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EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT SOCIOLOGY: HOWTENABLE IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: The importance of empirical research is well recognized and the method is used in almost all sociological research. Researchers often reiterate that in order to prove or disprove a concept or hypothesis scientifically, empirical research is an absolute necessity. This general notion in itself may be regarded as over-simplification, and there may be a need to re-examine and address the whole process of empirical research so that errors can be avoided. In Bangladesh perspective, the problems of reaching a conclusive and acceptable result by this method are often corroborated by many external and internal factors. The paper explores what these factors are and how they could be overcome.

Key Words: Social research, survey techniques, empirical survey, quantitative and qualitative survey, research by individuals, local institutions, international organisations, problems in data collection and fieldworks, cultural differences in ethnographic research

Empirical research is usually conducted to measure attitudes, beliefs, trends, values, tendencies and so on of people in society. While we think that such research is oriented to establishment or academic activities, in practice most people undertake or become respondents to such research unwittingly and often informally in daily life; they do so while asking or answering casual questions such as 'What do you think of ...?', or 'Do you think such and such actions are justified?' etc. Though such exchanges are not recorded or recognised, such exchanges are important since most ideas and concepts are developed and articulated from daily experiences of mankind, whether individual or collective. Sociological surveys attempt to bring such concepts into a structured form to make the basis of our knowledge regarding the society. From such knowledge, we try to find answers to a bewildering number of social questions.

Such research or surveys need to be authentic and credible, which would depend on many factors. Even though sociological fathers have developed dependable survey techniques, conducting them correctly is not always possible, and it is more so in developing countries. This may be criticised by

many a sweeping statement, illogical to some extent, but some sociologically well-travelled researchers might agree. This paper attempts to discuss the problems of empirical research in developing countries, with specific studies on Bangladesh.

The differences of developed and developing countries in most spheres need to be taken into considerations, though that should not be taken to mean that researches conducted in the developed countries are as dependable as they look or as they are made to look by their presenters. At the same time, due to some external and internal factors, researches conducted in developing countries are vulnerable to more errors.

Universally Acknowledged Disadvantages of Empirical Research

Let us first review the general disadvantages of empirical research techniques. After that we would evaluate those in Bangladesh context.

Of the structured quantitative methods, the most popular 'questionnaire' method suffers from an almost insurmountable disadvantage of having too many questionnaires around. The respondents feel that the persons who or establishments which have sent them are competing with others to get their responses, but they cannot satisfy all.¹

When researchers interview the respondents face to face with the questionnaire in hand, the response rate is good, but it cannot be lengthened enough by 'open ended' questions to have satisfactory information on all points. Face to face interview can also be severely gender sensitive in developing countries. This alone is often regarded as a major handicap of questionnaire method.²

Questionnaires sent by mail often overcome the time constraints of the two ways of conducting the survey. In this, the respondent may reply as and when he/she would have free time. But this method is often criticised as not having the personal touch as in the interview methods. The response is also not particularly reliable. The percentage of replies received may also be lower than expected.³

Group Administered Surveys (GAS) have higher response rate than others, and they also provide dependable information. The major disadvantage of GAS is that it requires intensive as well as extensive logistical preparation. Unless the research is well funded or commercial, the expenses may be too high to meet.⁴

Even if we assume that the research planning related to the empirical survey in question is academically approved and flawless, actual data collection may suffer for reasons beyond control. Such reasons may be lack of expertise on the part of the interviewer, sampling errors, biased selection of respondents, *a priori* and opinionated mind-set of the researcher, etc.⁵

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In empirical evidence collection by quantitative methods, the scope of going deeper than 'yes'/'no' answers even by some open-ended questions is limited. As a result, we cannot probe what prompted the answers of the respondents, meaning that the reasons of their 'beliefs' and 'opinions' remain un-researched. Even when following qualitative survey techniques (either individual or group), elaboration of answers is limited due to time factor.⁶ Also, all respondents may not be verbalised enough to explain the processes by which they have gained such knowledge or opinions. As a result of this limitation of empirical research, the outcome can only produce information that are only average from a given sample of respondents.⁷ We all know however well the sampling is, it is limited to the 'universe' chosen only. Naturally, in order to make the research feasible, the 'universe' and 'samplings' cannot cover everything. These limitations make generalisation and theorising difficult.

Problems Faced by Researchers in Bangladesh and Also in Many Developing Countries

With the above general disadvantages of empirical social research in mind, we may now try to assess the situation of empirical research programmes in Bangladesh context.

There are many constraints in social research in Bangladesh. Such constraints include non-availability or paucity of funding, lack of research-oriented environment to work in, lack of trained research and administrative personnel, lack of logistic support – to name a few major ones. These result in conducting research programmes in as short duration as possible, not having a research team, engaging not-so-trained field workers and data collectors, mismanagement of large data for computer input, incorrect use of SPSS program, and final write-up of the result.

Exacerbating the above and universally acknowledged disadvantages are general misconceptions about surveys or research as non-significant academic exercise by most institutional authorities. Sociologists in Bangladesh often complain that sociology is a non-event in social policy-making in this country, that empiricism or scientism¹ is hardly taken into considerations by policy-makers, and that whereas economic researchers are invited to contribute to the government, sociologists are hardly remembered.

Another problem of empirical research in Bangladesh and developing countries in general emanates from the fact that the techniques of empirical surveys have originated in the developed countries of the West, mainly Europe (Britain included) and North America. As a result, the application of the same in developing countries cannot produce correct and dependable

result. One critical academic observation by Bulmer and Warwick succinctly put is quoted below:

The conditions under which social science research is carried out in the Third World differ in significant respects from conditions in the industrial world ... The guidance available from standard texts – particularly those on survey methods – for the most part assumes as background the conditions that exist in the developed world. When such texts are transported to the context of the developing countries, although they provide guidance on how to proceed, they do not pay attention to the particular local conditions and problems which are likely to arise.⁸

The above quote identifies inlaid difficulties in conducting empirical social research with knowledge gained from the West or developed countries. But the author of the present paper believes that had we developed research institutes with a strong body of researchers, those difficulties could have been removed easily. Until then, we have to put up with general as well as local constraints. It is true that social researchers in Bangladesh try to overcome such constraints by personal endeavours, and many have presented successful research papers that have been published in academic journals.

Still, we have to admit that this is not a happy and acceptable situation. In academic field, some team works also take place at the pre-research stage with the course teacher and some colleagues. Usually selection of the topic, methods of data collection, and logistic preparation are made at this stage. Construction of the questionnaire in quantitative survey, 'guide notes' preparation for participant observation or for qualitative survey are also done. These are part of academic programmes or course works, but it is questionable whether all these important activities at pre-research stage are given serious consideration and attention.^{9, 10}

Some outside organisations sometimes commission research to the universities, often to teachers and hardly to the departments. Teachers usually employ his or her students to undertake routine works like data collections etc. Since they are given to individual teachers, the outcome is often unreliable. Teachers, with myriad of academic and social commitments cannot usually pay full attention to such assignments. They also find it difficult to train the field workers/data collectors satisfactorily.¹¹

As a result of such constraints, most empirical researches in Bangladesh tend to become small community or even just group studies rather than social studies. There is nothing wrong in undertaking such small area studies, but they cannot be taken further to embrace other areas, each of which needs to be studied independently and then compared with previous studies. Such procedures are naturally time consuming and expensive in terms of man-power and production of results.

Who Conduct or Undertake Social Research in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, social research is usually conducted within academic environment for course work and also by social market research groups for commercial assessments. There are some well-funded (both government and non-government sources), and semi-government bodies with express objective of undertaking commissioned research. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), and Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) are active bodies in the latter categories. There are some 'medium strength' professional associations in economic, political and general humanities fields who undertake some empirical research. I call them 'medium strength' to mean that they are usually run by one or two 'talented' persons, sometimes assuming a name the style of which give an impression of their being an important research organisation. They usually try to impress on the government so that the latter frame policies acknowledging their research findings. There are also some independent and well established research organisations, such as Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), which have produced significant research findings. In the university spheres, there are many research 'bureaus' and 'centres' only a small percentage of whom can claim to have undertaken worthwhile social research. In Dhaka University alone, there are about 47 such bureaus and centres, of which only ten are related to social science research. Many of them have not made any significant contribution.

How Are the Government's Research Needs Met in Bangladesh

It is not clear how the research needs, particularly social research needs of the Ministries and the Departments of the Government of Bangladesh are met. They surely need scientific evidence and data, for which they must have undertaken or used some existing empirical research, but we do not have much information of the sources. It does not mean that the government reports and occasional 'white paper' type of publications do not offer empirical evidence. It is just that the description and sources of their research or surveys are hardly made public. There is also foreign participation in empirical research field in Bangladesh. International donors and financial bodies (e.g. World Bank, IMF), as well as development partners (e.g. United Nations Development Programme, IDRC of Canada, DFID of Britain, JICA of Japan, and those of Scandinavian countries working in Bangladesh) also use local consultants and researchers to undertake empirical research and general surveys.^{13, 14}

Organisations Which Undertake Social Research for Themselves

Mention should be made to specialist institutions outside social science field. Once such institute belonging to the health sector is International Centre for

Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, better known as ICDDR,B. This institute undertakes many social research programmes. It also makes impact studies after implementing some health and hygiene related activities in the communities.

Research and Surveys of Dubious Nature

For some years, Bangladesh is braving another kind of obscure and sweeping research conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh Chapter (TIB). They do not claim the objectivity of their data; they call them perception data, out of which a perception index is presented. Naturally this perception index of the TIB has itself become non-transparent since they would not divulge the identity of their so-called 'respondents', thus making the data unverifiable. The fact about TIB is that their index reflects no more than popularly conceived notions, even if they are baseless and un-proven. However, this author believes that more scientific way of identifying corruption in society and government should be developed by local government initiative, if not by German based TIB.

At a time when Grameen Bank's microcredit in Bangladesh was making national and international headway, sociologists and economists undertook many empirical researches on that system. Even researchers and students from the western developed countries came to Bangladesh to conduct field surveys on 'microcredit'. It is surprising to note that research results and reports had been very varied from positive assessments of the system to extremely hostile and negative assessments. What could be the reasons for such extremely polarised results? They could be due to differences in research designs, wrong samplings, faulty data collections, falsifications of the evidence collected, biased reporting of results, and so on. There could also be political ideology in action in many such researches and surveys.

Some authors, particularly Shah Srinivas and Ramashamy have written about unreliability of data offered in many researches, No amount of statistical sophistication can set right the distortions and falsifications of wrong data.¹⁸

Large Scale Social Research

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) presents Household Surveys in various details in their *Statistical Yearbook*. The picture of the society reflected by the sum total of data is sociologically important. It points out correctly the development aspects of our society. There are critics that the surveys have not been completely truthful. Many figures are assumptions or fabricated additions based on previous data. Such criticisms, in the absence of any concrete evidence to the contrary cannot be accepted. Further, the household situations are constantly changing, and the printed or published data can only be true at the point of time when they have been collected.

The same BBS also details many important society related data and statistics, many of which are quoted extensively in research and government documents.

As stated earlier, results of research and surveys need to be verified. But there is no independent body to undertake such verifications.¹⁹

Difficulties in Theorising from Research Results

Generally speaking, research is mostly about establishing relations between two or among many entities or ideas. As developed and practised to date, researchers and data collectors have become well at ease with various empirical research techniques. Data collections or collecting evidence from the respondents in quantitative survey with a well-constructed questionnaire can be undertaken even by non-sociological researcher as a matter of routine, and anyone with simple arithmetical and simple statistical acumen can produce summaries of findings afterwards. While some techniques are laborious but simple, their result is not always simple. The result, depending on the skill of the presenter can be light and shallow as well as some can strike a profound note.

Let's dwell here on the profundity of empirical research. Personally I find the simplicity of some of the research techniques and at the same time the profundity of the result obtained academically an interesting matter. This profundity develops once the researcher starts theorising. At the same time, we must accept that all empirical research cannot lead to theorisation.

This last statement is well exemplified by thousands of empirical research undertaken during and after Chicago School's urban studies, all of which have not stood the test of time or have not offered theories of some kind. But we must acknowledge startling exceptions in Chicago School time. One such was Louis Wirth's research on the complex issues of 'race relations' then prevailing in most US cities. Wirth along with his team ventured research and surveys in a hostile social environment. They produced race studies in urban environment, and the problems of black underclass and even Jewish ghetto. Their research managed to produce sociological theories on race relations which are still valid. They also paved ways for future ethno-research in urban ecology.²⁰

In Bangladesh, such ethnicity related problems are rife, particularly if we take religious and sectorial issues in considerations. Many researches have been undertaken here, but most of them follow theories offered by the American, British and European studies. We also try to copy the theories of the advanced developed countries, and try to justify and support those theories by interpreting our research data in a manner that should fit the theories produced in the West. Surely that is not the right approach. We should

collect research data and develop a body of knowledge based on historical facts, and then proceed towards theorisation. We have generally failed to produce an indigenous theory of ethnic relations in Bangladesh because of wrong approach. Our historical, national and social situations are unique to ourselves. We have not undergone the kind of industrialisation, technological expansion, and consequent rapid urbanisation that happened in the West, nor have we experienced World Wars on our own. Our social fabrics have remained unchanged for ages, and due to colonial ploys, our advancement to create a modern society was stopped. Even today, due to unimaginable changes in the politico-economic situations in the world, we have remained dependent on the West. Such dependence is reflected in our research as well. We need to come out of this situation if we want to understand our social problems by our own research.

Problems of Research Designs

Research designs cannot be of one singular style and format.^{21, 22} Each successful research is designed with many factors in considerations, and copying one another could be disastrous. What major sociological research achieved was based on much academic knowledge and objective analysis.

It should be remembered that taking into consideration the situations of contemporaneous black communities in the States, and the general climate of 'racism' in white establishments, the research has remained topical in itself, and the design of that research cannot be applied to 'black' people in Britain or to black and Asian immigration to Britain after World War II. Sadly, many later researches on 'urban problems' in Britain in the 1960s were designed following Chicago school designs of empirical evidence collection by questionnaire and dubious 'participant observation'. Even the hugely appreciated classic *Racial Disadvantage in Britain* (1977) by D J Smith under the auspices of Political and Economic Planning is criticised by politically opposite academic circles for copycat research design. However, there had been many social similarities between Britain and the States, and those similarities helped to make the latter study a success.

The objective of the above discussion is to establish that each research must be designed individually and after conducting and taking into account the social situations. It may not be altogether wrong to say that we fail to undertake such background studies in many of our empirical research. For example, 'Adibashis' of Bangladesh are often portrayed in our research as ethnic minorities/culturally different groups in Bangladesh.²³ We do this following similar wordings used in European countries by major 'white' establishments to describe non-European people who migrated to those countries for various reasons. We do not take into account the differences between the European ascribed 'ethnic minorities' of the European countries, and our original indigenous populations, like Garos, Chakmas, Marmas,

Tripuras etc. of our country. According to the Bangladesh official statistics mainly as in *Statistical Yearbook* there are 29 major such groups (unofficially 45). They are victims of caste and class system and exploited for cheap labour. The latter population may be culturally different from the major Bangalee populations, but they always belonged to this country unlike the African, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Indian and Asian labour migrants living in the West. It will be interesting to note that the Europeans in Australia call original Australians as 'aborigines' thus denying their rights on their own land. It would be an error to follow their research in this respect, and I feel that this is where many of our research may go wrong.

Conclusion

What an empirical research is, may be understood by asking what it is not. Data creations about the people in the society, community and small groups as regards their values, opinions, beliefs etcetera do not constitute research; such data are tools for research, and they are not the end in themselves. Good point about Chicago School was that they produced such effective guidelines for survey methods including quantitative, qualitative and participant observation, that the students of Chicago School later went to other universities as teachers and researchers. Many of them have excelled in social research. Margaret Mead followed the guidelines of sociological research techniques of the same school. Although some of her methods were later questioned, she produced sociological research on young girls living in a not-so-advanced community²⁴. This aspect has been hitherto unstudied sociology. Nevertheless, some of the important objectives of sociological research are, offering a body of knowledge about the subject investigated, creation of possibilities for generalising on people, subject or communities, supporting or negating a hypothesis, and opening doors for theorising.²⁵

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