

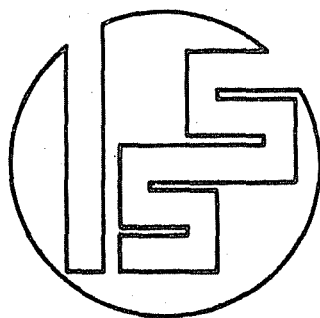
# I.S.S.

## OCCASIONAL PAPERS

**A Research on Social Practice :  
some ethical considerations on research  
in the Third World**

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## A Research on Social Practice: some ethical considerations on research in the Third World

G. Huizer

### The Ethical Question

It would be interesting to study why, in the last few years, the ethical implications of Western sociological and anthropological research in underdeveloped countries have received increasing attention. Particularly in the USA where the debate on ethics started, anthropology has developed rapidly since the Second World War (particularly as to the number of people involved. It might be that the "Establishment" which financed this relatively innocent ivory tower, in the end wanted something in return, research to serve the maintenance of the Establishment, including counter-insurgency research.

Although in Western countries a subservient anthropology formerly existed at Royal Institutes for Colonies or Tropics, this was so self-evident in those days that it did not arouse debate on professional ethics. The unexpectedly strong resistance of Vietnamese peasants to the Establishment, which resulted in an escalation of the Vietnam War, has helped to bring the issue of subservience of anthropology acutely to the foreground. To understand and cope with the resistance, anthropological studies were used in psychological warfare. More and more anthropologists discovered that their work was (mis)used for such purposes. One could almost say that in addition to food and some history-making revolutions, we are at least partly indebted to the peasantry for this new ethical concern; and also to students and some younger anthropologists in our own countries who drew attention to the involvement of anthropologists in the Vietnam War at meetings of the American Anthropological Association. However, it is doubtful whether the students would ever have gained sufficient attention if the resistance movement in Indo-China had not been so unexpectedly strong - or, for that matter, if the Latin Americans had not made such a fuss about the Camelot project in Chile.<sup>2</sup>

Anyway, it is becoming increasingly clear that the ivory tower of social science is also a mere pawn in the chess-game of vested interests and powers. In the service of whom and of what does anthropology really function? What is its purpose? What is its usefulness?

### Why research?

The way in which social research projects are frequently initiated should be analysed briefly to help answer this question. Generally the social research worker himself proposes the problem he wants to study. For some reason, frequently irrational and sentimental, he is interested in some specific, more or less exotic, country, area or ethnic group. He reads about it, gains insight and possibly goes there for some time. His interest increases and he applies for funds from some foundation or from his university for an investigation of certain aspects, chosen by himself, of the life of those whom he happens to be interested in. The project should appear to mean a contribution to Science and give more insight and knowledge to the specialists, who already know a great deal about the subject. These specialists judge the research project; if it is accepted, the research can start. It all looks rather detached and one could speak indeed of

hobby-ism. It seems as if the most immediate purpose of the research is to satisfy the rather arbitrary curiosity (or urge for knowledge) of the social researcher. The satisfaction of this urge, according to the rules of the game of scientific effort and the passing-on of the knowledge gained to others, determines the career and promotion of the research worker.

If he plays things correctly, he eventually gets a highly lucrative post as professor. There are some common characteristics with the system of free enterprise. In the freedom of research (and choice of subject), the problems of society are not the main concern or even reckoned with. Predominant are the desires of the research worker or-for that matter - the entrepreneur: more knowledge or more profits (economic power). Is this a sufficiently ethical or social justification?

### Knowledge is Power

A question which easily arises in this context is whether there is a relationship between knowledge and power. The popular saying, "knowledge is power", suggests that there may be something more behind the gathering of knowledge than mere satisfaction of curiosity and other urges of the research worker. Can the research and the research worker be used? During the years that I worked with United Nations in Latin America I knew several social research workers with a hobby for peasant societies, who were highly surprised and sometimes even indignant when, in 1967, the New York Times (following Ramparts) published lists of researchers and foundations which were directly or indirectly financed by the CIA, particularly when they found their own name or that of their sponsor. Some were honestly unaware of this possibility and went through a crisis of conscience.

The interests of those who supply research funds has hardly been subject to scientific investigation, although more has been done in this respect in USA than in Europe. That scientific research policies have something to do with power and politics will no longer be denied. What exactly scientific research policy has to do with politics should now be taken from the field of ethical speculation and concretely investigated. It is interesting to know, for example, that the Council for Pure Scientific Research in the Netherlands includes three official representatives of multinational enterprises (Unilever, AKZO and Philips). In addition, several professors, members of the Council, are consultants to such enterprises. How "pure" is "pure science"? How are decisions about financial allocations made?

An example of research into interests behind scientific research and related activities in Latin America is the work that has been going on for more than five years by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA). A group of young social scientists of various disciplines with very few resources, is studying and publishing material about the influence of their country (USA) in Latin America. Their publications contain a great deal of material about the "influence structures of economic and political elites", a subject only very recently investigated in the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>3</sup>

In 1969 NACLA published the NACLA Research Methodology Guide which indicates how the power structure can be most fruitfully investigated. In 1970 the booklet Subliminal Warfare: The Role of Latin American Studies, was issued, describing the relationship between the Industrial-Military Complex and the scholarly centres for Latin American studies.

As regards Asia, a similar group works in USA which issues the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars. This bulletin has dedicated a special issue to analysing and publicising the operations of the Center for Vietnamese Studies at Southern Illinois University, as part of the Vietnam War effort.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the role of social research that serves American interests in Africa, the Africa Research Group published a report in 1970, African Studies in America: the Extended Family (A tribal analysis of U.S. Africanists: Who they are; Why to fight them), with a wealth of material including a short case-study of a refusal to publish research data on American financial interests in Africa by several scholarly journals, including Human Organization and Economic Development and Cultural Change.

It is clear that concerned scholars in USA are far ahead of those in Europe. I wonder how many ethically concerned European research workers even know the material of their American Colleagues and in how many university libraries it is available. An even bigger question is how many European research workers pose themselves serious questions regarding the background of their own grants or regarding subsidizing as such, the scientific research policy and its background.

#### The Interests of Those to be Investigated

If little attention has been given to the interests behind scientific social research, even less is given to the interests of the people who are being investigated. The interests or needs of the objects of research are at the most seen as an interesting aspect of the subject. That the research could possibly serve the interests of the people investigated or even remedy their distress, hardly occurs to most social scientists. Such a thing might occur by chance, but generally the interference with the realities under investigation is seen as disturbing or dangerous for the scientific quality of the research.

The Ethical Code of the American Society of Applied Anthropology, written before 1940, emphasized that it was not desirable that anthropologists participate in the change processes of the groups they study. Only during the Second World War was there considerable deviation from this view, but after the war the old point of view predominated again. This point of view was, as Richard Adams noted, determined by the laissez faire ideology.<sup>5</sup>

If we examine the conditions of exploitation and poverty in which many of the people studied by anthropologists live, it appears just - at least according to common-sense human ethics - to disqualify the laissez faire type of research which does not care about the awkward conditions of its object, as asocial, not to say simply immoral.

#### Is Snooping Allowed?

The Dutch anthropologist, Andre K bbsen, remarked in a paper on the relationship between ethics and anthropology that it happens that social researchers are refused admittance because people do not want the "snooper" (and this is what he is basically) to be around, since there are too many things which they prefer to remain undiscovered.<sup>6</sup>

With this remark K bbsen poses implicitly the ethical problem at times put forward by distrustful peasants or slumdweller. Instead of the term

"snooper" one could also use a term from psychopathology: "voyeurism". The ethical dilemma which arises is: Is this allowed at all?

During my 12-year period in various so-called developing countries, I was confronted several times very concretely with this dilemma. For example: At an agricultural extension meeting in Western Sicily the participating peasants bluntly refused to meet any longer when the chief of the regional research and development project of which these meetings were part, Danilo Dolci, wanted to make a tape-recording of our session. Their argument was: We don't want him to make another book or article showing the whole world how backward and stupid we are. In former years Dolci had widely publicised the backwardness and poverty of Western Sicily, as a result of which the project had been initiated.

Another example: In an area of the Coquimbo province in Chile, peasants were reticent or even hostile towards some Chilean sociologists (guided by an Englishman from United Nations) until the local leaders had been convinced that the research would be useful in relation to the land reform needed in the area.

In order to really understand the problem of snooping we should on the one hand try to see it through the eyes of peasants in a developing country; on the other hand, we could try to imagine a similar situation in which people from the outside world come to investigate us. How would we react if an anthropologist from China came to investigate the internal policies of our anthropology or social research institute, posing questions regarding how decisions are made concerning the programme, the research being done, the nomination of professors or assistants, the ranking of staff members, etc. One can imagine, knowing the secrecy which is maintained about such petty rivalries and grudges in our institutes, that snoopers would not be too welcome, maybe even bluntly unwelcome. Are the patronage systems and factional strife in village communities abroad not basically more important to the people involved than is the management of our institute to us? Not to mention such a loaded subject as internal power struggle. I specifically took the example of a Chinese researcher since K bber in his paper frowned on certain restrictions encountered in China by the Swedish researcher/journalist Jan Myrdal. I can imagine that investigators from China would not be allowed at all into our Western countries. Our understanding of the sensibilities of people in the Third World would increase if we would be more realistic about our own and we would - consequently - become more modest in our role as snooper in developing countries. Basically, it is surprising that we are allowed there at all.

Ethically one could focus the whole dilemma more sharply and ask where anthropologists find the courage to go snooping in countries where their compatriots in past and present have brought underdevelopment and exploitation. In earlier years but even today, some anthropologists have served the colonial regimes or their inheritors and were well paid for their services. But apart from that: are the interesting books which result from the snooping, from the point of view of the people in the underdeveloped countries not just another way of exploitation: authors trying to become famous and (eventually) well-to-do at the cost of their ignorance....? It is a somewhat demagogical question, but not completely misplaced and in any case a question which the objects of research sometimes pose. What do they benefit from the dissertations, articles, books etc. written in a language foreign to them and hidden in academic libraries?

One could probably say that the fact that so many snoopers are still allowed

and even kindly received by people in underdeveloped countries is often a consequence of the "culture of repression" in which these people still live. They are accustomed to submit to all that comes from above or from outside, although they may show some resistance, e.g. in giving incorrect answers or by saying what they think outsiders want to hear. Perhaps the fact that peasants and slumdweller in some countries start to show more open reluctance towards snoopers is a sign of their emancipation and their increasing sense of dignity and resistance against the culture of repression. Maybe anthropologists who are really concerned with those whom they want to study, and who value highly conscientisation and emancipation of the people, should be glad of signs of distrust or resistance shown towards them by their objects.<sup>8</sup><sup>9</sup>

#### When can Snooping be Justified?

Although on the whole it appears difficult to justify the usual forms of snooping by Western social researchers in underdeveloped countries, there may be some reasons which would make certain forms of social research not only acceptable but even desirable. In my opinion, these reasons are related to the serving function of the research. At present most laissez faire research serves mainly the academic careers of persons in the highly developed countries, not to mention the research that directly serves the maintenance of the established order and Western interests. Very few cases are known of social research in underdeveloped countries which serve more or less directly the interests of those who are the object of the research, such as peasants, slumdweller, a minority group, or the women (that forgotten group). Of course, one can argue that it is impossible for us to determine what serves the interests of people in underdeveloped countries. This difficulty can be overcome if we try seriously to identify with their way of living and thinking and - together with them - focus on those elements which are important for conscientisation and emancipation.

When speaking about people in underdeveloped countries, a clear distinction should be made between those who are generally the object of investigation, the poor strata of society, and those who are powerful in those countries. It is increasingly clear that the latter category, although they also accuse the Western social scientists of academic colonialism, are often themselves parasites on the majority of their compatriots. The term, internal colonialism, has been introduced in Latin America to indicate this problem.<sup>10</sup> Often the influential groups in underdeveloped countries are more or less direct accomplices of Western interests.

Generally it is not difficult to observe or discover the situation of exploitation or repression in which the majority of people in underdeveloped countries live, a thing which is important for the ethical position-finding of the Western researcher. Is it not ethically reprehensible to remain neutral when you see that there are victims as a consequence of a situation for which one, as a Westerner, is also responsible? Victims not only in the statistics of infant mortality and undernourishment, but also in the little known statistics of assassinated peasant and trade union leaders.

#### Self-education of the Researcher

One of the most important and highly needed ways to gain knowledge about human beings in our own and other societies is to gain self-knowledge and to recognize our own feelings, desires, grievances, reactions in those

whom we are studying. Phenomenological methods, identification, empathy, Einführung, are the professional terms for this way of gaining knowledge. It could also be simply called solidarity. To try to see the reality of the other persons through their own eyes.....including hunger, repression, exploitation, resentment, resistance and other phenomena which exist on a large scale in countries where anthropologists prefer to do their research. The effort to understand such phenomena through empathy would contribute considerably to the self-education of many social scientists. It is surprising how much middle-class intellectuals can learn as human beings and gain in common sense, by living in and effectively sharing the life of a village or a slum area (or a factory, for that matter).<sup>11</sup>

The benefits of such efforts would become even greater if the researcher would act according to the new understanding he is gaining and would effectively try to support the people he is living with in overcoming their awkward conditions. "Participant observation" may naturally lead to "participant intervention".<sup>12</sup> It can even become full commitment to the emancipatory effort in which those people are or may become involved, the role of "militant cum observer".<sup>13</sup> Thus the laissez faire anthropology can become "liberation anthropology".<sup>14</sup>

#### The Scientific Value of Active Commitment

A common objection raised against active involvement of social scientists in the processes or situations they are studying is that this approach distorts the research results and diminishes their scientific value. Against this objection I would argue, from some of my own field experience, that the opposite seems to be the case. Active involvement in the life of the people amongst whom one is working not only may bring some benefits to those people, but also quite valuable scientific insights. At times even insights which are more scientific (or simply: truer) than the insights gained through mere observation, snooping, pure research. Objectivity, as claimed by pure researchers, is not so much a question of detachment from what one studies, but rather the distance or detachment which the researcher can take from himself and his personal and cultural biases while he is in the field or writing his opus.

The kind of objectivity generally striven for by social researchers in all kinds of situations, not putting themselves into the game and remaining emotionally aloof or outside at all costs, seems an illusion. It is one of the forms of alienation of which many people in our Western societies seem to suffer. It is also a bad thing for gaining true and relevant scientific insights. Time and again, we see how anthropology remains a Western intellectual effort, and therefore subjective. Some classical examples of biased and typically Western research are some of the works of Charles Erasmus, George Foster and Edward Banfield.<sup>15</sup> The way in which Erasmus and Banfield discuss - or conspicuously neglect - the socialist or communist-oriented actions of peasants in the areas they studied (Northern Mexico and Southern Italy respectively), indicates clearly their own political bias and determines to a large extent how their work served the Establishment to which they belonged.<sup>16</sup>

The tragical thing is that the research of these and numerous other scholars contains some unscientific and simply wrong conclusions, which create a great deal of misunderstanding about the outlook and attitudes of the poor peasants in the world. The persistency with which such misunderstandings



of the peasants and their potential for change of society remain en vogue can probably be explained by the detached and static way in which the peasant population is generally approached by anthropologists. To me it seems that this approach is part of the bias that scientific research cannot coincide with active participation in the change processes which occur in some peasant societies. From my own experience I would say that active involvement in the change processes in peasant societies, and participation in small or large experiments or large experiments or occurrences, tend to give a clearer understanding of the potential of peasants for change than mere laissez faire participant observation.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that in addition to being - hopefully - helpful to the emancipation or conscientisation of the people in underdeveloped countries,<sup>18</sup> and of oneself, active involvement can even serve the cause of science as such.

#### Reorientation of Research Towards the Overall Power Structure

One aspect of the self-education which may follow from active involvement and consequently a deeper understanding of the problems of people in underdeveloped countries, has considerable bearing on the whole issue of the ethics of snooping, presently under discussion. The understanding one gets of the obstacles faced by the people and the culture of repression or internal colonialism of which these obstacles are merely an expression, gives one almost automatically a better insight into the power structure prevalent in the underdeveloped countries. It is then only a continuation of the lines which show the involvement of our own highly developed countries in the maintenance of this structure. This latter insight may increase the sense of responsibility of any Western social scientist for the state of affairs in his home country, as it relates to that of the people abroad whom he is studying and with whom he sympathizes.

As a Dutchman, it is easy to see such links when studying e.g. peasant settlements in Venezuela in the neighbourhood of Maracaibo. The villages contrast strikingly with the neat "concentration camps" of bungalows of the foreign personnel of the oil companies, in casu Royal Dutch Shell.<sup>19</sup> Widely publicised figures of profits give further perspective (Shell made 3 billion Dutch guilders in 1971, of which one-third accrues to Dutch shareholders, more than the whole Netherlands Foreign Aid Programme).

The only relevant ethical consequence to be drawn from this knowledge about the inter-dependence of developed and underdeveloped countries, is to get a better understanding of ( and eventually control over?) the power elite at home on which the power elite in the underdeveloped countries partly depends. Snooping may thus find another justification if it concerns itself with the power structure which ties the home country of the researcher to that of his interest. This seems to be a field particularly suited for investigation by ethically-concerned social scientists- a field which has been until now too conspicuously neglected.

Richard Adams indicated that the neglect of studying the power structure abroad, in Latin America, found its reason in the ethocentric bias of the Euro-American tradition and is "related to the fact that the very strangeness of the phenomenon has led interpreters to regard it as inexplicable or irrational and as characteristic of a structure that is thought to be immature or underdeveloped." <sup>20</sup>

But why then are the mature and highly developed power structures of our rich countries not taken into account? Was this mere naiveté (or a middle-class-centric bias, to paraphrase Adams), or were social researchers guilty of some kind of self-censorship (to avoid 'touchy subjects'), or was it a question of overall scientific research policy (chanelling of funds -see above)? As regards the latter point, conscientious social scientists who want to probe into the power structure which, in the end, also dominates their own life, may well find that the Establishment at home as well as in the country of study will no longer collaborate with them in the pursuit of their urge for knowledge. Freedom of scientific research, however, is as yet sufficiently guaranteed in our countries to make an investigation of the overall power structure, particularly the multinational corporations, feasible for those who are willing to gain such needed knowledge even when they do not get ample funds from established sources. The NACLA effort, mentioned above, is an example. So is the book which reveals for the first time in a systematic way at least some of the most striking aspects of Dutch power in the Third World.<sup>21</sup> If the results of such research are fed back to those in the underdeveloped countries who, for reasons of struggle for emancipation, are interested in them, snooping may become an ethically highly justifiable effort.

Moreover, participation in such efforts can give the excitement of detective work to scientific research in addition to the satisfaction of ethically justified commitment. One wonders why so many social scientists are still following the rule of remaining outsiders to the change processes of the societies they study, whether their own or others. Have not some of the greatest breakthroughs of social science been brought about by Marx and Freud, scholars who were both in a very practical way related to their field of study, and who consciously merged theory with praxis? This cannot be valid only for the greatest of the social scientists. The time seems to have come when social scientists should leave their ivory tower, as many of them did during the Second World War<sup>22</sup> in order to contribute to the rescue of the occupied countries. Problems in the underdeveloped countries appear of similar magnitude as those faced by the highly developed countries in those years. The only way to prevent that social research, particularly abroad, remains asocial, is to strive for a merger of theory and praxis at the service of those who are subjected.

Footnotes:

1. Cf. Eric Wolf & J.G. Jorgenson: "Anthropology on the Warpath in Thailand", The New York Review of Books, Nov. 19, 1970; also discussions of the responsibility of the social sciences in Current Anthropology, Vol. 9 1968 and Human Organization, Vol. 30, No. 4.
2. About the Camelot project see Irving Louis Horowitz (ed.): The Rise and Fall of Project Camelot, Studies in the Relationship between Science and Practical Politics (Cambridge, Mass., The M.I.T. Press, 1967).
3. R.J. Mokken and F.N. Stockman: "Invloedstructuren van politieke en economische Elites in Nederland", mimeographed, 1971; Norbert Koubek, Wilfried Höhnen, Wilhelm Kaltenborn, Ingrid Scheibe-Lange, Lorenz Schwegler: Wirtschaftliche Konzentration und Gesellschaftliche Machtverteilung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Serie "Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte", Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn, 1972).
4. Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, February 1971.
5. Richard N. Adams: "Ethics and the Social Anthropologist in Latin America" (No. 47 Offprint Series, Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas, Austin, 1967).
6. A. K8bben: "Sociale Wetenschappen en Ethiek" (mimeographed, 1971).
7. For more details of both projects see Gerrit Huizer: The Revolutionary Potential of Peasants in Latin America (Lexington, Mass, Heath Lexington Books, 1972), Ch. II.
8. The concept "culture of repression" was developed by Allan R. Holmberg: "Some Relationship between Psychobiological Deprivation and Culture Change in the Andes" (Cornell American Year Conference, March 21-25, 1966, mimeographed).
9. I am aware that the terms "conscientisation" and emancipation can easily lead to confusion. They imply a value judgement on what is good for human beings. "Conscientisation" is a term introduced by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire indicating the raising of people's consciousness about their own generally repressed situation. See Paulo Freire: Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York, Herder and Herder, 1970). The term emancipation as I use it here is best explained by W.F. Wertheim: Evolution and Revolution (Penguin Books, forthcoming).
10. The term was introduced particularly by the Mexican sociologists Pablo Gonzalez Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen. See e.g. Rodolfo Stavenhagen: "Classes Colonialism and Acculturation", in Irving Louis Horowitz (ed.): Masses in Latin America (New York, Oxford University Press, 1970).
11. I am speaking here from my own trials and errors described in articles in literary reviews in the Netherlands and in: "Evaluating Community Development at the Grassroots: Some Observations on Methodology", America Indigena, Vol. 25, No. 3, July 1965.
12. See Ibid., for a discussion of these research methods. The term "participant intervention" was introduced by Allan Holmberg when describing

the wellknown Vicos experiment in Peru (Ibid., p.283).

13. This term comes from Rodolfo Stavenhagen: "Decolonizing Applied Social Sciences", Human Organization, Vol. 30, No.4, Winter 1971, p.333 ff.
14. See Andre Gunder Frank: Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1969), Ch.7, "Liberal Anthropology vs. Liberation Anthropology."
15. For a critique of some of the theoretical conceptions used by these three social scientists see Gerrit Huizer: The Revolutionary Potential of Peasants in Latin America, op.cit., ch.3, which is an elaboration of "Resistance to Change and Radical Peasant Mobilization: Foster and Erasmus Reconsidered", Human Organization, Vol. 29, No.4, Winter 1970, and the answers of Erasmus and Foster in the same issue.
16. For relevant quotations see Ibid.
17. For some concrete cases see Gerrit Huizer: "The Revolutionary Potential, etc." op.cit., ch.2.
18. For a discussion of various ways in which social scientists can concretely serve the emancipation or liberation of the people in the underdeveloped countries see Rodolfo Stavenhagen, op.cit., and Andre Gunder Frank, op.cit., Also Orlando Fals Borda c.s., Causa Popular, Ciencia Popular, Una Metodología del Conocimiento Científico a través de la Acción (ROSCA, Bogotá, 1972).
19. For an impressionistic account of this experience see "Brief uit Maracaibo", Podium, 1969. No. 3.
20. Richard N. Adams: "Political Power and Social Structures", in Claudio Veliz (ed.): The Politics of Conformity in Latin America (London/New York, Oxford University Press, 1967), p.25-26, where Adams also notes: "It would not be an exaggeration to say that the entire internal structure of the upper sector is a series of relationships established and altered by virtue of a constant concern for gaining and using power."
21. Eric Paërl : Nederlandse Macht in de Derde Wereld (Amsterdam, Van Genneep, 1971); the book is the result of the efforts of many volunteers coordinated by Eric Paërl. In Freiburg, W. Germany, a group called Informations Zentrum Dritte Welt is producing similar fact-finding studies, e.g. about German investments in Brazil.  
See also G. Grosche & R. Lehmann-Richter: Die Gewinne aus deutschen Direktinvestitionen in Entwicklungsländer (Institut für Entwicklungsforschung und Entwicklungspolitik der Ruhr-Universität, Bochum, 1970).
22. See also Andre Købber, op.cit., who expressed his thankfulness to the American anthropologists who "involved" themselves in the liberation struggle of those days.

