

QUALITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN INDIA: A REVIEW

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Social science disciplines are crucial in understanding the influence of social dynamics on an individual's behavior and social interaction system of a society. Research in this discipline can therefore play an imperative role in enhancing our socio-economic progress by improving our understanding of normative patterns of a society, administrative decision making, cultural diversity and multifaceted dimensions of complicated human behavior. Recent increase in research in this area by academicians, research scholars, policy makers and administrators is therefore not surprising. However, this colossal attention has failed to translate itself qualitatively in terms of effective policy making or enhancement of our research ecosystem. An increase in number of publications, research projects and copious doctoral fellowships has been amiss in adding any value to the socio-economic progress of the Indian society. Lack of adequate academic infrastructure, faculty persons, research resources and financial grants has resulted in substandard research in this area. Further, citations being the only tangible parameter to evaluate the quality of research in India, has given way to bogus research journals publishing irrelevant literature. Keeping in view these Indian complexities and challenges in the area of social science research it is essential to evaluate the quality of social science research in India. The paper therefore, attempts to review the quality of existing social science research in India and further provide suggestions for improving the same. For this purpose, *firstly*, the paper provides a baseline understanding of social science research and its objectives. *Secondly*, it attempts to review present literature of the quality of social science research in India. *Lastly*, it attempts to suggest certain procedures to enhance the quality of social science research in the Indian setup.

Keywords— Social Science, research, quality, India

I. INTRODUCTION

Research is often understood as reviewing the existing facts in order to derive something new. Rajasekar et al., (2013) depicts that research is a logical and systematic search for new and useful information in a scientific manner. Deriving these new facts from the already existing literature makes research both an art and a science. Kothari (2004) in his study also agrees that research refers to an 'art of scientific investigation that includes a systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic.' In the past few decades 'research', particularly in the area of Social Scientific disciplines, has gained immense importance in the Indian education system.

Social science disciplines are understood as academic disciplines which deal with the social, behavioral and cultural environment of the individual (Chatterjee, 2015). Academic disciplines like political science, sociology, psychology, economics and anthropology are amongst the major contributors of social science researches. Thereby, the aim of the above disciplines is to scientifically evaluate collective behaviors of individuals in varying life circumstances (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Halloran (2010) however depicts that social science researches not only aim to study how and why people behave the way they do in 'groups' but also how they behave the way they do 'individually' within a group. These goals of social scientific research have undergone major changes over the years. Social scientific research dates back to the era of Independence, where the goal of research was to track the socioeconomic growth of the country by their higher education system (Papola, 2010). However, recent studies of Bhattacharjee (2012) reveal that the goal of social science research currently is to build scientific knowledge in order to explain natural or social phenomena.

On the basis of the above mentioned goals there are certain *objectives* that are a prerequisite for a quality research to be conducted, such as:

- a) Contributing creatively to the resources of the research ecosystem
- b) Being able to generalize its findings to the general population.

Kothari (2004) however outlined 4 other objectives apart from the above mentioned objectives of research i.e.:

- a) *Exploratory Objective*: This refers to exploring an ill defined area of research by gaining new insights related to that area.

- b) *Descriptive objective*: This refers to describing an individual, group, situation or social phenomena accurately and objectively.

- c) *Diagnostic Objective*: To study the frequency with which a phenomena takes place so as to understand its value in the social ecosystem.

d) *Hypothesis-testing Objective*: To explore the cause effect relationship between two variables to gain understanding about the same.

As mentioned earlier, social sciences deal with an individual and his social interactions, which make it difficult to conduct research in this area. Sen & Nagwanshee (2016) list certain **issues pertaining social science research** which eventually deteriorate the 'quality' of research:

- Violation of ethical guidelines such as plagiarism or adopting questionable research practices.
- Duplicating articles by the same authors in various journals so as to increase their 'quantity' of research work.
- Tampering with the responses or size of the research sample.
- Using inappropriate statistical analysis techniques to enhance the significance of the study.
- Falsifying results so as to fit their 'predisposed conclusions'.

II. QUALITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN INDIA: REVIEW

The dubious nature of social scientific research in India makes it essential to conduct the current investigation. Social science research in India has been on an upswing in terms of its 'quantity', whereby on the other hand, it has hit its 'lowest ebb' in terms of the 'quality'. Social scientific research in the Indian scenario had turned towards 'quantification' in its very inception i.e. during 1960's. This incline initially brought specificity and organization in the work however later this positivistic approach led the researchers to focus just towards the 'method' than towards the 'results' of the study (Papola, 2010). Thus, most of the research 'findings' failed to contribute significantly towards contributing effectively towards 'policy changes' of the higher education system. Therefore, it is all the more important to evaluate the parameters for assessing 'quality' of social science research in India and further analyzing how the quality degradation can impact the country's socio-economic progress.

What does 'quality' in 'social science research' actually imply?

Analyzing the 'quality' has always been a concern for professionals because of the 'subjectivity' attached to it. Therefore, it's essential to understand what does 'quality' in 'social science research' actually imply? According to Akkerman et al., (2006) there are 3 *quality indicators* of social scientific research:

a) *Visibility*: This refers to the frequency with which a research work is cited by various research professionals of social scientific research which is taken as a measure to ensure the 'credibility' of a research work.

b) *Comprehensibility*: It refers to how well a particular research work is interpreted by various research professionals in terms of its contribution towards the research ecosystem.

c) *Acceptance*: This dimension refers to the approval of a research work by institutional bodies of research on the basis of varying parameters such as its contribution towards the community, its rationality and its newness in content etc.

However in the Indian scenario, only the 'first' indicator is being focused upon by the researchers, while the others are being completely neglected. This viewpoint was also seconded by an article that appeared in the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW, 2007) and further by Fourth Review Committee of Indian Council of Social Scientific Research (2007), that social science research in India has failed to meet the 'expectations' of scientific professionals i.e. contributing to the socio-economic progress of the society and further providing resources for idea generation regarding structural and functional changes in higher education system. According to Ray et al., (2016) extensive focus on 'volume' of research and complete neglect of 'quality' has given way to 'bogus' publications i.e. paid publications, wherein, research scholars/academic researchers pay hefty amounts to journal publishers to publish their research work. This 'commercialization' of an academic body of work takes away from the very 'rationale' of conducting research altogether, whereby; primarily the emphasis should be on the 'relevance' and 'contribution' of the work towards the social science research.

Perspectives of Understanding 'Quality' of Research

The 'quality' of social science research can therefore be understood from two perspectives (Ray et al., 2016):

a) *Quality from User's Perspective*: The quality of research from the 'user's' perspective implies the 'purpose' for which a user is considering a research work i.e. whether the user is referring a research work to add to his existing knowledge system or whether the user wants to utilize the existing research work to actually add something new to the existing body of literature.

b) *Quality from Producer's Perspective*: The quality of research from the 'producer's perspective' implies the extent to which the producer is successful in dissemination of knowledge by publishing their research work with 'quality' journals having valid impact factor.

Challenges of Social Scientific Research in India

In context of Indian social scientific research, the analysis of 'quality' still remains restricted due to a variety of challenges posed by the Indian society. Whereby, Sarvanavel (2001) listed that 'challenges' in the Indian society in terms of social scientific research are much more complex than any other society. Indian researchers lack:

- a) A knowledge regarding the latest techniques of research
- b) Universities lack infrastructure to carry out adequate research
- c) Funds are insufficient to derive qualitative output and there exists a dearth of quality 'research professionals' to carry out research.

Another challenge that is pertinent to social science research is that of 'plagiarism' i.e. Indian researchers often duplicate another researcher's research work on their own name so as to increase their 'number' of publications (Subramanyam, 2010). This not only degrades the 'quality' of research but further goes against the ethics of social scientific research.

Errors by Indian Social Scientific Researchers

Apart from the above mentioned challenges, Bhattacharjee (2012) mentions certain common errors that researchers especially in the Indian context commit, which further deteriorates the quality of their research i.e.:

- *Irrelevant Research Problems*: Problems that do not contribute to the research ecosystem or problems that involve repetition of the subject matter.
- *Following Research Fads*: This involves studying areas that have a limited shelf life i.e. are relevant today but till the time the research work would get published it has no use.
- *Convenience Sampling*: This refers to choosing a sample as per your convenience rather than a 'representative' sample that poses difficulty in generalization of the results.
- *Blind Data Mining*: This refers to conducting 'data collection' first and then choosing a problem area depending upon the scores from the data.

These errors are a result of the 'policies' evident in the higher education system in India, whereby a particular 'number' of 'publications' is the only measure to evaluate an academicians professional credibility. This criterion is not only valid for selection but also for promotion, accreditation and appreciation of the academicians in terms of monetary and non monetary awards. They neglect the fact that there is marked difference between the 'aptitude' of a researcher and that of an academician. This forced research in order to obtain employment eventually results in a sub-average quality of research. Therefore most Indian researchers publish their research work with either a motive to uplift their 'curriculum vitae' or to obtain 'a job position/awards/funds/accreditations' from an organization (Sivapathasundharam, 2008).

Citations as a Measure to evaluate Quality of Social Science Research in India

Another important indicator to evaluate 'quality' of research in India is the '**number of citations**'. In order to increase citations of a research work, researchers are coerced to refer to an article/paper even if it holds no relation to the main body of research work. According to a research review by Bornmann et al., (2008) there are certain factors that influence the 'number' of citations of a particular research work, which are as follows :

- *Time dependent factor* (the more recent a research work the greater likelihood of it being cited)
- *Journal dependent factor* (the impact factor, visibility and accreditation of a journal in which the article was published increases its likelihood of being cited)
- *Field dependent factor* (this depends on the specificity and longevity of a research work i.e. the more the shelf life of a research work the more likelihood that it will be cited)
- *Author/reader dependent factor* (the number of authors/co-authors and the social connectivity of an author is likely to impact the citation number)

Structural Problems in Indian Research Ecosystem

Lack of funding and appropriate infrastructure is the most essential shortcomings in the Indian research scenario. This dearth of funds and infrastructure not only constraints effective research but also impacts the 'quality' markedly.

- According to Mapping Report on Social Science Research in India (2011) University Grants Commission (UGC) and Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) are the only governmental bodies funding major social science research in India. Although non-governmental funding agencies have grown by manifolds their contribution to funding social science research in India is still unclear.
- According to Chatterjee (2015) most of the social scientific research is either politically or economically dominated in the Indian setup due to interference from political bodies.

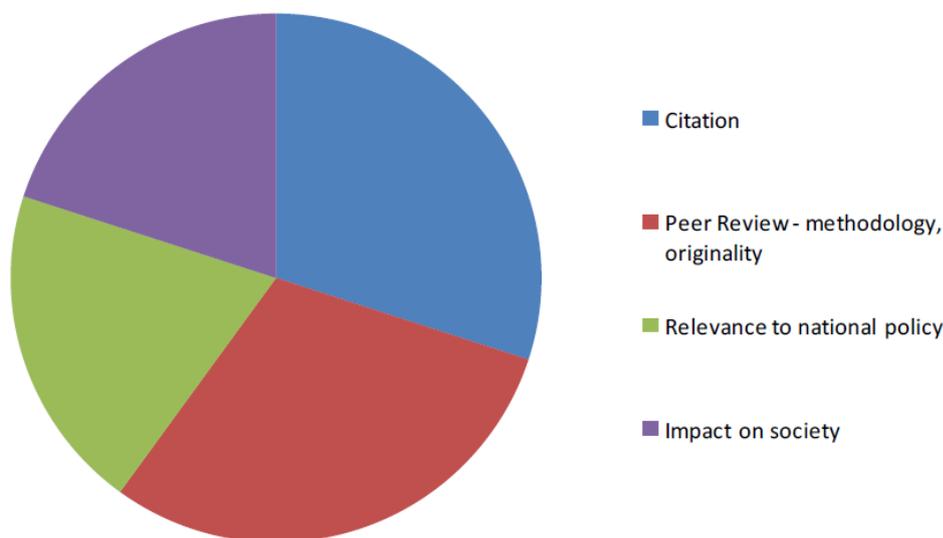
- Lack of infrastructural facilities at university levels is evident because of lack of involvement of research scholars in research oriented activities. This is evident due to public funded organizations that conduct major research (Chatterjee, 2015).

III. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The above literary review clearly defines the current scenario of social scientific research in India. The declining research quality can pose a threat to the Indian socio-economic system and further to the quality of higher education system which is the foundation of 'quality researchers and academicians' in the country. Looking at the above shortcomings related to social scientific research in Indian scenario the **following suggestions** are recommended to improve the quality of research:

- To have an objective parameter to evaluate the 'quality' of social scientific research that must be generalized to any research taking place in India.
- To emphasis the 'quality' rather than the 'number' of publications, articles written or conferences attended.
- Appropriate funding should be made available so that the 'area' of research doesn't get compromised in order to meet financial expectations.
- To increase research based centers in India so as meet the problems of funding crisis and infrastructural inadequacies and to enhance the 'quality' of research work in the country.
- To consider that 'researchers' and 'academicians' are two different sets of professionals with different sets of skill sets and aptitudes. Henceforth, research shouldn't be a mandatory prerequisite in order to become an academician or seek promotion.
- To adopt a more holistic system of evaluation where researchers 'area of expertise', 'professional background', 'diverse body of work' and 'relevance' in terms of its contribution to the research ecosystem be evaluated to evaluate the 'quality' of the work.
- To evaluate the research quality of the publication on the basis of the quality of the 'research journal' in which it got published i.e. in terms of the impact factor of the journal rather than the 'number' of citations an article had.
- To ban 'bogus' journals that publish 'irrelevant' literature for hefty amounts which will further eliminate the problems in terms of quality, authenticity and duplication of research work.
- To have a 360 degree evaluation of the research work so as to ensure transparency and enhance quality. According to Walter et al., (2003) and Ha et al., (2006) the following multi-axis system must be adopted for 360 degree evaluation:

Research Quality



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