

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

A Brief Review of the Present
Situation in Bangladesh

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	3
INTRODUCTION	4
SOCIAL SCIENCE IN BANGLADESH	5
SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION	7
THEORY AND PRACTICE	8
THE ACTIVISTS	8
COMBINING RESEARCH AND ACTION	10

PREFACE

This paper was prepared for the ARENA (Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternative) workshop on the State of Social Sciences in Asia was held at Hua Hin, Thailand, during September 10 -14, 1983.

Perhaps many people will agree with the view that social science research plays a significant role in the process of social transformation where the forces of social transformation, particularly the activists, get stimulus and direction from the objective analysis of the phenomenon. And in this context the relevance of social science research can be reviewed. But how far this role has been played in the concrete situation of our country is, however, an empirical question.

Here an attempt to highlight the existing dichotomy between research and social action in Bangladesh is being put forward. The authors strongly feel that it is necessary, this dichotomy should gradually disappear resulting in an ideal situation where research can be integrated with social action.

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INTRODUCTION

There may not be sharp differences opinion with respect to the definition of social science, in the sense that it corresponds to certain disciplines that try to analyse the society in a scientific or logical manner. However, people may not agree on how to look at the society. And here social science, as a broad tool of looking at the society, breaks into multiple schools of thought. But first, it may be imperative to discuss briefly about the application of social science.

Application of social science towards the solution of practical problems should be distinguished social science itself .The essence of social lies in its method of analysis with respect to gathering of facts and formulation of laws and principles which the analysis of these facts reveals. This may be boiled down to a single proposition: it is the accurate description of phenomena, exactly and truthfully, without any prejudice.

When the application of scientific knowledge arises to solve any practical problem we are compelled to depart from science to some extent since the very existence of a problem implies the making of a judgement. A Problem to be solved implies an end to be attained. But mere revelation or description of fact dose not tell us what ends are good or desirable. This is particularly true for social science which deals with human beings in relation to each other.

If we agree that the objective of the study of social science is to achieve progress in a society, then the question of judgement cannot be thought of separately. It is important to stress this, because people, while giving judgement to a problem, are naturally inclined to be influenced by their own particular interests. The employment of child labour may seem desirable to a manufacturer who can earn more profit by paying low wages. On the other hand, such employment may have adverse effect on the lives of children and thus some may oppose such employment.

Hence the pursuit of truth in the form of value judgement cannot be separated from the study of social science. Value premises, whatever they may be, seem to be taken care of considerably in studying a phenomenon, and gathering and analysis of facts are ultimately built on such value premises. For example, while analysing a peasant situation, one may look at things in such a way where the solution is sought in the form of modernisation of agriculture, undertaken by big farms through the application of modern inputs and technology. One may also look at the very same situation differently and may seek solution in the form of cooperative farming through the application of a technology based on local resource endowment .The situation is the same but judgement but judgement s are different. And in order to arrive at a certain judgement, one needs to gather and analyse data according to one's notion of the situation where one cannot remain value-free. Hence different interpretations of a single situation or event are possible and it is on wonder that interpretors either belong to different schools of thought or have different objectives in mind.

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN BANGLADESH

Social science research in Bangladesh is recent phenomenon gaining popularity and breaking down its exclusiveness only recently. It virtually started in the fifties and the PIDE (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics) was the only notable institution where research mainly in the field of economics had been carried out. It was a government sponsored institute where research was carried out both on macro and micro issues, mainly to feed the Planning Commission. A lot of research was undertaken corresponding to planning models. Rapid economic growth in terms of GDP was emphasized. This objective was well reflected in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Five Year Plans. The development of consumer goods industry was spectacular. But it gave birth to serious imbalances and contradictions in the economy and society. Economy became highly dependent on foreign aid and gave birth to 22 capitalist families who controlled the whole economy. The inter-regional disparity reached an alarming stage. However, there was little reflection of these phenomena in the works of the social scientists in those days. In this situation, the political activists became vigilant. Consequently Pakistan disintegrated and its eastern region, Bangladesh, emerged as a separate political entity in December, 1971.

The first Planning Commission in Bangladesh was set up in all enthusiasm with membership from reputed academicians who never hesitated to speak for “radical social transformation”, and “socialism” was set as a goal in the first Five Year Plan of Bangladesh. Public cooperation and public opinion were described as the principal force and sanction behind planning. It was said, “Planners in a country can only give direction. Execution of policies and programs depend entirely on the political will of the country and as such, on the commitment and the effectiveness of the leadership, the ability of the party in power to mobilise the people, and dedicated functioning of the government machinery. Form this point of view; planning is more a political process than a mere economic device”.¹

But things did not work. Planners were too ambitious and the political leadership had different objectives in mind. All members of the 1st Planning Commission resigned. The political leadership successfully mobilised opportunist intellectuals and hooligans. Ultimately the regims was overthrown by a group whose intentions and administration were no better than those of the former.

After the independence of Bangladesh, BIDS (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies) was formed, inheriting the same structure as that of the PIDE. The BIDS is equipped with esteemed professional researchers. But there are only few works that reflect the reality of the society which needs immediate attention. One considerable work was a study on the Famine of `74. This famine shook the whole nation and as a consequence of this famine, Bangladesh started to be known as an “international basket case”. While the ruling party was searching for a “CIA conspiracy” behind the famine, and many of its political opponents had been analyzing things as “a result of a repressive regime comprising of the lumen bourgeoisie patronized by the Indo-Soviet axis”, this study tried to analyse the situation in a historical perspective, and revealed that a famine could occur even in a situation where there was enough food but the people lacked purchasing power. Thus the people, particularly the rural poor, became destitute. The victims were the landless and there was not enough

alternative employment. Rapid pauperization of the rural poor was the main reason behind such a situation. But how to combat pauperization was, however, a difficult question which did not seem to bother our academic researchers.

Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) is a privately institute founded few years back, where economic studies are mainly carried out. Both BIDS and BUP undertake research projects in collaboration with government, as well as with foreign and international agencies like World Bank, US AID, etc.

In fact, their works are mainly devoted to providing up-to-date data to foreign and international agencies time to time as required, thus becoming mere brokers of information.

CSS (Centre for Social Studies) is another research institution which is privately sponsored and which commenced working since late seventies. This centre is geared towards research work mainly in the field of sociology and history. From viewing their journals, it seems that the groups involved with this institute are more interested in interpretation of the past rather than the present. It may be argued that the exhaustive interpretation and assessment of past events and institution of understand the present, and facilitates to formulate directions for the future. However, such positive directions can seldom be found in their works.

BARD (Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development) is a government sponsored institute working since early sixties. The present model of farmers' cooperatives being pursued by the government had been the result of years experiment and research undertaken by BARD. It may be mentioned here that this is the only notable institute where "action research" had been undertaken, in the sense that their efforts and findings had been combined with their intervention with respect to the formation of model cooperatives among "owner- farmers". But this exercise failed to develop viable farmers' cooperatives. Big landowners became dominant within the cooperatives. With the application of production-augmenting technology, rich peasants became richer and the rate of landlessness increased. The motto of self-reliance turned out to be an empty slogan amidst rapid stratification of the peasantry. However, BARD has been continuing its research activities concentrating on issues of technology, farm production and saving-investment problems, without paying any attention to structural phenomena corresponding to social relationships and contradictions.

Bangladesh Bank (the central bank of the country) and other commercial banks in the public sector, also gather periodical information vis-a- vis undertake detailed studies with respect to issues related to credit. However, they are supposed to generate information mainly to be used as a means to make their credit operation activity more effective.

The universities of Bangladesh could have been important centered for research activities in the field of social science. The reality is that the most of the university based academicians prefer to work for private consulting firms or to provide consultancy to international and foreign agencies rather than involving themselves in fundamental research which the society expects from them.

The existing social science research in Bangladesh may be summarized as follows:

- a) There are researches which simply generate data periodically for planning and monitoring. This is mainly done by the Planning Ministry and banks.
- b) There are researches where the issues of social and economic development are highlighted. This is done in the BIDS to some extent.
- c) There are researches of an evaluative nature which deal with the consequences of measures undertaken by intervening agencies, mainly the government. These are done by different government and private agencies.

Beside these, there had been some research efforts, though inadequate, undertaken by individuals and groups who are known to be belonging to the Marxist school and though. Their works are devoted to the analysis of the mode of production and social relationships. Many of them are activists in the political arena. In fact, the history of the left movement in Bangladesh for a “radical transformation of the society” may be traced back to early twenties. Their repeated failures, disintegration and degeneration perhaps indicate either their inability of grasping the discipline of social science or, their apathy towards understanding their environment and evaluating their actions.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Man, to maintain his existence, acts on the external world, he changes his own nature.² This seems to be the crux of the Marxian view of social science. Social science deals with human beings in relation to each other in a given society. The objective of studying social science is implied here, whereby it facilitates the dissemination of scientific knowledge, being a theoretical weapon for practical action. If such action leads to greater progress and welfare in the society, positive social transformation is achieved.

We like to argue that the study of social science cannot be thought independent of its objective. And if the objective is the transformation of the society towards the path of progress, social science becomes a tool for social transformation. In this sense, social science may be described in a broader perspective as follows:

- a) Observation of facts for enquiry and working out laws concerning them;
- b) Formulation of judgements as to the desirability or undesirability of certain conditions, events or institutions within the field;
- c) Application of knowledge from enquiry to the attainment of the desirable, or the elimination of the desirable, or the elimination of the undesirable.

If the study of social science is integrated with its application to a concrete situation, the inherent contradiction corresponding to the dichotomy of theory and practice diminishes. Sadly, the experience in Bangladesh reveals a different picture.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The question as to whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking, is not a question of theory, but a practical question.³ And in the context the relevance of social science can be justified, since man must prove the truth by judgement and action. Mere pursuit of truth or knowledge is of no use unless it works as a stimulus for action and guides action.

Practice is a painstaking process where the people involved, the activists, can reorient themselves with adjustment, can get rid of theoretical bias, can stimulate and strengthen processes of changing circumstances and ultimately can move forward.

In this context, the scope of social science becomes wider. It is supposed to encompass also the existing and alternative processes that are working within the society for its transformation. Social scientists in Bangladesh have not yet paid due attention to this phenomenon. An elitist trend has developed in the state of social science in Bangladesh, where social scientists in general, are involved in mere academic exercises of theoretical importance only, giving sermons to activists when they are invited to speak, with a strong feeling that they have little to do in the practical process of social transformation. By shifting the responsibility of “revolutionising practice” to the shoulder of activists, they live amidst intellectual fervour with all their wisdom, and in situations of social unrest and political upheaval, leave the country and easily find employment in highly remunerative jobs in the west.

In recent years, though the concept of “participatory action research” is becoming popular in many developing countries, where the researcher not only possesses research interest but also has an objective of transforming society as being inherent in his/her research. The methodology corresponds to generating and assisting people’s processes at the grass-root level, and ultimately formulation of theoretical premises based on concrete knowledge of the objective situation and painstaking subjective effort. Researchers, thus, may find a way to get rid of their elitist trend. But the experience of many third world countries reveal that such efforts may ultimately end in racketeering, where easy access to huge funds are available for new “trendy” projects. However, the effectiveness of this method should not be confused with its probable abuse.

THE ACTIVISTS

With respect to the relevance of social science, the importance of the role of activists in using the discipline in a concrete situation is no exaggeration. Bangladesh seems to be “richly” endowed with political activists where there are no less than one hundred political parties or groups active in the political arena. A considerable proportion of them labels themselves as Marxists and are divided into dozens of camps. Marxist view of social science corresponds to the concrete analysis of the status and interests of different classes which serves as a means of defining and understanding a social problem or contradiction. Keeping this in mind, all these parties and groups have developed their own analysis of society, its

classes, its mode of production and its contradictions. The society remaining the same, they have arrived at different conclusions and opinions and formulated their respective strategies and tactics accordingly. It may be sufficient to state that most of them suffer from dogmatism and are quite removed from concrete reality. On the other hand, they suffer from a negative form of empiricism in the sense that they erroneously comprehend particular experiences as the universal truth.

This phenomenon has been reflected in past and present action of those parties. Some preach “socialist revolution” some others “people’s democratic revolution”. Some launch struggles in the form of general strike and armed insurrection against the ruling regime; some join the ruling regime in the name of “anti-imperialist national government”.

There is yet another group of activists for whom the question of the relevance of social science cannot be ruled out. After the emergence of Bangladesh, a host of non-government voluntary organisations (NGO) have been working in different areas. Many of them have been working with a “target group approach”, organising the landless labourers and marginal farmers and running different “community development” activities among their “target” audience. Hundreds of hardworking young men and women are involved with these organisations.

A huge amount of fund and effort devoted in their community development activities in fields of family planning, adult education, cooperative credit and vocational training in the last decade went near-waste in the absence of the appreciation of basic knowledge about the society where programs do not only appeal the target people, but also work as counter to the building of their social consciousness and foster a mentality of dependence among the people on these agencies.

There are also efforts on the part of some NGO s to mobilise the rural poor through the much publicised “conscientisation” process. These NGOs with all “good” intentions have been organising the people but unfortunately they do not know what to do with such organisations. They are critical about government policies, have little or no confidence in political activists, but are yet to organise their thinking regarding what they really want to achieve.

For social transformation, one must be able to make a correct assessment of the objective condition of a society. Without such assessment, programs adopted become unrealistic, either too ambition or in many cases quite irrelevant. It is a pity that NGO who are presently involved in organising the poor at the grass root, do not seem concerned about the need for understanding social science in a disciplined manner. They are, in practice, working in a directionless manner, spouting seemingly radical jargons. These activists in most cases suffer not only from a lack of analytical perception and skill, but despite their rich experiences, outside their own circle, due to their inability to comprehend the “language of research”.

COMBINING RESEARCH AND ACTION

Despite all these differences, which are presently in existence, perhaps it would be an ideal and the most expected situation where intellectuals stimulate and assist popular struggles and activists, in turn, equip themselves with the scientific method of analysing their environment and action. This will, no doubt, contribute a lot in eliminating the elitist trend among the intellectuals and “right and left deviations” among the activists that originate from ignorance or counter consciousness. Is the processes of enquiry and application are integrated; the wisdom of theory is combined with painstaking practice. The initiation of such a process needs urgent attention. In order to develop a viable process for attaining this, the following may be proposed:

- a) A mechanism should be developed as a priority amongst activists to study social science in a disciplined manner so that they may be able to critically analyse the long term and real effects of their programs and practice.
- b) There should be efforts to develop a workable forum comprising the activists and academicians who are willing to contribute in the process of social transformation in any form. Such a forum will facilitate wider understanding, mutual respect and confidence among them and both the groups can enrich themselves by learning more to the society.
- c) In order to develop a workable forum of the researchers and activists, some sort of consensus with respect to commitment for realisation of the same objective is needed at the outset. Given the objective of positive social transformation, the choice of subject for research is to utmost importance. Language and analysis should be such that the activists can readily understand, grasp and receive necessary direction for work from it. There should be a process of constant dialogue and interaction between researchers and activists to facilitate choice of subjects for research and conceptualisation and realisation on the part of the activists.

However, in the long run one cannot rule out the possibility of a situation where the dichotomy between research and action becomes non-existent.

Experiences of countries which achieved positive social transformation reveal that a correct balance of theory and practice in individuals is not only possible, but necessary for correct leadership.

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