

The Near Future of Social Science Research in India

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

It is important to make the ICSSR truly autonomous, but the question is whether the Review Committee's detailed plan for autonomy is desirable and feasible. One could also consider alternative plans to the committee's proposals for introducing accountability in the research institutions.

The Fourth Review Committee of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) has made recommendations on the future organisation and funding of the ICSSR itself as well as of the institutes within its network.¹ But since the time the report was submitted in March 2007, official statements have announced a massive increase in the outlay for higher education in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan and the setting up of several new central universities. This comes in the wake of the recommendations of the Knowledge Commission for the establishment of 1,500 universities in India in the next decade. Whether social science research will be affected by this enormous increase in state expenditure on higher education has not been considered, for understandable reasons, by the ICSSR Review Committee. But it must be borne in mind today in discussing the report, because it indicates a significant change in the background conditions.

The ICSSR

One suggestion of the Committee to augment the public funds made available to the ICSSR is to change the present arrangement of funding through a single source, namely, the ministry of human resource development (HRD), and instead encourage

various ministries of the government of India as well as the Planning Commission, which are users of social science knowledge, to provide research funding to the ICSSR. The suggestion is commendable, but it is doubtful whether the other ministries will agree to provide anything more substantial than limited, project-specific, grants. The reason is a simple fact of life of the institutional politics of state bureaucracies. The ICSSR is known to be the baby of the HRD ministry, and neither ministers nor bureaucrats belonging to other ministries will find any incentive in patronising it when they know they will have no institutional control over it. It will require a huge transformation in the prevailing bureaucratic culture to change this mindset.

The second, and perhaps the most radical, recommendation of the Review Committee is to reconstitute the Council of the ICSSR in order to make it genuinely autonomous. At present, the Council consists of 18 social scientists nominated by the government of India and six government representatives. The chairman and the member-secretary are also nominated by the government of India. A key recommendation of the Review Committee is to institutionalise a genuinely autonomous Council by having it elected by professional social scientists themselves. They suggest a detailed plan of nominations through a collegium of senior social scientists. But the primary issue is not the alternative plan of constituting an autonomous council but whether autonomy in this sense is indeed desirable and feasible.

Partha Chatterjee (partha@cssscal.org) is at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta.

Strange as it may seem, there are many who would argue against autonomy in this sense. They will point to the fact that where funding comes from government, and innumerable bureaucratic hurdles, big and small, have to be cleared on a daily basis to keep the channel of funds flowing smoothly, it actually helps to have government nominees on the governing council of an organisation. It ensures that ministers and bureaucrats take an interest in the ICSSR and, when necessary, appropriate members of the council can be mobilised to seek the ear of the minister. The downside of this arrangement is equally obvious – undesirable political interference and the appointment of government nominees of dubious academic standing.

It is impossible to support this argument on grounds of principle. There is no question that whatever the sources of funding – government or private – the apex organisation of social science research in the country should be autonomous not only in a nominal but a real sense. It ought to be run by a council of reputed and respected social scientists whose collective wisdom will reflect the most advanced research perspectives and the best disciplinary practices of the academic profession. Unfortunately, the erosion of autonomy of institutions of higher education in India has not been merely a one-way process of aggressive incursions by politicians and bureaucrats. Academics have been equally guilty of inviting the intervention of politically powerful figures to sort out their institutional problems or furthering their professional interests. Eminent social scientists, emerging as institution builders, have used their proximity to or influence over ministers and bureaucrats to raise funds and buildings for their organisations, and political authorities have been invited to intervene in professional disputes within academic institutions.

It was entirely possible, even within a formal structure of government nominations, to ensure the emergence of a universally respected convention that, irrespective of political or ideological views, only eminent social scientists would be nominated to an apex academic body such as the ICSSR. Unfortunately, at least from the early 1970s, that is to say, during the

lifetime of the ICSSR, such a convention has been observed largely in the breach in institutions of higher learning in India. Such is the perceived dependence today of academic institutions on the organs of government that many social scientists have argued, in conversation if not in print, that a middle-level member of the IAS would be a more effective facilitator as the member-secretary of the ICSSR than even the most imaginative and committed social scientist. Besides, many will also point to the dismal record of self-government in the national professional associations of economists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, etc.

Such being the prevailing conditions, the prospects of the Review Committee's recommendation for constituting a genuinely autonomous governing council of the ICSSR becoming a reality in the near future are not bright. Nevertheless, it is a cause that must not be given up. Now that a committee of eminent social scientists led by A Vaidyanathan has, in an official document, mooted the proposal, it is vital that it be discussed and propagated in order to create a strong opinion that social scientists of the country are prepared to demand and operate a truly autonomous ICSSR. There must be public criticism, whenever necessary, of unacceptable political interference or bias in the governance of the ICSSR, so as to keep up the pressure on government to respect the academic autonomy and professional standards of the practitioners of social science. At the same time, it should also be acknowledged by us that it is unlikely that the formal system of government nominations will end any time soon. One must, then, fall back on other plans to revive the health of social science research in the near future.

The ICSSR Institutes

The ICSSR does not itself do any research. The institutional research it supports is largely carried out in the ICSSR network of 27 institutes located all over the country. The reality that is apparent from the Review Committee's report is the enormous disparity in the capacities and performance of these institutes. Only half a dozen or so ICSSR institutes are today genuinely viable as research and training institutions in the advanced academic disciplines of the social

sciences. The Vaidyanathan report documents this, but does not discuss in detail what ought to be done with the rest.

I think a useful distinction could be invoked here between the academic and the applied social sciences. There is a large field today of the application of social science knowledge in government policy, non-governmental activism, market research, journalistic reporting, etc. These involve fairly standard theoretical frameworks, survey designs and techniques of data analysis that could be administered even by relatively small organisations of reasonably competent social scientists. These studies could be commissioned by government departments, non-government agencies or corporate firms. More importantly, such organisations could offer training programmes in the basic social science research methods and techniques that could attract many who are interested in acquiring these skills as professional rather than academic qualifications. This would require the designing of relevant and attractive professional courses instead of the utterly irrelevant academic courses on research methodology. But perhaps that is a challenge that many of the smaller ICSSR institutes might accept.

The Review Committee report also points to the perennial problem of accountability of the researcher. In terms of both quality and quantity, the academic research output of most ICSSR institutes is very poor – by no means enough to justify the ever-increasing burden of salaries and allowances. The Vaidyanathan Committee suggests that the core funding of all ICSSR institutes be frozen at their current levels and that they be asked to apply for additional time-bound project funds. Thus, additional research personnel will be recruited only for the period of each project. On satisfactory completion of a project, the institute will be eligible to apply for more funding of a similar kind. This will ensure, the report argues, better accountability, both of the researcher in relation to the institute and of the institute in relation to the ICSSR.

This plan has merit, at least in theory. If one tries to set down into concrete details, however, many problems begin to appear. Since the approval of a project grant usually means the beginning of the

time-period of the project, the institute will be under pressure to recruit the researchers to carry out the project as quickly as possible. This will mean that proper procedures of search and selection will not be carried out and hasty appointments will be made simply to get the work going. This will not create conducive conditions for the building and nurturing of faculty based on a long-term institutional vision. In other words, the plan may serve to discipline the poorly functioning institutes but will hurt those that have built their distinct identities and academic reputation.

It may be worth considering two alternative plans. One is to actually engage in an exercise of evaluating and ranking the institutes by performance and potential. This could be done by a committee of

reputed social scientists who will use a set of declared, and more or less objective, criteria to make their evaluations. Based on their rankings, the ICSSR may vary the level of funding for each institute. If this exercise is carried out periodically, it would provide the incentive to institutes to improve their performance to qualify for a higher level of grants or strive to maintain their standards so as not to be demoted from their current levels. A process of this kind has been initiated by the University Grants Commission in the university system and the results have not been insignificant.

The second plan is to seek to connect the ICSSR and its institutes with the imminent expansion of the central universities. If indeed dozens of new central universities are to come up in different parts of the

country, the ICSSR institutes could offer to provide some ready-made components for these new institutions. It will require some innovative thinking in designing new postgraduate and doctoral-level courses, but these fledgling universities could well be open to such proposals.

All this requires some dynamism and enterprise, both at the level of the ICSSR leadership and among the social scientists in the institutes. But it seems very likely that, for better or worse, the face of higher education in India will change quite rapidly in the next few years. I think it is time to think of the opportunities and dangers of the near future.

NOTE

- 1 'Restructuring the Indian Council of Social Science Research', *Report of the Fourth Review Committee* (ICSSR, March 2007).