should be organized in terms of research programmes that could be financed by the government, private sources or a combination of the two.
- Ensure the practice of social sciences is not absorbed into the government.
- Institutionalize the practice of providing substantial corpus funds to institutions with a proven track record.
- Increase the amounts paid to National Professors and offer it to younger social scientists who have established research credentials.
- Depute researchers to teaching institutions in exchange for teachers being deputed to research institutions.
- Substantially alter textbooks so that they reflect the latest developments in each field.
- Expand the scope of bilingual research and teaching.
- Explore the potential to use satellite imagery for data on agriculture.
- Create a system where health records maintained by hospitals are used to generate data that could be used by social scientists with the guarantee of anonymity for the patients.
- Create a sharable database of information on research-data across all ICSSR institutions.
- Establish a Social Science Network.
- Establish an online mechanism for the dissemination of research results to a wider audience.

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### *Concluding Session*



In October 2007 social scientists met in Bangalore to discuss the future course of Indian social sciences with those who engage with the social sciences, including policy makers, NGOs, industry and journalists.

This report captures the variety of that discussion and some of the suggestions for the way forward.

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