

A FILIPINO IN AN INDIAN VILLAGE: PROBLEMS IN FIELD RESEARCH¹

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This paper presents the methods and techniques I used while doing field research work in a North Indian village. It also dwells on the problems that the serious social researcher encounters in the field, problems whose solutions often make for effective guidelines in the accomplishment of research studies of a similar nature. Before going into this any further, however, it may be helpful to explain the circumstances that enabled me to undertake sociological research in Northern India.

In 1957-1958, I was awarded a fellowship by the Philippine Board of Scholarships and Exchange of Professors for Southeast Asia, University of the Philippines to do field work in a Punjab village. This scholarship helped me to enroll as a special graduate student at the University of Delhi, to study an Indian village, and to travel extensively for more than a month throughout the country in a program sponsored by the All-India Youth Congress Committee (*Bharat Darshan Yatra*). This work represents the result

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For some references on field methods and techniques, the reader is referred to the following significant works: Donn V. Hart, *An Annotated Bibliography of Anthropological Field Research Techniques A Preliminary Draft*, unpublished manuscript, Silliman University, Dumaguete, Negros Oriental, 1964, 45 pp. John J. Honigmann, *A Comprehensive Bibliography on Method in Ethnology for Anthropology*, University of North Carolina, revised, mimeographed. The Society for Applied Anthropology Journal, *Human Organization*, contains articles dealing with field methods. A very useful guide is Richard N. Adams and Jack J. Preiss (ed.), *Human Organization Research: Field Relations and Techniques*, 1960. A number of works on field methods in India have also been published, one of which is Gerald D. Berreman's *Behind Many Masks, Ethnography and Impression Management in a Himalayan Village*, the Society for Applied Anthropology, Monograph No. 4, Ithaca, New York, 1962.

of an analysis of one village council (*panchayat*) in India.² Such village councils have a long history in Indian culture, but are now assuming an added importance. This change is due to the implementation of a governmental program of community development in which these village councils are assigned a key role.

It would be perhaps most rewarding for social science students, especially those contemplating to do research in other Asian countries, to share with me my experiences as a foreigner and researcher in an Indian village.

I. *The General Approach*

Choice of the community development area: Through the kind assistance and cooperation of the Ministry of Community Development of the Government of India and the Development Commissioner of the Government of the Punjab, I was able to undertake a tour of a number of community development villages in the state. The block development officer³ of Hissar, Punjab, was also very helpful and cooperative. He accompanied me on preliminary field survey of villages. In addition to these initial visits to rural India, I also observed for a number of days with the block development officers and social education organizers⁴ who were then undergoing training at the Nilokheri Training Center, Nilokheri, Punjab. I chose a community development block near Delhi, the Capital of the Republic of India, for convenience and economy.

Choice of the village: My choice of the village was based upon the following criteria: that this village should be of average size; that it should not have some peculiar features which would make it unrepresentative of North Indian villages (e.g., the presence of very many rich or educated people); and that it should not fall under the category of a model village. Another basis was proximity to the community development block headquarters; it was felt that since the village was only two miles from the block headquarters and easily accessible through a well-paved road and since it was also

² For further information, see Mario D. Zamora, *An Indian Village Council in Community Development*, unpublished M. A. thesis, Graduate School, University of the Philippines, 1959. For a comprehensive discussion on the *panchayat*, see H.D. Malaviya, *Village Panchayats in India*, All India Congress Committee, New Delhi, 1956, 843 pp.

³ A community development block is the unit of administration in the Indian community development program. The block consists of about 100 villages and 66,000 people. It is headed by a block development officer.

⁴ Social education organizers are in charge of the adult education phase of development work.

the village level worker's (*gram sevak*)⁵ station, close cooperation between the community development workers and the *panchayat* could, therefore, be facilitated. Other criteria for the choice were caste and occupational composition of the population, the researcher's limited time and finances, and the possibility of establishing rapport with the villagers.

Choice of respondents: As gathered from the development village survey reports, Gurgaon block, 1953, there were 160 family heads in this community. Of this 160, fifty-five (55) were interviewed. This group of 55 respondents came from the three main castes⁶ in this village. The respondents (6 priest-teachers Brahmins), 25 farmers (Jats) and 24 Untouchables (Harijans) and other lower castes) represented 34.00 per cent of the total 160 family heads. The criteria for the selection of a respondent were that he should be a family head and a permanent village resident. Another basis was his availability for the interview.

II. Field Problems

I encountered the following problems: language barrier, transportation and accommodation, difficulty in overcoming caste suspicions, contacting some respondents, and choosing the village.

Language barrier: One of the main problems faced in this study was language differences. Within the short period (12 months) of my stay in India, I, however, tried to learn and communicate in Hindi. My attempt to speak the local language was helpful in fostering rapport with the villagers. The problem of language though was generally handled through the use of Indian interpreters. Though the results were ordinarily satisfactory, nevertheless a knowledge of the language would have produced better results in the data gathering process.

⁵ The *gram sevak* (literally, servant of the village) is the multi-purpose worker in community development.

⁶ The word caste is derived from the Portuguese, and is used in Europe to designate the different tribes or classes into which the people of India are divided. The most ordinary classification, and at the same time the most ancient divides them into four main castes — Brahmins (priests), Kshatras (military service), Vaisyas (agricultural, trade and cattle-breeding),

1 Sudras (general servitude). Each of the four main castes is divided into many others, the number of which is difficult to determine because subdivisions vary according to locality, and a subcaste existing in one province is not necessarily found in another. Refer to Abbe J.A. Dubois, *Indu Manners, Customs, and Ceremonies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1947, 14-15.

Transportation and accommodation: Village Rajinderpur⁷ is about twenty-two (22) miles from Delhi. It is located in Punjab state in the northern part of India. At the initial stage of the inquiry, I had to commute daily from Delhi to the village; I had to go in the early morning and return in the evening. However, this arrangement proved to be very taxing; as a result of these trips, I became ill for a number of days. Through the generosity and hospitality of a friend working in a Delhi electric company (who was a village Rajinderpur resident), I was then able to live in a nearby town for the remaining period of the field work.

Overcoming caste suspicions: Especially during the first few weeks, I was identified with the people whom I had accompanied, and with whom I had been staying in the village. For despite national efforts and sentiments for a casteless society, the caste system in India, particularly in the villages, is still deeply rooted. From personal experience, interviews, and observations, it seems that inter-caste relations are still rigid.⁸ I accordingly had to face two alternatives: either to continue staying in a *Brahmin's* house all the time and be completely identified with them or get out of the *Brahmin's* group and move around with all the major castes and thus create more goodwill among the villagers. I chose the latter course and eventually stayed in a town, four miles from Rajinderpur. From there I had to use a bicycle everyday to go to the village.

Contacting respondents: March and April happen to be the summer (kharif) season for Punjab farmers. During these months, most of them are busy working on the farm and it was difficult for me to contact all of them. Sometimes my interpreter and I had to go out to the field at noon to interview the farmers during their noonday break.

Choosing the village: One must have an adequate knowledge of the cultural milieu before embarking on a study of this nature. Besides library research in the University of Delhi, I was taken on an observation trip to various villages in the Punjab; the problem then faced was choosing a village from this survey. It was originally planned to select four villages for my project. However due to the pressing problem of communication and accommoda-

⁷ The name Rajinderpur is fictitious in accordance with my promise to respect the villagers' confidences.

⁸ Srinivas claims that this feeling has been intensified in many areas of public life. See M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, India, 1962, pp. 1-7, 15-41.

tion, the number was reduced to two. Finally, because of my limited time and finances and the difficulties in gaining ready acceptance in an Indian village, only one village council was studied. This village was chosen from a list supplied by the community development block headquarters. A number of other villages in the block were also visited before finally choosing the village Rajinderpur.

III. *Data-gathering Process*

The following research techniques were utilized: library research, participant-observation, and the interview.

Library research: Literature on the subject was consulted, particularly basic information about India, community development programs, and the *panchayat* system. Village survey reports by the community project headquarters and village records being kept by the *panchayat* were also examined. But the bulk of the material in this study was gathered first hand.

Participant-observation: I lived near the village; this facilitated my participation in a number of activities of the villagers and their leaders. I also attended some *panchayat* meetings and small group informal gatherings of the different castes. These gave me a richer insight into the actual workings of the village *panchayat*.

The interview: This method was used most frequently in the actual field work. Suitable rapport was always sought before the interviews which were conducted mostly in individual homes. It was usually difficult to hold individual interviews in Rajinderpur. Caste groups sit together while smoking a waterpipe (*hukkah*), and on two or three occasions, the influence of the group on individual responses was fairly evident.

The interview was usually initiated by greeting the villagers in their own language,⁹ talking about general village problems, and then gradually shifting to the subject matter of the interview. At the preliminary stage, no interview guides were brought; instead an attempt was made to memorize informants' responses and record them later in a resting house in one corner of the village. As rapport improved, interview guides were used and the informants' answers recorded in their presence.

⁹ The colloquial expression of greeting in this village as well as in other Hindu villages is "Ram...Ram" (God bless you...).

Two college students from this village were utilized as interpreters. One of them was a farmer (*Jat*) by caste and he accordingly interpreted for his caste. The other interpreter was an 18-year-old *Brahmin* who was in his first year in college. At the initial stage, however, a friend taking a Master of Laws degree from the University of Delhi served as my interpreter. He was a merchant (*bania*)¹⁰ by caste, 25 years old, and single. Before beginning field work, the interpreters were carefully briefed on the purpose and significance of my study. They were given a detailed explanation of the questions and were instructed on the methods of approach. My research guide and friend who teaches sociology at Delhi also accompanied me once to this village.

Two types of interview guides¹¹ — one for the villagers and another one for the village leaders — were prepared. The villagers' interview guide was tried out first on villagers other than the sample, and was then handed to Indian research assistants and some Delhi University professors for suggestions. The purposes of the pretest interviews were a) to know whether the questions were clear and unambiguous and b) to determine whether the villagers' responses gave the information desired. A student of Hindi at the University of Delhi was also requested to translate the questions into Hindi¹² for the interpreters' benefit.

Special methods were devised to win the villagers' confidence. I used both directive and non-directive interviews. To make the interview more systematic, the inquiry was divided into three stages: the introductory stage (mostly non-directive), the preliminary interview (directive), and the final interview (mostly directive interviews).

Introductory stage: At this non-directive interviewing stage, the villagers were very curious and suspicious about me — the "Pilipini" (Filipino) young man with a bicycle who had been paying them regular visits. Some of the villagers even thought that I was a high-ranking *panchayat* official's son out to "investigate" their own village council. It was only after a very careful and clear explanation by the interpreter and by some of the respected

¹⁰ The *bania* belongs to the Vaisya caste. See Dubois, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ See Appendices B and C in Zamora, *An Indian Village Council... op. cit.* for the interview guides.

¹² Hindi has been declared the national language of India though the Constitution recognizes 14 other official languages. Rajinderpur villagers speak both Hindi and Punjabi.

village leaders (who, by this time, had become my good friends) that the respondents extended their cooperation. I was also mistaken for a "Chini" (Chinese), "Japani" (Japanese), and even a "Gurkha" (an ethnic group with Mongolian features). Meanwhile, no mention was made about the subject of this research. I merely introduced myself to the villagers, answered all their questions concerning the Philippines, and explained as clearly as I could my plan of studies in India. An effort was made to meet all family heads and know their names whenever possible. Active participation in many of the village social and religious activities like *Holi*¹³ was done when there was an opportunity to do so. I also attended marriage ceremonies, helped some villagers in harvesting and threshing, played volleyball games with adults, distributed candies and sweets to the children, smoked *hukkah* or waterpipe with all the major caste groups, memorized songs in Hindi and Punjabi to their great delight, and tried to speak colloquial Hindi and Punjabi.

Preliminary interview: In this directive interviewing stage, rapport with Indian villagers had already improved considerably. Questions were therefore introduced that directly concerned my project. However, care was taken to ask only the simple and less delicate ones, especially those that could be answered by yes or no. Simultaneously at this stage also, data about the social and economic life of village Rajinderpur were collected.

Final interview: As rapport improved with these Indian villagers, the interviews were completed by bringing out all the questions hitherto unasked. The responses were properly recorded in the villagers' presence.

IV. *Some Suggestions*

A Filipino, doing research in an Indian village, should consider the following guidelines for field work.¹⁴

¹³Holi is "a Hindu religious celebration in honor of the most popular incarnation of God in Hindu mythology—the Lord Krishna, god of love and wisdom... During Holi all the villagers put on garlands of flowers, lit huge bonfires, danced and sang love songs, and scattered red powder; squirted colored water at one another symbolic of Krishna's escapades with the milkmaids of Mathura." Kumar Goshal, *The People of India*, Sheridan House Inc., New York, 1944; p. 30.

¹⁴I do not claim that these are the only guides for field work. These are suggestions based on my personal experiences in Rajinderpur. The success or failure in field work, of course, will depend on the researcher—his background, academic training, human relations skills etc. This paper should be judged in terms of my limitations as an inexperienced graduate student in sociology in 1957-58.

- (1) An adequate knowledge of his own country's history and life-way so that he can be an effective representative of his culture.
- (2) A carefully prepared budget of his time and finances; a well thought out preliminary research design is probably helpful at this stage.
- (3) An adequate language preparation in the area of research.
- (4) A fair knowledge of the literature of the country under study.
- (5) A willingness and capacity to undergo the possible hazards and inconveniences of field work.
- (6) An ability to refrain from making value judgments and biased opinions of the culture under investigation as is expected of a social scientist.