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Challenges Facing Social Sciences In Second Quarter Of 21st Century India

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Abstract: *This paper highlights the challenges that scholars face explaining the problems that confront the wellbeing of humankind today. The recent changes unleashed globally to neoliberalism needs an explanation. Scholars are attempting to explain these in a multi-disciplinary way.*

Over thirty years ago, Gulbenkian Commission made recommendations to restructure the social sciences to explain the emerging changes of that era. Since then, the crisis has only increased because of neoliberalism. The threats of pollution, climate change and growing inequality worldwide, including India, is now visible. This inequality is having differential impact on climate, pollution, health, societal and human wellbeing. Then there is the emergence of AI. Its unanticipated consequences are now being analyzed.

To examine these issues, the restructuring of the social sciences which has begun at the global level, is yet to be seen in India. So, a change is needed in policy decisions and in cultural attitudes in India.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Inequality, Social Sciences, Pollution, Climate Change, AI

I write this paper at a time in 2025, when the whole world is caught in the forces released by the present president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, right from the time he took oath of office on

20th January. The rapid changes which we are witnessing in geopolitics, trade, economy, pursuit of human rights, notions of development, has thrown a challenge to the social sciences to explain this change which we are witnessing and experiencing at the present stage of neoliberal capitalism.

In India, these changes to neoliberalism taking place at the global level, its impact at national and local level, all need to be examined and analyzed afresh. Various people, in the Western world, from academics to scholars to journalists, have been trying to throw some light on what we are witnessing, with each one of them bringing to bear their epistemic perspective in the analysis. Thus, Yuval Harari (2025) brings a global historian's perspective in saying the attempt of Trump is to redefine world order in terms of blocs and spheres of influence of two-three super powers, and this could lead to wars like in the past. Pro-business and pro-capitalist journals like *Economist*, say that Trump takes America's trade policies back to the 19th century; while another analyst says it will cause economic havoc (*Economist*, 2025a & 2025b). Another perceptive article in *Financial Times* (Rogers, et al., 2025), explains how corporate America fought Trump's tariff threats. Left oriented scholars have remarked that the global South will bear the effect of Trump's trade war (Leusder, 2025). Some explain the on-off of tariffs as a reflection of how capitalist interests are protected by the state, when profits are threatened (Barrow, 2025). Others are concerned with the state of democracy in the USA. A survey of more than 500 political scientists (Langfitt, 2025) finds that "the vast majority think that the United States is moving swiftly from liberal democracy toward some form of authoritarianism."

To try to understand these changes of the last few decades- in India and at the global level- being brought about by neoliberalism, this paper proposes a need for multi-disciplinary perspective as that could provide a better explanation than of any one discipline.

The present analysis is separated in three parts: in the first part, I trace the report of the Gulbenkian Commission, published at the end of 20th century, which advocates the importance of 'opening the social

sciences' to explain the emerging problems of that era. In the next section, I trace how the issues raised then have over the last thirty odd years, increased with newer issues being added. Thereafter, I examine at India level, the challenges that exist and persist in promoting inter-disciplinary social sciences at the organizational level and at the level of knowledge production and dissemination. The last section is the conclusion.

The Gulbenkian Commission Report: 'Open the Social Sciences'

Over thirty years ago, the Gulbenkian Commission (GC, now onwards) brought out a report (GC, 1996) on the need to restructure the social sciences. This commission was led by sociologist, Immanuel Wallerstein and its report was titled "Open the Social Sciences." They first traced the growth of social sciences and how knowledge got produced and disseminated globally. "Social science is an enterprise of the modern world. Its roots lie in the attempt, full blown since the sixteenth century, and part and parcel of our construction of the modern world, to develop systematic, secular knowledge about reality that is somehow validated empirically" (GC, 1996, p.2). They go on to state that this break between science and philosophy happened in late 18th century. "Science was defined as the empirical, the search for truth through research, as opposed to what philosophers did, which was to speculate or make deductions in some way. It was a continuation of the break between philosophy and theology; this was taking it one step further, toward a thoroughly secularized knowledge system" (Wallerstein, 2016). Tracing the history till 1945, the Commission points out that social science knowledge was produced in five locales "Great Britain, France, the Germanies, the Italies, and the United States" (GC, 1996, p.14). Secondly, during the period of a century (roughly from early 19th to early 20th century), many names for "subject matters" or "disciplines" were put forward; but by First World War, the names coalesced around "five", viz. "history, economics, sociology, political science, and anthropology" plus "oriental studies" as the sixth (GC, 1996, p.14). The third thing that happened in the 19th century, was "the recreation

of the university as the locus of both the creation of knowledge and its reproduction" (Wallerstein, 2016).

These disciplines distinguished themselves in their approach to the past versus the present. The distinction was between idiographic social sciences (history) vs nomothetic social sciences (economics, political science, and sociology). Further, the subject matter of nomothetic social sciences, was that economics studied "market operations," political scientists "formal government structures" and sociologists "the social terrain ignored by economists and political scientists" (GC, 1996, p.31). The studies of societies which did not have written records or were weak militarily and who were non-European, and termed as "tribes" by European scholars, became the subject matter of anthropology and it developed 'field work' as a distinct methodology (GC, 1996, p. 22). However, all non-European societies were not 'tribal.' There were those who had written systems and had large empires with bureaucracies and had world system of religions and were also called "high civilizations" by Europeans, such as the Arab-Islamic world and China (GC, 1996, p.22). The study of such societies became the area of Orientalists, whose perspective and approach were closer to that of humanities.

After 1945, the global political order got reorganized. USA emerged as a powerful country with tremendous economic strength; and for next twenty-five years-till 1970, the world's economic capacity grew. In the newly independent countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, there was growth of universities and social sciences (GC, 1996, pp.33-34). These developments had consequences.

The first question was: Were the Western and non-Western worlds "ontologically identical or different?" (GC, 1996, p.39). The response to this question was a compromise. The key argument was "that there exists a common modernizing path of all nations... (hence they were the same) ... but the nations find themselves at different stages on this path" (GC, 1996, p.40).

Another consequence was the increasing overlap in subject matter and methodologies between these disciplines; and the distinguishable boundaries between them became less clear. This led to questioning of

the claims to be distinct (GC, 1996, pp.46-8). The next feature of this era- 1945 to 1970, was that the "social scientific views dominant in Europe and North America remained dominant in non-Western world as well" (GC, 1996, p.53); but from 1960s onwards the questioning of this knowledge being parochial emerged. First was the criticism that it was "Eurocentric." "The challenge to parochialism has, however, been deeper than to do with the question of the social origin of the researchers." The argument was that "there have been presuppositions built into theoretical reasoning of the social sciences (and indeed into that of the natural sciences and humanities as well), many of which in fact incorporated a priori prejudices or modes of reasoning that have neither theoretical nor empirical justification, and that these a priori elements ought to be elucidated, analyzed and replaced by more justifiable premises" (GC, 1996, p.55). The commission goes on to say that "it is in this sense, that these demands were part of a demand to open the social sciences" (GC, 1996, p.55). Further they point out that "the problem is that those who hold social power have a natural tendency to see the current situation as universal since it benefits them. The definition of universal truth has changed with the changes in the constellation of power. Scientific truth itself is historical." (GC, 1996, p.58).

The commission also points out that since 1960s, there was increasing question of the wisdom of applying Newtonian concepts to the study of social phenomena; and secondly, there were developments as well in the natural sciences. Now non-linearity (versus linearity), complexity (over simplification) and the impossibility of removing the measurer from the measurement, made natural science closer to 'soft' social sciences (GC, 1996, p.61).

The commission in the third chapter (1996, ch.3) recommends certain issues for consideration. It points out that that the ontological distinction between human beings and nature which was embedded in social sciences since Descartes, is no more valid (GC, 1996, pp.77,80). The relations are more complex and interrelated. Secondly, the state is no longer the only boundary within which social action occurs (GC, 1996, p.77); and thirdly to accept the tension between one and the many, the universal and the particular as a permanent feature of human

society (GC, 1996, p.77). Lastly, on the notion of objectivity, to accept that while knowledge is socially constructed, a socially valid knowledge is possible (GC, 1996, p.93). On this basis, they recommend (GC, 1996, pp.101-5) a way to restructure the social sciences: (1) Scholars of different academic and social backgrounds could come together to work on a theme of common interest for a limited period like one year. (2) Establishment of integrated research programs that cut across traditional lines and have specific research objectives. (3) Compulsory joint appointment of professors, and (4) Joint work for graduate students.

The last thirty years: 1996-2025

In the last thirty years, since the Gulbenkian Commission Report, the situation has only got more complex and the challenges to analyse and understand are that more challenging. Let me illustrate with three broad areas that have now become part of mainstream discourse. They are pollution and climate change, health and epidemics, and the new technology of AI (artificial intelligence) and their link to human arrangements and life style.

Right at the turn of the 21st century, the Noble Laureate in Chemistry, Paul Crutzen along with Eugene Stoermer (2000) put forward the term “Anthropocene” to describe the impact of human activity on the environment. According to Crutzen, (2006), this impact is “outcompeting natural processes”. Manufacturing of hazardous chemicals, not produced by nature, like chlorofluorocarbons, are responsible for ozone hole. Further, deforestation, land usage changes, and fossil fuel burning, all are having an impact. Even before the coining of the term ‘Anthropocene,’ the impact these had on environment had drawn attention by a global level body like IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Pollution of air, land and waterbodies has become a big problem, with periodic reports in the media about them. Has the situation improved in the last few decades, in India and the world?

Let me quote from Narain (2024, p.3) about what is happening in India. She writes that “air pollution is deadly...Most of us who live in the gas-chamber that are our cities know that the air is not fit to

breathe.” The government has earmarked a large sum of money (“₹20,000 crore... for the five-year period till 2025-26”) and identified “42 cities and seven urban agglomerates with a population of more than 1 million for actions to curb air pollution” by “40 percent by 2025-26.” The NCAP (National Clean Air Programme) measures only one pollutant, PM₁₀ and not PM_{2.5}, produced by vehicles or industries. These PM_{2.5} are tinier particulate matter that are indicted for disease burden, as they enter blood stream and affect not only lungs, but heart as well. So, the action that is being taken is to control one pollutant PM₁₀, which is mostly dust. This is preferred “because it belongs to no one in particular, unlike emissions from vehicles for which manufacturers would be held to account and from coal-burning power plants where power producers would be responsible.”

Thus, no action is being taken against the rich and the powerful - the vehicle owners and the industries - who are responsible for PM_{2.5}.

The World Inequality Lab in the 2022 report (Chancel, et al., 2021) has one chapter (Chapter 6, pp. 114-135) titled ‘Global Carbon Inequality’. They analyse the carbon footprint across the globe; and in some select countries including India, they measure the carbon footprint of various income and wealthy groups. Of significance is the carbon footprint of the wealthy at the global level (Chancel, et al., 2021, Box 6.2, p.134). I quote from the report. “How much CO₂ do the wealthiest individuals on earth emit? Our estimates show that emissions can reach extreme levels: the global top 1% of individuals emits around 110 tonnes on average, the top 0.1% 467 tonnes, the top 0.01% 2,530 tonnes per person per annum.” The report goes on to state that “on average, however, the answer is quite clear: extreme wealth comes with extreme pollution” (Chancel, et al., 2021, p.134). As far as India is concerned, in Figure 6.10 (p. 129), they display the wide disparity between greenhouse gas emissions of the top 10% (8.8 tonnes per capita per year), middle 40 % (2 tonnes per capita per year) and the bottom 50% (1 tonne per capita per year). The average emission for the full population is 2.2 tonnes per capita per year.

Oxfam (Khalfan et al., 2023) brought out a report titled “Climate Equality: A Planet for the 99%”. The report points out (2023.p. xii)

that “In 2019, the super-rich 1% were responsible for as much carbon emissions as the poorest 66% of humanity (5 billion people).” The report also points out (Khalfan, et al., 2023, p.47) “that the super-rich have a taste for burning carbon excessively, be it in their private jets, superyachts, mansions, or spaceships. One study examining the consumption emissions of 20 billionaires found that each produced an average of over 8,000 tonnes of CO₂ a year”. The report says “rich people and countries are driving the climate crisis, while people living in poverty, marginalized groups and low-income nations are paying the price” (Khalfan et al., 2023, p.23).

The third study is a recent study (Schongart, et al., 2025). This research is based on a study of US, China, India, and the European Union. The researchers conclude that “the wealthiest 10% contributed 6.5 times more to global warming than the average, with the top 1% and 0.1% contributing 20 and 76 times more, respectively.” The authors go on to state that “the warming contributions of the wealthy are associated with considerable transboundary effects... across vulnerable regions such as the Amazon, Southeast Asia and southeast Africa.”

Recently, Pickett and others (2024) have pointed out on the enduring impact of inequality. In their publication, they point out how inequality is central to carbon footprint, air pollution and in recycling of waste. They state that “More equal countries recycle a higher percentage of their waste compared to less equal countries” (Pickett, et al., 2024, p.4).

The above analysis shows not only a clear link between pollution, climate change and lifestyle, but also how different social strata, the rich more than others, as being responsible for production of pollution and contribution to climate change. One can conclude that it is the life style of wealthier classes that is the problem and not that of the poor, who are being affected as victims.

Further, let us go to another aspect, the link between inequality and health. Epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett have shown that inequality affects health and wellbeing. In their first book (2010), they focussed on developed countries and in a later book (2018) they

expanded to cover more countries including from the developing world. They point out how countries with higher income inequality correlate with worse outcomes on health, mental illness, obesity, life expectancy, infant mortality, children’s educational performance, teenage births, homicides, imprisonment rates, and social mobility (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010, p.19).

The recent corona virus epidemic is fresh in memories of most people. However, its impact has been unequal. A survey of BBC (2020) finds that “the coronavirus pandemic has hit poorer countries harder than the rest of the world, sowing inequality globally”. The write up goes on to say that “the pandemic has had a more severe impact on people in poorer countries and has exacerbated existing inequalities.”

In India, Deshpande and Ramachandran (2021) using NFHS-4 data (2015-16) show how caste discrimination is related to stunting (children below 5 years, whose height is below acceptable range of global variation). They point out that India has one-third of all stunted children in the world and this incidence is higher than Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Poverty accounts for stunting, and India is richer than SSA. Why this anomaly? When they disaggregate NFHS-4 data by caste (Upper caste Hindus, SC-STs, OBCs and Upper Caste Muslims) they find that the children belonging to SC-ST, OBCs and UC-Muslims are “35 to 50 percent, more likely to be stunted compared to UC-Hindu children”. They conclude that this is because of illegal caste discrimination in service provisions.

Another dimension is more recent and is to do with AI technology changes. It is often propagated by those advocating it as being for the benefit of “human kind,” but more often they forget that they also have ‘unanticipated consequences’ (Merton, 1936). The most recent is the opensource promotion of AI (artificial intelligence) since November 2022. Although researched for long, its recent opensource growth has resulted in debates as to whether it will “close or widen the development gap” (Sirimanne, & Fu, 2025). Some (Thompson, 2025) are examining as to whether it is affecting job market in developed countries. There are others who point to challenges in education and to the dangers for students. The authors point out among other things,

that “those who know the least about a topic are the most likely to accept AI outputs as correct” and that “they might recognise that AI can produce errors but lack sufficient subject knowledge to correct those errors” (McKenna, & Schuma, 2025).

As for the benefits of development, the World Inequality Lab at Paris has brought out a series of reports on inequality at the global level and have pointed out how inequality has grown dramatically in some countries. In its 2018 report (Alvaredo, et al., 2018, p.41) they “observe rising inequality in most of the world’s regions, but with very different magnitudes”. They further point out in a table (reproduced in Appendix-1) as to how inequality has increased between 1980 to 2016 at the global level and dramatically in countries like India, China, and Russia. A few years later, they brought out a report on India comparing data from 1922-2023, the main points of which they published in Economic and Political Weekly (Bharati, et al., 2024). They point out that in India, there is “extreme concentration at the very top with shockingly high wealth shares. The top 1% owns 40% of the total wealth, the top 0.1% holds 30%, the top 0.01% owns 22%, and finally the top 0.001% alone controls a whopping 17%” (Bharati, et al., 2024, p.92). As for income share of top 1% in 2022-23, it was 22.6% (Bharati, et al., 2024, p.92, Table1). “India’s top 1% income and wealth share are now at their highest historical levels” (Bharati, et al., 2024, p.92). This makes “India among the most unequal countries in the world.”

Why has such concentration of wealth taken place across the globe? At the global level, some attempts have been made to explain this. Monbiot and Hutchison (2024) argue that neoliberalism has come to control our lives, in an invisible manner so much so we consider it as “natural law” (ch.1). Neoliberalism casts us as ‘consumers’ rather than as ‘citizens’ (ch.2) and it redefines liberty in a very narrow way as “absence of coercion” (ch.4). What they mean by the freedom from coercion, was not democratic freedom of the citizens, but the liberty and freedom of the rich to do whatever they wanted to promote wealth. This was promoted in the second half of 20th century (Ch5 &6) in the Western world. This spread to other regions later; and to India in the 1990s. What is happening today in 2020s, perhaps was presciently

written by Bourdieu (1998) in an essay titled “The essence of neoliberalism”. Neoliberalism policies aim at “reducing labour costs, reducing public expenditure and making work more flexible;” its desire is the elimination of all “administrative or political barriers capable of inconveniencing the owners of capital in their individual quest for the maximisation of individual profit.”

Naomi Klein (2007) has shown how disasters were converted to opportunities for businesses and corporates. Thus disasters, be it the tsunami in Asia, or hurricanes in USA, or war in Iraq, and in other countries, has resulted in them being considered as “opportunities” for business interests to grow. Perhaps, the most recent statement of Trump on Gaza – to convert it to a riviera, after evacuating all its residents – epitomises this aspect (Keath, 2025).

While these write ups by scholars and academics from the Western world have thrown light on what is happening there, how does one explain specifically the kind of changes seen in China and India, where neoliberal development has resulted in inequality growing dramatically compared to other countries? China is led by a party claiming to be following Marxist principles and believes in Communism, but has embraced neoliberalism. The Indian embrace of neoliberalism has led to tremendous increase in inequality but there is no critique of this path, even though India is a multi-party democracy. Further, why has alternatives to neoliberal path of development not met with success, either globally or locally. We need more research and analysis to throw light on these dimensions.

The challenges before Social Sciences in India

In India, the awareness to restructure the social sciences in terms of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination, is widespread. However, the efforts to restructure have been affected by other contingencies, including the promotion of the priorities of what the regime in power considers to be important.

In the last decade of the twentieth century and thereafter in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there have been collaborative efforts by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds to come

together and do research on a common theme. This includes health, environmental issues, and legal rights (of which I am aware of and have been involved as well in research on health). Further, scholars of Indian origin in the universities of the West, have written about topics which till recently would not have been their subject matter. For instance, Iyer (2017, p.2), a Cambridge economist, examines the persistence of religion in India. Her attempt has been to view this as “not merely as the outcome of largely sociological processes, but also as a rational economic response to changes in the political, ecological, and economic environments in which religions operate.” Recently, scholars from different institutions and different academic orientations, have published an article which shows how occupational heat exposure in India is linked to caste inequality (Shah, et al., 2025). All these reflect positive developments.

The attempts, if any, to affiliate a faculty member in more than one academic department has not taken off. Perhaps this is for a variety of reasons, including academic institutions coming under bureaucratic control. Further, in most universities, work of academics is evaluated in terms of teaching work load, rather than knowledge production. Furthermore, now, in the decade of Twenties, the priorities have shifted to promoting the policies of those in power. The focus of the state is on privatising of higher educational institutions either by starting private universities, or by encouraging the starting of self-financing courses in public funded institutions. This is being done in a top-down model where decisions either at the state level or the central level are being implemented; and very little autonomy exists to experiment with new initiatives from the grass roots. Further, with new appointments being time bound and temporary in nature, academic freedom is further curtailed. Lastly, in Indian academia, there is a continuing prevalence of hierarchical attitude between sciences and social sciences and humanities. This was first highlighted by Snow (1998) in his lecture in Cambridge University in 1959, titled ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’. “The ‘two cultures’ he identified were those of ‘the literary intellectuals,’ (as he called them) and of the natural scientists, between whom he claimed to find a profound mutual suspicion and incomprehension, which in turn had

damaging consequences for the prospects of applying technology to the alleviation of the world’s problems” (Collini, 1998, Introduction). While the distinction between sciences and humanities emerged in the second half of 19th century in Europe, but by the end of 20th century the distinctions in intellectual enquiry in terms of methods soon fell apart (Collini, 1998, Introduction). But in India, the hierarchy still prevails, where a student of ‘science’ can take a course in ‘arts’ or ‘social sciences’ but not the other way, where a student who has studied arts or social sciences can take a course in sciences. (In the West, like the United States, such a restriction does not exist).

So, in this light, any effort that is made, must be from outside the academia. Further, whether there is space and academic freedom to question the policies of the state becomes an issue and a challenge, as we search for answers, in the second decade of 21st century. The way social scientists respond to these, will determine the direction social sciences take in the future.

Conclusion

The challenges social sciences face in India are thus twofold. First, is the emergence of issues, owing to the neoliberal path of development, be they to do with environment, or health, technology, or any other aspect which affects human wellbeing, which need both research and knowledge production from multi-disciplinary perspectives by academics and research scholars. Initiatives have been made and journals like *Down to Earth* have become well established. Yet, more needs to be done. Secondly, in India, at the academic institutional level, space must be created and nurtured along with freedom to pursue such academic challenges. Academics, researchers, and students, need to be encouraged to work together to address these issues. This needs a change in educational policy from the state and a change in cultural attitude in the society, where all disciplines are considered equal in importance. Then only the linkages between the neoliberal path of development and threat to environment, health and human wellbeing can be brought to the fore.

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Appendix-1: Global Income Growth and Inequality, 1980-2016

Total Cumulative Real Growth Per Adult						
Income group	China	Europe	India	Russia	US-Canada	World
Full Population	831%	40%	223%	34%	63%	60%
Bottom 50%	417%	26%	107%	-26%	5%	94%
Middle 40%	785%	34%	112%	5%	44%	43%
Top 10%	1316%	58%	469%	190%	123%	70%
Top 1%	1920%	72%	857%	686%	206%	101%
Top 0.1%	2421%	76%	1295%	2562%	320%	133%
Top 0.01%	3112%	87%	2078%	8239%	452%	185%
Top 0.001%	3752%	120%	3083%	25269%	629%	235%

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Enlightenment-Centrism in Indian Social Sciences: A Transdisciplinary Analysis

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the continued influence of Enlightenment-centric paradigms on Indian social sciences. It critically examines how colonial inheritances, disciplinary demarcations, and entrenched epistemological hierarchies shape contemporary knowledge production. Drawing on postcolonial, subaltern, feminist, and indigenous perspectives, the study adopts a transdisciplinary approach to highlight epistemic constraints and propose alternatives rooted in plural knowledge systems. The central question—whether Indian social sciences remain aligned with Enlightenment thought—necessitates an exploration of the genealogy of social theory, institutional formations, and the normative aspirations of the discipline. This inquiry establishes a conceptual linkage between historical trajectories, structural conditions, and present-day critiques, which forms the analytical foundation of the paper.*

Keywords: Enlightenment, Epistemic, Philosophical, Institutional and Normative Perspectives, Transdisciplinary.

Introduction

The intellectual heritage of modern social sciences is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment—a European philosophical movement that championed reason, empiricism, universalism, and secularism. In postcolonial contexts such as India, the institutionalization of social