

*Published June 12, 1999 in Economic and Political Weekly (www.epw.org.in)*

## **Scratches on the Sands of Time**

### **Prospective Economic Studies of Indian Villages**

**Thomas Timberg**

**Economic Development in Palanpur over Five Decades** edited by Nicholas Stern and Peter Lanjouw; Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998.

**Village Voices: Forty Years of Rural Transformation in South India** by T Scarlett Epstein, A P Suryanarayana and T Thimmegowda; Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 1998.

Enterprise surveys of farm and non-farm enterprises are a standard element in economic statistics gathering. By following how the data they report changes over time we measure social change. But everyone is frustrated both by the sense that the figures they produce may not be accurately returned, and the fact that survey results give little feel for the dynamics out of which they emerge. Consequently surveys are often supplemented by detailed studies of specific villages which can be located in their context. In a study of some Nepali statistics more than a decade ago, anthropologists did detailed studies of villages which had been covered by standard statistical surveys, and identified precisely how misapprehension of language and social context had caused inaccurate responses.<sup>1</sup> Several years ago, I M D Little proposed that 'boreholes' be drawn to give a cross-check on survey and census data and launched a World Bank supported study of small enterprise with precisely that in mind.<sup>2</sup> In the various censuses of India since 1951, an unfortunately declining number of village studies has been done to complement the census results. Similarly, working with a succession of sponsors, S P F Seniratne developed a network of 10 villages which were systematically studied and then revisited periodically to give responses on various national level issues raised by Sri Lankan authorities.<sup>3</sup> I do not have the reference at hand but there was some sort of effort centred at the Institute of Development Studies to accumulate a database of village and community studies, which I hope has been continued.

However, 'boreholes' are typically single snapshots in time. Villages are located in time and space, and the story they tell is incomplete without these dimensions. What is especially valuable about survey data is the trends they reveal – the succession of snapshots that enable us to make a moving picture of society. Moving pictures of individual communities are considerably rarer than snapshots, especially ones directed to questions about economic dynamics – even though much of economic argument is precisely about such dynamics.

Medical anthropologists, in particular, have been able to resurvey certain villages over the years to observe the long-term effects of trends on physical health.<sup>4</sup> They frequently call the areas studied 'Population Laboratories' or 'Population Observatories'. A recent survey calls these long-term studies, 'prospective studies'. One of the things that emerges from a recent review of many such studies is how frequently what seems to be revealed at the end of a first study, turns out not to be the case in a second study. More importantly the investigators often learn over time how they were deceived in their first several years of work in a given community.

On a more naive level, most of us try to understand social change in the societies we follow by revisiting specific sites and environments. Many of those who have tried to follow Indian development find themselves, often naturally because of keeping in touch with friends, visiting and revisiting certain villages or neighbourhoods at periodic intervals. The experience base is often extended by paying attention to historic records. Occasionally this is a systematic effort but more typically an unsystematic one.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, we have two recent books which represent systematic attempts to do such visiting, spread over 50 years in each case.<sup>6</sup> Both of them represent collective efforts though of very different kinds. Epstein's book is done by her, her first research assistant (now a senior retired scholar), and a person who was a young villager in her first study but now a leading civil servant and rural development activist in his home state. Though many hands are represented in the Stern's volume, including the original ones, the bulk of the study represents new work done in the 1980s. Several of the contributions in Stern's book are from younger scholars who used data from these villages for their doctoral theses or otherwise – the results are included as chapters. Peter Lanjouw is the prime example, but the other examples include also Naresh Sharma on tenancy, Jocelyn Lynch on nutrition, and Anindita Mukherjee on labour. Tenancy is, incidentally 'little changed' though fixed rents account for 25 per cent of the total in 1993 versus 14 per cent in 1983-84. However, "the enhanced [more equal] status between landlords and tenants as agriculture becomes more capital intensive reflects to a large extent, the exclusion of the landless from tenancy contracts..." The chapter on credit by Jean Dreze, Peter Lanjouw and Naresh Sharma contains a systematic consideration of rural credit in India and is based in particular on the finding that in this village "the credit market does not work very well". The village credit market is highly segmented and leads to numerous market failures throughout the village economy. But the authors think that if "public lending institutions were honestly and effectively managed, we doubt they would have much difficulty in recovering a large proportion of their dues even without introducing major changes such as a shift to group lending". One regrets that the credit commentators did not address the considerable literature on systemic shortcomings in such public institutions – pro and con – which is often referred to as the Ohio State School debate. Some of this I suspect reflects a segmentation in the markets for the economics of rural areas.

The separate contributions in both cases are labeled and in each case represent both different viewpoints and different perceptions. The most dramatic contrast is between the relatively dispassionate outside observer Epstein, and the very involved, one might even say advocatory standpoint of the civil servant, Thimmegowda. Both books attempt to place their village in the general context of regional developments and the Stern's book even commissioned a study of other village studies.<sup>7</sup>

The Epstein's and Stern's books are very different. If the unifying drama of the Epstein's book is the contrast between her two villages, the Stern's book more lightly contrasts the agricultural progress in western Uttar Pradesh in which they place Rohilkhand and the social backwardness of Uttar Pradesh as a whole. The Epstein's book is essentially the tale of the differing fates of two villages – one of which had adequate irrigation and has developed as a prosperous agricultural centre with a strong community life and large-scale development of what is now called 'social capital' (schools, social institutions, etc) – the other lacked irrigation and its residents had to seek their fortunes outside which has resulted in its decline as a community and the accumulation of relatively little 'social capital'. Some of the difference is clearly due to physical factors – the presence or absence of irrigation, the proximity to a larger town – but some of it is due to the entrepreneurial role played by local leadership, not the least Thimmegowda himself.

Despite sparks here and there and some irrigation-based agricultural progress, Stern's village's 'social capital' has decayed. It no longer has a functional school; whatever social projects have been started have disappeared.<sup>8</sup> This lack of 'social capital' is partially attributed to the limited amount of 'collective action'. "The absence of any credible system of local governance [outside the World Bank it is usually called government], the persistence of near universal illiteracy among disadvantaged castes, the resilience of extreme forms of gender inequality, the retarded pace of the demographic transition, and the lethargic state of collective institutions are some symptoms of this..."<sup>9</sup>

The questions that village studies raise, presuming that they are accurate snapshots, are those of incidence and context, that is how typical are these studies of the area from which they are drawn and how do the phenomena observed fit into a broader historical and political context. Both volumes have made some attempts as I indicated to address these points. Even though village history often merges with village myth, Indian villages have easily accessible written histories in government land revenue and

police records. In one of Epstein's villages we have a tantalising reference to some conflicts going back to 1927. For her other village, Thimmegowda provides a useful historical setting on page 37-38, perhaps illustrating the importance of inside perspective. In fact, his contribution in its entirety is probably the literary highpoint of the two volumes considered. History is particularly important because groups and factions settled in the village at particular points in time. The fashion of their settlement often influences their place in the village.<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, social and religious movements and political campaigns attempt to act on villages. A little more perspective is provided by Epstein's book because some of her collaborators were involved in these, particularly in state politics. Perhaps no such influences were present in Stern's village or the sponsorship of much of the work by the World Bank constrained the contributors from paying attention to politics, but I imagine a different picture of the village might have emerged from discussions with the regional elites who relate to it. The RSS cadres must have some interest in the village; regional Muslim groups must interact with its Muslims.

One regrets that neither of the books refers to Hashim Amir Ali's study of two West Bengal villages in the 1930s and 1950s which I think of as the prototype of the study of a village over time – which manages to combine these missing elements, sometimes at the expense of the empirical findings, but in any case an interesting contrast.<sup>11</sup> I remember that there was some intention to resurvey these West Bengal villages – and perhaps it has been done by someone. Some improvement in living levels among the poor was reported, but rather modest ones considering that some considerable efforts had been made to assist the villages over the interim. It should be added that Hashim Amir Ali considered the studies to document the failure of government rural development efforts. While neither Epstein's nor Stern's book is so pessimistic, they should make people conscious of how much futile activity has occurred in the Indian countryside over the last half century.

What happens in India's village is progressively less significant as the country urbanises and the economy globalises, but villages as self-contained units still form reality for most Indians. What emerges from these and other village studies is the individuation of villages. This is not so marked in agricultural technology which seems eventually to spread to all areas for which it is suited. But it is marked in 'social capital' and the resulting levels of human welfare especially for the mass of the village population who lack the means to buy their way out of the village. It is constrained by natural ecology (such as the lack or presence of irrigation potential), by accident (has an industrial plant sprung up nearby), and outside and inside entrepreneurship (which also rises and declines over time). The importance of the latter factors is certainly one of the points that emerges from these two studies. Anyone familiar with swathes of the Indian countryside knows of progressive villages typically with strong leadership, indigenous or outside and weak ones without. The leadership does emerge from nature and history – but it rises and decays as well showing its dependence on particular people. Sometimes it can be institutionalised, even when it is not it may leave lasting legacies or residues.

## Notes

1 Gabriel Campbell, Ramesh Shreshta and Linda Stone, *The Use and Misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal*, Tribuvan University Press, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1979.

2 I M D Little, Dipak Mazumdar, and John M Page, Jr, *Small Manufacturing Enterprises: A Comparative Analysis of India and Other Economies*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.

3 Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Essex, Ilford, Longmans, 1983, reprinted 1995, 'Seniratne: Windows into Regions', pp 66-67.

4 Monica Das Gupta, Peter Aaby, Michel Garenne and Gilles Pison, *Prospective Community Studies in Developing Countries*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, reviews a number particularly of the most prominent of these studies. The data observed included in a minority of cases information about income and assets and in just two cases consumption.

5 This is quite common but I can cite an article of mine as an example, 'Borunda: A Case of Exhausted Development', *EPW*, February 21, 1981, p 265.

6 Stern and Epstein, op cit.

7 Raja Jayarman and Peter Lanjouw, 'The Evolution of Poverty and Equality in Indian Villages', World Bank Policy Research Paper 1878, World Bank, Washington, DC. It is not really fair to complain about the book that was not written – but one does wish the study concerned had a broader terms of reference.

8 In 1997 after many years of lapse the village primary school finally began to experience a revival, and a privately sponsored school appeared to be working in the village as well.

9 Stern et al, op cit, pp 112-13.

10 One study that took a long-term look at a village is Tom Kessenger's, *Vilayatpur, 1848-1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village*, Berkeley, University of California Press, CA, 1974.

11 Hashim Amir Ali, *Then and Now: A Study of Socio-Economic Structure and Change in Some Villages Near Visvabharati University, Bengal*, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1960.