



# Social scientists turn to india

Social scientists are increasingly asking how and why India has changed in recent years, and what that says about their disciplines' long-standing assumptions about development, writes **Huma Yusuf**.

Last summer, the Knight Frank and Citi Private Bank Wealth Report 2012 forecast that India would overtake China as the world's largest economy by 2050. The news came as welcome relief in the midst of an economic slowdown: in May, the Indian rupee fell to an all-time low of 55.82 against the US dollar; in June, India's factory output fell by 1.8 per cent and foreign direct investment fell by 78 per cent from a year earlier. Faced with these statistics, the wealth report's prediction offered a useful reminder that India's growth story continues to unfold and attract much interest from the international media, policymakers, economists and academics.

Social scientists, in particular, are increasingly drawn to the study of India, not least because their disciplines largely failed to predict the country's unprecedented economic growth of the past two decades. But as Stuart Corbridge, LSE Professor of Development Studies, explains, India offers social scientists much more than an opportunity to reconsider mainstream growth theories. "Academically, we're beginning to see more books on India of a different ilk," he points out. "Earlier, experts on India wrote books for other experts on India, but now we're seeing books that ask more generic social science questions about India and put the country in a comparative perspective."

Academic questions about India are inspired by the fact that the country's trajectory challenges

many assumptions that social science makes: that democratic rule cannot be sustained when per capita income is low; that sustained economic growth follows improvements in the rule of law and property rights; and that electoral participation depends on effective public service delivery. In a blog for *India at LSE*, a new initiative aimed at showcasing India-related research at the School, Professor Corbridge points out how none of these assumptions hold true for India – the country sustains democracy at low levels of average per capita income and that too in a fragmented, multi-ethnic society; it has witnessed phenomenal economic growth even though the institutional environment has failed to improve (and may even have worsened); and it fosters political participation among its most disenfranchised and poorly served citizens.

This exceptionalism has driven LSE academics, among others, to investigate how and why India has changed in recent years, and how it works in contravention of some established social science theories. Professor Corbridge himself has co-authored *India Today: economy, politics and society* with John Harriss and Craig Jeffrey; the structure of the book echoes academic debate about India, asking questions that social scientists raise when confronted by India's economic and political trajectory: why did India take off when it did? How did a "weak" state promote reform? Has India's democracy been a success? Does

caste still matter? And what of Indian women? To answer these questions, Professor Corbridge and his co-authors combine the insights of area studies with broader reasoning typical of arguments in economics or comparative politics. Each chapter in the book is therefore "T-shaped", first considering what answers theoretical or comparative work in the social sciences might offer to the above questions, and then delving into the particulars and peculiarities of the Indian case. "Working on India offers the wonderful opportunity to tack back and forth between general theory and deep knowledge of place," says Professor Corbridge.

One chapter of *India Today* highlights India's exceptionalism in a social science context through a discussion on Indian democracy. The authors reiterate the now common argument that India's formal democracy is a success despite low per capita income and a diverse polity. "The mobilisation of political identities around caste and religiosity have brought hitherto subaltern populations into the democratic game," explains Professor Corbridge. "In state assemblies, a transfer of power is underway from landed classes to groups that haven't historically had that level of affluence or political muscle." For him and his co-authors, the change in Indian federalism, whereby states are increasingly autonomous, bodes well for the future of the Indian democratic system because, as he puts it, "it's significant that the system can accommodate these changes".

This theme is explored in great depth by Sumantra Bose, LSE Professor of International and Comparative Politics, in his book *Transforming India: the world's largest democracy in the early 21st century*, which charts the evolution of Indian democracy over the past two decades and is scheduled for publication in spring 2013.



## “India’s trajectory challenges many assumptions that social science makes”



Indian general election, 1998

Professor Bose argues that such changes in the nature of Indian federalism are a historical inevitability given the diversity of India’s social mosaic. He believes that the country’s varied electorate is better represented through regional parties grounded in states than by the single-party-dominant democracy that characterised Indian politics from independence in 1947 until November 1989, when the era of the Congress party’s hegemony ended in the ninth Lok Sabha election. In the book, Professor Bose points out that Congress never won an absolute majority of the popular vote – the 50 per cent threshold – in any national election (it came closest with 48 per cent in December 1984, when Rajiv Gandhi benefited from a sympathy wave following the assassination of Indira Gandhi), but benefited from India’s “first-past-the-post” plurality-majority electoral system, which disproportionately rewards the frontrunner party.

Further, Dr Mukulika Banerjee, LSE Reader in Social Anthropology, asks why Indians are not discouraged from voting by consistently poor service delivery and widespread perceptions of the political class as venal. In particular, she is interested in why the propensity to vote increases down the socio-economic ladder – with illiterate, poor, low-caste people more likely to vote than members of the urban middle class – and why electoral participation gets more intense the closer to the village it takes place even though real power at the *panchayat*

(village council) level is limited. Economists may dismiss this behaviour as irrational, but Dr Banerjee believes there is more to the paradox: she is currently exploring these questions as part of the Explaining Electoral Change in Urban and Rural India project, which will conduct ethnographies of state and local elections from 2012 to 2015. The project builds on research presented in her book, *Why India Votes*, forthcoming in 2013. The book, based on ethnographies of electoral participation in 12 sites across India in 2009, finds that Indians make a distinction between politicians, whom they distrust, and democracy, which they respect, and argues that Indians value the vote as an important expression of citizenship. Moreover, Dr Banerjee argues that Indian voting can be understood as an act of reciprocity to the Election Commission of India, an institution that enjoys great credibility among the electorate.

But as Professor Corbridge points out, simply highlighting India’s exceptionalism in a social science context is insufficient for understanding the country. Certain issues – for example, India’s caste system and the widespread Maoist movement – have not been properly researched and may be ill-served by a comparative approach that overlooks key complexities and regional variations (in *Transforming India*, Professor Bose, too, emphasises the fact that the contemporary Maoist movement is a federation of factions, which emerged separately in different regional settings).

Professor Corbridge also argues that the next phase of Indian development will throw up more challenging questions for academics. As India starts to tackle tricky and contested reforms – in agriculture and the power sector, for instance – many reigning hypotheses about how the country works are likely to be tested anew. These developments will no doubt offer further opportunities for social science scholarship on India, a field that is likely to grow as rapidly as the country’s economy. ■



**Huma Yusuf** is the editor of *India at LSE*, a new blog on India-related research at the School, see [blogs.lse.ac.uk/indiaatlse](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/indiaatlse).



**India Today: economy, politics and society** by Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss and Craig Jeffrey is published by Polity Press (October 2012).

**Transforming India: the world’s largest democracy in the early 21st century** by Sumantra Bose will be published by Harvard University Press in 2013.

**Why India Votes** by Mukulika Banerjee will be published by Routledge in 2013.