REFLECTIONS ON FIELD WORK IN AGRARIAN STUDIES

Nimal Sanderatne[1]

Professor B. H. Farmer's article "Some Thoughts on the Place of Field Work in Agrarian Studies" in the inaugural number of the *Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies*, provides a useful opportunity to reflect on some of the important issues connected with agrarian field-work and field surveys in the agrarian studies. Field studies, which were inadequate and rare in Sri Lanka till about the sixties, have proliferated and one even hears of areas in the country which have been "over surveyed". A discussion of the perspectives, priorities, techniques and types of field-work in agrarian studies is thus very opportune.

In his paper, Farmer excludes from discussion field visits, field surveys and field mapping. Farmer identifies field-work with in-depth case studies of a particular rural community in which researchers spend adequate time to understand an entire social entity, by unravelling the interrelations among its different elements and their underlying casual factors. He thus refers to field-work as : "that intimate study of the situation in the field which will reveal not only the elements of order in agrarian and agricultural patterns but will also suggest the reasons for these elements of order . . . . . "[2] Farmer, regards case studies as one component of research methodology and admits a need for "a combination of depth-studies or case studies of particular villages or problems, on the one hand, and of rigorous sample surveys of a statistical nature on the other . . . . "[3]

The objective of this paper is to reflect on the ideas expressed by Farmer and elaborate on some aspects which he has not adequately dealt with. This paper attempts to place the various types of field-work in perspective, their conceptual merits and operational difficulties high-lighted and some of the broader issues of relevance to field-work in agrarian studies in Sri Lanka will be discussed.

The second section discusses field visits or field excursions. The significance of field surveys is discussed in the third section as a corrective to the limited role and importance which Farmer appears to assign to such surveys. Some of the difficulties and practical problems of conducting field surveys will also be referred to. In the fourth section attention is focussed on some of the limitations of in-depth case studies. Case studies are undoubtedly very valuable in understanding the socio-economic, political and cultural factors influencing agrarian societies, and the intent of this is not to depreciate their usefulness but to help in a proper understanding of the role of such studies in a broader framework of agrarian research. The fifth section deals with in-depth action oriented participatory research projects which Farmer does not refer to, though these are in fact an adaptation and extension of in-depth field-work. The final section summarises and assesses the specific roles of the different types of field-work and some of the crucial factors influencing the scope and quality of field-work. Some of the broader issues influencing field-work in Sri Lanka's agrarian studies are discussed here.

---

1. I am very grateful to Dr. S. B. D. de Silva who painstakingly provided valuable comments on an earlier draft of the paper and contributed much to the improvement of the original draft of the papers. I am also thankful to Dr. K. S. E. Jayatilleke, the late Mr. A. M. S. Radaliyagoda, Dr. Senaka Bandaranayake and Dr. Nimal Fernando for very useful comments on an earlier draft.

2. Farmer (1980) p.2

3. Farmer (1990) p. 2

II. Field Visits

Farmer repudiates mere visits or excursions into villages or rural areas as a category of 'field-work'. However, such visits have had an important bearing on theories of agrarian development. Some early explanations of the back-wardness of peasant agriculture in terms of a lack of motivation among peasants were based on such visits. It was argued *a priori* that peasants did not adopt improved methods and techniques of cultivation, including the optimum use of fertiliser, because they were satisfied with their low levels of living. Such assertions, which even acquired the status of theories, were developed by outsiders, visiting villages, speaking to a few farmers, often though interpreters. Surprisingly the 'researchers' had no in-depth knowledge of the rural economy and society and the basis of the peasants' response to market situations. More generally, the standpoint taken by researchers was the result of a particular theoretical approach which explains social phenomena in terms of subjective factors ('attitudes', 'proliferations' and 'values') to the exclusion of objective constraints.

This type of field-work is reflected in Kusum Nair's well known book '*Blossoms in the Dust*'[4]. Kusum Nair, a journalist, toured India's different states, spoke to farmers and summarised her experience in the book. The Key question she asked was how much land each farmer would like to possess, if land was freely given. The answers, it appears, were very modest extents. Kusum Nair then concluded that Indian farmers had no aspirations for improvement: the poorer they were, the lower their aspirations.

The deficiency of this type of 'field-work', apart from its superficiality, is that those who go into the field carry with them a theory which they want confirmed. It is in reality not a dispassionate or serious inquiry, but one that is designed to confirm rather than to test a hypothesis, it catalogues incidents and conversations which give the impression of the researchers' intimate knowledge of the people and environment.

This point needs to be stressed as there are instances when even a superficial inquiry hurriedly conducted could be a corrective to ideas conceived or formulated in an office. While fleeting visits to the field are not sufficient for a proper understanding of the reality, field visits of any kind could form a preliminary stage of an in-depth inquiry; they are certainly better than no acquaintance at all of the reality.

III. Field Surveys

The second type of field-work or field surveys requires more elaborate discussion than Farmer has done. Farmer implies that 'field-work' ought to be a more serious undertaking, requiring a preliminary knowledge of field conditions (pilot surveys) and should be conducted by a manageable group of qualified and perceptive investigators (not an 'army' of them or 'postman' who carry questionnaires to the field). Otherwise, the answers brought back could differ markedly from reality. Although admitting the usefulness of "rigorous sample surveys of a statistical nature"[5], Farmer grossly understates the importance of such surveys.

Farmer has made a conclusive judgement that such surveys "bring back answers departing markedly, as such answers will, from reality". How does one arrive at the conclusion that the findings of a macro survey are inaccurate. Perhaps by "globe trotting and moving rapidly by car or train and talking to more articulate inhabitants!!" Certainly not by in-depth surveys of all villages which would be impractical.

---

4. Nair (1961)

5. Farmer (1980) p. 2

This characterisation of field surveys is hardly in accord with Asok Rudra's assessment of the relative roles of the case study approach and the survey method quoted by Farmer himself. Rudra points out that the fact that case studies could never give "the reliable quantitative estimates that the survey approach makes possible" and that without surveys it is difficult to grasp the dimension of the problem"[6].

There are several reasons for the differing importance of these types of field-work. The data obtained in a single village are not necessarily indicative of general conditions in the country, or in Rudra's words, quoted by Farmer, "it is difficult to grasp the dimensions of any problem"[7]. Field Surveys are also at regular intervals and the changes in the country can be gauged. At the time a decision has to be made on some issue or other of agrarian policy the available data of field surveys already undertaken are more likely to be used than a new survey conducted for a specific purpose.

Despite or perhaps as a result of the national importance of these field surveys, their formulation, organisation and execution involve serious problems. It is worth spelling some of these out at least as a guideline to future organisers of these surveys.

Since these surveys do not have a single objective and they are important for gathering national data, it is a very common and known error to overload the questionnaire. Common refrains of participants at the organisation level of such surveys are: 'it will also be useful to know now many....', 'it will be very useful to get some information on....', 'if we get information on....we can then relate it to....'. The government is now very interested in finding out....' etc. Committees are often formed to organise such surveys and it becomes mandatory for each member to contribute a new idea on data to be collected and for each member not to be outdone by others. The pleas made by executors of the survey that the questionnaire may be overloaded are weak in such committees. Consequently the field worker is saddled with a long and tiring questionnaire which subjects both the interviewer and respondent to fatigue, and the quality of data collected suffers.

Those who have worked in the field are well acquainted with the fact that neatly worked out schedules are no guarantee of proper field collection of data. Pre-testing of questionnaires in pilot surveys provides an opportunity to understand field conditions and encounter likely problems that interviewers may face with respondents. In practice there are some problems which reduce the effectiveness and importance of pilot surveys. Where there are heterogenous field conditions it is often not possible to conduct an adequate number of such pilot surveys to reflect the different types of problems which may be faced in a survey. Besides, there is often inadequate time between the pilot survey and the main survey. Consequently all the modifications and adaptations which the pilot survey suggested may not be incorporated.

Although it is well known that field conditions for collection of data can be very different to those imagined at the desk, in practice, those who have not had enough experience of field-work may not grasp the complexities of field data collection. Unfortunately the scope and content of field surveys are not often determined by those without the required experience as field investigators. Thereby the cost of surveys are unnecessarily increased and the quality of data poor.

---

6. Farmer (1980) p. 2
7. Farmer (1980) p. 2

The planning and execution of field surveys are essentially learnt on the job and theoretical knowledge is only of marginal significance. Advanced statistical courses at the best of universities rarely touch on this area or even when they do, are only an introduction to the real thing. Even the limited literature on the techniques of field investigation relate to agrarian societies whose social milieu is very different to those in Sri Lanka. Bhati has pointed out that coditions are so different in Asian countries, to those in Western countries, that a good investigator has to do just the opposite of the advise in these books.[8] Adaptation innovation and ingenuity are most important in conducting field-work both of the survey type and of in-depth studies. Besides the experience gained on the field, temperament attitudes and inclinations play an important role in determining the functional efficiency and quality of a good field worker. Unfortunately field collection of data is an art which everyone is not capable of mastering.

What has been said here of planners and administrators of field survey is of relevance to the choice of investigators in field studies who play a crucial role. The choice of investigators – with due respect to linguistic abilities, attitude to farmers and farming and temperament – is very important. Adequate remuneration and field facilities, constant supervision of their work and on the spot resolution of field problems are important ingredients in making a field survey a success. Any lapses in integrity must be fairly dealt with and only investigators with a proven integrity over time must be retained as field investigators.

The implications of the earlier paragraph is that if field surveys are to be properly conducted, a trained, experienced and proven field survey units must be developed by agencies conducting such surveys. The recruitment of investigators on an *ad hoc* basis cannot be expected to give worthwhile results, except perhaps in the most basic aspects of statistical work like the counting of heads in a census.

Perhaps it is the difficulties of meeting the many pre-conditions for a successful field survey, that has made Farmer and others so sceptical about the validity of such surveys. A distinction must be made between the accuracy of data collected in the field and the methodology. The former, can be owing to inefficient management and this applies to field-work of any type, for each type of field-work has rigorous requirements of skills, integrity and devotion among its workers. Thers is no inherent reason why one type must necessarily give more accurate data.

The essential difference between Farmer's perspective and mine, is that while he is derisive of such surveys and believes they are of very little use in understanding socio-economic phenomena, it is my view that since field surveys alone could provide the kinds of data for the assessment and evaluation of many aspects of agrarian problems, field survey techniques, which are some of the best developed scientific tools available to a social scientist, should be improved and adapted to local conditions to provide useful insights on agrarian issues.

IV. In-depth Field-Work or Case Studies

In-depth field-work provide essential insights into the understanding of social behaviour in agrarian societies. Farmer has discussed in fair detail the usefulness of such studies in his paper.

---

8. Bhati (1975)

There are several aspects of agrarian studies which require an understanding of social and cultural factors influencing agrarian society. A deep understanding of the socio-cultural milieu can only be obtained by the development of good rapport between the researcher and the villagers, either by spending a sufficient length of time in the village or, by a number of frequent visits. This is particularly important as peasant society often views outsiders with suspicion and are reluctant to disclose certain information. Therefore the limitations of such in - depth case studies which I discussed should not be interpreted to mean that I am not appreciative of their importance.

The first reservation I have is that scholars who have immersed themselves in an in-depth study of a particular area, are often blinded to different conditions which exist in other areas. They are so convinced by the "in-depthness" of their field-work, that they become missionaries of their findings and want to convince all others that they alone have found the 'truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. Such researchers are so obsessed by their own experience of the particular village that they generalise about all villages and arrive at much the same predicament as the economist, whom Farmer quotes as having said in conversation, that "all countries are the same"[9]. They tend to be like administrative officers, who having worked in a particular district, cannot be convinced that different conditions exist elsewhere.

This failing derived from in-depth studies is particularly significant in Sri lanka. While in a large country like India, her heterogeneity is well accepted, the smallness of Sri Lanka leads researchers to believe that knowing a village or a few villages is an adequate basis for generalisations.[10] In fact, small though Sri Lanka is, there is a variety of land tenure conditions, social behaviour patterns, socio-cultural regions and agro-climatic zones. Even within a region a particular village could diverge quite significantly from others. Only a few studies have attempted to develop some ideas and classifications of the country which indicate some of these differences.[11]

Researchers of case studies tend to conduct their field-work in an unstructured manner without the use of questionnaires and sometimes without even the collection of quantified data. Quite often it is contended that the techniques of the field survey method elude the real facts and that information is withheld or inaccurate when collected by the use of schedules. Instead these field researchers depend on copious notes of conversations, interviews with interest groups, 'well-informed informants', village leaders etc. and participant observation.

The unstructured methods of inquiry have many deficiencies. The biases of the researcher intrudes into the findings much more as there is a lack of weightage of the different answers received. The more articulate respondents tend to receive greater attention and their garrulity is mistaken for knowledge. Structured schedules permit for inter-relationships to be derived especially if the field observations disclose different conditions to those originally expected. In short, intelligently implemented survey techniques could provide more knowledge and give less biased and more objective information than many of the untructured methods presently used by in-depth researchers.

---

9. Farmer (1980) p.3
10. Farmer (1978) discusses this weakness in several sample surveys.
11. Ryan (1950), Sanderatne (1974).

Joseph Elder, an anthropologist who initially used the usual unstructured techniques in his research in a small village in Uttar Pradesh later found that the use of a structured schedule counteracted the self-selection of respondents, permitted the coverage of a wider range of topics and their comparability. Elder concluded that survey research methods "by dealing with sufficiently large numbers of people permit controls, ... help direct the search for explanations to focus on genuine, rather than spurious or accidental associations"[12].

Another issue related to in-depth studies on which I wish to focus attention is not on their methodology but their nature and scope in Sri Lanka. Many of these studies are undertaken to satisfy the curiosity or provide the data for testing hypotheses of significance to the international community of scholars and have no basis of priority in terms of national needs of research. On the face of it, national priorities in research do not appear to be of relevance when the funds for such research are from abroad. Yet, in fact it has serious implications. Although local financial resources may not be expended directly, these projects do utilise scarce trained local personnel. Psychologically and physically there is diversion of research efforts and resources to these studies rather than ones which may be of greater use to Sri Lanka. Although there is a payment of allowances to local personnel and services, these payments, though handsome by local standards, are exploitative in terms of research costs of the funding country. The important point to be made is that scarce Sri Lankan research talent may be diverted to study in-depth problems of interest to foreign academic interests.[13]

Many in-depth field studies undertaken in Sri Lanka may have little social relevance, immediate policy implications or contribute to an understanding of our agrarian society. They may be sophisticated exercises to buttress ideas and theories in the social sciences, but the conclusions may be well-known to us or be of no practical use.

Since the different in-depth studies arise from motivations of diverse interests of scholars in different centres of research, there may be little connection or co-ordination between them. Therefore the value of a number of in-depth studies may be lost because there is an inadequate regional spread and the fields of inquiry over-lap or duplicate. Conversely some aspects may not be researched at all.[14] Therefore, it is very important to plan the use of our scarce research personnel in studies deemed important for-our understanding of the structure and changes of our agrarian society.[15]

V. In-Depth Action-Oriented Participatory Research

In this section I discuss a type of research which is not dealt with in Farmer's article-action-oriented participatory research. Such research projects are recent and tried out only on a limited scale as yet.[16] The rationale for these projects is based on the realisation that most research studies are elitist oriented and do not serve any useful purpose to the objects of research. In fact most research findings are not even communicated to the researched villagers. The participatory research methodology is meant "to avoid the double trap of irrelevance and elitism".[17]

---

12 Elder (1968)

13 Bandaranayake (1976)

14 Peiris (1978) p.53 and pp.55—56

15 This aspect is discussed more fully in the concluding section of this paper.

16 The Sarvodya village studies, the Govi Samelanya project and the ICA/RT1/NCC/CLT Research Project on Co-operatives and Small Farmer Development are examples of this type of research studies.

17 Verhagen (1979) p.4

The basic features of these studies are that the researchers live within a village and attempt to understand the problems with a view to evolving a solution to them rather than the collection of facts and elaboration of the problems for presenting a research report. The solution or action-programme is evolved over time by the researchers investigating the objective situation, identifying problems, determining felt needs, obtaining technical data on potentialities and by continuous discussions with the villagers. The parameters of the problems, an assessment of the resources and an agreed institutional framework for undertaking an action programme are ingredients of these studies.

These studies, in a sence, have a greater in-depthness than traditional case studies. In the process of collecting the data and in evolving an action programme, the "objective" researchers become "participants" with the villagers and villagers become "participants" in the research. This interaction, it is suggested, gives a better understanding of how an agrarian society functions than a pure research project of the conventional type.

There are however several limitations and problems associated with this research. Even in these research projects the initial approach is as an outsider and the researchers tend to collect data in the traditional manner owing to their 'academic legacy' — previous training and experience. The data collected and the action programme that is evolved are meant to develop micro-pfojects and are not of global validity. Therefore if similar studies are to be done to evolve micro-projects for each village it would be impossibel to find adequate devoted personnel to conduct them and would be far too expensive. Since the exercise is undertaken with an openly stated position that the research would be followed by an action programme (often with external assistance), this expectation itself may create biases in the assessment of the objective situation. Further, if the expectation of a quick implementation of the promised action program is not realised, the disillusionment of the participants could be quite serious.

Although these action-oriented participatory research projects have these limitations, the understanding of the agrarian problems in a particular area with a view to their resolution are commendable. However their validity and applicability being limited, these studies will have only a limited impact unless a methodology is devised to reduce research costs and make possible a large number of such studies. One way of achieving this is to make available the research methodology to villagers themselves so that they may conduct the research. While subjective biases are likely to be incorporated, yet their intimate knowledge of their own conditions implies that they would be able to present a better understanding of their problems.

In the present context where agrarian research is always undertaken by outsiders —elitist urbanised academics and often foreigners and foreign experts, it may not be possible to get the idea accepted that research in an agrarian society could be undertaken by members of that society itself. Despite this, I wish to suggest that this concept in agrarian research be discussed, investigated and experimented in future years. The development of new methodologies for such research would be an essential step in making such research feasible.

VI. Summary and Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to place the various types of field-work undertaken within a purposeful framework of agrarian data collection required for agrarian policies and agrarian studies. Farmer's derisive characterisation of field visit was generally accepted, but we rejected his point of view that field surveys did not constitute field-work. Instead

the importance and significance of field surveys for policy decisions and assessments of national problems were stressed and some of the difficulties encountered in the planning and execution of such field surveys were pointed out.

While in-depth case studies provide useful insights they are limited in their value of assessing either the magnitude or general nature of problems in the country. Unfortunately researchers who have been immersed in case studies in particular areas tend to generalise on the basis of their particular experience and sometimes even influence policy decisions from this bias. They do not see the wood, only trees. The paper also outlined in-depth action oriented research studies. These action oriented research projects too may have a limited usefulness owing to the inability to spread such work sufficiently widespread.

These limitations should not detract us from the immense value of in-depth case studies in understanding social behaviour and phenomena. These case studies are for the social scientist very much like the controlled laboratory experiments of the natural and pure scientists. They provide the basis of understanding why and how of social facts, the overall magnitude of which has been assessed by field surveys.

Let me illustrate this with a *hypothetical* example, Suppose the following eight in-depth studies have been undertaken:

'The land tenure conditions in a Kandyan village';

'The marketing of agricultural produce in a Sabaragamuwa hamlet';

'A study of women's participation in agricultural activity in two villages in Jaffna';

'The impact of tube wells on agricultural organisation in Vavuniya';

'The relationship between caste and land tenure in three villages in the Galle District';

'The social and economic factors influencing the adoption of new agricultural technology in two villages in the Anuradhapura District';

'The substitution of tractors for buffaloes in purana villages in Polonnaruwa' and

'The influence of caste and religion on livestock farming in a low country wet zone village'

The value of these 8 in-depth studies of various aspects of the agrarian economy and society is virtually restricted to an understanding of the particular conditions in the limited geographical area. If some action is taken to resolve problems in the particular areas than these studies would be useful. Else their insights could be very limited in usefulness. The eight hypothetical in-depth case studies mentioned above would only provide data to accept or reject a hypothesis or paradigm. An another publication will appear to establish the reputation of a scholar.

If on the other hand, eight in-depth case studies on the social and economic factors influencing for example, the adoption of new agricultural technology in selected areas were undertaken, the comparative analysis of their differences could give useful insights towards understanding the deeper issues of the problem.

My comments should not be interpreted to mean that I advocate the controlling of in-depth research studies, certainly not if any scholar wishes to research of the influence of Pregnancy Cravings of Sinhalese Low Country Women on Prices of Agricultural Produce' and even if we all think such a research study is of no use to the country, he should still be allowed to indulge in his 'craving' provided he uses 'private resources'. But research institutions like the Agrarian Research and Training Institute and the Universities should develop an overall research design into which the in-depth case studies could be filled in. At Present there is only a minimal co-ordination of

in-depth case studies or even field surveys with the result that the data collected provide inadequate understanding of the issues of agrarian change in Sri Lanka and many of the most important areas of inquiry remain unresearched.

The freedom to conduct and report research without constraints is an important pains-takingly collecting data if the results of the research could not be reported. work. There is very little purpose in following the best procedures in research and pains-taking, collecting data if the results of the research could not be reported. Unfortunately there have been instances in the past when research findings of field-work in agrarian studies have been drastically changed or not allowed to be reported on.[18]

If research studies are expected to produce a pre-determined set of findings the vast expenditure on research would not only be a gross wastage of money but also be misleading. If it is not possible within an existing political and governmental frame-work to publish certain research findings it is better for the research findings to be restricted in circulation rather than its findings changed to make it acceptable to the authorities.

If this essay provokes further thought and controversy on several issues of agrarian field-work and research in Sri Lanka it has served its purpose. It is hoped that subsequent issues of the **Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies** would be a forum of discussion and dialogue on the methodology of research studies.

REFERENCES

Bandaranayake, S. (1976) : "The National Organisation and Control of Academic and Scientific Resources in Third World Countries", paper presented at Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, Special International Sessions - 1976 on Scientific and Technological Co-operation Among the Non-Aligned Countries.

Shanti, U. N. (1975) : "Improving the Accuracy in Economic Survey" in Tan Bock Thism and Shao Er Ong (Ed.) **Readings in Asian Farm Management,** Singapore University Press.

Elder, Joseph W. (1968) : "Using Survey Research Methods in Traditional Societies" in Milton Singer and Bernard Cohn (Ed.) **Structure and Change in Indian Society** Aldine, Chicago. Reprinted in **ADC Teaching Forum .**

Farmer, B. H. (1980) : "Some thoughts on the Place of Field Work in Agrarian Studies", **Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies.** Vol. 1 No. 1 pp. 1-11.

Nair, Kusum (1961) : **Blossoms in the Dust - The Human Element in Indian Development** Allied Publishers, New Delhi.

[18] Peiris (1978) p.56

Peiris, G. H. (1978) : "Reflections on Agrarian Research in Sri Lanka in the 1970's", **The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies,** Vol. VI (New Series) No. 2 pp. 48-68.

Ryan, Brycs (1950) : "The Historical Evolution of Sri Lanka's Land Tenure Regions" Chapter 11 **The Political Economy of Asian Agrarian Reform** pp. 263-280. Ph.D. Thesis University of Wisconsin.

Verhagen, Loenraad (1979) : Discussion Paper on Research Methodology and Orientation, Working Document No. 3 for ICA/RTI/NCC/CLT Research Project Co-operatives and Small Farmer Development. (Mimeo).