Understanding Green Revolutions
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Agrarian change and development planning in South Asia

Essays in honour of B.H. Farmer
edited by
Tim P. Bayliss-Smith and Sudhir Wanmali

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Contributors

Christopher J. Baker,
55 Soi Patanaves,
Sukumwit 71,
Bangkok,
Thailand

Tim P. Bayliss-Smith,
Department of Geography,
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3EN,
England

Deryke G.R. Belshaw,
School of Development Studies,
University of East Anglia,
Norwich NR4 7TJ,
England

Robert W. Bradnock,
Department of Geography,
School of Oriental and African Studies,
Malet Street,
London WC1E 7HP,
England

Robert Chambers,
The Ford Foundation,
55 Lodi Estate,
New Delhi 110003,
India

Graham P. Chapman,
Department of Geography,
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3EN,
England

Stuart Corbridge,
Department of Geography and
Geology,
The Polytechnic,
Queensgate,
Huddersfield HD1 3DH,
England

David B. Grigg,
Department of Geography,
University of Sheffield,
Sheffield S10 2TN,
England

Barbara Harriss,
Nutrition Unit,
London School of Hygiene and
Tropical Medicine,
Gower Street,
London WC1E 7HT,
England

John C. Harriss,
School of Development Studies,
University of East Anglia,
Norwich NR4 7TJ,
England

Sir Joseph B. Hutchinson,
St John’s College,
Cambridge,
England

Steve Jones,
Department of Geography,
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3EN,
England
viii CONTRIBUTORS

C.M. Madduma Bandara,
Department of Geography,
University of Peradeniya,
Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka

Clifford T. Smith,
Centre for Latin American Studies,
University of Liverpool,
86-88 Bedford Street South,
Liverpool L69 3BX,
England

John S. Pethick,
Department of Geography,
University of Hull,
Cottingham Road,
Hull HU6 7RX,
England

David R. Stoddart,
Department of Geography,
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3EN,
England

V. L.S. Prakasa Rao,
Centre of Economic and Social Studies,
Hyderabad 50004,
Andhra Pradesh,
India

K.V. Sundaram,
Planning Commission,
Government of India,
Parliament Street,
New Delhi 110002,
India

S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe,
Department of Economics,
University of Peradeniya,
Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka

Sudhir Wanmali,
International Food Policy Research Institute,
1776 Massachusetts Avenue NW,
Washington DC 20036,
USA

Vidyamali Samarasinghe,
Department of Geography,
University of Peradeniya,
Peradeniya,
Sri Lanka

William Whittaker,
Department of Geography,
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge CB2 3EN, England

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Preface

SIR JOSEPH HUTCHINSON

This volume is a tribute by his students and colleagues, to B.H. Farmer on his retirement as Reader in South Asian Geography and Director of the Centre of South Asian Studies in the University of Cambridge. The essays it contains are evidence of the esteem and affection in which he is held. Moreover their content bears the stamp of his critical and encouraging guidance. It is not the function of a preface to enlarge upon them. They speak for themselves.

This is, however, an opportunity to record something of Farmer's influence on geographical studies in Cambridge. My first experience of his work came when I was asked to review his Pioneer Peasant Colonisation in Ceylon. Coming from East Africa where the term 'dry zone' would be interpreted as an area with an uncertain rainfall averaging perhaps 400 mm a year, I was immediately struck by his use of 'dry zone' to embrace areas with a very high (though seasonal) rainfall. It was an indication of his powers as a writer and a teacher that I found his exposition conclusive, and thereby widened my concept of the relations between climate, season and soil.

I regarded Farmer at that time as a specialist on Sri Lanka. The opportunity for him to widen his horizons, and to develop research and teaching interests throughout the subcontinent of India, came in 1961 with the allocation to Cambridge University of resources to develop modern studies of some of the major cultural regions of the world. To Ben Farmer fell the task of establishing the Centre of South Asian Studies. The resources available were not large, and had to be carefully husbanded. There was no definition of the range and scope of 'modern studies' so Farmer had to draw one up. Those in the University who were interested in South Asia were scattered in several Faculties, and had no meeting place. Indeed in many cases they did not know each other. Farmer set out first to make the Centre a meeting ground. He then organised lectures and seminars that brought together, not only those working in Cambridge, but also South Asian specialists in London and the southeast, and visiting scholars from overseas. He built up a library, so planned as to complement the South Asian holdings in the University Library and in Faculty libraries. And he was himself constantly available to scholars, graduate students, and above all visitors from abroad.

All human studies are rooted in the past, and the wise scholar takes history fully into account. Modern studies have the advantage over ancient history
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that much of the basic data on their roots is still extant, though scattered and often unknown or inaccessible. Farmer established an archive. With an enterprising and devoted assistant, and with support from grant-giving bodies, he acquired much valuable material that would otherwise have been lost. The South Asian archive is now a research resource of great value.

A Study Centre is more than a focus for academics pursuing their individual research interests, and Farmer set about planning a research project that would be sponsored by the Centre, and would be carried out by a team brought together by the Centre. He chose a study of the agricultural changes that have become known as the ‘Green Revolution’, and he decided to compare their impact in two areas, North Arcot in Tamil Nadu in India and Hambantota and Monergala Districts in Sri Lanka. Farmer had been increasingly concerned about the lack of intimate, practical experience of agricultural change that characterised the debate then raging on the nature and the significance of the Green Revolution. He felt that there was a great need for study in the villages and in the fields of the impact of changing technology on peasant communities. So he invited men and women from among his old students and colleagues to join him in studying these changes by means of detailed fieldwork in the two areas.

He solicited financial support from a wide range of grant-giving bodies, and he himself coordinated the work from Cambridge, with an occasional visit to the field. It was characteristic of him that he brought his team together (in December 1974) to discuss their findings and plan the outline of a publication, when the fieldwork was still incomplete. This short conference gave form and substance to the research findings, and enabled the team members to see what each still needed to do to complement the work of colleagues. The book which resulted from this meeting was published in 1977; it remains one of the few integrated studies at village scale of the various social, economic and environmental changes that are taking place in rural South Asia.

Ben Farmer has contributed widely to the discipline of Geography – as writer, reviewer, editor and teacher. In research the authority of his leadership is clear from the extent to which his team project in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka is reflected in the essays that follow. For this wide-ranging scholarship we honour him.

J.B. Hutchinson

St John’s College,
Cambridge
October 1982