

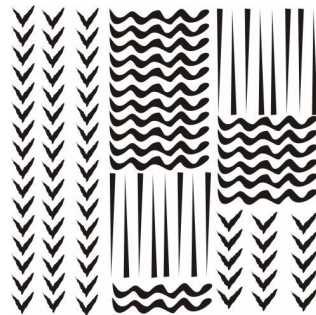
DRAFT PAPER

A NOTE ON METHODS OF VILLAGE STUDY

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**STUDYING VILLAGE ECONOMIES IN INDIA
A COLLOQUIUM ON METHODOLOGY**

December 21 to 24, 2008



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This is a short, preliminary note that tries to set down some broad guidelines for selecting one or more villages in a State or region for a detailed, comprehensive study of agrarian structure and relations. We do not propose to provide any strict, well-defined rules or procedures – a sampling procedure, as it were - for selecting one or more villages for studying agrarian relations. Aspects of agrarian structure and relations vary very widely across regions in the country; and the task of comprehending this structure, involving as it does a large number of quantitative and qualitative dimensions, even in a relatively homogenous region would be very complicated. In a context like this, trying to develop any strict, fixed procedure for selecting a village which would be applicable for all regions and states would be infructuous.

The method adopted for selecting one or more villages for studying an aspect of rural society would obviously depend on the nature of this aspect, the basic objective of the study. If the objective is to provide one or more well defined quantitative estimates – of say, level and distribution of consumption expenditure – in the rural areas of a State or region, there are standard, well defined methods of selecting villages and households, which along with appropriate methods of data collection and estimation procedures, provide reasonably accurate estimates of the attributes. The NSSO, as is well known, has more or less perfected this art. Similar, well defined, rigorous statistical procedures can be adopted for certain other rural studies involving quantitative estimations, as for example, the extent of indebtedness in rural areas; or even say a relatively more complex issue of working and living conditions of rural labourers.

But a comprehensive study of agrarian structure and relations in a region or state – or to put it differently, a study of the extent and nature of capitalist transformation in agriculture in a region or state – we believe, is a considerably more complex exercise. And this, for a number of reasons:

- 1) First of all, such an exercise would involve estimation of both the magnitude, and distribution among the rural population, of a large number of variables: These variables would relate to technical conditions of agricultural production; forms and extent of ownership of various means of production including land; and the working and living conditions of various sections of the rural population; and aspects relating to indebtedness, agricultural marketing etc.
- 2) Secondly, the manner in which the dimensions noted above interact with one another would be equally important to study: this would be necessary to identify the various agrarian classes; and the various modes – and the extent – of surplus extracted by the dominant classes, etc. While certain well defined quantitative measures like say, the labour ratio, may help in this analysis, one would also have to factor in a number of qualitative, relational dimensions – like say, the role of caste – here.
- 3) Thirdly, and very importantly, one has to recognize the fact that the nature of agrarian structure and relations – or to put it differently, the extent and nature of capitalist penetration of agriculture – varies enormously across space: This, we believe, is just a reflection of the fact that ‘in agriculture the process of development of capitalism is immeasurably more complex and assumes incomparably more diverse forms’ compared to the process in industry. And this would be particularly true of a country like India with its vast socio-economic and cultural diversity.
- 4) Fourthly, the study by its very nature has to be historical: Studying both changes and continuities in agrarian structure and relations would be an essential part of the exercise.

In essence the exercise would be an attempt at constructing the complex picture of agrarian structure in a State or region and it would involve estimating a large number of variables; identifying agrarian classes on the basis of distribution and interrelationships of these variables across social groups. And this picture would vary considerably across space and over time.

Given the complexity of the task it is doubtful whether one or more villages chosen in a State or region, through standard sampling procedures, would be able to provide a representative picture of the agrarian structure in the State or region. Even if such a procedure would be theoretically possible, the tasks involved, we would surmise, are enormously difficult.

In a situation like this, a better strategy, we would believe, is not to depend purely on data generated by a village survey – of one or more villages selected for the purpose – to construct this representative picture of agrarian structure for the State or region, but to treat the village survey data as one of the sources – and a very important source – of information for this purpose. One would have to draw on various sources of information – both secondary and primary- for the State or region on the one hand and for the selected villages on the other in order to construct this complex picture. Or in other words, there is a need to contextualize the village surveys within the larger spatial unit for which we try to construct the picture of agrarian structure; there is also the need to contextualize them in time, as it were, since changes and continuities in agrarian structure obviously have to be captured.

Apart from this rather 'operational' reason, there is perhaps a stronger methodological reason for such contextualization. As Lenin points out in a different context, ' "agricultural and the relations among the agricultural population...are marked by such tremendous variety that there is nothing easier than to seize upon a whole mass of facts and pointers taken from any enquiry that will "confirm" the views of the given writer...A distinguishing feature of all these arguments is that isolate individual phenomena, cite individual cases, and do not even make an attempt to connect them with the general picture of the whole agrarian structure of capitalist countries in general and with the basic tendencies of the entire present-day evolution of capitalist farming..." And Lenin emphasizes the need for never losing sight of "the connection between the tiniest phenomenon and the general structure of capitalist farming and the general evolution of capitalism."

This need for contextualization utilizing different sources of data has important methodological implications. Apart from being reliable and relevant, the different pieces

of information utilized from different sources have to be consistent. This may impose certain restrictions on the concepts and methods adopted in the village survey. Like for example, where there are well tested, standard methods and concepts available for studying certain phenomena in the secondary data sources – which are generally available at the regional or state levels – it would perhaps be advisable to adopt them in the village surveys also: Concepts and methodologies developed by the NSSO for measurement of employment-unemployment conditions perhaps would serve as a good example.

The method adopted for selecting one or more survey villages should facilitate such contextualization by utilizing information from different sources for constructing a picture of the agrarian structure for the state or the region studied. And in this, it is useful, we believe, to keep in mind at least three broad considerations: 1) Choose the village(s) to be surveyed from regions which are reasonably homogenous with respect to important aspects of agrarian structure and relations; 2) choose as (the areal) unit of survey, the one which is a socio-economic unit and for which considerable amount of data from other sources – the secondary sources, in particular – would be available; 3) in terms of the actual villages to be chosen from the agro-economic region, choosing villages for which comparable and reliable data from an earlier survey would be available would facilitate a study of changes and continuities in the agrarian situation.

Demarcating Agro-Economic Regions:

While identifying one or more representative villages from a large state – which, more likely than not, would be spatially very heterogeneous in terms of agro-economic characteristics – would be next to impossible, the task perhaps is much less intractable if choice is confined to villages in a reasonably homogeneous agro-economic zone. But this would mean that such agro-economic zones are identified prior to initiating the survey. While it is very likely that there are a large number of studies which have demarcated the agricultural regions in the country, our feeling is that most of them do so almost solely on the basis of what may be considered the technical conditions of agricultural production and do not factor in important aspects of agrarian structure and relations in any meaningful way. As far as we know a preliminary exercise with this orientation, i.e., an exercise which “centres on the classic agrarian problem namely, the interrelation of the institutional framework on the one hand, with the level and distribution of the

product on the other” was attempted in the 1950s by Daniel Thorner (Thorner, Daniel: “Demarcation of Agrarian Regions in India: Some Preliminary Notes,” in Rationale of Regional Variations in Agrarian Structure of India, Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, 1957). It is debatable whether Thorner’s 36 rural divisions would be valid today: considering the changes in the agrarian situation in the country over the last 40 years it is very unlikely. We do not know of any recent exercises of this nature either at the all-India level or for any major state.

Ideally one should perhaps start off with an exercise of this nature while attempting to study the agrarian structure, say, in a particular state; and one or more villages should be chosen from each of the agro-economic regions so identified for detailed survey. In the absence of such an exercise – which we believe is more a rule than an exception – identification of such broad agro-economic regions on the basis of discussions with individuals – political activists, academics etc – would be the next best option. But a detailed study of the agrarian structure of the regions so identified, by pooling together data from various sources – including the village surveys undertaken in each of the regions – is a task that cannot be avoided.

Village Unit to be Chosen:

How does one identify a village as socio-economic unit on the ground is perhaps an extremely difficult question to deal with. Such a unit, if it could be identified, is likely to show tremendous variations across the country. But going by the way various official agencies – data gathering agencies like the Census, the revenue administration, the development administration etc – have dealt with this problem, there are three broad categories of village units which seem to be applicable in large parts of the country: 1) the hamlet; 2) the revenue village and 3) the panchayat village.

Of the three, hamlets are the most nebulous: According to the 1961 Census, hamlets ‘spring up either as habitations of persons belonging to one caste living separately from others or as homesteads of cultivators who wish to live close to their fields for convenience of agricultural operations...’ (Census of India, Report on House Types and Village Settlement Patterns in India, 1961; p190). They are generally small in size and homogenous in terms of socio-economic characteristics. Given this, they are hardly

suitable as units of survey for studying agrarian structure and relations. Moreover since hamlets are not recognized as 'official' or 'administrative' units – either for revenue collection or for developmental activities – there is next to no official data that would be available on them.

The revenue village, on the other hand, is a well defined areal unit and has been used as a unit for data collection in all the Censuses in the post-Independence period. As the 1951 Census noted: " What is reckoned for all administrative purposes (and consequently also for the Census) as a village may or may not be the same as what we normally have in mind when we speak of a village. A village in the latter sense, means of should mean a cluster of houses (or more than one closely adjoining cluster of houses), whose habitants are regarded by themselves as well as by others as a distinctive social unit with its identity marked by a distinctive local name. The village in the administrative sense is the mauza – a settled area with defined boundaries, for which village records have been prepared." (Census of India, General Report, 1951; pp 42-43). The 1961 Census continued with this practice – of identifying the village as the revenue village – and so did all the other Censuses so far.

The choice of revenue village as a unit of survey has a number of advantages: First of all, as the Census of 1961 noted, choice of revenue village as the unit for conducting the census has a great deal of " administrative" convenience, since the area of the village unit is well demarcated for official purposes and a number of village records exist for the unit: " It enables the local staff to make absolutely certain that no tract, however remote, is left out of account. Thus the mauza, which is for convenience's sake translated as a village in census parlance, is merely that tract of lands, inhabited or not, which has been demarcated as a unit for revenue purposes.' (Census of India, General Population Tables, 1961; p57).

Secondly, a considerable amount of data on various socio-economic dimensions would be available at the level of revenue villages at least from the 1971 Census onwards. (The 1961 Census, at least in the case of Tamil Nadu, has presented these data at the level of panchayat villages and comparability between 1961 and 1971 is possible only for those villages where the jurisdictions of revenue and panchayat villages coincide.) This is a rich source of information which can be used to study different aspects of socio-economic

changes in the survey villages over a period of around 30 years at least, i.e., from 1971 to 2001. Apart from this, a number of village records – as for example, the village land records – exist at the level of revenue village and they can be useful sources of information about the villages surveyed.

While the choice of revenue village as the survey unit has these advantages, it is as noted above is essentially a unit of revenue administration; it is debatable whether it can be seen as a unit of the organization of social relations. Quite often a revenue village is also quite small in size: Even as late as 2001, close to 37 per cent of the revenue villages in the country had a population of less than 500 (less than 100 households), with around 15 per cent of them having even less than 200 persons (less than 40 households); many of them are far too small even as 'development units' and it is a moot point whether they can be considered as units of social organization.

The panchayat village, we believe, has a better claim as a socio-economic unit because it is generally treated as a 'development unit' rather than as a unit of revenue administration; and it is also generally larger in population size compared to a revenue village. Its genesis perhaps can be traced back to the first Panchayat Raj and the Community Development initiatives of the mid-1950s. Seen as a unit of local governance with an elected local body, as well as of grass root developmental initiative which was largely implemented by an elaborate bureaucratic structure extending right up to this unit, a panchayat village generally consists of one or more revenue villages (or in some cases even parts of some revenue villages). The actual size of the panchayat village depended on two broad considerations: as a political unit it could not be too large since that would hinder effective local level political interactions and involvements among the population; but economic viability and efficiency dictated that the size could not be too small either. The fact that panchayat villages have effectively functioned as units of developmental initiatives by the state in the last four decades or so – and given that there has been a considerable increase in the developmental role of the state in rural areas over this period – perhaps would mean that they have a better claim to be considered as units of socio-economic organization than say, the revenue villages. The fact that they have also acted as political units – in however halting a fashion – perhaps would strengthen this claim.

But using a panchayat village as a unit of village survey also has a couple of disadvantages: First of all, being a political, electoral unit it is prone to undergo frequent jurisdictional changes. Secondly, the Census data as well as the village records are largely available at the level of revenue villages. The only exceptions as far as we know are the data from the World Agricultural Censuses and the 1961 Census data (at least in the case of Tamil Nadu), both of which are available at the level of panchayat villages. But this is not such a major handicap as the secondary data for the selected panchayat villages can mostly be put together on the basis of the data available at the revenue village level.

Whether one chooses the panchayat village or a revenue village as the unit of study, there are two important aspects regarding the scope of the survey that need to be resolved:

1) While in a study of agrarian structure in the village the focus has to be on the agrarian economy of the village, the linkages that this agrarian economy has with the non-agricultural sector within the village may have important consequences for the very nature of the agrarian structure. This, we believe, is true at least in certain parts of the country where rural non-agricultural sector has a significant presence, as in say, Kerala, Tamil Nadu etc.

2) The linkages that the village economy has with the external world - with other villages as well as the urban centres in the region - may have important implications for the agrarian structure within the village. These linkages have become increasingly important over time, at least in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Methodological aspects involved in incorporating these elements in village surveys - both at the stage of data collection as well as of analysis - perhaps need to be seriously thought through.

Choosing the Survey Villages:

Once the agro-economic regions within the state have been identified, and a decision taken on the actual unit of village survey (revenue village or panchayat village), the question of the method of selecting of one or more survey villages from within each of the regions identified remains. Choosing the survey villages at random from a list of villages in each of these regions appears to be the obvious way of going about in this matter. While this procedure may ensure a degree of representativeness, it may not be

able to capture important dimensions of change and continuities in agrarian structure adequately; and a more purposive selection of one or more survey villages may serve that objective better. This may be particularly true if the agro-economic zones have been adequately identified, with each of them having a high degree of homogeneity: the loss of representativeness because of a purposive choice of one or more villages in such a situation may not be very high.

The purposive element that we have in mind here in choosing one or more villages that had been surveyed earlier. Given the tradition of village surveys in this country – which, we believe, was a strong one at least upto the 1980s – one can identify, in almost every agro-economic region that one wants to study, one or more villages which would have been surveyed earlier. There are different types of such village surveys that one can identify: There are, for example, very detailed ‘general purpose’ surveys done by the Census of India in 1961 and brought out as ‘Village Survey Monographs’. One or two such monographs exist for almost every district in the country. Then there are villages which have been surveyed a number of times over a long stretch of time: The examples that come to mind immediately are the Slater Villages which have been surveyed 4 times over the last century in different parts of Tamil Nadu; and the Arni villages which have been surveyed at least 3 times since the early 1970s in the northern tract of Tamil Nadu. Then there are a very large number of villages which have been surveyed by individual researchers some time or other – mostly before the 1980s – in almost every part of the country.

It is true that only a small of these village surveys concentrated on agrarian structure and relations. And to that extent, the mileage that one can derive in studying changes in agrarian structure by selecting a village which has been surveyed earlier may be somewhat limited. But a good, detailed ‘general purpose’ survey – like the Village Survey Monographs by the 1961 Census, the Slater and the Arni surveys – would provide important, relevant information on some aspects of agrarian structure. And more importantly, they would often be a rich source of general information on the village which would be of considerable help in reconstructing the general socio-economic context of the village at an earlier date – and the changes in this general context would have implications for the agrarian structure.

One of the major problems with these earlier village studies was that they were mostly 'stand alone' studies; there was very little attempt, in the case of most of these studies, at contextualizing them in space and time. All the same, they are still a very rich source of information – and it is still possible, we believe, to attempt such contextualization by utilizing the information they provide along with relevant secondary data for the period. And such an exercise, we believe, would be of immense help for a revived programme of village surveys.