

# A Few Selected Excerpts From My Sri Lanka Fieldwork Diary 1969-1971

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These excerpts are selected from a document that Dennis McGilwray uses in his research methods class. He says that sharing a large portion of his field diary with students is an important pedagogical technique. Many of the issues raised in these excerpts will be familiar to all cultural anthropologists: getting transport and housing in the field; coping with illness and unfamiliar food; and not having any privacy. These excerpts also show the critical importance of being fluent in the local language (eds.).

December 29, 1969

## Amparai to Akkaraipattu

Still very cloudy, but the rain is light and irregular. This time the car won't start without a push. Several pushes....At Irakkamam the car drops its muffler. Turn around and get it, despite last-minute attempts by local bystanders to get money for handing us our own muffler. The car, by the way, has been sounding worse and worse since Balangoda, but it is more of a feeling than a diagnosable problem. Lots more shaking and shuddering and clunking. Half-way to Akkaraipattu (Akk), there are signs of natural calamity in the area: a breached tank [irrigation reservoir] and debris on the road. Paddy fields flattened. Within sight of Akk, the surrounding paddy lands are totally flooded. Akk is a peninsula in a sea of flood water. Quickly discover that the causeway [coastal road] at Sinnamuhattuvram [southern outskirts of Akk, where the rest house is located] is under 2.5 feet of water flowing out to sea. Stop at the District Revenue Officer's (DRO) office to deposit my

gear temporarily, and I learn that the DRO is busy with flood relief work. Food is scarce and transportation is cutoff to the north at Kallar and also to the south.

January 2, 1970

## Akkaraipattu

Househunting all day. Nilam and I walk to Satvikaraja's, then all go to see Abdeen's house, a perfectly vulgar piece of architecture with all the amenities except lights. Abdeen becomes increasingly interested in renting to me, but the location is not much better than the house near Nilam's, which is a better house. Then, with Nilam, I begin walking looking for houses. Meet Nilam's great uncle (MoFaBro), who is a great old guy delighted at my pathetic attempts at Tamil. I think he will be a good man to talk with. After lunch we go to see a house in a Tamil area and one behind Ismail Stores on the "borderline" of Tamil and Moorish areas. The last house is nearly perfect, I think, except no lights... I'll ask regarding electrical connection tomorrow. The rent will be Rs. 50 per month [approx. US\$5.00 in 1970], and Mr. Abuthahir, the owner, will refund the difference between the rent and the cost of the electrical installation. I hope this house works out.

January 7, 1970

## Akkaraipattu

A miserable night indeed. Slight fever, humidity, and mosquitos. Abuthahir doesn't come at 5:00 AM as he promised. But at 6:00 AM, just as I was finally getting to sleep, he came to slaughter the cow to inaugurate the house. The whole spectacle was quite bloody and aroused deep sympathy from me for the poor cow. A mob of 75 children plus various old adults assemble to watch the butchering and to watch me. Mainly me. What little appetite I had soon vanished, and I basically felt sick, but nonetheless I had to endure endless questions and invasions of my morning bathing and shaving ritual. It seems that word of my camera, typewriter, and tape recorder has spread for miles around. And everyone also knows I am getting a jeep, and they all want reservations for rides. In a more

healthy state, I would be able to tolerate the speechless scrutiny of my every action, but this morning I came close to blowing my lid.

February 18, 1970

## Akkaraipattu

For the first time, really, since being in Akk, I would love to have a drink. Just a nice highball with ice, nothing too powerful. I am weary. It was another of those days when people grab me by the tongue and won't let go. It's what I need to learn Tamil, I know, but it is often mindwrecking and definitely like brainwashing. Right now, after everyone has finally gone and I am alone at last, I wish I could take a hot bath and crawl into a soft cool bed (dry, too) with clean sheets. But I can't: everything, my sleeping bag included, is slightly damp from the rain. The mosquitos and sundry bugs are waiting for me, and the bed still has no mattress so I sleep on planks. What a drag. I still feel as if I am not well-enough coordinated in studying Tamil: it is all just bits and pieces.

"The Tamil Chef," latest installment. Samitamby, my Barber neighbor, hailed me to the back fence again for another culinary delicacy. This time it was tortoise eggs and a bunch of green leaves. 'Vitamin A and calcium!' he exhorted, brandishing the clump of leaves. Palani (my Tamil cook), under strong pressure from Samitamby, laced every item for lunch with these damn leaves, which have zero taste whatsoever. As for the eggs, I tried the omelet but couldn't take the boiled eggs: they are still soft when cooked and look like rancid cheese fondue inside....

June 14, 1970

## Akkaraipattu

I came home feeling mighty depressed and confused. The time has come when I should have a clearer idea of what information I want to collect in detail and from whom, but I cannot decide how to select a proper sample out of 20,000 people, nor do I know how big a sample I should try to work with. If I want a crosssection of social variables like wealth and occupation, how can I just arbitrarily decide to work with the people on a few streets near the

Grand Mosque? On the other hand, if I select families from different parts of town, I lose whatever sense of neighborhood and territorial kinship ties there may be, and I am forced to broaden the study to include all of the mosques and temples, etc. I can see how psychologically satisfying it must be to study an isolated hamlet with visible boundaries. And after that question is decided, what information should I solicit? When I started asking Hassen's father about his genealogy, I felt as if I were going through a meaningless ritual. The trouble is that, although I know something about the general features of the town, I don't yet know any nitty-gritty individual family cases or individual histories. In short, I have very little anthropological data. Perhaps an economic survey of home would be a good start. Gnawing anxiety.

August 21, 1970

#### Akkarai pattu

It seems definitely to be the case that my morale, enthusiasm, and sense of confidence in the research goes in waves. Last week I was going out and meeting more people and investigating lots of new things and generally working my butt off trying to juggle all sorts of different data at the same time. Events kept happening and I found I was lagging behind in typing my notes simply because I was so tired from gathering the data in the first place. [NOTE: my general routine was to make brief notes on a small pad during the day, then type—in duplicate—much more detailed and lengthy records of the day's events during the evening hours. This enabled me to separate my data into different categories as I typed up my notes.] Then, predictably, I caught a cold from being tired so much. Then I suddenly felt like just staying in my house and vegetating. The thought of having to sally forth into Tamil conversations with strangers suddenly seemed most unappealing, and the decisions about research tactics and what to tackle from one moment to another seemed to weigh heavily. The feeling of responsibility for having to make constant choices about how to divide up my time, what to poke into next,

whether the time has finally come to really do some topic thoroughly before slipping into something else—this is a constant source of both adventure and anxiety...I worry about getting additional confirmation about every little tidbit of data I pick up, but things move so fast sometimes that I never do. Or at least I don't do it often enough. Yet, the cycle of gung-ho enthusiasm and fetal-position timidity is usually about a 2-week period. First great enthusiasm and rather bold approaches to various sources, often with unforeseen and interesting results. Then a period of staying home and tidying up my notes and screwing up my courage again. One week of each is a common pattern. In the long run it may be a pretty good way to balance primary contacts and organizational preparation.

With my cold at last almost gone, my spirits are again on the rise. I suppose one truth which all this illustrates is how absolutely perfect health is such an asset to fieldwork, since it is such a strain on body and psyche to keep on at it for any period of time.

September 8-11, 1970

#### Akkarai pattu

It is much more difficult to ignore people here. In America there are lots of people who want to be ignored, but here no one wants to be ignored. Everyone is hoping that you will glance their way, recognize them, and stop to talk—or at least smile and wave as you pass. This is, of course all nice and "gemeinschaftly" except when you are very tired or busy—which I often am. Having to constantly be aware of every face of the horizon, and to be ready to smile warmly and slip into a conversational routine can sometimes be extremely exhausting emotionally. There are plenty of times when it is quite pleasant to just amble along encountering people, but if you have some certain goal or job in mind, this same field of acquaintances (or not necessarily acquaintances, sometimes just strangers who want to be acquaintances) can be like an obstacle course.

I sometimes pass by people squatting on the ground who will stop

everything—complete silence—and concentrate on gazing up into my eyes as if by doing so they would see a complete diagram of my route, goal, ultimate purpose, past meal, and state of mind. They will crane their necks to look into my eyes. The face is everything—and the sole focus of interpersonal behavior. Or at least that is how people act toward me....People really use those facial muscles to augment their often abbreviated and lightning-fast Tamil comments. I find that I, too, must exaggerate my expressions in order to achieve clear communication with people.

## General Methods Bibliography

Steven McNabb has compiled a general bibliography on methodology from a comprehensive reading list he is developing for a methods course. "Not all of the citations are about methods," he says. "Even those rather laborious sociological citations that are packed with statistics may achieve the best value by exposing ideas about how scientific detection, measurement, and interpretation might occur." McNabb says that he does not agree with the arguments presented in bibliography but recommends them "since they illustrate how methodology is broadly conceived" by scholars in sociology, psychology and linguistics, as well as in cultural anthropology.

"Even though many of these citations border on the arcane," he says, "they tend to summarize a broader field before they move on to a very confined topic. In other cases, some of the sociological citations focus on absolutely crucial issues that most anthropologists overlook or assume away, hence a systematic (and apparently dense arcane) evaluation is very useful."

For copies of this bibliography, write to: Dr. Steven McNabb, Social Research Institute, 6133 Kensington Drive, Anchorage, AK 99504.