

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY  
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The study of individual poverty

by

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## THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL POVERTY

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Since I was in Batagarawa, in Northern Hausaland, in Nigeria, in 1967, one of my chief concerns has been to study the causes and incidence of extreme individual poverty in the tropical countryside. In my obstinate opinion, techniques for studying individual poverty are ill-developed - for most anthropologists, who rely on informants who happen to *volunteer their services*, the severely impoverished are invisible people.

I quote from my book on Batagarawa RURAL HAUSA (1972), p.148.

"When a man's plight is extreme, he cannot remember how it all started - the anatomy of poverty is least comprehensible to those in the worst predicament. Those few men who moan about their poverty to outsiders are seldom truthful and the numerous sincere sufferers endure their miseries silently. Insofar as poverty is inactivity, it cannot be studied by participant observation. The way of life of richer people makes far more sense than that of poorer. *Unless village surveys cover the entire population, the poor are usually unobserved*".

"There is also another difficulty. Although third parties are sometimes prepared to be much more forthcoming than the victims themselves, the general fear of extreme poverty, coupled with the moral attitude to hard work, results in stereotyped analysis, denigration and condescension: the contemplation of other people's suffering is only endurable if it is demonstrably 'their fault'".

In other words it is no good studying the impoverished in isolation as though they were a special species. In our work, the activities of everyone in the community must be related to those of everyone else so that we may see why some are suffering and others are not. The phenomenon of relative wealth is just as relevant as the phenomenon of grave impoverishment. But the difficulty about studying whole communities (since 1967 all my three major research projects have involved whole communities) is that it is so extraordinarily laborious: in my experience, communities with populations

of less than (say) one thousand are too small for our analytical purposes. I will give you an example. In Batagarawa, which had a population of some 1 200 people, there were only 171 heads (out of 171) of farming households whom I classified as 'rich' - of course I use the word 'rich' in a relative sense. For various practical reasons this was really rather too small a number, and I was glad that the population of the next community which I studied (Dorayi near Kano city - also in Hausaland) was about 3 500, so that the number of rich heads of households was 72. Had this number been as low as 17, I could not have studied the relationship between household standards of living and slave descent - so I was glad that by chance we found it possible to map the farmland on which 3 500 people lived dispersedly.

Of course when I say that the work is laborious, I am imagining the situation of an anthropologist, who has no more than one or two paid full time assistants (I have never had more in my life), so that she has to rely mainly on the assistance of local people. In this connection I might mention that ever since 1967 it has been my practice to rely heavily on certain local people who are (if it does not sound as though they are my spies) my 'confidential informants'. You have to wait for these people to come forward spontaneously and volunteer their services: this may require much patience and waste of time. Since I agree with those who say that it is most improper for anthropologists from rich countries to offer large sums (which I, incidentally, never had) in return for information, I used to pay my confidential informants only the equivalent of a farm-labourer's wage, as compensation for the time they were wasting. It has never been my practice to pay anyone else for the information they gave me.

I have the strongest possible aversion to the use of questionnaires. Insofar as it is the anthropologist herself who wields them, well then they may be a useful reminder of the essential questions - though the most valuable information is bound to appear in the blank space left for 'other information'. But for anyone else to use this technique is fatal, because the research becomes strait-jacketed. In fundamental research, of the kind I endeavour to undertake, it is the affairs of which one had no inkling before one went to the field that really matter. As for pilot surveys, they have to be undertaken so quickly, that they are bound to miss most of the vital points.

In my experience the bundle of questions that one is apt to ask goes on developing throughout the period of the fieldwork: it is only when one is back at home analysing one's material that one begins to get an idea of what

one has found out. I would go so far as to say that there is a stiff conventionality in all anthropologist's reports, based on questionnaires, which the percipient reader recognises immediately without being told.

But though one does not use a questionnaire there is a lot of routine work which must be done by one's assistants, all of which requires careful checking by the anthropologist. In Hausaland, where (as in West Africa generally there is no cadastral survey) we had to map the farmland from an aerial photograph which showed the farm boundaries. One of my assistants went out with a knowledgeable local man, and mapped the farms on a piece of tracing paper - the local man naming the owner of each plot. I checked all this work myself with the aid of my confidential informants, who were able to walk around the farmland in their imaginations, and could tell me, for example, what farms had common boundaries. The other matter which caused a lot of work was counting the population of each house, noting the relationship of everyone to the household head. In Dorayi where many of the houses were very large, we had to repeat this enumeration many times owing to the existence of very large houses so that many residents, especially widows and children, tended to be forgotten - it is not surprising that each time we counted afresh the population rose substantially.

In the three areas I am talking about (two in Hausaland, one in South India), the fundamental basis of inequality was the uneven distribution of farmland between households, and figures showing the distribution of farm holdings were absolutely indispensable. I have never yet worked in an area where farmers could estimate the acreages they cultivated with an acceptable degree of reliability: therefore, one has to manufacture these figures oneself. I use the word 'manufacture' because, I regret to say, that however hard one works, a fair amount of estimation, based on what people say, is always involved: all right, I do not mind admitting that some degree of cooking is inevitable.

In Hausaland (but not so much in South India owing to the existence of the Harijans) an impoverished individual's plight commonly results from a conjunction of unfavourable circumstances. Also, one has to recognise that once a household falls below a certain level of misery, everything is apt to conspire to make things worse. This is not because other people are against poor households, but because it is a general rule that poor people always receive less per unit of effort than rich people, are far less able to

withstand the blows of fate which fall on everyone from time to time.

After studying all the evidence, much of it obtained from my confidential informants, I decided that about a quarter of all the farming-households of Batagarawa were gravely impoverished. (I briefly explain my classification system in the Appendix). About 20% of the population lived in these households. This finding got me into a lot of trouble - from which I have never emerged; the point was that there were many people who could not believe that such a high incidence of extreme poverty was compatible with the existence of uncultivated land which any farmer could cultivate if he wished. My concept of "too poor to farm" was found unacceptable - though I insist that this was the condition of many of the poorest people. How otherwise can one account for the fact that as many as 37% of all the poorest households were not farming a so-called 'bush farm' - a piece of land in the bush which can be cleared and farmed by anyone?

In Batagarawa my enquiries made it clear that the victims of extreme poverty were not a separate group of under-privileged men, whose circumstances were necessarily hopeless from the start. The way to look at their plight is this. Economic life is so harsh in this impoverished locality, with its inadequate rainfall, poor supplies of manure, and uncertain weather, that everyone (or nearly everyone) is subject all the time to the risk of economic failure; considering the circumstances, it is surprising how many farming households are successful in getting the desert to bloom so well. But some people are unlucky or more at risk, and then there is little to stop them going down hill.

In terms of their origins the very poor were found to be a fairly representative cross-section of the population. Many of them had reasonably well-off brothers; some of them had inherited quite a lot of land; several of them had once been well off; some of them had large numbers of sons of working age; and so forth. On the other hand many of them had had a hopeless struggle from the start: their father may have died when they were a child; they may have inherited no farmland; they may have been forced to sell farms in an emergency; their working sons may have migrated because they wanted to escape from their father's poverty.

The two particular points I am trying to establish are that everyone is at risk in this hostile environment; and that once a man falls so low that he is caught in a vicious spiral of poverty, there may be no escape - which is

not to say that he will starve, for impoverished people are always kept above the starvation level by the better off, though not in any systematic way. Also, in Batagarawa, (though not in Dorayi) there was always the possibility of making a little money by collecting firewood and other saleable materials from the bush.

My informants in Batagarawa had, as it were, certain acid tests for extreme poverty. One of these was an inability to borrow - except, as they put it, from "fools or strangers"; another was the sale of the grain crop at harvest when prices were lowest; then, a man's inability to persuade his sons to work with him (in gandu) on his farmland is a very bad sign, as is the sale of manure; the act of selling a farm in order to meet a son's marriage expenses is regarded as particularly pathetic; then a man may be so poor that no food is cooked in his household, each member of which has to depend on bought food.

It must be made clear that in this particular community, economic inequality is not related to the existence of differential rights over land: there is no class of person with special access to land, all of which is individually owned. But the richest farmers had inherited on average more land than the poorest farmers - 7.5 acres, compared with 1.9 acres: however, these figures are averages, concealing much variation, and some rich men had inherited very little land.

The poor men are those who do not farm at all, or who farm on a small scale very inefficiently; they are the men who sell any grain they grow at harvest time when prices are lowest, and who are most dependent on bought grain. What particular disabilities do they suffer from in connection with their other occupations? Poor farmers and their sons comprise the great bulk of the hired farm labour force. But the fixed daily wage bears no relationship to the fluctuating price of grain. In June 1967, the standard daily wage of 2s.6d. would have bought about 7-lbs. of grain - far too little for the ordinary household, bearing in mind that work is so spasmodic; in June 1968, on the other hand, when the standard wage was 2s.0d. about 24-lbs. of grain could have been bought.

One has to take trivial examples, because the occupations of the poorest farmers are trivial. A poor farmer gets a lower return from rearing goats than a rich farmer, owing to their greater need to sell the animals before harvest, when prices are lowest, to finance grain purchase. Although the ~~the~~ Hausa locality of dispersed settlement I named Dorayi had a much higher population density than Batagarawa: it is the subject of Hill (1977).

animals owned by rich and poor have equal access to grazing, richer farmers are better able to afford supplementary foodstuffs for animals - poor farmers may sell their bran.

The only type of trading undertaken on any scale by poor farmers is butchering and meat-selling. In August and September 1967, at the time of maximum seasonal hunger, the demand for meat in Batagarawa was very low indeed - on most days goats only were slaughtered. During the long dry season when there is no work at all on the farms (they do not even need clearing in advance of sowing as no weeds grow in the dry season) a large proportion of the richer farmers can set themselves to work as traders and craftsmen - there are always trading opportunities open to farmers who own some capital. But the poorest farmers spend their time wandering around looking for odd jobs. And during the farming season, also, they are the chief sufferers from under-employment.

I turn now to the question of poverty in the six villages in Karnataka, in South India, where I worked in 1977-78. (See Hill (1982). There I was not able to map the farmland with aerial photographs for none are made available to the public; indeed, when I was there, it was not possible to purchase any published maps (they were state secrets), except maps on a very small scale - though I was able to obtain very out of date, poor quality sketch plans of the village farmland, showing out of date farm boundaries. So, as I could not map the farmland myself, I was obliged to make do with the village land records, which are maintained for taxation purposes; I found that these were very inaccurate and I had to spend hundreds of hours amending them, on the basis of enquiry, as best I might.

In these villages the incidence of poverty is much affected by the rigid caste structure, which is as intact as ever, in the sense that I came across no case of an inter-caste marriage - by the way caste endogamy is not nearly so strict in the big cities nowadays. But the idea that all the castes in a village can be arranged in a strict order with the Brahmins at the top and the former untouchables (now usually known, to the outside world, at least, as Harijans) at the bottom, is not correct. In each of these villages (where incidentally, the only Brahmins were ex-village accountants, so that I omit them from this discussion), there was either one or two dominant castes, which undoubtedly stood at the top of the hierarchy and then there were two Harijan castes which undoubtedly stood at the bottom. The incidence of poverty was very much higher among the Harijans, than the dominant castes -

but most of the other castes could not be arranged in any particular order, they just lay vaguely in between.

The plight of a majority of the Harijans in most of the villages was, indeed, distressing, their extraordinarily low standard of living being reflected in a high incidence of landlessness or near landlessness, low ownership of livestock, squalid living conditions (much worse than in Hausaland) and an enormously high incidence of under-employment. Nor was this poverty much relieved by outward migration - only 19% of all households had lost one or more men by migration (of course many of the women migrate on marriage), a figure which compared with 16% for the dominant castes. Furthermore, many of the Harijans who had migrated had merely removed to other villages on marriage.

In these villages I managed to classify most of the households into one of four groups - rich, middle, poor and very poor. (I did this after taking account of all that I knew about the households, including the size of their farm-holdings, their ownership of livestock, their size and household composition and so forth). In four of the villages one-third of the Harijans were classified as being 'very poor', and a half as being 'poor' - making a total of 84% who were poor or very poor: only 3% of the Harijan households were classified as 'rich'. Real poverty is thus the usual plight of Harijan households, and enquiries showed that very few of them had any real hope of emerging from their plight. As for the dominant castes hardly any households were 'very poor' - and they were anomalous cases. Taking the principal dominant caste (the Reddy) in two of the villages for which the best information was collected, 57% of all the households were classified as rich, 26% as middle, 17% as poor and none as very poor - the corresponding proportions for the principal Harijan caste in these villages being 1%, 13%, 48% and 38%. Most of the Reddy households which are poor are headed by younger men, whose fathers had died, or who had separated from their parents; or they are anomalous cases such as a newcomer who arrived in the capacity of a very small shopkeeper and owns no farmland.

The reason for the poverty of the Harijans is that in the past, few of them were in a position to cultivate any farmland, so that nowadays hardly any of them cultivate more than five acres. In two of the villages 6% of Harijan households (Adikarnatakas only) cultivated more than five acres compared with 62% of Reddy households. As for landlessness, or effective landlessness, 54% of the Harijans cultivated less than 2 acres, compared

with 11% of the Reddy. (Hill, 1982, p.127).

I said that in the past few of the Harijans were in a position to cultivate farmland, because there was no law or convention which prevented Harijans from being cultivators in this locality - though this was not so everywhere in South India. Almost all of them failed to cultivate because they were too poor - they lacked the plough animals, could not afford to hire ploughs, and were obliged to live from hand to mouth, by means of odd jobs, notably farm labouring. The only exceptions were certain so-called 'village servants' (a condescending misnomer) who had the hereditary right to perform certain important functions, including irrigation control; one of their rewards for this work was an allotment of farmland.

The Indian government (at federal and state level) pursues a very positive policy of encouraging Harijans (technically known as members of the Scheduled Castes) who, if their parents can afford to forego their services by sending them to secondary school, get definite priority in higher education and access to professional jobs. But such Harijans as benefit in this way, are obliged to leave their home village. If a Harijan does not enter higher education, he stands little hope of bettering his position unless some outsider, such as a rich relative, helps him. If a man lacks capital, he is unlikely to improve his position by migrating to the overcrowded city of Bangalore, where the shanty dwellings may be even worse than his habitation in his home village, and where he may have costs of transport; true, if he is engaged on a building site, or in stone dressing, he is likely to get higher wages than he does from farm-labouring in his own village, but the same may not apply to his wife.

One of the most important reasons why the Harijans have become deadlocked in their village poverty, is that land has become so scarce that it is hardly ever sold. This is, indeed, interesting. I have the impression that at the beginning of the nineteenth century land-selling was uncommon, that at the beginning of this century it was common - and that now the wheel has come full circle and it has become uncommon again. This unwillingness to sell is reflected in prices for land which are absurdly high in relation to yield (I am referring, of course, to unirrigated land). Everyone, rich and poor alike, wants to hold on to their land if they possibly can - the rich because, for one reason, it is much the best security for raising a loan from a bank.

There is, therefore, little hope that the Harijans can acquire a greater proportion of the land than they hold at present. (In this connection I should mention that in these villages, Land Reform legislation, had no effect whatsoever: this is because no one held so much land that he was affected by what is called the 'ceiling', which limits the area an individual may own).

Just as I emphasised that impoverished households in Hausaland are never at starvation level, so I am sure that the same is true in South India. Obviously my sample of households is far too small to interest any demographer, but I do believe on the basis of my own enquiries and other evidence relating to the size of households, that there is no reason to believe that mortality rates for Harijans are significantly higher than for the population generally: in other words the Harijan population of the villages is increasing about as fast as the population generally. (Of course rates of outward migration are much too low to make much impression on the huge expansion of the rural population: the reason this is so seldom understood is that such a high proportion of the total population lives in the countryside, that enormous increases in the urban population are entirely compatible with great increases in the urban population - and if you take a city like Bangalore, which was not far away from my villages (it is reputed to be one of the fastest growing cities in the world), many of the newcomers come from quite far away, and from towns rather than small villages). In this connection I should mention that rates of infant mortality are far, far lower in South India than in Northern Nigeria: this is mainly because malaria remains as endemic as ever in West Africa, but not in India. I am at a loss to understand why the world is so unaware of the astounding infant mortality rates in West Africa generally - perhaps 40% under 4 years old, but there are no reliable figures.

Everyone knows that rural poverty and under-employment in these dry farmlands of South-Eastern Karnataka, will get worse unless an enormous effort is made to introduce suitable rural industries. One hears a lot about the need for 'cottage industries', but this expression will not do, it is too old fashioned: proper rural factories, on the Japanese model, are required. But there is one cottage industry which surprised me by its virtual absence in my six villages - this is sericulture, or the rearing of the silk worm, which industry flourishes in many villages which are quite near. This is an ideal cottage industry, as the worm is very fussy and needs attention, like a baby, at frequent intervals throughout the day and night. But one

of the great drawbacks of sericulture is that the mulberry bush has to be cultivated on irrigated land, which is scarce in these villages.

Everywhere in Hausaland the economic situation of the agricultural population is, as it were, leavened, by the opportunities of trading. But this is not so in Karnataka, where the rural markets are very small, and where few richer farmers participate in trade to any extent. Here again, we are up against the caste system, and the fact that traditionally all the transport animals were owned by specialist traders or transporters. In Hausaland before the introduction of the lorry, most traders, including very long-distance traders, used donkeys as their transport animals, and most donkeys were owned by countrymen; this being so, most trade, including long-distance trade, within Hausaland, was conducted by farmers, the big cities, like Kano, being entrepôts, whose trading populations tended to look northwards towards the Sahara desert.

I mentioned that Land Reform (proper) had had no effect upon land distribution in the six Karnataka villages. But the compulsory breaking up of large hereditary estates - a legislative operation which preceded, and was quite distinct from Land Reform - did help those Harijans who happened to live in a village where a large hereditary landlord had existed, for when he was dispossessed they were able to retain some small part of the acreage which he had permitted them to farm on their own account. So it was that I found that the general position of the Harijans in Hullahalli where such a landlord had existed until the 1960s when he was dispossessed, was notably superior to that of the Harijans in Nanjapura, where there had been no such landlord.

Good evidence that this is so, is provided by figures of the ownership of bullocks. In these villages the usual plough animals are cows - which often also pull carts. Bullocks being much more valuable than cows, there is a marked relationship between a household's standard of living and bullock ownership. In the six villages the two main Harijan castes owned only 14 bullocks (as against nearly 200 owned by other castes) - and 13 of these 14 Harijan bullock owners were Hullahalli men who had benefited from the redistribution of land. But in this connection it is interesting to note that the distribution of cows is not nearly as uneven as the general distribution of wealth would lead one to expect - thus the three poorest Harijan castes actually owned as many as 0.9 cows per household against 1.7 for other castes (p.66). Indeed since, contrary to general belief, there are no old and

useless animals in these villages, it is the Harijans who are specially notable for speculating in cows - buying an animal in order to fatten it and selling it again at a small profit a few months later. No Harijans owned old and useless cows - they dispose of them long before they become decrepit.

In endeavouring to ascertain what hope there is for those Harijans who do not better themselves through the channels of higher education, I looked at the situation of 12 men whose situation 'was not hopeless' - I omitted the 4 village servants who had certainly benefited from holding this hereditary office. It seemed that at least half of these men had benefited from assistance they had received from rich relatives living elsewhere. In some cases this had enabled them to follow a rewarding occupation, such as trading or casuarina wood contracting, the profits having sometimes been invested in farmland; in other cases it took the form of loans or gifts of animals. Considering that 3 of the remaining 6 men were a driver, an agent for rock from a nearby quarry and a man who arranged for the selling of casuarina wood as fuel, it became clear that the only road to betterment for a Harijan who does not migrate, involves help from, or direct economic contact with the outside world.

In one of the villages Harijans were forced to break the law (though I doubt if there are ever any prosecutions under this law) and to place their unmarried sons as bonded labourers with rich farmers, often in other villages, in return for a cash sum, which was repaid in the form of labour. Given that these youths and young men were automatically freed after a few years of work; that their standard of living was higher than it would have been had they had to depend on their own household for food; that the demand for such labour was sufficiently high for it usually to be possible (or so I was told) for a father to borrow from another employer, if he wanted to free his son from working with an unsatisfactory employer I found it difficult to work up any moral indignation against this system, especially as I noticed the pride with which one of these boys ploughed a farm, something he could not have done for his father, who owned no plough. It is long-term bonded labouring, involving adults which is so objectionable.

In my 1982 book I inverted prevailing orthodoxy by insisting that the rural stagnation, which resulted in so much misery among the Harijans, was the result, not so much of capitalist intrusion by urban areas into the countryside, but of a *withdrawal from the countryside*. It is my contention that

both in Northern Nigeria and in South-Eastern Karnataka the countryside had formerly been the medium within which economic enterprise flourished, but for a variety of reasons this is no longer the case. In former times in both regions the existence of large estates (unacceptable though these certainly are today) had at least ensured that opportunities of rural employment were better than they are today and that trade had a stronger rural base. Of course the long-term secular tendency for rural craftwork to be replaced by urban manufacturing cannot be denied, but in Karnataka the quality of rural craftwork was poor, so that hand-woven cloth was not, I think, exported outside the villages, as it was, on a large scale, in Hausaland. Certainly, people still take in each other's washing in the villages, in both continents, but the vitality of life in the countryside is much reduced. This is particularly true in Karnataka, where ordinary villages own no means of transport, other than the bicycle, where there are no transport-donkeys (which are ubiquitous in Hausaland) and surprisingly few farm carts. In the six villages which had a population of some 2 700, there were only 123 carts (according to my count) and many of these were useless, being broken or old. Owing to their great interest in cattle ownership it is not surprising that a few Harijans did own workable carts.

Considering the small degree to which increasing population densities are relieved by migration, it seems to me that poverty is bound to get worse. The Anekal villagers, like most rural South Indians outside the state of Kerala, take no interest in modern contraceptive methods - and are terrified of vasectomy, even though the scandals associated with vasectomy during Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency, which was declared in 1975, did not occur in South India. The population increases inexorably. For three of the villages for which reliable figures are available it rose by 15% between 1961 and 1971 - 1981, figures have not yet been published; this compares with growth of 115% for the eighty years between 1891 and 1971.

One of the worst aspects of population growth in an area where densities exceed 600 per square mile is the encroachment on the hitherto reserved grazing ground. I am sure that cattle populations must be much lower now than in (say) 1900 - this being a particular hardship to Harijans.

## APPENDIX

The Batagarawa households were classified into 4 "wealth" groups on the basis mainly of subjective judgments made by my "confidential informants" each of whom was familiar with all the households. The "rich" were those who during the weeks immediately preceding the millet harvest, when the classification was made, were suffering no seasonal hardship to the degree that they were known to be assisting others; the second group consisted of households who were in no particular difficulty but could not help others; members of the third and fourth groups were entirely dependent on assistance received from others - the distinction between these two groups being mainly based on whether there appeared to be any hope of an improvement in their economic condition in the longer run.

On returning to England I computed the statistics relating to the areas of farm-holdings by household and was astonished to find that the "wealth classification" showed a very close correlation with farm-holding size. (Sizes of farm-holdings were unknown to myself and my assistants at the time the "wealth classification" was made).

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Quoting (in context) from these preliminary papers with due acknowledgement is of course allowed, but for permission to reprint any material, or for further information about the Inquiry, please write to:

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