

Indian Exceptionalism: Why social scientists increasingly study India

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LSE's Professor Stuart Corbridge argues that the decision not to study India would be a poor choice for any serious social scientist.

In the first 20 or so years after India's independence a sizeable group of western social scientists concerned themselves with Indian affairs without ever advertising themselves as 'Indianists'. [Edward Shils](#), for example, himself once at LSE, wrote on the cultural and economic worlds of Indian intellectuals, or the intellectual caught between tradition and modernity as he put it in 1961. [Kingsley Davis](#), meanwhile, the great demographer, wrote extensively about the populations of India and Pakistan, while the Cambridge economist [Brian Reddaway](#) concerned himself with the historical development of the Indian economy in comparative perspective. Most memorably of all, [Barrington Moore Jr.](#) devoted a chapter to India in his magisterial (1966) account of *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. (An aside: There's not so very much in Acemoglu and Robinson's 2012 account of *Why Nations Fail* that isn't anticipated by Barrington Moore, which makes it all the more astonishing that Moore isn't cited by Acemoglu and Robinson.)

In the 1970s and 1980s, and even into the 1990s, India was less often on the radar of western social science. Intellectual trade with India quietened down in partial imitation of the protectionism and occasional repression heaped on the country by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1966-77; 1980-84). Of course, anthropologists and others continued to produce magnificent studies of social and cultural life in India's towns and villages. But this was generally within an area studies paradigm that seemed on occasions to endorse the 'exceptionalism of India' (caste and Hinduism). If anything, during this period – and happily so – the net flow of academic knowledge was strongly from South Asia to the west, notably through the exports of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory. [Partha Chatterjee](#), [Ranjit Guha](#), [Ramachandra Guha](#) and [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak](#) all became household names in the global academy, along with many more of their colleagues.

Now, though, and certainly over the past 10 or 15 years, we see social scientists flocking back to India who wouldn't for one minute describe themselves as India specialists.

This has been particularly notable in economics and political science. Among the big questions that exercise this new generation of scholars are the following: (a) how has India sustained democratic rule at such low levels of average per capita income?; (b) why have poor rural women been more inclined to vote in parliamentary elections than rich urban males?; (c) why has the Indian economy 'taken off' post-1980 when the institutional environment has signally failed to improve (and may even have worsened: by institutions, I mean incentive regimes or the formal and informal rules of the game)?; and (d) how has India managed to hold itself together since 1947; how has a fragmented multi-ethnic country been managed effectively as a patronage democracy?

One of the great fallacies of western social science has been the presumption that the United States or the United Kingdom are somehow 'normal', or can serve as a benchmark for other countries, either normatively and/or intellectually. In fact, both countries are exceptional – Perry Anderson reminded us many decades ago just how exceptional England is – as of course all countries are. But some countries might be more exceptional than others, at least from a social science point of view. For scholars who believe in the possibility of law-like regularities – no sustained democracies below US\$8,000 (mid-80s ppps); no sustained economic growth without prior improvements in the stability of property rights or the rule of law; no sustained participation in elections in the absence of effective public service delivery – India is a challenging exception. So much is it a challenge, indeed, that *not* to study India – both comparatively and with an area studies sensibility – would seem to be a poor choice for any serious social scientist.

The LSE has long and deep connections to India. Over the next 20 years I expect those connections to deepen even as they are reworked. LSE's anthropologists will continue to advance our understandings of religiosity and the worlds of labour and social activism in India, but their work will increasingly be complemented by sociologists and political scientists working on votes and violence or on decentralisation and public service delivery issues. Meanwhile, the School's economists, led in no small part by [the International Growth Centre](#), will further examine management practices in India or the causes of the so-called 'miracle in Bihar'. The political economy of climate change in South Asia will be another area of strength. We can anticipate growing teaching and research interests in India across LSE, and further deepening links with our colleagues in India at institutions including the [Tata Institute of Social Sciences](#) and the [Indian Statistical Institute](#).

This is a great time to be a social scientist working on India. Certainly, it's the most productive that I've known in more than 35 years. India will increasingly impress itself on the minds of all social scientists concerned with growth, development, geopolitics, ethnic fractionalisation, voting systems, decentralisation, health and education reform, the environment, and so on.

In other words, on the minds of *all* social scientists.

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