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Causes of the Marginalization of Social Sciences in India: A Comprehensive Research Analysis

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Abstract: *The social sciences—encompassing sociology, political science, economics, history, philosophy, and anthropology—have historically served as the intellectual backbone of democratic societies, offering the analytical tools necessary to understand diversity, governance, and structural inequality. In India, a nation defined by its complex socio-cultural landscape, these disciplines are indispensable for formulating inclusive public policies and fostering civic consciousness. However, an analysis of recent trends in higher education, fiscal allocation, and institutional frameworks reveals a systematic marginalization of these disciplines. This article investigates the root causes of this decline through a multi-dimensional lens: historical legacies of uneven development, the neoliberal restructuring of education and severe funding asymmetries compared to science, technology, engineering and medical (STEM) fields. Drawing on official reports from the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), and academic literature, the analysis argues that the rise of "employment-centric" education models and the dominance of technocratic development narratives have collectively undermined the social sciences. The paper concludes that without immediate structural intervention, India risks producing a workforce devoid of*

critical reflective capacities, with profound implications for the health of its democracy.

Keywords: Social Sciences in India, Higher Education Policy, Academic Marginalization, Neoliberalism in Education, Research Funding Inequality, Democratic Civic Education.

1. Introduction: The Paradox of Progress

In the narrative of modern nation-building, the role of the social sciences is often described as the "conscience of the republic." In a country as socially, economically, and culturally heterogeneous as India, these disciplines are not merely academic pursuits; they are essential mechanisms for understanding the structural inequalities of caste, class, gender, and region. In the immediate post-independence period, the Indian state recognized this utility. Social scientists were integral to the planning process, tasked with interpreting social realities to guide the massive project of national reconstruction. They were the architects of understanding poverty, social justice, and the dynamics of a nascent democratic governance system.

However, as India moves deeper into the 21st century, a troubling paradox has emerged. The nation is witnessing escalating social challenges—ranging from widening economic inequality and rapid urbanization to identity-based conflicts and labour uncertainty. Logically, this should result in a heightened demand for rigorous social scientific inquiry to decode these complexities. Instead, the opposite is occurring. The disciplines best equipped to critically analyse these developments—Sociology, Political Science, History, and Anthropology—occupy an increasingly precarious position within India's academic and policy ecosystem.

This marginalization is not merely a matter of shifting student preferences but reflects a deeper transformation in the state's vision of development. The contemporary paradigm prioritizes technological efficiency, market-oriented skills, and quantitative metrics of progress over critical social inquiry. Enrolment patterns, shrinking budgetary allocations, and recurring debates over curriculum content indicate a steady decline in institutional support, particularly when juxtaposed

with the aggressive prioritization of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) disciplines.

The establishment of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) in 1969 symbolized the Indian state's formal commitment to strengthening this field. As noted in its mandate, the ICSSR was designed to "review progress in social sciences, advise the government on policy matters, promote and fund research... and identify emerging and neglected areas of research" (ICSSR, n.d.). Theoretical frameworks positioned the social sciences as central to evidence-based policymaking. Yet, current institutional trends reveal a sharp contradiction between this vision and reality.

The marginalization is evident in deteriorating infrastructure, the "contracting out" of academic work, and the symbolic displacement of social science departments by the growing presence of engineering and management institutions. This paper argues that the weakening of social sciences is neither sudden nor coincidence. Rather, it is the result of a deliberate policy driven by neoliberal development thinking that treats education as a private commodity rather than a public good. This shift threatens to produce what might be called "technocratic sergeants"—individuals trained to efficiently manage the system but discouraged from questioning power relations or policy failures.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, analytical research design based on secondary data analysis. It investigates the systemic marginalization of social sciences in Indian higher education through a multi-dimensional lens, examining historical, economic, and institutional factors. Additionally, academic literature, government budget statements, and media discourses were reviewed to analyse funding disparities and policy shifts. The gathered data were subjected to thematic analysis to construct a critical argument regarding the future of democratic education.

2. Historical Trajectories: Colonial Legacies and Uneven Growth

To understand the current crisis, one must examine the historical trajectory of social sciences in India, which has been characterized by

uneven growth and structural limitations dating back to the colonial era.

2.1 The Pre-Independence Constraint

The roots of social science education in India are entangled with the colonial administration's need for data and governance. However, the scope was limited. As noted by Vaidyanathan (2001), "The nature of social sciences in the pre-Independence era was almost entirely confined to the universities... it is consequently unable to occupy the central place in school education today" (Venkataraman, 2016). The colonial education system prioritized administrative training and basic literacy over critical sociological or political inquiry, which might have questioned the legitimacy of the empire. This legacy created a disconnect between high-level academic theory and foundational school education that persists today.

2.2 The Post-Independence Imbalance

Following independence in 1947, the Indian state invested heavily in higher learning, but the focus was skewed. "During the first fifteen years of independence, the growth of institutions of higher learning and research in the field of social science and development was incredibly slow and partial" (International Social Science Journal, 1984).

At that time, the vision of development prioritized industrialization and scientific thinking, which naturally benefited economics and the hard sciences. Consequently, the study of economics (and economic and social history) was elevated to a high academic level, comparable to that of universities in major Western cities. In contrast, the quality of teaching and research in other social sciences—sociology, anthropology, and political science—remained lower, except in a few specific areas such as anthropology in Calcutta and Lucknow, and sociology in Bombay and Pune (International Social Science Journal, 1984).

This historical imbalance created a hierarchy within the social sciences themselves. Economics became the language of the state and planning, while sociology and political science were often relegated

to the periphery. Furthermore, "interdisciplinary social science was conspicuous by its near total absence throughout the Indian higher education system" (International Social Science Journal, 1984). This fragmentation prevented the emergence of a holistic understanding of Indian society, a weakness that continues to plague research output today.

3. The Neoliberal Turn: Education as a Commodity

The most significant driver of the contemporary marginalization of social sciences is the shift toward neoliberal education models. This paradigm redefines the purpose of education, moving it away from the creation of an informed citizenry toward the production of a employable workforce.

3.1 The Erosion of the Public Good

Neoliberalism fundamentally alters the value proposition of education. As Davies and Bansel (2007) argue, "Neoliberalism withdraws value from the social good. Economic productivity is seen to come not from government investment in education, but from transforming education into a product that can be bought and sold like anything else."

Under this framework, disciplines are judged solely by their immediate market value or Return on Investment (ROI). Social sciences, which foster critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and historical awareness, generate "value" that is diffuse, long-term, and societal qualities that the market has difficulty pricing. Consequently, they are viewed as "non-productive" sectors.

3.2 The "Employability" Discourse

This ideological shift has materialized in policy through the aggressive promotion of "job-oriented" courses. In a sociological analysis of employability, Sugureshwar (2022) notes: "In India, social structural factors like caste, class, gender, and even region impose and influence socio-economic inequality... However, over the last 2-3 decades, the government... has introduced a number of job-oriented courses, free coaching... and promoting deserving students to seek higher education like PhD etc."

While increasing access to education for vulnerable groups is a positive development, the nature of this education is increasingly instrumental. The emphasis is on skill acquisition for the global marketplace rather than intellectual emancipation. "In this complex arrangement, the sectoral opening is seemingly commercialized to match the market requirements where the employment-centric model of education becomes important" (Venkataraman, 2016).

This commercialization creates a feedback loop: because the market values technical skills more highly, students and parents prioritize STEM fields. Institutions respond by diverting funding to these departments, further depriving the social sciences of resources and prestige. The result is an educational culture that views sociology or history not as valuable subjects in their own right, but as *"backup"* options for those who couldn't get into medicine or engineering.

4. The Political Economy of Research Funding

Perhaps the most quantifiable evidence of the marginalization of social sciences is found in the allocation of financial resources. Research in India is characterized by a stark apartheid of funding, where the "hard" sciences receive the lion's share of state support while social sciences survive on meagre crumbs.

4.1 The Funding Chasm

The disparity in grant allocation is staggering. Data from the DFID South Asia Research Hub (2011) highlights this imbalance: "Of the total expenditure on research by the UGC, less than 12% was allocated to research in social and basic sciences in 2009-10."

Even more telling is the comparison between specific research councils. "During 2006-2010, the total grant to ICSSR was 2.3% of the total grant to the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and approximately 11% of the total grant to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)" (DFID South Asia Research Hub, 2011).

This 2.3% figure is symbolic of the state's priorities. It suggests that understanding the social fabric of the nation is valued at a tiny fraction of understanding its industrial or biological mechanics.

'Over the past decades, India's investment in research and development has stagnated at around 0.6-0.7% of the GDP which is well below the global average of 1.8% and far behind emerging economies like South Korea (4.8%) and China (2.4%). The social sciences in India occupy the bottom rung in this already meagre pool. As per the Department of Science and Technology, less than 3% of the national R&D expenditure is directed towards social science research.' (Podh, 2025)

4.2 Institutional Starvation

'Government spends nearly 300 crores of rupees annually on an IIT. This is in addition to the donations received from alumni and grants from foreign agencies, business houses, industry and NGOs. Whereas universities and specialized institutes in social sciences have to depend only on government funds. Central universities may be well funded but suffer from a crisis of governance.' (Gurupanch, 2023).

This financial starvation has direct consequences on the quality of research. It prevents social scientists from undertaking large-scale, longitudinal field studies that are necessary to understand complex social changes. Instead, researchers are often forced to rely on secondary data or small, localized surveys.

A review of ICSSR projects over the past decade reveals stagnation. "326 projects were awarded in 2015-16, 470 in 2016-17, 413 in 2022-23, and a total of 377 in 2023-24. This indicates that there has been no significant increase in the number of projects awarded" (ICSSR, 2024). In a country where the population and the complexity of social problems have grown exponentially, the stagnation in research projects represents a de facto contraction in knowledge production.

5. Institutional Decay and the Crisis of Research Culture

The marginalization of social sciences is not solely a matter of external funding; it is also driven by internal institutional weaknesses and a deteriorating research culture within Indian universities.

5.1 The Quantity-Quality Disparity

India presents a paradox of volume. "While the country has the highest volume of research in the region and is significantly ahead of other countries in south Asia, there is wide disparity in research activity and output across the country" (DFID South Asia Research Hub, 2011).

'Some premium universities located in the major cities foster academic research cultures which include interdisciplinary work, knowledge production with emphasis on peer review, and engagement with internal and external intellectual networks and learned societies. Members of faculty in many of these institutions are scholars of national and international repute. However, the quality of research in a large majority of institutions neither conforms to international academic standards nor have they been able to make a significant contribution to social science research, either theoretical or applied and policy-oriented, in the country.' (DFID South Asia Research Hub, 2011).

5.2 Structural Disincentives

The root of this mediocrity lies in the structural design of the Indian university system, which has historically separated teaching from research. "While the bulk of social science research is undertaken in universities... the university administration is not research friendly and there are no incentive structures – either financial or professional – to encourage teachers to undertake research" (DFID South Asia Research Hub, 2011).

In many state universities, faculty are burdened with heavy teaching loads and administrative duties, leaving little time for rigorous inquiry. Furthermore, the recruitment of university graduates by research organizations often leads to a dead-end in capacity building. "Applied research organisations and consulting firms are increasingly becoming attractive career options but there is a preference in these organisations to produce policy papers or briefs with no incentives to publish academic articles in refereed journals" (DFID South Asia Research Hub, 2011). This trend commodifies social research, turning it into "consultancy" work rather than deep, theoretical scholarship.

5.3 Factors that weaken discipline

Several systemic factors can be identified that have consistently weakened this discipline in India. These include:

Brain Drain: The migration of the brightest minds to Western universities due to better funding and academic freedom.

Retirement of Senior Scholars: A generation of nation-building social scientists has retired, leaving a vacuum that has not been filled due to hiring freezes.

Lack of Training: Young faculty often lack rigorous training in modern research methodologies.

Lack of Funding: Social sciences receive limited financial support compared to STEM fields, restricting research quality and scope.

Insufficient Institutional Support: Inadequate research infrastructure, libraries, and academic backing weaken social science research capacity.

Lack of Research Incentives: Fewer rewards, promotions, and recognition discourage scholars from undertaking serious research.

Disciplinary Hierarchy: Social sciences are often considered inferior to natural and technical sciences, limiting interdisciplinary collaboration.

6. The Enrolment Paradox: Popularity without Prestige

A curious phenomenon in Indian higher education is that while institutional support for social sciences is declining, student enrolment remains high. This "Enrolment Paradox" warrants close examination.

6.1 The Illusion of Choice

"Over the last decade, an increasing number of young Indians have chosen Arts over the usual Science and Commerce fields. The All India Survey on Higher Education (2021-22) found that the most popular stream of choice for postgraduate studies was the Social Sciences (21.1%) followed by Science (14.7%)" (Nagaraj & Deo, 2024).

On the surface, this appears encouraging. However, the motivations behind this enrolment often have little to do with a desire for research. 'Apart from other professional courses such as engineering, law and medicine, the social sciences are the best options for students who are seeking substantial salaries and social status. Here, you can get a higher status along with a substantial salary. Students of social science and social work today face significantly more challenges in their education and work contexts (compared to other programs). It contributes greatly to their personal growth. Apart from options such as journalism, mass communication, and law, students today look forward to careers such as public health, disaster management, wildlife conservation, habitat conservation, and policymaking' (Ronad, 2024). Many students view a Master's degree in Social Sciences as a stepping stone to government exams rather than an entry into academia.

6.2 The Ph.D. Decline

The superficiality of this popularity is revealed when looking at advanced research degrees. "The share of Ph.D. graduates in the Social Sciences has been reducing considerably over the last few years (from over 15% in 2013 to 7% in 2021)" (Nagaraj & Deo, 2024).

This statistic is alarming. It suggests that while the pipeline of students is wide at the entry-level, it narrows drastically at the level of knowledge production. The talent that enters the field is not being cultivated into a cadre of researchers who can contribute to new social scientific knowledge. This creates a dependency on Western social theory to explain Indian realities, as the domestic production of high-level theoretical work dwindles.

7. Socio-Political Implications: Governance in a Vacuum

The marginalization of social sciences is not merely an academic concern; it is a governance crisis. As India rapidly modernizes, it faces "challenges due to this de-prioritisation" (Nagaraj & Deo, 2024).

7.1 The Technological Spot

'India's current social system has many innovations that rival the West, such as biometric identification and digital payments. The

impact and governance of these social phenomena must be undertaken locally. While we have been able to rely on Western advances in the Natural Sciences such as Engineering, Computer Science, and Medicine, in the realm of Social Science, the lack of a deep and robust social scientifically trained bench and a body of knowledge seriously hinders our ability to tackle systemic issues that are slowing India's progress' (Nagaraj & Deo, 2024).

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The neglect of social sciences in India is a structural tragedy, a consequence of a historical legacy of uneven development. While it's understandable that research in science, technology, engineering, and medicine requires substantial funding, the social sciences also need adequate and respectable budgets to address social problems and provide experience-based advice to the government on social policies. Social sciences also play a crucial role in shaping responsible citizens. Therefore, when formulating budgets and other plans for the social sciences, the expertise of subject matter specialists should be given paramount importance, rather than relying solely on administrative officials. To reverse this decline, a multi-pronged approach is required.

1. Rebalancing the Funding Equation: The government must bridge the chasm between ICSSR and CSIR funding. A specific target should be set to increase social science research spending to at least 25% of the total national research budget. This includes direct grants to universities to establish research cells, separate from teaching duties.

2. Institutionalizing Research Incentives: Universities must overhaul their promotion and tenure systems to reward high-quality, peer-reviewed research. This includes creating "teaching buyouts" where productive researchers are given time off from teaching to focus on fieldwork and writing.

3. Strengthening the Ph.D. Pipeline: To arrest the decline in Ph.D. output, fellowships for social science doctoral students must be increased to match those in STEM fields. Furthermore, strict mentorship programs should be established to ensure that the volume of enrolment translates into quality research output.

4. Interdisciplinary Integration: The strict separation between IITs and universities must end. Technological institutes should be mandated to have robust social science departments that are not merely "service departments" for engineering students but centres of research that investigate the sociology of technology.

5. Decolonizing Knowledge Production: India must invest in "home-grown" social theory. This requires funding for translation services to make regional social science literature available globally and incentives for research that addresses specifically Indian problems—caste, agrarian distress, and urbanization—without solely relying on Western frameworks.

In conclusion, the social sciences are the mirror in which a nation sees itself. If India allows this mirror to cloud over through neglect and underfunding, it proceeds into the future blind to its own reality. Revitalizing these disciplines is not just an academic imperative; it is a prerequisite for sustaining a vibrant, reflective, and just democracy.

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