Methodology of the Village Study

Age reporting of girls was always an area of inaccuracy due to the tendency for parents to underestimate ages of unmarried daughters who, parents believe, should be married at puberty. Thirty percent disagreement was found between parents’ age reporting on the Household Schedule and that reported by the girl herself on the Adolescent Schedule.

(Vlassoff, 1978, p. 73)

In this chapter the broad methodology of this longitudinal study is described in order to set the general context for the study, while in each of the following chapters a more detailed methodology is presented as it pertains to the specific study population described therein.

In all three periods, 1975–76, 1987, and 2007–08, the study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative (survey) methods. The same core information was collected on social, economic, and demographic characteristics of village households and respondents, in order to allow for a quantitative assessment of change over time. After the first study, the research broadened from a mainly demographic focus on women, fertility, and family planning to a more anthropological approach incorporating research on village institutions, such as educational and health services, migration, inheritance patterns, and challenges facing special groups such as widows. Respondents were asked to elaborate on their answers whenever possible and qualitative
responses were recorded. Other qualitative methods included key informant interviews (with male and female leaders and village council members, school teachers, students, health professionals, etc.), in depth interviews, informal group discussions, focus group discussions, and participant observation.

The strategy of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was chosen in order to have measurable results from questionnaire data, as well as more comprehensive contextual information about the community to enhance the analysis and interpretation of the findings. It was felt that the complex phenomena of rural culture, gender relations and many social, economic, and demographic factors could not be understood without an in depth understanding of local beliefs and practices. The sensitivity of many of the study’s questions also necessitated deeper exploration than would have been possible based on simple “yes/no” or other precoded responses.

The village study, part of the author’s PhD program and supported by the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, began in November, 1975, after nine months of preparatory work at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, University of Pune, her host institution. Preparatory activities included a literature review, language training in Marathi, questionnaire design, pretesting, and field trips to select the study village, Gove. The village was one of six communities randomly chosen by the author’s PhD supervisor, Professor Kumudini Dandekar, for two earlier surveys (Dandekar and Bhate, 1976). It was anticipated that there would be fewer problems of acceptance (especially of a foreign researcher) in a village that had already been exposed to social research, and that the previous surveys would provide useful background information for the study.

The village selection was based on four broad criteria: it should resemble, in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, other villages in Satara District; it should be fairly large to allow for the inclusion of a wide variety of respondents; it should be within a day’s journey of Pune and accessible in all seasons; and, if possible, it should have some modernizing influences, in order to determine how village women were affected by these changes.

In May, 1973 the author made a trip to the six villages. Two were eliminated quickly because they had populations of under 1,000 people and were considered too small. Two others, located on main highways and thus in regular communication with urban areas, were not typical of most rural Maharashtra communities. The two remaining villages were similar in size, “ruralness,” and socioeconomic