

Will there be any contention if it is stated that travelling to see places, armchair politics and stories concerning people, famous and ordinary, are among the top topics of non-work discussion for ordinary people in India (and elsewhere as well)? I do not think so. Ask any tour operator and he/she would confirm that our local tourism industry is thriving, check any discussion forum, be it an informal gathering or a formal, one will find that politics is the most discussed topic and a glance at the daily supplements of our newspapers and general magazines confirm the marketability of stories concerning people.

If we strip the subject of social science down to the bare minimum one can see that it is all about stories of people, places and institutions and we see all around us people tuning into stories, be it on the television, movie screens or newspapers. However survey of ordinary people on how interested they were in any of the social science subjects during their school days will indicate that either they were bored and hence completely switched off or disinterested because they saw no value add from these subjects to the practicalities of living life. And this when the subjects are all about living life! The subjects that make up social science in school connect us to the past to understand, appreciate and learn how we have reached to where we are now; they also connect us to the present through the study of institutions that govern us; and contextualize the past and present by providing us with an understanding of the larger eco-system that we are a part of. Social science helps us to dream of building a better world. Practical questions related to human development such as 'How to make our cities better, improve standards of living, reduce crime rates, overcome discrimination, provide better governance, improve productivity' are what social science is made of.

If this is so, why is it that when these topics are packaged as subjects they tend to become uninteresting and useless? Is it something to do with the material created to study these topics or is it to do with the manner in which social science teachers use them in a classroom setting? The answer lies in both of the above; however, the latter is critical because the task of making a subject drab can be done only with active support of a teacher! Even a very well crafted book can be used by a teacher to put a class of enthusiastic students to sleep. The advantage of good material is that students can

benefit from it even without the teacher. But the teacher can surely play the spoil sport and that is what one sees in our classrooms.

There are several methods of facilitating the understanding of social science subjects in schools. However, at present, in most of the schools in India the emphasis is on rote memorization. The teaching is through a method where in the teacher talks/lectures and the students passively take notes and memorizes to regurgitate in order to pass the exams; the more similar the answer to what the teacher has said, the higher is the passing grade. 'Passed in flying colors' will be the description as long as the colors are the same as painted by the teacher! Though the lever to change appears to be with the teacher, the fault lies with society itself; society which has accorded a secondary status to social science.



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As a student if one opts for any discipline associated with social science, especially the humanities (subjects such as history, literature, and philosophy that are based on the study of human culture and ideas) one is branded as a student who is not as bright / smart as those who opt for the natural sciences. This branding begins at the immediate family level and the key reason for this is the status that modern Indian society has accorded to engineers and doctors. One may also add here that even those who have taken up a natural science based subject but are not interested in pursuing a career in engineering or medicine are most likely to be viewed through the same lens as those studying social sciences which indicates how skewed society's perception

towards these two disciplines is. Hence the postulation of society is that those who are incapable of taking up natural sciences for their higher studies are the ones who take up social sciences. NCF 2005 also corroborates this when it says, 'from the initial stages of schooling, it is often suggested to students that the natural sciences are superior to the social sciences, and are the domain of 'bright' students' and it goes on to add that as a result of this, 'low self-esteem governs the classroom-transaction process, with both teachers and students feeling uninterested in comprehending its contents'.

In India, studying social science is also associated more with girls than boys and this is the 'patriarchal and gender biased' society's means of according an inequitable status to a field that is considered un-important. This is not only evidence of how society views social science, but also how societies that demean social science view the female members. Social science subjects are considered as non-premium fields, in terms of importance, demand and hence the fee, and patriarchal societies such as ours carry the belief that girls need not study anything worthwhile – this belief system leads a society to combine the 'oppressed' with the 'worthless'.

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Given the status, the question is where the correction mechanism lies. And a correction is necessary because further human development can take place only when we understand our societies. Social science is a study of the society at all levels, it is an inter-disciplinary subject that draws from probably all other subjects and from human experience and one whose scope and importance is not only continuously growing, but is becoming invaluable in furthering human progression. With regard to the correction mechanism, one line of argument is that unless the way

social science is taught in schools (allowing a student to appreciate it's usefulness in the practicalities of life) changes, one can never manage to turn around a society's point of view. Therefore the task of changing the perception of the society lies with social science itself – Is there hope? A bit of history could inform us better.

It was only in the 19th century that social science began to take shape, and it is only in the 20th century that a number of disciplines such as economics, sociology, political science, history geography, psychology and anthropology made their mark. It is interesting to note that social (studies) science became part of the official curriculum in modern India only with the Basic Education Program of Gandhiji, which makes it's history less than a century old. Hence, the fact that it is a very young discipline compared to the others may have contributed to the image society has created. After Gandhiji's Basic Education Program brought social (studies) science into the realm of formal education in modern India, the Secondary Education Commission provided the official recognition to the subject at an all India level. The Mudaliar Commission Report dated 1953 spoke of attention that is required towards the currently relevant concept of world citizenship, but even 50 years hence, the study of social (studies) science is still associated with remembering dates, facts and names of famous people, places and institutions. NCERT soon after it was set up, also came out with objectives of teaching social (studies) science and other than the usual and now staid things such as to 'make a better citizen' also mentioned that a key thing is to 'train minds to think' and 'to develop skills to express freely'. There are evidences all around us to show that leave alone our larger society, even our schools have not come close to achieving these objectives. In 1964, the Kothari commission said that one of the aims of teaching social (studies) science is to help students acquire certain values and attitudes which are critical for participation in the affairs of the world other than the acquisition of knowledge of the environment and understanding the human relationships. And in 2005 in it's position paper on social science, the NCF said that it is important to 'reinstate the significance of the social sciences by not only highlighting its increasing relevance for a job in the rapidly expanding service sector, but by pointing to its indispensability in laying the foundations for an analytical and creative mindset'.

Given that since the time social science has been brought

into the mainstream in the context of education in modern India all the committees have said the 'right' things, the discipline is yet to get the status it deserves in the opinion of the larger society. For the larger society social science is a non-utility subject. Therefore, there is need to drive home the point that the social sciences are essential to provide number of skills required to adjust to the globalized world, and to 'deal with political and economic realities'.

The correction mechanism therefore lies within the discipline and the onus is on social science itself. The correction needs to take place at the elementary school level; the popular perception that 'social science merely conveys information which is required to be rote learnt for examinations with the content of the material used in schools only remotely connected to realities of life' needs to be altered. For this correction to take place, the social science curriculum, the material available such as the prescribed textbooks and the teachers of social science subjects are the three vital change levers. Of these three, the NCF 05 has taken a big step towards identifying an appropriate framework for the curriculum and the new CBSE material (textbooks included) is surely a vast improvement and much can be achieved using them effectively, which leaves the third vital lever, that of the teacher, to be attended to.

Getting the third lever activated in a desirable manner is the key to the correction required to elevate the status of social science. The challenge of getting the teachers to facilitate the exploration of the social science subjects by the students themselves and to focus on conceptual understanding rather on superfluous 'facts' is also closely entwined to the current examination system. However, the examination system need not be the alibi for teachers refusing to adopt a model in which they join hands with the students in generating knowledge, because those who have adopted such a non-coercive approach realize that once the concept clarity is achieved, the exam pattern will not matter.

This understanding is critical for revitalizing social science by helping its students to acquire knowledge and skills in an interactive setting. Subjects such as Math and Physics have the potential to survive didactic approach in it's teaching due to certain inherent characteristics which will not be discussed here for lack of space, however students' interest in social science is surely exterminated using an approach that does not promote critical perspectives through a

participative approach. An important aspect of social science is the possibility of having different shades or at times even diametrically opposite answers. Hence, more than the teacher of natural sciences, it is critical for a social science teacher to move away from the age old habit of preaching from the pulpit; a shift in the pedagogy from merely providing information, towards debate and discussion, will enable both the students as well as the teacher, to be alive to real life situations. As is rightly said in NCF 05, 'it is important that the process of learning should promote the spirit of inquiry and creativity among both children and teachers'. This idea of 'exploring' is fundamental in infusing life into the subject of social science and only when this happens the usefulness of the discipline emerges. Therefore an open-ended approach to teaching is critical and the teachers should allow for the differences to emerge among the students thereby encouraging them to see different points of view and appreciate divergent opinions which are invariably based on the local contexts the students come from.



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It is therefore in the hands of the social science teacher to elevate the status of the discipline to one that is seen contributing to the development of the students in their journey as learners. For achieving this objective the social science teacher is required to study and analyze the diverse philosophies of instruction and come up with a necessary synthesis. Of the many things expected from a teacher, a social science teacher should play the role of a philosopher who knows different philosophical schools of thought. For this to happen, fundamental changes are required in the training of teachers through teacher education courses.

For instance, educational philosophy should be utilitarian in its purposes in which case it is important to focus on the application of the tenets of the philosophy.

A combination of procedures is required to be used by the social science teacher such as a project method that highlights an activity-centered approach to learning, problem solving procedure wherein subject matter from diverse academic disciplines are used to find solutions and so on; this in turn will lead to the development of skills among the students that are in tune with daily realities. Allan Janik in a paper titled 'Future for the Humanities?' presents how in the case of a gifted 40-year-old architect or engineer who is promoted to a management position, the promotion could be a source of deeply disturbing problems if there is no preparation for being a manager, which is largely a matter of coping with conflicts - and conflict resolution is a skill imbibed through social science. The author rightly argues that in this case more technical knowledge would be superfluous because it was the architect's/engineer's technical acumen that led to the 'disastrous' promotion in the first place and it is only skill sets from social science that will contribute positively. He espouses the case for studying social science by saying humanities (which is only one part of social science) are vital to understanding the context in which knowledge is applied in society and thus to any serious approach to life-long learning. He describes life-long learning as making serious re-adjustments to our very selves that mere technical knowledge cannot facilitate. The paper further elaborates how the financial crisis of 2008 has shown that it is necessary to 're-adjust to drastic changes in our unquestioned assumptions about ourselves and the world.....and a part of making a successful transition under such arduous circumstances is understanding how our minds, our lives and our enterprises are always embedded in conditions not of our making that may unexpectedly shift in dramatically unforeseen ways'. Thereby he argues that humanities are crucial to obtaining perspectives on human life and activity which comes in handy during critical junctures and that society (especially politicians and policy makers) cannot afford to ignore it, the way we have seen in recent times, especially in the Indian context.

It is also important for social science to position itself as a discipline that contributes to successful careers. Though the perception is changing in some urban centers of the country, the popular perception however is that not many desirable

job options are open to students of social science. Hence, it is important to establish to the larger society the relevance of social science for the present.

*A project method that highlights an activity-centered approach to learning, 'humanism' as a Philosophy of Education as advocated by Carl Rogers (1902-1985) whereby students identify questions to be answered, so that what is desired in learning comes from themselves and adopting a problem solving procedure wherein subject matter from diverse academic disciplines are used to find solutions.*

In conclusion, one can state with authority that it is becoming increasingly clear that the relevance of social science is only rising as it is intrinsically linked to the formation of the Knowledge Economy and Society and the recent emerging trend of evidence-based politics. Governments are beginning to realize how social sciences can help in the management of societies and are increasingly depending on the social sciences to deal with particular problems they are now facing. For instance, modern governments run research projects and the findings of these studies influence the design of government programs for combating various issues such as social discrimination, unemployment, urban violence and so on.

In a decade old paper titled 'Into the future with social sciences' Jean-Eric Aubert, Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development predicted that 'perhaps in the information age and in the dematerialized economy of the knowledge world, society will discover a pressing need to know itself much better, if only to survive. Social sciences will then be very much in demand'. Today, even in the Indian context we can say that the trend is clearly towards elevating social science to a much higher level than what has been accorded till date. These changes are already visible in the urban centers and popular perceptions on the relevance of

social science are also changing. This has clearly led to a demand for the discipline from aspiring students. However, at this moment very few places in India offer social science

in the way it is sought. But the hope is that even this will change soon. Caveat being we do not lose sight of the corrections required.

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