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Samar Verma & Anshu Bharadwaj: Why is India freezing out policy research?

Support for social science research is only 8% of national science & technology research budget

Samar Verma & Anshu Bharadwaj
Last Updated at January 21, 2013 02:06 IST



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In a recent speech to the 99th Annual Session of the Indian Science Congress, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh noted that India's R&D spending was too low and stagnant, and called for increasing it to two per cent of GDP by the end of the Twelfth Plan period, from the present one per cent. He also expressed concern about India's declining global position over the last few decades, in particular compared to China. Finally, he noted that the overriding objective of science, technology and innovation should be to support faster, sustainable and inclusive development.

Nobody can dispute the importance of science and technology in accelerating human and economic development. Who can forget the Green Revolution, which led to dramatic increase in agricultural production? Or the recent telecom revolution, which has improved efficiency and transparency in delivery of services?

In this context, it is relevant to quote from the Royal Society's 'Science Report 2011': "Science is essential for addressing global challenges, but it cannot do so in isolation. A wide range of approaches will be required, including...working with the social sciences and wider disciplines. ...the science infrastructure works best when it is supported by, and enables, other systems".

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2011 report emphasises this worrisome trend. The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) is India's premier government agency for promoting social science research; its present funding is just Rs 51 crore. In real terms, funding to ICSSR for the period 2005-06 to 2009-10 actually declined by seven per cent!

The ICSSR supports 25 social science research institutions, and the average grant per institute shrank by 17 per cent in real terms over the five-year period ending 2009-10. It is no surprise that these institutions are becoming increasingly dependent on international foundations. For example, the International Development Research Centre-managed Think Tank Initiative programme's total annual grant to nine selected Indian think tanks itself is approximately Rs 16 crore, which is nearly half of what ICSSR provides to its 25 research institutes in India!

Let us compare this with the situation of social science research in China. The budget for social sciences, including for teaching and research, has been increasing by about 15-20 per cent every year since 2003. The Chinese government has assessed social sciences as being as important as the natural sciences for the country's progress. According to the China country paper by Huang Ping in the Unesco 'World Social Science Report', never before have social sciences had such an impact on China's social policy and social change.

So, what can be done to stimulate high-quality social science research to ensure that the fruits of development reach everyone?

To start with, it is important to realise that the issue is not just of supporting social science research, but one of strengthening "policy research", which is interdisciplinary. Most of the pressing problems facing the country are interdisciplinary in nature. For instance, in an emergency and disaster situation, the poor are usually the most affected. Therefore, effective emergency management must combine technology options with appropriate social-science models to account for issues such as human behaviour and crowd dynamics. Similarly, technology options for increasing electricity generation should also improve access by the poor to electricity while being environmentally sustainable. US think tanks, which have played major roles in enriching policymaking in that country, have a healthy mix of disciplines such as science, engineering, economics, statistics, law, psychology and medicine.

Clearly, there is a case for significant increase in government research support. However, mere increase in funding is not enough unless it is coupled with measures to ensure significant improvement in interdisciplinary research quality. Attracting highly qualified and talented scholars for social science research is a challenge in the present environment. However, there are several success stories where young and talented researchers have performed outstandingly when given an opportunity. A few ministries provide internships to young professionals and this is an excellent platform to involve them in the policymaking process. This should be strengthened and institutionally linked to the university curriculum.

The role of private industry and philanthropy is crucial to augment government funding. Indian industry trusts do support a large number of NGOs working in social sectors such as education, health, poverty alleviation, etc. However, industry in general is less generous to policy research organisations. Perhaps they are not sure whether funding these institutions would lead to direct impact on social and economic challenges facing the country or whether the policy research would be objective and non-partisan. It is, however, important for industry to realise the importance of high-quality policy research in enriching policymaking processes and outcomes. A few domestic foundations have given generous grants to leading US research centres; even a fraction of that spent domestically would be of great benefit in enriching policy research at home.

Jawaharlal Nehru, long ago, in his address to the Indian Science Congress in 1937, advocated a scientific approach to all aspects of human interaction and behaviour, not just the pursuit of knowledge in natural and social sciences and humanities. And scientific approach is a defining characteristic of policy research. Policy research institutions, in turn, remain at the centre of this domain. A strong and determined effort to strengthen them is indispensable to realising the scientific temper that Nehru envisioned.

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First Published: Sun, February 19 2012. 00:05 IST

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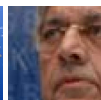
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