Methods of field research: encounter, experiences and strategies in Nepali Villages

Author(s): Tulsi Ram Pandey
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Introduction

A fieldwork exercise involves not merely the task of asking questions and noting down the responses, but also a careful plan and implementation of a series of strategies to obtain the desired sets of information. Part of the plan of fieldwork strategy requires identification of research site. The researcher should decide the geographical area of his/her fieldwork for the collection of data pertaining to his/her research. Part of it also relates to defining the research tools, which he/she intends to use in the process of that research. Even when these parts of research strategies are adequately devised, the research process does not imply a straight-forward activity. The investigator may encounter a number of challenges in the course of his/her stay in the field (Beteille and Madan 1975).

This essay highlights the methodological strategies as well as experiences I gained, encountered or followed during the process of the research. The fieldwork exercise for this research was conducted in the year 2001 and was focused on the theme "Household, Community and the State: A Study of Modes of Livelihood in the Hill and Tarai Villages of Western Nepal". This essay shows those strategies and experiences with a view that it may be useful for researchers' fieldwork plans in rural Nepal. In view of these multiple issues involved in a research process related to collection of field based information, this paper organizes the discussion by breaking down the issues associated with selection of field sites, encounters in the field and strategies applied to data collection processes.

Selection of Research Sites

There are three alternative ways available for a researcher to select his/her field-work site. One such a way is to take into account some specific sites as samples of a larger geographic region (Parel et al. 1973). A number of selection procedures have been suggested to identify these sample sites so that the data collected from these sites could be used to discuss the features of that broader geographic area (Lin 1976). However, to generate data which could represent the regional features, the researcher is required to visit a number of such sampled localities. Consequently, he/she is also required to use some strictly defined methodological tools that could allow the researcher to collect related information from all these sites within a limited time span.

The methodological tools which are strictly defined and are used to produce similar type of information from different types of localities are useful to generate mainly those data sets which could be used to discuss quantitative aspect of the problem. Social problems also involve a number of subjective qualities. They cannot be summarized in quantitative terms. Scholars have also produced some evidences that people may not provide an accurate response to questions
asked by a strange investigator about the problems of their lives. It happens so usually in those conditions when these questions are asked by the investigator without building good rapport (Campbell et al. 1979). The methodological tools which do not permit the researchers to stay longer in the field do not allow them to gain an adequate opportunity to develop this intimacy with the people.

Questions may also be raised about the claims and utility of representative character of information collected through shortcut visit to sample sites (Denzin 1970). Field sites distributed in different places of a larger region may retain a number of specific features. These local specificities remain unexplained in the aggregate type of inferences derived from quantitative data gathered through visits to a number of field sites. They fail to provide a detail account of the local context of the problems by relating them to specific realities of their natural settings. Consequently, questions are raised about the authenticity of relationship between the diverse realities of empirical fields and their portrayal as a unified event depicted in those discussions (Dickens and Fontana 1993).

Another line of argument proceeds with a belief that attempts towards deriving data on quantified units of the problems facing with different types of empirical environments present the reality only in distorted form. Society in itself or the arguments made by social sciences on it in general may rather be considered in the form of a discourse (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Brown 1992). An agreement with this line of argument inspires one to pay respect to specific quality of each event and idea experienced or hold by members in each specific setting. The admission to this type of idea requires one to perceive the meaning of those events and activities as a contextual reality (Alexander 1992). Such an abstention from the positivist intention of formulating universal law of social analysis opens the possibility to pay respects to some alternative ways to collect data from the field.

Social problems in their specific context are supposed to be explained much effectively by way of "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1975) of individual events. Such a description can be made by taking into account the narratives of experiences reported by members of society. It is also much useful to draw on information gathered through other types of qualitative tools (Fontana 1993). Research activities that seek to provide meanings of the facts within the context of their own specific localities demand some separate type of studies for each specific site. Their emphasis on local specificities of the problem hardly pulls their attraction towards relating them with the broader social environment. As a result, it is less important for them to speak of the common type of experiences faced by people living in different types of social and natural settings by inferring them in quantitative terms.

There is no doubt that social events hold a contextual meaning relative to locations at which they happen to appear. The meaning they hold within the context of their specific location may be different from the meaning accorded to them by an alien investigator who is interested to place them with other events of a broader setting. However, it is not correct to perceive that all the social events can be explained only in contexts of their local environment. Some of such events may be influenced by forces external to their localities. Likewise, some others may influence the tasks of people located out of those localities. Given these multiple connections and related diversities of meanings of the social events, it is important to interpret them within the context of both their local setting as well as their linkages with larger environments.
Any attempt that seeks to interpret the relationship between local events and broader social environment induces one to make more general level of abstractions compared to those interested to discuss the events within the context of their local settings. It is particularly so in a situation when the investigator intends to identify an aggregate pattern of that relationship by making a comparison of events occurred between numbers of locations. This type of discussion permits the investigator to use both qualitative and quantitative set of information. Quantitative data make it possible for the investigator to have a quick glance of similarities and differences between some important features of those locations. Qualitative information on the other is helpful to explore an in-depth meaning of those quantitative abstractions. It allows one to connect them with the feelings, sentiments and other types of emotional experiences gained by people in the course of activities regularly done by them within their natural setting.

Studies devoted to collect both qualitative and quantitative type of data from a number of locations for a comparative discussion of problems among areas with a view to observe their commonalities and variations appear as expansive enterprises. They require investing large amount of human and financial resources. Even when this amount of resource is not available, it is however, not impossible to make this type of discussion by taking into account the case of one or only a few of the villages. Such a possibility lies by way of relating the experiences of people of that/those areas with the social forces interacting to them from outside their locations.

Many studies have established the utility of village level information on illuminating the problems of wider social reality (Betille 1970; Caplan 1970). In a study devoted to livelihood practices of the population, the statistically quantifiable information on such items as ownership of land and livestock help to manifest the local pattern of these events. A comparison of these local patterns with those manifested in records of national level information or to those available for the case of other village settings permits the researcher to make inferences that apply for the case of a broader region. Together, collection of qualitative aspect of information about the relationships among members within household, between different households of the village and between households and the operation of other broader institutions like the state and market in that village provide supporting evidences to establish the relationship between local events and broader social environment. It is this belief that the author of this article preferred to visit two villages for the collection of data for the Ph.D. dissertation study.

A village does not represent an isolated pocket with atypical characteristics. It forms a part of a larger society. The external world enters the internal life of the village in multiple ways. Many of the forces operating in the village apply to larger society as well. To take a few examples, most of the features of productive resources of a particular village represent the character of the region within which they are situated. Topographic features of the land, climatic condition and distribution of vegetation appear almost the same among villages of similar ecozones. Similar ecological features between places lead to uniform pattern of their production. Unless interrupted by different types of intervention, the seasonality of cultivation, and the nature of jobs appear almost the same between villages, which share common geographic features within a particular region.

In all villages of Nepal, household is the basic unit of production. Its members pool their income, labor together, and use them in their commonly valued areas. Household property is inheritable among heir along the male line. Agricultural land is privately owned throughout the country.
Theoretically, forest land is a property of the state. People's access to forest products is governed by the distributive regulations of the government.

Kinship network is the main bond of social relations in the village. Give and take between close neighbours and extended families are the important sources of social support at time of difficulties among the villagers. The relationships between property owners and tenant cultivators are governed by similar considerations in many areas. The uniformities in the workings of village life give each village the character of a microcosm of larger social reality. Village level studies provide a microscopic amplification of the problem of broader national society.

Generalizations derived from village level studies should, however, be taken with caution. Despite many similarities, some subtle variations may also exist between villages even within a single region. The quality of their land may not be uniform. In some places, a large proportion of land may be the rain fed area. In others, there may be some parts, which are located at lowland and hence irrigable. The distribution pattern of land among production units may also be different. It may be relatively equitable in some places. At others, a few families may take hold over a large proportion of resources. Differences in quality of resources among villages led to different patterns of production among them. Similarly, differences in distribution of land create different types of production relations. In addition, the villages close to urban areas may be more prone to interact with market. People there may buy some goods for consumption and some others for sale in market. They may also be engaged in various kinds of works available at market places and earn to fulfill various requirements. Such activities may be negligible among people living in remote villages.

Through a careful plan of research strategies, micro village studies may probe into inter-village differences by adopting a comparative perspective. A researcher can make a casual comparison of the event of his/her field site with those of other village communities by observing them through paying some visits, at least, occasionally. He/she may also use the information from archival materials to make such a comparison. More importantly, he/she may select a field research site in such a way that it may present many features of the region.

In the present study, I have attempted to use all of these research strategies. The fieldwork for this research was conducted in Remi and Parsawal villages of Western Development Region of Nepal. The Western Development Region is one among the five east-to-westward blocks in which the country's territory is divided for administrative purposes. This region is located at the middle part of this regional division.

Remi village is situated in Santipur VDC of Gulmi district in the hill region and Parsawal village is situated in Amrot VDC of Nawalparasi district of the Tarai region in western Nepal. The Choice of two villages, one each from the hill and the Tarai region for data collection rules out the possibility of statistical randomness. This lack does not preclude the use of some degree of rationality in their selection. The two villages undertaken for the study from the Western Development Region has not been on the consideration that this region holds unique features compared to the other regions. What attracted me to focus on this region is its location in the middle part of the country. Further, all except two of its districts are connected with fairly good road links. These features of the region led me to assume that the study of two villages from the hill and the Tarai zones of this part may provide opportunities to observe the influence of state and market institutions on the livelihood activities of people working in micro settings.
The differential production potential of the hill and Tarai regions aroused interest to take one village each from these two geographical regions. While both the hill and Tarai regions are the areas with large concentration of Nepal's population, the flat land of the Tarai are more productive than the sloppy terrain of the hills. This has made the Tarai an attractive destination for the poor people of the hill region, who are in search of fertile land. Within the past few decades, there have been major shifts in regional balance of Nepal's population. The share of population of the Tarai region has been proportionately increasing with corresponding decline in the hill region due to out-migration of population from the hills and the mountains (CBS 2003). Given these regional contexts, a study of hill and Tarai villages may shed light on the regional pattern of problems and opportunities concerning people's livelihood strategies.

A large number of anthropological studies in Nepal have already grappled with the problem of mountain region, which is the abode of less than 8 percent of the country's population. Among the hill and Tarai districts, I was inclined to select a village for the study from Gulmi and Nawalparasi districts. Gulmi ranks almost close to a median position among all districts of the country in terms of human development index. The Nepal Human Development Report 1998 ranked it in 36th position in terms of human development status of its population. This district is located in the middle hill zone, which shares a larger proportion of Nepal's population. A study of a village from this hill district would throw light on the condition of life of people living in middle hill part of the country.

Among the Tarai districts of Western Development Region, I chose a village from Nawalparasi district for the same reason. The human development status of the population in that district ranks between that of Rupandehi and Kapilvastu, two other districts of this part of the Tarai region. I felt that a village taken from this district could be more informative about general condition of life of the people living around the region.

No doubt, identification of each specific village from among many others distributed in those districts was not an easy task. I considered the villages that could reflect the physical and social features of the districts so that they could be more representative of the problems under investigation. Accordingly, I worked out some criteria to identify a list of such possible villages. In the case of hill district, I kept in mind that the village to be selected should meet at least the following four criteria: (1) the place should have households distributed along all elevation from top to bottom of a hill, probably close to the bank of a river; (2) its population should be composed of diversity of caste and/or ethnic groups; (3) it should be in a location close to road, market places and local administrative offices, but not very close to the headquarters of the district; and (4) it should have relatively a large number of households so that household specific information could be gathered in quantitative terms. In the Tarai district, all settlements are in the flat terrain. Therefore, social composition of the village population was taken as the major criteria for its selection. It was thought that a village comprising population of hill in-migrant as well as of Tarai origin would better reflect the problem faced in the region. Of course, number of households in the settlement was also an important consideration.

It was not possible for me to conduct a reconnaissance survey of all villages of the hill district within a short period. Most of the villages were not connected to road links. A long period would have to be invested to travel to those places by foot. Therefore, the district level administrators and politicians were consulted to sketch out a list of possible areas that could be taken for this study. Particularly, the elected representatives of the District Development Committee (DDC)
appeared more informative to suggest a comprehensive list of such possible sites. A deeper consultation with them made it further clear that some of those areas were hot spots of Maoist activities—the then underground political movement aimed at transforming the existing system of governance—which I thought of avoiding for security reason.

I was not acquainted with both the Maoist activists and security personnels of the government. I felt safe to avoid the Maoist zone. With the list of other possible areas, I traveled from the district headquarters to hunt for the fieldwork site. After two full days' travel through observing sites and consulting with people, I finally closed my journey after approaching a village named Remi.

Remi village forms 7, 8 and 9 wards of Santipur VDC of Gulmi district. "Santipur" is a small bazaar area, after which the VDC has been named. The bazaar is at ward no. 1 of the VDC at northeast bank of Hugdikhola stream. Part of the bazaar extends to the corner of Harrachaur VDC that borders the west of Santipur village. Santipur bazaar is also an Illaka (local region) centre of some governmental offices of the district. It has the branch of some district based government offices such as those related to forest, police administration, as well as veterinary, health and agriculture extension services. It has also a higher secondary school.

From the district headquarters Tamghas Bazaar, Santipur village is 26 km far in the northeast direction. This distance is measured in terms of the length of the shortest trail that connects these places. During the dry season, a motorable road connects this village with the district headquarter. Up to a distance of about 22 Km, the road that extends from this village had a narrow track. After crossing this distance either by tractor or the jeep one could travel by bus in the dry season. This road also connects the village with other southern districts and their bazaar areas.

Remi village forms the southern half of the Santipur VDC. The lower part of the village starts from the bank of Hugdikhola stream--the opposite side of Santipur bazaar area--and it extends up to the upper elevation of the hill. The main part of the village exists in hill slopes and is divided into two major settlement blocks known as Tallo (lower) and Uppallo (upper) Remi village. It is a very large settlement in the context of hill setting. The village has 351 households in March 2001. They belonged to the caste and ethnic groups like Bahun, Chhetri, Damai, Kami, Kumal, Magar and Newar. They are distributed to 21 sub-settlements within Remi village. These sub-settlements are contiguous to each other, named separately and are evenly distributed.

I adopted a somewhat different strategy to spot out the study site of Nawalparasi district. This district is composed of 73 VDCs distributed over three ecological belts. Seventeen of the VDCs are in the middle hill region, 20 in the flat lands encircled by Churia hills in the inner Tarai region, and 36 in the outer or the main Tarai region. In the course of the visits, I took note of the villages and also consulted with common people, school teachers and VDC officials about the social and economic features of those areas.

During the course of this trip and consultation, it was found that farm fields in the south and southwestern part of the district are irrigable only by the monsoon rains. Those in the northern margin are seasonally irrigable from water of the local streams that have their origin in the Churia hills. Some plots of lands in the southeast part of the region are perennially irrigable through canal irrigation system. Forest is available only in the northern part of this region. In terms of composition of the population, majority of people in villages south of the district headquarters, Parasi Bazaar, comprise of the original inhabitants of the of the Tarai regions. In
villages close to Churia hills along northern border of the main Tarai region, the majority is formed by the in-migrants from the hill region. The population in the settlements between the above two geographical locations is composed of hill immigrants as well as the local original people. I realized that the village from this middle zone of the Tarai in the district could be more representative of the problems under study. This consideration led me to select Parsawal village as a site for field based study.

Parsawal village is located at a distance of about 6 km north from the district headquarters. Approximately 4 km north of the village is the Mahendra highway that cuts this district from east to west. This point also locates the Sunwal Bazaar area, which is the nearest market of this village. This village forms ward no 4 and 9 of Amrot VDC. The village has two segments of settlements. One of these is the main or the original Parsawal village and another recently developed sub-settlement in the west of the original village. During the time of field visit the main village had 139 households. Fifty eight of them formed ward no. 4 of the VDC and the remaining 81 of ward no. 9 of the VDC. The recently developed sub-settlement consists of more than 100 households and forms the remaining part of ward no. 9. In the original village the people of Tarai origin constitute the majority, but in the sub-settlement the in-migrants from the hills form the majority.

Despite the division of the original village into two wards of the VDC, it is a single settlement. A small irrigation canal divides these wards at the middle of the village. Previously, the sub-settlement was developed by "landless" households of the original village through clearing up of part of forest area. Gradually, landless migrants from the hills flooded into the area and now formed majority group living there.

Entry to the Villages

The selection of fieldwork site was only the beginning of many challenges that I encountered in the course of data collection for my research. After the selection of villages, the next task for me was to enter these villages. At the outset, it was important to identify the key persons of the area through whom I could establish contact with people of the villages. The field sites as mentioned above were selected through personal observation of the location, review of voters' list prepared for use in political election, consultation with leaders of respective VDCs as well as teachers of the local schools. I also thought it appropriate to seek help of these people to get entry into the villages.

Encounter and Experiences in the Field

The most important encounter I had in the field was with my own awkward 'social position in the village. My status was a researcher coming from outside the village to stay there for a short period of time to explore many secrets of life of the people which many of them might not be interested to disclose.

The psychological stress of being a stranger in the village often gave me a feeling of "isolation in crowd" (Sarsby 1984). Such a feeling, however, lasted for only a short time. A slow and gradual interaction with the people helped to cultivate a warm and cordial relation. In the beginning, I had to think of some plans to initiate interaction/conversion. To this end in mind, I began paying
visits to villagers in their respective homes. I also started attending the public places like schools and government offices. This strategy dispelled my image as a strange outsider.

Interest and Information

Proximity between people and investigator sometimes hindered the flow of objective information. Households in both the field sites were divided into groups based on political ideologies, caste status and economic standing. They had different interests in the village, which were often conflicting to each other. Accordingly, they had their own reasons for providing the information. The leading personalities of each political party of the village used to interpret problems of their community in their own party lines. Quite often, they were interested to see the investigator speak in their political tone.

During early days of fieldwork in Remi village, my stay with the vice-chairperson raised curiosity among other political leaders. They were suspicious that I might have some political interest in the village. Many of them carefully watched my activities to identify whether my interest was only an academic research.

The caste status of village leaders also influenced their views about the problems of the community. Their information on matters of inter-caste relations was usually biased towards their own positions. The non-leaders or the general people showed much interest to inform about their own household problems. People of different economic standing had different visions on economic problems of their village. The wage workers and load carriers wanted to discuss on issue of jobs, wage rates and their household problems related to meager income of their family. The businesspersons had interest to discuss on benefits or loss of changing price of the commodities. Farmers had their own problems related to climate, land size, price of farm products and the cost of goods purchased in the market. None of these categories of informants could provide detail information on workings of each other in relation to one another. I could receive only partial information from each category of the informants.

At some time, the views expressed by different categories of informants became useful for cross validation on the information. They provided important ideas to compare and contrast different interests and perceptions of people towards certain problems of the village. Of course, this required me to consult a range of informants and use various types of research tools.

Gender and Researcher

Literature dealing with fieldwork experiences has deliberated the aspect of gender in two different dimensions. One dimension of such discussion has focused on gender based adjustment problems of the investigator in the new environment. It has been argued that fieldwork activities do not match with the cultural orientation of female's roles in many societies. According to dominant ideological values, "the female anthropologist not accompanying a husband, is rejecting her conventional destiny by the act of fieldwork" where as "the male anthropologist is completing his" (Okeley 1975). Such a cultural perception produces some additional problems of adjustment to female investigator in the field compared to those faced by their male counterparts.

Gupta (1979) had experienced that her decision to go to the field made her well-wishers worried. When she was present before the officials, they also "let loose to volleys" of impertinent questions about her personal life. She had to make her presence to the field through a secret plan of hiding her professional identity. Leela Dube had conducted her fieldwork under the
"protective umbrella of her father in law" (Dube 1975). Redcliff Brown himself had to advice some of his female students to carry guns in the field to defend themselves from the possibility of any attack intended to harm them physically (Referred in Sarsby 1984).

Another dimension of discussion on the advantages or disadvantages of investigator's gender in the field focuses on the problem related to access to information. It is generally believed that information about activities which fall under the domain of people of opposite sex are likely to be less accessible than those which fall under the domain of one's own particular sex. It is reported that male investigators face much difficulties to enter the domain of female's activities than that faced by female investigators to get access to male's tasks (Sarsby 1984). It appears particularly so when the investigations touch upon issues that have concern with the secrets of personal life of the informants. For the study of human fertility in a Nepali village, Macfarlane (1976) had to depend on information provided by males about sexual behavior of couples. As a male investigator it was not possible for him to talk to women folks about their sex life.

Issues related to human livelihood activities are, however, less secret phenomena. They involve areas related to use of productive resources, employment structure and income status as well as expenditure patterns of the population. I was able to discuss these issues quite openly with both male and female informants of the village community.

In Remi and Parsawal villages, there were tasks which fall specifically in the domain of male or female sex of a person. Female performed most of the domestic works in both the villages. Even in agriculture, there was sex based division of labor. In Remi village, the young laborers had sex based labor groups, which was to perform different types of agricultural activities. Participation of male field investigator in females' labor group just to observe their work and activities was considered morally improper.

This moral restriction to participate in working groups of women did not block other possibilities to observe the nature of their work. The works performed by women of the village were also the ones done in open fields. Most of the farm activities were done both by male and female members side by side. While men were plowing and leveling the fields for cultivation, women groups were engaged in planting or transplanting seeds or seedlings of crops in those fields. Other tasks performed by labor groups of woman were collection of firewood and thatching materials from the forest and grass fields. These types of tasks were performed even by male members of the area. However, they used to have their own labourer groups if they were interested to perform these tasks in the group. All these activities performed by labourer groups of both the man and women were clearly visible in the open field. Their tasks could be observed even without directly participating in their groups. They could also be consulted about their experience in leisure time in their families. Activities related to preparation of food and taking care of children at home were also not secret ones even though they were mostly the responsibility of the females.

Of course, there were areas of specialized work of both the male and female members of the village. The women might not know the ways her husband arranged cash to buy cloths for their children. The man might not be aware of the quantity of corn left in his household barn for the next month. As a normal process in the family they, of course, occasionally discussed these issues. Both categories of informants thus could provide some information about the task of the other.
Professional Interest and Moral Disposition

The very task of field-based research has been questioned in moral ground. The fieldwork exercises are considered to be morally inappropriate in those conditions when they produce harmful results to the life of people which are being investigated under those undertakings (Akeroyd 1984). There is, however, a controversy among scholars as to what type of research is appropriate in moral ground. One type of debate on the question of moral content of field based research is concentrated on the discussion of positivist and normative elements involved in issues of the research. The advocates of positivists approach have the argument that research activities guided by value of researchers remain unable to portray the objective picture of the reality. They are biased by the value of researchers. They twist facts of realities in support of those values. They argue that research activities to be morally justified need to be free from any content of personal value of researcher. They should be able to speak only the objective fact of the reality. However, those who hold the perception that research undertakings are always guided by some sort of normative objectives do not envisage the possibility of existence of value free science of society. They consider that the very notion of "value-freeness" in research is itself a kind of value. In the guise of "value-free" discussion of observable facts of current reality, it detractions academic attention out from the analysis of dynamics and change of social reality (Giddens 1974).

It is not my intention to judge in this small peace of work about whether the positivist or normative path of research is morally superior. Both of these lines of thought may have their own merits and limitations. What I want to mention in this context is just to share my experiences about how it is morally a painful event to touch upon some delicate issues of people's livelihood situations when the research bears no intention for making any type of help to ameliorate those conditions. This appears so particularly in the context of research on resource poor households, when they are asked for exploring information about the status of their income, indebtedness, consumption and expenditure patterns.

In the process of collection of field-based data at one occasion, I happened to visit a household lived by only an old widow. Her husband had died for about 27 years ago leaving with her four children. Two of them were daughters and two were sons. One of the sons, who was the youngest among all children, was only one-and-half year old during the time of this event. The family had only a little amount of land to cultivate. So she used to earn the living of her family through engaging in different types of wage labour. After some years, the daughters grew up and married away to leave the parental family. The elder son also brought a wife and produced two daughters to add new members in the family. In the mean time, the elder son fell sick and could not recover again to be able to work for wage. During this period, the old mother, her youngest son and the daughter-in-law were the earning members of the family. While the eldest son could not recover from illness, the daughter-in-law thought it appropriate to bear by herself the burden of her nuclear unit by living separately so as to relieve her-in-law from sharing this responsibility. Later on the younger son, who was living with the widow mother, also left the house to go to India. He had migrated with a hope of finding relatively a regular employment to bring back remittances to care for the mother. However, he never returned after he left the home. The old mother knows nothing about him after this event. Now, she is very old and stays at one part of the decomposed hut built long ago by her husband. Her elder son's family shares the remaining portion of this residential unit as he is also not able to work. She eats what her neighbours offer her occasionally or what she can collect through begging. While she was telling
these distressing experiences of her life in a highly emotional sentiment, it made me to feel guilty for myself to enter into such a delicate issue of one's life as my inquiries had nothing to do to reduce her pains.

Rapport Building with the Population

The moral constraints of field situations did not permit me eliciting information from the people in an imposing way. Rather, the situation demanded me to develop friendly relations with all categories of people in the villages. But the human objects, which I had to handle in the field, had a variety of interests. This posed me challenges to maintain a neutral status in relation to social milieu of the village and the larger areas.

During the course of my stay in the field, I had to come across with multiple debates among different factions of the village population. These types of debates were usually held in matters of their social, economic and personal lives. The political debates of interest among people of these areas were usually concentrated on issues of their perceptions on relative strength and weaknesses of the ideologies held by their respective political organizations. Particularly, the leading personalities wanted to establish that the ideas held by political organizations of their choice are the best among all categories of such ideas. Each of them wanted me to express my views in this regard though all of them would expect to hear the arguments in favor of their opinions. I found my presence also in the debates held on matters of family separation, divisions of parental property among its multiple claimants, conflicts among members in neighborhoods on issues of encroachment of resources such as land, problems of domestic quarrels such as those related to divorce and separation as well as a host of such other events. The village notables who were present in the meetings organized for resolving these problems wanted me to suggest my views about those situations. It was an uneasy task for an outsider to express his views on issues of these conflict-based situations, as they would be in favor of some and against some.

I made it a point to avoid personal judgments on any issues representing personal or factional problems of those localities. I tried to meet and talk with as many people of the villages as it was possible. The interactions developed through this strategy enabled me to win the trust of all village people. Gradually, they found me a harmless friend to confide their problems and share their joys as well as sorrows without hesitation. It made me easy to elicit necessary information without letting them develop a sense of imposition. However, I must be honest to mention that the villagers kept some level of distance between our relations as they saw me also in a form of a researcher coming to their village from outside their locality.

Methods and Techniques of Data Collection

Once a good rapport was established by winning the trust of the village people, it was now time to gather information. The issues covered in the research were complex and hence the data had to be gathered in both qualitative and quantitative terms. This made it necessary to adopt multiple types of data collection strategies (Burgess 1982) to gather the required set of information. Data gathered through use of multiple research strategies were useful also for cross validation of the information (Denzin 1970). Accordingly, the following tools and strategies were employed to gather data for the study.

Use of Documentary Records and Archival Materials
Young (1979) quotes from Curt Lewin’s writing on Field Theory on Social Sciences that "[D]irect observation of social phenomenon in a state of rest is not a sufficient foundation [for study]; it gives neither requisite scope nor accuracy. There must be added a study of development of those phenomenon in time that is in history.” Even aspect of contemporary life has some conditioning factors, which may have link to the long history in the past and to the social and institutional forces developed out of the experience of the locality. These dynamics of life events and the influences of external factors on them cannot be understood simply through direct contact with local people. Societies also maintain some continuing records on their past developments and on activities of their institutions. A survey of these records can help to reconstruct the history of any activities and identify their place within a wider social environment.

Indeed a wide source of documentary information remained useful to illuminate the issues discussed in the study. Official reports of governmental institutions as well as the knowledge stored in written documents of individual scholars were among the important sources consulted much frequently during the research process. There were different types of documentary information prepared by local, district, regional and national level organs of the government. They included reports on the census of the population, other statistical reports, documents on their annual and periodic plans of operation as well as various types of rules and regulations. Information available from these sources became useful to establish the national and local context of the research problem. These types of documentary information available for different time sequences also made it possible to evaluate the historical context of the problem.

Data available from census report served as the basic information to locate the study villages by analyzing the features of their respective population. The statistical reports provided by national agencies and international organizations proved useful to compare the local contexts of village areas with those of the national settings. Information on plans of activities prepared by different levels of governmental institutions appeared beneficial to measure the differences between policies of the state and the level of their implementation in real field situation. The wisdom stored in scholarly reports and writings of individual scholars and other institutions provided substantive and theoretical inputs required to make sharp the discussions made by the research.

Participant Observation

Social world is a constructed reality. Those who participate to construct it experience this reality. The meaning of this reality is the meaning provided to it by those participants. This native point of view of the social world can be grasped by participating with the natives to observe their behavior and practices in their own social setting.

Malinowski (1922:24) makes the argument that the researcher as an outsider to his research community remains unaware, at the beginning of his research process, of the context and intrinsic meaning of the act performed by people of that community. He/she cannot explore the meaning of those acts through momentary contact with those people. To grasp their meaning, as actors in the field perceive them, he/she should immerse in their life through participating in their daily life processes. This type of participation provides opportunities for the researcher to collect rich details of data on social situation through its observation in a natural setting. With this method, the researcher can obtain accounts of situations in participants’ own language, which gives access to the concepts that are used in everyday life (Burgess 1984). It provides learning
opportunities in the field and opens possibilities for encountering "unexpected phenomenon that may be more significant than anything the fieldworker could have foreseen" (Whyte 1984:27).

Participation is, however, a matter of degree. Malinowski is in favor of long months of stay with people in the field. He argues that longer stay in the field provides the researcher with an ample opportunity to establish himself as a part of the context being observed in the community. A native researcher may, however, be previously familiar with the language of the people and some social and economic contexts of the research community. Further, a researcher may also want to observe events of the field without being emotionally involved with the people. Thus, the "participant observation" is only a loose label that covers many varieties of participation and observation. The activities and roles in participant observation take various forms based on the fieldworker's emotional relationship with people and their activities. He/she may appear as a "total participant" having completely involved emotionally in their social situation; or may appear as a "researcher participant" participating only in those social situations that are relevant to his/her study. He/she may also remain as a "total researcher" observing the activities of the people without participating with them emotionally (Gans 1982:54).

My stay in the field did not appear in the form of a "total participant". There were some reasons for it. One of the important reasons was that I was a native researcher. This native status made me familiar with many of the social and natural features of the field sites as per their relation with my research even before the time of this study. This type of familiarity enabled me to identify the contexts of many activities of people even without participating fully in them. Secondly, I had to shuttle between two places. The total time I spent in the field was a one-year period. Of this one-year duration, I spent a few weeks in gathering archival materials and documentary sources as discussed above. The rest of the time was spent with the people shuttling between two field sites. This type of movement between two places did not allow me to be a "total participant" in many of their activities. However, my presence even in the form a "researcher participant" proved extremely useful to explore some sorts of important information, which would be difficult to grasp through use of other sets of research tools.

To identify differences among households in terms of quantity of food produced by them in their family-owned lands I needed data on land size and its productivity. Information related to land size was gathered through structured interview among the sampled households. However, their responses appeared different about the quantity of crops produced even in the same size of their lands. I was aware that this type of difference might result partly by the amount of fertiliser used in it and by differences in ecological conditions of its location. Given this context, I considered it useful to establish a standard rate of productivity for different categories of land to ensure for the collection of more valid set of information.

At the beginning, it was thought that discussion with key informants of the areas could be an effective way to find solution of this problem. Later on, it was found that even the family members within a household had no uniform opinion about the quantity of crops grown in their own farmlands. Information provided by key informants of the areas also appeared no uniform. They expressed different opinions about the productivity of the same quality of land. This type of diversity of opinions among people made it necessary to explore the reasons lying behind these differences through observation of harvesting practices followed by households for different crops of their land.
Observation of harvesting practices of crops in these areas revealed the facts that each of the households collected the same variety of all crops grown in different plots of its farms within a single yard to thresh and process them for storing. This method of collection of crops for harvesting was the reason that they remained unable to provide information about the quantity of product produced in different categories of their lands. There were difficulties for many households even to recall the total amount of crops grown in their total land. In many cases, they used to start to consume these crops immediately after bringing them in the yard even before they completes their threshing and processing operation. They had no practice of keeping any systematic record of the amount of crops consumed directly from the yard before storing. Nor did they follow any form of precise measurement practices to identify volume of grains stored in their household barns. Only few households could supply accurate data on their family farm production. Most of the information provided by majority of households in this regard was found to be as guesswork rather than an exact account.

This disclosure of the use of guesswork in providing information on family farm production motivated me to adopt an alternative way to enhance the precision of information. I thought it appropriate to participate myself in harvesting processes of crops in some sampled plots of different locations and measure the quantity of products produced in them. This type of exercise was thought to be important to set a standard for computing the amount of crops produced by households in different categories of their lands. There was no ecological variation in the farm fields cultivated by households of the Tarai village. As a result, there appeared no significant variation in the quantity of crops measured in sampled units of its land. Such an observation allowed for setting the average amount of products produced in the sampled units as the standard to measure the quantity of products produced in all lands.

The effects of quality of land on production were found more pronounced at different elevation of the hill village. For example, one farmer produced 22 Dokos (basket full) of corn ear in his two Ropanis (a local system of land measurement) of land located at lower elevation. Another farmer produced just four Dokos of corn ear in one Ropani of his land located at upper and cooler elevation. My host family at the middle elevation of the hill village had 12 Dokos of corn ear in his one Ropani of land. The measurement of this type of differences observed in different quality of lands of the village made it easier to set a standard of their productivity through discussion with people and adjust the responses provided by households about the production of their family farms.

Observation as tool of data collection was found useful to be familiar in the context of a number of other occasions. Participation in labour groups to observe the routines of their activities illuminated the fact that they rotated their services much frequently between household members included in the groups. A deep interaction with them made it clear that they are highly conscious of relative differences of the importance of tasks performed in the peak and marginal time of a season. The tasks performed in the peak period are more beneficial than those performed in the marginal time. They rotate their services to ensure that each member of the group could avail an equitable advantage of the benefits of tasks performed in different time of each season. Some of the other issues that were closely observed to explore the context of internal dynamics involved in connected social processes may be listed here as those related to the structure of settlement, features of domiciles, patterns of allocation of domestic labor and use of household and community based resources.
Data gathered through observation of events and activities in the field had however one limitation. They could provide mainly the photographic view of information of a static period covered by the fieldwork time. Events and activities observed in the fields might have a history of gradual evolution. They might be viewed in different ways by different categories of people who were exposed to them. The meanings those events and activities could be grasped much adequately by locating them with these different contexts and situations. As a result, some alternative types of data collection instruments were also required to explore those historical and other contexts of their operation. Interview with different category of people appeared much beneficial to explore the historical dynamics and other meanings held by people about those events and processes.

Interview

Interview as a data collection instrument may be defined as the face-to-face type of verbal interchange between the researcher and the human objects which are being investigated. Such a face-to-face type of verbal interchange with those who have witnessed the reality can help to dig-out all details of the information related to history and all dynamic of that reality (Dengin 1970). It can be used either as a primary tool for the collection of necessary information, or as the one to generate data that are necessary to complement them. The face-to-face types of verbal interchanges also appear in multiple forms. In general, scholars have classified them between the structured and unstructured types in broader categories. Both types of these interviews were followed with the people to generate some specific kind of information.

Structured Interview

The verbal interchanges, which are based on following the schedule of a structured set of predetermined questions, are termed as the structured type of interviews. Interviews of this type are beneficial to collect quantitative set of data required to interpret the issues. They permit to elicit uniform pattern of responses on the issues from different segments of the population. They allow the researchers to summarize those responses into quantitative categories by classifying them in systematic terms (Young 1979). For the case of this study, this type of interview was used to collect data related to demographic features, land ownership status, production patterns, income levels and employment structure of households living in study areas.

Indeed, it is not always easy to collect desired set of data by use of structured interviews. The difficulties involved in the use of this data collection instrument start from the point of preparation of this tool. This type of research tool previously fixes the type of questions to be asked to the respondents, and mention the possible alternatives of their responses from which they are required to choose. In some contexts, these alternatives of possible responses fixed with the questions at hand may not be enough to reflect the views held by people. In some others, the respondents may not have adequate account of events under investigation to provide exact set of information.

I have already mentioned about the context of guesswork used by people to inform about the amount of crops produced in their household farms. This type of difficulty was experienced also in the case of identifying the level of their income. Households in study areas derived the income of their families by engaging themselves into different types of activities. They had cultivated some crops in some amount of farm field, kept some livestock and sold the products available from them. They were involved in working on wage within and outside their villages in
agricultural and other types of operations. Some members of some families had some regularity of employment. Others had to work only seasonally and stay unemployed for all the remaining time. These multiple categories of tasks performed by members in the families might not fetch cash on all occasions. The seasonality of works and involvement in various activities also made it difficult for them to measure cash based values of their returns. As a result, it appeared a Herculean exercise to identify the exact volume of income derived by these families.

However, different types of activities had different levels of importance for different categories of households of the areas. There was no doubt that farming was an important source of income for majority of the families. There were also those households which had not owned the land. Some of the households had both land-based source of income together with cash derived from regular employment. Amidst these variations, identification of income levels for different types of these families would demand to follow a specific strategy. I preferred to set different types of standards to measure income derived from different sources and adjusted them with the types of activities performed by individual families.

Use of Unstructured Interview

Above discussion makes it clear that administration of structured interviews in many contexts does not appear as a simple process. A number of adjustments may be required according to contexts of the field in the use of this strategy to generate valid set of information. The contexts of field can be understood partly through observation. They can be grasped much adequately by way of intensive discussions made about them with the people. A good comprehension of all contexts of issues covered by the investigation allows the researcher to make meaningful interpretation of related theme.

Interviews made without sticking to a set of structured questions can be the effective strategy to explore all details of the contexts involved on issues of discussion. These types of verbal interchanges are informal conversations made with a purpose on some topics of those issues (Burgess 1984). They do not proceed to seek responses on a definite set of questions. They allow flexibility in conversation (Young 1979) and provide opportunities to informants to express freely their opinions. These types of conversations are useful to dig-out a variety of views in the context and theme of research to intensify database required for the explanation of the problem. As informal conversations, they can be conducted with different categories of people who hold knowledge about them (Tremblay 1982).

During the course of my stay in the field, these types of informal conversations were the normal part of daily interaction with different segments of the population. Sometimes, they were held with members of individual households with a view to understand household level dynamics of social and economic activities. In some others, they were conducted with groups of people and their representatives in their common gatherings like public meetings, religious ceremonies and working fields to explore the details of the contexts involved in these events. The key informants or the persons who had special knowledge on particular field of activities (Pelto 1982) were much useful in providing a good amount of information. Discussions made in this way with different categories of people sometimes "focused" on specific topics or areas (Tremblay 19879) and at other times, they were open and undefined. I would like to mention here one example of information provided by people about the adequacy of services they received from the veterinary office of the government located in the hill village.
During the office time, it was usual to observe that a number of people used to attend this office to seek advices and other types of solutions of the problems faced by their livestock. When they were asked about the quality of services received from the office, their common response was that it was satisfactory and adequate. However, a detail discussion with members of a household explored different type of experience. This household had a baby goat. One day it became sick and the household head went to this office to seek advice about the case. There was also a privately run veterinary center in the area. It used to take fees for the services. The farmer felt it expensive. He thought that it would be convenient to go to the government run office, which was supposed to provide its services free of cost to the people.

The farmer informed about the case in the office. He had not carried his goat with him at this occasion. The medical staff who was also in-charge of the office told the farmer that he could not say anything about the case without inspecting the goat. The farmer asked for his permission to bring the goat to the office for treatment. The medical staff advised him that it was not necessary to take this difficulty. He had some work to go to the settlement of the farmer in the next day. During the time he would come to the farmer's home and inspect the goat to provide necessary advices to solve the problem.

The medical staff went to the village next day. He inspected the goat and asked the farmer to buy some medicine from the market. He also demanded from the farmer a sum of rupees 125 as a fee for his visit to his house. The farmer shared his experience that the price of the baby goat in the market used to appear less than the amount of fee demanded by the medical staff. If the cost of medicine was added to it, the goat could not fetch this amount of price even if it was cured and tamed for the whole of the next year. In his opinion, the office worker cheated in his services. He paid the fee, as it was demanded. However, he did not buy the medicine, as it would make additional increment to the cost of the farmer. He left the goat to die. He has no faith in the services of these officials.

It was only through adoption of unstructured type of informal discussion with members of the household that it became possible to explore details of the event.

Case Study and Life History

Case study is not a distinct technique of research. It is rather a method of detail illustration of selected aspects of a situation using a full variety of evidences gathered through documents, artifacts, interviews and observations. Informal interviews conducted with different sections of the population can collect adequate details of information in various types of issues covered by the study. However, it is not necessary that all types of research designs provide primary importance to data gained through use of this research tool. The research designs that provide emphasis on use of quantitative data in discussions mainly keep in background the information collected through unstructured tools.

Quantification of some aspects of life of people represents merely "a tip of iceberg" of their problems (Okaley 1988). Social life in any of its aspects involves complex social processes that can be elucidated more adequately by touching upon all of its historical, behavioral and emotional issues. Case studies and life histories are those techniques of discussions that can provide the details of specific configurations of a series of events or actions of people, as they appear in particular situation (Mitchell 1984). Case study research usually focuses on describing a few or single event of a social setting. Its emphasis on the discussion of a particular event
raises questions about its representative character. But the use of case study information together with data produced through other methods of research enables the investigator to expose human actions in all their contexts and conditions (Yin 1984). In views of these utilities, this study also employed the case study based information to provide explanation of many activities and events. The cases that were taken into consideration included both the personal experiences gained by individual families in their course of earning a living and the social forces of the villages addressed to affect these experiences.

The contexts referred to above-mentioned sections of this paper about the difficulties associated with identifying the quantities of household farm production and the relationship developed between a farmer and medical professional in matter of treatment of a baby goat are themselves the examples of the details that can be observed by use of a case study method. The importance found in use of this method in this research can be illuminated further by citing here one more example.

The case mentioned here as an example relates to the issue of regulation of family size as one of the livelihood strategies adopted by households of study areas. It is generally held that people feel comfortable to live in small size families. It may be true in many contexts. However, it does not appear the same for one Yogi Kunwar family of the Tarai village. He preferred to keep a larger size of its household unit to make it easy for the members to earn a living.

This household had nineteen members representing three different generations. They included the parents of household head, he himself and his brothers including their wives, and their children. It had owned 1 Bigha (0.67 hectare) of land. If the parents and all brothers were separated to form their own household units, this land would have to be equally divided into at least four parcels of their separate shares. Separation of family would not only reduce the size of land to be owned by these individual units, it would also create a number of other difficulties.

The production of crops from 1 Bigha of land was almost inadequate to provide food for the family. However, living within a domestic unit had allowed different types of its members to engage in different types of activities according to their age and sex. The old father had responsibility to look after children. The mother had skills to prepare puffed rice and sell it in weekly markets held around the area. One among the wives of household head or his brothers would take responsibility of the household kitchen. The rest of family members used to work in their household farm whenever it was needed during the agricultural seasons. For the rest of the period they remained free to engage in different types of wage works whenever available to earn cash to support the household income.

Separation of this family to form smaller domestic units would require each household formed through this process to involve in each of these activities. However, it would not be possible. Each household would have to be engaged to look after their children and livestock. They would have to run their individual kitchens. These and other types of such separate involvements would unnecessarily consume their domestic labour. At the same time, they would have to be deprived of the advantage of certain types of skills specifically owned by specific members of this larger unit. Given these reasons, the members had the opinion that appropriate time for the separation of this larger unit would come only after all children grew adequately and became able to help their parents in their activities.

Concluding Remarks
The issues raised and discussed above make it clear that social research that seeks data from study of the field involves a chain of complex processes. These types of complexities begin from the point of identification of research problems and proceed through selection of study sites, specifying methods, tools and techniques to collect data from the fields as well as preparation of a plan of work required for a meaningful interpretation of those sets of information. However, it is necessary to simplify these complexities to fulfill its objectives. The complexities involved in research process can be simplified through making a match between the issues raised by research objectives, characteristics of the field to be visited for the collection of data demanded by those objectives, and type of methodological tools selected for use in the research process to collect those data. It is true that different types of research designs may have their own specific requirements. However, a careful blend of qualitative and quantitative type of information collected through various types of methodological tools permit the researcher to make adequate explanation of the problems.

References


Pandey, Tulsi Ram

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