

Social Science Research Methods and Knowledge-Claims

Paramjit S. Judge*

This paper explores three important but interrelated issues: The power of example; the fragment as evidence; and finally, the field experience and the possibility of generalisation. These issues are central in the current discourse of social science practice in which serious doubts are being raised about the ability of sociological research to come up with the generalisations and make knowledge-claims. [This is the revised version of the paper presented in the symposium on 'Methodology of Agrarian Studies' in the Tenth Conference of the North West India Sociological Association, November 16-17, 2006, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana.]

***Professor of Sociology, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.**

All practising scientists, both natural and social, are aware of the basic purpose of research, that is, production of knowledge. We in the academia tend to add two more dimensions to this primary purpose. These are: critique of established knowledge on valid grounds and secondly, addition to the already existing knowledge in the specific area. For the production of knowledge, the researcher must work out his/her way in the form of formulation of hypotheses, conjectures and sometimes ideas, and objectives in the form of certain research questions. Each one of these leads towards one particular issue, namely, the employment of methods. It is thus quite obvious that a researcher is aware of the significance, centrality and crucial role of the choice of methods. Generally, the method of research is organically linked with the hypothesis or the objectives of the study, but at the same time, it should be clear that in the path of achievement of a particular research objective the researcher may have to decide among alternative methods.

It is clear from the above that two dimensions are intertwined in the practice of research. First, there is a plurality of methods, and secondly, the fact that a problem can be understood from various perspectives. What is more important is that the choice of the method and the perspective is not accidental and is a pragmatic act. To be fair with him/her, with his/her value relevance, it is a function of the values of the researcher. In other words, certain segments of reality become significant to him/her and his/her primary orientation remains focussed towards the substantiation of the conjecture that has

been already formulated. For Weber, it is perfectly fine. Weber himself studied Polish migrant labour to Germany with an obvious bias towards the Junkers [Breman 1994]. Does something go wrong when the researcher's orientation and personal perceptions lead towards the formulation of the conjecture? Not at all. It is reasonable not to think of doing research without such an element of personal interest or priority as well as a perspective. However, it is expected that the researcher's perspective remains constant for a period of time and there must be some reason for change in it after some time. Otherwise one is reminded of a beggar who shouted the name of Allah in front of a Hindu's house and asked for alms. On being informed by the owner that he was a Hindu, the beggar brought out a new bowl and told the owner that that particular bowl was for Hindus in the name of Ram.

One thing that should be emphasised with regard to sociological research is that it is empirical with a blend of sense experience and reasoning as its epistemological basis. Without the company of reason the sense-experience is pedestrian and without sense-experience reason could guide to the kind of lack of common sense that has been mentioned by Russell (2004) with regard to Berkeley. Pure logic without common sense may lead to empirically invalid conclusions. After having clearly stated our position with regard to the two major sources that are central to the sociological knowledge, it may be pointed out that field investigation constitutes the core of sociological investigation. Over a period of time the sociologists have endeavoured to refine various empirical techniques to make them reliable and effective so as to arrive at conclusion, which could be validated under various conditions. Statistical tools have been extensively and intensively used to enhance the ability of the discipline to come to grips with the questions and doubts with regard to its status as science.

In recent years, the emergence of Dalit and Gender Studies has put into contention an important methodological issue in sociology. It is being argued that it is not possible to study the agony of the subjugated, depressed and discriminated social groups, like dalits or women, without being part of it. The biographical experience of a dalit, a woman could only be understood properly, adequately, or actually if the researcher is also a dalit or a woman. Ever since sociology and social anthropology have developed a general methodological consensus that intercultural understanding is possible, the above issue

was almost understood as settled. It has come up again. Gautam (1983) has highlighted the sources of serious difficulties that a researcher may face in comprehending the motives of the actors being studied. Reasons for action could be best known to the actors. In such a situation, it is important to point out that in certain areas of dalit studies, it is essential to have the experience, which is not possible without being a dalit. Culture is lived, whereas cultural practices could be observed. At the same time a dalit cannot attribute a singular meaning to the way the upper caste people behave. The reference is, of course, made to the Brahminic ideology, which, of late, is indiscriminately used as a political rhetoric as well as an analytical concept to explain the conditions of the dalits. The logic may lead to a spiral escalation of claims and counterclaims of knowledge. The issue of methodological devices and their employment gains significance in such a context. Reasonable inroads can be made in unfolding social reality through the combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques. It is because of this practice in sociological research that it provides a good understanding of the nature of phenomenon being studied.

The present paper is an effort to explore three important but interrelated issues. These are: The power of example; the fragment as evidence; and finally, the field experience and possibility of generalisation. In the proceeding discussion, it may seem that these three dimensions may contradict one another, but it is not so. Obviously, the issues taken would be relating to agrarian studies.

Power of Example¹

Flyvbjerg (2001) identifies five misunderstandings about the case study of which the most current seems to be that it is not possible to generalise on the basis of one case². Flyvbjerg (ibid.) makes an attempt to show how it is possible to make generalisations on the basis of the case study. One of the solutions he offers is to take cognisance of the extreme cases, because “atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied” (p. 78). He also refers to Campbell and Eysenck, who after having strong reservations began to value case studies. Case study is basically an intense observation of particular phenomenon.

Laing and Esterson (1964) and Esterson (1972) have shown how significant the case study method is in the understanding of the schizophrenic patients.

How do we posit the study of agrarian relations and dynamics by using the case study method? It may be noted that the question has not been raised whether case study method can be used at all. One obvious example where case study method could be extremely fruitful is farmers' suicide. There are certain reasons that are specific to the case of farmers' suicide. First of all, there is a wide spread of the cases of suicide in terms of physical space. Secondly, the rate of suicides though goes up, but it has to be countable. It is thus possible to contact the maximum number such families and villages where the suicide has been committed. Meeta and Rajivlochan (2006) have shown it convincingly in their study of farmers' suicide in Maharashtra that the case study method could be adequate and effective in understanding this aspect of agrarian crisis in India.

It may just be reminded that in the falsification of a generalisation, one needs only one example to falsify it. Incidentally, in sociology there is no dearth of black swans.

Going a Little Beyond Fragment

What constitutes the data for social analysis has not been much of a problem so far as certain aspects like census, NSS data, reports, personal collection of data through surveys, etc. are concerned. The problem emerges when we go beyond such sources to examine literature. Pandey (2006: 42) wrote 'In Defense of the Fragment' in 1991 in order to understand communal violence with the help of what he called a fragment of history in opposition to the standard history writing thus

And that what I have called the fragment – a weaver's diary, a collection of poems by an unknown poet (and to these we might add all those literatures of India that Macaulay condemned, creation myths and women's songs, family genealogies and local traditions of history) – is of central importance in challenging the state's construction of history, in thinking other histories and making those contested spaces in which some unities are constituted and others destroyed. Obviously, Pandey does not include, in his notion of fragment, creative imagination that may not necessarily be located at the margin.

The argument offered here is that literary sources constitute an important source of reconstruction of agrarian relations. In this regard, the Punjabi literature could be considered one of the major sources of social reconstruction. Punjab has been

predominantly an agrarian society. Its cultural formations revolve around the agriculture and its relation with the people in various forms. Most of the prominent writers of Punjab have dealt with the vicissitudes of rural life. Jaswant Singh Kanwal, Gurdial Singh and Waryam Sandhu are most notable writers of Punjab. Even Krishna Sobti's *Zindaginama*, written in Hindi, has portrayed the agrarian relations in the colonial Punjab. Jaswant Singh Kanwal's novel *Rat Baki Hai* is one of the finest pieces of history of the tenant movement in the PEPSU region. Similarly, his *Lahoo di Lo* is based on the Naxalite movement. Gurdial Singh's novels capture the changing agrarian relations as a result of the capitalist development of the agriculture in Punjab. Relative lack attention to these fragments of reality that sometimes may reveal more than the information from some of the standard techniques in certain special cases. It may be at the same time reminded that literature is not social science and without the corroborative documentary or empirical evidence one may fall into a methodological trap.

Field of One's Own: Sociologists and social anthropologists are fond of mentioning field experience with a great degree of pride and this pride lies in the fact that both they and their audience believe that the very mention of field visit would establish the truth of the statement beyond doubt. It is quite similar to the experimental verification. Such claims are not beyond doubt. Gautam (1983) has clearly pointed out that without the reasonable familiarity with the social and cultural practices of the community under investigation the researcher may come out with erroneous conclusions. It is not necessary that a correct perception is possible only if the researcher belongs to the community under study. In such cases where the researcher belongs to the same community, which he is studying, the subjective bias has the probability of entering into his perception. Intercultural understanding is always possible and should be accepted as the probable and possible reality.

In order to avoid the subjective bias and achieve intercultural understanding, the researcher is required to do intensive fieldwork. In recent years social scientists in Punjab are trying to comprehend the complex phenomenon of the impact of migrant labour from U. P. and Bihar on the Punjabi society and they come out with various contentious conclusions. One of them is the calculation of remittances these migrant labourers are

sending to their native places. However, many conclusions seem to be biased because there is no attempt at calculating the contribution of the migrant labour to the Punjab economy. The mapping of social consequences is devoid of cultural understanding of Punjab. There is also an attempt to show that with the arrival of the migrant labour the crime rate has gone up in Punjab. Such an observation is devoid of the knowledge of Punjabi society. In the interfamily disputes among the Jats, the participation of the lower caste Mazbis is not taken into consideration as an indicator of how the propertied classes used to hire members of the family of the traditionally attached labourers belonging to the low castes to resolve their disputes. It is important to know how the migrants are exploited by the rich and powerful to settle their scores.

There is another example of the experience of fieldwork that can be questioned on grounds of insufficiency of the exposure to the subjects and events to the extent required for making generalisations of the kind made by the researcher. The expressions like 'Punjab problem', 'Punjab crisis' are value loaded, but it is how the period between 1978 and 1993 has been generally referred to. A considerable number of people belonging to different fields of expertise have contributed to the understanding of one and half decades' old militant movement and its consequences. This author has also done his share of work in this regard [Puri, Judge and Sekhon 1999, and Judge 2005]. One of the significant findings of our study was that the emergence of Punjab problem could be linked to the agrarian dynamics of Punjab in one respect: most of the militants had come from the small and marginal farmers families. The declining farm size could have been associated with the reasons for joining terrorism. In the work, this conclusion was presented modestly that was expected from the researcher as principle of falsifiability is to be kept in mind [Puri, Judge and Sekhon 1999]. This was in spite of the fact that all of us were familiar with the social life of Punjab as its members and it had taken two years to complete our data collection in 28 villages of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts of Punjab.

I now come to the contribution of Dipankar Gupta – an eminent sociologist who has written on various sociological issues. Gupta has written a book on the Punjab problem (1996). Before this book was published, he also wrote an article in 1992, which was later on included in the book referred to above. In his first article, Gupta (1992)

informs us that he visited some villages of Amritsar district in 1990 along the Indo-Pak border. However, in the proceeding two pages that cover his fieldwork experiences in totality, one gets the impression that he visited only two villages. In the footnote on page 234 he informs us that he visited three villages that he mentions as, “some Punjab villages in Amritsar district”. Nowhere do we come to know how much time he spent in all the villages or in each village. In the first village he comes across a situation when in the evening he is told to leave the village as the members of ‘parallel government’ could take some action. However, he found the world quite normal. The people of the second village also confirmed what he was told in the first village. However, to the surprise of the sociologist there was no such visible threat. Instead of seeing the militants, *mundas* or terrorists, he came across bootleggers. On the basis of this field experience, Gupta used Lacan’s framework to understand the entire Punjab problem.

In his recent work, Gupta (2005) has tried to re-explain his discovery of Lacan that helped him to make sense of Sikh ethnic imagos. Let us quote his first two sentences,

My fieldwork in the Punjab during these years convinced me that only a small number of Sikhs actually supported Bhindranwale. A large majority, on the other hand, were deeply hurt at the way the Golden Temple was ransacked in 1984, and they were most bitter about the fact that so many Sikhs were killed after Indira Gandhi’s assassination, but not a single person was brought to book [Gupta 2005: 200].

Let us continue with the next paragraph on the same page thus:

When I visited the villages of Punjab along the border areas in Amritsar and Taran Taran, I came across some curious incidents that held up my work for a fairly long period of time. I just could not make sense of why there was such a vast discrepancy between what the Sikhs said and did and what I observed around me (ibid. 200).

What has happened between 1992 and 2005? The field visit in the first case is now turned into a monopolised knowledge of the ground reality where the fact that the sociologist has a field of his own about which he has authentic knowledge-claims. Look at what the sociologist has to say. On the basis of the fieldwork he was convinced that “only a small number” among the Sikhs were on the side of Bhinderanwala. When we say number it means quantity, which implies tremendous familiarity with the subjects mentioned as each one of them has been enumerated. In quantitative analysis there is a

practice of sampling, which means that to know exact number of persons in terms of percentages or proportions, it is not necessary that every one of them is contacted and enumerated. A researcher can draw a representative sample and after working out the sampling error can assert that near truthfulness of his knowledge-claim. For this assertion there is a need for a systematic drawing of sample. No empirical researcher would accept the claim on the basis of the visits to three villages of the kind Gupta has made in the above statements.

Major social anthropologists like D. N. Mazumdar would ask their research students to live in the village/among the tribes, which they were to study for a year if not more.³ Ethnographic research had a great degree of merit in the sense that the researcher was able to thoroughly study his/her object of investigation at the micro-level. We should not forget the standards set by researchers like Margret Mead who lived with tribals by managing to become a part of them. Malinowski's fieldwork among the Melanesians comes immediately to our mind.

The present day sociologist does not have that much time to live among the people he is going to study. He/she may not have the temperament to do so. Many of us do not try to learn the language of the people we propose to study. The reason is simple. Sociological techniques have a degree of universality in terms of their application and do not require the kind of sacrifice from the researcher, which was earlier needed for ethnographic research. It is simply a matter of filling interview schedules. At the same time, a sociologist is *very* particular about reliability and validity of his/her method and research. Gupta's study, we find, is neither ethnography nor a systematic sample survey. But he does talk about numbers. Numbers are important only when we have an exact estimate either through our own sample or from other sources like Census or National Sample Survey (NSS) data.

By way of Conclusion

The three issues taken here may not be confined to the study of agrarian dynamics only, as these have wider implications for the sociological research. However, these issues are central in the current discourse of social science practice in which serious doubts are being raised about the ability of sociological research to come up with the generalisations

and make knowledge-claims. For example, the increasing rate of farmers' suicide requires an analysis based on an in-depth analysis of cases as well as some concrete policy suggestions at the national level. It is important that we should be clear and cautious about the knowledge-claims we make. Doubts and questions can be raised with regard to some of the knowledge claims in sociological research. Rigorous analysis and presentation of perspectives must be accompanied by the same level of intensity in data collection and analysis.

Notes

- 1 The term has been borrowed from Flyvbjerg (2001).
- 2 These five misunderstandings are: "General theoretical knowledge is more useful than concrete knowledge, it is not possible to generalise, case study can help only in the formulation of hypothesis, it contains bias towards verification, and difficult to develop general propositions from a case" (Ibid.: 66-67).
- 3 A. P. Sinha, former Head, Department of Anthropology, North Eastern-Hill University, Shillong told the author in personal conversation.

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