

The Spirit of Research

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I am conscious that in choosing to write about the spirit of research I am pitting an ideal against a thorny terrain of academic realities. I am also aware that it makes more sense to confront the realities than merely dallying with ideals. But then realities can only be judged against some ideals, possibly meaningful or useful ideals. And realities cannot be celebrated if they are defiantly at variance with ideals. When the world around us throws up situations which fit ill with any ideal models or standards, some are cynically inclined to brush aside these models as superb irrelevancies at best. There is an argument that knowledge, pursuit of knowledge and the ways to pursue it can be a function of freedom, which may not endorse any prescriptive model or method. Since researches are done in so many fields with so many purposes and goals in mind and with so many legitimately possible methodologies, it is difficult to proclaim any one ideal as the ideal; nor can we cling to any one methodology as the sole efficacious prescription. Science has often staked its claim for having offered the standard by which other disciplines ought to be judged. The triumph of science has been so spectacular that it has found flattering imitators in social sciences. In the nineteenth century the subjects revolving around man-in-society were keen to show that they were no less scientific in their methods as in their goals. They were nearly convinced that they were not honourable enough if they could not establish such credentials. Whenever they were driven to accept that such imitations could not be stretched too far, they would harp on the extenuating circumstances in which certain details could not be coaxed to fit into the stern ideals of science. But they would not give up the claim that they were also science.

Today this desperation to be reckoned as no less than a science has abated to a large extent. They can be honourable enough without shining in borrowed armour. Besides, science itself has conceded that not all sciences are as scientific. The idea of science as a compulsion to pursue 'disinterested' knowledge has been given up. The play of paradigms in the

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production of scientific knowledge has been adequately acknowledged ever since Thomas Kuhn wrote about it, though he has not gone uncontested. Today no sensible scientist would propound that science proclaims a guarantee of unimpeachable exactitude of 'two plus two is four'. True scientist knows that neither the example nor its implication is true. If science and its methods are exact and an insurance against error, it cannot explain why the findings and theories of science have changed over the centuries, and how any science is science if only it is available for falsification. Propounding a theory is as important in science as testing the theory, and possibly disproving it. Obsolescence of a theory does not deride or discredit science, but shows that scientific activity and spirit are alive and kicking. It does credit to science, instead. Science progresses, as does any knowledge, by renewing itself. Old scientific ideas and theories are important because they submitted themselves to critical review and tests by other scientists. New science emerges from the womb of the old. The old stands discarded only after it has yielded, or yielded to, the new.

Besides, the promise of truth varies in different sciences. What mathematics or physics can promise cannot be matched by medical sciences or psychology. What observational sciences can is of a different order than what experimental sciences do. Observational sciences too have different possibilities of repeating observations and different sophistications in doing that. And not all experimental sciences have the same possibilities of experiment or efficacy of results. If human beings are subjects of observations and experiments, they can only promise a different order of results. Some people even question the credentials of psychology to be called a science because it has so many assumptions to make and so many *ceteris paribus* to fulfil. That is so about many such sciences, so much so the old confidence of science as the sole repository of truth, nearly replacing the long- entrenched belief of humanity that God alone knows the Truth or that God indeed is Truth, has been given up. Whether there is a God who knows all the Truth or not, what matters is what we know. And although we know a great deal, we do not know enough. The wisest among us would take the position of Socrates that he knows that he knows not. This is in spite of the phenomenal triumph of science and technology, in spite of the explosion of knowledge we are witnessing. For, the more you know the more you realise that you have not known enough. This realisation behind all that is called research, the spirit of research.

What is called research, across all disciplines, straddling all methodologies prescribed or debated, is about a compulsion to know. This may sound a little trite because human beings normally want to know about men and matters, about things that are related to them and hence are of interest to them. They are endowed with the ability to see, observe, evaluate, know, understand and review what they have understood. They all go into the ways they live in society with awareness. They make a successful life possible. These qualities and abilities are often taken for granted, although we know that the world is large enough to accommodate people in whom these qualities are in acute shortage. But these qualities are precious, and when they are harnessed purposively they go into the making of the spirit of research. These are not unique qualities, but common sense qualities uniquely harnessed. They are not special endowments, but purposive, targeted use of these qualities for specific ends.

What is called research, shorn of its pomposity and proclaimed academic grandeur, is basically inquiry. The word is simple enough, and we are all familiar with it. It is an activity of knowing more of something. The word 'research' itself encapsulates its meaning. It is 're-search', an activity of searching again, searching for more, searching for things you do not know about, searching for things you do not know enough about. It involves not just labour, but renewed, repeated labour to know more, to know more clearly. That is what inquiry is about. It assumes that you know something, to begin with, but you do not enough of it. You want to know more of that something, - something of which you know already. Therefore, all inquiries or all research assume a subject and assume a status of knowledge. There is no inquiry without a subject of inquiry, and without some knowledge about it. People had known about it; you also know about it. But what they know or what you know appears incomplete. They do not answer all your questions; they do not tick all boxes. That coaxes you to inquire about it, institute a search again, to make the picture more complete, to find answers to questions which have not been answered or not answered well enough or to your satisfaction, or to raise questions that had not been raised in the earlier inquiry. So any research assumes the prevalence of a body of knowledge and a need to revisit that knowledge critically, because the received knowledge is seen as inadequate, incomplete and hence in need of another critical engagement.

If research is inquiry, and all inquiry is critical inquiry, it is obvious that the existing knowledge warrants critical interrogation. While we are grateful for what knowledge we inherit, we cannot advance that knowledge unless we

critically review it. Often our gratitude to received knowledge tends to goad us to an uncritical acceptance and celebration of it. They can be anything like our unquestioned devotion to scriptures, gospels, words of holy men or books or authors taken as authorities. We accept them because we accept the authority of its authors. We accept the power behind that knowledge. Such knowledge becomes inviolable. Such knowledge brooks no questioning, no critical inquiry. For example, if certain things are declared to be words of God, they demand implicit acceptance and obedience. It is a sin to question the words of God, much less to defy them. God will certainly punish such sinners, and there are self-styled agents of God to punish the sinners even before God does. So this category of knowledge is supposed to stand high up above the reach of the humans to conduct any research on! But in logic it is listed as a fallacy - fallacy of argumentum ad verecundiam, in which you accept a statement because a great man or authority had said it. It is a fallacy of argument because you do not review the logical quality or substance of argument, but hide behind the authority of the person who has made that statement. The authority of the person can be as varied as that of Mahatma Gandhi or Adolph Hitler, depending upon who considers them as unimpeachable authorities. An argument does not become right just because you quote someone who is considered as universally good and venerable. Nor can an argument be considered bad because it is put forth by someone who is considered evil. The argument should stand or fall on solely on the strength of it, and not on the strength of the person who had made that argument.

If anything that we receive from others is declared as sacrosanct and barred from further inquiry, it is hard to classify it as knowledge. For true knowledge should be available for furtherance. A knowledge which brooks no inquiry or questioning is petrified knowledge, which is a dead knowledge. You may endlessly quote it with approval, repeat it with reverence and believe that the more you repeat it and the more number of people repeat it, the more inviolable it becomes. You can build a monument over it, adore it and worship it. That is all. But knowledge does not get any richer, except that those who recite its unquestioned greatness may get a sense of fulfilment. But that is a different human need.

If research is critical inquiry about what we know, there is an element of irreverence going into it. Do not mistake that word. It is not a word suggestive of any wanton act of destruction, although it does indicate a necessary and creative subversion. It is a happy irreverence, creative and

fruitful irreverence, - a dissent that takes us forward. This dissent is born of doubt. For, unless you doubt the received knowledge, you do not question it. Unless you question it, there is no inquiry into the knowledge you receive, and unless you subject it to a critical inquiry that knowledge remains petrified. The subversion that it involves is dissection of that received knowledge to analyse and review it for what it means and what it does. This becomes all the more important in humanities and social sciences, because the knowledge there keeps changing both in terms of their possibilities and implications. More than science, humanities and social sciences are yoked to the changes taking place in societies. What man thought of himself in society in the past would be different from what he would be doing today or tomorrow, although there is no gainsaying that the thoughts of the past perforce stream into how we think today or how we may do tomorrow. But the doubts that we express about our knowledge are the doubts expressed by the changing society, about its relevance and usefulness.

For example, our understanding of law today or our expectations of it is so different from what it was in the past. There were many things in India which were once thought of as eternal verities, like caste hierarchies, the ordained superiority of Brahmins, un-erasable untouchability, haughty patriarchy, glorious subordination of women, king drawing his sovereignty from God and as the sole fountainhead of law, all supposed to be held together by the powerful gravitational pull of ever-present and yet superbly elusive dharma, and so on. Some of these categories have survived defiantly and some have been as defiantly rejected, but none but the most die-hard would deny that things have changed. Our questions about our laws are, therefore, the questions posed by the changing society. The questions we pose now would have been sacrilegious if they had been posed in the past, and our questions of today would be dismissed as too naive or conservative by those who review them tomorrow. New heresies and new irreverence to 'accepted' notions of truth will make the truths unacceptable or differently acceptable. That is why any research will have to accept dissent in various shades, because that is what tests the relevance of truth in the changing realities of living. If research does not allow dissent, it is no research. But it is dissent not as an insistent policy, not anything in eristic mood, but where it is due and where there are reasons to dissent. Doubt should go as a component in any inquiry. Credulity does not allow inquiry or investigation, nor does it push the frontiers of knowledge. But doubt should not become pathological, - a morbid celebration of negation. Pyrrho of Elis had taught his disciples to

doubt everything, and he did his job so thoroughly and successfully that they did not lament the demise of their preceptor, because they doubted if indeed he was dead. With this morbid scepticism you cannot conduct an investigation. The doubt should be a healthy doubt, which should trigger off an inquiry - an activity to clarify one's doubts and how both one's doubts and their clarifications should be explained. It does not mean that others cannot have doubts over your clarifications and solutions. They certainly will and inquiries will surely continue.

Research as a possible irreverence to accepted truth and suggesting an alternative truth does not, however, mean that finally it is going to 'establish' the truth. Many researchers carry this illusion, that they will finally unveil the truth. That claim is a bit too presumptuous. 'Re-search', as it has been suggested, does not end with any researcher. No researcher pronounces the final word on his subject. If he does, there is no further research. Research is an activity born of an attitude, and so long as that attitude stays, that activity will continue. The same researcher can review his work and his findings or verdicts. The honest ones do it. If she does not, others will. Research is not merely what one person does, but is an activity which addresses a problem, - an activity which is not conducted in isolation but as a dialogue. It becomes a dialogue with the producers of that knowledge before, even as those would be engaged in it would do later. It is a dialogue which does not preclude dissent and disagreement. Even as I can question the knowledge I have inherited, others can test the knowledge they have been heirs to. There are continuous interplay of acceptance and dissent of the knowledge we gain, and this tension alone makes possible advancement of knowledge. Often dissent is resented, because it seems to defy the power that consecrates knowledge. Dissent is resisted by the guardians of the knowledge regime. Philosophy, science, our notions of God/s, Heaven and Hell or regarding the paths to reach there have all been propounded and contested, and what were once perceived as heresies have become, at another time and in another clime, new accepted knowledge. 'Re-search' continues because new questions are thrown up and new demands are made for new answers. The tensions and dialectics persist. If at times new inquiries find the old one's trite or commonplace, that is because the new ones have used the old and are familiar with them and moved on.

Often we hear that all researches should be conducted objectively and reported with stern objectivity. The prescription of this virtue is as noble and uncontested as the prescription of dharma in human affairs. Can

anybody be advised to pursue adharma? Can any researcher be nudged to look upon his work as anything but objective? But the virtue prescribed, has a noble slipperiness about it. It looks irrefutable but defies easy definition. Every researcher will swear that she has been objective in her attitude and work. However, she would be as keen to swear that the others in the business have not been as objective, much in the same way the others would point out that her claims on objectivity are weak or false. It is invariably a virtue in me and a failing in others. That is why the debate on it goes on, and often the debate gets acrimonious. If, on the other hand, the debate concludes in consensus, it pushes us to the improbable situation of barring further research on the subject. We may have agreement on what to accept or not to accept within a knowledge regime, and that is what is often mistaken for objective knowledge. We loathe acknowledging that our knowledge is only perspectival and that we can at best put together several such perspectives.

But does that dismiss the notion of 'objectivity' altogether? Or what does it mean? Objectivity implies a knowledge of a thing as it actually is rather than what it actually means to us. In the story of Four Blind Men and the Elephant we may pity the blind for their blindness and assume that we or the teller of the parable who are not blind know the elephant to be what it actually is. But that assumption may also turn out to be false, although in the story it is not meant to be so. What we see with our naked eyes would be different from what we see a thing in a telescope or a microscope, and they will be different still through those instruments of higher power and resolutions. And yet what we see there would not be the entire picture, inside and outside. The search is always on. We know and yet we know that we do not quite know. That is why we have accommodated a phrase in our language, 'God alone knows!' But what matters is what we know, and this is an acknowledgement that we do not know the thing as it actually is. And yet we talk about objectivity. We can talk about it only in the sense of sincere, honest labour to know, making our best efforts to know. We do so within our strength and limitations, drawing on the strength and labour of others.

The honesty associated with research is more than sincerity of labour involved in it. It is the honesty of acknowledging our position and stating the framework within which we perform our labour. We carry the bias of our times which transcend our ideological bias or idiosyncrasies. We may not always get over them, but we should be aware of them. While we have our own bias or ideological positions, we should not fail to consider the

other positions with transparent honesty. We may think that we are right. We may have reasons to think so, and we have the freedom to show that we are right. But we should also have the strength and honesty to acknowledge that there can also be 'the other points of view' which may also be right. We should have the strength to weigh their respective strengths and values. If we have frozen assumptions about a thing and our research is all about proving our assumption right, we would only excel as propagandists. A lot of 'research' takes place for propaganda; but that does not carry the true spirit of research. It is an exercise in circular reasoning. We always begin our research with certain assumptions. We cannot do otherwise. If we have to test any knowledge we should have an idea as to which knowledge we test and how it could be tested. But our labour should not be exclusively devoted to proving what we assume to be true. Our assumptions should be the starting point of inquiry, no doubt; but our assumptions themselves need testing. For, although we have reasons to doubt the knowledge we are called upon test, we are not giving an alternative to that knowledge with our assumption but with our findings. The findings are the fruits of our labour of testing both our assumptions and our evidence. And again, we are not offering an alternative which is a guarantee or a certainty, but a possibility. If our inquiry begins with doubt and we do an honest job of testing our knowledge and clarifying our doubt, the result of inquiry does not necessarily put an end to the doubt we began with, but it possibly does. But the answers I am satisfied with may not necessarily satisfy others. I may then provoke further inquiry into the knowledge. That is the way knowledge advances. An illusion of certainty may deter further inquiry and further advancement of knowledge.

Perhaps I should clarify a point. When I talk about research, the spirit of research, I do not necessarily refer to what is conventionally understood as a research programme, leading to a degree, or a project beyond it. I refer to research as 'inquiry' which any intelligent reader or seeker of knowledge can pursue. Its spirit transcends the methods prescribed in conventional research. It is an attitude towards any knowledge. An intelligent, critical reader, who is not remotely interested in pursuing a doctoral degree, may have this attitude, while a pompous research student, may woefully lack it. It is an attitude which makes any pursuit of knowledge worth its while. But such an attitude gets highlighted only when a critical reader participates in interrogating and hence producing knowledge.