

International Journal of Rural Studies October 2010 Editorial

There is no doubt that India lives in its villages yet, as Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, the towns and cities dominate the villages and drain them of their resources. The needs of villagers always come last despite the fact that 72% of Indians still live in rural areas. Moreover, this doesn't apply just to India. There are at least thirty other countries in the world where the rural population far outnumbers the urban.

IJRS (International Journal of Rural Studies) was set up to focus specifically on rural issues. Its aims are:

1. To highlight and encourage socially relevant and useful research in various fields of rural studies
2. To identify the potential of rural people
3. To find ways and means to realize their hitherto neglected potential

In the sixteenth year of its publication, it is only prudent to reflect on these aims and ask ourselves whether IJRS has been able to achieve them, if not fully then at least partly.

We can definitely say that we have achieved the first aim. We receive a great many research papers from a number of developing countries. Almost all these papers deal with rural issues; we only select those that do.

We also try to include articles and research papers that highlight the potential of rural people, something that is often ignored. Research shows that villagers should be given more responsibility for their own development and empowered to make decisions about their own progress and actively participate in it.

Some papers also suggest ways to realize rural people's potential but this is not an easy task and undoubtedly this is the one where we feel we have not yet fully achieved our aim.

At present, academic education and research are largely urban-oriented. We believe that it is essential for education, research and development to evolve from the cultural heritage, expertise, experiences and strengths of rural people.

However, there is now a strong body of thought that feels there is no need for a practical base for theory and that anything which appears purely practical has no theory behind it. This is patently untrue. Knowledge cannot evolve from a vacuum and practice does not occur without some theoretical base. Only a combination of the two can lead to change.

For what is the point of research if not to bring about change? And that too for the better.

Can purely academic, theoretical research achieve this? The answer must be a resounding no. In any case a large amount of theoretical research is just gathering dust in the libraries. At IJRS, we do not want to add to that dusty pile.

What is urgently needed is practical, grass-roots action research and a practical approach to professional inquiry in a rural context. At the simplest level, this involves planning, action, monitoring and reflection, though not necessarily in that order.

The most important part of action research is the collection of primary data through questionnaires, interviews, focus group interviews, observation and case studies. However, it is easy to make mistakes and draw faulty conclusions unless the data is painstakingly checked and re-checked. Urban-oriented, academic researchers frequently make mistakes, sometimes very serious ones. When conducting research into rural life or rural people, it is crucial to be aware of pre-existing beliefs, prejudices and biases and to make a special effort to be objective. For example, many academics, consciously or unconsciously, associate 'rural' with 'backwardness', 'lack of intelligence' and 'uncultured'.

S. Senthikumar, Director of Information Education and Communication at the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation, describes rural men and women as "rich in grassroots wisdom based on experience of working with nature and natural resources. Their strength lies in the saying; "One ounce of practice is worth tons of theory". If rural transformation is

to take place, the contributions of grassroots academicians is essential since they know the problems of rural communities and also their solutions. Whether semi-literate or literate, rural families are able to master new technologies, provided the pedagogic methodology is learning by doing.....What the rural families, particularly women, need is social prestige and recognition. They take to new technologies like fish to water provided they are helped to do so through appropriate training and capacity building opportunities.”

It is also important to ensure that questions are worded in a clear, simple way that both literate and illiterate respondents can understand. Wherever possible, researchers should make every effort to learn the language used by local people. Questionnaires should not be too long or complicated and should not ask questions that intrude into the respondent’s personal life.

Do researchers ever think what it would be like for them if some complete stranger came uninvited to their homes and started asking questions about their income, property and personal life? Would they immediately supply all the answers? Would they be truthful? Or would they be highly suspicious?

At the Gramodaya Post-Graduate College in the village of Amarpurkashi, we run a unique, one-year course, the Post-Graduate Diploma in Rural Resource Management. This course is 50% theory and 50% practical. The practical work involves students going to an assigned village, getting to know some of the families there and eventually selecting two for further research.

This research is very down-to-earth. The students must identify two key problems that each family is suffering from and work with them to come up with viable solutions. If the university to which our college is affiliated had allowed us to run the course as it was designed, it would run for two years and students would be able to follow the progress of the families as they implemented the proposed solutions. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Before selecting the families or discussing any personal information with them, our students are given very specific guidelines. They must greet the villagers they meet on their initial

visits in a respectful manner. They must spend time with them, getting to know them and telling them about themselves. Only when they have established a good rapport with the villagers are they then ready to begin the research. Such preliminary preparation is essential if the villagers are going to work willingly and happily with the students and if they are going to feel comfortable about imparting personal information.

In certain kinds of research requiring a lot of observation, another important factor and one which can completely change the results of the research is whether those being observed have prior knowledge of the research being undertaken or are aware at the time of data collection that they are being observed.

For example, there have been a number of studies of government primary schools aimed at assessing the performance of teachers and the overall success of the schools. Where teachers knew that researchers would be coming to observe them and record their attendance, punctuality and teaching, the results were, not surprisingly, very different from those studies where neither the schools nor the teachers knew anything about the research.

This was clearly seen in one action research project conducted in February 2008 at ten government primary schools in the blocks of Bania Khera and Bilari in the district of Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh. All were visited without prior notice or knowledge. Observations were made from village houses conveniently situated near the schools. Neither students nor staff were aware of this. Observation began one hour before the schools were due to open and teachers’ and students’ movements were recorded every five minutes up to the close of the school day.

A summary of the results is given below:

1. None of the schools opened at the officially specified time.
2. None of the schools remained open for the whole of the school day.
3. Out of a total of ten teachers working in these schools, two (20%) were absent for the whole day.

4. Out of a total of twenty assistant teachers, (Shiksha Mitra) five (25%) were absent.
5. None of the teachers or teachers' assistants stayed at the school for the whole day.
6. Those staff who were present moved in and out of the schools throughout the day without any formalities i.e. without asking permission or informing anyone.
7. Two (20%) of ten schools held an assembly.
8. Pupil-teacher contact was 45%.
9. 20% of the total number of students on roll was present at the beginning of the school day.
10. 18% of the total number of students on roll was present at the end of the school day.
11. Approximately 90% of the total number of students attending school

that day arrived before any of the teachers.

12. 20.8% of pupils were present for the midday meal.

These results are totally different from the figures that are supplied to the government by the schools themselves. Yet all our planning and budgeting is based on their faulty information.

A very important purpose of research is finding the truth for only the truth can lead to change. But its discovery is not always popular, for the simple reason that it usually threatens the status quo. The first victim of this is the researcher followed by the participants.

Unfortunately, those who live by exploiting the poor and particularly the rural poor are the most resistant to change. For them, a change simply means 'more of the same'. However, whether they like it or not, change is inevitable.