

Social Science Research

Harsh Sethi's article ('Social Science Research: Dark Days Ahead', September 30) raises important questions on the role of our research institutions. Although his article is primarily concerned with ICSSR institutes, the same issues confront non-ICSSR institutes. As he points out, it is clear enough today that these institutions cannot continue to function in an autonomous sphere with guaranteed funding from the government and claiming a high degree of respect. The money will have to be acquired, the respect will have to be earned. In other words, we have to re-convince our constituencies that such research is, indeed, needed and the institutions deserve support. Where is the catch? One might be a duality of objectives. The financial situation is such that it is accepted as an unpalatable truth that sponsors are needed, and hence that the research must be of relevance to someone.

Just to illustrate the point, consider the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER). The ratio of government to non-government funding in the 1960s and 1970s was roughly 60:40. In the period 1980-81 to 1989-90, this ratio had altered to become 39:61. Of the 61 per cent coming from non-government sources, 37 per cent came from domestic industry, and 25 per cent from international donors. In the period 1990-91 to 1993-94, the contribution of government fell to a little under 30 per cent, and that of industry to 17 per cent while international agencies now provided 53 per cent (NCAER Annual Report 1993-94, p 1). Taking the period 1990-91 to 1998-99, the ratio now stands at 32:68. Of the 32 per cent from government, 6 per cent came from the public sector. Of the non-government funding, 8 per cent represented domestic private sector, and the balance 60 per cent was from international organisations. The result of this change in sources of funding is that today the assured funds that NCAER receives from the government and returns on an endowment fund together constitute

less than 10 per cent of annual expenses (NCAER Annual Report 1998-99, p 9).

At the same time, there is a certain lack of confidence in forging ahead in the direction of sponsored research, and the constant reassertion of neutrality is seen as being necessary. Are 'relevance' and 'neutrality' at odds with each other? Surely this is the case only if the sponsor demands – and the researcher accepts – a pre-determined outcome to research. How common is this?

There are of course some institutes which clearly enter the arena of advocacy – prime examples being those engaged in furthering women's issues and environmental concerns. Presumably the real issue is not whether the research is furthering some particular agenda, as much as the extent to which the choice of research issue/question is made within the institution or is imposed from the outside. Again, there is a subtle difference between being able to impose an agenda upon an institution because it is short of ideas and funding (Sethi's fear of ICSSR institutes being taken captive by ruling party ideology) and finding a genuine consonance of ideas between the sponsors and the researcher. The latter is not such an unlikely event, and researchers do not seem to have the same fears of losing their neutrality when they agree to the importance of liberalisation, or protecting childhood, or arguing for women's rights.

In the same vein, a great stumbling block is created by the ideal of a 'pure search for knowledge'. What is this all about? Social science research has certainly produced some great minds and thinkers, but not many of us would find it difficult to agree that the bulk of our research (and researchers) is much more mundane. The research we see as being 'good' generally provides some empirical confirmation of a simple hypothesis regarding social or economic behaviour. Is this pure search for knowledge? Or is it rather

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the application of tools? It is good to have ideals, but it is also good to have realism.

Another dilemma that besieges research institutions is that of where credibility is to be sought. The search for international acclaim and credibility among researchers is strong, but a global perspective is not always conducive to the identification of locally relevant concerns. Good, careful, micro-level analysis may at times be of the greatest interest to local residents. It is very often possible (and necessary) to link these micro situations to global ones. But the primary motivation for research, and initial choice of subject, may make much more sense to the local community than the global one. Do we have the time to do such research? Do we see it as relevant?

The 're-invention' that, as Sethi points out, our research community has not made much effort to do could take different routes. One such route would be to seek to respond to development issues around us. Although development

is a jaded concern, there is energy and vitality in the efforts of people all over the country to change their lives. It is not clear why independent consultants and the new research NGOs have been

able to see this more than our mainstream institutions. Attempts to document or understand these efforts could lead in time to the development of new concepts and theory. And that, perhaps, is the ultimate attraction of an engagement in a research process: finding new ways of looking at an observed reality.

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Beyond Economist's Framework

Though Rajat Acharyya and Sugata Marjit take as their theme

'Globalisation and Inequality: An Analytical Perspective' (September 23), their focus on the wage gap compared across narrowly defined criteria of skill, education and employment reinscribes the most exploitative aspects of globalisation, namely, the requirement that everyone's value be measured according to 'the market'.

Their analysis excludes those self-reliant, largely unmonetised or non-monetised, natural resource based communities – farmers, fishworkers, tribals and indigenous people – whose riches are not comprehensible in the economist's frameworks. Their analysis ignores the process by which people are forced into the global economy, not to consume but to be consumed.

Who desires this 'more desirable yardstick of development' that the authors find 'quite exciting' (due no doubt to the advertisements on TV and web known as 'information on the consumption standards worldwide')? The authors presume the reader is part of the ingroup dependent on 'our TV sets...our access to world news...our exposure to technological changes' for 'our lifestyle'. The life and livelihood of those who do not belong to this 'us' fall nowhere on the yardstick, except perhaps in the space before the zero that is allowed to erode while leaving the yardstick intact, or even the sawdust on the workshop floor where the yardstick was polished. In the authors' hypothetical world in which poverty means 'having only an old car', they opine that while inequality exists, physical survival is not a problem.

Here their theory fails. Just as in the (real) world in which poverty means having no food, in their (theoretical) world too, 'someone dies'. Not the old car owner, but all those whose natural resource base and livelihood are consumed to make possible this plethora of 'top-of-the line Mercedes' that 'everyone else' has. 'Everyone' except those whose homes are bulldozed and farms acquired to make way for expressways and parking lots, who end up on the streets inhaling all the exhaust of the top-of-line and bottom-of-line vehicles. Someone dies.

Records from the Planning Commission indicate that the number

of such development refugees is of the order of one million per year since independence. Their unrecorded struggles for daily survival come to 'our' attention only when death visits – due to starvation in resettlement sites, diseases and earthquakes due to reservoirs, not to mention poisons released in 'industrial accidents'.

No theoretical explanation of the wage gap phenomenon can address this dominant, pervasive dimension of globalisation and inequality. It is astounding, nay, appalling that the authors call cable TV the 'most visible' aspect of globalisation.

From where we write, there is no TV, let alone cable or websites. A friend will take this to the nearest town for posting. No bus comes within an hour into this village, and that too runs only from November to May. No government school or other service is here for miles and land titles have not been issued since before independence though people have lived and cultivated their lands for generations.

Like hundreds of other villages, this village is part of the First World (both within India and without) Expense Account. Industries of Gujarat will use it for water storage. Where will all the villagers go? There are more than 2 lakh reservoir-affected and totally 10 lakh people who will thus lose land and/or livelihood to a single 'development project', namely, Sardar Sarovar, which has gotten a go-ahead in a 2-1 majority decision by the Supreme Court. Madhya Pradesh government has declared that it does not have land and will, instead, offer cash to the project affected people. It will thus 'integrate' those who are rich in natural resource capital with 'the rest of the world' where they must enter as 'poor', 'unskilled', 'uneducated', and 'unemployed', though such attributes never applied to them in their own world.

The dominant (aka 'more desirable') yardstick of development impoverishes people first at the conceptual level and second at the violent level of actually expending the resources which are the basis of the people's own life, livelihood, and development process.

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