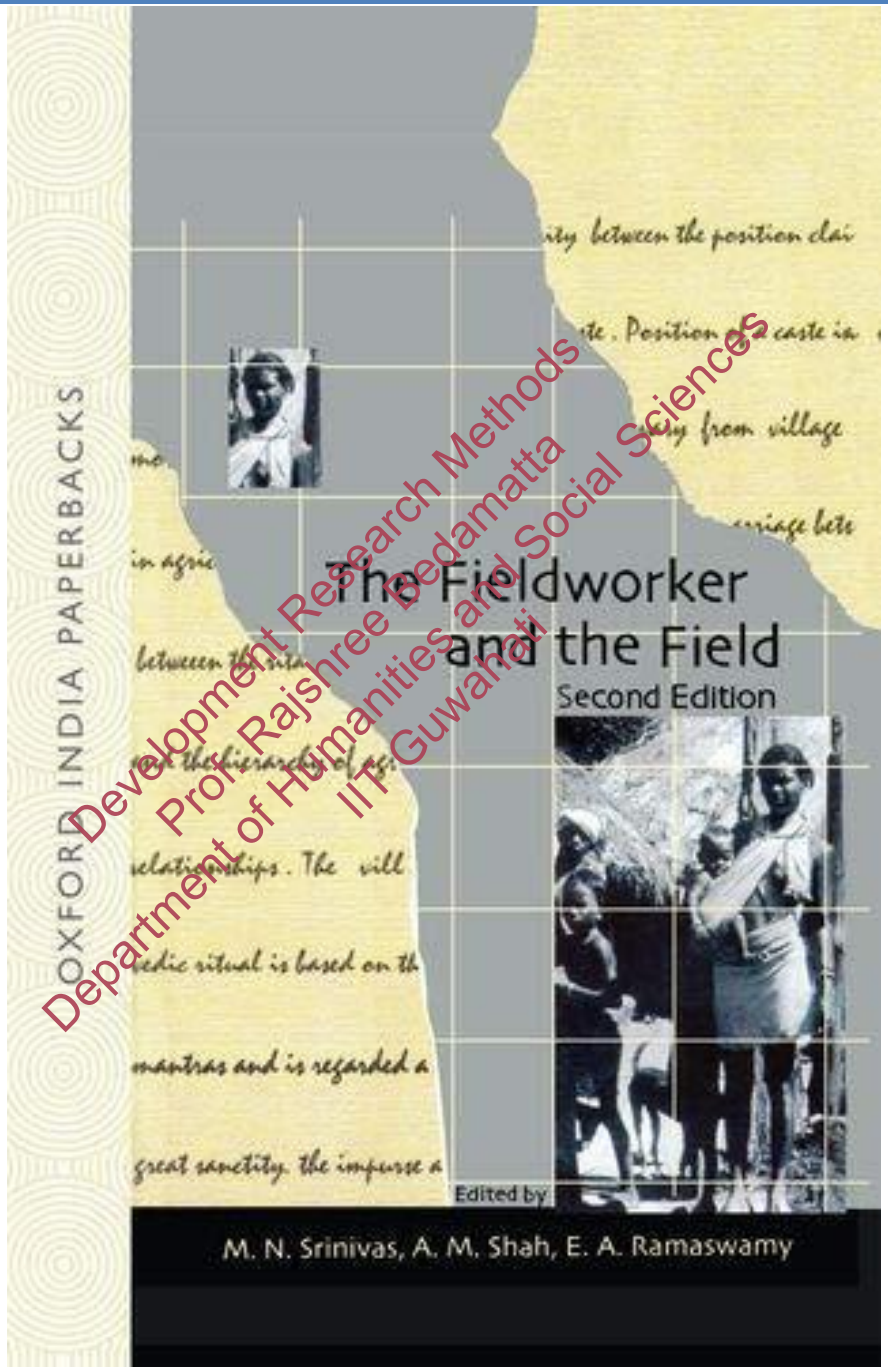
DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH METHODS

Week 3, Lesson 2: 'The Fieldworker and the Field'

Based on M.N. Srinivas, A.M. Shah and E. A. Ramaswamy, The Fieldworker and the Field: *Problems and Challenges in Sociological Investigation*

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About the book

M. N. Srinivas, A. M. Shah and E. A. Ramaswamy. The Fieldworker and the Field – *Problems and Challenges in Sociological Investigation*, OUP, 1979

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Rural India

The Fieldworker and the Field

A Village in Karnataka

M. N. Srinivas

Studying the Present and the Past

A Village in Gujarat

A. M. Shah

Experiences of an Encapsulated Observer

A Village in Rajasthan

Anand Chakravarti

On Tracks and Tracts in my Fieldwork

Rural Kerala

K. Raman Unni

Fieldwork Experience: Relived and Reconsidered

Rural Uttar Pradesh

P. C. Joshi

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Urban India

Travails of a Woman Fieldworker

A Small Town in Uttar Pradesh

Khadija A. Gupta

A Woman's Encounter with Arya Samaj and Untouchables

A Slum in Jalandhar

Veena Dua

The Bottom View Up: Some Cognitive Categories

Slums in Madras

Beba D. Varadachar

Objective Appreciation through Caste Images

Untouchables in Poona

Sunanda Patwardhan

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Complex Organisations in India

Trial and Error in a New Field

A Factory in Gujarat

N. R. Sheth

Being Where the Action Was

Trade Union in Coimbatore

E. A. Ramaswamy

Walking on the Edge of Factionalism

An Industrial Co-operative in Rural Maharasthra

B. S. Baviskar

Varied Roles in the Field

A Hospital in Delhi

Aneeta A. Minocha

An Apprenticeship Marked by Frustrations

College Students in Mysore

Chitra Sivakumar

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Societies Outside India

Selecting a 'Representative' Village

A Village in Japan

S. Sehaiah

The Anthropologist-Informant Relationship

The Navajo and Zuni in America and the Tharu in India

Triloki Nath Pandey

Problems of Entry

Sri Lanka, Zambia and Australia

R. Jayaraman

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Fieldworker and the Field

A Village in Karnataka

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Year: 1948

Place of stay: Rampura, a village 22 miles from Mysore on the Mysore-Malavalli Road.

This chapter refers to Srinivas' Rampura experience

Physical conditions

The accommodation that was made available to me was the cow-house of the headman situated about forty feet diagonally across the headman's main house. I shared my quarters with the headman's five pairs of plough-bullocks and one solitary bullock which was used for drawing a covered cart in which the headman or his sons occasionally travelled to their fields or to neighbouring villages. The northern portion of the cow-house was separated by a mud wall from the rest of the building and in it lived a Muslim client of the headman and his family….The snoring of the servants and villagers, and byways of the tiled roof provided the backdrop to my sleep at night.

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Being a Participant observer

…My bath presented a problem. The cowhouse had no bathroom and the headman suggested that I take my bath in the open courtyard in the middle of the house. I did not find this practicable, as the headman's servants and others were moving about in the cow-house especially in the morning when I wanted to have my bath. Once or twice, I proceeded to my bath after bolting the front and back doors and asking my cook to stay in the kitchen till I finished. Within a matter of minutes, there were bangings on the front and back doors, and loud demands for the doors to be opened immediately. The villagers quizzed me about my bathing habits…Eventually I found a way out of my problem by having an enclosure of woven bamboo splits put up in one corner of the central courtyard. This incidentally brought me into contact with the Medas, hereditary basketworkers, and it enhanced my knowledge of Medas and of rural life.

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Caste and factions in village

On my first and ‘scouting’ visit to Rampura, I was told that it as a ‘united’ village unlike neighbouring villages which were faction-ridden. I very soon discovered that this was only an establishment myth. A day or two after I had settled down in the village, I went to a teashop and there a young man from the Peasant caste asked me who I was and what I was doing in the village. (He had already heard about me.) When I had explained to him the reason for my stay in Rampura he admonished me that if I were desirous of presenting a ‘true picture’ of village life I should not stay in one part of the village meeting and talking with only a few but go all over the village and talk to everyone…

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Caste and factions in village

I soon learnt that there were two main factions in the village: one of them led by the headman and the other by two or three younger men who resented the headman's hegemony over the village. The latter group avoided the headman's part of the village. Indeed, many others also avoided walking past the cow-house or on the headman's street for fear that the headman or one his sons would entrust them with a job which would take them away from their main work. The headman had made a fine art of utilizing everyone's time and energy for his work.

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Caste and factions in village

During one of my … field trips to the village, two brothers, bitter enemies of the headman, invited me to photograph a portion of the tank embankment which had been breached and flooded their banana crop, and they obtained from me a promise to send them copies of the pictures I had taken. When I later returned to the headman's house I learnt that the brothers had filed a suit against the headman and the village panchayat for their negligence which had led to a breach in the embankment and the resulting ruin of the banana crop. The headman told me that by my action I was going to become a witness in a law suit against him and the panchayat. I felt humiliated and assured the headman that I had no knowledge of this matter when I took the photographs and that I would destroy the negatives.

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A note to anthropologists

Anthropologists usually write reports which are impersonal, abundant in sketches and charts and, nowadays, also tables. This is the accepted style of presenting learned reports. But quite apart from their dullness, the reports convey an impression of objectivity which they do not, and in my opinon, ought not, have. Nowhere in such reports does the anthropologist make it clear that his perception could be anything other than objective, and that his affiliations, class, regional, and religious, quite apart from his values and temperament, influence what he sees and how he sees them. Contrariwise, the role that local community assigns to him is also relevant in understanding his perceptions, etc.

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Fieldwork Experience from Rural Uttar Pradesh, *P. C. Joshi*

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As interplay of theory and fieldwork

If I had no theoretical background, my fieldwork would have been far less exciting and productive. My theoretical approach favoured a 'class' analysis of the agrarian society. But fieldwork served as a powerful corrective of the gaps in this approach. It impressed upon me the hiatus between what I learnt from class theory and what I found from direct observation. Field experience showed how difficult it was to view agrarian society as a class society and the peasantry as a class in the classical sense.

The field view also helped me to distinguish between regions in U.P. having a landlord-dominated agrarian system on the one hand and a peasant-dominated system on the other. The distinction between landlord and peasant ideologies, the latter being less fatalistic than the former, was also revealed to me by fieldwork. These insights led me to reformulate my theoretical positions regarding the institutional requirements of economic development. I came to appreciate the potentialities of peasant economy and peasant ideology for transformation of the rural economy.

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The fieldworker and the ‘field’ usually come from entirely different worlds (worldviews)

The contact between the fieldworker and the field is a contact between two types of cultures whose categories of understanding are not identical and who do not share a common framework of values or a common world view. The investigator observes the many-sided activities and processes of rural life, and the meaning which he attaches to each of them in terms of *his* (or her) values differs from that which different segments of the rural population attach to them in terms of *their* values. For instance, the extortion of rent and forced labour which he may regard as an index of feudal exploitation may have a different meaning for landlords and tenants under the sway of the ideology of patronage. Land may be viewed by landowners more as a source of social status and power rather than as an economic resource and a source of profit. What the fieldworker considers ‘conspicuous consumption’ may be viewed as a necessity for maintaining or enhancing status by groups indulging in it.

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The (conflicts) surrounding the Insider-view and the Outsider-view

It involves much mental strain for the investigator – who is an outsider – to suspend his meaning system for the time being and to understand the people's meaning system. His difficulties are enhanced if among the rural poor people themselves a consciousness of the conflict of values has begun to emerge and the unifying values (e.g., the concept of patronage) sustaining the old social framework have started breaking down. Problems arise in presenting the insider's view of the system when the view of one set of actors, the dominant and articulate group, has to be juxtaposed with that of the other set of actors, the subordinate and inarticulate group.

Viewing the social system from the outside in terms of categories of social science, and simultaneously from inside in terms of the categories of the dominant and subordinate groups – this is the dual challenge involved in fieldwork.

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Four phases of the process of fieldwork

Phase I: First, I tried to evolve a philosophical and theoretical basis for my fieldwork through a general study of relevant literature. This also helped in a broad formulation of my problem of inquiry.

Phase II: It marked the beginning of my fieldwork…characterised by an attempt on my part to put the facts, as perceived in the field situation, in the ready-made conceptual and analytical boxes derived from my study of social theory…my mind tended to ignore inconvenient facts if they were not in accord with received theory, and to seek its confirmation rather than refutation.

Phase III: The complexity of the social reality as revealed through fieldwork had such an overpowering impact on my mind that my unquestioning allegiance to my concepts broke down. In the whole course of my investigation this was the most agonizing phase…realization of the inadequacy of uncritically received theoretical categories to take account of this complexity made me sceptical and pessimistic about the usefulness of any theoretical construction…this was a phase of surrender to empiricism as opposed to Phase II in which I was under the influence of a doctrinate tendency.

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Four phases of the process of fieldwork

Phase IV: It began when, immersed in the mass of concrete data, I felt the necessity of tools which would help me in distinguishing essential from non-essential facts. In this way I was led towards reformulating my theoretical concepts in the light of the data provided by my inquiry. I was now able to use fact-finding as a stimulus to theoretical reconstruction and the latter as a stimulus to deeper fact-finding. This phase eliminated the dichotomy between theoretical abstraction and concretization and harmonized the two processes. It represented for me the peak of excitement of research. It pulled me out of Phase III of research which represented the trough of despair. This phase, which represented a process of reconstruction of my field experience, did not end with the completion of my research monograph. I now feel that reconstructing field experience is perhaps a life-long affair.

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Travails of a Woman Fieldworker
A small town in Uttar Pradesh

Khadija Ansari Gupta

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Personal circumstances of the researcher-investigator

Every attempt of mine to conduct a field investigation has been influenced by three major personal circumstances. The first is that I have been a housewife since 1952 – five years before I conducted the first field study. Secondly, I was born and brought up in a traditional Muslim family of Lucknow, but am married to a Bengali Hindu. His family has an altogether different background from mine. I come from a family of Ulemas engaged for generations in spreading the message of Islam, and socially entrusted with the task of preserving and protecting Islamic traditions, while my husband comes from a family of urbanized, middle class, Bengali Hindu intelligentsia devoted to modern higher education. Those who are acquainted with the complexities and conflicts inherent in a marriage between members of these two divergent cultures will, I am sure, realize what a complicated background I have as field investigator. The third circumstance is that I am a woman.

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Taking up a subject of research 'suitable' to women

After I enrolled as a PhD student at Delhi University I was asked to finalise the topic for my doctoral thesis in consultation with a senior teacher. My first meeting with him was a disappointment.

Throughout the year I had braced myself for undertaking a study of small town politics, a theme which I found had not been adequately dealt with my Indian sociologists. I knew that the study entailed not only strenuous field research but a number of other complications as well: the need to stay away from home alone in an unknown town, establishing rapport with strangers, meeting and interviewing almost regularly for several months the leaders and supporters of rival local factions while at the same time keeping them at a respectable distance and so on. I was, however, prepared to face all these difficulties…My teacher however felt differently.

He appreciated my enthusiasm, but did not share it. He argued that small town politics was too tough a subject to be handled by a member of the weaker sex who had been further spoilt by the comforts of modern urban living. He suggested that it would be best for me to take up a less ambitious and safer research project, one suited to my social and personal limitations. I was not prepared to accept his suggestion, and I eventually had my way.

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Selecting the field

Soon after the topic was finalized I was faced with the problem of selecting a town – one which suited the scope of the study and was not at the same time too inconvenient for me to reach, stay in, and study. Added to this was the question of how much of my domestic responsibility I could safely afford to ignore. My husband, brother-in-law and son gallantly offered to take care of the house, but I did not have much faith in their ability…the task of identifying the town, which I thought would be very difficult and taxing, actually turned out to be the easiest. Because of my knowledge of the languages spoken in U.P. my home state, I had decided to study a town there.

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Secondly, in view of my limited financial means and various other compulsions, I thought it best to opt for the smallest possible town. I also wanted it to have an elected municipal body with a continuous history for at least the last two decades, so that I could study the political processes which preceded and succeeded the introduction of adult suffrage in the country.

Selecting the field

To this I had added a personal, non-academic preference: as far as possible the town should be situated near a large city where I could have a friend or a relative to bank upon.

With these considerations in mind I scanned through the census reports of U.P. for 1951 and 1961. This exercise helped narrow my choice to six towns: two situated within 50 to 60 kilometres from Lucknow, my home town; one each in Azamgarh and Jaunpur district, both totally unknown to me; and the remaining two in Aligarh district. My ultimate choice fell on Ranipur, smaller and the nearer to Aligarh city of the two in Aligarh district.

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