

BOOK REVIEWS

Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists: Methodological Issues in Measuring Economic Change in Rural India edited by Pranab Bardhan, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989, ix+288 pp.

I

The world of scholars studying social and economic life in rural India, according to the editor of this essay collection, seems to have its own particular "caste system, with different disciplinary groups zealously observing their internal codes of conduct, status symbols, rituals and taboos" (p. vii). The anthropologists, for example, who rely on participant observation surveys done over long periods spent in the field, do not lend much credence to standardized macro-level data, such as censuses and National Sample Surveys while the economists, whose bread and butter for the most part is quantitative data, tend to find very little use for the micro-level survey results presented by anthropologists. As a result, in spite of the huge amount of data and research that has come out over the past several decades or so concerning changes occurring in India's agrarian village society, what is going on within the social science disciplines has yet to reach many points of convergence conducive to interdisciplinary discussion.

As its title suggests, the purpose of "conversation" is to bring a group of social scientists together to discuss just what is so unique about their respective methodologies and then try to discover points of mutual coherence. The volume is the product of a workshop held in Bangalore in 1985 by the Social Science Research Council (New York) and the Indian Statistical Institute. The participants, who were made up of editor Pranab Bardhan and the volume's twelve contributors, A. Vaidyanathan, N. Bhattacharya and M. Chattopadhyay, Susan S. Wadley and Bruce W. Derr, Jan Breman, John Harriss, N. S. Jodha, Suresh D. Tendulkar, Ashok Rudra, T. N. Srinivasan, and Arjun Appadurai, are a group of social scientists and statisticians, each with their own unique methodological approaches to the study of agrarian economy. The discussion that develops around the topic of "measuring economic changes in rural India" does not stop at describing the technical aspects of various survey approaches, but is also enveloped in a rather tense atmosphere where the discussants are forced to recognize that it is methodology that constitutes the very essence of social science. It is this latter motif that makes for very stimulating reading.

II

I would like to focus on three particular aspects of the discussion contained in the selection.

The first point concerns the possibility of overcoming the kind of "marginal error" that seems to be inherent to data gathered at the macro level. In his preface, editor Bardhan has presented a skillful summary of those areas that tend to elude the type of standardized statistical data put out in censuses and NSSs, or gathered by Agricultural Economics Research Centres around the country. Also, the Harriss and Jodha's papers point out the dangers involved in hypothesizing about changes in the agrarian economy

from macro-level data alone. That is, when comparing the results of their village by village studies with comparable macro data for the larger surrounding region, it is possible to detect that (1) there are margins of error in the macro data that cannot be ignored all across the board—from such basic statistical demographic categories as population and number of households to measuring poverty levels—and that (2) the margin of error levels are not uniform in terms of either survey question categories or region.

There is no disagreement among the discussants that margins of error do in fact exist in the macro data; however, as soon as it comes time to interpreting the significance and meaning of the error, we can observe very sharp opposition arising. For example, in the case of Vaidyanathan and Srinivasan, who represent the group of scholars that believe quantitative data based on scientific sampling techniques is the only objective means for analyzing changes in the rural economy, margins of error are merely problems to be solved through improvements in information gathering techniques and analytical precision. In contrast, Appadurai points to a gap that exists between those (researchers and government administrators alike) who look at rural economy in terms of scientifically defined terminology and quantitative concepts, on the one hand, and agrarian villagers who conceptualize their situations within the framework of regionally specific agriculture and society. For example, when agrarian people, who think about “quantity” in relative terms like “more than usual” etc., are pressed to answer survey questions in absolute terms, ingrained margins of error are bound to occur in the data that cannot be corrected by mere technical improvements in information gathering procedures. But there is a middle ground between these two types of opinion; for Harriss and others suggest that while macro data has definite limitations, it will have sufficient usefulness if constantly checked and compared with the available micro data.

My second point concerns the conventional micro-level village survey that takes as its object of investigation one single, presumably static community. Given current increases in labor migration and the rising commercialization of agriculture itself, doubts arise whether such an approach is effective any more for studying specifically the changes taking place in the agrarian economy. In this respect, the reader will find interesting both Breman’s attempt to expand the village survey in scale to the district level, and the Wadley and Derr’s paper containing a follow up to the Wisers’ fieldwork results, in order to add a time-series perspective to the data. Micro-level surveys are truly “hand crafted” pieces of research, in the sense that the fieldworker has chosen a certain limited area and applied to it a specially designed research framework. What Wadley and Derr, and Breman have done is to show through their own field experience the various methodological difficulties in not only expanding the limited spatial aspect of micro surveys, but also trying to update the “handicraft” of those who came before. What this discussion goes to show is that methodologies that bring out the dynamism of broad regional change are being sought even on the level of single-village survey approaches.

Finally, over and above (or preceding) the problem of methodology per se, we have to deal with how to approach the question of “where” to look for socioeconomic change in the agrarian village. For example, take the problems involved with studying poverty. There is the approach that measures it in terms of household income and outlay, and the approach that looks at the problem in terms of changes in village social relations, community consciousness, etc. Within the former approach changes in social relations and consciousness should be reflected in the quantitative results (i.e., if changes do not appear in the hard data, they are without substance), while the latter approach attempts

to recognize the "substantial" nature of those relations and consciousness that actually exist among the people who live and work in village society. It therefore follows that how "change" is measured will differ depending on the approach. The dispute that arises in the volume between Srinivasan and Appadurai has reinforced the fact that approach and methodology are mutually determining entities: that is to say, it is very difficult for anyone to share similar methodologies, while at the same time following different approaches to the subject matter.

III

The above problem points obviously lend themselves to no easy solutions, since it is self-evident that in both micro- and macro-level surveying there are specific areas which cannot be measured unless one or the other methodology is exclusively employed. As far as this reviewer is concerned, therefore, rather than reducing the methodological differences to the level of their "essential natures," a détente of sorts should be established, in which we all recognize each other's methodological limitations, but still try to inspect and verify each other's results. Harriss is a good example of this and has shown the necessity of bringing both macro and micro surveying together into the same arena and analyzing tendencies in terms of both sets of data. In addition, the kind of research Breman did in trying to fill the gaps between micro and macro data for a rural society of predetermined size also offers excellent possibilities.

By dealing head on with the little discussed problem of methodology, *Conversations between Economists and Anthropologists* has also brought into perspective many aspects of social and economic change characteristic of the Indian agrarian village. Due to its broad ranging theoretical implications the volume has significance to offer social science readers even if they are not involved directly in the study of India.

(Fumiko Oshikawa)

South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1945-1988 by James Barber and John Barratt, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, x+398 pp.

The present selection is one more addition to the growing body of research literature on the foreign-policy-making process in the Republic of South Africa and its diplomatic history. *South Africa's Foreign Policy* now stands along side the work on policy making done by E. S. Munger¹ and D. Geldenhuys,² the G. Cockram³ monograph focussing on the situation during the premiership of John Vorster, and of course of the predecessor

¹ Edwin S. Munger, *Notes on the Formation of South African Foreign Policy* (Pasadena, Calif.: Castle Press, 1965).

² Deon Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making* (Johannesburg: Macmillan South Africa Publishers, 1984).

³ Gail Cockram, *Vorster's Foreign Policy* (Pretoria: Academica, 1970).