Approaching Research
Research in Humanities and Social Sciences

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"Throughout history, the arts and humanities have helped men and women around the globe grapple with the most challenging questions and come to know the most basic truths. In our increasingly interconnected world, the arts play an important role in both shaping the character that defines us and reminding us of our shared humanity." Barack Obama

These words of Barack Obama, Former President of the USA, encapsulate the critical position of subjects studied under the domain of Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS).

Humanities & Social Sciences in Higher Education

It is a well-known fact that higher education programmes feed research. Therefore, the lower the number of students of HSS in higher education, the lower the number of researchers and research in HSS. To understand this phenomenon we will have to take stock of the situation at the higher education level in HSS.

Almost all the Universities of the world, not just in India, show citizenship and nation-building at the core of their vision statement, but do not seem to be applying their mind, and policies, to achieve this. This is evident with the lack of interest shown in developing and nurturing the subjects/courses under the broad spectrum of HSS. As a domain of knowledge, the Humanities can be seen as a network of varied subjects. The demand for speedy changes by society and the Government has resulted in a lopsided approach towards the art and science of education.

Led by learning by a collaborative approach, the various disciplines in HSS observed, recorded, interpreted and made an attempt to understand human behaviour and experience. However, in the post-colonial scenario, academic disciplines with more 'utility' in terms of job and employment gained more importance over what was necessary for building a holistic personality and balanced human being. Education is largely seen as a ticket to good employment and a good social life, with all the material wealth that one can possess. The course of study also became a symbol of prestige in the person's social standing. Therefore, over a period of time, Engineering programmes became the first choice of education, with Medicine and Chartered Accountancy and Management following them, with a reasonable following for pure and applied sciences. Also, there was this understanding of these being tough and Humanities being easy. It was also understood that subjects under Humanities and Social Sciences were chosen by those who would score low marks in the qualifying exams or did not have any other option for building a future. All this led to a marginalisation of HSS. Parallelly, the other Programmes became more and more exclusive ignoring the need for softer skills which were needed for meeting the challenges of a globalised world. Steve Jobs said, "Technology alone is not enough. It is technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing" - emphasising the need for bringing Humanities and Sciences together in programmes being offered at the Higher Education Institutions.

An interesting special issue titled "How to Build a Student for the 21st Century" in TIME Magazine, on December 18, 2006, said that "This is a story about … whether an entire generation of kids will fail to make the grade in the global economy because they can't think their way through abstract problems, work in teams, distinguish good information from bad, or speak a language other than [their own]." Charles Fadel Global Lead, Education Cisco Systems, Inc. conducted research for OECD/CERI Paris, in May 2008 with the topic, "21st Century Skills: How can you prepare students for the new Global Economy?" While enumerating the skill sets apart from language competency and communication skills in subjects it identified Mathematics, Science, Economics, Government, History, Geography, and Foreign Languages and in the other skills it recognised the potential of Critical Thinking, teamwork/collaboration, diversity, IT application, life-long learning, Ethics/Social Responsibility and some others as the important skills needed for the individual in the 21st Century. It also recommended that apart from the core subjects these topics should be disseminated in the classrooms for bringing out strong individuals who can contribute positively to the growth of the society and nation.

However, the implementation, in the true spirit, of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 may change this scenario to some extent. This is also helped because of the changes in the socio-psychological needs of the ongoing and upcoming generations. NEP 2020 has proposed many changes at all levels of education. It has also shown a change in the academic structure, which if implemented in true spirit will bring about a sea change in society and the nation. Apart from changes in the academic structure, it has shown an increased focus on

higher-order thinking skills, innovative and technique-based pedagogy and so on. While this has been welcomed by everybody, education providers are now finding out a way in which they can implement this to achieve the desired results.

Current Status of Research

Apathy towards subjects under the umbrella of HSS at the higher education level has resulted in a decrease in the research being conducted in these domains. The lack of people with the right skills and mindset for research has dealt a hard blow to research in this domain.

There are many factors which are contributing to the slow pace of research in the domains of HSS despite the understanding that more needs to be done. The factors range from lack of funds to lack of students interested in pursuing research in HSS. The challenge is compounded because research is being conducted in the various subjects under HSS as stand-alone topics, restricting the study to HSS. Good and productive research needs funds and since HSS does not enjoy the funding for research the way STEM does and this severely restricts the ambitions of the researcher. Research in HSS may lead to a deeper understanding of the world around us but not necessarily lead to any innovation, business idea or any improvement in sales, profits and so on. This being the necessary 'outcome' of any research in the present day, makes the students pull back from venturing into this. Priorities and expectations in terms of job opportunities, new options of upward movement, social standing and other aspirations of young research scholars make them hesitate to choose HSS as their domain of study.

As per *Social Science Research in India A Mapping Report; DFID South Asia Research Hub September 2011*, "largely structural, one of the fundamental shortcomings of social science research in India is the lack of proper institutional support and funding. Driven largely by the huge volume of undergraduate enrolment in the social sciences, as mentioned earlier in the report, less than 20 per cent of Indian universities combine teaching and research with most universities emphasising teaching over research. This limits the scope of research opportunities within universities."

Possibilities

Also, there seems to be a limitation in understanding the vast possibilities that the broad spectrum of HSS offers when it is seen in the context of other domains of study like Engineering, Sciences, Medicine and so on. We are living in exciting times of collaboration and synergies. It would be foolish to operate in silos with the immense opportunities available if only we can look at HSS from Inter, Multi and Transdisciplinary perspectives.

The era of globalisation in the early 1990s welcomed this kind of collaborative and synergistic view of all knowledge domains. Globalism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, dynamics of identity and culture, new media, new messages, new meanings in the "information society".

Human representations and expression through art, media, technology, design, Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary humanities, the relationship of humanities to other knowledge domains (technology, science, economics) digital humanities, medical humanities, environmental humanities, literary humanities….the list can be endless.

There is an impressive list of thought leaders and business leaders of the world who had a background in Humanities, like Steve Jobs, Anand Mahindra, Oprah Winfrey, Michel Eisner, Arundhati Bhattacharya, Howard Schultz, Denise Morrison and many others. Similarly, there are achievers and popular figures from a Science and technology background who have ventured into the domains of HSS.

Finally

There is an imminent and urgent need for exploring ways to broaden the scope of the humanities and creating a wider canvas through inter, multi and transdisciplinary perspectives. Traditional disciplines must respond to changes and bring critical perspectives to academic disciplines. Orientation towards Humanities will enable one to examine the interrelationship between society, technology and the environment. This will enable us to learn about the new shifts in conceptual frameworks and research methodologies and suggest new directions for HSS.

In the past two decades, social science research has grown beyond the traditional disciplinary boundaries into areas that are pertinent to the current socio-economic and political context in the country. Globalisation and development have emerged as major areas of focus. With the obvious changes in the world order, politically and academically, society's dismissive attitude towards the social sciences is also undergoing a slow and steady change.

Problems of today and the complex world of tomorrow need to be viewed from multiple lenses — of the past and future. While technology and sciences may have the answers to many challenges faced by human civilisation, HSS will help us in a seamless integration of technology and the human world which is led by empathy and ethics. More and more research into such inter and multi-disciplinary domains will not only bring the various societies together, but bridge the gap between the various knowledge streams, and help create a new world order.