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NOTE

PROBLEMS OF RURAL SOCIAL STUDIES IN KHUZESTAN, IRAN

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ABSTRACT

Drawing largely on experience of social research in rural Khuzestan in the 1970s and early 1980s, this paper identifies two kinds of problems met when conducting village studies. These still persist. First, are those related to bureaucratic and administrative shortcomings- the lack of, or ambiguities of socio-economic data, and the restrictions on releasing information. Secondly, there are problems related to villagers attitudes and behavior, mainly associated with peasants preconceptions about the research worker and the purpose of the research. A lack of awareness of these is a serious handicap to both the collection and interpretation of field data.

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مشکلات بررسیهای اجتماعی روستایی درخوزستان ،ایران

سیروس سلمانزاده و جی. ای. جونز
به‌ترتیب دانشیار جامعه‌شناسی روستایی وترویج کشاورزی ،دانشگاه شهید چمران ـ اهواز ومدرس ارشدجامعه‌شناسی روستایی بخش ترویج کشاورزی وعمران روستایی ،دانشگاه ردینگ ،انگلستان .

چکیده

این مقاله که عمدتا "براساس تجارب حاصله از تحقیقات اجتماعی درنواحی روستایی خوزستان دردهه ۱۳۵۰ وسالهای نخستین دهه ۱۳۶۰ است ،دونوع معضل راکه هنوزهم‌دوام‌دارنددرانجام‌بررسیهای روستایی شناسایی می کند. مشکل نوع اول مربوط به‌تنگناهای دیوانسالاری واداری است وشامل کمبود آمار اجتماعی ـ اقتصادی ،ابهام‌درآمار وارقام‌موجودومحدودیت دراستفاده از اطلاعات میباشد. مشکل نوع‌دوم ،مسائل مربوط به‌نظرات ورفتار روستائیان است که اغلب مربوط به‌تصورات وپیش اندیشی های روستائیان درموردماهیت محقق وهدف تحقیق میباشد .عدم‌آگاهی ازمشکلات مزبور ،نارسائیهای جدی را درجمع‌آوری اطلاعات وتفسیرآنها به‌وجودمی آورد.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1960s, the traditional villages of Khuzestan (southwest of Iran) had a clearly defined social structure and hierarchy based on the traditional landlord-peasant sharecropper farming system (6). Under this system, the villager was controlled by the landlord and the village was closed to outside influences.

This situation was not conducive to rural socio-economic studies and, thus, very little empirical research had been undertaken at the village level in Khuzestan or elsewhere in Iran. The few earlier village studies were mostly prepared by native historians, foreign travellers, or the officers of government agencies concerned with taxation, security and military matters (5). The study of villages in classical terms is a relatively new development in Iran, and dates back only to the years following land reform.

The land tenure reform program, which came into effect in January 1962 and took about ten years to complete, "was a political decision" (3); it was launched "due to external pressure and fear of political unrest" (4). Nevertheless, the land reform of the 1960s reduced the power of influential landlords through the division of the large landholdings among their tenant sharecroppers (7).

One of the "side-effects" of the land reform program on the village situation has been to make rural communities more open to study. However, this changed situation did not mean that all villages in Iran became accessible or that information on the rural and agricultural sectors became readily available. Rather, it meant that there were (by the 1970s) more chances for qualified and sensitive rural social research workers to carry out village studies in Iran. However, when collecting data and gathering information for such village studies, the research worker faces a variety of problems in addition to the barrier created by local dialects and different languages spoken in some areas.

This paper, based largely on fieldwork experience in the pre-Islamic revolution period of the 1970s and more recently in rural Khuzestan, attempts to identify some of the major problems connected with conducting village studies. The fieldwork involved collecting data, information and documents at the national, regional and village levels. The village level studies were both extensive in nature, using questionnaires, conducting informal interviews, and recording personal observations.

The obstacles and difficulties which occurred during field research could be categorized into two broad classes of problems: first, those relating to bureaucratic and administrative matters, and secondly, those connected with the behavior and attitude of the village respondents.

Bureaucratic and Administrative Problems of Rural Studies

This category of obstacle mainly concerns the lack of availability of information, the ambiguity of much of the information, restrictions on releasing information, and the reluctance of civil servants to release information even when no restrictions were inforce. The keeping of detailed public records and data was little practiced in Iran until 1925 when the government administration was reorganized and modelled on a western style, centralized bureaucracy. Even so, it was not until 1956 that a national population and housing census was taken for the first time. This lack of long standing socio-economic quantitative data had prevented a fuller understanding of the trends in social change in Iran s rural communities.

It has also often happened that the presentation of official information lacked precision and clarity. A case in point was an official report in 1972 which stated that 16,426 villages (including whole villages and part villages) had been distributed during the First Phase of the Land Reform of the 1960s (3). However, this report did not specify the number or percentage of whole or part villages distributed, neither did it give a frequency distribution based on the total number of village parts affected by the program.

Further confusion was caused by the fact that some of the regional and local sources used different maps, but in their reports the geographical boundaries were often not specified. For example, the geographical boundaries for the Dezful Shahristan (located in the northern part of Khuzestan province), used in the 1960s land distribution program by the local office of the Ministry of Cooperation and Rural Affairs (which then existed), differed from that used by the Statistical Center of Iran in its 1966 national census. Such inconsistencies have made it difficult to correlate information from different departments with any accuracy.

Various restrictions prohibiting the release of seemingly innocuous information were also enforced. An example of such a restriction was the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs communique number 3710, dated 28 Aban 1352 (Persian calendar, corresponding to 19 November, 1973) This stated that the records and reports of the Land Reform Program should not be made known to any non-ministry persons, and the communique was shown whenever a request was made for access to detailed regional statistics on the 1960s land distribution program.

Further, a few minor civil servants were not willing to release ordinary (unrestricted) information to the general public. This reluctance was observed personally and usually took the form of continued and seemingly 'legitimate' postponements in handing over required information. Whilst such behavior was not a general characteristic of Iranian civil servants, there were sufficient occurrences of this reluctance to enable the authors to examine the possible reasons and motivation behind it.

First, not all minor civil servants were aware of what information was 'classified' and what was not. The safest procedure to follow was therefore to regard all information as 'classified This consideration was expressed by a civil servant who told one of the authors, "you get no punishment for restraining information, but you risk your job every time you give it out". Secondly, some civil servants were themselves doubtful of the accuracy of information which they held and were unwilling to damage the reputation of their department by releasing what they considered to be erroneous. Thirdly, some civil servants simply continued to withhold information in order to elevate the importance of their position and to induce a more respectful attitude from the general public. Fourthly, and perhaps more importantly, there was a noticeable desire for minor civil servants to use 'their' information as a 'currency' in making social interactions. To this end their information served as a means of introduction to new friends and as a

method of cementing social bonds. There was also the thought that information given at the right time and in the right place could lead to promotion. Lastly, and closely linked to the last point, it was not uncommon to find civil servants withholding information from one person in order to save it for a 'special friend who would be in a position to appreciate the minor honor' thus being done for him. Such behavior, in other words, served as a lubricant' to create smoother social interactions within the civil servants peer group.

Problems Relating to Village Studies

Several problems also arose during the period of the village studies which were mainly related to the traditional pattern of life in rural Dezful, while some other difficulties arose in connection with the use of interviewing techniques and questionnaires (undertaken as a supplement to personal observations) in collecting information from peasant households.

The villagers image of the research worker.

The gradual increase over the past twenty years of hitherto absent government representation in the villages of Dezful, coupled with the rarity of visits from members of the private sector, led the villagers to identify all urban visitors to their village as official government agents, whether or not this was the case. This attitude was demonstrated in July, 1974, in the village of Bonvar Hossein (situated about 10 kilometers west of the town of Dezful) when one of the authors was asked to help in mediating by the two parties concerned in a dispute between the wife of the village gopun (herdsman) and another woman, over the rights to collect cattle dung from the village fields. This request was obviously made in the belief that the research worker was mamor-e dollat (a government agent) and when it was explained that he was not, the herdsman's wife replied "If you are not a government agent, what are you doing here?"

This attitude was shared by a good many of the other villagers.

Villagers interpretation of the purpose of the research worker's inquiries.

During fieldwork in the early 1970s, various government-sponsored field inquiries were being carried out at the same time. Most of these were undertaken by staff of the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs. These were often in connection with the resettlement program in shahraks (rural towns) of displaced villagers, with the incorporation of villages into farm corporation units and sometimes with offers of employment to peasants who had previously held land (6). Being aware of the nature of these on-going enquiries by one of the authors into the ethnic background of the villagers was a covert attempt to discover the origin of the village residents so that the government could send them back to where they came from if the village was ever scheduled for resettlement. In the village of Shalgahi Sofla (located about 20 kilometers south east of the town of Dezful) several peasants voiced the idea that the purpose of the research was to offer relief employment and to distribute food ration books to needy peasants. This belief caused a few informants to adjust their responses to correspond with that which they thought would better qualify them for inclusion in this scheme. Such information was corrected, but only by continuous double-checking of all the information received.

Some villagers were perhaps more curious about the purpose of the research as a result of an unfortunate consequence arising from field inquiries made by the government officials some years ago. Without knowing the reasons for these inquiries, the peasants had given under-estimates of their incomes from sharecropping only to find that this figure had been subsequently used as a base for calculating the new wage scales for farm laborers. In the light of this kind of experience it was not surprising that villagers were not as immediately

open and frank as one might wish. It is therefore important, when conducting field inquiries, to inform the village leaders of the purpose of the study before starting to collect data.

Difficulties arising from the lack of privacy surrounding individual interviews.

Prior to conducting field studies, it had been assumed that interviews with household heads would take place in private sessions at an individual peasant s home. However, in practice this ideal procedure was impractical due to the lack of privacy which characterizes most aspects of social life in rural Khuzestan; this would probably also be the case in other parts of rural Iran. Thus, several neighbors might walk into a room while the household was being 'interviewed' and then would proceed to participate actively in the 'dialogue and begin to answer questions which were not intended for them. Similarly, even in the fields it was found that several individuals would often collect around the interviewer and an interviewee. In some cases, the presence of such intruders at 'interview sessions helped the general informality of the work and provided a consensus of local opinion against which the accuracy of the information gained could be immediately checked. This was particularly useful for quantitative information such as assessing approximate ages and income levels. However, it also often inhibited a peasant's expression of his personal feelings and attitudes towards issues relating to community affairs, since his own views were being submerged beneath those of the group.

Vagueness of quantitative information provided by villagers.

Lack of precision in obtaining numerical information was particularly acute in questions requiring ages, or dates and times, which were often alien to the peasants' frame of reference in which time was related to changes in the kinds of

crops being grown with the times of planting and harvesting acting as further divisions. The cropping pattern in some parts of Khuzestan has undergone some changes. For example, the cropping pattern in parts of Khuzestan has undergone changes over the years which can act as time indicators; indigo (vasmeh) was commonly grown in the north of the province before 1945, but has been replaced by green beans. The years were not strictly counted and age was often a matter of simply being bozorgtar (older) or kochektar (younger) than the other members of one s age group'. Most peasants did not know their exact age and were even vaguer about the ages of other members of the household, particularly the females whose reported ages were often obviously wide off the mark. A peasant respondent in Bonvar Hossein gave such a wide over-estimate of his wife's age that his young wife, on hearing it, protested saying, "If I am as old as that I will stop producing children for you!"

Unreliability of peasants identity documents.

It was hoped that uncertainty about a villager s age could be rectified by reference to his/her shenasnameh (individual identity card). However it was discovered that a few villagers did not possess an identity card, some held cards on which the date of birth had been fixed , and others held identity cards belonging to deceased persons.

Although a law in the 1930s had made the possession of an identity card compulsory for every citizen, prior to the 1960s there was no pressing need to acquire one in rural areas, and a peasant might pass his whole life and never have cause to establish his identity by such means. More recently, the Land Reform Organization, as well as some other government agencies, have been using the shenasnameh to establish personal identification, and in the past they were also used to obtain certain jireh (food rations) during World War II. Since 1980, the shenasnameh has been used in Iran to issue the government coupons for a number of

subsidized food items like rice or sugar. Since the 1930s in rural areas, the shenasnamehs have been issued by visiting mamor-e sabet, (official agents of the Registrar) who also verified and settled claims regarding the information recorded on the cards, and in this respect the agent s knowledge of 'the rules' was useful in enabling a peasant's petition for altering or changing his shenasnameh; now, claims for altering identity cards are settled by the courts.

The basic reason for the inaccuracy of information on the villagers' identification cards and the false presentation of such documents stem from the rural situation where there was a wide gap between customary practices and those of official regulations or requirements. An example of this dichotomy between practices and official requirements was observed with regard to a girl's marriage age and a boy s military draft age. While the official regulations indicated (in 1976) that the minimum marriage age was 16 years (in 1990 it is 15 years) for girls, some village girls were being married as young as 12 years old. While the official laws stated that all men (aged 18 to 25 years) had to serve in the army for two years, some villagers in this age-group, by fixing their identity cards, were able to obtain military exemptions and were permitted to continue working on their farms. In order to comply with official regulations concerning the possession of individual shenasnameh and the adherence to legal age requirements governing the marriage of minors and liability for national service, the following procedures were adopted by the peasants.

The comparatively high child mortality rate in the villages led to the practice of postponing the application for a shenasnameh for a new-born baby until the child was certain to survive (usually after two years). This was to avoid having to officially report the death and perhaps be accused by the Registrar's Office of neglect and lack of care. However, a few peasant families managed to avoid surrendering the identity cards of deceased young members and continued to use them for later

born members (without altering any information on the identity cards). This was especially practiced for giving under-aged girls in marriage, for the predated identity card would satisfy the official requirements of 'lawful marriages'. Now, the Court for Family Affairs considers all requests for girls wishing to be married before they reach the age of 15 years. On rarer occasions, the identity cards of deceased male members were re-used by another member of the family in order to obtain official exemption from national service.

The practice of re-using a dead person s identity cards was not limited to rural Khuzestan. For example, a newspaper report had indicated that in Sabzavar, a town in the north central province of Khorasan, a woman submitted a petition to the local court stating that her father, through being illiterate and ignorant, had used the shenasnameh of one of his long deceased children for her, and she requested the court to authorize the issue of a new correct shenasnameh to correspond to her real age which was much younger than that recorded on the inherited identity card (2).

Another practice which has led to the unreliability of information contained on a peasant's identity card was the 'exchange' or 'circulation' of the shenasnamehs. In order to satisfy the official requirements for benefiting from certain opportunities, peasants have sometimes substituted the identity card of one child for another of the same sex with a few years age difference. The case of two brothers in the village of Bonvar Hossein, Ahmad (the older one) and Hossein (the younger one), illustrates the significance of this practice. In 1972, Hossein, then aged six on his shenasnameh, wanted to enrol in the new village elementary school. He could not be admitted because he was a year too young. His father substituted Ahmad's shenasnameh, who was then aged eight, and had never attended school, and as a result Hossein was accepted and registered under the name of his brother. The only apparent confusion caused was when the teacher called the roll; Hossein had to answer when his brother's name, Ahmad, was called.

In the past, the altering of identity cards by the registrar's agents was another source of inaccuracy in identity documents. One village informant alleged that in the village of Shalgahi Sofla a registrar's agent had, on a number of previous occasions, changed the official entries of the birth dates on their shenasnamehs for a number of villagers; as a result a few younger villagers had their age fixed over the limit for military draft requirements and could obtain exemptions. Also, a few older peasants had theirs adjusted upwards to qualify as a dependent of their bread-winning sons' and in this way gained military exemptions for their sons. Now, these kinds of alterations to identity cards are much more difficult to contrive since a medical examination is required to verify a person's age.

It was also alleged that there were other methods of 'altering' identity records. For instance, if a well-off peasant could not persuade the official registrar s agent to 'adjust his son's birth date on the shenasnameh, he would bury the son's identity card . This practice, which was referred to by the peasants as shenasnameh khak kårdan, involved presenting the registrar s agent with an asteshad-e mahali, (documentary evidence signed by three witnesses) stating that his son had 'died' on a certain date and requested that the son's identity card be cancelled. Then the same peasant would present further documentary evidence, also signed by three witnesses, claiming that he had a son without an identity card of the desired age', i.e. older than 25 years of age to avoid eligibility for military service. If the evidence was found 'satisfactory', the registrar's agent would cancel the son's previous shenasnameh and issue a new one. Nowadays, registrar's agents would not get involved in such a practice.

Peasants reluctance to reveal household information.

In villages studied intensively in Dezful in the 1960s, it was noted that informants were sometimes wary of giving information on present and deceased members of their households. This reluctance probably reflected a peasant s wish to protect himself from possible reprimands or accusations of wrong-doing from official agents over such customary practices as child marriage.

However, there were some peasant informants who, for reasons of sentiment for deceased members, or ghirat (male jealousy over the female members), preferred not to elaborate on information about members of their household. As a result of this delicate situation, female social scientists might find it easier to collect information. Perhaps the 'ideal combination to study rural communities such as these in Khuzestan, as well as those in other parts of Iran, would be a husband and wife team of social scientists.

There were some peasant informants whose reluctance was related to their fear of a stranger discovering their 'tricks', as in the case of using the deceased family members. A case in point was a respondent in the village of Chogh Sorkh (located about 15 kilometers south east of the town of Dezful). Whilst completing the household composition questionnaire, one of the peasant informants changed his mind about the number of deceased and living members of the household. On the first questionnaire, he had indicated that two of his children, a son aged one and a daughter aged two had died. The following day, this informant decided that he had made a 'mistake in the number of his deceased children and that one of his children, the son aged one, had died but not the daughter. In other words, the deceased daughter's identity card was still 'alive --presumably waiting for a new arrival to inherit it.

Moreover, there were a few peasant informants who at first refused to give any information about

their households. The response of one member of this group to the request for household information was, "whatever you have written for our neighbors, write for us!". This could be interpreted as indicating that some individual peasants were not willing to take a risk on their own, but they were willing to share the risk with their neighbors. This is a feature that enters into many aspects of rural life in Khuzestan.

CONCLUSION

Problems such as those discussed above indicate that, in undertaking any social survey work in the rural areas of Khuzestan, a research worker must be continually aware of, and sensitive to many factors which will inevitably have an effect on the field data collected and on their interpretation. The problems of obtaining reliable information of a general kind, as well as that concerning specific households or individuals, reflect many intricate and subtle features of the social systems involved of the administrative structures and the village organization. However, in order to be able to investigate the detailed character of Iranian rural life and how it is changing complete and correct information and accuracy in its interpretation, are essential. But this cannot be realized unless the data are made available or can be gathered and known to be accurate. This is a circular quandary. A sensitive approach to the process of obtaining information can, however, reveal some of the complexities of rural relationships which, in turn, can enable further studies to be conducted with a fuller appreciation of the problems involved and of the quality of the information.

In order to overcome some of the obstacles and difficulties of rural research mentioned in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1) A long-term and clear internal research policy should be adopted to support researchers in various fields (including those with an interest in rural society) by providing them with

the essential information and data on social and economic affairs at the national and local levels.

2) The Iranian Statistics Center should serve as a central agency for checking and validating data and information issued by various government organizations.

3) As for field investigations at the village level, the emphasis should be placed on gaining the confidence of the village leaders by being frank and clear in explaining the objective of the field inquiries.

4) The methods used to collect socio-economic data depend on the research topics and the social atmosphere of each village. However, considering that rural social study is a relatively new field in Iran and that the villagers are not used to the questionnaire technique, informal interviews coupled with participant observations could prove to be preferable methods for collecting relevant data and information in rural communities.

This paper has attempted to illustrate the intricacy of the relationships which exist between social data and the means of obtaining them, and the society from which they are collected and their associated problems which are by no means unique to rural Iran.

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