Engagement with Social Actors – The High Point of Social Research

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Society is rarely the same between any two points of time, even though change is not always perceptible if we judge between two closely contiguous movements of time. And also, this change has been variously perceived – *a la Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Herbert Spencer,* and several others. But talking in terms of the processes of change what has personally struck me is the sequencing of change proposed by a celebrated anthropologist Raymond Firth. Talking of change in the Polynesian society across two generations, he identifies three levels of change: *Structures of ideals, structures of expectations and structures of actions.* Change according to him has to mediate through these three levels in order to complete itself. But, strangely enough, there is certain methodological invariance in the study of societies or social phenomena separated widely by time or levels of socio-cultural development. Logically, therefore, the temporally disparate situations call for certain degree of improvisations in their study and analysis. But as it has actually happened, the larger necessity of consistency and dependability has taken the front seat and kept us immune to these master-variations.

There is something very basic to the study of social phenomena – the sum and substance of sociological inquiry, that for any meaningful engagement with the social reality we need to assimilate the basic or the raw data concerning social behaviour, social institutions or social units like groups, parties or even the entire social system. These data could be obtained either by availing of the sources that have already assimilated diverse materials, or by collecting and aggregating data from the actors themselves who are part and parcel of the social situation under focus of study.

All these questions are highly relevant and need to be pursued in all thoroughness and detail. But what I have said above on these issues is more by way of a prelude and a bit of an intellectual teaser.

At the moment, however, I wish to talk of the method of inquiry that has inspired some of the earliest forays into the study of human societies and social phenomena – which is the method of direct or face-to-face engagement with the social actors. Some scholars, however, dispute the usefulness of this method on the plea that it is no more serviceable in the study of urban phenomena which is large and spread out both in scope and scale. But I wish to maintain here – and this I do from my own experience of having encountered a vast range and variety of research – situations all along my career – both in the domain of rural as well as urban settings, that the first hand engagement with respondents whom you want to supply, is of immense value and generative of invaluable insights, and the method is a useful additive to the vast and large scale surveys of social phenomena. I would even go as far as to say that the reality that seems imprisoned within the confines of ossified variables come alive when we try to see it through the fears, anxieties and perspectives of the discrete actors.

What I propose to do in this short presentations is not to sequentialize the high points of my career during which I busied my self in varied research activities within the context of different institutions where I worked, but instead to identify particularities of diverse field-situations I experienced both while working for myself and for my employers or 'clients'[1]. In particular, I shall also try to focus on the 'encounters' that I had in the field while trying to collect data[2] on the jobs in hand. The presentation of the material will be in the form of different narratives, using whatever theoretical-conceptual categories suitable for the purpose.

1. My first experience as a researcher concerns a village study that I undertook-along with another colleague, on behalf of the Ministry of Home Affairs, as a part of their programme to build up a database on certain select villages through out the length and breadth of the country. The scope of such studies-called 'surveys', was not very sharply defined, and thus left me much freedom

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both as regards the *format* and the *method* of inquiry. I had no guidance and the initial information as regards the village, its precise location, composition, nature of economy, etc. My only loadstar to guide me was the juvenile excitement of a fresh pass-out expecting to stumble upon something as significant as that documented by the master-sociologists or anthropologists. Equipped with such temerity of a novice I launched myself into a village located barely 12 miles away from the Ashram crossing in Delhi along the Faridabad highway. I remember that my very first respondent to provide me with the barest of information about the village-*Mithepur*, was a semi-educated businessman who was enjoying a glass of tea with *jalebis* in a road-side restaurant on the highway.

"The village you are looking for is located 2 miles to the left of this highway... it is a 'kachha' road al the way... You are lucky that this is December and no rains fall around this part of the year; otherwise, it is damned muddy...I think, there will never be a proper road to go to this village in the next 50 years. These sarkari plans for building roads! But why do you want to 'study' this village? This is Gujjar village. You know these people; cantankerous and cattle-lifters. They would never listen to you even if you mean their welfare. Even a son will not listen to his father!"

Despite all the excitement of wanting to apply several idyllic concepts[3], to this modest *research-situation*, I felt quite unsure of how to go about it,; all the more so because I had been given the widest possible mandate-*to prepare a socio-economic and cultural profile of village Mithepur.* Frankly, I did not know how to translate this *bonanza* into actual investigations. In this sheer directionlessness, I latched on to the above respondent as my key-respondent who during the course of interview provided me several useful leads of what to look for and where! Another key respondent in this study turned out to be a kind of 'outsider' to his own family. He was from a large family of Gujjars with so many middle-aged and old brothers, their married and unmarried sons and daughters. I chanced upon the respondent in question, in one of the festive-sessions in the village. He was viewed as a vagabond by the rest of the family who thought that he had gone hay-wire with the pernicious influence of the city life, which he had sampled during his occasional visits to Delhi in connection with family matters. To me, he proved immensely useful, particularly when I was exploring the functioning and dynamics of *Gujjar panchayat* in the village and also when I tried to understand how *Gujjars* who were numerically preponderant in this village, exercised their leverage over other castes. Indeed, he proved my key-man for the study of *Mithepur!* The role the *key* respondent can play in

establishing the researcher in the field is often not given its due, granting the currency of *questionnaire* and several other impersonal techniques as tools of data-collection. On account of frequent consumer-surveys conducted by a diversity of research-organisations for a variety of clientele, the necessity of rapport is often glossed over. So mush so, that the fashion has also caught on with *sociologists* who are often engaged in consultancy-projects of all descriptions. Having to 'manage' these projects *from a distance* through the hired staff, where reported' reality is often equated with 'actual' reality, the researcher rarely takes the burden of proof on him or her. Moreover, since only a part of the 'reality' is sought to be explored such as the consumption habits of the respondents or their electoral behaviour, a *thorough rapport* is not regarded necessary. Therefore, the traditionally available anthropological wisdom of *situating oneself in one's milieu of study* is often scoffed at.

2. That the key-respondents are not out there, easily accessible to the field-worker, goes without saying. Instead, quite often, some deliberate search is also needed to identify such useful connections. To convey this point I proffer another illustration from my own researches. After a brief teaching assignment in Delhi University, I joined a consultancy-house in the area of industrial relations. I was assigned to collect some revealing information through the post-facto analysis of a strike situation, which had proved ruinous for the company. The research-mandate was to identify the crucial and critical factors which had led to the strike. Maintaining as much distance from the *management* as possible in identifying the workers whom I could usefully interview, I stumbled upon a respondent whom *management* would have rather wanted to be left alone. This worker who subsequently became my useful and *key-respondent* was very inconspicuous to look at and in no way qualified to be a smart respondent apparently. I was driven to him both fortuitously and through my *deliberate* search for a 'crucial' respondent who would throw some light on circumstances preceding the strike. The 'copy-book', stratified-sampling of respondents from various levels of workforce brought before me only a formal and journalistic account of the strike, which looking to the virulence with which it occurred looked rather simplistic. I went about interviewing my 'carefully' selected sample of workers. Desperate as I was, being not able to make any effective headway with my work, I drew him out for a chat. Then, suddenly, the *Khul ja sim, sim* happened for me! The said worker was a *supervisor* in the assembly-line section of the factory when I interviewed him and had an interesting story to tell.

He said that just before the strike, he had a bitter feud with his co-workers in the factory, which ultimately spilt into his relations with the management[4], hastening the strike. Just before the strike took place, as he reported, he was an important union leader, and was in the good books of the management, which suddenly became hostile towards him without any reason[5], favouring his rival who ultimately displaced him as the leader of the union. This made him 'very bitter' towards management and as he said: 'I wanted to teach them a lesson'. Recounting the circumstances, he said that:

"Management in those days when the strike had taken place, had committed a serious blunder regarding the announcement about the bonus payment and their new-found union leader could not help them a bit in placating the workers. I was quick to grab this opportunity, and started inciting the workers to strike work. In no time, there was a complete strike..."

3. Tapping One's Own Network for Key-Respondents

As I mentioned above that even though crucial our key-respondents are very vital for collecting meaningful data, these don't come by easily and automatically, notwithstanding some fortuitous coincidences. The most potential resource-base for such useful contacts lies in social-network of the investigator himself or herself, which may also provide immediate acceptability to the investigator in the milieu one is studying[6]. But this insight that I have just worded is a product of some painful experiences during the course of which I found myself seriously handicapped. Let me once again give a telling illustration of this from my own experience. I was to conduct field-investigations for my doctoral work in a district court, which happened to be in my own home town. When I reached the courts for the first time, it felt that my confidence to having to work in my very own familiar milieu, was entirely misplaced, and had to do a lot more than walking around in a familiar milieu. The atmosphere in the court looked forbidding quite *impersonal and impenetrable,* and that I had nowhere to go except the very basics that I had learnt during my elementary lessons on sociology and Indian society.

As I started looking for some familiar faces, some references, some contacts that may very well lie there in my familiar milieu- i.e. the town where I was born and had also spent first twenty years of my life uninterruptedly. And it proved a bountiful experience. First again was in terms of a 'professor' who was known indirectly to one of the elderly members of my family. A youngish person-in his mid-forties, who was holding a masters degree along with graduation in law. Even though, he practised law in the district court, yet he drew much of his sustenance from his larger family, which had investments in property and banks. He did not expect to make any career in Law; instead, he looked upon this primarily as a gateway to public life and a career in politics, which he was building up quite assiduously. He was rarely busy in the court-work and was always available for an informal chitchat during which he proffered informed and intellectual comments on the going on in the state and the country at large. He sat in the company of other members of the bar occupying a shaded enclave in a corner of the court, engaged in serious and hilarious exchanges with each other. As soon as a case on which any one of these lawyers was engaged was called up in any one of the court-rooms, and the information to this effect provided by the concerned *munshi,* the lawyer in question would get up and proceed to the court, leaving the said quadrangle. I met many useful contacts there while I sat in the company of the 'professor' who introduced me to many lawyers very favourably.

One day when I was crossing from end of the court to the other, I was hailed by my name by a lawyer, approximately my age. As I recognised, he had been my class-fellow in the college from where both of us had done our graduation nearly 15 years ago. He too proved useful to me as a contact-point in my work. But, I also realized-very strangely though, that while interacting with me, he was not particularly forthcoming-especially on sensitive areas like touting and the composition of his clientele. Whether he was doing so of his own or under the influence and advice of his father whom he was assisting in business, it is very difficult to say[7].

Some further contacts that I gained as I went along my work in the district courts, were drawn from my own circle of relatives. There was a senior lawyer who was reputed to be a *first or second choice* in revenue cases, and I was advised by my family to approach him 'for guidance in my work'. In the beginning, he was not of much use, since he could never forget that we both shared the same extended family and thus went about giving an inflated picture of his business. He would often boast of his astute acumen as a revenue lawyer and also about having built up a substantial property through his practice. In order, therefore, to get some useful information from him, I had no way except to put up with his boastful sallies. But another fact about him which helped me in getting some useful and objective information was that he was also an occasional *lecturer in law* in the local university department, and had the *analytical* style of a teacher. Occasionally, therefore, he would launch into a long

lecture on the 'immoral' and 'unprofessional' aspects of legal career, and detail various features of the legal practice. That proved my gain!

Let me sum up briefly what I have said above on the problem of selecting and identifying *respondents*, in the context of field-work based research.

Firstly, it is indeed very crucial that one perceives the criticality of obtaining dependable data from appropriately 'identified' respondents. It is not just enough to select respondents, following some copybook safeguards such as their *representativeness* in the methodological sense. On the contrary, one has to feel assured that the respondent-to-be interviewed has not only the requisite connectivity with the *structure* to be investigated but also has the appropriate orientation to share some crucial information with the researcher.

Secondly, one also has to try the *informal* technique of picking up respondents from amongst those who may not be centrally located within the structure. For their reported 'peripheral' placement within the system, they may in fact be nursing a grouse against those who occupy the system's centrality. By lending ear to such 'troubled' respondents, one may find it possibly 'to get to the heart of the matter' in no time. But such a lucky situation may not always come one's way; there is an element of fortuitousness in it.

Thirdly, there is no doubt that on account of the basic *gemeinshaft* characters of the Indian society, researcher's own network holds the highest potential of supplying useful connections and key-respondents for meaningful and useful understanding of the problem under study. But, the danger of a respondent too intimately known wrecking the prospect of a useful inquiry should also be kept in view. Since one shares one's intimate social ties with the respondent, these might also invoke certain antipathies, jealousies and rivalries.

4. The Uncertain Respondent: the dynamism of Interview situation:

i) The relationship between the researcher and the respondent is not a static one. Instead, it evolves dynamically, and sometime also in the unexpected direction. As a result, the end-result may be more positive than expected, or quite unexpectedly frustrating. In early-eighties, I was interviewing some supreme-court lawyers in connection with the Public Interest Litigation movement, which had started gathering momentum after Mrs. Indira Gandhi lifted the Emergency in the seventies. It was a treat talking to a whole galaxy of eminent jurists. One of those days, I rang up one such lawyer-who later also went on to be the Chief Justice of India. Only, with a great difficulty, I could get the appointment. Subsequently, when I landed at the judge's residence, I found that he was very inhibitive about talking on certain matters, such as the question of giving a variant judgment as against a consensual judgment, i.e. the question whether or not as a judge one should give a judgment on a case different from the one being given by the rest of the judges if one felt professionally persuaded to do so. On this question, he not only went on dilly-dallying, but also took offense at my question-as if it implied the lack of 'professional' solidarity on the part of the judges. I changed the topic and inquired from him about his days at the Inns of Court in England. He was deeply stirred with pride and after providing me the basic information about his law education in London, started expounding freely on the very question that he had ducked initially. It was really a problem for me that evening, I vividly remember, to conclude the interview with him, since he went on talking about the judiciary almost endlessly.

ii) But this sense of self-aggrandizement on the part of the respondent though initially produced by the *smooth and sweet style* of the researcher may come to work against his/her very interest in the sense that it may send the former on an extended ego-trip, parting company with the specifics of the issue under inquiry. Under such circumstances the respondent misperceives the issue-based inquiry, which the researcher has launched as if it were an inquiry into his/her, personal biography. While the respondent then goes on and on detailing his personal experiences though quite un-relatedly, the researcher does not quite know how to stop this soliloquy for reasons of good manners. I encountered such a situation in the research mentioned in the preceding. I was advised to meet one senior Supreme Court lawyer in connection with public interest litigation. She was indeed very polite and agreed to talk to me in a forthright manner on these cases that were coming up before the Supreme Court more and more. As I had found out, she was indeed among the pioneers in this kind of litigation, but I soon realised that she thought herself to be the only fountainhead of public interest litigation in India, without whose initiative nothing of this would have happened in the legal history of India. Whenever I would ask her to relate her work to those of others in the court, she would dismiss the 'futile' query with an imperious wave of hand. Thus, despite her scholarship and high status in the profession, she had no value for me as a respondent.

iii) All along my research-career, I have never encountered a hostile respondent except once whose memory continues to rankle in my mind till today. And in this case, I never knew what was coming, till it suddenly banged upon me and crushed my confidence,

so that I had no alternative except to flee the scene. This happened during the course of my doctoral research which I have mentioned earlier in this write-up. I was in the midst of my investigations having already spent one and a half year interviewing lawyers in the Gobindgarh District Court. I had just interviewed an ex-college mate of mine whom I found practicing along with his father who enjoyed a high profile at the district court. He got me appointment from his father who invited me to his house for a 'chit-chat'. As usual, I started with the peculiarities of practicing law as against other professions. He was indeed very scholarly and forthcoming and I thought I was proceeding smoothly to certain very important inquiries, till I asked him about his family background. He told me that he was from Lahore. I wanted to know whether he was a first-generation Lawyer in his family and so shot the question. "What was your father doing?" He suddenly got up from his seat and said very tersely, "You may leave now". I said, "But why Sir?" To this he said, "I know my colleagues are jealous of me that I have progressed very fast in my practice...but so what if my father was a *halvai* (A sweets-seller)... They have all fed you with this silly stuff against me." I left, but to this day I have not been able to comprehend why it happened. Many questions since that day circuit my mind uncomfortably.

5. In Concluding

Even though, it is a subjective account of diverse research-situations particularly concerning the ticklish problem of collecting data through face-to-face interaction with the respondents, it has some general implications:

1. Since face-to-face interaction with the respondents is vital in nearly all field-situations, it needs a deliberate and careful cultivation, but more as a sensitive strategy than as a fancied scientific methodology.

2. One must be conscious of the diverse type of respondents with diverse data-potentials, who have a differentiated function in the overall success of the research-project. Respondents who may apparently look very relevant may not turn out to be useful. Contrarily, quite often, those who are found dwelling almost in the outer concentrics of a research milieu, in rather innocuous manner, turn out to be key-respondents, very vital for the researches.

3. Despite all the safeguards that one may take against the possible upsets, one should always be prepared to face un-expected twists and turns in the interview-situations. One need not be faulted if these have some upsetting consequences for one's research; but to be able

to repair the damage caused by these developments requires real artistry in the management of researcher-interviewee relations.

4. It would be very useful to supplement even the distant questionnaire-based research with the anthropological variety of rapport with some crucial respondents in the research-situations. The results would quite simply be fabulous!

Now when I go over what I have narrated and stated above, a strange similitude strikes me between my own narration and what that master of field-research-Prof. M N Srinivas, kept cultivating and pursuing all through his field-researches, viz., the art of *qualified detachment* from one's research-milieu and respondents. It is not that one needs to deliberately measure and achieve one's distance from the respondents in a coarse and cussed manner, reducing the researcher-respondent dialogue to drab and mechanistic monotones. Instead, what is implied here is that the *rapport* with a respondent need not degenerate into loss of one's own perspective and objectivity. All this comes out vividly in his "Field Situation". (Pp.11-52; *The Remembered village*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1976). As it comes out clearly, he forms his rapport with all the respondents[8] (Located *differentially in the village social system*) with equal ease and guarded detachment[9]. Even in the classroom situation he stressed the value of researcher's *qualified detachment*. He would often say, I vividly remember, "A field-worker has to be on one's guard constantly... it is so easy to be swamped by the intensity of a respondent's remark or reportage". While emphasising this, he would endearingly mention some of the classics in fieldwork like William Foote White's *Street Corner Society*.

NOTES

1. This refers to some Consultancy-research that I was engaged in either alone or as a member of a research-team doing analysis / diagnosis of some problematic situations, e.g. in the domain of industrial disputes, strikes, etc. or in the context of some pathological situations such as those of drug-addiction, family violence, professional – improprieties.

2. This would mean *perceptions, opinions and experiences* as reported by respondents in the field.

3. Most of which I had imbibed from my post-graduate studies of Anthropology classics.

4. This is, however, not to say that there were no other reasons behind this paralyzing strike which I was studying now for the benefit of the management, but just like the 'immediate reasons for the war', which we so often try to identify while studying some major wars, this bitterness among the leaders of the workers in this factory and its consequence for the

industry under study looked to me to be most important input in this strike.

5. This was only his version, which the management disputed and afforded their own version. In the context of the theme of this paper, however, we don't consider it necessary to give all these details. It seems sufficient to state here that as reported by him, it was a situation of *receiver hurt*, which he wanted to avenge on the management.

6. But, this ready-made familiarity may also, sometime work to one's disadvantage even wrecking whatever work one may have done. So, even though, unavoidable for its immediate pay-off, it may be described as a double-edged weapon.

7. But as I fell back reminiscing about my days in the college, I seemed to remember that I did not have a particular intimacy with him and that, he was rather a loner and did not mix very much with those of his college-mates whom he regarded as his rivals in studies; indeed I was one of them. It could, therefore, possibly have been a case of antipathies from the past visiting you in the present.

8. Whether Nadu Gowda, Kulle Gowda, Nachcha-his servant or the headman of the village.

9. 'Guarded' in order that the researcher's *detachment* is not construed as insolence by the respondent who despite a 'functional distance' maintained by the researcher from him/her, continues to share his/her sensitivities, perceptions and information with the researcher.