

On research and action

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Commentary

On Research and Action

The value of scientific research can, in many circumstances, be enhanced if it is combined with real-world involvement and action. This approach should be seen as an essential complement of, not a substitute for, research of a more 'detached' kind.

JEAN DREZE

The worlds of research and action are far apart and the gulf shows no sign of narrowing. In this brief note I would like to share a few thoughts on this issue, based on my involvement with action-oriented research in different parts of India over the years.

I have been particularly influenced by a sustained association with Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan and, more recently, with Akal Sangharsh Samiti. The latter is an all-Rajasthan network of about 50 grass roots organisations that came together in late 2000 to defend the rights of drought-affected people, especially the right to employment. This campaign involved a good deal of action-oriented (even 'action-based') research, focusing for instance on living conditions in drought-affected areas, the government's response to the crisis, and corruption in relief works.

My association with this campaign was an eye-opening experience in many ways. I discovered, for instance, that my painstakingly-accumulated academic baggage was not always as useful as I had expected in this venture. After 15 years of research on hunger and famines, one is perhaps entitled to feel like an 'expert' of sorts on these matters. Yet I did not always find myself better equipped than others to understand the practical issues that arose in this situation. At times, I even felt embarrassingly ignorant compared with local people who had little formal education but a sharp understanding of the real world. Some of them were curious about my collaborative work with Amartya Sen (who had become a household name in India after winning the Nobel Prize for Economics), but when I tried to explain to them the main insights of this work, they were not exactly impressed. It is not that they disagreed, but they just thought

that the basic message was fairly obvious.

This made me realise that social scientists are chiefly engaged in arguing with each other about issues and theories that often bear little relation to the real world. It is in this foggy environment that common sense ideas have a cutting edge. Their power, such as it is, springs not so much from great originality or profundity as from their ability to bring some basic clarity in the confused world of academia. It is no wonder that these common sense ideas often fail to capture the imagination of people who are not exposed to that confusion in the first place. To illustrate, an article in defence of rationality (vis-a-vis, say, postmodern critiques) would fit well in a distinguished academic journal, but it is of little use to people for whom rational thinking is a self-evident necessity – indeed a matter of survival.

The proliferation of fanciful theories and artificial controversies in academia arises partly from the fact that social scientists thrive on this confusion (nothing like an esoteric thesis to keep them busy and set them apart from lesser mortals).¹ It also reflects the frequent absence of a 'reality check' in the academic world. In seminar halls in Delhi, or for that matter in London or Harvard, one hears all kinds of weird ideas that would never pass muster in an Indian village. It is no wonder that 'academic' has become a bit of a synonym for 'irrelevant' (as in 'this point is purely academic').

My Rajasthan days also drew my attention to the deep inadequacies of mainstream economics in making sense of the world we live in. We do not even seem to have the basic concepts required for such an understanding. For instance, 'exploitation' does not belong to the standard vocabulary of mainstream economics.² It is quite possible to complete a PhD in a leading economics department without having heard about this notion. Yet ex-

ploitation is a pervasive aspect of the life experience of the underprivileged in India. I am not thinking here of the specialised Marxist notion of exploitation, which has serious flaws, rooted as it is in the labour theory of value. I am thinking of how people are routinely exploited in government offices, at the work place, within the family, and elsewhere. Even commercial advertisement appears to me to be a form of exploitation, invisible in modern economics. I am very much in favour of a revival of old-fashioned political economy, of a kind that was an accepted part of mainstream economics right up to the second world war, when the centre of gravity of the profession shifted to the US.

On a more positive note, this experience was also the occasion to discover the value of simple but credible research for action purposes. Many grass roots organisations dabble in research of some sort (indeed 'research' is really an everyday activity), but not always very effectively. Simple tools like random sampling, a well-thought survey questionnaire or clear writing can give this 'barefoot research' a much sharper edge. For instance, Akal Sangharsh Samiti's basic surveys of living conditions in drought-affected areas went a long way in debunking official claims about the scope of drought relief programmes – claims that were otherwise largely unchallenged. Later on, when the People's Union for Civil Liberties submitted a writ petition on the 'right to food' to the Supreme Court (demanding the immediate utilisation of the country's gigantic food stocks for hunger prevention), elementary action-oriented research proved its power once again.

The kind of research that came into play on these and other occasions was not just 'desk research'. It also involved close interaction with the people concerned, in particular drought-affected people. One of the highlights of this process was the month-long 'dharna' staged by Akal Sangharsh Samiti in Jaipur in June-July 2001, to demand the extension of relief works until the next harvest. This dharna was an opportunity to hold many enlightening 'seminars' and 'workshops' with drought-affected women and men from all over Rajasthan. I have learnt more from these informal gatherings than from the entire academic literature on famine prevention in India.

Thus, my point is not just that research can help action, but also that involvement in action can enhance the quality of research. This statement is bound to raise some eyebrows. What about 'objectivity'? Is personal commitment to a cause compatible with an objective reading of the facts? Is it not important to remove oneself from the situation in order to consider it in an objective light? To this I would respond, first of all, that inaction is not neutrality. The university campus may look like a neutral vantage point from which the world can be analysed with due objectivity, but in fact it is well integrated with the structures of power. Economics departments, especially, are closely connected with business schools, the world of finance, government ministries, the World Bank, the military establishment, and so on. If it is considered acceptable to conduct research from that extraordinarily biased standpoint, I do not see why it cannot be done in the middle of a dharna. It seems better to take a position and be explicit about it than to pretend that we stand on neutral ground.

Commitment and Objectivity

Further, I am not convinced that personal commitment necessarily interferes with an objective appraisal of the facts. The latter requires intellectual honesty, not an abdication of all convictions. To illustrate, in the course of an earlier action-oriented research project on primary education, I (and other members of the research team) noticed many unsuspected qualities of informal private schools in rural India.³ For instance, the levels of teaching activity were undoubtedly much higher in private schools than in government schools. My personal opposition to the commercialisation of schooling does not stand in the way of this recognition. Indeed, 'inconvenient' facts make the issue more interesting, not less. They prompt us to sharpen our argument as well as to retain some open-mindedness.

A related clue on these matters comes from the notion of 'positional objectivity'. Briefly, an observation is 'positionally objective' if it is seen in the same way by different persons *in the same position*, bearing in mind that "what we can observe depends on our position vis-a-vis the objects of observation".⁴ This notion reconciles the possibility of objective enquiry with the crucial recognition that observations are often position-dependent. The world certainly does not look the same, say, from the Delhi School of Economics

and from the heat and dust of drought-affected villages. Objective enquiry can be conducted from both 'positions', but the results are likely to be quite different.

An illustration may help. Campaigning activities in Rajasthan gave me plenty of opportunities to observe the deep hostility of the government bureaucracy towards the poor. There are, of course, sympathetic and dedicated individuals at all levels of the bureaucracy. But the overall mindset in these circles strikes me as extremely anti-poor. One manifestation of this is the pervasive tendency to blame the victims for their own predicament. Poor people are blamed for being lazy, for not sending their children to school, for squandering their money on drink, and so on. In the context of drought relief, they were constantly accused (against all evidence) of being unwilling to take up employment on relief works. Now, this hostility appears to me to be an objective feature of the work culture in government offices. But this feature would not be easy to perceive from academic armchairs. In fact, a Delhi-based researcher poring over official documents and conference reports could be excused for getting the impression that the government machinery is fully engaged in a well-intentioned war on poverty. There is a grain of truth in that also, but it is very important to go beyond it, and that is where looking at the situation from a different 'position' can be of great help.

To take another example, I would submit that Indian democracy is apt to look very different from different perspectives. In international and historical perspective, there are good reasons to admire the integrity and vitality of India's democratic institutions, evident for instance in the country's impressive voter turnouts, highly pluralistic parliament, advanced provisions for the political representation of disadvantaged groups, strong commitment to secularism, and exceptionally vigorous media. On the other hand, it is quite understandable that Indian democracy has often been called a 'sham' or a 'hollow shell' when viewed from the perspective of the underprivileged, who have extremely limited opportunities to participate in these democratic institutions and are at the receiving end of the power structure. The point I am making here is not just that a *normative* assessment of Indian democracy is likely to be very different from these contrasting standpoints, but also that *factual* descriptions of it are likely to differ, without necessarily involving any serious breach of objectivity.

Having said this, it remains true that even from a given 'position' our reading of the facts is often coloured by personal convictions. The answer to this is to engage in open-minded debate with people who have different views, rather than to abdicate our own convictions. Indeed, 'debate' can be seen as an integral part of the enterprise of research.⁵ Given our individual biases and prejudices, the pursuit of knowledge has an inescapable collective dimension.

The case for action-based research appears to me to be particularly strong if the aim of research is to facilitate human advancement and social change. In the academic world, and particularly in development studies, there is often a presumption that this is the case. Most project proposals stress the importance of the proposed research for economic or social advancement, and academic papers routinely end with a section on 'policy implications'. In this perspective, however, the government is almost always perceived as the crucial agent of change, so that 'better policies' become the focus of attention. Rarely is there much acknowledgement of the ability of people themselves to bring about change, and of the potential value of research in assisting that process. If the researcher addresses himself or herself to civil society rather than to the government, research grounded in public action (rather than in the world of policy advice) is likely to have special value.

Complementary, Not Substitutes

To avoid misunderstanding, I should clarify that I am not making a case for parting with mainstream scholarship or academic rigour. Knowledge in the social sciences does advance over time, even though quacks and charlatans command a lot of influence at any given moment. The reason for this is that real knowledge is durable and cumulative, whereas sophistry and mumbo jumbo tend to self-destruct in due course.⁶ There is, thus, a wealth of insights to gain from academic training and scientific pursuit. My point is that the value of scientific research can, in many circumstances, be enhanced *even further* if it is combined with real-world involvement and action. I see this approach as an essential complement of, not a substitute for, research of a more 'detached' kind.

The methodological requirements of action-based research deserve further thinking. In many respects the standard research methods would apply, but there is also

room for innovative principles such as the virtue of simplicity, the value of personal experience as a source of knowledge, and the need to see 'debate' as part of the research enterprise. The flourishing of action-based research could also pave the way for a healthy 'democratisation' of scientific research. In the social sciences particularly, I see no need for research to remain confined to the ivory tower of academia. Indeed, wider public participation could significantly enrich the entire process. In this respect, once again, research and action belong to a common cause. [27]

Notes

[I am grateful to Ajay Mehta and Anuradha Maharishi for encouraging me to clarify my thoughts on 'research and action'. The quest for clarity continues.]

1 Premchand's lines in 'The Road to Salvation' come to mind: "It is a mystery why there is so much hatred among the good as there is love among the wicked. A scholar at the sight of another scholar, a holy man at the sight of another holy man, and a poet at the sight of another poet tend to sizzle with animosity... But if a thief sees a fellow thief in trouble, he always extend a helping hand. All men hate wickedness, so the wicked always love each other. The entire world praises virtue, so the virtuous are forever squabbling with each other. What does a thief gain by killing another thief? Contempt. What

does a scholar gain by insulting another scholar? Fame" [Premchand 1992:118].

- 2 Even the comprehensive *International Glossary on Poverty* [Gordon and Spicker 1999], with its hundreds of "technical terms used in contemporary scholarly research on poverty", does not mention exploitation.
- 3 See The PROBE Team (1999), chapter 8.
- 4 Sen (1993), p 126; for related ideas, see also Rapoport (1960, 2000).
- 5 On the method and ethics of "debate" as an aspect of scientific research, see particularly Rapoport (1960).
- 6 For an illuminating discussion of this point, see Andreski (1972).

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'Lemon Law' of Indian Auto Users

Product liability laws have long replaced the 'buyer beware' laws in consumer transactions in most countries. More recently the 'lemon laws' lying down the rights of consumers when they are stuck with a 'lemon' or a bad deal have further strengthened consumer rights. But not so in India. The recently announced auto policy is a case in point.

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The Market for Lemons' by George Akerlof, won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2001, although the hypothesis was propounded as early as in 1966. To illustrate it, Akerlof analyses transactions in used cars. Here, a seller obviously has more information than what a prospective buyer has about the condition of the vehicle. The buyer naturally suspects that instead of a car s/he may get a 'lemon' – a car with some defect that impairs its use, value, or safety. In fact,

because of the asymmetric information in markets, all consumers fear that they may get stuck with a 'lemon', – something not its worth, lacking requisite safety or of less utility – whether it's a used car, a faulty appliance or a less-than-adequate health care insurance policy. Equally, buyers are likely to reveal less information and sellers, apprehensive, may charge more to cover the risk. For instance, in the housing finance sector, borrowers have more information about their capacity to repay, while finance companies don't. Therefore, finance companies may make the eligibility

conditions more stringent and thereby both lose – companies some of the credit-worthy and desirable potential borrowers and the latter, satisfactory loan facility. Asymmetric information in markets may bring about adverse effects for all consumers, such as lowering of the quality of products (insurance policies with inferior shield against risks). It also leads to unequal bargaining power in markets. One side of the business equation – either the buyer or the seller – has more information than the other party. In most cases, it is the seller who has more information, and thus has the upper hand and the ability to skew the outcome of the sale. Hence, the concept of 'lemon' – a bad deal due to lack of adequate information on the part of one party to the deal – is of great significance in consumer protection laws.

Lemon Law for Autos Abroad

Product liability laws have long back replaced the 'buyer beware' (caveat emptor) law in consumer transactions in most countries. Now, the 'Lemon Law' fortifies the general product liability laws, for automobile transactions in the US. The California Lemon Law, for instance, lays down rights of consumers when they are stuck with a 'lemon' in their vehicle-purchases. When their vehicles are back to the dealer's shop multiple times while under warranty and are not repaired after a reasonable opportunity, the California Lemon Law presumes that they are lemons.

In order for this presumption to apply, (1) the defect must be a condition likely to cause death or serious bodily injury; (2) it should substantially impair the use, value or safety of the vehicle; (3) the vehicle has been sent to the dealer for repairs two or more times during the first 18 months or 18,000 miles, whichever comes first; and (4) the defect has been directly notified to the manufacturer.

Sometimes, a defect is not likely to cause death or serious bodily injury, but substantially impairs the use, value or safety of the vehicle. In that case, the Lemon Law presumes the vehicle to be a 'lemon', if the dealer has attempted to repair the defect four or more times or the vehicle has been out of service more than 30 days.

When a vehicle is presumed to be a 'lemon', the buyer is entitled to a new vehicle of her/his choice or a refund, which includes the following:

– full purchase price including charges for undercoating, transportation, and installed options;

