

Poor visibility

Policy makers are rarely poor: to understand poverty they must study it. A visit to the village promises a glimpse of the real thing, but meeting poor people is not so simple. Anything from fuel prices to bad weather can obscure rural poverty from the urban visitor. Robert Chambers reports.

Close-typed reports and colourless statistics are the staple diet of the office-bound expert. It is from them that the facts and figures on development come. But it is the occasional day out, the field trip, the visit to the village that offer city dwellers and policy makers their most colourful and enduring images of rural life. And in most cases it is rural development tourism — the brief rural visit, often a guided tour — that provides urban outsiders with their only experience of rural poverty. Visitors may differ widely in nationality and religion, in experience and prejudice, but they usually have three things in common: they come from urban areas; they want to find something out; and they are short of time. So the visit begins.

The visitor sets out late, delayed by last minute business, by subordinates or superiors anxious for decisions, by a family crisis, by a cable or telephone call, by mechanical or administrative problems with vehicles, or by urban traffic jams. Even if the way is not lost, and there is enough fuel and there are no breakdowns, the programme still slips behind schedule. The visitor is encapsulated, first in a Landrover and later in a moving entourage of officials and local notables (headmen, chairmen of village committees, village accountants, progressive farmers, traders and the like). Whatever their private feelings, the rural residents put on their best face and receive the visitor hospitably. According to ecology, economy and culture, the visitor is given goats, garlands, coconut milk, coca cola, coffee, tea or milk. Speeches are made. School children sing or clap. Photographs are taken. Buildings, machines, construction works, new crops, exotic animals, the clinic, the school, the new road — all are inspected. Some special group — the self-help committee or the women's handicraft group — its members dressed in their best clothes, is seen and spoken to. They nervously respond in ways which they hope will bring benefits and avoid penalties.

As the day wears on and heats up, the visitor becomes less inquisitive, asks fewer questions and is finally glad, exhausted and bemused, to retire to the rest house, the host official's residence or back to an urban home or hotel. The village returns to normal, no longer wearing its special face.

When darkness falls and people talk more freely, the visitor is not there.

Shortage of time, the importance of the visitor and the desire for information all influence what is perceived. Lack of time drives out the open-ended question; the visitor imposes meanings through the questions asked. Checking is impossible and lies become accepted as facts. People are neglected while formal actions and physical objects are given attention. Refugees in a rural camp in Tanzania said of UN and government officials that 'They come and they sign the book and they go'. But above all it is the poorer people who tend to be unseen and remain unmet.

Starting and ending in urban centres, these visits follow networks of roads. The hazards of dirt roads, the comfort of the tourist, the location of places for spending the night and shortages of time and fuel all dictate a preference for tarmac roads and for travel close to urban centres. The result is urban and roadside bias.

Urban bias concentrates rural visits near capital cities and large administrative centres. But the poorest rural residents are often in remoter areas — Northern Brazil, lower Ukambani in Kenya, the Tribal Districts of Central India. In many places, people are being extruded from densely populated areas better served with communications and are forced, in order to survive, to colonize less accessible areas, especially the savannahs and forests. Inaccessible from the urban centre, the poorest of the poor remain largely unseen.

Visible development follows main roads. Factories, offices, shops and official markets all tend to be at the sides of main roads. Even agricultural development has a roadside bias: in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu agricultural demonstrations of new seeds and fertilizers have been sited beside main roads.

Services along roadsides are also better — improved tarmac surfaces, buses, electricity, telephone, piped water supply — so those who are better-off buy up roadside plots and build on them. The poorer people shift away out of sight. Ribbon development along roadsides gives a false impression in many countries. The better the roads, the nearer the urban centre and the higher the traffic, so the more pronounced is the roadside development and the more



Soil scientist on the left, ministry official on the right. But the man in the middle — is he poor?

likely visitors are to see it and be misled.

Fuel shortages and costs accentuate urban bias. Whenever governments make budget cuts, travel is a favourite; it can be trimmed without visible loss. But each cut makes rural contact rarer and harder, and urban and tarmac bias more pronounced. Every rise in oil prices not only impoverishes the remoter, poorer people by tilting the urban-rural terms of trade against them, but also reduces the chances of that deprivation being known.

Visitors are pointed to those rural places where something is happening — where money is being spent, staff are stationed, a project is in hand. Contact and learning are with tiny atypical islands of activity which attract repeated attention.

Project bias is most marked with the showpiece: the nicely groomed pet project or model village, specially staffed and supported, with well-briefed members who know what to say, and which is sited a reasonable but not excessive distance from the urban headquarters. Governments in capital cities need showpiece projects for foreign visitors; district and subdistrict staff need them too, for visits by their senior officers. Many such projects have one thing in common: they direct attention away from the rural poor.

Some projects have attracted international attention. Any roll of honour would include the Anand Dairy Co-operatives in India; the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit in Ethiopia; the Comilla Project in Bangladesh; the Gezira Scheme

in Sudan; the Intensive Agricultural Districts Programme (IADP) in India; Lilongwe in Malawi; the Muda Irrigation Project in Malaysia; the Mwea Irrigation Settlement in Kenya; the Ujamaa programme in Tanzania. All of these have been much visited and much studied. Students seeking doctorates have read about them then sought to do their fieldwork on them. Research generates more research, and investment by donors draws research after it and provides funds for it.

Fame forces the managers of showpiece

projects into public relations. More and more of their time has to be spent showing visitors around. Flooded with the celebrated, the curious, and the ignorant — prime ministers, graduate students, farmers' groups, aid missions and directors of this and that — managers set up public relations units and develop a public relations style. Visitors then get the treatment. A fluent guide follows a standard routine and standard route. Two British Members of Parliament visited the Anand Co-operatives in India during February 1979. They were

With pressure on time and mounting fuel costs, few aid agencies can afford to travel to remote areas.



Photo: OXFAM

impressed by the delivery of milk from small producers to one centre. Inside hung a photograph of James Callaghan, the British Prime Minister, taken during his visit to the same centre. Asked if they would like to see a second centre, they readily assented. There they found another photograph, this time of the visit to that centre of Judith Hart, the British Minister of Overseas Development.

So often, the same buildings are entered, the same people met, the same books signed, the same polite praise inscribed in the book against the visitors' names. Inquisitive visitors depart loaded with research papers, technical evaluations, and annual reports which they probably will never read. They leave with a sense of guilt at the unworthy scepticism which prompted probing questions and with memories of some of those who are better-off in the special project and of the charisma of the exceptional leader or manager who has created it. They write their journey reports, evaluations and articles on the basis of these impressions. Such projects then take off into the realm of self-sustaining myth.

Experienced tourists may bypass projects and head for 'ordinary' villages. But their reception committee will still be swollen by the local elite — progressive farmers, headmen, religious leaders, teachers and other government workers. It is they who receive and speak to the visitors; they who articulate the village's interests and wishes; their concerns which emerge as the village's priorities for development. It is they who entertain visitors, generously providing the expected beast or beverage. Meanwhile the poorest villagers remain silent: weak, powerless, and isolated they are reluctant to push themselves forward.

Just as most rural tourists are men, so most rural people with whom they make contact are also men. Women have inferior status and are often shy of visitors. Yet poor rural women are a class within a class. They work very long hours and are paid

less than men. Single women, female heads of households, and widows are among the most wretched and unseen of the world's poor.

Tourists also tend to visit places where activity is concentrated, easily visible, and hence easy to study. Children in school are more likely to be seen and questioned than those who are not in school; those who use the health clinic more than those who are too sick, too poor or too distant to use it; those who come to market because they have goods to sell or money with which to buy more than those who stay at home because they have neither; members of the co-operatives more than those who are too poor or powerless to join it; those who have adopted new agricultural, health or family planning practices more than those who have not. Again and again it is the underprivileged who are overlooked.

Most of the rural poor live in areas of

marked wet-dry seasonality. For the great majority whose livelihoods depend on cultivation the most difficult time of the year is usually the wet season, especially before the first harvest. Food is short, food prices high, work hard and infections prevalent. Malnutrition and mortality rise; body weights decline. The poorer people, women and children are particularly vulnerable. Birth weights drop and more newborn babies die. Child care is inadequate. Desperate people become indebted. This is both the hungry season and the sick season. It is also the season of ratchets, of irreversible downward movements into poverty through the sale or mortgaging of assets, the time when poor people are most likely to become poorer.

The wet season is also the unseen season. The rains are a bad time for rural travel because of the inconvenience posed by floods, mud, broken bridges, getting stuck,

damaging vehicles, losing time and enduring discomfort. In some places roads are officially closed. Many rural areas, especially those which are remote and poor, are quite simply inaccessible by vehicle during the rains.

Once the rains are over visitors can travel more freely. It is in the dry season, when disease is diminishing, the harvest in, food stocks adequate, body weights rising, ceremonies in full swing, and people at their least deprived, that there is most contact between urban-based professionals and the rural poor. The poorest people are most visible at precisely those times when they are least deprived.

As fair weather favours the tourists, so rural development tourism favours roadsides and projects, elites and men. The urban outsider is guided towards better-off people in better-provided areas at better times of the year. Thus the prosperity

What am I doing here — bumping along an Indian dirt road on a bicycle built like a tank? The lady crouching in that field would have no trouble justifying her presence here and now. But me, I'm not so sure. Carefully she scavenges single grains of wheat from the ground, every one a complete vindication. Her child sits dull and dumb under a ragged cloth stretched over a thorn bush; he does not appear to be thinking about anything.

I'm a consultant; a development journalism specialist. Supposedly I know how to put across in a vivid way important but dull subjects like health, irrigation, deficit finance or, in this case, urban drift. The other half of the convoy is behind me, at the bottom of the hill. On that bike there are two people. One is Amit, a reporter on *Nai Dunia* (New World), the local Hindi language newspaper based in Indore — and for the purposes of this exercise my 'pupil'. The other is Rajiv, the paper's part-time correspondent for this area.

As usual I am floundering. No matter how many villages I visit in how many countries I will always be a grotesque anomaly, stumbling along lacking some of the most basic skills for survival.

Even riding a bicycle here is a different art. The last town we passed through was nerve-racking, defying any attempts at a planned trajectory. In those narrow packed streets all decisions had to be last-second, instantaneous. Amit and Rajiv sailed through, ducking and weaving and cursing as necessary. But I was in trouble. Faced with belligerent rickshaw drivers, swarms of fragile children with precarious headloads and, above all, with herds of enormous cows that needed to move their horns only a fraction of an inch to make a lasting impression on my bodywork, I seized up and was stranded.

In the *Nai Dunia* office in Indore I was almost as out of place. I did not have quite the same objectives. Indian newspapers are suffused with politics: a healthy enough characteristic you might think. But here that does not mean the airing of principles or issues or ideologies. The focus is on personalities and their intrigues and that is nothing like as interesting, particularly for an outsider. We said that we wanted to do something different: an article about the relationship of the villages around Indore to the city — jobs, education, entertainment — and to choose one community as an example.



Inside story

Finding poverty may be hard but writing about it can be harder still. Journalist Peter Stalker rode his bicycle into an Indian village, found the people, but lost his story.

The editor was interested but reminded us, persistently, that today was in fact polling day for the State Assembly elections. Couldn't we at least cover the election in that village?

I was not able to work up much enthusiasm. And no-one else around here seems to be able to manage it either. Their preoccupations are much more immediate and completely timeless. A little girl pops round the back of a roadside concrete box of a house with a jar of water on her head. Her world is a small one; today she is with her father, in ten year's time her daily labour will be for her husband, chosen by her father — a closed system.

I feel more excluded than ever. But strangely this also gives me the beginnings of hope — for surely the whole point about being an expert is to capitalize on your outsider status. From the outside it can be easier to prise up the lid and let in some light. That of course is the job of any journalist, but for the development journalist more so since the object of his attention is often eventless; there is nothing happening inside; there is no news.

My confidence is starting to return. I remind

myself that I am here to find for us a way of penetrating that dusty facade and of coaxing the contents into a life in print. Then I will have performed a service. Then I will be able to look that busy, desperate woman in the field straight in the eye.

As we approach the outskirts of the village I am propelled by the power of positive thinking. Everything takes on a different aspect. Most of those already awake are gathered under a huge neem tree in the centre of the village. They politely make room for us on their charpoys and others start to appear, curious. The introductions are made — *Nai Dunia* is widely read here, it seems — and they ask us what exactly is it that we want to know.

But I have been in this position many times before; people will rarely say anything worth listening to in such a public arena. We need them one or two at a time, and somewhere quiet. Fortunately Rajiv has a friend here, the chairman of some young farmers group. He'd be a good person to start with if we could get him away from here. 'Well', he says, 'we can go to my house.'

after the harvest of a male farmer on a project besides a main road close to a capital city may colour the perceptions of a succession of officials and dignitaries. But the plight of a poor widow starving and sick in the wet season in a remote and inaccessible area may never be known outside her own community. As rural development tourism persists so rural poverty remains unseen. ■

Robert Chambers is a Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, working on rural development in South Asia and Africa. He is currently with the Ford Foundation in India.

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As we wheel our bikes in the general direction he indicates I start to run through in my mind some of the questions we might ask and the suggestions I should make to Amit. The conversation will have to go very slowly of course, to build up confidence and allow us to draw out the kind of detail and incident we need. I feel myself slipping into the routine.

But now the object of our interrogation has disappeared. He is somewhere in a knot of people about twenty yards back. Still this is not the kind of place where anything happens quickly. We can wait. But then some rather more distinct noises emerge from the babble of the crowd — an argument?

A fight. Legs and arms are flying. Our young farmer is flat on his back being heftily thumped. Now people are rushing in from all sides clambering into the trees for a better view. Two policemen suddenly appear and gallop towards the action tearing into the fray with their truncheon-like lathis. They drag our dishevelled farmer out.

Everyone is now arguing with everybody else. Our interviewee, it seems, is the leader of one political faction in the village — the other side stepped in to stop him getting exclusive coverage in the local paper. They are still snarling at each other and as soon as the policemen relax their grip the fight starts all over again. This time there is no hesitation: the combatants are marched away, arguing now with the police.

We have judiciously moved away from the centre of the action. But as the crowd swarms past us towards the police post the young farmer spots us and drags his captor and all the other hangers on in our direction... 'I'm sorry about this', he says, ruefully, as though he has just spilled a cup of tea. 'Maybe we can talk later.'

We watch as he is dragged off and then quietly pick up our bikes. The countryside, as we pedal through, is as silent and breathless as ever. The lady has finished picking up her grain and is now squatting under the bush next to her baby. Fortunately she does not look up as we pass. ■

Peter Stalker is a New Internationalist co-editor who has just spent a year on sabbatical at the Press Institute of India, training development journalists.

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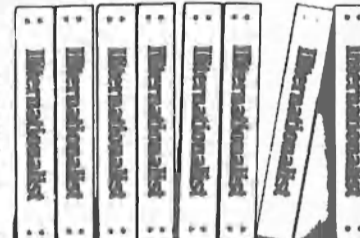
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