Reflections on the Delhi School of Economics

Edited by
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odds and, I am certain, under great strain—physical, emotional and psychological. Tears were often close to the surface but, oddly enough, these very difficulties seemed to add to their motivation rather than detract from it. For many of them, the Ph.D. was an intellectually liberating experience and a chance to make a come-back into active academic life. They came to their task with a sense of humility—I would even say with more open minds than those for whom this was just another rung on the straight ascent up the professional ladder. And many of them, I am glad to say, never looked back.

The old Research Room was not just a physical space packed with office furniture. Though its language of intercommunication was largely body language—privacy in proximity—it was also a moral space, a little society.

But physical arrangements also matter. No one, I am sure, actively designed the Research Room to enhance its potentialities as a work-space or a society: it must have just happened that way. But I would imagine that happening was certainly much more conducive to both these functions than the present setting, to which the research students were moved (or should one say banished?) when computers once again took over the downstairs space.

I checked out the new D.School Research Room a few weeks ago. Up four flights of stairs, past two sets of lavatories ... rather desolate and chilly, early in the morning. Perhaps it was just nostalgia for the lost ambience of the old Research Room, for a period in my own life to which there is no return, but I honestly did not feel this eagle’s eyrie to be an hospitable space. It may be that this bleak setting has also nurtured a society of the type that I recall from those Emergency years. But if so, it is surely a testimony to the resilience of the human spirit.

From a Personal Point of View

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I finished school with pretty good marks and so had a range of subjects and colleges open to me for my bachelor’s degree. My father wanted me to do physics, I wanted to do nothing, and we settled on economics as a compromise. I finished my bachelor’s study from St Stephen’s, Delhi, with pretty poor marks which, I thought, was a fair price to pay for three riotous years. But the upshot was that I was not too sure whether I would be able to go to the London School of Economics for further studies. That is when I first encountered the Delhi School because in July 1972 I registered there so that, if I failed to get to LSE, I would not be left doing what I wanted to do when I finished school.

My memory of the Delhi School during the month I spent there is somewhat faded because, being more or less certain that I would be leaving, I rarely attended classes and preferred to occupy myself with other, more pleasing, pursuits. My overwhelming impression of the School of that period was one of a boring place with eminent people.

It was in 1977 that I had to make a hard decision. I had finished my Ph.D. from LSE the previous year and there was no question in my mind that I wanted to return to India. The only

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way for a middle-aged woman—as one would in most cities of the world—she jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow as advance action against any attempt on my part to board the bus before her.

Callow and full of enthusiasm, I walked into the room of Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri, then head of the department, who was, I believe, the main person responsible for my getting the job. I asked him what I should do—lecture, take tutorials, give seminars? He was taken aback, recovered, and said he would not be so unkind as to thrust work on me so immediately. I should just settle in first. If I remember right, I got three months to settle in.

At the end of the first month I got my salary cheque. It was for Rs 2500. Mrinal had told me during a phone conversation in England that my salary would be Rs 3000. I did not really care about the additional 500 rupees but felt that a self-respecting person ought to complain about this divergence between precept and practice. So, reminding myself of karma, I walked into the head’s room and complained. Mrinal was extremely flustered and gave a long explanation which can be summarized, without any loss of information, into: he wanted to give me Rs 3000 but the university had not allowed this. I liked the fact that he was uncomfortable discussing money and also coward enough not to have confronted me with this information as soon as he got it from the university. I did not prolong the conversation.

Rs 2500 seemed enough. My wife, Alaka, and I moved happily into a bursati in Defence Colony. Rents were low in those days and the daily Mudrika ride to office was cheap and a reasonable substitute for the squash which I used to play quite regularly in London.

Despite a reputation to the contrary, the Delhi School of Economics was quite a mediocre place in the late seventies. While it is true that the past always looks more glorious because the stars get telescoped together, the School had suffered immensely from
two rounds of exodus. The first, in the late sixties and early seventies, occurred with the departure of Jagdish Bhagwati for MIT, Amartya Sen for the LSE, and Sukhamoy Chakravarty for the Planning Commission (though Sukhamoy later returned to the School). The second diaspora was in the mid seventies, marking the departure of Pranab Bardhan for Berkeley and Prasanta Pattanaik for La Trobe University in Australia.

The late sixties and early seventies were also a period of large scientific output from the School. Of the many books and research papers written at the Delhi School since its inception to the present time, one of the most influential was Amartya Sen’s *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, published in 1970. In 1971 another book of great originality was published by a faculty member of the School. I am referring to Prasanta Pattanaik’s *Voting and Collective Choice*, which was based on his Ph.D. thesis written at the School. Social choice soon became the department’s favourite subject. Thanks to Amartya Sen, Prasanta Pattanaik and the latter’s two Ph.D. students at the School, Bhaskar Dutta and Manimay Sengupta, Delhi must figure among the world’s two or three greatest centres of social choice research. This was so evident that when I was trying to choose a topic for my Ph.D. at the London School, the eminent Japanese economist Michio Morishima asked me if I wanted to work on ‘India’s subject, social choice theory’.

Among the other areas in which the Delhi School’s contribution has been significant and on which I have competence to comment is theoretical development economics. There was Sukhamoy Chakravarty working on planning models and growth, Pranab Bardhan on trade and agrarian relations, and Bhagwati on international trade.

I owe my own interest in development to India, and in particular the Delhi School. I must be a closet anthropologist, for it is from discussions with colleagues at the School, snatches of conversation overheard in trains and buses, a servant’s lament about conditions in his village, and observing the predicament of a widowed aunt that I got provoked into questions of development. But this happened a little later.

Within a year or so of settling down in India, the Delhi School lulled me into a lackadaisical lifestyle. I cannot share in the enthusiasm of researchers who analyse and study large amounts of data and statistics and find these interesting in themselves. For me reality provides information through the osmosis of everyday life. The real challenge is to fit these pieces of information into a pattern consistent internally and also *vis-à-vis* what we already know. I am sure there are better things to do but I would happily leave these to others.

The Delhi School in those days did little to stir my latent yearning for logic and reasoning. No one seemed to be working hard. I tried to attend some of my colleagues’ lectures but that merely confirmed Auden’s observation (if the LSE 1992 calendar is to be trusted) that ‘a professor is someone who talks in someone else’s sleep’.

I do not here mention the easygoing lifestyle at the School in the early eighties as criticism. Indeed I believe—as Bertrand Russell said he did while commenting on the Chinese earlier this century—that this is a good attitude to life. But I also agree with Russell that this attitude is too dangerous in a world where there are others who are more materialistic and predatory.

Our landlord’s temperamental water pump, his even more temperamental wife and my own lack of interest in research made me wonder (for the first and the last time) whether I had made a mistake in my cavalier dismissal of my family profession, the law.

Belgium saved me. At the suggestion of Jacques Drèze I applied to CORE for a fellowship and Alaka, our son Karna, and I ended up spending 1981-2 in Belgium. There I suddenly woke up to the importance of hard work and discipline. I use the word ‘importance’ somewhat selfconsciously, because in a fundamental sense I do not consider such traits important. They are important only instrumentally. They have good survival value or, to use the argon of evolutionary game theory, a high ‘fitness’ coefficient. I worked very hard in Belgium. And when we returned to India the
passion and excitement of discovering new ideas kept me engrossed.

The Delhi School also seemed a more congenial place now. Among my friends of that time were Ashok Lahiri, now languishing at the IMF in Washington, and Pronnay Roy, whose departure from the Delhi School and immense success as a television personality, while not quite devastating for the science of economics, was nevertheless a great loss for the atmosphere of the School. What viewers of television do not know from Pronnay’s deadpan performance is that he has a great sense of humour. And so does Ashok. This meant that we had a wonderful time in the School. We wasted several hours every day merrily in front of the coffee house. I made up by working late hours at home.

V

Compared to other departments in India and abroad, the department of economics at the Delhi School has been a place remarkably free of infighting and intrigue. I do not necessarily say this as a tribute: infighting can often be a consequence of intellectual integrity and a refusal to compromise, while its absence can reflect compromise and opportunism. I do not know what the cause was in the case of our department, but it has in general been a place of warmth and friendship and at times even fitted Shaw’s description of hotels—a great refuge from home.

The ‘in general’ should have warned the reader that it is time for dirty linen, time for the exceptions to what was in general true. One episode that I recall is the founding of the development economics course. In the early eighties a major syllabus revision was being debated among us. I planned a new course on theoretical development economics and tabled it at a departmental meeting. This met with an astonishing range of objections. Some felt it would have nothing to offer which was not already being taught in other courses. Some felt it would be too different from what was being taught in other courses. Some felt it was too vague and ill-defined. Some felt it was too rigorous and rigid.

It was finally decided that I should rework the plan of the new course. This became a pattern. At every syllabus meeting a new variant of my course would be discussed and struck down. It seemed to me that what my colleagues were against was not the course but the audacity of my trying to design a full new course so soon after joining the School. They would look for any reason to stop me.

In one departmental meeting when I said that I planned to teach Amit Bhaduri’s paper on stagnation and semi-feudalism in the new course, an erstwhile colleague of mine objected that he already taught it in his course and then, throwing caution to the winds, went on to explain the gist of the paper. Within moments it was evident that he could not have been teaching it (or at least I hope he was not).

Desperate but still quite determined I went to Sukhamoy Chakravarty, who rarely attended departmental meetings, and asked him if he would share with me the teaching of a new course in development. Sukhamoy agreed and came along for the next meeting. With his reputation as one of the most distinguished scholars in the country and adviser to successive prime ministers, Sukhamoy Chakravarty had a somewhat formidable presence. After I, for the nth time, discussed the motivation behind my course and described it to the department, Sukhamoy said he felt that such a course could be challenging and offer a fresh perspective on development. Soon I heard one colleague say that he felt that the course had potential; another said it could offer a new angle on development; yet another felt that it could provide a fresh viewpoint on development. The course was approved.

In retrospect, my collaboration with Sukhamoy Chakravarty worked out remarkably well. The course was a resounding success, with enormous student enthusiasm and attendance. I put considerable effort into it and so did Sukhamoy, despite his very heavy commitments as chairman of the prime minister’s Economic Advisory Council.

For my part of the course I used, among other readings, my book *The Less Developed Economy*. This had been written in Delhi
and Belgium and was very well received in India and abroad. There were only two critical reviews, one of them by Ashok Rudra, who later became a very close friend. A colleague of Rudra's told me he was upset that I had not referred to his work adequately. I subsequently learnt that this is not an uncommon response among academics. Amartya Sen, being very intelligent, must have figured out as much rather early, since a look at the list of references in his books suggests that he covers himself against this risk by a wide margin.

VI

A majority of my colleagues at the School have been truly progressive and liberal. Their lifestyles are simple but their ideas and beliefs are unconventional and bold. I consider myself lucky to have been able to work in such an environment. Let me not embarrass anyone alive by naming names, since there is no dearth of examples from among the ones who have died. Elsewhere, I have written extensively about Sukhamoy Chakravarty, his modesty and arrogance, his erudition of Schumpeterian proportions, his sense of bitterness and fulfilment, and his simplicity of lifestyle. So I shall not dwell on him here.

Two other colleagues with whom I interacted were Raj Krishna and Khaleeq Naqvi. I did not know Raj Krishna too well because he used to be a member of the Planning Commission for much of the time that I was in Delhi. He was supposed to be a riveting public speaker, full of wit and a great skill for coining new terms and expressions. It was he who popularized India's GNP growth rate of 3.5 per cent as the 'Hindus rate of growth'. Given India's stubborn adherence to this rate from the time of independence to the late seventies, it did appear at times that it must be a number written in our scriptures. Raj Krishna's description captured the idea so well that it became common parlance among students of the Indian economy.

Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri once described Professor Naqvi as a person who had 'nothing small-time' about him. Naqvi was indeed a man of colour, a word that Jacques Drèze used when describing him to me. Drèze told me that, once, at the Delhi School, he was trying to phone Belgium and found himself arguing with a rude and obstinate telephone operator. Naqvi, who walked into the room, offered to help, took the receiver from Drèze and began talking to the operator with 'you are stupid'. Drèze was sure that that had put an end to what little hope there was of his getting a line through to Belgium. Naqvi went on pouring venom into the mouthpiece and at the end of it passed the receiver on to Jacques Drèze with a polite: 'Speak. Here is your line to Belgium.'

Naqvi, like some other illustrious teachers at the School, had a distrust of automobiles and possessed no car when I joined the School. I was told that he used to have one. Once, when he was returning home from somewhere, the car broke down near Red Fort. This had happened before and Naqvi was exasperated. He walked and found an automobile shop, called the owner, struck a deal, sold his car, and took a bus home.

The human side of the School has been enriched by the presence of some of India's best anthropologists and sociologists in the department of sociology of the Delhi School. A few of these are outstanding intellectuals with whom to argue is to be kept on one's toes. I have been told that historically there was a lot of tension between the two departments, with the economists exuding confidence about the advanced state of their science and the sociologists being the more eloquent speakers. I do believe that sociology is overburdened with jargon, and that some sociologists are fluent talkers because inadequacy of meaning does not get in the way of their speech. But I am also aware that to measure everything in terms of rigour or precision is utterly foolish. For many an economist, mathematical competence is anyway a façade for the vacuousness within. Moreover, many of the most sophisticated art forms, such as poetry, would have to be classified as backward if this were the only yardstick. Fortunately, in the contemporary Delhi School there is considerable mutual respect
for the comparative advantages of the two disciplines, even though Ricardo would probably have been disappointed to find that this did not result in as much trade as his theory would have predicted.

VII

The most unfortunate part of the Delhi School of Economics is its physical condition and research infrastructure. The main building is in a state of disrepair, the bathrooms are dysfunctional, the library is crumbling, and not only do the gardeners not work but try waking them up.

Deep down inside me there is a fatal attraction for chaos, dilapidation and anarchy, and so the Delhi School appeals to me in the same way that Calcutta does. Their run-down state is almost a metaphorical proof of what, to adapt Kamala Das' expression, 'life is worth in the end'.

But as others know and a detached intellectual sense tells me, this is wrong. It is wrong on the part of the government to allow the School to run down. When every even medium-ranking government officer has a PC gathering dust in his room, it is wrong to have a premier institute starved of computers. At the Delhi School's Department of Economics there are two phones in two central rooms and you have to go running down the corridor to receive a call on the rare occasion when the operator is in a good enough mood to call you. Of course, the question of E-mail does not arise. And FAX is nearly a dirty word.

We do not have funds to invite visiting scholars. It is lucky that Hsuan-tsang did not think of visiting India in the eighties and nineties. A visiting scholar who gives a seminar is given 100 rupees, i.e. about three dollars, which includes the honorarium and taxi fare. Of course, over time one learns to deal with the situation. The technique is to slip the money into the hands of the visiting speaker after the seminar, apologise that you have to rush to an urgent meeting, and vanish before he can count the poverty thrust into his hands.

It is true that this has meant that only the most progressive and committed social scientists come to the School. This is not without advantage, but there is no denying that the squeeze has been hurting research standards for some time now and has made collaborative research with economists based elsewhere very difficult.

India's higher education system and research output has, in comparison with other Third World countries and even some industrialized ones, been outstanding. This is one of the few internationally recognized achievements of our nation. But this did not happen effortlessly. It was a consequence of the foresight and interventions of the founding fathers of the nation. I have no doubt in my mind that this is on the slide. There is no point telling the university system to pull itself up by the bootstraps. Higher research—disinterested research—is one area that needs purposive government initiative. So if it fails we all know who is responsible.