

If I were to Conduct a Village study... Deep Joshi, PRADAN

I guess I would begin by locating a village to study, would you not? I would choose a village I knew little about so that what I know does not bias my inquiry. Since it is a new place and I have a very poor sense of direction, I would mark it on some kind of a map with respect to places that can serve as reference points. That should help me make inquiries. I would also like to know how far the village is, how one reaches there, what kind of terrain one has to traverse, any landmarks, etc.

Whenever I go to a new place where people live, I am curious to know how the settlement came about. Often there is nothing to know, but some places have a history that is worth knowing, especially if people themselves attach some significance to their history. Questions like who lives where and why, who does what and why, who relates with whom and why... are sometimes connected to the past. In any case, these are some of the questions I would like answered. There are often reasons why people build particular kinds of houses to live in, the location of houses relative to each other and clustering of houses, especially if there are identifiable communities. We know so little about communities, and how they get formed, how they function...

“Who lives here?”, is an obvious question whenever I go to any settlement. How many people? How many families? Are there children here, are there old people... men, women... chronically ill, handicapped... Is it not curious how so many ways there are of looking at people! I would do that if I were conducting a village study... Why, I am nosy enough to want to find out who is related to whom! I have known villages that descended from a bare five families some three centuries ago and now there are as many hamlets. I would also want to know how families are composed, how many generations stay together, who does what in the family, are there established customs and patterns about these things...

I am fascinated by landscapes and all they encompass. And what meaning bits and parts of a landscape have for different people! A building may be a home, a school, a factory, a jail, a place of worship... Land, water, trees, forests, pastures, livestock, mines, quarries are all parts of a landscape... But wait people's lives depend on these! So, I would like to know more about these.

To some land is merely a hunk of earth... but others may call it farmland, pasture, forests, etc. It may be terraced, banded ... well looked after or not ... different kinds of soils... irrigated or not ... eroding or well kept ... near people's homes or far away. What people do with different pieces of land, how do they use it, what sense do they make of it, how they keep it ... I would explore all these facets. And I would inevitably draw inferences and make judgments about how people look after their land and what meaning different pieces of land have for them. I would try to find who owns how much land and where ... who can use which piece of land ... I would also explore

what I might do with the land I see.

Then there is water ... ponds, springs, streams, wells, rivers ... water underground ... how is it being used? How much is being used? For what purposes? What happens to it through the years? There are trees, some isolated, others in groves; some growing naturally, others planted; some carefully nurtured and others vandalised. There are forests ... mines and quarries ... livestock. I would try to learn about these.

Whenever I go to a new place, I ask myself, “what if I lived here?” What would my life be like if I lived in this village? Where would I get water to drink, where would I buy provisions from, how would I cook my food, and what would I do if I got ill, where would my kids study? I could be a farmer in this village or a blacksmith, or a potter ... where would I buy the things I would need for my occupation? And if I had to sell some of what I produced or collected ... where would I sell? If I need to borrow money ...who would I go to, and what would be the terms? Hey, when do people borrow in my village? And who has borrowed how much, for what purpose, since when?

What if I was unable to sort out a quarrel with my neighbour... Funny, is it not, that we take all this for granted ... things seem to happen in life without people having to question “how?” ...

What about the government? Government, after God, seems omnipresent and omniscient in our country. Does my village have anything to do with government? Are there signs and symbols of any relationship? I would want to dig that out.

Do people in this village ever do things together? And how? ... in a sporadic, happenstance sort of way or more systematically ... by some kind of design or custom? What kind of things? Seems like an obvious question, does it not? After all, “man”, as the saying goes, is a social animal.

My study would hardly be complete if I do not learn how people make a living. Then again, it is not much use to say, “people do farming”. One person may cultivate his own land, another may rent it out or rent it in ... one person may use hired labour, another may not ...one person may use fertilizers, another may not ... one person may sell a part of his produce, another may not ... different members of the family may do different things ... the outcomes may vary across households ... and so on. And this is just one way of making a living – farming. There may be myriad other ways people make living, and I should want to know about those. Some occupations I know give a steady flow of incomes, others do not ... there are more or less risks ... some are “regular”, others are sporadic, etc. And what does it all add up to? For example, how much does a farmer spend to earn how much? What do they do with what they produce or earn?

How do people make dough? What if there is not enough to eat? Does that ever happen? To whom? I should like to know that. What if there is huge expense unexpectedly? Does that ever happen? When? And what do people do then? Is life the same through the year, year after year? Are there ups and downs? What do people do when they are “down”? Do they plan ahead

for the times when they might be “down”? Is it the same for men, women, the aged, children and all families? What are people's fears and anxieties? What are their aspirations and hopes? These are people I am dealing with, not cattle ... human beings like me... so I would want to know all these things.

Now, did I ever come here before? Have I ever been to this village before I chose it to “study”? Well, not really... though whenever I go to a new place – any place – I always feel I had been there before... But wait, suppose I had come here some years back... what might have I seen that would be different? Curious, is it not! Did people live differently? Did they make their living differently? Have families changed? Have things that I see around changed? Do people think about the rest of the world differently now? Has the landscape changed? Has anything happened in the recent past that people talk about? How would things be in future?

Did I say something about man being a social animal? I guess I did. Well, what I understand by that is that people do not live in isolation like stones ... not even like trees; they deal with each other all the time, in myriad ways. If one sells labour, another buys it ... if one has extra, he may sell or lend to others... some people come to be regarded as wise, so everyone seems to consult them ... some have lots of money or food .. so people borrow from them ... over time, some of these dealings become “frozen” - due to habit, convenience or compulsion ... A person may always deal with some people and avoid some others ... does that happen in my village? ... may be not ... And as people deal with each other “as people”, as performers of specific tasks, etc., some become more prominent than others ... And some people like to be prominent and they do things that would make them prominent ... So, what is the worth of my study if I do not decipher all this, the most fascinating of things about people?

Of course, I do not expect my village to be an isolated enclave ... if it were; I would not be here, would I? And if it is not isolated, who is it “connected” with? Just as people deal with each other within the village, they perhaps deal with outsiders ... what are these dealings, these connections? ... I would surely want to explore and understand. People buy and sell things, for example; some work for others; some seek others' advice. Of course, it would not surprise me one bit to find that these connections are not the same for everyone.

Finally, as a development wallah, I would like to know what is happening in my village by way of “development”. I understand government does various things for the development of villages ... is it doing anything in my village? Do people know what is being done? I would like to find out what has been the outcome, and how it has affected people's lives. I would also want to know what people think about it? Are they themselves doing anything?

That is all very well! But how do I know people are telling me the truth? I am a stranger here, after all. What if I do not understand what I see? Alas, there are no easy answers to these questions. Perhaps I can ask others around me if I do not understand something ... I could analyse

what I have learnt and see if it makes sense... I could cross-check ... I could try various ways of going about my study so that people in the village open up to me.

You may well ask, "How would you do all this?" and I have no answer to give you. I think it is just as well that I do not have one answer, for there is no single answer, there is no single method! I know I would travel around the village... walk, walk and walk. I would listen and talk with people as they are where they are. I would keep my eyes open to see; I would keep my mind open and alert so that I observe what I see; I would turn in my mind what I have observed so that I reflect upon what I observed. I would discuss with my colleagues, others around me... I would read if I can find something about my village or the region where it is located... I would share with the inhabitants of the village what I have learnt so that they may educate me further. And in the end, if I have uncovered my own ignorance, may be it has been a worthwhile exercise...