

R K Hebsur (1935–2022)

The Epitome of Multidisciplinary Research

ANIL S SUTAR

R K Hebsur has contributed immensely to strengthen the philosophical and methodological foundations of social science research in India. Despite spending considerable time teaching as a college lecturer, he made an imprint in the field of research methodology. Hebsur worked hard to synthesise different disciplinary perspectives to explain a social phenomenon in its entirety. As a head of the Department of Research Methodology at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, he established a multidisciplinary research tradition. Though he had a short stint in the university system, the generations to come will remember and admire his life and work.

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Raghvendra Keshava Rao Hebsur (1935–2022) who made remarkable contributions to the pedagogy and practice of social science research, passed away on 18 August 2022, creating a void in the interdisciplinary and associated with research traditions in the country. Hebsur's engagement with the diverse research issues—caste and reservation, backward class movements, riots, migration, social work intervention, and research methodology—to a certain extent contributed to creating his “pluralist” image beyond the original identity of a political scientist. His approach was multidisciplinary and hence academicians from different streams would identify with him as their fellow colleague in the discipline. His command over sociological theories, philosophical foundations of social research, the praxis of social work, and the approaches of his own discipline—political science—have made him a popular teacher among the students of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and those in the neighbouring universities in Mumbai.

Hebsur was born on 28 May 1935 in Dharwad, which was then a part of the Bombay Presidency. He graduated from Karnatak University in 1955, and did his MA in Political Science from Bombay University in 1961. After yet another post-graduation in Political Science at the American University of Beirut, in 1969, he pursued his doctoral research there on the topic of “Social Mobilization, Political Development and Civil Violence in the Indian States,” and was awarded the PhD in 1975. As it has been a case with the research work, his career trajectory was also quite a distinct one. He was one of the few academicians, who started their career with humble beginning as a lecturer in the city colleges and later joined a university. He worked as a lecturer of political science in Kirti and SIES Colleges in Mumbai. He joined the

TISS much later in 1978 where he worked in different capacities—as a reader, professor, head of the Department of Research Methodology, and as its first deputy director before retiring in 1997. He had a short stint (19 years) in a university set-up, but had a long-lasting impact on social science research, policy formulation and of course, on generations of students. His passion for teaching and research was well admired by colleagues and students alike. He continued teaching and associated with different universities even after retirement.

Conviction in Professional Ethos and Social Justice

Apart from teaching and academic writing, Hebsur was also known for his association with national-level commissions and committees, which dealt with highly critical and sensitive issues. As he was a part of the Mandal Commission (1980), some writers would call him “Mandal Commission sociologist.” He would maintain high level of integrity while dealing with issues of reservation, caste and backward classes. Whenever he would speak on these issues, he would expose the fragility of the Brahminical perspective. His commitment to professional ethos and stand on contentious issues would be deeply informed by his research convictions. In his academic deliberations, he made it a point to see that personal affiliations took a back seat.

In his review work “Caste and Politics” (1976), Hebsur invokes more fundamental social and theoretical issues. While reflecting on one of the findings of the study, he raises a question on the role of urbanisation, its inability to erode the hierarchies of caste and education in the urban areas, despite the fact that the percentage of educated lower castes is higher in the urban areas than in the rural areas. The answer that he offers to this question has enormous policy implications in dealing with contemporary issues such as the economically weaker section reservation. He says,

the head start enjoyed in the field of education by the upper castes in the cities, increasing migration of brahmins to the urban areas, and the fact that education may become a possibility only for the second and subsequent

generations of low caste urban migrants could be a few of the factors. (p 692)

Repositioning Research Methodology

In “Methodology of Social Inquiry,” Hebsur (1979) articulated his well-known perspective on research methodology, where he gave a sharp critique of the prominence of “things” over “theories,” and argued for a stronger philosophical base in research. I had an opportunity to organise and also attend several of his workshops on research methodology. He firmly believed, that in research, theory is more important than techniques. For him, research cannot be “atheoretical,” as theory is at the heart of it (whether descriptive or exploratory) and it must lead to an explanation. For him, arriving at an explanation was the prime goal of social science research than manoeuvring data with tools, techniques, and software. He further makes an observation on the problematic manner in which “research methodology” is positioned and taught in our universities. It is largely viewed as positivist and grounded in behaviourism.

The eclectic nature of research methodology that draws from diverse perspectives such as historicism, *Verstehen* approach have been largely undermined. He expressed concern about the field being reduced to that of a survey design. He emphasised that it should engage more with philosophical questions than constructing tools for data collection. Therefore, while heading the Department of Research Methodology in TISS, he conceived several research methods courses. A course on “Theoretical Approaches to Social Science Research,” designed and taught by Hebsur during the 1980s, is still being taught as a compulsory paper for the PhD programme at TISS. It was under his able and foresighted leadership that the research methodology department gained wider recognition, and emerged as a centre providing cutting-edge knowledge on methodological issues of social science research.

Hebsur’s (1981) critical analysis of the Havanur Commission—the first backward classes commission of Karnataka—reflects on his efforts at building the multidisciplinary approach. He disagreed

with an important observation of the commission where it mentions that the Constitution through Article 17 abolish- es untouchability but it has failed to provide a robust framework to abolish the caste system. On the contrary, Hebsur argued that the constitutional provisions, of equality before law and abolition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth are quite revolutionary and anti- thetical to the traditional social order. He believed that the provision of protective discrimination for lower castes in employment and education aimed to help them to secure their social and educa- tional upliftment. He was optimistic that in due course of time, these constitu- tional provisions would help mitigate the rigours of the caste system and may pave the way for the eradication of the system itself. Hebsur criticised the sampling design of the commission on methodologi- cal grounds, wherein it selected a large village from each taluka for the survey, resulting in the exclusion of about 396 minor castes from the study. Instead, he pointed that selecting a small and re- mote village from each taluka would have avoided such an exclusion.

He did support the survey method of data collection for such studies, and dis- approved the proposals for more qualita- tive methods like participant observa- tion, to get better understanding of the status of different communities. He was of the opinion that though qualitative methods have their own benefits, they reduced the possibility of drawing compar- isons of the units. The methods of data collection for fact-finding purpose needed to be more standardised and comparable than ethnographic studies.

Contribution to National-level Policymaking

Few would be aware of the contribution of TISS in drafting the Mandal Commis- sion Report. The commission chose the institute to study the differential reac- tions of people towards the implementa- tion of reservation for the Other Back- ward Classes (OBCs) in different parts of the country. It specifically wanted to understand the reasons that led to more violent protest in UP and Bihar compared to none or mild protests in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Hebsur’s (1980) study, of reactions of people to OBCs reservations, was academic but at the same time

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meant for addressing a pertinent question of public policy and society. The explanation that he provides takes into account comprehensive factors—the historical background, caste equations and the forces of modernisation and urbanisation. The south Indian states, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, had a long history of reservation that had created a conducive environment for the implementation of OBC reservations. Moreover, the dominant castes in these states were quite divided and were unable to pose a collective front against the policy. Whereas in the case of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, there was no history of affirmative action for the OBCs and the sudden implementation of reservation provoked violent protests. The dominant upper castes in these two states were quite united when it came to protecting their caste privileges, thus making the agitation more aggressive. Hebsur accomplished this challenging task assigned to him by the Mandal Commission quite successfully and his report is incorporated in the Mandal Commission Report as Vol IV titled “Reactions to the Reservation for

Other Backward Classes—A Comparative Study of Four States” (1980).

Another important milestone in his career was his engagement with the Justice Srikrishna Commission that was set up to investigate the causes for the riots that took place in Bombay in the early 1990s. Hebsur played a crucial role in carrying out this study and his characteristic style of writing was quite visible in the study report. The study attribute much deeper socio-economic factors as responsible for riot than simply communalisation of politics. The study brought forth an interesting insight where it said “the economic decline of Bombay” was the most important factor for frustration among the unemployed and the poor, which possibly caused the ethnic violence. The commission acknowledged the significance of the study as indeed elucidating and enlightening one which helped it better understand the situation.

In Conclusion

Hebsur’s writings were multidisciplinary on three grounds—first, they touch upon diverse issues such as politics, reservation,

and migration; second, they also inter-rogate these issues on theoretical, methodological and disciplinary lines; and third, they cover issues of varied interests—academic interest, policymaking and reforms. One can say that the richness of philosophical and methodological ideas, empathy about social justice and the wit in argument that can outsmart a seasoned lawyer, happens to be the characteristic feature of most of his writings. In the passing of Hebsur, we lost not only a person but a glorious legacy of social science research.

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