

Critical Social Science Perspectives: Understanding Theories and Praxis

Orientation Programme for

Faculties/ Ph.D. scholars of SC/ST and other marginalized groups
25 – 29th July 2017, MIDS, Chennai

Concept Note

John Dewey, Ambedkar's teacher at Columbia University, observed that the task of social science is to repair moral and social beliefs and practices by encouraging the application of scientific methods and critical intelligence. It should have practical and transformative significance for existing maladies¹.

Trends in social sciences traverse traditional disciplinary boundaries and have become more inter/ intra-disciplinary/ multi-disciplinary. The widening scope of social sciences has resulted in the emergence of critical theories and praxis. As a result of these dynamics, academic understanding too requires new ways of thinking, engaging with new fields of enquiry and more 'complex' objective conditions of the excluded communities.

Emergence of new 'disciplines' or academic enquiries have always been critical, such as critical social science, development studies, cultural studies, women/gender studies, area studies and the like, which is testimony to the expansion of social science. There is, however, a need to have conceptual clarity and focus on a particular discourse. The new disciplines have emerged due to lacuna in the mainstream social science discourses. The 'mainstream' social science disciplines did not provide enough space to discuss or address the issues and epistemology of marginalized peoples' history, politics, economy and culture. This is not just an experience of India alone but also across the world. Scholars need to realize the negation of the mainstream social sciences and critique of existing literature before defining their own academic engagement. This requires not only a good knowledge of what has already been studied, but also an inquisitive mind willing to recognize the epistemology of the diverse communities and the complex objective conditions in need of critical perspectives. Scholars should be able to grasp the complexities of emerging new disciplines, objectives and interface of peoples' struggle for such an endeavor. These studies have to take cognizance of the changing dynamics both in theory and praxis.

¹ Valerian Rodrigues, 1996, 'Buddhism, Marxism and Conception of Emancipation in Ambedkar' in Peter Robb, (ed) *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p 305

Critical Social Science starts with a 'reflexive' posture towards knowledge and processes. Reflexivity refers to the capacity to locate one's academic activities – teaching and research – in the same social world as the phenomena being studied/ taught, to explain within the same framework as is used to understand the object of learning. Reflexivity leads us to recognize alternative ways of viewing reality and prompts us to make explicit some of the world views which we and others bring to our academic endeavour. The key features of CSSP are: assumption and ideology; role of power; acknowledgement of possible inherent irreconcilable contradictions; and appreciation for the dialectical relationship between the formal and informal structures of society and individual or collective human action².

In order to capture and understand these emerging trends, contemporary critical social sciences have been expanding at a rapid pace bringing into its fold new subjects and new lines of enquiry. This Orientation Programme will introduce participants to fundamental issues in new arenas of critical social sciences, more specifically of development studies, gender studies, cultural studies, area studies and the like which include formulating historical necessity, objectives, and methods in order to understand the debates in these domains. It will cover important issues related to theory and empiricism, subjectivity and objectivity, and issues of more recent concerns such as inter/ multi-disciplinarity. These issues are relevant towards formulating a broader framework for the critical social science in agriculture, industry, education, poverty, socio-economic discrimination, identity politics, and environment amongst others.

Objectives and Scope of the Proposed Orientation Program:

The objective of the Orientation Programme is to deliberate on the role of critical social science discourse and to comprehend, interpret and incorporate marginalized communities into the academic discourse. It would be imperative to defining what this mainstream is and the mainstream itself has moved quite a bit. This workshop will expose students to 'alternatives' to mainstream social science in terms of problematizing the world of the marginalized. The idea of lived experience involves ontological, epistemological and methodological critiques. There is an appalling lack of systematic understanding of the diverse aspects of communities' knowledge, experiences and their learning. Hence entails a disjunction between academic activism and a deficient theoretical foregrounding. These lacunae could be minimized by means of conducting regular Orientation Programmes to formulate a boarder curriculum framework.

² Joan Eakin et.al: 1996, "Towards a critical social Science perspective on health promotion research". *Health Promotion International*, Vol.11, No.2, Pp.157-165.

Thus, the Orientation Programme would also give a basic introduction to issues of critical social science, introduce the scholars to the significance of these problems, concerns and tools of analysis, help the faculty and scholars formulate a broader framework and interface with mainstream social sciences and other stakeholders. Many faculties are trained in diverse discipline of social sciences, which did not provide adequate space to understand these new discourses. For this, dissemination of information on literature related to socially excluded communities is immensely useful. Further to familiarize the faculties/scholars about the contemporary social theories, innovative pedagogical tools and source materials are helpful for constructive framework. The Orientation Programme will consist of lectures and more interactive sessions aimed at strengthening the scholars' perspectives on contemporary academic endeavor.

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