A New Beginning?

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or loyalty, and outside the black box of brilliance, what is it that individuals must do collectively – with, for and to each other – to make institutions work? It is the sense of institutional citizenship – rights, duties, stakes, belonging – and the everyday realities of a research culture – its rhythms, its investments and interdependencies – that help in opening up institutions to better description.

Choosing Research Agendas

As a concrete example, take the age-old question of how institutions identify their research agendas. To say that projects undertaken at the behest of "funders" lead to poor research is to invoke a truism so well-worn that it appears self-evidently true. But why exactly does this happen? Are the goals of "funders" always and greatly different from "our" goals? If not, then why is it that the divergences always trump the

convergences – why do significant areas of overlap in the objectives fail to have a positive impact on the quality of research? To come at the same question from a different direction, what is the precise chain of causation that links academic freedom to excellence in research? And, finally, why do we believe that steady state support is the best bulwark for autonomy?

When we look at the current plans for expanding our universities and replacing the University Grants Commission with a brand new commission, or even at all the sound and fury surrounding the Lokpal Bill, we are up against a very general problem indeed: We continue to be trapped in the false belief that a "few good men" at the helm (and, no, I am not asking that we add a token woman to the group) will somehow, magically, redeem us from all past sins. Institutions devoted to social science research might seem like

odd places to look for what is wrong and right with our institutions overall. But, given that they are inhabited by people who are supposed to be more prepared than most to ask and answer difficult questions, there may be surprises here and something to learn.

In sum, rather than stories of decline leveraged on a glorious past, we require good descriptions of the present that will help us map possible institutional futures, and perhaps even navigate our way to one that is distinctly better. At any rate this is one way of responding positively to the extreme optimism of the MHRD-sponsored review report on the ICSSR.

NOTES

1 See the set of articles in the special section "Fourth Review of ICSSR" (EPW, 2 February 2008).
2 For a fuller discussion of knowledge and higher education today see the issue of Seminar, "Democratising Knowledge: A Symposium on Reforming Higher Education", No 624, August 2011.

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How may ICSSR and its network of institutes enable the growth of social sciences? It is time to move beyond assessments and towards building different possibilities into an archaic system, using texts of different kinds and bringing the diversity and dynamism of the world outside. The need is to frame research questions differently and reimagine higher education in the process.

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...it should also be emphasised that despite all its shortfalls, the ICSSR has never been an obstacle hindering research in the social sciences (Report of the Committee Constituted by the Government of India to Review the Functioning of ICSSR, 2011, p 43).

Introduction

The "crisis in the social sciences", has been discussed at length in the last few years, especially after the publication of the Fourth Review Committee Report in 2007. The discussion in the EPW (2 February 2008), on the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in particular, brought to the fore several concerns and questions – some of them interrogating the framing of the crisis itself. The most recent report by the committee led by Deepak Nayyar echoes, briefly in 51 pages, the arguments of the Vaidyanathan Committee of 2007.

Key Observations

In the main, the report draws attention to the disparity between funding for the social sciences and the sciences;[1] the disparity

between the ICSSR and the University Grants Commission (UGC);[2] the grossly inadequate budgetary allocation to ICSSR, which in a downward spiral saw a decline by 17% in the average grant to each of the 27 research institutes in this period; the maintenance of faculty at a level way below the critical minimum necessary for sustainable research programmes and long-term planning of research agendas; a decline in independent research output; a less than optimum level of publication by faculty of research institutes;[3] evidence of "a strong regional bias" in favour of Delhi and northern India.[4] While no comparable regional bias was found in the matter of research projects, the committee gave voice to widespread perceptions that "the process of approving research projects is...influenced by patronage rather than by considerations of merit alone".[5]

Dismantling Barriers

The critique of the structure of bureaucracy in ICSSR and the institutes it supports – in the Nayyar report and in the discussion following the Vaidyanathan report – is comprehensive and for the most part well taken. There is, however, one point that bears reiteration. This has to do with the question of representation – along lines of gender, region and other indices. It is a troubling fact that both patronage and authority

continue to be gendered through practices of avoidance, with the constitution of all male committees at different levels of academic administration remaining a complacent possibility. This is true of numbers on other indices of diversity as well. The north-eastern region, for instance, is poorly represented on all counts. That representation is not a question of tokenism, but that it alters the terms of discussion and deliberation, is a fact that is yet to form part of administrative commonsense, therefore an exercise that ICSSR and its institutes must invest some intellectual energy in.

The committee highlights what it calls "missed opportunities" – the complete lack of synergy between ICSSR institutes; the absence, for the most part, of partnerships with universities or the UGC; and its weak presence in policy spaces and newly emerging areas of interdisciplinary research (p 42). It is to this brief section that I now turn.

A Possible Way Forward

I will use the epigraph as my point of departure to think through some new ways in which we could broaden the imagination of the social sciences. How may ICSSR and its network of institutes enable the growth of social sciences? It is time to move beyond assessments and towards building different possibilities into an archaic system, using texts of different kinds, bringing the diversity and dynamism of the world outside into the university and harnessing this rich knowledge and experience to serve the larger interests of the development of the social sciences – framing research questions differently and reimagining higher education in the process. The effort is long overdue. While there is a widespread perception of a qualitative decline in social sciences, enrolment figures show that in 2005-06, 45% of students in institutions of higher education were in the arts and social sciences, a similar trend evident in proportion of doctorates for the same year (Krishna and Krishna 2010). Against this backdrop, although we have seen a sharp rise in "institutions of excellence" and now the proliferation of central universities, this has not really altered the fact that the largest number of students from underprivileged backgrounds can only access public, state universities. And yet, these students, through their life worlds, carry the potential of breaking

barriers with path-breaking analyses, a point amply demonstrated through the volume of incisive writing, in English too, but far more in the regional languages – not to speak of innumerable personal accounts of teachers from these institutions of animated discussions in and outside classrooms.

For this to be possible, however, we need to put in place a multi-tiered intervention, the first part of which must look at undergraduate education in the state. While ICSSR institutes need not engage in undergraduate teaching, it is important to develop partnerships with undergraduate institutions and bring good research into undergraduate teaching, even while exploring ways in which the needs of undergraduate education might influence the framing of research processes. The Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education, for instance, has revised and standardised social science and humanities syllabi at the undergraduate level across the 41 universities in the state – of which 21 have social science programmes – after a 20-year gap. This at a time when all reports on the status of higher education in India have dwelt at length on the problems of stagnation and lack of imagination in the delivery of higher education.

The major obstacle, however, is the utter paucity of teaching and learning materials at the undergraduate level, both in English and other mediums of instruction. An innovative textbook production programme that will introduce textbooks for undergraduate students accompanied by teachers' manuals, phase-wise for all social sciences and humanities, have the potential of revolutionising undergraduate and postgraduate education because they will focus on reimagining the disciplines in the social sciences by drawing on non-conventional texts, diverse sources and local histories of struggles and argumentation. While the question of the virtue of a standard, unimaginative syllabus remains, there is also the unexplored possibility of a radical, subversive interpretation of syllabi, investing them with rigour and meaning that was not intended in the formulation. The task of writing in a manner that will strengthen the quality of teaching and learning at the undergraduate level – the feeder channel for robust, critical research – is especially crucial, considering these universities cannot be matched in

terms of inclusiveness and access. It is imperative for some of us to be the bridge. Over a period of three years, which is the time that students go through an undergraduate degree programme, the character and parameters of learning can be transformed through a textbook programme.

The second part of the intervention could focus on building a doctoral research programme that opens the system of higher education up to students from underprivileged social and economic backgrounds and builds research capacities through close mentoring and supervision in an inclusive manner. The effort should be to hone knowledge, capability and diligence in research capacity in the state systems on par with more privileged and well-endowed centres of learning.[6] It is important to be able to take doctoral research possibilities to first and second-generation students from non-English speaking backgrounds, building capacities for research and writing step by step. In a sense, research institutes then become a support to the inclusive but ill-equipped state universities, that prepare students till the postgraduate level, and for reasons of scale and capacity are unable to guide doctoral research closely. We cannot forget that these are students with unexplored potential, who are, for the most part, out of the "brain drain" circuit.

The third part of this intervention could look at the possibilities for strengthening the capacities of people who cannot afford a full time education. Currently, the open universities are entrusted with the entire responsibility for fulfilling this huge task. Conversations with scholars and officers in charge of these institutions foreground the need for linkages with and support to the open university system, in a manner such that affiliation (which ICSSR institutes are dependent on to run their academic programmes) results in a two-way engagement – conferring recognition on the institute for its programmes, as well as making it obligatory on the institute to shoulder the responsibility for creating teaching materials for the distance mode. This is especially important, given the fact that with very few exceptions, open universities are focused on imparting education in the social sciences and humanities.

A fourth part must address the needs of teachers in colleges and universities, who

at present are constrained to teach with no access to facilities or materials. Initiating regular dialogues with teachers and developing materials in collaboration with them will go a long way towards helping higher education to shift tracks. This needs to go far beyond the orientation and refresher course mode, to a more sustained professional relationship that brings university and college teachers, independent scholar-activists and scholars in research centres together at short intervals, specifically to discuss recent developments and materials in the social sciences.

Breaking New Ground

The entire discussion on research priorities in the ICSSR system has focused on traditional social science disciplines – economics, sociology, political science, etc. While a range of disciplines are listed in the call for proposals issued from time to time, the focus on critical fields like law is negligible, and a focus on disability studies absent. I will conclude this essay with a brief look at the possibilities of interdisciplinary law. While the issue of relevance to policy has been addressed by all the participants in these debates over the years, an area that is critical and completely off the radar of social science reviews is relevance of this research to the development of jurisprudence in courts.

The ICSSR sponsored the preparation of two trend reports on the Sociology of Law – one by Veena Das that covered studies in this field till 1969 and the second by Upendra Baxi, which covered studies from 1970-80. J S Gandhi conducted a third review in 2008. There is now increasing recognition on the indispensability of adopting an interdisciplinary standpoint in pedagogy and research, both within the broad field of law and within other disciplines as well.[7] An exploration of the possibilities of an indigenous jurisprudence as well is important to the exercise of critical curricular interventions in the social sciences and humanities. Drawing on the work of radical historians to look at the sources of justice and legitimacy, and the developments of the normative order through the ancient and medieval periods, and re-examining the writings of M K Gandhi, B R Ambedkar, Jotirao Phule, Periyar, Tarabai Shinde, Satyamurti,

Ayyankali and others like them from different parts of the subcontinent who developed an anti-colonial theory of justice, will provide a much needed historiography of constitutionalism on the subcontinent.

The renewed focus on the commons provides an important space for engagement with the idea of social justice and constitutionalism – one that takes us through but also way beyond classic "environment concerns" alone. In an important sense, the Constitution of India is a commons-in-itself and sets out a broad network of general and specific rules for the governance of commons-at-large across a range – within the framework of social justice, and the recognition of the need to create access – both to the commons-in-itself and the commons-at-large. Also, importantly, the Constitution fosters the ideas of pluralism and diversity, so that both in itself and with reference to the commons-at-large, it has the potential to sidestep the pitfalls of a monolithic, monoculture of rules. Sustained research on the constitutional foundations of the commons, and an exploration of the social and political foundations of the Constitution and laws are indispensable to the endeavour of social science – theoretical and applied.

The relationship between law and literature is an important one. From laws on sedition and censorship to the vitality of resistance literature in times of struggle, creative writing has played a critical role in shaping the public conscience from the time of the freedom struggle to the contemporary times of new social movements. And, importantly, there is a large corpus of writing and oral literature across regions and languages that speak to alternative ideas of justice. An as yet relatively uncharted field, this provides a rich context for research. This is of course not to speak of the use of creative writing by courts to frame arguments. A recent judgment of the Supreme Court triggered much debate because it quoted Joseph Conrad,[8] and another on inclusive education carries Tagore's "Where the Mind is Without Fear" as its epigraph.[9]

Conclusions

There has been a more than adequate deliberation on the need and modalities of transforming the institutional structures

that govern social science research. The repetition of the terms and observations of ICSSR's Fourth Review Committee by a committee constituted by the government probably heralds governmental action on these reports. While funding is a major constraint, reflected immediately in insecurity of tenure and skeletal staffing, the remedies are not exhausted by an increased budgetary allocation and increased transparency in appointments at the helm alone. What is required is a detailed mapping of the substantive transformations based on recommendations made so far (both in the discussions around the review reports, but also in the rich and voluminous debate on the social sciences between 2000 and 2011) and concrete planning to make them actionable and sustainable in the long run.

NOTES

1 Between 2005 and 2010, funding for the ICSSR from the Government of India shrank by 7%. During this period, the grant to ICSSR was only 2.3% of the total grant to CSIR and 11% of the total grant to ICMR. This is not the situation of ICSSR alone. Within the UGC, the committee found that social sciences received only 12% of the total expenditure allocated for research in social and basic sciences. As a remedy, the committee suggested a increase of 25 times in funding for the ICSSR and the building of a Rs 1,000 crore corpus to support newly emerging areas of research.

2 The total grant to ICSSR was only 1% of the total grant received by UGC.

3 On an average, the committee found, a faculty member takes five years to write a book and one and a half years to write a book chapter. Barring a few exceptional individuals in these institutions, at a general level, the committee found faculty had very few publications in peer-reviewed journals. This observation comes with a caveat that the comment pertains only to quantity and not quality of published work.

4 Between 2000 and 2010, Delhi and north India together received more than 60% of doctoral fellowships, 67% of general fellowships, 58% of senior fellowships and nearly 70% of national fellowships, p 32.

5 P 38. The troublesome issue of patronage has also been raised by others, notably Chatterjee (2008). This, in my view, is not a problem limited to research projects alone. The deliberate cultivation of personal contacts with key persons (officers, bureaucrats, academic members) in ICSSR is seen by senior researchers with good research and publication records to be the route to securing grants. The evidence of unevenness in fellowship disbursal raises the question of whether regional disparity is tied into cliques of mutual patronage. Whether or not this is true, it is a matter that needs to be addressed directly through clear procedures and other transparency measures.

6 This was in fact the thought behind the effort initiated by the Government of Kerala in 2008 in setting up the Expert Group on Legal Education Reform in Kerala under the chairmanship of N R Madhava Menon. The group after travelling

extensively and having discussions with faculty and students in every single law college/department in the state recommended concrete strategies to bring the entire law college network in the state on par with a national law school system as it was originally conceived, especially in terms of the rigour of teaching and institutional mechanisms for academic outreach.

7   For a cogent account of the development of the sociology of law and its intersections with feminist research see Baxi (2008).

8   *Nandini Sundar and Others vs State of Chhattisgarh*, Writ Petition (C) No 250 of 2007.

9   *Indian Medical Association vs Union of India and Others*, Civil Appeal Nos 8170 and 8171 of 2009.

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Governance, Autonomy and Social Science Research

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Other than the funding issue, the review committee has highlighted governance and autonomy as crucial issues to be addressed in the ICSSR. Any efforts by the government to tackle these areas will have to be based on policy decisions on the structural composition of the body, its internal organisation and funding.

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The committee appointed to review and restructure the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) was mandated to review among other issues, its structure, functioning, and performance over the last five years in promoting social science research.

Introduction

So far, the ICSSR has been reviewed by four committees[1] and a one-man committee (Anand Swarup Committee), which did a limited review of the internal organisation and systems in 1995. A common characteristic that emerges from the reports of these committees is a concern for the structure and autonomy of the ICSSR. The most recent MHRD review committee also raises concerns of governance and autonomy.

Other key concerns flagged by the MHRD-appointed committee are:
• Significant decline and decay in many of the institutes and finding new ways of reinventing them.
• Low amounts set aside for fellowship thus discouraging bright researchers.
• Regional bias in disbursement of fellowships.
• Modest programme of international collaborations.
• Small quantum of funds provided to research projects.
• Low number of research projects sanctioned.

Any efforts to address the above issues will have to be critically based on three central elements, requiring policy decisions by the government. These are: the structural composition of ICSSR, its internal organisation, and the policy framework governing institutional funding.

Governance and Autonomy Issues

The ICSSR was set up as a society. The Memorandum of Association (MOA) of the society has attracted much criticism for long.

All previous review committees (set up by the ICSSR) had pointed out that the structure of the present MOA with its emphasis on nominated members would lead to problems for the council. The review committees, in turn, suggested methods to make the process of nomination more transparent but none of these changes were ever incorporated in the MOA.

Another related issue concerns the term of office of the members which is governed by rule (4) as stated:

4 Term of Office:
(i) In the first reconstitution of the council in 1972 one-third (or six) of the social scientist members shall be appointed for one year, another one-third of the social scientist members shall be appointed for two years and the remaining six social scientists will be appointed for three years.
(ii) Except as provided in sub-rule i above the term of office of all members shall be three years.

Clearly, when the council was set up, it was visualised that it would be constituted on the Rajya Sabha model with rolling tenures. This structure implies that some degree of institutional memory is preserved. However, in practice, appointments have not been made on this pattern. This has resulted in a complete loss of institutional autonomy. A quick review of the composition of the council from 1980 to 2005 will reveal this.

The problem of governance and autonomy exists in research institutes too. The third ICSSR review committee observed that as the "founders" of the institutes fade