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Scientific Enquiry vs Ideology

In the comment, "Replacing Science with Mystery" (EPW, 12 June 2010) that George Thomas wrote on Laurent Pordié's article, "The Politics of Therapeutic Evaluation in Asian Medicine" (EPW, 1 May 2010), an orthopaedic surgeon, also interested in medical ethics, takes up an anthropological paper addressing issues of power in the health field to share his view and experience on this topic. This is a very welcome initiative, which however shows the need to further encourage dialogue between specialists of different disciplines. Thomas brought back an old debate but does not seem to master its complexity. His argument is embedded in an ideological frame, which characterises numerous MDS in our country who see a binary opposition and impermeable borders between Indian medicine and allopathy. This is unfortunate because the remarkable paper written by Pordié brings a balanced and refreshing analysis of the politics of therapeutic efficacy, which would have rather deserved a constructive comment.

For Thomas, "The Politics of Therapeutic Evaluation in Asian Medicine" promised to offer a new method of therapeutic evaluation, and the author searched for it in vain in the paper. He should have been warned that social sciences offer social criticism and unfortunately not ready-made solutions and even less technical propositions. As the title actually suggests, the paper addresses issues of power involved in the evaluation of Asian medicine, such as the hegemony of medical epistemologies over others and the political reorientation of international ethnopharmacology. The paper follows by showing that the proof of efficacy in traditional medicine entails the production of particular types of commodities, which claim universality while remaining strong markers of cultural identity. This process, shows Pordié, involves three important shifts: Indian medicine is rendered more onerous, is increasingly urbanised and solely accessible to the higher social fringes. Biomedical standards create a normative frame which "delimit the space of possibility" (Pordié: 63) for Indian medicine.

Pordié offers an insightful analysis of the socio-political consequences brought about by this encounter.

Thomas writes that Pordié hopes "to ensure access to medical care for the poorest populations through traditional medicines". This is an absolute mistake. When reading anthropological work, it is important to clearly discern the various layers of discourses involved in the author's analysis. Pordié clearly presents this as the World Health Organisation's (WHO) objectives and Thomas conflates the WHO objectives with the author's arguments, which are concerned with the politics involved in the WHO project. This is highly problematic. The same applies to issues pertaining to accessibility and therapeutic efficacy. The WHO agenda aims to ensure wide accessibility to traditional medicine, but insists on doing so through the strict validation of their efficacy. The confusion is not that of the author of the paper but that of Thomas. The commentator also thinks that Pordié "is concerned about the possible exploitation of people by modern medicine". Again, this is not what the paper tells us, quite on the contrary. It rather shows that Indian medicine, once validated by biomedicine (through clinical trials) becomes out of reach to the poor, through the three shifts I have presented. Now, I would see no harm in thinking that biomedicine *also* exploits the poor. I am a medical practitioner as Thomas, and I am well aware of the rampant corruption in our hospitals especially as they concern the poor.

While Pordié's paper would not generate any controversy in anthropological circles, I understand, however, that it may irritate practitioners (from both sides) who take a social critique at face value, and not as a heuristic device.

Dilip Reddy
HYDERABAD

Is Speculation a Problem?

This refers to Richa Kumar's article on commodity futures markets in India "Mandi Traders and the *Dabba*" (EPW, 31 July 2010).

The author mentions that the large MNCs exert an undue influence in setting futures prices, yet, the article itself mentions local

oligopolies of big traders doing the same. Naturally, the loss of a market-influencing monopoly would be rued by these very traders who were the respondents of the author's ethnographic interviews.

It is for the precise purpose of removing the disproportionate advantage of one/few market players that the market needs to be widely participated in. Hence, the activities of speculators in futures market need to be welcomed, albeit under sound regulatory principles which the national commodity exchanges and the regulator have long put in place. Speculators bring in the much needed liquidity to the futures market which lead to efficiency in the process of price discovery and make the process of risk management, cheaper. Speculation, moreover, cannot and should not be confused with absence of delivery, as has been made in the article, as hedgers can also opt for cash settlement.

Another point made by the author is that price movements in futures markets are often out of sync with domestic market fundamentals. In globally integrated markets with free and rapid flow of information, international factors play as important a role in influencing prices as domestic factors. The specific example the author gives – a crash in soybean price – is a correction (rightly pointed out by a trader) in price, not very dissimilar to such corrections one observes in other markets – from equity to real estate – as these markets adjust to fundamentals. Hence, there is nothing to be unduly worried about the soybean market, or be critical of futures market on this count. Criticism of speculators on this market also appears unwarranted as for every “unusual price” in the market, there is a buyer and a seller willing to transact and clear the market at this price knowing fully the risks of not being in tune with market fundamentals.

The author also appears to mistake the risk-mitigating function of the futures market to a non-existent objective of profit-guarantee. Futures markets, functioning through self-regulatory organisations (SROS) like commodity exchanges and the Forward Markets Commission (FMC), the market regulator, help stakeholders to lock in prices; they do not guarantee higher profits to market players. The actual price may indeed move adversely to the

locked-in prices for the hedger. Yet, to the extent that a price has been fixed (and delivery opted for, as may be the case, guaranteeing availability), futures markets provide an *assured* price rather than the *best* price. The article unfortunately adds to the misconception rather than clearing the air on this issue.

Be so as it may, the point of the author that the traders are worried about futures markets needs to be taken cognisance of. We also hold that unless the trader, an important stakeholder in the agriculture ecosystem, sees tangible benefits from this market, one cannot expect the market to deepen significantly. With this realisation, the national commodity exchanges have teamed up with FMC and many other agencies (viz, academic institutions) to conduct awareness campaigns on an extensive scale to educate the public about the benefits of futures markets and to remove any misgivings or apprehensions they may have. We have seen these efforts yielding results in terms of increasing references to futures-traded prices in their spot market transactions and a steady and consistent rise in the participation of physical market players on the futures platform.

V Shunmugam, Chief Economist and
Debojyoti Dey, Economist

MUMBAI

Repression and Waste

I thank Kashmir Singh “False Proposition” (EPW, 21 August 2010) for taking the trouble to respond to my short article. However, I am disappointed by its contents. He writes that my argument (in “False Proposition on the Strength of the Police Force”, EPW, 17 July 2010) is based on “inadequate research and irrelevant assumptions”. I would be the first one to agree with him had he proceeded to illustrate his contention. Instead, he leaves me confused because he actually repeats what I have said and endorses that “paramilitary forces have been often deployed to fight insurgents (as in J&K) ...for decades”. I pointed to the difference between short-term and prolonged deployment, where the balance of power between civilian and security forces changes in the latter. He is also unaware of the irony when he cites J&K, which is a case of failure of military

suppression and wastage of personnel and public funds, when more than 20 years of military offensive against the Kashmiri people has not won them over to acceptance of forced union with India. He also finds fault with me by stating that the “author admits that he is not clear” about whether the union home secretary meant civil or armed police when he spoke of vacancies and additional requirement, a total of eight lakhs (and not 3.5 lakhs that Kashmir Singh refers to) over the next five years.

My caution can hardly be an argument against me. The reason for my hesitation was because civil police recruitment is not the constitutional responsibility of the union government, which only raises paramilitary forces under the mistaken title of “police”, but of the states. It is also my experience that each time the security forces suffer casualties at the hands of insurgents/rebels, there is a clamour for augmenting their strength. Not once has the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) contested this “assumption”. Indeed, it puts out statements referring to the UN benchmark so as to suggest that there is a deliberate mixing up of the issue of civil police shortage with augmentation of armed police. Therefore, if I am wrong in being unclear as to what the union home secretary meant, all that was needed to be done was to provide a break-up of state-wise recruitment of the eight lakhs personnel over five years which will make evident how many are being recruited by each state and under which category. This information is, regrettably, not available in the public domain.

I am also astonished at the remark that in 34 districts the ratio of “armed police to the population is much higher is neither here nor there”. Really? Why is it of no concern that there is a very high deployment of armed personnel which has an impact on the lives of civilians in these areas? For example, why is it of no concern that in addition to state armed police, all the five battalions of the Border Security Force (BSF) posted in Chhattisgarh are deployed in a single district of Kanker, which has a population of 6.5 lakhs?

It may be the difference in our vantage point from which we approach issues that accounts for our differences.

Gautam Navlakha

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