Introduction to *Sense and Solidarity: Jholawala Economics for Everyone* by Jean Drèze. Permanent Black, 2017

Economics among the Road Scholars

Around the corner from my office at Ranchi University in eastern India is a wide avenue that leads into the city, called Kanke Road. If you go there at the crack of dawn, you will see something you may never forget: thousands of young men, many emaciated and dishevelled, pushing bicycles loaded with more than two hundred kilograms of smuggled coal. Under the cover of darkness, they have walked twenty or thirty kilometres with this stupendous load to sell it in Ranchi and earn just enough to feed their families. Some of them, I am told, dig out the coal from below the land they used to cultivate, before they were forcibly displaced.

This sight often reminds me of George Orwell's 1937 essay "Down the Mine", especially its last sentence: "You and I and the editor of the *Times Lit. Supp*., and the poets and the Archbishop of Canterbury and Comrade X, author of *Marxism for Infants* — all of us *really* owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel." Replace underground with "on the road" and shovel with "bicycle", and the sentence applies word for word in Ranchi today.

These young men are known as koilawalas (coal guys). I remember seeing the photograph of a koilawala for the first time in P. Sainath's book *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* (1996). The koilawala of today looks the same. Perhaps he has better footwear, and, quite likely, his children are now going to school. But the nature of his predicament has barely changed. It is not very different from slavery, except that he is driven by economic necessity instead of physical coercion.

Another thought often occurs to me when I see the koilawalas. How come they are in their situation, and I in mine? The only answer I can find is: "chance". Perhaps a few of them drank or gambled away their land, but most are in that situation for no fault of their own. They were born in a poor family of the wrong caste, suffered from undernutrition in childhood, did not get a chance to study, and so on. In a different environment, they might have become geologists, engineers, artists, or hockey champions. But they never had a chance.

In India, as elsewhere, the privileged tend to nurture the illusion that they "deserve" what they have. This illusion, however, evaporates with even the most casual introspection. Sure, some rich people work hard – but so do koilawalas, construction workers, and domestic helpers. Other bases of privilege have little to do with personal merit: our aptitudes, health, inheritance, social connections, and other assets derive from contingencies (such as the accident of birth) over which we have no control. Even our education reflects inherited circumstances, and our parents' and teachers' efforts, far more than our own. All this is without going into the fact that wealth and power often build on corruption, exploitation, and crime.

If our situation is more a matter of chance than personal merit, then surely the privileged have a responsibility towards those who are left behind. We cannot prove that the privileged owe something to the rest, any more than we can prove that theft is wrong. But both can be thought of as sensible principles of a good society.

None of this, of course, tells us what should be done to ensure that everyone is able to live with dignity. Some people believe that the best thing to do for the koilawalas is to create a business-friendly environment so that the economy grows faster. Others might advise the koilawalas that armed struggle is the only way to change the system. I hope that this book will convince you – or reinforce your conviction – that there are other options too.

Social Development

For want of a better phrase, the essays in this book can be said to deal with various aspects of India's "social development" in the broadest sense. Social development is often reduced to specific matters on which quantitative indicators happen to be available, such as child health, elementary education, and gender inequality. These matters are undoubtedly important, and figure prominently in the essays. However, there is a great deal more to social development, seen as the endeavour to create a good society.

The abolition of caste, for instance, can be regarded as a critical aspect of social development in this large sense. Quantitative indicators on the abominations of the caste system are scarce (perhaps no accident), yet leaving out this issue from the ambit of social development would be like ignoring "the monster that crosses our path", as Ambedkar described the caste system. Similar remarks apply to patriarchy and other forms of arbitrary power. The expansion of democracy – still very limited in India, as elsewhere – is another natural concern here.

Going beyond these obvious examples, the abolition of violence, or at least of armed conflict, also seems to me an integral part of social development. The same applies to the progress of ethics and social norms. To illustrate: the spread of civic sense and public-spiritedness can be of great help in preventing corruption, crime, exploitation, and environmental vandalism among other anti-social activities. Then there is the destructive power of modern technology (for instance, through nuclear war or climate change), which has reached frightening proportions and keeps growing. Unless ethical development catches up with technological progress, humanity – or even life on earth – may not survive much longer.

The essays that follow do not make more than tentative forays into these big issues, but they are influenced by this concern to enlarge the boundaries of social development. As Noam Chomsky says, it is useful to distinguish between our visions ("the conception of a future society that animates what we actually do") and our goals ("the choices and tasks that are within reach"). This book is largely about goals – and action – in the field of social development, but I hope that it will also contribute to a clearer vision of the sort of society we can aspire to create.

Let me add that efforts to get closer to our goals often present opportunities to further our visions as well. When all the children in a village study together in a good school, the caste system takes a blow. Women who come out of their homes to earn their own wages on local public works are also chipping away at patriarchy. Communities that run their own ration shop to avoid being at the mercy of a corrupt dealer, or resist the corporate plunder of local natural resources, are practising far-reaching principles of self-management and self-governance. The right to information is quietly taking some power away from the state and putting it in people's hands. Taken together, these efforts represent an important counter to forces acting in opposite directions – towards greater inequity, irrationality, and concentration of power.

On Research and Action

The essays reflect an abiding interest in what might be called action-oriented research, or "research for action". This essentially refers to research aimed at contributing to practical change. Research for action is still research – it need not involve compromises with scientific methods or objective enquiry. However, it differs in some important ways from the conventional approach to research in academic circles. I tried to share a few thoughts on this, fifteen years ago, in a short article called "On Research and Action".[1] In particular, I argued for the complementarity of research and action, and against the conventional view that involvement in action detracts from objective enquiry. That article was just a couple of pages long, but it prompted more responses than most of my other writings – some appreciative, others not (one good friend described it as "shitty"). I take this opportunity to clarify some of the basic ideas of research for action, as I understand them.[2]

First, action-oriented research is not a stand-alone activity. Rather, it is part of a larger effort to achieve practical change through democratic action, that is, action based on democratic means and institutions – public debate, the media, the courts, the electoral process, street action, among others. Research can help with arguments and evidence that contribute to more effective action. This perspective would naturally inform the subject and method of our research. To illustrate, one useful form of action-oriented research is to counter some of the propaganda that appears in the mainstream media (various examples are discussed in this book). Academic research rarely concerns itself with this, and in any case, its long-drawn time frame makes it an ineffective response to media propaganda. This is a situation where action-oriented research has an important role, and even becomes a form of democratic action in itself.

Second, if research is to contribute to action, it must be presented in a clear and reader-friendly manner, preferably to a wide audience. This is important, because social scientists have a tendency to talk among themselves and slip into "verbose phraseology", as one of my revered teachers at the Indian Statistical Institute used to put it. In academic circles, complicating matters can be quite rewarding. That applies to economics in particular: another

[1] Drèze 2002.

[2] The article mentioned elaborates several points being made here in condensed form, particularly the relation between commitment and objectivity as well as the learning value of action.

esteemed teacher once told me, "so-and-so is a great economist – very few people can understand him." In action-oriented writing, by contrast, it often helps to remember the KISS principle: keep it simple, sweetie.

Third, action-oriented research resists the common tendency to think of the government as the main agent of change. In development economics, it is customary to end a research paper with a few comments on its "policy implications". This typically reflects an attempt to give the research a practical twist, but based on the assumption that government policy is the prime mover. Public policy, of course, is very important, but there are also other means of bringing about practical change. And even public policy, in a democratic country, is the outcome of democratic processes that involve not only the government but also to a range of non-government institutions. Research for action addresses itself to the public at large, not just to the government.

Fourth, action-oriented research disputes the conventional view of action and research as antagonistic activities, and even sees complementarities across the two. The basis of the conventional view, influential in academic circles, is that involvement in action detracts from objectivity. However, objectivity requires intellectual honesty, not an abdication of convictions. In any case, academic institutions are not, in the first place, neutral ground – they tend to be well integrated with other institutions of power, such as the government, funding agencies, and the corporate sector. Further, action can be a great eye-opener, and thus contribute to more enlightened research, just as research can lead to more effective action. For instance, engagement with the media, the legal system, and political parties can vastly sharpen our understanding of the institutions of democracy. And there is nothing like a few days in jail to see the state from a new angle.[3]

Fifth, research for action makes special demands on ethical standards. Ethical lapses in academic papers (plagiarism, opportunism, fudging, selective reporting of results, and so on) may or may not have serious consequences. The stakes tend to be much higher when research is linked with real-life action in one way or another. Another ethical issue is that action-oriented research, especially on social development, often brings us in direct contact (through field surveys or other activities) with people who are struggling with extreme forms of poverty and exploitation. In such situations it becomes difficult to stay aloof, making this another good reason for seeking ways of linking research with action.

Sixth, a related demand of action-oriented research is to avoid obligations to funding agencies and institutions that may stifle our freedom of expression or action. Indeed, the dependence of academic research on funding agencies is a serious matter, with even some PhD work now being paid for by the World Bank and the corporate sector. Some funding agencies are relatively principled and independent, but many are an integral part of the structures of power. Keeping a distance from them may require a low-cost working style, or efforts to explore ethical sources of funding such as individual donations from people who share or support the spirit of the project.

Last but not least, research for action regards the pursuit of knowledge as a collective endeavour. When we get involved in action, we inevitably develop strong views on the issues at hand. Sometimes we are even under pressure to take simplistic or one-sided positions. That

[3] The concept of positional objectivity, based on the recognition that "what we can observe depends on our position *vis-à-vis* the objects of observation" (Sen 1993), can help us understand this issue. On related ideas, see also Rapoport 1960.

may not be the worst of sins, since there are also professional biases and pressures to conform – of a different kind – in academic circles. However, it calls for some safeguards, mainly through dialogue and arguments with people of different views. Researchers, action-oriented or not, can turn dangerous when they think of themselves as experts who are competent to design public policies on their own. Discussion, dialogue, and debate are essential to avoid this trap.

Research for action is a simple idea and there is no need to make a song and dance about it. Many researchers, even in academia, are eager to see their research contribute to practical change in one way or another. However, the academic environment often dulls this aspiration, partly because of its suspicion of organised action, and partly because of the pressure to use research as a means of career advancement.

Needless to say, research for action is not the only valid form of research. Nor is research for action intrinsically a good thing – much depends on what sort of action it is geared to. The limited claim being made here is that research for action carries possibilities that are commonly underestimated, especially in a country like India where relatively sound democratic institutions coexist with massive social problems.

Hard Work No Pay

This book often makes use of the findings and insights of a series of field surveys conducted over the years with student volunteers, mainly during the summer holidays. Most of these surveys were planned in collaboration with Dr Reetika Khera (Associate Professor at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi) and other like-minded scholars. The first time we tried to mobilise student volunteers, we had a small research grant, so we felt that we should give them some token remuneration – the minimum wage applicable to casual labourers. We circulated an appeal called "Hard Work, Low Pay". The response was overwhelming. From the following year on, we dropped the remuneration and modified the appeal to "Hard Work, No Pay". The response was even better, with more and more students applying from all over India each time the appeal was circulated. In most cases, the survey teams also included local volunteers or activists, often from underprivileged backgrounds.

This approach turned out to be very useful in many ways. To start with, it enabled us to complete most of the surveys on a shoestring budget. The survey costs (a tiny fraction of what the government or NGOs typically spend on comparable surveys, not to speak of international organisations) were met by collecting donations from well-wishers – "voluntary donations in rupees with no strings attached" being the basic principle. This freed us from any obligation to funding agencies, the government, or corporate donors.

Dispensing with financial incentives for field investigators also turned out to enhance the quality of the survey work. The volunteers were driven by passion, not money. Most of them went well beyond the call of duty to reach sample households over hill and high water, polish their questionnaires late into the night, and hold extended group discussions about the survey findings. Their living conditions in the field were spartan: they often slept on the floor in the nearest verandah, ate simple food, latched on to crowded buses, and walked long distances in torrid heat. None of this deterred them.

Further, the whole exercise (not only the survey, but also the training and debriefing workshops, as well as follow-up activities) had lasting value as a means of fostering the spirit of voluntarism among the students. For many, it was an eye-opening experience to spend time in the nooks and crannies of rural India, seeing for themselves the daily struggles of ordinary people against grinding poverty, the brutality of labour contractors, the indifference of the bureaucracy. This is not to say that the experience always changed their lives – many of them returned to the pursuit of career and family life after the surveys. But in many cases, judging by their own accounts, it had a lasting influence on their outlook. And some of the volunteers did later become leading practitioners of action-oriented research.

Not all volunteers, of course, joined in the spirit we had hoped. Some had joined up mainly to pad their CVs. Others seemed to be hoping to sample the local rice beer, or to end up in the same team as their sweethearts (real or imagined). And, as in all team work, there were occasional tensions and irritations. Overall, however, there was remarkable goodwill and energy among the survey teams.

The surveys aimed at high-quality data collection, both quantitative and qualitative, facilitated by careful training and debriefing workshops. However, they were not restricted to data collection. In many cases, the work plan also included some real action – for instance public hearings, social audits, and even the odd effort to catch some of the crooks who are constantly trying to siphon off development funds in rural India. These activities usually took place after rather than during the survey – research and action have their own methods and should not be mixed casually. But we did learn a great deal from them and considered them an integral part of the exercise.

I take this opportunity to express my appreciation of all the students and local volunteers who participated in these surveys over the years. I have fond memories of the times we spent talking with people, visiting schools, and inspecting ration shops from the hills of Chamba district to the forests of Kalahandi and the dunes of Barmer. Aside from being highly rewarding at a personal level, the experience boosted my confidence in the possibility of doing things (not just field surveys) differently – based on principles of freedom, co-operation, and enthusiasm rather than the drudgery of employer–employee relationships. The wage labour system strikes me as a little archaic – better than slavery, but still based on control and subordination. The profit motive, too, is quite crude, and its alleged virtues are much exaggerated in mainstream economics. It will take time to get rid of these norms, but some sections of the economy and society (including academia) have already moved away from them in substantial measure, and hopefully their domain will shrink further over time.

Evidence, Experience, and Enlightenment

There is another reason why involvement in action, and participation in field surveys, are valuable activities for a researcher: they enrich personal experience of the issues of interest. Research and experience can be thought of as two complementary ways of enhancing our understanding of these issues.[4]

Nowadays there is in development economics a tendency to devalue experience and to insist on "evidence". The buzzword is "evidence-based policy", where the word evidence essentially stands for statistical analysis. Sometimes it is even treated as more or less synonymous with randomised-controlled trials (RCTs). I am told that getting funding for development research, or even in some universities doing a PhD in development economics, is increasingly difficult unless something like an RCT is involved. The idea is that this is the only foolproof way, or at least the best way, of demonstrating "causality" between interventions and outcomes.[5]

RCTs can certainly be a useful source of insights. But I submit that if we were to restrict ourselves to RCTs, or even to statistical analysis, as the evidential basis of public policy, we

[4] This idea can be regarded as one of the foundations of statistical inference, and therefore, of science. Bayesian statistics, of which classical statistics are a special case, require a "prior" (that is, a probability distribution that captures our initial beliefs), and provide a method for revising the prior in the light of new information. Experience is a natural source of prior beliefs.

[5] There is a large literature on the validity of this claim; see e.g. Deaton and Cartwright 2016 and earlier studies cited there. The concerns discussed here apply *even* if this claim is accepted.

would not get very far. Quite often, in fact, we would miss out on very important knowledge. Let me try to explain.

Statistical analysis, important as it is, is often overrated in economics, while other means of learning, including experience, are undervalued. Studies based on statistical analysis have the reputation of being "rigorous", but in practice they can go wrong in numerous ways – even those published in peer-reviewed journals. The data may not be reliable: even large, renowned datasets like India's National Sample Survey or National Family Health Survey are sometimes misleading. The analysts may lack a sound understanding of the data. Coding errors may creep in. The statistical models being used may not be appropriate. The underlying assumptions may not apply. The authors may lack honesty and nudge the analysis towards particular results (how many have the will power to resist that, if, say, their PhD or tenure is at stake?). It is no wonder that efforts at the independent replication of results published in peer-reviewed economic journals have often had poor success rates.[6] Further, the same results can be reported in very different ways (even turned upside-down) by different authors, depending on their respective convictions. And then there is, in the economic literature, a huge "publication bias": if one study shows, say, that the deworming of school children has a statistically significant effect on pupil achievements, while another finds no such relation, the former is far more likely to be published than the latter. Ideally, they should be read together.

This is not hair-splitting. Consider for instance the economic literature on social policy in India. There is quite a jumble of studies here: some are really insightful, others are deeply misleading. If someone were to rely on that literature alone to form a view on India's social

[6] See e.g. Chang and Li 2015, who "assert that economic research is usually not replicable" based on an attempt to replicate the key results of sixty-seven papers published in "well-regarded economic journals"; see also Young 2016, with specific reference to RCTs. To be fair, the standards of transparency in data analysis are growing, at least in the best economic journals, and replicability may improve over time. As things stand, however, this is a serious and resilient problem.

policies (as many students of development economics are under pressure to do), she would learn very little. In order to learn from "rigorous studies", it really helps to read them in the light of other information, such as the views of the people concerned, as well as direct experience.

Is experience a form of evidence? It seems to me that it is, though mainly for ourselves. When we move about, observe the way things work and listen to people, some patterns emerge. In principle, that information can be treated with the same rigour as statistical data. Of course, personal experience can be misleading, but so can statistical analysis. The real problem in treating experience as a form of evidence is that it is difficult to share. If I trust someone, I would be able to benefit from her experience, and to that extent experience would become a form of communicable evidence. But when we write for a wide audience, we cannot always expect readers to trust our knowledge. In fact, when academic papers quote "knowledgeable informants", I am often suspicious – who counts as a knowledgeable informant, and how does the author know that an informant is not only knowledgeable but also trustworthy? So-called knowledgeable informants, from government officials to NGO workers and community leaders, often have professional biases, personal prejudices, or various reasons to mislead the researcher. Thus, the notion of knowledgeable informant does not go very far in helping us to treat experience as a form of evidence. What does help is a forum where people can share their experiences, discuss them, and submit them to scrutiny.

In scientific journals, the author's experience is not generally considered admissible evidence. Every important statement is expected to be substantiated, if not with data, then with reference to an earlier study, also published in a credible journal. This is understandable: we cannot expect the editor of a scientific journal to accept what we say at face value. This convention, however, evacuates a great deal of useful knowledge from the literature. In a book, the author has more latitude to draw on his or her personal experience, and then there are journals like the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) where this is also possible. In fact, the EPW's tremendous success may have something to do with the fact that it provides such space while being committed to sound research.[7]

There is an interesting dilemma here for academic research – if the standards of evidence are too high, then little may be learnt, but if they are too low, what we learn (or think we learn) may not be reliable. The world of policy-making and public action, however, is different from that of academic research. In that universe, we have good reason to make constructive use of experience. Indeed, without it, we would be deprived of rich sources of insight and forced to take decisions based on very limited knowledge.

Public Policy and Democratic Practice

A simple example may help illustrate these issues. During the last few years, India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) has been afflicted with a series of problems related to wage payments, including corruption and delays. Consider the simple question – should the payments be made through banks or post offices? In answering this, one could make good use of a number of facts, or rather observations, on which there is likely to be wide agreement among experienced people. For instance, it is relatively well understood that post offices are generally closer to homes, but more vulnerable to corruption, at least when it comes to NREGA payments. The first proposition in the preceding sentence can be backed by statistical evidence (for instance, data on the density of banks and post offices in rural areas), but the second – about corruption – is more a matter of common knowledge. Personally, I am quite confident about it, not only because I have often observed post-office corruption in

[7] Methodical "qualitative research" also makes some room, in principle, for integrating evidence with experience, though much depends on how it is done. For instance, participant observation would contribute to experience, but getting a case study done by a research assistant would not.

NREGA wage payments, but also because the vulnerabilities of the post office are easy to understand. On the other hand, if a hard-nosed economist asks me, "what evidence do you have that corruption tends to be higher in post offices than in banks?", I would be at a loss to cite any statistical evidence of it, let alone an RCT. And of course I may be wrong. But if policy-makers were to wait for "rigorous" evidence on this and other relevant aspects of wage payments before taking a decision, nothing would move. The best they can do is use statistical evidence along with other relevant information – that is the way things tend to work in the real world, and rightly so.

Let us pursue the example a little further, because I have simplified the issue. For instance, it is not always true that banks are less corrupt than post offices: some local "co-operative banks" are very corrupt, while post-office corruption may be relatively low in some of the better-governed states. One can imagine a very interesting consultation on these matters taking place among a group of people who might include, say, bank managers, post-office representatives, government officials, development economists, and some NREGA workers or union leaders. Various questions are likely to arise – whether the post offices can be reformed, whether the reach of the banking system can be expanded, and so on. Hopefully, the discussion will proceed towards a better understanding of the problem and its possible solutions. The economists may well be able to contribute important insights, whether based on statistical evidence or other sources of knowledge (say, theoretical reasoning or qualitative research). If the participants come from adequately diverse backgrounds, and make a genuine effort to learn from each other, there is a good chance that progress will be made.

The last sentence, of course, begins with a big "if". Depending on how and why (and by whom) it is convened, this sort of consultation may be vitiated by conflicts of interest, the absence of key participants, the power of influential consultants, or other biases. Leaving that aside for now, the point being made here is that this process of mutual learning involves much more than "evidence" as it tends to be understood in development economics today. Evidence is certainly an important part of it, but if the discussion were to be confined to formal evidence, it would not go very far. For one thing, the problem at hand has numerous aspects on which hard evidence is lacking, and perhaps difficult to generate. For another, whatever the reach of statistical evidence, other sources of enlightenment (including experience) have much to contribute.

Going beyond this illustration, public policy in India is best seen as an outcome of democratic practice. No doubt some would prefer it to be left to technical experts, insulated from the hustle and bustle of public debate. As it happens, that is the trend today (with more and more decisions being taken behind the ramparts of the prime minister's office or the finance ministry), but it does not strike me as a healthy one. Indeed, the knowledge of accredited experts is often more limited than they think. Also, their values tend to be over-influenced by the privileged circles in which they move. Democratic practice is a more exacting process, but I believe that it is ultimately more effective and appropriate. It is also essential to clarify the goals and priorities of public policy, something no amount of expertise can do on its own.

The case for "evidence-based policy" has to be seen in this light. If the idea is to bring more evidence to bear on public policy, there is much to be said for it. This endeavour, however, is likely to be all the more useful if we bear in mind that evidence is more than RCTs, knowledge more than evidence, policy more than knowledge, and action more than policy.[8]

[8] A useful distinction can also be made between knowledge and understanding. The latter is more demanding than the former. Sound policy-making requires both. It also requires clarity about goals and values – more on that in the next section.

Experience and Values

Aside from being a valid form of evidence (at least for the person concerned), experience can also be very useful in helping us to clarify our values. This is important, since economic policy and public action necessarily involve value judgements about goals and priorities. Even the most committed advocate of evidence-based policy is likely to agree that evidence, on its own, cannot translate into policy advice unless we are clear about what we are trying to achieve and why.

Here again, an example may help. India has some rudimentary schemes of social security pensions for widows, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Their coverage, and the pension amounts, are very modest as things stand, and there is a view that these schemes should be expanded and perhaps even universalised. Presented with this proposal, an economist is likely to look into various features of pension schemes – for instance their impact on poverty, their administrative costs, their vulnerability to fraud, and so on. A number of studies have looked into this and found that India's pension schemes are doing quite well in many ways.

These analyses are very useful, but what is no less useful is to spend some time with widows and the elderly and ask them about their lives. If you have a heart, their pain and helplessness will move you like no statistical evidence is likely to. You will also understand that, despite their meagreness, social security pensions mean a lot to poor widows and the elderly for it gives them some independence and dignity and helps them enjoy small comforts, such as getting their spectacles repaired. Quite likely, the central government's failure to raise old-age pensions above its abysmal level of Rs 200 per month for the last twelve years (even as the pensions of government employees went up by leaps and bounds) will then strike you as deep injustice. In short, lived experience can help us put statistical data in perspective and form a more enlightened view on the priorities of social policy.

Fiction and literature can help, too, despite seeming far removed from "evidence". Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's classic novel *Pather Panchali* (turned into a film by Satyajit Ray) begins with a very perceptive description of the daily life of Indir Thakrun, an elderly widow. It tells us a great deal not only about how she lives, but also about how she feels. As many avid readers of fiction affirm, the empathy arising from sharing in the lives of fictional characters can be more intense and certainly no less illuminating than real-life encounters. Similarly, reading Dalit autobiographies (e.g. those of Shantabai Kamble, Laxman Gaikwad, Om Prakash Valmiki or Daya Pawar) can tell us things about caste – and its horrors – that would be hard to fathom from academic textbooks or survey data. If we are concerned with social development, we have good reason to take interest in these matters.

All this, of course, is difficult terrain. It is certainly possible to be carried away by personal experience, just as it is possible to miss important aspects of reality when we confine our attention to statistical data.[9] What tends to work best is to make good use of both, and to engage with people who may have a different experience, or different views.

Jholawala Economics

There is no such thing as jholawala economics and I disown in advance anyone who claims to be a jholawala economist enthused by my writings. Jholawala economics is just an expression I

[9] In this connection, I often remember a comment received many years ago from the late Ashok Rudra, one of India's finest economists and public intellectuals. He was kind enough to read a paper of mine, where I quoted an old widow who was sharing the pain she felt when her sons had abandoned her: "I suffered so much to bring them up, and what did I get in return?" she said. Ashok Rudra immediately wrote in the margin: "typical blackmail". Clearly, personal testimonies can be interpreted in very different ways, just like statistical data.

have made up for the title of this book. However, I can say a few words about the inspiration behind it.

"Jholawala" has become a term of abuse in India's corporate-sponsored media. Jhola, in Hindi, refers to the sort of cheap sling bag that many Indian activists used to carry (nowadays, a backpack is more likely), and jholawala is a person with a jhola. So jholawala is basically a disparaging reference to activists. The term is part of the business media's propaganda against what they consider subversive ideas, such as the welfare state, minimum wages, and environmental regulation. An important part of this propaganda is to create a convenient vocabulary, for instance by using derogatory terms like "freebies" and "handouts" to refer to valuable and valued social security schemes. Similarly, the term jholawala helps marginalise critics of business-driven public policies.

Economists are generally more respectful, but most of them are also quite sceptical of jholawalas. They often say things like "good intentions are not enough" or "effective policy-making requires sound theory", implying that jholawalas are well-meaning but confused. The scepticism is handsomely reciprocated: jholawalas are in no hurry to learn economics, and often dismiss economists as docile servants of the establishment.

This mutual suspicion is unfortunate. Jholawalas can make much better use of economics – a very enlightening discipline, if it is studied with a critical mind. The insights of game theory, for example, are a dream for the peace activist. They show, among other things, that conflicts can easily get out of hand, no matter how rational the players may be – something we also know from everyday experience. That sounds like a good argument for seeking nuclear disarmament. Game theory's insights on the collectively irrational nature of selfish behaviour (for instance, in "prisoners' dilemma" situations) are also of much interest for critics of the established economic order.

On the other side, jholawalas and their work deserve more appreciation from economists. True, jholawalas are often woolly-headed, intolerant, or prone to herd behaviour. But they tend to have a relatively good view of the dark underbelly of the system, because they are well placed to see it. Many of them are also well informed, at least on the issues that concern them. The reason is that they are passionate about these issues, so they keep track of the details, much like football fans who read the fine print of the sports page. Economists (myself included) often look embarrassingly ignorant by comparison.

To illustrate, few economists – if any – come close to India's best right-to-information activists in terms of their understanding of corruption and how it can be fought. It is mainly activists, not economists, who have developed the principles of a series of anti-corruption legislations concerned inter alia with the right to information, grievance redressal, whistle-blowing, and the right to public service. Interestingly, even recent surveys of the economic literature on corruption rarely refer to the right to information – a simple but powerful idea that has gone a long way in India. Instead, the focus in these surveys tends to be on more conventional measures like fostering competition among government agencies, reducing the scope for discretion, and better use of auctions. These measures, of course, are also important– here as in other fields, there is much scope for mutual learning.

Thus, the reference to jholawala economics in the title is intended to serve a dual purpose. First, it affirms the validity of "research for action" in economics. Second, it is an invitation to mutual learning between economists and so-called jholawalas. It is an odd idea that the proper attire for an economist is a corporate briefcase rather than a jhola. Ideally, economists should be found not only in universities, governments, and the corporate sector, but also among the public at large – working with civic organisations, trade unions, political parties, alternative media, the peace movement, or just freelance. Of course, economists generally like their work to be well paid, so they tend to gravitate towards the centres of privilege and power.[10] But nothing prevents economists from mingling with the jholawalas if they are so inclined – and vice versa.

Scheme of the Book

A few months ago, I read somewhere that publishing a collection of one's op-eds as a book was "the ultimate vanity". That came as a large spoke in the wheel of this book project, halting it for a time, but I revived it for two reasons. One is that the topics of these essays are, sadly, alive and well. India is still grappling with hunger, poverty, inequality, corruption, conflict, and related issues. The arguments in this book have not lost their relevance.

The second reason is that this collection of essays provides some sort of retrospective on the course of social policy in India between 2000 and 2017. Despite India's general inertia in this field, there were some important initiatives over this period, such as the introduction of midday meals in primary schools and the enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. As befits a democracy, these initiatives emerged out of lively public debates. Others, notably in the field of health care, failed to materialise. This book may help to understand some of these advances and setbacks, as well as the debates that accompanied them and continue today.

[10] In fact, this applies even to those inclined to simple living. A well-known economist tends to be bombarded with invitations to deliver keynote addresses at international conferences, release books authored by influential people, advise governments, and join countless boards. Declining these invitations, however unwelcome, is often difficult. That leaves little time for engaging with different circles.

The essays have been arranged thematically, with a top-up of miscellaneous issues in the last section. Each thematic section begins with a short headnote which puts the essays in perspective. Within each section, the essays appear in chronological order. Since the date of publication often helps to understand the context, it is footnoted at the start of each essay.

In a few cases, I have merged two short essays into one longer piece. Some titles have been modified – the original titles and sources are mentioned at the end of the book.

I have not revised the essays, except for some streamlining here and there, e.g. to correct an error, avoid repetition, or revise a careless statement. In order to keep the book as readable as possible I have also refrained from the temptation of adding footnotes to them. However, each section closes with endnotes, where I have done my best to retrieve the original statistical and bibliographical sources.[11] The notes also include the odd clarification, and a short update here and there.

[11] For further guidance to the literature on social policy in India, see Drèze and Sen 2013, and Drèze 2016a.