

## Indigenization of the Social Sciences

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The social sciences, as we know them today, are largely of western origin. In the Third World they were a colonial import; even today they do not appear to have gained firm roots in the new soil and are not adequately adapted to the social environment of their new habitat. Non-western civilizations had their own traditions of social thought and many of them even made limited use of the empirical method for understanding their societies, but such intellectual quests did not crystallize sufficiently to acquire disciplinary individuality. In these civilizations speculation and reflection concerning man and society gained greater strength in the direction of social ethics and philosophy; there was much less emphasis on exploration of the existential reality. The forms in which the social sciences have developed in the societies of the Third World are unmistakably shaped by the western intellectual impact.

The different disciplines under the rubric of the social sciences were conditioned by the milieu in which they originated. Most of the pioneering studies were culture-specific and represented the response of perceptive and creative minds to the social reality they encountered. With the exception of anthropology, which studied exotic cultures, in all other social sciences the earlier studies were done within the societies of the pioneers. Analytic and methodological refinements gradually raised the levels of their generalizations. But few concepts could claim genuine cross-cultural validity and universal applicability. Limited use of data from non-western societies was made in some of these studies, but the empirical foundations of most of the disciplines remained solidly western. When the social sciences gained acceptance in non-western societies, their western orientation was not significantly altered. Implanted from outside and nurtured somewhat artificially, the social sciences found it difficult to shed their alien character. Even to this day they have not been able to attune themselves to the operating social realities.

The first teachers of many of these disciplines came from abroad, mostly from the home country of the colonial rulers. The textbooks used

were also foreign and had little bearing on or relevance to the society in which they were used. Most of the earlier researchers were also foreigners who brought with them the conceptual apparatus and methodological tools that had gained academic respectability in their home countries. Native teachers and researchers were trained by these men and often finished their education with a spell of stay and study abroad. Colonial administrators and missionaries—some of them self-taught—also undertook investigations into economic, cultural, and social problems. This as well as much other research was only partly inspired by an academic motivation; it was also an aid to colonial administration.

After the advent of independence in the former colonies and dependencies, it is amazing but true, there was little visible change in the academic culture. The social sciences not only retained their links with high prestige centres of learning abroad but also maintained, in a significant measure, their attitude of deference, dependency, and servility. Some self-conscious assertions of autonomy notwithstanding, by and large the social scientists of the Third World continued to look up to the great names in western social science as reference individuals and reference models. Styles set in the academic capitals abroad were avidly copied. There was a race as it were to keep up with the latest trends: imitation of conceptual frameworks and methods of research was all too evident. Little thought was given, in the process, to the applicability and relevance of these frameworks of enquiry and analysis to the countries where they were being adopted. Most of the developing countries thus remained outposts of academic empires and a sizeable group of social scientists continued to function with, to use the words of an eminent Asian social scientist, a captive mind.

In reality what had happened was the emergence and acceptance of a patron-client relationship between the social scientists of the more affluent countries and their counterparts in the less developed countries. The system of recognition and reward was weighted in favour of this pattern. Foreign degrees, even from minor universities without any claims to academic excellence, were rated higher than equivalent educational qualifications from the more recognized native centres of learning. Naturally there was a scramble for fellowships and teaching assistantships in foreign universities. Not everyone who entered the portals of these universities came out unscathed; almost all learned something, but some got so enslaved by their new acquisitions that they lost imagination, perspective, and critical ability to identify larger issues of public policy and to explore them unfettered by set ways of thought. In selections for faculty and research positions preference was given to those who had published their work in international

journals. There was little realization in the less developed countries that the contributions acceptable to these journals possibly required research that did not fit into their own scheme of priorities. Matters of national relevance could leave the editors cold; what they would find exciting might be an academic luxury to a poor country. Books published abroad added tremendously to the reputation of individual scholars; works representing greater depth and perspective published within the country went either unnoticed or got acclaim far below the level due to them because of their intrinsic worth. Invitations to international seminars and conferences were another mark of recognition; the more prestigious the centre of learning or sponsoring agency, the greater was the pride of the scholar selected for the distinction. No one wondered *who got asked?* and *why?* Yet another avenue of reward and recognition was participation in international or cross-cultural research projects. The role assigned to the social scientists of the less developed countries in these programmes was often a subordinate one. They did not have a decisive role either in developing the conceptual framework or in determining the methodology of enquiry. They generally collected data to fit into a pre-determined framework, following rigidly set methods of investigation. Those who could write and publish in a foreign language occupied the higher echelons of the academic hierarchy; those using native languages were looked down upon. The social science culture, in consequence, retained a satellite character. An astonishingly large number of academics uncritically allowed themselves to be exploited in this subordinate role. Some of them unwittingly even became tools of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism.

There was a pathetic dependence in the less developed countries on borrowed models and techniques. Great names in contemporary western social science were set on a pedestal; they were shown a degree of reverence that almost bordered on worship. Even the prejudices and predispositions of the mentors abroad were loyally copied. In a sense they, and not the native social scientists, determined what the social sciences shall be in the less developed countries. The concepts and theories rooted in and relevant to the western experience were uncritically applied to the vastly different social situation obtaining in the less developed countries. Blind imitations of western methodology led to distortion of perspectives and falsification of generalizations. For example, in India the individual interview as a tool of research among tribal and rural populations failed to draw reliable responses because people in these societies tend to think in groups and prefer to respond with group support, at least when outsiders address to them a series of wide ranging questions. No effort was made to test the reliability and validity of complicated scales and status ladders. In their desire to

follow and match the methodological perfection attained elsewhere, these doubtful tools were pressed into service despite their questionable applicability to the situation in the less developed countries. In some instances, studies based on inadequate conceptual framework and faulty methodology, were mechanically repeated several times over. Take, for example, the KAP (knowledge-attitude-practice) studies done in relation to adoption of improved agricultural and new fertility control practices. Several thousand of these studies exist in India alone. The industry displayed was perhaps commendable, but it did not bring forth a single analytic or usable insight. The consequence of the persistence of these trends was a two-way disaster. The growth of the social sciences remained stunted as the native social scientists operated within parameters set by others and could not see the challenges and opportunities inherent in their social situation. The results of their imitative research were of doubtful analytic and diagnostic worth because of their inappropriate conceptual and methodological foundations.

The elite of the social scientists in the less developed countries forms a charmed circle and its members interacted mostly with one another and with their peers and mentors overseas. They are very selective even in what they read. Their sources of inspiration and stimulation are confined to a narrowly defined "we group". Contributions of foreign mentors are read and emulated with adulation and from within the country itself they read and quote only those who belong to their mutual self-admiration society. This pathological and tragic aspect of dependence on outsiders and their native imitators even to understand our own societies causes no serious concern. They take pride in their "international" status without realizing that they are addressing themselves only to a few hundred people — a select band of professionals. Little effort is made by them to make their voice heard in their own countries in the remaining two-thirds of the world consisting of people having comparable low standards of living. The magic of international science, however hollow, continues to cast a strong spell on a sizeable section of the Third World social scientists. This so-called international social science needs to be demystified and even debunked because it is based on a false definition of internationalism.

The state of affairs is unsatisfactory and unhealthy. On the national level it leads to fixing of wrong priorities and thus to very considerable misdirection of effort. As suggested earlier, it also leads to distortions in research findings and their analyses. Because of these inadequacies the potential of social science insights and perspectives cannot be fully exploited and pressed into the service of nation-building. In the absence of imagination and creativity the contributions of the social scientists of less

developed countries in the fields of research and reflection neither enrich theory in any significant way nor do they prove powerful aids to social transformation.

The social scientists of the less developed countries mostly write in a foreign language and adopt the esoteric idiom of their discipline. This results in extremely limited diffusion of their ideas in their own countries and in their inability to contribute significantly to the raising of consciousness among their people.

Another trend, though it is somewhat unrelated, also deserves note. Although the less developed countries share a number of problems the opportunities for them to have a sustained exchange of ideas and experiences are few. Because of the absence of communication and meaningful dialogue among them, a great opportunity of contributing to disciplinary growth both in terms of theory and method is missed. Paradoxically we of the Third World see one another mostly through western eyes. Some of our work indeed finds publication in international journals, but one can legitimately suspect that the chances of its acceptance are enhanced if it follows a pattern. We have remained strangers to each other despite our geographical and cultural proximity and/or the similarity of our tasks and burdens. There is a great deal that can be achieved through indigenization of the social sciences and through evolution of meaningful patterns of interaction between the social scientists of countries sharing common problems.

The strong urge for the indigenization of the social sciences is not born out of xenophobia nor is it to be dismissed as a manifestation of national narcissism. Western social scientists have done some good work in the less developed countries and some of them do indeed work jointly with native social scientists on a basis of equality in research endeavours concerning the Third World. Doors do not have to be closed to them and no curtains — of iron, bamboo, or paper — have to be raised to bar their participation in research. But some caution is definitely needed. National and foreign spending on social science research must bear a logical proportion; indigenous effort must not be allowed to be swept off its feet by powerful foreign agencies spending lavishly on social research. They should be welcomed as equals, not as masters. The slavery of mind which blunts the imagination, constricts the vision, and erodes creativity must be fought resolutely. In short, a fresh approach has to be made to invest purpose in to the social science endeavour in the less developed countries. The payoff of imitation has been poor. What is needed now is a creative response to our social reality. Rather than be distracted by the glitter of

the so-called international social science and blindly follow current fashions, we must take a critical look at the prevailing situation and do something about it. At the same time platforms that contribute to productive cross-fertilization of ideas and enhanced interaction among the social scientists of the less developed countries and other like-minded scholars elsewhere should be created. Indigenization does not involve a retreat of the social sciences into national shells. It is aimed principally at a redefinition of focus and at purposive efforts to develop dynamic perspectives on national problems and critical issues of public policy.

The emphases in my argument so far have been on the emancipation of the mind and on improving the quality of professional praxis. A number of related arguments in support of the indigenization of the social sciences can be offered. When they are indigenized the insider's view of culture and society is likely to emerge in clear relief. This will enable better explication of native categories of thought and of the meaning that the people themselves give. The social sciences, in the process, will relate directly and meaningfully to the country's history, traditions, and corpus of indigenous thought. Such a trend would naturally provide correctives to some of the tragic convolutions of perspective. For example, in a culture-conscious country like India social anthropologists would not reject tradition and history only because Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the historical character of the discipline and return to them with zest only when Louis Dumont vigorously pleads for forging meaningful links between Indology on the one hand and sociology and anthropology on the other.

Indigenization would also correct some of the distortions and imbalances in peer group behaviour among the social scientists within the less developed countries. Once the high gods of international social science are dislodged from their pedestals, even those enjoying elite status in their respective countries would take more serious note of the different approaches and conceptual emphases of those who either do not belong to or have been kept out of their closely guarded inner circle.

Finally, subversions by foreign agencies would be held in check and tragedies like Project Camelot would not be repeated easily. Of course, it would be stupid to treat all foreign researchers as spies, but it would be suicidal to ignore the warnings of possible subversion.

In any debate on the question almost all these arguments can be controverted, but their partial validity cannot be demolished. It can be argued that what is assumed or taken for granted by the insider can be

brought out in a new and different perspective by the outsider. This is not denied but even such acceptance does not in any manner diminish the special capability of the insider to illuminate the hidden meanings and subtle nuances of cultural emphases. A return to history and traditions of social and philosophical thought can also vitiate empirical research. That this has happened can be convincingly demonstrated. In their new found love for religious and philosophical traditions as sources for illuminating some of the covert dimensions of culture, many of the recent converts have succeeded only in demonstrating their inadequate familiarity with the classics and have come out with half-baked and unconvincing propositions.

It is not difficult to anticipate many of the arguments against indigenization. The first set of these will revolve round the taxonomic status of the social sciences. Do they have greater affinity with the natural sciences or must we regard them as applied humanities and practical arts? Such an argument need not detain us long. Social sciences do have a special character which is determined by the nature and objectives of their study. Human society cannot be studied like chemical substances or plants or frogs and insects.

The second set of arguments will be centred on the propositional structure of science. All sciences, it will be claimed, come out with universalist propositions whose validity can be tested by whites, blacks, yellows and browns alike provided they have the requisite training and the minimum infrastructure of investigation. This may be true, but the kind of science practised in different societies is influenced by a number of dependent variables. Theoretically, the Australian aboriginals are as capable of exploring space and landing man on the moon as the scientists of USA and USSR. But will they do it? And must they do it? The practice of science is governed by social needs and that is why we find differences in how it actually develops in different economic and cultural settings. Besides, not many examples exist of profound universalist propositions of major consequence in the social sciences.

The value neutrality of the social sciences has been done to death. It cannot be denied that objectivity must characterize all science, but the value neutrality of the social sciences will have to be more convincingly demonstrated. Formulations that adopt a self-conscious value neutral posture, on deeper analysis, can be demonstrated to be founded on value-laden assumptions and are not free from predispositions.

It will be argued that social sciences are essentially comparative and that their indigenization would detract from this characteristic. This

argument has considerable force. However, two important points in this context must be borne in mind. First, we must be sure of the quality of what is being compared. Comparisons between distorted and convoluted research findings will be worse than useless. Second, in the first instance at least like must be compared with like. It is for this reason that a case has been made here for meaningful interaction leading to profitable comparison of the experiences, findings, and trends in the less developed countries. Later the area of comparisons can be extended. Much will be lost if we miss the essential first step in this direction.

The very mention of social purpose causes apoplexy among a section of the Third World social scientists. With injured innocence they suggest that all science has its inner logic and that no one should try to legislate its priorities and directions of growth. Such a view can be ignored for it is propounded generally by politically naive individuals with little or no social concern. Very little social science can be practised for its own sake and no poor country can afford to be indulgent towards the academic luxuries advocated by this, self-important group basking in its largely self-evaluated worth. The serendipity pattern underlying all scientific endeavours is not denied. But its acceptance need not necessarily lead to underplaying the obvious. The more pressing problems staring the less developed countries in the face need to be attended to first.

The social sciences in the developing countries stand at the turning point. It is time for serious reflection and redefinition of objectives. The socially concerned among us have to engage in serious heart-searching. Indigenization of the social science endeavour can provide a way out of the present impasse.