

SOCIAL SCIENCE GAZETTEER

Special Volume

July 2026: pp 69 – 83

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Article History

Received: 21 – 12 – 2025

Revised: 16 – 06 – 2026

Accepted: 27 – 06 – 2026

Contemporary Challenges in Social Sciences Today: A Critical Reflection

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Abstract: *This article critically examines five interrelated challenges that confront contemporary social sciences. Drawing on existing critical scholarship on the nature and functioning of social sciences in changing contexts, the article argues that these challenges hint not just technical or institutional problems but a fundamental epistemological and political symptom of present-day societies. The neoliberal restructuring of educational institutions and resurgent of nativism of different sort constrains what can be known, through what methods and blocks critical inquiry of the social conditions of our times in favour of “safe and fundable research” which celebrates the existing administrative and corporate interests and initiatives. Digital platforms also shape our social lives critically and pose another challenge to the autonomy and sovereignty of citizens’ self. It is coupled with post-truth’s displacing research expertise with emotional authenticity as foundation of knowledge. The recent debates on decolonial approach to social sciences demand pluralism beyond west centric frameworks. This is related to AI tools and their intervention in academic and social world posing both potentials and dangers. The article underlines the idea that these challenges are structurally interlocking and, in a sense, produce a constellation rather than discrete and thus require social sciences to be reasserted to defend their role in*

shaping and sustaining democratic self-governance, citizenship and collective welfare.

Keywords: social sciences, challenges, epistemic shift, knowledge production, democracy,

Introduction

The social sciences stand at a very critical juncture facing unprecedented challenges that fundamentally question their methodological foundations, epistemological frameworks, and practical relevance. In the context of ever-increasing social inequalities, growing corporatization of everyday life, the role of social sciences within academia and the position of academics within the country is under severe stress. This is not the first moment of crisis in social sciences. Decades ago, Gouldner (1970) in his seminal work, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) addressed the crisis of sociology when it was confronted with liberation but stuck with cult of objectivity, Parsonian abstract language that dominated the discipline but alienated the people. It suffered the reduction of its progressive commitments ultimately to administrative purposes under the technical rationality. His call for reflexive sociology remains crucial to this day and becomes urgent than ever before. More recently, Michael Burawoy’s call for public sociology forces us to rethink professional divisions within professional, policy, public and critical sociologists to address social science’s connection to wider society and civil society in particular (Burawoy, 2005). This would also hold valid for social sciences as whole when neoliberal transformation reshapes the relation between social science’s critical professional and theoretical knowledge and people’s issues and concerns expressed through movements and collectives.

In this article, I try to reflect upon some of these challenges that social sciences face today to identify the interlocking crises with which contemporary practitioners of social sciences find themselves grappled. The five challenges i) *systematic assault on critical social science knowledge*, ii) *digital turn in social life*, iii) *the post-truth challenge*, iv) *the decolonial imperative* and finally v) *artificial intelligence integration* together form **a structural constellation** that

characterise the problems of social sciences today. Throughout the discussion, the article argues that challenges to social sciences today are not merely technical, institutional or related to employment but *deeply political*. One needs to pay close attention to each of these problems and their mutual engagements if social science is to remain critical rather than merely an administrative and instrumental knowledge enterprise.

1. The Assault on Critical Knowledge Production

To write as a social scientist is to live with a paradox in the times of post-truth. The key problems social sciences deal with climate crisis, technological intervention, algorithmic governance, wealth inequalities, cultural polarization etc. are much more visible and complexly configured than in previous decades. Yet the institutional, social, epistemic conditions that sustain critical social science inquiry are under pressure. This is not merely a problem of resources or policy, rather it's a problem of epistemic orientation that decides what will count as knowledge, what evidence will be considered valid, and what forms of activities will constitute a 'good' academic work. These are systematic attempts to constrain what can be studied, known, taught and researched within universities and educational institutions. Particularly those studies that seek to support welfare state and social reforms are under specially constrained. These constraints are framed in both market rationality as well as authoritarian nationalism to delimit social science inquiry.

Across the countries, universities and research institutes now function within different landscapes with reduced funding, more managerial and employability metrics, market output frame, uncritical documentation of social lives as data. Present day research institutes focus on measurable impact, rankings, quantifiable outputs, increased governance surveillance on the kinds of research done with critical insights on state, market, community etc. These practices produce not merely new incentives but epistemic dispositions i.e. research project framed for compliance with funding agencies. Bourdieu's (1991) insights on symbolic capital remain critical to understand the social change in academic field and its relationship with state and market.

State and market have been redefining what counts as 'research' and 'academic knowledge' and it remains contested by various stakeholders.

Bourdieu's insights are critical to understand how academic institutions are restructured, how qualifications, criteria are redefined, career structures changes etc. constitute what is called epistemic order. Both in public domain and within academic world, there are systemic assaults on critical knowledge production through the narrative of nationalism, nativism and neoliberalism. Academic writings on popular topics of caste, class, land, history, community, discrimination and violence often invites administrative suspicion and hostility. Even a comment on Facebook can land a social science scholar into deep trouble. While the generic and deeply problematic, biased and discriminatory views and opinions, devoid of any factual validity or evidence are celebrated as expression of 'local knowledge' or as 'counter to western hegemony'. Often the denigration of critical knowledge is framed as a demand for neutrality or rather a demand for nativist perspective of social sciences. A demand that actually conceals politics. Academic institutional reforms are necessary and must be initiated but must be combined with scholarly practices that privilege methodical and grounded work, supported by data, and proper methodologies.

Dipankar Gupta in his article on social science and democracy (Gupta, 2016) raises pertinent questions in this context. Gupta argues that a key challenge social sciences face today is the decline of democratic conditions and citizenship which created the epistemological ground for the making of social sciences themselves. He explains that social sciences emerged when societies moved beyond closed communities and beyond rigid control, where interaction with 'other' become significant and accepted, when people accepted universal rules, and understand that others can make mistakes and it can be revised. He points that when formal democracy comes under threat social sciences tend to become risk-averse, self-censoring and methodologically impoverished. In societies without democracy i.e. monarchical or dictatorial ones, he says, social science questions become difficult to be posed as it will be too subversive to authority. He reasserts the point

that social sciences are 'citizen-centric' and must function accordingly as the social conditions of democracy slip away it brings existence of social sciences into question as well (Gupta, 2016: 37).

Kishor Podh (2025) captures some of these issues unfolding in social sciences in Indian context. He makes the point that the contemporary crisis in social sciences represents a deep structural transformation of knowledge production rather than merely a shortage of funding to academic research. He argues that the faculty casualisation, academic precarity and favouring funding to private institutes within educational institutions further shapes the declining courage in academic writing where scholars avoid risk taking and critical engagement. This attitude promotes 'safe and fundable research' that minimises the value of social science research output. Instead of critical analysis of the pressing problems of the society, the scholars become ideological conformists and tend to focus on those research types that supports government's political projects, and which actually diverts attention from the major problems that social groups face in a democratic context.

Another aspect of the crisis of social sciences in contemporary times is the broad restructuring of higher education within neoliberal contexts. The rapid rise of corporate interest in education by establishing private college, and university is well known. The private and corporate notion of university as so far operated through market rationality (Pathak, 2018). Universities, accordingly, become market actors that compete with each other for rankings, more admissions and more funding from diverse agencies. Avijit Pathak in his work, rightly identifies that universities are racing today to showcase their credentials, ranks, number of projects achieved as 'trophies' to establish their brand in academic market to attract more students, more admissions and more money (Pathak, 2018). Universities are no more interested to serve as public institutions for collective knowledge production for welfare. The decline of social sciences in universities today is one of the major reason and impact of such transformations.

There is a current emphasis in popular domain in India that downgrades the emphasis on social sciences as they are allegedly less

economically useful. University professors in social sciences who voice out their views and ideas openly and critically are growingly seen as troublemakers by the administration. This anti-intellectual bias reflects instrumental and narrow understanding of social science knowledge, that views education only as job seeking skill rather than cultivating critical citizen consciousness. Reversing Gupta's position, one can argue that devaluing and marginalising social sciences also devalues and weakens democratic thinking and citizen subjectivity. A healthy democracy requires aware, critical and independent minded individuals who analyse actions of state and market through critical rationality and question the arbitrary domination and subjugation. Developing the skill and moral stamina to ask questions from government and powers be on behalf of citizens, on behalf of the people is one of the key contributions of social sciences.

II. The Digital Turn in Social Sciences

With the advanced technological developments over the decade, social life is increasingly expressed, lived and articulated through digital technologies. Digital technologies in the form of media, social media and communication, have forced us to rethink the epistemological implications of the digital turn. Whether its people's consumption behaviour, or sharing their personal, political, cultural lives through social media, or its about connecting people through digital networks, and cognitive embeddedness on media, increasingly social life is organised around digital technology, and hence social sciences need to shift their attention to digital spaces, methods and its constitution of new social. Digital technologies do not simply mediate information or relations and behaviour, they also actively structure action, visibility, relevance, cultural recognition and credibility in social and economic life. Social life on digital world works differently, people respond differently, new terms have acquired currency in people's daily conversations, who liked what, shared whom, subscribed to what means crucial to understand what's going on people's lives these days. Their behaviour online is also governed by 'ranking', 'logging into' 'nudging', 'clicking', 'filtering', 'connecting' and 'unfriending' Even the impacts of digital tools are spatially dis-embedded from bounded territories that traditionally social scientists focused on. Digital world

has created new forms of social stratification where people talk about who is 'visible', who is 'made viral', who is 'silenced', 'muted' and 'followed' and these new social forms impact people's self-perception and their sense of self.

Digital turn is not merely descriptive and reconfiguration of social topology. Manuel Castells (1996) clearly identified how digital technologies would reshape social relations, creating new forms of power and resistance. Even Shoshana Zuboff's concept of "surveillance capitalism" in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) further sheds light on new domains of social and power relations. Zuboff argues that digital platforms extract behavioural data to predict and modify human behaviour, creating new forms of power that traditional social science categories struggle to capture. Digital turn in society also indicates toward the growing significance of platforms in our lives. Capitalist Platforms like Google, Facebook, amazon, WhatsApp, LinkedIn etc. function as para structures that organizes, arranges relations, politics, identity, intimacy, culture. From teaching to politics to friendships are being done on such platforms. These platforms blur the boundaries between private and public, market and community and operate on very different scales and norms. Multinational corporations govern people's lives, relations and actions through these platforms as Mejias & Couldry (2024) show in their new work on 'data colonialism' and data extraction by big tech companies. Mejias & Couldry (2024) argue that data colonialism is going on global scale and it has quite long impact on lives of the people. They assert that there is continuity between historical colonialism and the new data colonialism. They explain how these global companies have reduced society to a data territory where companies compete to capture and extract data that help them govern people's lives. They argue that companies extract data from each sector of life and work closely with governments. This fusion of state and market interests through data and algorithm is called *algorithmic state* (Mejias & Couldry, 2024).

This debate on data and digital technology as powerful actor in people's lives, poses profound challenges for social sciences. Unlike previous forms of power, data and digital platforms, social scientists

are implicated directly, as academic and as a citizen. Understanding these challenges require systematic analysis of how data extraction works, how digital technology operates and transforms the possibility of social science knowledge production. It also raises question so voice, representation and consent. When social scientists study platform data of twitter, Facebook, Google search patterns, these data are extracted through power relations, it brings new issues and methodological and ethical dilemmas for social research. Social sciences face complex epistemological issues in this context as to what counts as legitimate data, and how do we study this data, examine and analyse it when a company claims it as proprietary assets.

III. The Post-Truth Challenge to Research Expertise

The rise of public opinion, social media interactions, forwards on WhatsApp mark a significance of new sources of information, however biased and incomplete it may be. Similarly, the post-truth era marks a shift from authority of facts to authority of feelings and experiences (Fischer, 2021). Due to the growth of multiple frames of information i.e. journalists, media influencers, politicians, media personnel, internet, social media posts etc. social scientists' claims to expertise are contested. The notion of what is 'credible knowledge' today remains questioned. Social scientists' authority of knowledge of facts, history, data now is questioned and research expertise is displaced due to competition with other forms of knowledge production, including media narratives, political discourse, and digital influencers. This change has posed a grave challenge for social sciences to maintain scientific rigor while acknowledging the socially constructed nature of knowledge claims. The post-truth challenges have created a situation where legitimacy of social science claims are rejected and called as one of the many competing claims. The social implications of this challenge are severe. In this context, citizens are unable to differentiate between evidence based claims and misinformation or fake information, or manufactured doubt about the first, it also deteriorates their political and democratic capacity to reason out core issues. Post-truth established emotional authenticity as stronger than factual accuracy (Fischer, 2021). It elevates personal experience over systematic analysis. The events, instances, stories,

ideas that feel true to people regardless of their factual existence have gradually dominated public discourse. This has further led to strong scepticism toward knowledge claims that transcend beyond immediate experience.

This requires some changes in the way knowledge is constructed. Firstly, it calls for deep methodological rigor in generating knowledge, and secondly, this availability of diverse narratives discourses and platforms for information necessitates that social science knowledge distribution i.e. through writing, teaching, public discussions is done without abstractness or jargons and theoretical complexity. Drawing on Burawoy's (2005) framework of public sociology, that necessitates the engagement with public, we need more clear exposition and rooted critical argumentation on issues that public can engage with without feeling threatened or subordinated.

Social sciences have to engage meaningfully with public concerns instead of rejecting it from a position of authority (Burawoy, 2005). The language of social science claims needs to be grounded, understandable and packed with logic, data, analysis and understanding. It must prepare itself to attend to this situation as a form of power dynamics. It can benefit from political economy and symbolic interactionist approaches to engage in a critical analysis in dialogic form. Similarly, the reflexivity of social science knowledge production process must be demonstrated by being transparent about methods, data, method of analysis, limitations and uncertainties etc. It will allow people to engage substantively with social science knowledge claims. Post-truth's challenge to social science research also raises issues of reach of academic voice. Social scientists must engage with mainstream and alternative media to explain knowledge claims, correct misinformation, provide evidence-based analysis of public issues. Academic must write in accessible style to reach out to wider public through newspapers, blogs, magazines, social media rather than focusing exclusively on academic journals. This shift also points towards a deeper transformation in information ecosystems and people's interpretation of cultural discourses. It demands a stronger connectivity between critical social science research and democratic publics.

IV. Decolonizing Knowledge Production

Several postcolonial theorists (Connell; 2007; Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2014) have highlighted how traditional social science methodologies may perpetuate epistemic violence by failing to recognize alternative ways of knowing. Modern decolonial theory stresses that political decolonization must be supported by what Mignolo (2009) terms 'decoloniality', in other words, the change of knowledge systems, subjectivities, and modes of being that stay colonized despite official political independence. Santos (2014) contends that social justice depends on 'cognitive justice,' thereby stressing that decolonial politics depends on acknowledging the legitimacy of several knowledge systems. In the present times, the term and approach - 'decolonize' has been appropriated more as a cultural and political slogan rather than an academic substantive perspective and conceptual reorientation.

Wallerstein et al. (1996) identified that nineteenth century divisions of social sciences as complex and inadequate to comprehend global realities. *Open the Social Sciences* (Wallerstein et al., 1996) report suggested epistemological openness and recognition of multiple trajectories of social development. Its call for restructuring the social sciences needs to be relooked in today's context, particularly the question on state-centric imagination of social sciences when neoliberal transformations have reshaped the debate on the nature and goal of humanities, social sciences and so on.

Connell (2007) challenges the dominance of European and metropolitan knowledge systems in social sciences and exposes how these theoretical frameworks marginalise the intellectual traditions from global south. Although she focuses on sociological theory, it helps in reflecting on social sciences as a whole and their epistemic blindness to the experiences and perspectives of different geopolitical locations.

This challenge requires not just methodological innovation but fundamental epistemological reconsideration. Satish Deshpande's (2009) work on politics of location provides key insights into social sciences and this question of moving beyond west-centric imagination

of it. He argued that the issue today is how can we approach particular experiences and locations in a way that demonstrate broader patterns and aspects of social life without erasing differences. In his understanding social sciences are characterized by context-sensitivity, reflexivity, their methods to negotiate power (Deshpande, 2009: 42-43). His position makes a case for social sciences which are neither *uncritical universalist nor romantic indigenous* though in 'post national condition' and yet are deeply reflexive, anti-essentialist and critical.

Similarly, Shiv Visvanathan (2012) critiques the civilisational conditions of knowledge production and approach of social sciences. He argues that social sciences are trapped in western epistemology and categories like nation-state and colonialism. Drawing on Goa's case, he reflects on the categories and traditions of knowing that non-western societies offer and engage with. The west originated categories of social sciences flatten the lived realities of non-west, Southern societies and thus become imaginatively sterile (Visvanathan, 2012). He suggests that to think of emancipative social science we need new alternative imaginations beyond national' centric understandings in favour of plurality & diversity of categories and epistemologies. Social sciences should reimagine themselves by re-examining the 'margins' and 'silences' that mark current social science imaginations.

The 'provincial' character of supposedly universal concepts has been widely examined by postcolonial scholars yet social sciences have been slow to produce alternative frames to understand and explain the multiple trajectories of development across the societies. Decolonial approach to knowledge production in social sciences requires epistemic shift, pluralism and acknowledgment of diverse experiences of social life. It is not about discarding the scholarship from non-west as merely data collection and case study (Connell, 2007) but as theoretical reflection rooted in social and historical context.

V. AI, Bots and Social sciences

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence based software and apps have created a critical challenge for social science research (Au & Fong,

2025). These challenges are multifold, for instance it's not just about reproducibility of ideas but also implications for institutions that have been traditionally engaged in social research, pedagogical shifts for both teachers and students, methodologies of conducting research etc. AI also offers certain advances for social science practitioners. For instance, it can aid in quantitative analysis through large data sets and special the big data, by allowing triangulation and also providing critical reflections on the researcher's approach and perspective. Au & Fong (2025) argue that it can provide a critical reflective details observation on tools adopted for analysis and identify blind spots and latent biases in making the research design (Au & Fong, 2025: 1131). The increasing use of open-source AI models also aid in democratizing the access to these tools to wide range of researchers across social contexts in modifying, editing and replicating context specific issues in research. However social science must be vigilant to the significant limitations of the AI models and tools in social research. When used to create data itself, AI can reproduce biases, existing inequality, and create artificial responses, generate fake data sets based on the algorithms. Similarly, social science practitioners must be careful in relying on AI in designing research that may reflect historical decontextualised understanding and inbuilt biases and inequalities of various kinds. Another key challenges that AI and Bots based apps and tools for social research is the increasing reliance on automated solutions among researchers. AI tools can also pose severe risks of deskilling researchers who for the sake of various comfort and quick responses may bypass fundamental analytical skills in favour of automated task completion. Critical thinking, theoretical reasoning, methodological rigor can decay if practitioners start using Ai as a substitute for research training. AI assisted outputs can further endanger the issue of plagiarism among researchers.

Conclusion

The challenges facing social sciences today are not merely technical but fundamentally epistemological and political. It's not just about disciplinary decline or institutional dysfunction; these challenges threaten democratic capacity of the society. It's about the loss of the collective ability to understand social and material conditions of its

existence, to analyse power relations, imagine alternatives, and reason out and make informed judgments about collective futures. The work of critical thinkers from Bourdieu to Zuboff suggests that addressing these challenges requires not just methodological innovation but a fundamental reconsideration of what social science can and should do in an era of neoliberal shift, digital surveillance, epistemic crisis, and social acceleration. The future of social sciences depends on their ability to remain relevant while maintaining analytical rigor in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Michael Burawoy (2025) reflects upon social sciences in changing context by emphasizing the significance of multi-disciplinary collaboration instead of restructuring of disciplines as suggested by Wallerstein et al (1996). he argues that social sciences are embedded in both instrumental and reflexive knowledge (Burawoy, 2005: 22). He also frames the key axis of social sciences as a whole is to balance between different kinds of publics and policy today.

The path forward likely involves embracing uncertainty rather than seeking to eliminate it, developing more collaborative and participatory research practices, and creating new theoretical frameworks adequate to the complexity of contemporary social life. This represents both a crisis and an opportunity for social sciences to renew their critical potential and social relevance. The path further requires neither retreat into narrow disciplinary approaches nor uncritical celebration of interdisciplinary fragmentation of social sciences. Rather we must engage with different contexts and produce cumulative knowledges with newer methods that address complexity without sacrificing the critical inquiry. The struggle to defend social sciences is to defend and strengthen democratic self-governance that prioritizes citizenship, autonomy, social justice and collective welfare.

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Current Situation and Future Prospects in India's Social Sciences

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Abstract: *As a reflection of India's ever-changing political and economic climate, the field of social sciences has developed considerably throughout the years. With a focus on the growing importance of empirical research, interdisciplinary approaches, and fast technological advancements, this article delves into the present trends and challenges encountered by the field in India. It takes a look at how local socio-cultural circumstances have shaped social science theories and procedures, as well as the increasing impact of global viewpoints. In addition, the article delves into the difficulties of obtaining resources, data accessibility, research inclusivity, and the social sciences' contribution to solving critical societal problems like poverty, inequality, and social justice. In its last section, the paper makes some suggestions on how the social sciences in India can have a brighter future, with an emphasis on the value of multidisciplinary work, government backing, and institutional changes.*

Keywords: Policy backing, socio-cultural factors, social problems, academic culture

1. Introduction

Though the concept of social sciences as an interpretive tool for human experience is not new, the question of whether or not the