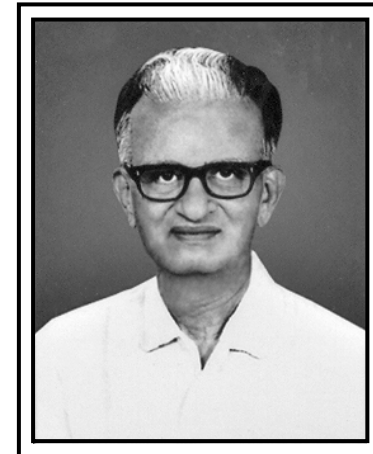


**2008**

**Malcolm Adiseshiah  
Memorial Lecture**



**MALCOLM ADISESHIAH**  
(1910 - 1994)

*Whither Survey Research?  
Reflections on the State of Survey  
Research on Politics in Most of the World*

**Yogendra Yadav**

*Senior Fellow,*

*Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi*

# **Malcolm Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture**

*Whither Survey Research?  
Reflections on the State of Survey  
Research on Politics in Most of the World*

**Yogendra Yadav**

*Senior Fellow,  
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi*

## SURVEY RESEARCH THEN AND NOW

When I was a student, doing Masters in Political Science, the worst thing you could say about any political scientist was that he or she “did survey research”. The label 'survey research' stood for what was considered to be most inappropriate in the third world imitations of the American science of politics: it was methodologically naive, politically conservative and culturally inauthentic. Perhaps my academic socialization bore a strong impress of the institution where I studied then: the Jawaharlal Nehru University in general and the School of Social Sciences in particular, was strongly left-wing in its orientation. In those days a radical orientation in Political Science was associated with taste for certain kind of subjects (revolutions rather than constitutions, land reform rather than affirmative action, protest movements rather than voting behaviour), preference for some approaches (political economy over analysis of political institutions, history of ideas over conceptual analysis) and strong methodological partisanship (theoretical and not empirical, diachronic and not synchronic, qualitative and not quantitative). In retrospect it is less obvious why these preferences were associated with radicalism. But it should not be hard to see why 'survey research' did not then fit into what a young Political Scientist wanted to do then.

Some of it may have been specific to the JNU or to political science in India. But it may not be unfair to say that milder or stronger versions of this orientation towards survey research characterized the cutting edge of third world political science such as it was. Survey research was not merely a technique of data gathering, as keeping beard was not merely hair-style. It was a cultural package with a political orientation. It meant focusing on mainstream politics of parties, elections and voting. It went with liberal political orientation; to be 'liberal' was as conservative as one could get in a self-consciously left-wing discipline. It also meant relying on sample surveys of political opinion and behaviour and drawing simple-minded, often harmless if inane, conclusions from the quantitative data thus gathered.

I must confess that I shared with my contemporaries much of this disdain for survey research<sup>1</sup>. After completing my Masters, I took to political theory and did research on the history of the idea of socialism in modern India It was not

---

<sup>1</sup> I think I was only reflecting this commonsense in one of the first essays that I published on a critique of positivist ambition of creating a science of politics. 'Political Science: Positivist Method and Philosophic Critiques' *Indian Journal of Political Science*, October-December, 1986: 502-17.

surprising therefore that my professional friends and well wishers were quite puzzled and upset when I started doing survey research, and that too on voting behaviour. Many of them tried to dissuade me from this strange move of 'giving up' on political theory and 'taking to' something as crass as survey research. Some of them have never understood why I did so; some have never forgiven me for doing so.

As I received the news of my selection for the Malcolm Adiseshiah Award, my thought went back to that initial response of my professional colleagues. Not because this honour vindicates my choice; as would be clear from what I say, I continue to harbour deep unease with the practice of what is often called survey research. In any case I have never managed to gather enough energy to participate in methodological crusades in social sciences and could not care less if one or the other carried the day. The reason I turned to my initial encounter was that my initial reaction and that of my professional colleagues was very typical of those times. This award recognizes some of my work and much of the work done by other colleagues in the Lokniti network, for which I get underserved credit -- in gathering and analyzing empirical data on Indian politics. It occurred to me that perhaps this recognition marks a silent shift in the discipline from largely derivative 'theoretical' debates to addressing our own agenda with the help of systematic gathering and sifting of information, maybe with some of our own conceptual tools. In that sense my work happens to be a part of a much larger body of work as much a product of the work by political theorists as of empirical studies on Indian politics that has ushered the discipline of political science in India into its own. I take this award not so much as recognition of work already done but as an encouragement to work in this direction so as to earn this honour and as a signal about the direction in which the study of politics in our country should proceed.

From what I said about my disposition towards survey research in my student days, you might expect my lecture to be a story of conversion, a story of how I discovered the virtues of survey research and found that the charges against it were unfounded or irrelevant. I'm afraid I am not going to do that today. It is true that a closer encounter with the practice of survey research has made me appreciate some of its subtle aspect more than I did initially. I do believe that some of the criticism against survey research reflected (and continues to do so to this date) the fear and the prejudices we all have against things we know little about. Ignorance about the basics of survey research is not confined to public and media; I have found that my fellow political scientists are no less innocent and often give in to the temptation of making a virtue of it. But that is not the burden of my argument this evening. As I said earlier, fighting disciplinary crusades on behalf of survey research cult doesn't engage me.

Looking back at it a quarter of a century after I first encountered survey research and as someone who has come to be seen as a practitioner of survey research, I am not sure if the charges against survey research were mistaken. Nor can I say with any confidence that these charges do not apply to the practice

of survey research today, including to some of my own work. I would suggest instead that the encounter between the package of cognitive practices that we call 'survey research' and the socio-political reality of what used to be called the third world continues to be a very difficult encounter, full of pitfalls and possibilities. I would therefore seek your indulgence to use this opportunity that you have been so kind to provide me to think aloud about the dangers and the promise of this epistemic encounter.

A quick word of clarification about what I mean by survey research here. I do not use the word in its generic sense<sup>2</sup> that covers census as well as sample survey. I use it in the sense in which it is used commonly by Political Scientists, as a technique of data gathering in which a sample of respondents is asked questions about their political preferences and beliefs to draw conclusions about political opinions, attitudes and behaviour of a wider population of citizens. In this sense survey research is associated with but not limited to election studies and research on voting behaviour on the one hand and public opinion research on the other. It includes academic as well as commercial use of this data gathering technique.

In my remarks today I draw upon two contexts that I am somewhat familiar with. The first, the more obvious and familiar context is that of Political Science in India. In sharp contrast to many other social sciences, the discipline of Political Science in India has had a fraught relationship with things empirical<sup>3</sup>. The unease originated in conditions that are not difficult to understand with hindsight. Empirically oriented study of politics came to our country as a part of the package of American Science of Politics which was, understandably viewed with deep suspicion by the students of politics in our country. This suspicion initially released creative energies that involved philosophical and political interrogation of the new fangled science of politics<sup>4</sup>.

As a first reaction, this was understandable. Arguably this response saved the discipline of Political Science in our country from becoming an intellectual

---

<sup>2</sup> A recent textbook defines survey in this generic sense as follows: "A 'survey' is a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purposes of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members." Robert M. Groves, et.al., *Survey Methodology*, New Jersey: John Wiley, 2004, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> The contrast is, for example, with the discipline of history in India that has been robustly empirical without giving up on theoretical ambitions. Irrespective of their ideological hues, Indian historians are very attentive to their 'sources' in sharp contrast to the attitude of most political scientists to the nature of 'evidence'. Marxist economists in India have never shunned quantitative information, unlike their counterparts who study politics. The most influential tradition of social anthropology has also been deeply empirical in nature, with 'field work' being seen as a rite of passage. The discipline of Political Science did not develop any such protocol of external reference to archive, ethnographic field-work or surveys.

<sup>4</sup> For two examples of this initial energy see Sudipta Kaviraj et. al. *State of Political Theory: Some Marxist Essays*, Calcutta: Research India Publications, 1978 and Randhir Singh, *Reason, Revolution and Political Theory: Notes on Michael Oakeshott*, New Delhi: PPH, 1967.

colony of American Political Science. But protests have a tendency to degenerate into rituals and serve as shields for vested interests. This I think is what happened to the early critique of positivist political science in India. Since this critique was not backed by a vigorous and creative search for alternative modes of thinking about politics, the discipline of Political Science soon degenerated into a loose if fashionable way of talking about politics, poorly grounded in theory and devoid of anchors in reality<sup>5</sup>. As radical posturing replaced serious thinking, every empirical enquiry was dubbed empiricist, anything to do with numbers was shunned<sup>6</sup>. In this intellectual climate there was simply no space for developing skills for data analysis, though the universities continued with the ritual of teaching some abstract statistics as a part of the Research Methodology courses. As Political Scientists in India try to come terms with survey data, they face a larger question that has relevance beyond the disciplinary context: Must the late comers to survey research confine their intellectual ambitions to 'catching up' with the advanced survey research tradition and data analysis techniques offered by the dominant discipline of Political Science? Or can they use the latecomers' advantage to reflect on the state of the discipline and chart out a course of their own?

This question acquires a wider significance if we turn to the other context that I draw upon for my reflections today. This is the context of expansion of survey research on politics outside the academia and beyond the boundaries of India. One of the by-products of the global march of democracy in our times is the expansion of public opinion research all over the globe. Much of this research takes place outside the academia and is driven by the institutional imperatives of the opinion polling industry in close collaboration with the mass media. Often the focus of this industry is very narrow. In India, survey research on politics has become synonymous with "exit poll" that has come to be the generic name for all the pre and post election polls that aim at predicting

<sup>5</sup> *These remarks are aimed at the mainstream of the discipline of Political Science. Needless to say, there were some exceptions and creative interventions from within the Marxist and the non-Marxist camp that defied the limitations of the mainstream.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ironically, one of the biggest casualties of this radical orientation in the discipline has been a systematic study of class in Indian politics. While Marxist economists and political practitioners spent a good deal of their intellectual labour in going over empirical data, including a lot of survey data, on land relations to understand the structure of class in agrarian economy of India, Marxist political scientists have never cared to sift through the existing evidence on how class operates in the domain of politics. If anything the irony has deepened in the last decade or so: as evidence of operation of class as a variable in electoral politics begins to mount in these years, political analysis of radical persuasion has moved further away from any attention to this kind of evidence. It is not surprising that one of the few attempts at using empirical information for the study of class character of Indian politics came from an economist. See Pranab Bardhan, *Political Economy of Development*, Delhi: OUP, 1984.*

<sup>7</sup> *I have had the misfortune of commenting repeatedly on this art of the so-called 'psephology' in our country without much success. See my 'Polls, Predictions, Psephology', Seminar, 385 [Beyond the Vote: A Symposium on 1991 Election and After], September 1991. For a more technical analysis of election forecasting models, see Rajeeva L. Karandikar, Yogendra Yadav and Clive Payne 'Predicting the 1998 Indian Parliamentary Elections' *Electoral Studies*, vol. 21 (2002), pp.69-89.*

electoral outcomes<sup>7</sup>. This is occasionally supplemented by analysis of electoral outcomes and by opinion polls that are not election related<sup>8</sup>. In most of the newly democratizing countries, a similar pattern is being replicated, except that there is even less academic input into opinion polling than in our country. Opinion polling organizations, often the local branches of global corporate companies, are rapidly spreading in all these countries, introducing polling into the newly developing democratic culture. This has had its academic counterpart: some countries with social science capacities have evolved public opinion research. But much of serious public opinion research in these countries has been carried out by cross-country, international surveys by academics in the global North with local collaborators. A little later I will say something about the nature and effect of this type of expansion of survey based public opinion research. But at this stage, let me just use this to pose a question: what happens when survey research is taken to 'most of the world'?<sup>9</sup> Must the growing research on public opinion in most parts of the world replicate the dilemmas and infirmities of the art in the older democracies? Worse, must the practice of polling citizens opinions, attitudes and behaviour in the global South follow the intellectual and political agenda set in the global North?

To anticipate, I shall argue that public opinion research can take one of the two paths as it expands beyond the global north to 'most of the world'. The first – the more likely and decidedly less promising – path is that public opinion research in the rest of the world will replicate a discipline that is yet to come to terms with its foundational assumptions. This expansion might expose and accentuate the inherited flaws of survey research, especially its Euro-centricism and political conservatism. Instead of serving democracy, public opinion research can become a tool of the powerful local and global interests. I do not however think that this is the only path possible. The encounter between the inherited toolkit and the new political reality opens a second path as well. This would involve not just reflecting on how the techniques should be 'applied' to a new setting but to rethink and reshape the methodological self-image of public opinion research. This encounter offers an opportunity to rescue survey research from its unreconstructed positivist self-image and to learn from the 'linguistic turn' of the social sciences. It invites us to consciously bracket many of the western assumptions and meanings that have crept into the standard toolkit of public opinion research. This encounter also provides us with a powerful tool to restore the 'public' that is increasingly elusive in the 'public opinion' manufactured by the mass media.

<sup>8</sup> *Although the number of such polls is now huge, there is little academic reflection on the findings of these polls or on their methodology; there is not even a simple compilation of the reports of such surveys. India Today's 'Mood of the Nation Poll' done in association with ORG-MARG is one of the most reputed and long-standing series of public opinion polls in the country. In recent years, the CNN-IBN and the CSDS have come together to institute a six monthly 'State of the Nation Survey' that combines the functions of political barometer and general purpose public opinion research.*

<sup>9</sup> *I borrow this phrase from Partha Chatterjee who uses it to draw our attention to the fact that what used to be described as the 'Third World' or the global South is not just a small appendage; this comprises most of the world. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.*

## A CASE AGAINST SURVEY RESEARCH

Let me go back to the three charges that I mentioned right at the beginning and try to review where we stand on each of these today. I would not even attempt to offer an overview of the vast literature that exists on debates and controversies concerning survey research on political opinions, attitudes and behaviour<sup>10</sup>. I am interested here in summarizing the basic questions and the answers that these elicited or failed to elicit. Just to remind you, the three charges leveled against survey research in its early days were that it was methodologically naïve, politically conservative and culturally inauthentic or neo-colonial<sup>11</sup>.

Right from the beginning, survey research was imagined within the four walls of the larger project of developing a 'positive' science of society on the lines of the natural sciences. That its findings could be presented in terms of hard numbers and therefore lent itself to a lot of precision and sophistication that comes with quantification tended to confirm this self-image of survey researcher as a scientist in the mould of a natural scientist. Ironically, largely unknown to the practitioners of survey research in political science, this grand project was interrogated and its methodological foundations rendered suspect just when survey research was beginning to take off. This is not the place to offer a birds-eye-view of the positivist debate in the philosophy of social sciences; the debate is very well recounted in more than one place<sup>12</sup>. Suffice to say here that the

<sup>10</sup> For a quick overview see Slavko Splichal, *Public Opinion: Developments and Controversies in the Twentieth Century*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. For a summary of theoretically informed critique of survey research on public opinion, see James R. Beniger, 'The Impact of Polling on Public Opinion: Reconciling Foucault, Habermas and Bourdieu', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 1992 (4:3). For a political critique of the polling industry, see Peter V. Miller, 'The Industry of Public Opinion' in T. L. Glauser and C. T. Salmon, eds., *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*, New York: Guilford, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> The literature on philosophy of social sciences and method in Political Science, which the current section draws upon, is so vast that I have avoided making specific references. Some of the classical critiques aimed generally at the follies of the new empirical science of politics were Charles Taylor, 'Neutrality in Political Science', in Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967, Alisdair MacIntyre, "Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?" in Alan Ryan, ed., *The Philosophy of Social Explanation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973. For extracts from the larger philosophical debate in the philosophy of social sciences, see Gerard Delanty and Piet Strydom, eds., *Philosophies of Social Science: The Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Giddens, 'Positivism and its critics' in *Studies in Social and Political Theory*. London: Hutchinson, 1977. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983. For an extracts from the larger philosophical debate, see Gerard Delanty and Piet Strydom, eds., *Philosophies of Social Science: The Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003.

critique of the positivist claim came not only from the intellectual traditions like hermeneutics and phenomenology that have offered strong reasons why social phenomenon could not be treated like natural objects. Some of the most powerful critique came from historians of natural sciences and philosophers of language who questioned the impression that the kind of science that the students of society sought to imitate was ever practiced in natural sciences or could in principle be achieved in any branch of knowledge<sup>13</sup>.

Survey researchers in general and survey researchers in the discipline of political science in particular offered very little by way of response to this critique. The critique and the 'linguistic turn' in social science did dent the prestige of survey research and served to subordinate these within the American academia to the theoretical enterprise within which surveys could measure whatever they sought to measure, but it is not clear if this critique changed in any way the practice of survey research on political opinions, attitudes and behaviour. The study of political opinion, attitudes and behaviour was split between two groups that co-existed in a relationship of back-to-back neighbourliness. Most of the radical students of politics went in for ethnographic case studies, completely disregarding whatever information was gathered by survey researchers. For survey researchers it was business as usual, as if the Emperor Science still had his clothes on. They was no doubt methodological sophistication, but largely confined to data analysis. Search for grand theory of value shift in contemporary world did bring some conceptual sophistication as well; but this was confined to Anglo-Saxon political culture. Arguably the currency of large-N studies and search for cross-national data actually led to a decline in the quality of survey data in post-colonial countries. Survey instruments conceptualized and designed in North America and Europe were lifted and hastily transferred to other parts of the world, generating many a dubious insights. Be as it may, the fact is that survey researchers and those who shunned surveys have largely been two different sub-disciplines, almost two different sects, that hardly spoke to one another. One could say that the methodological dispute regarding a science of society has left political science on the whole a wiser and a more modest if fractious discipline, but it would be difficult to make a similar case about the sub-discipline of survey research. It may be unkind but not very unfair to say that we stand on this question exactly where we did twenty five years ago.

The second charge of political conservatism may not stick as easily today as does the first one. But that is not necessarily a function of learning or improvement in survey research practices. One could argue that this critique was always somewhat misplaced. It was a critique of the political conclusions of the scholars who happened to do survey research; the method itself was free of political bias. It is true that in the heat of the methodological debate it was argued that the method itself was tied to status quo, but it is hard to see the merit in that reasoning today.

<sup>13</sup> The critique surfaced with Thomas Kuhn's classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, University of Chicago Press, 1962. An examination of the implication of the debate following Kuhn's work, see S. Fuller, *The Philosophy of Science and its Discontents*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, New York: Guilford, 1993.

Survey research on political opinions and attitudes is bound to be a surface investigation, but it is not clear why a conversation in a survey setting is more likely to be status quo than textual interpretation or ethnographic description. All one can say is that (like in all other branches of knowledge) established routines of knowledge tends to favour the existing configuration of power and that one needs to be very creative to be able to break this.

There is another, weaker, version of this charge that deserves a closer scrutiny. It could be argued that the association of survey research with status quo politics may not be a necessary function of its method, yet this association is not just a coincidence. It reflects a theoretical inadequacy or laziness that has always characterized survey research. The community of survey researchers has not been vigilant about interrogating the values implicit in its measures. The absence of caution has led to a wholesale and unconscious importing of unexamined political values that reflect the dominant values of the society that exports survey research. This is what accounts for the evident political conservatism of much of survey research on politics. The question we need to answer is whether the practice of survey research has improved in this respect in the last quarter of a century. I am not very sure of my judgment on this score, for such a judgment presupposes a familiarity with substantive conclusions of survey research based studies of politics in different parts of the world that I do not possess. I look forward to corrections and refutations of my reading. But on balance it seems to me that the verdict cannot be very positive on this score as well. Survey research continues to be imprisoned within the frame of liberal democracy that may not appear conservative in Europe and north America, but that has a built-in drag in the context of the post-colonial societies. I think it is possible to counter this drag while using the survey method, but I am not sure the community of survey researchers has done very much about it. From a largely passive application of 'modernisation' and 'development', we have moved to equally uncritical application of 'democracy' and 'civil society'. A check list model of democracy dominates the discourse on democracy; survey research applies it to different parts of the world to measure how they measure up to it. Cross-sectional surveys use more or less the same framework as was used by elite measures like Freedom House index; Washington consensus on democracy dominates both of these. I see very little attempt to use survey research to expand the meaning of democracy. Let me reiterate that I do not see this as the limitation inherent in survey research but as a weakness of the way it has been practiced.

Let me now turn to the third charge, that of cultural inauthenticity. To be sure, this is not how the charge was originally framed, and this is not how many critics of survey research will like to articulate it: the charge presupposes a notion of authenticity that is not shared by all. Some critics might wish to call it the neo-colonial nature of the survey research enterprise; others might point to the intellectual heteronomy in the practice of survey research. Whatever the label, the substance of the criticism is not very different: survey research is accused of mindless imitation of ideas and concepts of one society in a different and inappropriate context. This criticism is similar to the previous one in that it is political in its substance, but it is different from calling it politically

conservative. The charge of political conservatism could apply in any context, but that of cultural inauthenticity is specific to the practice of survey research in post-colonial setting. It involves three related arguments: that survey research has external origins, that its currency draws its strength not from its intrinsic intellectual charm but from the field of power and that its application creates an incongruence or a mismatch between the method applied and the reality that it seeks to capture. Please note that the criticism about cultural inauthenticity is not confined to a simple minded complain about its external origins alone; at the heart of this charge is an intellectual criticism. I am not sure if survey researchers have responded to this criticism seriously. It might be useful to contrast the response of survey researchers with the response of anthropologists to the charge of being instruments of colonial knowledge<sup>14</sup>; survey research on political opinions has never undergone that kind of self-criticism and transformation.

This is not just an academic point. The link between survey research and colonial power is not just a matter of archeology of knowledge as it were. It is a contemporary and pressing political concern. It is not a coincidence that there has been a proliferation of comparative survey research precisely at a point when the world is more uni-polar than was the case before and the when the USA is on a mission to export liberty and democracy by using, shall we say, rather unconventional means. In a world where knowledge is power, the sudden proliferation of US sponsored research on mass political opinions cannot be an unmixed blessing. At least the students of politics cannot pretend that this is a pure diffusion of scientific knowledge. Not to put too fine a point on it, I fear that survey research on political opinions and attitudes can serve as instrument, more effective and therefore more dangerous, of neo-colonial surveillance of global population. In this respect, I'm afraid we do not stand where we stood a quarter of a century ago; we may be in a much more precarious position today. That much of survey research in global south is done now by 'local' researchers, does not take away from what I am saying. We know that colonial power (or for that matter white racist regime) was defended by largely 'native' army.

---

<sup>14</sup> See, for example the powerful critique of Western descriptions of the non-West in anthropology in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* by James Clifford, George E. Marcus, School of American Research, Santa Fe: University of California Press, 1986. Edward Said's classic *Orientalism* had already had this influence on humanities in general and literary criticism in particular.

## TRANSFER AS TRANSPLANTATION

The extension of democracy to most parts of the world following the third wave of democratization was also accompanied by the expansion of polling and other forms of survey research in most parts of the world. This globalisation of survey research took many forms, but in each case it meant a transfer of the established survey practices from the global North to the rest of the world. This may be described as 'transfer as transplantation'. Expansion of survey research has meant an extension of field sites but it has not been matched by corresponding expansion of theoretical and methodological imagination. Before turning to the deficiencies of this mode of transfer as transplantation, let us first understand the dynamics of globalisation of survey research<sup>15</sup>.

The demand for more and better survey research outside the global North has been fuelled by a shift in the agenda of media, academia and global financial institutions. The fall of Berlin wall was accompanied by opening up of a new world that was both accessible and newsy. Similarly the story of rise and fall of democracies in other parts of the world also served to shift the media attention in the global North to politics in most parts of the world. This was particularly so for the 'emerging economies' that now held the key to economic transformations all over the world. All this meant greater media attention to political developments in democracies outside North America and Western Europe. This was accompanied by a shift from area study to comparative design in the academic research on politics, especially within the discipline of Political Science in the US. This has meant greater comparative attention to democracies outside the US. The methodological premium on putting theoretical models to empirical test fuelled the need for greater data from these parts of the world. Partly as a result of these two, there occurred a shift in the thinking of the global lenders and donors. They discovered that politics mattered, perhaps in fundamental ways, to economic and human development. It began with the World Bank's emphasis on what it called 'governance'. But the agenda, and the number of institutions that subscribed to it, expanded rapidly. An intellectual desire to understand quality of governance soon gave to a quest to index and rank countries by their quality of governance. Thus came together curiosity, intellectual tools and the funds to support public opinion research in

<sup>15</sup> This section draws upon the limited literature on globalisation of survey research on politics. See Smith, Tom. and Kim, Jibum. "The Globalization of Survey Research" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, TBA, New York, New York City, Aug 10, 2007 Online <PDF>. [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p175569\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p175569_index.html). *International Organization for Standardization/Technical Committee 225, Market, Opinion and Social Research Draft International Standard. Madrid: AENOR, 2005.*

Harkness, J. 'In pursuit of quality: issues for cross-national survey research' in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 2, 1999. Heath, Anthony, Stephen Fisher, and Shawna Smith, "The Globalization of Public Opinion Research." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2005(7).

most parts of the world. While the initiative may have come from within in some cases as in India that can boast of a large economy, mature media and social science academia, for most countries the push came from outside.

The supply side of globalization of survey research took three forms. First, there was a rise of cross-national surveys in a comparative design. Some of these surveys were one-off cross-national comparisons of political behaviour, attitudes and opinions. But this gave rise to some very large and regular cross-national surveys that have increased their scope. The trend began with the World Values Survey in 1981<sup>16</sup>. By the time the WVS carried out its fourth wave in 2004, it covered as many as 80 countries. Over the years it has also tried to shed its dependence on North American concerns and vocabulary, though it continues to retain a large residue of that. One could add the Pew Global Survey and the Transparency International survey to this list.

The second source of cross-national survey data is the rise of regional barometers all over the world that offer at regular intervals a reading of political opinions, attitudes and values of cross-section of citizens in several countries. Taking its inspiration from the Eurobarometer that began in 1960 and that covers countries of the European Union, a series of regional barometers started in the 1990s. Beginning with 1991, the New Europe Barometer has come to cover sixteen post-communist countries. The Latinobarometer has run continuously since 1995 and covers seventeen countries of Latin America<sup>17</sup>. Afrobarometer began in 1999 and covers nineteen democracies in Africa<sup>18</sup>. Finally, the East Asian Barometer began in 12 countries of East and South-East Asia in 2001<sup>19</sup> and has joined hands with the State of Democracy in South Asia study that covered five countries of South Asia in 2005<sup>20</sup>. The regional barometers of the global south, beginning with Latinobarometer have tried to foreground different concerns and are sensitive to the vocabulary of politics in each region. Although the regional barometers began independent of one another, they have come to ask a core set of comparable questions on political participation, institutional trust, support for democracy and its alternatives, sources of political information<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> For introduction to the World Values Survey and access to its data and findings see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.latinobarometro.org/>. Latinobarometer also serves as the headquarter for a coalition of all these regional barometers call the Global Barometer Surveys, see <http://www.globalbarometer.net/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.asianbarometer.org/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.democracy-asia.org/> for introduction to the survey and to the State of Democracy in South Asia study.

<sup>21</sup> For some of the findings from the barometers on support for democracy see articles in the symposium on Democracy Barometers, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2008

The third source has been the rise of commercial opinion polling in most of the new democracies. While some of these countries witnessed local companies take initiative in this regard, the general trend has been the entry of some big global corporations like the Gallup, MORI and A C Nielsen in most of these countries. Commercial opinion polling works closely with market research and draws some support from local media.

There is no doubt that the globalization of survey research has widened the base for generalisations about public opinion on some key issues of our time. We have comparable data from more countries than ever before on what the citizens think about, say, democracy. We have data on many new issues of global concern, such as global warming, corruption and terrorism. At the same time it is only fair to say that the expansion of survey research has as yet not brought corresponding theoretical dividends to social sciences. Much of the quest in cross-national research is about confirmation of the existing wisdom drawn from a small part of the globe. There is some attempt at statistical sophistication in analyzing data from different countries, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that much of this sophistication is at the expense of contextual understanding of each of these countries. Anchored in 'democratisation' paradigm, much like the modernisation paradigm that characterised the first wave of studies of 'developing societies' the new wave of survey research shares the same naïve teleological approach that expected the rest of the world to traverse the golden path taken by Europe and America. In sum, more than presenting us with an opportunity, the globalization of survey research brings us face to face with a real danger of a new 'parochial universalism'.

#### IV

### TRANSFER AS TRANSFORMATION

By now some of you must be wondering where this onslaught on survey research is headed and whether it does not cut the branch on which I am perched. If survey research faces such fundamental questions and if these are only deepened as a result of the recent globalization isn't it time to give up on it? If the advanced and well-funded academia in the first world could not respond to these questions, how would the practitioners of survey research in the global South cope up with the challenge?

But as many of you can guess, I do not share this line of reasoning. Let me say with all the emphasis at my command that doing survey research on political opinions, attitudes and behaviour of the citizen is not an optional activity in modern democracies. If we are at all serious about the democratic project, we cannot but record and register public opinion. And if we are even marginally aware of the contemporary setting when exposure to mass media and homogenizing political practices shape rapid shifts in mass political opinions, we cannot but need an instrument like survey research that can sketch the broad contours of changing public opinion. Those of us who have chosen to or are

condemned to live under conditions of modernity that are usually not of our making have simply no choice except to use modern cognitive tools that enable us to make sense of the world that we inhabit. In that sense modern social science and survey research on public opinion is essential for those who wish to make sense of modern politics, democratic or otherwise.

There is a stronger, democratic, argument for taking survey research seriously. We face a paradox in the global discourse on democracy: while democracy is expanding all over the world, our notion of what it means to be democracy is shrinking. A one-dimensional, check list model of democracy seems to dominate our imagination today along with institutional quick-fixes about how to build democracy. Survey research can play a very significant role here by recovering and foregrounding 'public opinion' in an age where democracy is all about institutional forms and correct rituals. As a tool for recovery, reconstruction and amplification of subaltern/marginal voices, survey research can become an ally of the project of radical democracy. This is not to say that every form of survey research is an ally of radical democracy. Such an enterprise would require considerable change in the dominant mode of comparative survey research. Surveys will have to be not just carried out but also imagined in different parts of the globe. Designing surveys specific to the political culture, might mean giving up on some universal questions and checking some of our global theoretical ambitions. Above all, it would mean focusing surveys to excavate the 'social imaginary'<sup>22</sup> that envelops democratic practice in different parts of the worlds and gives a different character to this word in different political settings. By pluralizing the concept of democracy to reflect the diversity of opinions across the globe, we might forge one of the strongest counter to neo-colonial domination of the world.

In the post-industrial societies of the global North, public opinion polling as an institution may have become a way of shutting out the critical voices by drowning them into the mainstream voice of the majority. But in the global South, the real challenge is to establish that the opinion of the public and the voice of the majority heard. In this context, a simple minded aversion to 'positivist' social science and complete abandoning of empirical enquiry into political behaviour, attitudes and opinion has done a lot of harm to the understanding of politics in many countries of the global South. I know I am making a fairly strong and largely unsubstantiated case here, but I hope that by now I would not be accused of being partisan to survey research.

I do not believe that survey research in the global South is condemned to producing a poor copy of the comparative survey research practiced in the global north and thus reproducing its fundamental flaws in its worst form. I think what appears to be a grave problem, of carrying the tools of survey research to a radically different situation, is in many ways a big opportunity of tackling afresh some of the foundational questions that have always dodged survey research on public opinion. This would require us to diverge from the prescription of a pure

---

<sup>22</sup> This concept is drawn from Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

methodologist in the global North: giving up omnibus surveys, better sampling, living up to standards set by 'proper' surveys and greater emphasis on sophisticated data analysis. Instead the approach we need to pursue may be described as 'transfer as transformation'. This involves innovation in a different direction so as to explore the distinct character of public opinion research in the South. This calls for nothing short of rethinking the method, substance and protocols of survey research in a radically different setting and reflecting on the political practice embedded in survey research. In what follows I offer a synoptic overview of this approach. I do so in the hope that these remarks will generate a debate that can lead to a more careful consideration and reflection on the future direction of survey research.

First of all, truth claims of survey research could do with some clarity and modesty. If the current state of philosophy of social science dictates a mood of methodological modesty, survey research too needs to partake of this modesty. While methodological debates have shaken the foundations of survey research, it has questioned other hallowed ground as well. Philosophy is seen as no more than a form of writing<sup>23</sup>. If hermeneutic engagement with texts or ethnographic involvement with the subjects was not assured of recovery of meaning, survey research had all the less reasons to pretend to do so. It is time we saw and presented survey research as a craft, as an art form, rather than get entangled with claims of scientificity. This can help survey research get rid of a lot of excess baggage that the previous generation of survey researchers carried on their shoulders. In particular this would free survey research from carrying the burden of the positivist project of a science of society. This would also alert the researchers to the profoundly political nature of survey research on politics. Survey research on political opinion, attitudes and behaviour is no different from any other form of inquiry on this subject in that it is inextricably enmeshed with concepts that are 'essentially contested'. Embedding such concepts in a questionnaire and presenting the evidence in statistical tables does not absolve the researcher from the responsibility of demonstrating that the concepts are appropriate to what they seek to measure. This would necessitate establishing a conversation between survey-based inquiries with political theory.

This reorientation would affect the design of surveys as well as the analysis of survey findings. Survey research in most parts of the world need not adopt the latest, the most fancy state-of-the-art techniques; 'appropriate technology' is a good slogan in this context. In the last few years, the routine and flat-footed understanding of causality deployed by mainstream researchers has attracted serious criticism within the American Political Science<sup>24</sup>. This

<sup>23</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Charles M. Cameron and Rebecca Morton, 'Formal Theory Meets Data' in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner, eds., *Political Science: State of the Discipline*, Washington: APSA, 2002. For a critique of mechanistic models of explanation that dominate statistical analysis of survey data in Political Science see, Christopher H. Achen, "Let's Put Garbage-Can Regressions and Garbage-Can Probits Where They Belong", *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Volume 22, Issue 4 January 2005

awareness of the complex nature of causality is vital for the study of most parts of the world. Since the formal models of politics are usually distilled from the historical experience of European and North American societies, they can be specially debilitating in the study of other societies. There is a need therefore to build in an understanding of the context of different countries, especially in cross-national surveys. In this effort some of the state-of-the-art techniques can be quite useful. I have in mind the use of vignettes as a way to control for the variations in base-line expectations in different societies and the use of field experiments<sup>25</sup>. But we need to resist the have-data-will-regress mood of the discipline and the fad for the latest techniques of data analysis. No matter how sophisticated the technique of data analysis, it offers no more than an interpretative suggestion that needs to be fitted with other links in the logical chain to arrive at a causal inference. Regression by itself is not causal determination, though carefully testing of models with sophisticated techniques is a necessary tool for arriving at any serious conclusion about mass political behaviour. The outcome may be even weaker in the case of survey data on opinions and attitudes, for what one can conclude from such an inquiry is severely constrained by the conceptual design and interpretative frame.

The second change would have to do with how survey research relates to other forms of inquiry. Once we give up the monopolistic claims of survey as a method to understand the structure of mass beliefs, survey research can serve as a reality check for much of social science research on democracy and democratisation. It can do so by sketching the big if rough picture of the changes in mass political behaviour or mass opinions and attitudes. Even if survey based investigation does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon, it can set the agenda for what needs to be explained. Nature and pattern of political participation in contemporary India provides an apt illustration. Earlier both popular and academic commentaries had assumed that India had followed the global pattern of growing disinterest apathy among the citizens, especially in the lower orders. It took survey based investigation to show that this was simply not true: levels of political participation in India were good by global standards, did not experience a secular decline and that citizens from the lower order of society actually participated as well if not more than the upper castes and classes<sup>26</sup>. This finding does not by itself explain this outlier, but it does specify what needs to be explained. It now opens itself to ethnographic enquiries of what goes into political participation<sup>27</sup>, comparative investigations of the

<sup>25</sup> For suggesting use of vignettes within surveys, see Gary King et al, 'Enhancing the Validity and Cross-Cultural Comparability of Measurement in Survey Research' in *American Political Science Review* (97) 2003. For field experiments, see Donal P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, 'Reclaiming the Experimental Tradition in Political Science' in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner, eds. *Op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: Trends of Bahujan Participation in Electoral Politics in the 1990s" in Francine R. Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeeva Bhargava and Balveer Arora eds., *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, for subsequent modification see Suhas Palshikar and Sanjay Kumar, 'Participatory Norm: How Broad-based is it?' 2004, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39(51) December, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Mukulika Banerjee, 'Sacred Elections', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42 ( 17), 2007.

patters and theoretical disputes about meaning and significance of political participation. Similarly for a country like India where we have some credible survey based data for several points in its post-colonial history<sup>28</sup>, there needs to be a better conversation between political historians and survey researchers. The need for dialogue is more pronounced if we take the instrument of survey research to newer democracies in most parts of the world. Research designed on formal models of politics is unlikely to be of much help here, simply because these models have not been distilled from the political realities of these societies. If one has to pose meaningful and researchable questions in the survey, one has to draw from anthropology, political history and in some cases post-colonial studies. The less insular survey research on politics becomes, the more its dialogue with other related disciplines, the higher we can expect its yield in terms of a better understanding of politics<sup>29</sup>.

The third domain of 'transformation' is really about restoration of a fundamental tenet of survey research, namely its privileging of probabilistic sampling. Random sampling is usually seen and discussed in technical terms, as the ideal method for selecting a sample that mirrors the attributes of the larger universe. It is time we viewed this technical practice with a political lens. In the new democracies of the global South, random sampling is a radical device to ensure that the subaltern and suppressed opinions are made public. This is a way to find out if a collusion between the political elite and the opinion makers may have kept the public opinion out of public policy. The introduction of policy package of 'liberalisation' in many countries including our own is a case in point. In most of these cases these new policies have been pushed with the help of a political consensus. In our own country the New Economic Policy was a political surprise, was a matter of political contention but has over the years come to be seen as a subject of political consensus for all parties that govern at the centre or at the state level. However, a series of studies of public opinion on this question has demonstrated that the public does not share this political consensus, that the public opinion is still for state intervention in the economy, for public sector as a provider of basic services and uneasy with though not hostile to globalization<sup>30</sup>. Afrobarometer found a similar dissonance between public policy of Structural Adjustment Programmes and public opinion in many countries of Africa. I am not here to make a case for or against neo-liberal economic policies. My only point here is about ensuring that public opinion really reflects the opinion of the public.

In this context sticking to random sampling acquires a new salience. If the opinion polling in India is any indication, the expansion of polling in most parts

<sup>28</sup> Much of this data is available at the CSDS Data Unit, perhaps the richest data archive on politics anywhere in the global South. See, [www.lokniti.org](http://www.lokniti.org). For an introduction to its flagship survey series, see Lokniti Team, 'National Election Study 2004: An Introduction' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39(51) December, 18.

<sup>29</sup> For a plea for such a dialogue between ethnographic and survey research on elections, see Yogendra Yadav, "Epilogue: What does fieldwork do in the field of elections?" in A M Shah, *The Grassroots of Democracy: Field Studies of Indian Elections*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> K. C. Suri, 'Democracy, Economic Reforms and Election Results in India' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39(51) December, 18.

of the world has meant a step back in methodological terms. Crude quota samples, where even the quota does not represent the population profile, are the norm. Much worse are urban or metro polls that do not even try to cover the national population that they seek to represent. Even academic surveys do not use the principle of randomness; purposive sampling is the norm as and when the researchers use survey methods to study public opinion<sup>31</sup>. Well-regarded global surveys accept utterly unrepresentative samples when it comes to countries outside the global North. Insisting on random sampling in this condition would require some innovations. We need to work on sampling techniques in conditions where background information is very low and the listing of the population is not always available. Another area of attention will be devising protocol of reporting the sample profile that takes into account the various dimensions of exclusion and marginalization. In India, for instance, it should be mandatory for every poll to make public its sample profile in terms of urban-rural divide, gender and major caste-community groups.

The fourth transformation is about ensuring that survey research is imagined and conceptualized in the language of the subjects whose opinions it seeks to capture. It is ironic that nearly two decades after the 'linguistic turn'<sup>32</sup> in social sciences was recognized, survey research is yet to take that linguistic turn. Surveys on political opinion, attitudes and behaviour are still imagined and conceptualized in the languages of the global North. Concepts distilled from the political practice of Europe and north American democracies are often applied all over the world without serious debate on the appropriateness or otherwise to most parts of the world<sup>33</sup>. And this applies not just to cross-country surveys. The entry of global firms in the polling industry all over the world has meant a mechanical replication of survey items designed in the older democracies to all other countries. In this respect as well the expansion of survey research has meant methodological regress: some of the elementary rules of survey research

<sup>31</sup> The CSDS surveys have been an exception in this regard. Ever since the 1960s when the survey tradition started there, the CSDS teams have followed multi-stage random sampling procedures and have used the official electoral rolls to draw the sample. For discussion of the evolution of sampling practices, see Lokniti Team, 'National Election Study 2004: An Introduction' *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> The expression is used wisely to refer to the move in social and human sciences away from objectivist orientation to one that takes language and subjectivities more seriously. Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, University of Chicago Press, 1992. There is very little reflection on the question of language in survey research. For a few examples of some technical work see, Behling, O. and Law, K.S. *Translating Questionnaires and Other Research Instruments: Problems and Solutions*, Sage, 2000. Harkness, J., Pennell, B-E. and Schoua-Glusberg, A. 'Survey questionnaire translation and assessment' in S. Presser et al. (eds.) *Questionnaire development evaluation and testing methods*, Wiley Series in Survey Methodology, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons Inc. 2004.

<sup>33</sup> The wide currency of concepts like social capital and civil society and the battery of questions on trust and membership of organizations in most global surveys appear to me to be an example of this trend. The application of the concept of 'self-expression values' drawn from post-industrial societies is another instance of lack of fit between the concept and the world that it seeks to capture. For the latter see Ronal Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Humna Development Sequence*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

are given a go by when exporting it to most parts of the world. Methodological discussions on cross-national surveys rarely mention language as a key issue. In a multi-linguistic context like ours, the challenge is multifold: the survey instrument needs to be developed in several languages and dialects<sup>34</sup>.

The challenge is not merely that of accuracy of translation that can be checked by back-translation: the real challenge is of conceptual translation and the appropriateness of the concept itself. I would like to reiterate emphatically that we are not discussing nuts and bolt issues here: if the enterprise of survey research derives some of its relevance from the project of pluralizing the idea of democracy, then recovering the 'social imaginary' embedded in political practices is one of its key tasks, one that it cannot even begin to take up unless the surveys are imagined and designed in the languages of the subjects. Survey research must recognize language of political practice as a conceptual resource.

The fifth and related domain is that of survey fieldwork protocols. Here is another area where survey research tradition has experienced a decline in the recent times. Since face-to-face interviewing has become prohibitively expensive in North America and Western Europe, the focus of methodological sophistication has shifted to telephonic and now internet-based interviews. As a result very little attention is now paid to refining the original and the best practice of face-to-face interview, which is still possible in most parts of the world. Anthropology has produced a good deal of reflection on how should an 'outsider' gain entry into a new culture, but there is no equivalent reflection in survey research on how to establish a rapport with a respondent who is from a very different class, caste-community or gender and speaks a different register of the same language, as is often the case while doing surveys in India. There is a real need to develop fieldwork manuals and training modules to attend to these questions.

Let me pick up two questions for special attention here. Survey researchers often approach respondents who are either not literate or are not exposed to media and draw a blank when they ask them questions about controversies of national politics or questions involving remote institutions. The standard protocol requires them to put these responses under a dustbin category of "Can't say/Don't know". This category actually masks three different kinds of responses: when the respondent is unable to comprehend the question, when the respondent understands the question but has no clear opinion about it and when the respondent has an opinion but does not wish to disclose it. Since the proportion of those who fall in this category can be anything from a quarter to half of the respondents for some of the complex questions, we need much more reflection on fieldwork protocols for identification of these different responses. A related issue is that of survey research in conflict zones. The current protocols of fieldwork are about the ordinary or

<sup>34</sup> *The question of 'dialects' or languages without a script or state recognition is a vital question waiting to be attended to in our context. The National Election Study, with its research instrument in 18 languages, has attempted to address this question with the help of transliteration in the case of Kok-Borok, a language spoken by the adivasis of Tripura. The real challenge is to attend to more than a dozen 'dialects' of Hindi that can be mutually incomprehensible.*

normal situation that simply does not obtain very often in our setting. Think for example of survey researchers in the Maoist controlled areas in Nepal before the restoration of democracy, or for that matter in Salwa Judum affected areas of Chhattisgarh today<sup>35</sup>.

Finally let me turn to the externalities of survey research: Who carries out surveys? At whose behest? To what end? These questions are more pertinent to survey research than any other form of social science inquiry, for survey research is a resource intensive team game. More than any other kind of research, surveys require institutional support. The history of evolution of surveys in the older democracies has meant a close collaboration of public opinion research with private interests. Opinion polling is done by private companies and is dictated by their bottom line. Mass media and political parties are the biggest funders of public opinion. A good deal of public opinion research never makes it to the public domain, for it is for-clients-eye-only. No wonder, the agenda of 'public opinion' is dictated by organized private interests. The situation gets even more complicated when we look at public opinion research in the global South. The agenda is not just dictated by private interests, but by those situated outside the country. Very often the nationally owned media simply cannot afford to sponsor or does not see value-for-money in such surveys. The surveys are supported by media outside the country, global corporate houses, instruments of global finance or multilateral donor agencies. While the investigators are local, the intellectual leadership and the toolkit comes from outside. No wonder survey research of this kind is viewed within these countries with deep suspicion if not active hostility.

It is time therefore that we start thinking of the questions of funding and the institutional setting of survey research as political questions that require policy responses. First of all it would require infusing some public funds into the collection of public opinion on some key questions on a regular basis. Our country has a rich tradition of data collection on economy and demography thanks to institutions like the Census of India and the National Sample Survey Organisation. I am not suggesting that a governmental agency should be set up to investigate public opinion on politically sensitive questions. We are fortunate to have autonomous agencies like the Indian Council of Social Science Research that can be used to funnel public funds into regular monitoring of public opinion. Other countries that do not have a similar set up will have to think of different mechanisms. Nor am I arguing for banning private or foreign funding: such bans are either superfluous or counter-productive. What we need is greater public spirited philanthropy and at any rate more transparency in reporting of funding sources for every kind of survey. Besides funding we also need to think of other resources like institutional space, intellectual capacity and skills. Very often a rapid expansion of polling in the absence of trained personnel leads to a decline in quality of survey research. I believe that this is what has happened in our country in the last decade or so. Pioneers of academic survey research and

<sup>35</sup> *For some reflections on survey at the height of Maoist insurgency in Nepal, see SDSA Team, State of Democracy in South Asia, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008. The CSDS teams have carried out surveys in the Kashmir valley, Manipur and Nagaland in the recent years but the lessons remain to be written about.*

commercial opinion polling in our country had achieved for their time fairly high international standards of quality of research. The expansion of commercial opinion polling in the last decade has led to a visible decline in the quality of research, accuracy of findings and the extent of transparency. There is clearly a need to invest more into the R&D of survey research and into training of the personnel. Improving the standards of survey research would also require learning across national boundaries. In this respect the survey researchers in the global South can learn quite a lot from one another.

V

## CONCLUSION

I began by talking about the days when I was a student. It may be appropriate therefore to conclude by reflecting on what it could mean to be a student of politics today and what role, if any, could survey research play in that. We live in different times today and the world of Political Science in our country has, at least partly, moved with the times. There is a grudging acknowledgment that the students of Political Science should study politics, and not just socio-economic structures. There is a desire to understand popular opinions and attitudes, and not merely as false consciousness. There is also a willingness to entertain a suspicion that understanding India may require modification in some of the received categories and theories of social science. All this has happened at a time when Indian politics has witnessed a democratic upsurge, new social groups are making claims to political power and new social alliances and political coalitions are being forged. These are exciting times to be a student of politics in India.

This is not my case that survey research has to be at the fulcrum of the engagement for a student of politics in India today. As would be clear by now, I would consider it nothing short of an intellectual catastrophe, were the entire discipline of Political Science to swing now to survey research of the kind that we have received. My plea, rather, is that theoretically oriented yet empirically grounded engagement with politics should be at the fulcrum of the future of the discipline of Political Science in India. This engagement can and should take multiple forms: conceptual analysis, intellectual history, political history, comparative analysis, ethnography and survey research, among others. I do believe that survey research of the kind suggested above would constitute one necessary ingredient of the toolkit for a student of politics in India. I do hope at least some of those who are students of politics today would make it their business to not just transfer but transform the tradition of survey research and make it relevant for most parts of the world.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

[Acknowledgment: Delivered as the Malcolm Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture on 21 November 2008 at Chennai. Some of the ideas here were presented as a plenary speech at the session “Probing Public Opinion, Interpretations, Deliberations” of 38<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology at Central European University, Budapest, 27 June 2008. An earlier version was presented as a talk “Setting standards for international survey research” at Afrobarometer Round 3, Planning Workshop, Accra, February 7-11, 2005 and as valedictory address to the Summer School in Research Methodology in Political Science organized by India Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla with Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi at IIAS, Shimla, 2-14 July 2007. Comments and feedback from participants at Budapest, Accra and Shimla are gratefully acknowledged.]