



Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad

Second Pravin Visaria Memorial Public Lecture

on

Reflections on the Role and Relevance of Social Science Research in India

delivered by

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Eminent Economist, Educationist and Policy Thinker

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PRAVIN VISARIA A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in 1937 in a village near the coast in the semi-arid Kachchh district of Gujarat state, Professor Visaria is regarded as an internationally renowned economist-demographer, with a Master's degree in Economics from the University of Bombay. A fellowship from the Population Council, awarded on the basis of his brilliant academic career and exemplary performance in extra-curricular activities, enabled him to study Demography at the Office of Population Research, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., USA. He was awarded Ph.D. degree in Economics in 1963. During 1963-73, he was first a Reader and later a Professor at the young age of 34 in the Department of Economics, University of Bombay. He had been awarded the prestigious Dr. V.K.R.V. Rao Prize for Demography for 1981, given to a young social scientist for significant contributions to the field.

During 1973-80, he served as an Economist at the Development Research Centre, World Bank, and worked on survey data gathered in several Asian countries for the joint ESCAP-IBRD project on Evaluation of Data on Income Distribution. After his return to India in 1980, he was Professor of Demography at the Sardar Patel Institute of Economic and Social Research, Ahmedabad, and Director of the Gujarat Institute of Development Research during 1983-1996.

Professor Visaria's Ph.D. thesis presented an exhaustive analysis of the factors contributing to the excess of males in the population of India and highlighted the excess female mortality as its prime cause. It is considered the most comprehensive modern scientific study on the complex subject that is of considerable relevance to not only India but also the entire Indian subcontinent.

Subsequently, Professor Visaria's concern for a policy relevant identification of the employment and unemployment status of the Indian population led to the evolution of a new approach to

the labour surveys in India. The advantages of a simultaneous assessment of the usual, current weekly, and current daily activities of the respondents were recognised by the International Labour Organisation, Geneva, and have become a part of the new survey procedures adopted by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians. Both as a member of the Governing Council of the National Sample Survey Organisation for eight years beginning 1981, and as its Chairman since 1991, Professor Visaria had made important contributions to the strengthening the database of the Indian economy. He had made useful contributions to the methodology of studies on child labour.

Professor Visaria's analysis of the financial cost of medical treatment highlighted the heavy burden of illness requiring hospital care on the poor (several times their per capita expenditure for a month). It has been the basis of the inclusion of assistance for hospital care in the social assistance programme of the central government.

Professor Visaria's work on the population dynamics has had a significant impact on the family planning programme of the country. His research in Gujarat demonstrated the serious problems involved in the numerical targets for the number of acceptors to be enrolled by female health workers in different parts of the country. Its findings had helped to revise the strategy towards establishing the credibility of the grassroots level workers in the respective communities in which they work.

His wide spectrum of research publications had covered mortality, fertility, migration (both internal and international), urbanization, labour force, population projections, census and survey analysis, poverty, and population policy. Widely respected for his incisive analysis, scholarship, balance and integrity, Professor Visaria had worked closely with the Planning Commission, Department of Statistics, Office of the Registrar General and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India, the Bureau of Statistics of

the International Labour Office, the World Bank, the World Health Organisation and the Population Council, New York.

Professor Visaria had been a member of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP), a professional organisation with nearly 2,000 members from almost all countries of the world, since 1964. He had served as a member/Chairman of its scientific committees concerned with interrelationships between population and economic development for two terms. He was President of the Indian Association for the Study of Population during 1994-96. Between 1984 and 1990, he was a member of the central decision making council of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, an autonomous body set up by the Department of Education in the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Professor Visaria had been a member of the Governing Bodies of several research institutions and was a government-appointed Director of the Dena Bank since 1995. He last held the position of Director, Institute of Economic Growth, New Delhi.

His important books include *The Sex Ratio of the Population of India* (Office of the Registrar General, New Delhi, 1971); *Non-Agricultural Employment in India: Trends and Prospects* (co-edited) (Sage, 1983); *Infant Mortality in India: Differential and Determinants* (co-edited) (Sage, 1988); *Contraceptive Use and Fertility in India: A Case Study of Gujarat* (Sage, 1995); *Women in the Indian Working Force: Trends and Differentials* (Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, 1996); *Urbanization in Large Developing Countries: Brazil, China, India and Indonesia* (co-edited), (Clarendon Press, 1997); and *Social Change through Voluntary Action*, (co-edited) (Sage, 1998).

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE AND RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN INDIA



Professor A. Vaidyanathan

I am grateful for this opportunity to join all of you in this function to honour the memory of Pravin Visaria. He was among my closest friends both at a personal and professional level for nearly three decades.

As a scholar, his main, but by no means an exclusive, interest was in demography. Most of you are no doubt aware of the extraordinary range and quality of his research in this field as well as on several aspects of development: notably poverty, employment and health. He was actively engaged in policy debates on these and other developmental issues.

Less well known are his contributions to improving data collection and dissemination especially in the population Censuses, NSSO (which he chaired for nearly a decade) and other large scale sample surveys. He worked in several research institutions, nurtured GIDR before moving to Delhi to head the NSS and subsequently the Institute of Economic Growth where he fell to a fatal illness. .

For me personally, this is an occasion to revive fond memories of our long and close personal friendship, shared interest and excitement in many areas of development research, the stimulating interactions that marked our relations for over three decades in research and as members of the governing councils of several social science research institutions and in the ICSSR. This Lecture gives me the opportunity to reflect on our concerns on the role and relevance of social science research, emerging trends in the way research is organized and funded and the nature and quality of their performance; and on some of the larger, substantive issues involved in such research.

* Sincere thanks to Leela Visaria for her substantive comments and editorial suggestions on an earlier draft.

ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The function of 'research' is to broaden and deepen knowledge through systematic investigation to discover new information or reach a new understanding of various phenomena. This is as true for social sciences as the natural and physical sciences. Intellectual curiosity to explore the unexplored, and explain the unexplained by improving on extant theoretical and analytical frameworks or creating radically new ones are basic driving forces of research. Research of this genre that questions received wisdom and seems to expand and deepen the boundaries of knowledge is conventionally the domain of universities and academic institutions.

Not all 'research' is a quest for knowledge for its own sake. In the case of social sciences, research is stimulated by controversial and hotly debated issues of public policy on contemporary socio-economic issues, as well as by dissatisfaction with the existing social order and its functioning and the desire to change it to become more efficient, more just, more humane or more sustainable.

At a practical level, research contributes to better understanding of the nature of specific socio-economic problems, critical exploration of alternative ways of addressing them and assessing how attempted solutions in fact work. Its functional role in enabling public policy makers as well as managers of government, public and private institutions and enterprises to deal with practical problems in an informed way and after due deliberation is also an important driving force. This role is of crucial importance in a democracy

Social science research has special features arising from the multi-faceted nature of society and societal processes; the fact that several disciplines, which differ in their focus, perspectives, analytical frameworks and techniques, are involved; that ethical issues of good and bad, just and unjust have a salience in dealing with social issues to a far greater and more pervasive extent; and that history plays a far more important role in social processes than in natural and physical phenomena. Because of these, a unified framework of theory that encompasses different aspects and

facets of society and their complex interactions is inherently difficult. More so because of wide differences in focus and methodological perspectives of the researchers from different disciplines. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that there are widely divergent views on the role and relevance of social research, the relation between theoretical and applied research, techniques of empirical observation, the role of quantitative analysis, and the possibilities of interdisciplinary research.

The choice of specific issues for research and approaches to their study is influenced not only by the academic background and interests of researchers, but by the nature of institution where they work, its ethos and orientation, the scale and source of funding. Over the years there has been a palpable decline in intellectual curiosity among researchers to pursue sustained studies in areas of their choice and interest. Part, but by no means the only reason, is that sponsored research has become the dominant source of funding and shapes the scope and priorities of research. Much of social science research in India, sponsored by public sector as well as non governmental and private organizations, is focused strongly on applied empirical studies of specific issues of socio-economic development to help devise practical strategies, programmes and policies to tackle them and also to critiquing them. Besides providing an opportunity to get to know programmes and policies in the concrete, and the ground realities of the way they operate, these studies also raise interesting new research issues of broader significance. This potential, regrettably, is not exploited adequately.

There is a misplaced notion that academic research tends to focus on abstract concepts and theoretical frameworks and interpret societal problems at a far too general level to be of value for tackling practical problems. In point of fact, ideas generated in 'academic' debates have a profound influence in shaping views on the appropriate strategy, programmes and policies for tackling current problems at different levels. Several important broader issues of development strategy and policy have been and continue to be under intense and lively debate among scholars. Academic debates and

critiques have influenced several of the major changes in strategies relating to such diverse areas as employment and poverty alleviation, agricultural and rural development strategies, fiscal policy, industrialization, economic liberalization, and decentralization of governance and development. Perceptions and understanding on many of these aspects have changed in the light of studies of emerging experience.

Conceptual frameworks, as well as the analytical and empirical techniques emerging from academic research are widely used in 'policy' research on current issues. At the same time, research on contemporary problems often challenge extant concepts and highlights their inadequacies and thereby provides a strong stimulus to search for improvements in theoretical and analytical techniques. It is important to recognize and appreciate this complementary and symbiotic relation between the two.

The impact of research on policy works partly by influencing perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders, policy makers and managers and by providing information and analysis relevant to address specific problems. But decisions are not always or entirely based on logic and reasoned analysis. In many cases suggested reforms to address specific problems are rejected or ignored by policy makers. Their attitudes and reactions are strongly influenced by political assessment of the extent of support and opposition from various interest groups, the possibility of arriving at a widely acceptable compromise, and keeping in view the likely impact of decisions in terms of electoral support. Politics apart, there are also serious issues concerning the scope and methods of inquiry used by researchers, the nature of data used and the way they are analysed, and the reliability and validity of the inferences drawn from them. My subsequent observations address some of these issues relating to applied empirical research.

QUALITY AND RELIABILITY OF DATA

Researchers, policy makers and public discourse make extensive use of quantitative data and statistics for tracking and interpreting socio-economic trends as well as for design

of policies and programmes and evaluating their impact. As a long standing believer and practitioner of applied empirical research, let me start by commenting on the widespread skepticism of statistical data, their use and abuse, their reliability for understanding social reality and as a basis for policy.

An enormous amount of resources is spent on collecting data on a wide variety of subjects by government statistical organizations, administrative departments, academic researchers, NGOs and private consultancies. A great deal of effort goes into designing and organizing data collection. Information is collected in some cases through complete enumeration and more generally through sample surveys based on structured questionnaires to elicit quantitative information through interviews of a large number of respondents using a large number of investigators. Economists and statisticians play an important, and some would say a dominant, role in the process.

Surveys differ hugely in scope, scale and design as well as in the organization of field work and, therefore, in the quality and reliability of data they generate. Specialised statistical organizations of the government (notably, the Registrar General and the National Sample Survey Organization) take great care in design, collection and validation of data. Such changes as they make in these respects from time to time are published. Their published tabulations are detailed and extensive. Moreover researchers can access the primary data.

However, much of the data collected by numerous other censuses and surveys conducted by or through administrative departments and under publicly funded projects are processed, if at all, only partially and only processed data are available in the public domain. Data collected under projects funded by non government agencies, and the analysis based on them, are mostly not published.

There is considerable skepticism of the way data are collected, their quality and reliability; in part this reflects doubts about the ability of sample surveys to provide reliable

and accurate estimates of socio-economic characteristics. However, even when surveys are well designed, there are concerns about the quality of investigators the organization and supervision of field work, the veracity of information provided by informants and the rigour with which post enumeration checks are carried out.

These concerns are all the greater in the case of data collected by, or reported to, administrative departments and state level agencies. The incidence of incomplete coverage, non-reporting and inaccurate reporting is greater and the indifference to taking corrective action is far more serious. An added reason for concern is that the statistical agencies of administrative departments do not have the professional status and autonomy to publish the data fully and without making any arbitrary adjustments. Large un-reconciled differences in estimates of the same characteristic made by different agencies reinforce doubts about the credibility of data.

A deeper objection to structured surveys relates to the efficacy of seeking information using standardized concepts and categories unmindful of wide differences in language, socio-economic status, and education. Critics are skeptical of the extent to which informants understand the import of questions and also their ability and willingness to provide reliable responses especially when information sought is very detailed and relate to sensitive matters and, therefore, about the accuracy of estimates based on them. In addition, there are logistical problems of organising and supervising data collection through a large number of field workers and to ensure that instructions are followed strictly by all field workers. There are also growing indications of respondent fatigue and bias.

Even the most carefully conducted surveys cannot avoid these problems. Supervision and post survey verification of responses on a sample basis are used both by censuses and sample surveys to ensure that enumeration errors are within acceptable margins. But the information they collect and the estimates based on them necessarily have errors arising from non-response, inaccurate response or biased response.

Errors in data are by no means unique to social sciences. They are present in natural and physical sciences. Wholly objective and accurate observations are impossible. But given the fuzziness of concepts and measures data on social characteristics and attitudes are likely to have much larger margins of error. Estimates of absolute magnitudes obtained from surveys, no matter how well designed, must, therefore, be used with great caution. The need for caution is much greater when scope, concepts and design of different surveys, and of the same survey over time, are not comparable.

All estimates are subject to unknown margins of response and estimation errors, because of inherent difficulties of getting direct estimates of several characteristics. For example, in several cases (sectoral outputs, GDP, investments and consumption) estimates are based on secondary data and assumptions rather than reliable and complete data on actual realizations. Estimates of income and consumption, poverty incidence, female work participation, savings and investment made by different sources using different definitions vary, often by wide margin. Estimates of some characteristics (notably, poverty incidence and nutritional status) are based on normative rather than objective standards of what is considered acceptable/necessary.

Micro surveys and case studies used in combination with large scale surveys would provide deeper and more generalisable insights if they are planned well and conducted in multiple locations. They need not be selected on rigorous sampling. Purposive selection based on typological classification would be adequate and in any case is more practical. It is important to ensure that all components have a common focus in terms of issues to be studied. Repeating such studies in the same locations periodically will be an effective way of studying dynamics processes.

There are some promising efforts in this direction – for example, in research on demography, education, health, land improvement and irrigation, and performance of employment guarantee programmes. But these are

exceptions. Such an approach requires a degree of careful planning and sustained, collaborative effort among researchers for which the current institutional environment and funding prospects are far from favourable.

That quantitative socio-economic data collected through large scale surveys are incomplete and noisier to a greater extent than in physical sciences does not render the data useless. Since controlled experiments are impossible in social sciences, survey data provide the best available and valuable basis for empirical research on the nature of variations across different segments of the survey universe and to explore the factors underlying these differences. Explorations of systematic patterns of variation, exceptions to the pattern, and differing patterns open up exciting possibilities of research. It requires great care, circumspection and also ingenuity to extract insights from imperfect and noisy data. But neither academic nor non academic researchers are sufficiently sensitive to the weaknesses of data and the need to use them after careful scrutiny of their scope, relevance and reliability for the purposes of study. There is an increasing tendency among researchers to select such data as are available in readily accessible publications or websites that seem relevant to their particular topic and proceed to put them through mechanical applications of statistical packages.

NEED FOR BROADER PERSPECTIVES

Much of applied empirical research tends to be policy centric. Besides tracking and analyzing emerging trends in various aspects of economy and society, the emphasis is on contributing to, or critiquing, strategy and policies both overall and in relation to different regions and sectors, for determining the viability of specific project proposals and for evaluating the implementation and impact of programmes and projects. This policy centricism narrows the scope of analysis to techno-economic and managerial dimensions without considering the wider ramifications of particular programmes and policies, their impact on other programmes and policies and the larger context in which they operate.

Being part of, and embedded in, the larger society, the economy cannot be understood without taking into account its interface and interactions with social, cultural and political aspects all of which are changing over time. The premises and presumptions of conventional economic theory about consumer sovereignty, competition and free markets have no doubt undergone significant changes with the growing recognition of the role of government, of social structure and norms, as well as the organization and functioning of institutions, which have been the domain of other social science disciplines. This has helped widen the perspectives of economists and facilitated interactions with other disciplines to some extent. It has also had an impact on survey design and methods. Besides widening the scope of surveys, to use different techniques to elicit information of a qualitative nature has also become more widespread.

But skepticism persists. Anthropologists, in particular, believe that societal processes are far too complex and multi dimensional to be explored through large scale surveys with preconceived concepts and categories. They emphasise the need for deep, open-ended and detailed exploration of structure, relationships and processes through participant observation of select communities and social groups. Such an intensive effort is, however, necessarily limited in scale and in practice also in scope. While they do offer insights that conventional surveys cannot, the immense diversity among social groups and communities makes generalizations of the larger picture nearly impossible.

One need not accept the methodological perspective of anthropologists to recognize that micro studies focused on specific aspects make it possible to explore them in far greater detail, get more fine-grained picture and deeper insights than can be obtained from large scale surveys. The two approaches should, however, be viewed as complementary rather than as mutually exclusive alternatives. It would also require imaginative use of different survey techniques – structured surveys, rapid assessments, focus group interviews and opinion surveys - both on large samples and for micro studies.

INADEQUATE ANALYSIS

Economists' use of quantitative data and quantitative techniques of analysis is open to criticism for being excessively policy centric, descriptive than analytical, and paying inadequate attention to non-economic aspects of socio-economic change. Attempts to explore the factors responsible for the variations in socio-economic characteristics and processes generally do not go beyond highlighting differences in associated characteristics. Techniques of multivariate analysis (logit, probit and more conventional regression techniques) are increasingly used to assess the relative strength of 'plausible' quantifiable factors in accounting for variations in characteristics and in the rate and direction of their change. The coefficients give an idea of the net strength of the association of independent on dependent variables, some of which have a direct impact while others affect outcomes indirectly. In the absence of a clear understanding of the manner in which each variable affects a particular characteristic and of the interrelations and interactions among them, it is difficult to interpret the substantive significance of the statistical coefficients. Since details of methodology, data used and analytical arguments are not always transparent, interpretations and insights they have to offer on underlying causative factors are limited and incomplete.

There is also the deeper problem that these analyses do not capture the role of physical environment, social structure, cultural values, political processes and other non economic factors in determining the nature, pace and impact of socio-economic change. But all these aspects are interrelated and interact in complex ways which cannot be unraveled if, as is the current practice, different disciplines tend to focus research on aspects of development programmes and policies which they consider important.

ON INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Bringing different disciplines into closer and more meaningful interaction to promote meaningful multi-disciplinary research is a daunting task. We do not have, and are unlikely to have, a unified theory of development. A

more practical approach would be to constitute multidisciplinary research teams, and have each of them explore, from their respective perspectives, the factors/forces that shape the performance of a particular programme, or of differential performance of different programmes of a given genre. This can provide an opportunity for better appreciation of the relevance of different perspectives, a basis for more meaningful interactions across disciplines leading to richer insights and hopefully stimulating more such collaborative research.

An alternative approach is to internalize an interdisciplinary approach in one's own research. Initially, in my research, I focused on exploring regional variations in agricultural performance, rural employment, and poverty incidence and on their associated characteristics that seem from extant knowledge to be important. In the process I was sensitized to inadequacies in available data (in terms of concepts, detail and reliability of different data sets and wide differences in all these respects and in estimates from different sources), and in the current conceptual frameworks and techniques used for analysis. Relatively simple regression analysis seemed to provide plausible explanations in some cases. But where (as in agriculture) the determinants of output and its changes are complex and interdependent, both the specification of the 'independent' variables and interpretation of results proved problematic. Simpler techniques – cross tabulations with appropriate partitioning of data - seemed to be more meaningful. Much of my recent work on agricultural growth uses this approach.

SOME ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

This experience led me to a closer study of concepts, design, and mechanisms of collecting the data, as well as the kinds of errors and biases that the process involves. It also led me to take active part in ongoing efforts to improve the data base. While recognizing the need for caution in interpreting results of analysis based on imperfect and noisy data, I found that closer look at the patterns could suggest interesting new issues for research: the relation between irrigation, fertilizers and agrarian structure and agricultural growth; the role of animals in agricultural economy; determinants

of intensity of labour use in agriculture and diversification into non-farm activities; and the puzzling differences between Indian and Chinese agriculture in labour intensity, use of animals and wage labour; and apparent anomaly of Kerala having a relatively high level of health indicators despite below levels of food intake recommended by nutritionists.

Questioning extant frameworks and explanations, opened up further issues for inquiry and underscored the importance of extra economic factors – ecology, technology, economic environment, institutions and politics – in shaping economic outcomes. This meant tackling the problems of interdisciplinary research. Much of my recent work is an attempt to meet this challenge partly by internalising basic scientific knowledge of the role of environment and different elements of technology in shaping agriculture and animal husbandry practices. This led to a study of spatial variations in crop yields and their relation to differences in rainfall, irrigation and fertilizer use; and of the impact of ecology on the size and composition (by species and use) of animals and, in turn, on intensity of human labour use relative to animals and machines. The developments in institutional economics provided the framework for understanding the role of markets, public and private organisations, and collective/community institutions in agriculture and especially in irrigation and land improvement. It has led to a number of detailed studies of the institutional arrangements and their functioning in different types of irrigation systems under different agro-climatic conditions. These have proved to be very exciting both in terms of understanding the important role of such studies in diverse locations and, more importantly, in terms of the insights they offer. Many of these insights are tentative and would need far more detailed, sustained and refined work in many more locations.

In the sixties there was a controversy over the desirability of allowing cow slaughter, despite opposition on religious grounds, for more efficient use of cattle. Both propositions were questioned on the ground that actual age and sex composition of cattle was more or less similar in different

parts of south Asia with very different religious composition and that it is shaped by rational considerations given the imperative need for bullocks as a source of draught power for agriculture and the use of cows primarily for breeding bullocks. More detailed analysis of regional variations in density and composition of cattle showed that use of bullocks was nearly universal, and that they are a function of rainfall, population density and inequality in land distribution. It further turned out that, over the years, as the average size of land holdings declined and small sized holding proliferated in absolute terms and as a proportion of total holdings, the advent of mechanical equipment for land preparation, harvesting, transport and lifting water, combined with rising cost of labour led to rapid reduction in the bullock population in most parts of the country.

By contrast, in China, and East Asia generally, traditionally animals were rarely used for operations and that these were conducted mostly by human labour using the hoe and other implements. Investigating the reasons for it led to an exploration of the role of climatic differences (temperature, rainfall and its seasonal distribution) in explaining the contrast. In most parts of India, the preparation of land for timely sowing on the onset of the monsoon after a long hot summer was not possible without animal power. But lower temperatures, ample and seasonally well distributed rainfall permitted hoe cultivation over most of China. The notable differences in these respects also seem to have been a significant factor in shaping the characteristics of irrigation systems and the evolution of institutional arrangements in the two countries. The necessity for having bullocks and the inability of the landless and land poor to afford their own bullocks resulted in lower incidence of tenancy and high incidence of wage labour in India. By contrast, conditions in China facilitated tenancy as the means to meet the mismatch between distribution of land ownership and labour power. Differences in social composition – caste based stratification in India and a greater social homogeneity in China – also seem to have impacted on the politics of land reform.

In my more recent work on agricultural growth, dissatisfaction with viewing agricultural growth as a function of investment, an undifferentiated concept of technology, and prices taken individually, led me to take a closer look at different components of agricultural technology and their role in raising production, and to explore the individual and collective impact of changes in environment, growth promoting technology, economic environment (defined by markets and government policy), and the functioning of institutions (comprising agrarian structure, institutions for managing common pool resources and those that generate technology and provide support services).

In respect of irrigation, this approach is the basis for the design of structured surveys of a number of irrigation systems to understand the organization of management, its interface with users, the rules for distribution of water, the extent to which they are observed, and the impact on actual use and productivity of water among different segments of users in different types of systems under different conditions.

Going beyond the conventional frameworks of inquiry is challenging. It requires the researcher to learn from different disciplines the role of environment, technology, economics and institutions and their interactions. The range of information needed is far more diverse. Their analysis uses methods from different disciplines and tends to be eclectic. The results of examples cited are highly tentative and open to contestation. But it does open up exciting new possibilities of comprehending the complex and ramified ways in which natural environment, technology, incentives and socio-economic institutions influence and shape agrarian structure and change.

CURRENT STATE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

In India, research is done by numerous organisations including universities, government and non government research institutions, international organisations, well organized professional consultancy organizations and freelance consulting firms and individuals. The scale and scope of social science research of all types have expanded greatly.

A recent survey identified over 400 institutions – 190 universities, 67 government institutes, and over 160 non government institutions (including 27 of the ICSSR family) – currently engaged in social science research with full or partial public funding on a continuing basis. The majority of universities and a sizeable number of publicly funded non government institutions (mainly in the ICSSR family) cover different disciplines and are meant to be free to pursue their own research agenda. The rest are institutions specializing in different disciplines and research on particular aspects of society.

The conditions and performance of this class of institutions which are expected or claim to be centres of independent, rigorous research on social problems give cause for concern. The nature of their malaise has been widely discussed. Public funding of research in this class of non governmental institutions has not kept pace with rising costs of even maintaining their core activities, let alone expand and improve them. Over time, most of them have been forced to depend increasingly on projects sponsored by government agencies, private trusts, foreign organisations and the private sector. This has led to the focus of research being determined by the issues of interest to the sponsors rather than sustained work on clearly defined agenda. Inadequacy and uncertainty of funding for such centres that requires or enables them to pursue such research is an important, though not the only, reason for their increasing dependence on sponsored projects.

They face great difficulties in getting and retaining professionally trained and motivated researchers for reasons beyond their control. Major changes in the pattern of job opportunities for professionals have eroded the attraction of aspiring and able students for social sciences for even undergraduate not to mention post-graduate degrees. Even better known universities face declining interest of students in post-graduate degrees in social sciences. This trend is even more striking at the PhD level as the better performing postgraduates prefer to go abroad or get attractive jobs in the burgeoning sectors of the new economy. The cumulative impact is felt in the difficulty of getting good faculty in both universities and research institutions. The

spirit of inquiry spurred by intellectual curiosity which drives good research is on the wane even as many exciting and puzzling issues are being thrown up by the ongoing turbulent process of social, economic and political change.

The adverse impact of these factors on the quality and motivation of research personnel has been aggravated by internal weaknesses in governance, the adoption of personnel policies that give little room for objective assessment of performance and incentives based on such assessments. The professional quality of research in academic institutions, their contribution to widening and deepening knowledge, providing rigorous analyses of trends and underlying factors and shaping public policy are far from impressive. There are of course significant, but regrettably few, exceptions.

Even as publicly funded research institutions have suffered, there has been a mushrooming of NGOs, consultancy firms and individuals in the social science research business. It is impossible to know even the number of freelance consultants and consultancy firms in this field. A recent (incomplete) compilation by NASSDOC lists some 800 or so organizations reported to be engaged in research. Information on the areas and topics of research is not available in most cases; and in others, it is quite sketchy. Closer scrutiny suggests that a large number of them are not engaged in any serious research.

Civil society organizations seek to critique the basis of public policies and their implementation and play an advocacy role to make them more responsive to people's needs and more accountable. NGOs are directly involved in development projects of different sorts at the community level in an effort to improve the efficacy of government schemes and also try out innovative approaches to promote participatory development. These roles require them to assay relevant information and knowledge and to learn from their field experience. Several of the larger NGOs have research wings for both purposes. These efforts, commendable as they are, are subject to inherent limitations arising from lack of conceptual and analytical clarity, a propensity to generalize from the particular, and the difficulty of ensuring

detachment and objectivity inherent in self-evaluations. The possibility of learning from their collective experience is impeded because of their marked reluctance to engage in open, introspective interaction among themselves and with others.

Business enterprises (both public and private) and their associations have in-house research units and also sponsor studies to review the current state of information and knowledge on status and prospects for specific sectors and industries; and studies relevant for formulation and appraisal of specific projects and policy decisions. International aid agencies – both public and private – have emerged as important sponsors and financiers of such ‘research’. Their agenda is entirely client driven and policy centric. The basis of and procedures for sponsoring ‘research’ has led to rapid commercialization of research and the mushroom growth of private consultancy organizations. Most are individuals and small firms; corporate consultancy firms (both domestic and foreign) have become increasingly prominent players. The data they collect and reports they prepare are meant exclusively for their sponsors. Sponsors (including public agencies) use them usually in a selective way and do not make them public. The material is extensively used in discussions on public policy but not available for independent critical scrutiny. The knowledge they generate is not accessible to the wider public, and tends to be used in selective ways to serve particular interests and lobby for particular viewpoints rather than contributing to better understanding or informed public debate.

The growing importance of sponsored projects has intensified and fragmented policy-centric focus of research. It has also led to a proliferation of studies of particular schemes viewed in a narrow perspective. The opacity of the process and the fact that the results of most of these studies are not available for scrutiny has greatly reduced their social value for improving our knowledge and the quality of public policy. There are however some significant exceptions: notable recent examples include the evaluation of IRDP, and NREGP (all of which were funded by the government and public sources but entrusted to a network of

independent research institutions taking care to ensure that they followed a common methodology). Their professional credibility and the fact that their methodology, data and results were published, stimulated extensive discussion in the public domain and have led to significant modification of these programmes.

REVITALIZING SOCIAL RESEARCH

These deficiencies have been highlighted in the report of the Fourth Review Committee of the ICSSR. Recognising that intellectual curiosity cannot be kindled by exhortation or fiat, it argued for creating an environment which is conducive to and encourages research that widens and deepens our knowledge and makes it available for contestation in the public domain. It emphasized the importance of larger public funding contributed by agencies involved in development through an institutional mechanism which is autonomous, professional, credible in terms of objectivity and transparency in the manner in which agenda is decided, proposals and performance are evaluated. It visualized a restructured ICSSR to play this role. Instead of the present practice of the ICSSR to provide open-ended commitments to support core activities of select institutions, the Committee suggested that access to funding for programmes and projects should be widened and that renewal of research programme grants linked to the performance in terms of peer evaluated output quality.

While giving ample freedom to researchers to decide their research agenda, the priority should be to provide liberal institutional grants for sustained medium-term programmes for studies on selected broad themes. A conscious effort should be made to encourage collaborative multi-centric, multi-disciplinary research on select topics and themes especially for in-depth micro level studies and impact evaluations repeated periodically in the same locations. Also underscored was the importance of making all data collected by public agencies or with public funding to be placed in the public domain through digitized data banks.

The Report was placed in the public domain and also sent to the government in March 2007; it has not attracted much attention or discussion in the media or in the social science

community. There has been no reaction from the government. Several respected social scientists supported the main recommendations for restructuring the ICSSR into a autonomous, professionally credible institution but raised doubts about the proposal to establish an Indian Academy of Social Sciences in its place. The central issue of alternative practical ways to establish an autonomous institution which will promote and sustain high professional standards and transparent functioning was, however, not discussed. I can only hope and plead that the larger social scientist community evince interest in discussing the issues seriously, mobilize support for much needed reforms and pressure the government to take appropriate action.

Professor A. Vaidyanathan has been one of India's most distinguished social scientists who has made substantive contribution in enhancing our knowledge and understanding of policy and processes at both macro and micro levels of economic development. With a Master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh and Ph.D. from Cornell University, Professor Vaidyanathan had long association with many national Institutes of repute, including the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum and Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai. He has been a committed teacher, meticulous researcher and a policy maker of rare distinction. He was actively associated with many policy making bodies including the Planning Commission, Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Bank. He has been chairman or member of important national committees concerning such vital themes as irrigation pricing, cooperative financing, agrarian backwardness and social science research. His pioneering work, in the form of numerous articles, books and reports, has deeply influenced social scientists, policy makers and development practitioners for decades.



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