SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PLACE OF FIELD WORK IN AGRARIAN STUDIES

by

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It is a great honour to be asked to contribute to the inaugural number of the **Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies.** I hope that the new periodical will have a long life and be of great benefit to the people of Sri Lanka. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to a whole host of those people, too many to be mentioned by name, for much friendliness, hospitality and encouragement during my various visits to their country, visits which now stretch back over more than thirty years: not least to government officers and to cultivators for putting up with my questions and enquiries about agrarian matters. I cannot begin to repay that debt adequately; but perhaps the modest paper that follows may be placed to my credit.

In setting out to write about the place of field work in agrarian studies, I propose to offer a number of rather disconnected thoughts, some old, some new. I do not think it necessary to define 'agrarian studies' in contributing to a journal concerned with just those studies which is published under the auspices of the Agrarian Research and Training Institute; nor to elaborate on the statement that I suppose that I may be described as an agrarian, rather than an agricultural geographer. Perhaps I should, however, say that, geographer though I may be, I have had much fruitful contact with workers in other subjects; partly through directing the Centre of South Asian Studies in the University of Cambridge since 1964, partly through happy collaboration with ARTI in running a research project on agrarian change in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu[1] partly in yet other ways.

Perhaps, however, the term 'field-work' also needs some definition, since it is apt to mean all things to all men. I assuredly do not mean the 'field-work' undertaken by those globetrotters who merely visit a country, move through it rapidly by car or by train, and talk to its more articulate inhabitants; yet thus does field-work seem to be understood by some. Nor do I mean what passes as field-work with some sociologists and economists and to some geographers bemused by what passes for social science 'field work', that is, planned and largely executed at a desk, with the help of an army of investigators or postmen to carry questionnaries into the 'field' and to bring back answers departing markedly, as such answers will, from reality. Not do I necessarily mean field mapping, by some considered as essential to the agrarian geographer as documents and pendant foot-notes are to the historian (though field mapping may be an essential part of the exercise). What I do

1. See, for example, Dias and Wickramanayake (1977); and Farmer (1977).

mean by field work is 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, whether these reasons lie in facets of the physical environment or whether they lie in social and economic characteristics (including land tenure). Field work of this sort may, of course, involve the collection of statistics to be processed at the desk; and it may involve field mapping, though I confess that I am more impressed by the potentialities of the mapping, or even the sketching of samples, or of what appear to be typical situations, than by the mapping of totality after the manner of the Land Utilization Surveys of Britain.

What I have in mind, it will by now be clear, is a thoughtful period spent in the area concerned, living with the land and with the society that uses it. This sort of field work, has, of course, a good deal in common with the field methods of the anthropologist of the kind that were so well exemplified by the studies made by John Harriss in connection with our project on agrarian change[2]. It should be noted, however, that our project involved close co-operation with sample surveys, undertaken so far as Sri Lanka was concerned by a team headed by H. D. Dias[3], and complemented by hydrological work undertaken in both Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu by C. M. Madduma Bandara[4]. Where resources permit, such 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, has much to commend it. As Asok Rudra[5] has said:—

> The case study approach gives an insight and familiarity that the survey approach can never give; and, on the other hand, that approach can never given the reliable quantitative estimates that the survey approach makes possible and without which it is difficult to grasp the dimensions of any problem.

It is absolutely essential, however, that there should at all stages be adequate communication between the workers responsible for each approach and those responsible for the other. At the outset, for example, the 'depth' workers should be allowed to influence the data to be collected by the sample surveyors, while the latter raise questions suitable for study in depth. As work proceeds, it may well be that the sample surveys throw up questions and problems, particularly of causality, that their data alone cannot answer, but on which one or more depth workers may be able to throw light; while the latter in their turn will readily find ways to influence the questions asked in the sample surveys.

There are, however, people who see no need for field work of either kind, whether depth or sample studies. I remember vividly, for example, the attitude of the lawyer-members of the Land Commission of 1955—58[6]. These gentlemen were invaluable members of the Commission because of their knowledge of statute law as it affected land policy — and in a recently colonial country like Sri Lanka there are a number of enactments that have

2. Harriss (1977a, 1977b, 1977c, 1977d).
3. Chambers et al. (1977); Dias (1977); Silva (1977).
4. Madduma Bandara (1977a, 1977b).
5. Rudra (1972).
6. Government of Ceylon (1958).

had a profound bearing on agrarian and agricultural affairs: notably the Crown Lands Encroachments Ordinance, No. 12 of 1840, under which apparently 'waste' land, including in some areas land subject to shifting cultivation, was declared Crown property, so that shifting cultivation could be, and was controlled, and so that 'waste' land formerly available to villages for pasture, occasional cultivation and so on could be (and was) alienated for use in suitable areas for tea, coffee and rubber plantations; and the Land Development Ordinance, No. 19 of 1935 which, inter alia, prescribed conditions, or made it possible to prescribe conditions under which Crown land might be alienated to peasants in colonization and village expansion schemes. A Commission whose task it is to advise the Government on land policy needs a land lawyer, notably to advise on the meaning of legal terminology and on the way in which the relevant enactments have been interpreted and administered in the Courts of Justice, where, in a very real sense, the lawyer's field work lies. And a social scientist proposing to investigate some agrarian problem, and impressed (as he usually should be) with the need to know something of the operation of statute law, may be well to seek legal advice. But in my experience a lawyer seldom knows the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about an agrarian situation, or even about agrarian law unless he knows intimately what happens in the field, the real field, not the Courts. He suffers particularly from the limitation that he believes that the Book of the Law, whether statute law or customary law, is indeed the rule-book by which society manages its fields; so that, all one needs to do is to know the law and deduce its consequences; or to amend the law and prognosticate from it. This attitude is, in an Asian setting at least, subject to two sources of error: first, that much legislation (notoriously the Land Development Ordinance, and I suspect much other legislation) was imposed by a colonial Government, or by its western-orientated successors, without full appreciation of local custom or local need, so that villagers may be unable or unwilling to carry out the law, yet be adept at concealing breaches of it. The second source of error is that most Asian lawyers themselves are members of a Western-educated élite and tend, when drafting and administering legislation, not to understand the workings of the rural society from which their education and urban residence have divorced them. The gulf between lawyer and villager, combined with the lawyer's bookish education and his attitude that because he knows the law he knows how society functions, is largely responsible for a phenomenon that I have often watched with mingled amusement and exasperation — the sheer inability of many lawyers to learn from the actual village, and their boredom and apathy when confronted with the actual agrarian situation in the field.

Some economists, likewise, are a menace to the emergence of truth. I do not wish to castigate for one moment the honest, empirically-minded agrarian economist, from whose field techniques all other social scientists have indeed a good deal to learn. I refer, on the contrary, to the sort of economists (and we all know them) who claim that, as one of them put it in conversation, 'to the economist all countries are the same'; who is, in other words, obsessed by his own idea of the universal, and ignorant of the particular, especially that which is particular about the physical, social and institutional environment. Now it is unfortunate that under-developed countries, not least those in South and South-east Asia, are apt, though less now than formerly, to invite economists like these to descent briefly from their chariots of the air (one might say their aerial bandwagons) and to give advice that derives

little or nothing from a study of local conditions, certainly nothing from a study of these conditions in the field: unfortunate, too, when the advice of such an 'expert' is believed and acted on, while once again local conditions and local knowledge are alike ignored. It is profitable to remember the words attributed to St. Bernard: 'Believe an expert, but believe one who has had experience.'

I do not for one moment wish to suggest that the work of those unable or unwilling to work in the field is valueless, nor to under-rate the importance of concept and theory as opposed to empirical fact (I shall return to this point later); not do I suggest that the field worker is the sole repository of wisdom or of the means to get it. Truth about an agrarian situation is a many-sided thing, and is most likely to be appreciated if it is approached from a number of different directions.

FIELD WORK AS A CORRECTIVE FOR THE OFFICIAL ATTITUDE

It is inevitable, and in many ways right and proper, that the State and its agencies should play a large part in contemporary agrarian affairs in South and South-east Asia: the colonization of new land may require costly investment in irrigation and in road construction, which only the State can afford; the land to be alienated is usually conceived as being in the trusteeship of the State, whose duty it is to see that some principle, some orderliness, underlies its allocation to individuals; 'land reform' is conceived of as one of the necessary ingredients of desirable economic and social change; the 'Green Revolution' demands research, extension and other State services; and so on. Primary printed sources for the study of agrarian affairs therefore consist largely of official reports and statistics and of statements by Ministers in the House and elsewhere. My own personal experience is that, in certain important respects, material of this sort can be most misleading. I first had my interest in Sri Lanka's peasant colonization schemes aroused during a wartime tour of duty in 1944—45, when, however, no real investigation could be done for obvious reasons. When it appeared likely that I would be able to make an intensive study of these schemes, I began to read about them, particularly in the **Administration Reports** of Government Agents (then the Officers in charge of Provinces) of the Directors of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Land Development, and of the Land Commissioner; and also in special reports on specific projects.[7] But the impression that I formed from such sources as these were very different from those with which I returned from six months' field work in 1951; in fact, had I tried to write a paper on colonization schemes from these sources only, and then written another, after six months' field work, the two papers would have been so different that they would have appeared to be not only by two different authors but about quite different colonization schemes, if not quite different countries. To some, the converted, this will appear only that which is to be expected; but unfortunately it is not so with everyone. I can think of many publications that appear to be based on nothing more than an uncritical reading of official sources.

The last thing that I want to suggest is that official sources are useless: far from it. They are invaluable repositories, first of all, of statistical data: numbers and distribution of colonists, areas under specific irrigation works, and so on. Where they record statistical data for what the government itself

7. e.g. Government of Ceylon (1932).

has done, they are in my experience generally quite accurate, though this is not universally so. But where they record data for what the peasants have done, they are subject to serious error which can only be corrected in the field, for they then rely on basically what the peasant has told a government officer, or what that officer has reported. T. B. Wilson described twenty years ago a situation in the paddy fields of Province Wellesley, in Malaya, which shows how very different the actual ownership of paddy lands can be from that which is recorded in the land register[8]; and this has important implications for those of us who hold heretical views on the wisdom of trying to prevent the subdivision of holdings by tampering with the customary rules of inheritance.[9] (The phenomenon that Wilson recorded is an example of something already mentioned: the tendency of a society to circumvent an imposed legal system, in this case an imposed system of land registration; and one reason for the heretical views held by some of us is the impossibility of administering a law which flies so markedly in the face of custom.) Again, the Gal Oya Project Evaluation Committee reported that the nature and reliability of the statistical and other data 'severely affected the task of evaluating the Gal Oya Project'.[10] This applied particularly to the published accounts of the Gal Oya Development Board, and to data on paddy acreages under the Pattipola Aar Scheme. A much more recent example comes from our agrarian change project, this time on the Tamil Nadu side of Palk Strait, where, in North Arcot District, 'official figures for the area under high-yielding varieties of paddy...............were exaggerated at least threefold';[11] principally because the same officers who report the area are responsible for promoting HYV cultivation and are, in fact, under the baneful spell of self-fulfilling targets.

A further valuable feature of official reports and the like is that they may record shifts of policy, or at least of the administration of policy. They thus tell the investigator a great deal about the changing terms that affect agrarian affairs (and it is, incidentally, the fact that he can watch the effects of known changes in at least certain terms that makes a colonization scheme one of the nearest approaches to an experimental laboratory open to the agrarian social scientist). But they do not tell him all that there is to know about these changing terms, still less about their effects. This is because on the whole, and with honourable exceptions, they are not critical appraisals of policy and its shifts. This is not by any means to accuse those who write reports of this sort of deliberate dishonesty. It is just that a public servant is but human, and naturally seeks to justify the work of his own department: he can hardly say that all of its work is based on a confusion about aims or attribute a sudden shift in policy to reasons of expediency rather than the economic or social rationalization he has quoted. And if a public servant rarely says these things, still less does a politician. In other words, it may take a good deal of patient enquiry to discover what is the real basis of policy. Some of this enquiry may not take place strictly in the field, but in discussion with those concerned (and their critics!); but in my own experience, many of the confusion and shifts and mistakes only come to light when one is confronted with their effects in the field, and so begins to probe. And perhaps

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8. Wilson (1958).
9. Farmer (1960).
10. Government of Ceylon (1970), Chapter 4.
11. Chinnappa (1977), pp. 93 — 97.

it should be said that to probe in this way is not merely appropriate to a Land Commission, or to a student of land policy for its own sake. It is necessary for the agrarian researcher to get a closer approximation to the truth about the changing terms of the experiments in management which he sees in progress in such things as colonization schemes. To do otherwise would be to imitate the errors of a scientist who measures changing temperatures against an uncalibrated thermometer.

One of the exceptions to the rule that official sources are uncritical, and therefore distort the truth about the changing terms in the agrarian equation may be provided by the reports of commissions of enquiry and of similar bodies; and another is provided by the publications of Agrarian Research and Training Institute in Sri Lanka and of the Programme Evaluation Organization in India.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

By their very nature, official sources rarely have much to say about the physical environment, though parts of it crop up in reports on agriculture and irrigation, and summaries appear in such places as reports of the World Bank. If one wanted, therefore, without field work to evaluate the role of the physical environment on, say, peasant colonization or the 'green revolution' in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka one would turn mainly to the works of geographers. Indeed, I suppose that before I went to Sri Lanka in 1951 to undertake work in the field I had gained a fair idea from Miss E. K. Cook's pioneer work of the Dry Zone environment and of its climatic characteristics:[12] and I was prepared for a number of the physical problems that face peasant colonization, notably that of providing irrigation for rice cultivation. What I was not prepared for (and this is no criticism of those whose works I had studied) was the great and then largely unrecognised difficulty of cultivating the unirrigated and mainly unirrigable 'high land' in such a way as to give the peasant some return for his labour and yet to avoid the erosion and degradation of the soil.[13] In the first place, it was only in the field, when I came upon high land allotment after high land allotment that was uncultivated, or full of dying coconuts, or visibly degrading and eroding, that I became aware that there was a high land problem; though, with hindsight wisdom, I can see that certain phrases in official reports refer to, or conceal, this problem. One does not wish to blame officialdom for not making these things clear in its reports, though it is unfortunately true in Ceylon as elsewhere that an appreciation on the importance of the variability of the physical environment is not a characteristic of the official mind any more than it is of economists. It is just that the problem can only be formulated in the field, and those I met who had gone some way towards formulating it were all field men, usually with scientific training.

This being the problem, why is it thus? Here again a search of the literature is of little value. Insight into the complex inter-relationship of climate, hydrology, soils, slope and agricultural practice came mainly through close watch in the field, to be followed up it is true by a return to the literature for an evaluation of single factors, especially climatic ones. Let me say straight away that I would wish in this connection to be the first to

12. Cook (1951)

13. Farmer (1957), especially pp. 249 — 55 and 342 — 8.

acknowledge my debt to other workers with whom I have had discussions in the field, notably Dr. E. F. L. Abeyaratne and Dr. C. R. Panabokke: much additional insight and many formulations of new problems came from discussions of this sort; but I should like to stress that it all happened in the **field.** I am sure that discussion in an office in Colombo or Peradeniya would have been infinitely less fruitful. The same applies to the lessons to be learnt about land capability and land problems by study of peasant practice, for which I have come to have a great respect; the Nuwarakalawiya peasant has, for example, his own classification of unirrigable land into a number of categories; and he is right.

(I would at this point like to interpolate two somewhat disparate footnotes. The first I will hang on the question of finding a viable system of land use for Dry Zone high land. I am prepared to accept the criticism that in my early writing on this matter I was too pessimistic about the possibility of finding a system which would replace **hena** and yet permit cultivation in perpetuity: partly because of the then state of research, partly because I was under the influence of Pierre Gourou's **The Tropical World**, with its insistence on the inherent difficulty of the tropical environment, particularly of tropical soils. Later I became more optimistic. But, with the recent concern of many wise people and bodies, notably the United Nations Environment Programme, for the reconciliation of the needs for enhanced food supply and of stable agricultural eco-systems (to enable cultivation in perpetuity), I must insist that I was right at least in my criterion: stability of cultivation over time.

The second footnote I will hang on the remark about the respect I have for peasant practice. I believe with profound conviction, and with a good deal of evidence behind it, that untold harm has been done in developing countries because the assumption has been made that the peasant is ignorant, if not stupid, and that salvation for agriculture lies in prescription from on high by foreign experts, or town-bound technocrats and officials. A far, far sounder approach is to study carefully and humbly in the field what the peasant does; then to find out why he does it, and then, and only then, to attempt to improve what he does: to improve, that is, from humility and knowledge, not from arrogance and ignorance).

Let me now introduce a further important principle — the comparative principle; for just as a worker on a government research station or colonization scheme can learn much by studying the peasant's reaction to similar natural problems, so are the problems, academic or practical, of one region illuminated by study of those of an apparently similar region. And once again field work may well be the only means of study which will supply the answers. I had long wondered, for example, why the Tamil peasant of South India seemed able to cultivate year after year on what was apparently the equivalent of the 'high land' which in the Sri Lanka Dry Zone it seemed difficult or impossible so to cultivate, under what appeared to be similar conditions of rainfall. I searched in vain for the answer through the large and admirable volume of writing, agricultural and geographical, about South India. I was dropped a series of hints, mainly in terms of differences between Tamil and Sinhalese technology; and a study of rainfall régimes and variability suggested that superficial similarities concealed important and perhaps critical differences, at least in parts of South India. That Indian and other geographers did not really answer my question is no criticism of them; they had not worked in the Sri Lanka Dry Zone, where perpetual cultivation

appeared so difficult, so why should they do anything but take the perpetual cultivation of their own high land as anything out of the ordinary? Or, to put the matter in more general terms, does not the advancement of understanding consist largely of asking new questions of old material? And it was brief work in the field in 1956, confirmed on our more recent project, that seemed to me to supply the answer to my problem. It is largely that the aquiferous zone of weathering appears to be a great deal thicker and more continuous spatially in Tamil Nadu than in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka...........so that in spite of lower rainfall the potentialities for well irrigation are higher in the former than the latter', to quote our recent restatement.[14]

The comparative principle, in a broader sense, also lay behind the choice of two study areas, one in Hambantota and Moneragala Districts of Sri Lanka, the other in North Arcot District of Tamil Nadu: both non-deltaic (much earlier work in India has been biassed towards deltas);[15] both on crystalline rock overlain by an aquifer; both subject to a maximum of rainfall during the north-east monsoon. By thus holding environmental factors as constant as may be in this patchwork world, we hoped the better to compare the 'agrarian impact of different political and administrative systems'.[16]

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

What of the value of field work in the assessment of the social environment? I will quote first an example from sociological work in Ceylon that has been discussed by E. R. Leach.[17]

The student of agrarian affairs cannot but be interested in the phenomenon of landlessness, not least as a measure of pressure upon available land if he is working on an overpopulated area. Thus I tried to obtain some sort of index of the extent of landlessness in both the Wet Zone and the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka;[18] and based my figures and my discussion on official sources.[19] I was wrong. Later N. K. Sarkar and S. J. Tambiah conducted a survey of Pata Dumbara;[20] and concluded, **inter alia**, that out of 506 households surveyed no fewer than 335 (or 66.2%) owned no paddy land at all (a household being defined as a group who cooked in the same pot). Leach commented as follows:— [21]

> 'Now what are the realities of this matter? Let us try to convert the figures back into facts. For a start, being anthropologically inclined, I have to take into account certain features of Sinhalese custom. I note for example that:— (1) Sinhalese village girls tend to get married very young, but that every married woman, however young, has a separate cooking pot. Thus every married couple constitutes a separate statistical householder whether living in a separate house or not. (2) Property

14. Farmer and Madduma Bandara (1977), p. 10; and Farmer (1956a and 1956b).
15. Harriss (1977a).
16. Farmer and Madduma Bandara (1977), p. 7.
17. Leach (1958).
18. Farmer (1957), pp. 65 — 6 and 89 — 90.
19. Government of Ceylon (1951 and 1952).
20. Sarkar and Tambiah (1957).
21. Leach (1958), p. 13.

may be transmitted to an individual's descendants either by inheritance at death or at any other time by gifts **inter vivos**. In practice, except in the case of dowry to the daughters of the relatively wealthy, most property is handed on only when the original owner has become elderly. Thus, if a man of means is living in a single compound with three married sons, the sociological analysis might record this fact with the statistic that 'three out of four households are landless'.

in other words, landlessness while it may still partly be an index of sheer pressure on land, is also an index of the nature of Sinhalese custom. I was therefore wrong to take it, as I did, as something of an indication of agrarian pressure though, for various reasons, I did cover myself by saying that 'landlessness alone cannot be taken as an index of pressure on land.' [22]

Leach goes on to point out that share-cropping (so frequently also taken as a sign of a seller's market in land, of agrarian pressure, and of an evil landlordism to be stamped out) often included, in the village in which he worked in Nuwarakalawiya, the relation between two relatives, the cultivator frequently being the heir if not the son of the 'landlord'.

I have already referred to John Harriss' work on our recent project (see above pp. 2): by close participant observation he gave it an invaluable social dimension.

These examples not only serve to show that it is not only the figures in government reports that need correction, but also demonstrate the value of the understanding that comes with field work as I have defined it.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to explain why field work seems so important a component of agrarian studies that seeks to attain anything approaching the truth. There will, I hope, be many who will agree with what I have said; some, indeed, may take it as merely a statement of an obvious principle that needs no statement. But there may be those who object, some perhaps because, however they may rationalize it, they do not really know how to do field work; others because their concept of agrarian studies is not mine.

I do, indeed, conceive of agrarian studies as essentially inter-disciplinary, needing concerted attack from economists, lawyers, geographers, agriculturalists, anthropologists and sociologists, amongst others. Here I am in good company. That distinguished student of peasant society the late Doreen Warriner, saw agrarian studies as inter-disciplinary in a double sense: first, because they constitute a borderland between the disciplines, all too often neglected by practioners of narrow specialisms (she would have been encouraged by the recent revival of interest in agrarian affairs); secondly, and more relevant here, because she saw agrarian work as demanding a concerted attack by a number of disciplines. Moreover, 'knowledge grows at the points where different studies intersect'.[23]

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22. Farmer (1957), p. 89.
23. Warriner (1955) and personal communication.

Since my early, and rather lonely work on peasant colonization in Sri Lanka,[24] I have become more and more convinced of the essential importance of inter-disciplinarity in agrarian research, above all in the field work the need for which I have tried to highlight in this paper. Inter-disciplinarity and field work were certainly keynotes of our project on agrarian change.[25] And in tackling such problems as those of land reforms in contemporary Sri Lanka I hope that ARTI, and the pages of this Journal, will be concerned with numerous attempts to see problems from the points of view of many subjects, **and in the field**: 'to understand agrarian matters in the soil in the field', as Doreen Warriner, a great student of land reform, put it to me.

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24. Farmer (1957).

25. Farmer (1977).

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