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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON RURAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC FIELD WORK

By

S. Kesava Iyengar

Rural areas in India comprise vast expanses. All-weather road milage has been increasing, but yet a high majority of villages are off the road—some nearby, some far away, some with village sites, some with homesteads spread over hills and dales, amidst farms. Generally speaking, there is a wide gulf between roadside villages and those in the interior with regard to progressive ideas and the general outlook on life : it would be fallacious to mix up these two categories of villages and arrive at averages and percentages, just as much as to attempt to study rural problems with urban or semi-urban spectacles. Rather, it would be comparatively safer to distinguish among four sectors for the purpose of investigations ; namely, urban, semi-urban, roadside rural, and interior rural. Of course, it is not possible to draw any hard and fast border lines as among these four, but even an elastic classification should help immensely in getting fairly accurate data separately which may not be comparable on account of vital environmental differences.

The average villager is quite intelligent, can understand his own interests quite clearly, but the tendency on his part to imitate and to suspect is a great hurdle. He prefers to imitate his neighbour because he cannot afford to risk. He is suspicious due to neglect by the British administration in India, of which his predecessors and himself have been victims on account of over-centralisation, theoretical rural administration, token grants for relief and development work, and the unrighteous way in which the Law of Contract was enforced by law courts against him, for several scores of years. Unlike the urban household, the village family members know practically nothing about the economic side : it is only the head of the household that may be able to give some details.

Standardisation is more or less absent with regard to fertility of land, proximity to the village site, selection of seed and manuring. In view of this, it is almost impossible to adopt any norm while enquiring into costs and yields, gross and net prices, income and expenditure, profit and loss.

While non-economic items like religion and morality, joint family and franchise, cannot possibly be evaluated in any socio-economic survey (although exerting profound influence on socio-economic life), non-monetary economic items like climate, rainfall, environmental hygiene, communications and transport, health and educational facilities, "free" roots and nuts and fruit from road-side avenues and adjacent forests, the family's own farm labour and that of the family's cattle, barter transactions in consumer goods, labour and cattle, and the marketable produce, are indeed very hard to be rendered into monetary terms, such items exerting influences sometimes on the plus side, sometimes on the minus side. Yet, such items are very important in the economic life of villagers. A technique has yet to be evolved for making adjustments in data based only on monetary items, in view of the incidence of non-monetary but yet economic factors.

With regard to sizes of holdings, village records are incomplete inspite of "records of land rights" and "land censuses" : even within ten years after complete revision, new unrecorded holdings crop up on account of informal distribution of land by the children of a deceased father. There are other considerations like widely varying fertility of land, dry and wet cultivation, poor and rich crops, which must make the mere size of the holding quite a subordinate consideration. In spite of land reforms progressing at different levels in different areas in the country, cultivation holdings (farm units) change materially in area from year to year with individual activities of the occupants-cum-tenants, landless tenants and agricultural labourers jointly holding minute plots (mostly *Inam*), sometimes cultivating by turns, sometimes leasing out to tenants.

Assets may be analysed into three groups, namely, immovable, liquid, and other movable. Particularly in villages, the last item comprises long lists of cheap secondhand trinkets and lumber, the cash value of which may be practically nil among the low income groups. Liquid assets are of course definite with a high cash value, but even members of the family are not told about the liquid assets of the head of the family. Immovable property like agricultural land and houses cannot be given any cash value : if all lands in a village are to be auctioned simultaneously, bids are bound to be ridiculously low. The best that can be done is to assign values based on the opinion of the village *panch* which in turn is determined on the basis of numerous other considerations than the annual cash value. Here again, similar items are bound to carry widely varying evaluation as among roadside and interior villages.

Liabilities are equally hard to assess. Memory is short in many cases specially with regard to hand loans from relatives and friends, shop dues, land revenue and *tacavi* dues etc. Calculations take time and involve examination of documents. In numerous cases, the sense of humiliation prevents the parties from revealing truths, specially among those who borrow from several creditors, each creditor not knowing the debts due to other creditors by his own clients.

Housing in villages is impossible to classify. The question of measuring the plinth area or calculation of the cubical air space, does not arise for the simple reason that many houses have no windows, some have no walls, a few have no roofs ! The Second Five-Year Plan disposes of rural housing with a hope that local initiative might do something.

REQUISITES

A few difficulties have been enumerated above. To meet them successfully, there are several requisites with which the investigator should be armed :

(i) High academic qualifications although very desirable, do not automatically make a successful investigator. The most important requisite is the missionary spirit, an attitude of sympathy and high level of patience and presence of mind. For this, experience of village psychology and life should prove much more helpful than mere University degrees.

(ii) The investigator should not have any kind of prepossession or presentiment : he should have an open mind. Camping in the local money-lender's comparatively comfortable guest house, or the local deshmukh's garden cottage, is bound to influence the investigator in making entries of data.

(iii) A table and chair, a cot, tea or coffee, a variety of vegetables, a good laundry, an attractive cinema—these may not be available in most of the villages. Like the professional hunter, the economic investigator should unlearn most of his urban habits and be prepared for physical discomfort in order to enable himself to stay in the village for the required time in a cheerful mood. There is undoubtedly some risk to health in villages infested with guinea worm, cholera, plague, typhoid or malaria, but protection is possible with the help of prior inoculations. Any idea of staying in the nearest traveller's bungalow and doing the survey work during hours suiting bus timings, would be suicidal : it must lead to a resignation or "manufactured" data.

(iv) The investigator has to adjust himself to suit the convenience of the villager with regard to both time and place. As such, his programme would have to be flexible to some extent. What is more, revision of the data and recording of impressions and observations, must be done before leaving the village ; otherwise, data and impressions of other villages might overlap and lead to confusion : soft revision has the virtue of the source of information being readily available. Similarly, grants for village surveys would have to be upgraded in the light of unexpected local peculiarities and circumstances.

(v) The investigator would have to be very tactful : one harsh word, one wrong epithet, might alienate the whole village. Smoking a *beedi* or a cigarette although not habituated, and sipping even an unpleasant cup of tea by the investigator, may persuade the villagers to hearty co-operation. No rural investigation can hope to succeed with the help of police or judicial powers : if a villager does not co-operate in the enquiry, the investigator must be construed as having failed in his work.

(vi) It is a common temptation to the investigator to imagine that he is on a Government or semi-Government job, in Departments like the Revenue, the Police or the Public Works. He may forget the fundamental fact that these Departments of Government have respectively certain important responsibilities and powers while he himself has neither. But the average villager is not able to distinguish and the investigator should beware and not take advantage. Otherwise, the enquiry is bound to be vitiated by local disputes and squabbles. The investigator should frankly explain the ambit of his work, and his limitations.

(vii) The investigator should not assume the role of an adviser even with regard to the items of enquiry in which he is engaged. It would be very much worse if he should deal with or express opinions on technical and professional matters of which he is quite innocent, like the suitability of irrigation with regard to particular soils, use of fertilizers, anti-malaria measures, village planning, protected water supply, etc. In this respect, experience should go a long way : an investigator should be preferably forty years of age or over, but in any case not less than 30. In the present context, women cannot take up rural investigations al-

though they prove very successful (other things being equal) in urban surveys. At least one year's training is very necessary before invetigators are given independent charge. Such training should be organised at least in six centres in order to cover personnel all over the country.

(viii) The investigator must go to the villager's house for collecting data, but for verification the village ecclesia must be assembled. The villagers have very few secrets. Once they see the village officers and the "elders" co-operating in the survey, they would be inclined to co-operate heartily, even correct some mistakes they might have made while furnishing data in their respective houses.

(ix) Rural investigations are somewhat like gold-digging : data must be collected for their own sake, without being accompanied by any theatrical aftermath or reputation. There have been several cases of employees of governmental and semi-governmental concerns chastised for presenting or publishing data which were not in the interests of the authorities. For this reason, investigators should not be the employees of Government Departments, the Reserve Bank of India or even Universities (which in India are mostly financed and controlled by the respective Governments) unless they become fully autonomous.

(x) Even a co-operating householder may give wrong figures on account of ignorance or inability to calculate. Therefore, verification with regard to every item is very necessary, for example, between tenant and landholder, debtor and creditor, employee and employer, the consumer and the grocer, figures from individuals and Government records, etc.

(xi) Days of isolated *ad hoc* surveys are gone. Like periodical taxation enquiry, fiscal and finance commissions, socio-economic surveys should go on periodically so that comparisons might become possible with earlier surveys, and the technique might improve on account of cumulative experience.

The task is beset with difficulties, but the prospect is hopeful. With the First and the Second Five-Year Plans, more and more of the rural masses are becoming socio-economically conscious. New techniques for investigations are being evolved in new centres of research. The Planning Commission and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research are fully aware of the basic importance of rural socio-economic research, and the supply of qualified personnel with the right temperament is becoming less of a problem.