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Critical Realism as the Philosophy of Social Inquiry with a Cross-Cultural Resonance from Indian Philosophical Traditions

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Abstract: *This paper presents Critical Realism (CR) as a coherent and transformative philosophical foundation for the social sciences. It begins by tracing the history of the philosophy of science, examining paradigms from classical realism to positivism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism. The paper critiques the limitations of these prevailing approaches, arguing they struggle to capture the complex, layered, and dynamic nature of social reality. The paper then introduces CR, developed by Roy Bhaskar, as a robust alternative. CR offers a framework that connects social structure with individual agency, allows for multiple ways of knowing (epistemic plurality), and maintains a commitment to a deep, structured reality (ontological depth). In a novel cross-cultural analysis, this work explores the connections between CR and classical Indian philosophies. It highlights shared commitments to causality, a multi-layered reality, and the pursuit of emancipatory knowledge found in traditions like Sāṃkhya, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Vedānta. Finally, the paper discusses the advantages of CR, addresses*

common criticisms, and examines responses to those critiques. It concludes that CR provides a globally relevant, ethically grounded, and methodologically versatile framework for conducting meaningful social inquiry and fostering social transformation.

Keywords: Critical Realism, Philosophy of Social Science, Indian Philosophy, Causality, Ontology, Epistemology

Introduction

In recent decades, the field of social science has been shaped by ongoing and often unresolved philosophical tensions. The discipline has oscillated between positivist empiricism, which privileges observable data and the search for general laws (Karupiah, 2022); interpretivist subjectivism, which centres human agency, meaning-making, and lived experience (Shcherbak, 2003); and postmodern scepticism, which challenges the very possibility of objective knowledge, instead emphasizing discursive constructions, relativism, and power dynamics (Bunge, 1999; Jennings, 1983). While each paradigm has contributed important insights, their divergence has led to increasing fragmentation in how we study social reality (Oyedipe & Ibitoye, 2024). This affects the credibility of social science (Oyedipe & Ibitoye, 2024), the relevance of its findings, and the ethical orientation of its practice (Betts, 2024; Bunge, 1999). As social researchers strive to address complex, layered, and deeply situated phenomena – such as inequality, identity, power, and transformation – the absence of a unified and philosophically grounded framework becomes a significant limitation (Betts, 2024; Romm, 2024).

This paper argues for a reorientation toward Critical Realism (CR), a paradigm developed by Roy Bhaskar that offers a unique and powerful synthesis. Using a methodology of philosophical

analysis and comparative inquiry, this paper posits CR as an ontologically grounded (Joseph, 2014), epistemologically modest (Tynan, 2023), and methodologically pluralistic approach to social inquiry (Patomäki, 2019; Tynan, 2023). CR upholds the reality of social structures and causal mechanisms while recognizing that our knowledge of them is always partial, situated, and subject to revision (Adam-Bagley & Abubaker, 2023; Williams et al., 2017). Crucially, it bridges the structure-agency divide and supports emancipatory research aimed at social change (Adam-Bagley & Abubaker, 2023).

A central methodological contention of this paper is that engaging in cross-cultural philosophical dialogue is essential for rethinking and enriching dominant paradigms. By placing CR in conversation with Indian philosophical traditions, we can decentre its Western origins and build a more globally relevant and decolonial-sensitive framework for social inquiry.

The aim of this paper is fivefold: (1) to trace the historical genesis of the philosophy of science; (2) to critique dominant philosophical approaches in contemporary social science; (3) to advocate for CR as the most coherent and comprehensive philosophical foundation for social inquiry; (4) to explore the strengths and criticisms of CR; and (5) to draw resonances between CR and Indian philosophical traditions, thereby offering a culturally enriched reimagining of realist philosophy. In doing so, this paper contributes to a more integrative and reflexive philosophical orientation for the social sciences – one attuned to researching an open, stratified, and morally urgent social world.

The Role of Philosophy in Social Inquiry

Philosophy plays a foundational role in shaping the assumptions, methods, and aims of social inquiry (Jabar et al., 2024). Every

research paradigm is underpinned by philosophical commitments about what exists (ontology), how we can know it (epistemology), and how we should study it (methodology) (Buriro et al., 2020; Hothersall, 2025; Jabar et al., 2024; Uddin & Hamiduzzaman, 2011). In social science, where the objects of study are complex, value-laden, and historically situated, philosophical reflection becomes even more crucial.

Rather than being abstract or detached, philosophy grounds our methodological choices, helps us interpret data meaningfully, and links knowledge to ethical aims. It clarifies our positions on key issues like causality, agency, structure, and change (Root, 1993). Moreover, philosophy fosters reflexivity, encouraging scholars to critically examine their own assumptions (May, 1999). In this sense, philosophy is not a barrier to empirical research but its necessary companion – guiding inquiry, deepening understanding, and supporting a more coherent and transformative social science (Risjord, 2022).

The Historical Genesis of the Philosophy of Science

The philosophy of science has evolved significantly, shaped by shifting understandings of reality and knowledge. This history helps contextualize the emergence of CR as a response to long-standing philosophical tensions. Early Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle laid the groundwork for rationalist and realist thought, while the Scientific Revolution introduced empirical rigor (Krauss, 2024; Rahayu, 2023). Thinkers like Comte extended these ideas to society, envisioning a “social physics” rooted in observable regularities (Fatonah et al., 2022; Rahayu, 2023).

This positivist impulse, refined by 20th century logical positivists who tied meaning to empirical verification, soon faced criticism for excluding core theoretical constructs (Bird,

2013; Krauss, 2024). Karl Popper challenged this by proposing falsifiability, reintroducing uncertainty into the scientific process (Parusniková, 2021; Schroeder-Heister, 2015).

Later, Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm shifts emphasized that scientific change is also shaped by historical and sociocultural forces (Omar, 2012). Postmodern critiques pushed this further, exposing the entanglement of knowledge with power, often at the cost of abandoning any claim to objective truth (Omar, 2012).

Across this trajectory, the tension between realism and relativism, objectivity and power, has left social science with fragmented philosophical foundations (Bhaskar, 1998). CR emerges in this context as a vital alternative – one that affirms the reality of social structures while recognizing the limits of knowledge and embracing methodological pluralism (Gorski, 2013; Van Bouwel, 2003).

Philosophical Approaches in Social Science and Their Critique

The social sciences have long been guided by philosophical paradigms, each with valuable insights and significant limitations. Positivism, rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, promotes objectivity and causal explanation through quantitative methods (Alhoussawi, 2023; Hasan, 2016). While it has advanced empirical standards, its focus on observable data often reduces complex social phenomena to mere variables, ignoring the deeper structures and meanings that shape social life (Ikram & Kenayathulla, 2022; Labra, 2013).

Interpretivism arose in response, focusing on meaning, context, and lived experience (Alhoussawi, 2023). It views reality as socially constructed and accessible through subjective understanding (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). This has enriched

qualitative research but can lead to a form of relativism that neglects the enduring social structures and mechanisms that constrain and enable individual action (Ikram & Kenayathulla, 2022; Junjie & Yingxin, 2022).

Postmodernism challenges the very possibility of objective knowledge, revealing how discourse and power construct what we accept as “truth” (Fox, 2014; Larrain, 1994; Muhamba & Francis, 2023). Thinkers like Foucault and Lyotard critique grand theories and emphasize multiplicity and deconstruction (Hicks, 2011, 2024). While it has been vital for exposing dominant ideologies and amplifying marginalized voices (Hornsey, 1996; Okpanachi, 2012), its extreme relativism can paralyze critical inquiry by dismissing the ontological foundations needed for coherent explanation and social change (Lone, 2023; Patton, 2015).

Pragmatism offers a flexible, problem-oriented approach that values practical outcomes (Feilzer, 2023; Goldman, 2014; Joas, 2015). It encourages methodological pluralism and responsiveness to context through mixed methods (Shah et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2017). However, its focus on “what works” over “what is true” can lack theoretical depth and risks reinforcing power structures rather than challenging them (Gillespie et al., 2024; Joas, 2015; Rosenthal, 2002).

These paradigms leave social science fragmented. Positivism is often reductive, interpretivism can lack explanatory power, postmodernism drifts towards nihilism, and pragmatism can be philosophically thin. The next section introduces CR as a coherent and integrative alternative, capable of addressing these shortcomings while preserving the strengths of each tradition.

Philosophical Foundations and Strengths of Critical Realism

CR, developed by Roy Bhaskar, emerged as a response to the limitations of both positivism and postmodernism. It offers a powerful alternative by combining ontological depth with epistemological humility. CR asserts that reality exists independently of our perceptions and is structured, stratified, and shaped by both agency and social structures.

A core tenet of CR is its concept of ontological stratification, which distinguishes between three layers of reality: the real, consisting of the deep underlying structures and causal mechanisms that have the power to produce events; the actual, consisting of the events that occur, whether or not they are observed; and the empirical, consisting of the subset of the events that we can actually observe and experience. This layered model allows CR to embrace ontological realism (Joseph, 2014; Morton, 2006) while also recognizing that our knowledge is socially situated and fallible – a position of epistemic modesty (Morton, 2006).

Methodologically, CR is open and flexible, encouraging researchers to use whatever methods best uncover the nature of the phenomenon being studied (Park & Peter, 2022). It promotes retrodiction, a mode of inference that moves from observing empirical events to positing the underlying causal mechanisms that best explain them. This approach is ideal for studying complex, open social systems where neat prediction is impossible.

A key strength of CR is its ability to bridge the agency-structure divide (Morton, 2006). It sees individuals as both shaped by social structures and capable of transforming them (Peter & Park, 2018). Because CR acknowledges that research is value-laden, it enables normative critique (Morton, 2006; Patomäki, 2019) and supports an emancipatory goal of social change.

Therefore, CR is a powerful framework for applied, problem-solving research across many disciplines.

Critical Realism and Indian Philosophical Resonances

While CR emerged from the Western philosophical tradition, its core ideas find profound resonance in several Indian philosophical systems. This section engages in a comparative analysis, selecting the *Sāṃkhya* (As in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* of *Īśvarakṛṣṇa*), *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* (As in the *Nyāya Sūtras* of *Akṣapāda Gautama*), and *Vedānta* (as in the *Upaniṣads* *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya*, the *Brahma Sūtras*, and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the commentaries by *Adi Shankaracharya* on these texts) traditions specifically because of their highly developed and influential theories on ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), and causality, which offer direct and fertile points of comparison with CR's foundational tenets.

CR's ontological realism mirrors the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* tradition, which also posits a structured reality independent of mind. CR's stratified model of the real, actual, and empirical finds a striking parallel in *Advaita Vedānta*'s three levels of reality: illusory, empirical, and ultimate. Similarly, *Sāṃkhya* philosophy, with its dualism of *prakṛti* (matter) and *puruṣa* (consciousness) and its focus on emergent transformation, aligns with CR's concept of a layered reality where new properties emerge from underlying structures. *Sāṃkhya*'s doctrine of *Satkāryavāda* – the belief that effects pre-exist in their causes – resonates deeply with CR's notion of generative mechanisms, where change is the manifestation of deeper causal powers.

In epistemology, CR's assertion that knowledge is partial, situated, and fallible yet capable of approximating truth connects with Indian *pramāṇa* theory. *Nyāya* philosophers identified

valid means of knowing while accepting the reality of error and illusion, an approach that mirrors CR's iterative and pluralist stance. Likewise, Buddhist thinkers like *Nāgārjuna* and *Dharmakīrti* also critiqued epistemological certainty while defending the pragmatic knowledge, echoing CR's middle path between relativism and dogmatism.

Finally, CR's insistence that knowledge should be directed toward critique and transformation strongly echoes Indian traditions where *jñāna* (knowledge) is intimately tied to ethical living and *mokṣa* (liberation). The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s synthesis of knowledge and action exemplifies CR's ideal that understanding the world must inspire transformative praxis. This cross-cultural synthesis allows CR to expand its conceptual tools and deepens its ethical foundations, contributing to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive social science.

Criticisms of Critical Realism and Opportunities for Growth

Despite its growing influence, CR has faced several critiques, which can be seen as productive tensions that foster development. One major concern is CR's abstract vocabulary, with terms like “retroduction” or “ontological stratification” feeling inaccessible to some researchers (Kurki, 2010; Park & Peter, 2022). This complexity, however, reflects CR's commitment to capturing a layered reality (Kurki, 2010; Lawani, 2020). The challenge is not to oversimplify ideas but to develop better pedagogical tools to translate them for applied research. Another critique involves CR's minimal methodological prescription. Because CR is a philosophical orientation rather than a fixed method (Kurki, 2010), critics argue this leads to vague or inconsistent applications (Lawani, 2020; Park & Peter, 2022). This highlights the need to develop more mid-range frameworks and empirical examples that show

how CR's principles can guide concrete research designs across disciplines.

CR has also been criticized for prioritizing material structures over discourse and meaning. Poststructuralist and postcolonial scholars have pushed back against this tendency (Baca, 2023; Gikandi, 2004). In response, developments like Dialectical CR and cultural CR have sought to better integrate the material and the symbolic (Porpora, 2024), showing CR's ability to evolve through dialogue with other critical traditions. From a postcolonial lens, some worry CR's emphasis on causality and ontology could impose universalist assumptions, marginalizing non-Western epistemologies (Bhabha, 2004; Bhabra, 2018). However, CR's principles – such as ontological realism and epistemic humility – support pluralism (Mignolo, 1997). Its compatibility with Indian philosophies, for instance, shows its potential for intercultural dialogue, so long as it remains reflexive and open.

Finally, empiricist philosophers challenge CR's belief in unobservable causal mechanisms, calling it speculative (Porpora, 2024). CR responds by rejecting the closed-system model of natural science (Franzki & Aikins, 2010). In open systems, understanding mechanisms – not predicting outcomes – is the goal. Retrodution helps infer these underlying causes, allowing CR to deal with real-world complexity in a nuanced way. The critiques of CR are not flaws but opportunities. They highlight areas for growth – such as clearer communication, richer methodological guidance, and deeper cultural engagement. Rather than diminishing its relevance, these challenges confirm CR's value as a dynamic and ethically grounded framework for social inquiry.

Evolving Forms of Critical Realism and Empirical Resonance

In response to its early critiques, CR has evolved into more nuanced strands that address key concerns around culture, discourse, and historical change. Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR), developed further by Roy Bhaskar, integrates dialectical reasoning. It emphasizes the transformational potential inherent in social structures and human agency, offering a richer account of contradiction, absence, and becoming. DCR highlights that social realities are not static but are shaped through ongoing struggles, negations, and emergent syntheses. This dynamic ontology is particularly suited for analysing change in systems marked by conflict, resistance, or transformation – such as social movements, policy reforms, or transitional justice processes.

Cultural Critical Realism (CCR), on the other hand, responds to critiques that CR underemphasizes symbolic meaning and cultural narratives. CCR incorporates insights from hermeneutics and semiotics, emphasizing that cultural systems, values, and discourses are not mere epiphenomena but possess causal efficacy. By recognizing the material and symbolic as co-constitutive, CCR allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how meaning shapes – and is shaped by – social structures. This has opened CR to richer engagements with postcolonial, feminist, and indigenous epistemologies, reinforcing its pluralistic and inclusive orientation.

To illustrate how CR might guide empirical research, consider a hypothetical study on educational exclusion among formerly incarcerated youth in India. A CR-informed design would begin with identifying observable patterns – such as dropout rates or limited access to vocational programs (the empirical level). It would then explore underlying events and institutional practices – such as stigma, lack of policy implementation, or staff bias (the

actual level). Through retroduction, the researcher would infer deeper generative mechanisms – such as structural marginalization, cultural narratives around criminality, and historical neglect of restorative education in policymaking (the real level).

Such a study would use mixed methods: interviews to capture lived experiences, policy analysis to understand institutional structures, and perhaps a longitudinal component to observe change over time. The goal would not only be to explain exclusion but to identify points for transformative intervention – aligning with CR's emancipatory intent. Through such extensions and applications, Critical Realism demonstrates its evolving capacity to respond to critique, accommodate complexity, and offer a deeply grounded yet flexible guide for meaningful social research.

Implications of Adopting Critical Realism in Social Research

Adopting Critical Realism (CR) as a philosophical foundation significantly shapes the conduct of social research. It shifts the focus from surface-level correlations to deeper generative mechanisms, encouraging a more explanatory approach to complex, open systems. By recognizing reality as stratified, CR enables multi-level analysis of how structures and agency interact, supporting mixed methods and layered research designs.

CR also fosters ethical reflexivity by positioning researchers not just as observers, but as agents of critique and change. Its openness to diverse epistemologies, including non-Western traditions like Indian philosophy, allows for more inclusive and culturally sensitive inquiry. CR's emphasis on causal depth and contextual understanding makes it especially relevant for

applied research and policy, offering tools to tackle systemic challenges and promote transformative outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

This paper's analysis has certain boundaries. First, the cross-cultural comparison between CR and Indian philosophy is intended to show resonance, not to suggest a comprehensive or exhaustive alignment; many divergences and nuances within these vast traditions remain unexplored. Second, the argument advocates for CR as a robust underlabourer for social science, providing a philosophical foundation rather than a ready-made methodological toolkit. For highly descriptive or idiographic research, its explanatory focus on causal mechanisms may be less central.

Future work could deepen the cross-cultural dialogue, exploring resonances with other non-Western philosophical traditions to further develop a pluralist philosophy of social science. Further, more applied research is needed to develop and showcase mid-range theories that bridge CR's abstract principles with the practical demands of empirical inquiry in specific fields.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for CR as a compelling alternative to dominant paradigms like positivism, interpretivism, and postmodernism in social science. We positioned CR as a response to the enduring challenge of balancing empirical inquiry with ontological depth and epistemological humility. In contrast to fragmented and often incoherent methodological pluralism, CR offers a philosophically consistent framework that emphasizes causal mechanisms, a stratified reality, emergence, and the fallibility of knowledge.

We also explored how CR can transcend its Western roots by engaging with Indian philosophical traditions such as *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṃkhya*, and *Vedānta*. This cross-cultural resonance reinforces CR's potential as a pluralistic and interculturally relevant framework. While acknowledging critiques around CR's abstraction, methodological openness, and early neglect of discourse, we view these as opportunities for further development and reflexive growth.

As illustrated by the potential study of educational exclusion, CR provides a concrete roadmap for research that is both explanatorily powerful and ethically committed to social transformation. At a time of global epistemic uncertainty, CR's grounding in ontological realism, epistemic fallibilism, and methodological openness makes it uniquely suited for addressing the complexity of the social world and offers a path toward meaningful change.

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Re-Imagining State - Citizen Relation through the Politics of Risks: A Case Study of Sanitation System of Gurugram

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Abstract: *This paper analyses how the state-citizen relationship is re-imagined through the "politics of risks" in Gurugram, India, a city characterized by speculative urbanism. Focusing on the fragmented sanitation system, the study examines the three-way negotiation between the state, residents, and private developers. It argues that risks are socially constructed, with residents often leveraging public health and environmental concerns to pressure the state for infrastructural solutions. Through a qualitative case study of two residential sectors, the research identifies "proxy settings" and "quick fixes" as temporary arrangements that create inconveniences. The paper explores how these inconveniences are selectively converted into risks based on a dichotomy of "insider" vs. "outsider" actors, influenced by class and caste dynamics, to advance the interests of certain groups. This process redefines urban governance and citizenship in the context of structural inequalities.*