

On Anthropological Fieldwork: Does Fieldwork Experience Matter in Writing Postmodern Ethnography?

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ABSTRACT This paper examines whether fieldwork experience makes any significant contribution to writing postmodern ethnography. Since the publication of *Writing Culture*, issues of objectivity, ethnographic representation, and the role of the researcher in ethnographic fieldwork have undergone critical scrutiny. Taking the political and subjective nature of ethnographic research as a point of departure, this paper critically examines whether personal accounts and experiences of conducting fieldwork shape the writing of postmodern ethnography. Through narration of fieldwork experiences in northwestern Bangladesh, it is argued that the materials of ethnographic writing do not only come from the formal application of methodological tools for collecting data; rather, researchers' own observation and experiences of fieldwork significantly shape the ways postmodern ethnography is produced.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnography is not only the product of fieldwork, but also the process – the way in which ethnographic research is done. Yet, many anthropologists become overly anxious about the product of their research without paying sufficient attention to the processes through which this product is produced. Fieldwork experience is, thus, one of the essential ingredients of thick ethnography and should be equally valued. Successful ethnographic research involves a participatory fieldwork process that narrows the gap between “self” and “other” through shared living, language and lifestyle – to the fullest extent possible. A crucial way in which researchers and subjects come together is through good rapport, which is a methodological tool as old as the history of anthropological fieldwork. In this paper, the researcher delineates the ways in which fieldwork is experienced among the indigenous people of northwestern Bangladesh, and the ways this fieldwork experience shaped ethnographic writing. The researcher narrates the ways in which rapport is established with the subjects, and the constraints faced throughout the field-

work period. It is argued that such a fieldwork experience is as important as data collection processes, using formal methodological tools. Participant observation and the process of fieldwork are nothing but “anthropology of experience” (Turner and Bruner 1986). Freidenberg (1998) argues that the fieldwork and data collection process must be participatory and visual methods often help the researcher engage with the subjects and validate data collection procedures. In order to establish anthropological research as a field-based initiative, it is important that fieldwork experience and relationships between the observer and the observed be appreciated, which structure each other and shape intensive data collection process (Palriwala 2005). However, in recent times, the question of objectivity, ethnographic representation and the role of the researcher in ethnographic fieldwork have undergone critical scrutiny (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Based on these contexts, this paper reinforces the argument that the researcher must not be satisfied with the collection of observable data, but also document the experiential aspects of fieldwork - the sense of being in the field.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this paper are drawn from anthropological fieldwork conducted in the Rajshahi district of north-western Bangladesh. A total of six months were spent among the Santals and Oraon ethnic communities. Participant observation was key to this anthropological research. Both formal and informal interviews were con-

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ducted to collect in-depth information. The researcher lived in the village and tried to learn the local language and participate in the everyday life of the villagers as fully as possible. One of the major constraints of initial fieldwork was the researcher's identity as a Bengali, as the Bengali people are the dominant and majority section of the population. The researcher had to answer many queries relating to why he was living with them and researching them, and how it would benefit the local community. Key informant technique proved a very useful methodological tool for establishing initial rapport with that previously unfamiliar community. An educated and enthusiastic local person agreed to introduce the researcher to the local community by taking him around every corner of the village. The researcher sat with the local people when they gossiped in the afternoon, met people in the tea stalls, village market, playgrounds, and agricultural fields when they were busy planting rice.

Once the researcher was accepted by the community, his next task was to survey the village to gain a broader understanding of the socio-cultural, demographic, and economic condition of the population. Structured questionnaires were used to carry out this survey. Since there were only 123 households in that village, it was decided to survey them all. These survey results provided the researcher with ample information to prepare a checklist to conduct more in-depth interviews. A total of five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to learn more about the population under study. However, the researcher had to be cautious in selecting participants for FGDs, to ensure that the sample size represents different class, gender and age groups. These FGDs were recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. Participant observation was one of the key techniques of data collection throughout the fieldwork process. The researcher lived in the community for six months, attended their ceremonies and participated in their everyday life. Maintaining a diary was routine work. In the daytime, main points of observation were noted, which were then elaborated on in detail every evening when the researcher returned to the hut. Through purposive sampling, the village headman of the Santal and the Oraon, the executive director of the NGO (which was working to promote development among these ethnic groups), and some selected influential individuals in the community were exclusively inter-

viewed. Apart from these formal methodological techniques, the researcher informally talked to people on many occasions. In order to not restrict the natural flow of discussion, the researcher did not direct the participants towards specific direction of the research objectives. This allowed participants to discuss many issues beyond the immediate research issues. During the initial phases of the fieldwork, it was frustrating for the researcher that he was denied entry to the community due to his personal identity as Bengali; the initial noncooperation from the community left him very disheartened. However, as time passed by and rapport was built, the researcher was gradually accepted by the community and began to successfully accumulate the data required for the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before illustrating the ways in which fieldwork was experienced, it is important to briefly describe the research project for which this fieldwork was conducted. Having reviewed the literature on development, the researcher was dissatisfied with the fact that development interventions often fail or bring about unintended consequences on the beneficiaries (Escobar 1988, 1991, 1995, 2004; Ferguson 1990, 1997; Esteva 1993; Gardner and Lewis 1996; Curry and Koczberski 2013; Smith 2013; Shah 2010). It is considered whether an alternative development discourse would be possible, whereby lay subjects would be valued as active participants and powerful actors in the entire development process. Guided by this curiosity, Bangladesh was chosen to examine the practice of development. The researcher was aware that Bengalis are the dominant majority group, constituting about 97 percent of the population, whereas indigenous people are the minority group, who are socio-culturally, economically, and politically disadvantaged. Historically, these minority groups have been severely exploited and discriminated against by the majority Bengali people (Anwar 1984; Islam 2003, 2010; Mohsin 1997; Shafie and Mahmood 2003). In order to examine whether indigenous minority people can help themselves by promoting their own development, and, thereby, the possibility of an alternative development model, it was decided to study a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was formed and run exclusively by the indigenous people. One

of the objectives of this study was to critically evaluate how development can be achieved in a more humane and alternative way. Before conducting the fieldwork it was hypothesized that the grassroots initiative taken by the indigenous people may have the potential to demonstrate an alternative development discourse. As an anthropologist interested in the issues of development led the researcher to conduct fieldwork in northern Bangladesh. The discussions that follow illustrate these fieldwork experiences that were encountered in the field which subsequently shaped the writing of the ethnography.

Locating a Field Site

The first methodological hurdle was finding an NGO that was run by the indigenous people, themselves. When the researcher worked as a research staff in one of the donor organizations in Bangladesh, a minority-run organization named Prochesta was the recipient of funds. Thus, the executive director and many staff members of this organization were known to the researcher. Since then relationship and contact were maintained with many of the Prochesta staff members. One morning, the researcher went to the head office in Rajshahi, one of the northern districts in Bangladesh. The executive director welcomed him and the researcher expressed his desire to conduct fieldwork in one of the villages served by their organization. The executive director gladly approved the request and advised to contact the frontline field staff at Kakonhat, one of the operational offices of Prochesta, situated approximately 40km from the divisional headquarters in Rajshahi. The next morning, the researcher started off to the Kakonhat office and reached there within two hours. Fortunately, again, the office staff members were known to him and he consulted with them to discover a village inhabited by the Santal indigenous people. The staff members informed me that there was one village, but it was too remote to comfortably visit. They suspected that the researcher might not want to travel to that village, but they were assured that the distance would not be a problem for the researcher, and that he would like to live there.

Initial Settling

Although it was known to the researcher from earlier fieldwork experiences that it would be dif-

ficult for an outsider to live in a village inhabited by indigenous people (for reasons discussed below), the researcher still planned to live in that village. However, two initial difficulties were encountered. Firstly, the researcher was worried about snakes, as two local persons had died from snakebites just a couple of days before his arrival. Secondly, although the fieldwork was started in the monsoon season, there was not a drop of rain. The temperature rose between 42 and 44 degree Celsius each day. The researcher was never exposed to such extremely hot weather, and became sick very quickly.

A room, or even a verandah, was desperately looked for to live in, but the poverty-ridden minority people had a severe accommodation problem. Most had only one room to share between families of about six to seven persons; some households even used their verandah to keep cattle. Having not found any place to live in the village, the researcher began to travel in from Rajshahi district, approximately 40 km away. He would come in the morning by the first bus, and catches the last bus back to Rajshahi in the evening. After one week, when the researcher became familiar with the local people and had established good relations with them, he asked the *manji*, the village headman, if he could arrange accommodation for the researcher in the village. He was uneasy, and told him to come back the next day. On the following day, he repeatedly apologized for not having been able to find a suitable place for the researcher. He advised to stay with a nearby Muslim household, but the researcher declined, fearing that staying in a Muslim household might jeopardize the relationship with the non-Muslim minority community under study. The Prochesta office came forward to help: they had a room vacant in their village office, which they offered and the researcher gladly accepted that.

From *Padri* through *Sir* to *Dada*: Rapport Build-up

Building rapport with the indigenous people was one of the difficult tasks of the field research. As a Bengali person, the researcher was worried about non-cooperation from non-Bengali indigenous people, who had long been discriminated against, exploited, and excluded by the Bengali majority people. Fortunately, the villagers were

convinced of the researcher's goodwill through his honest intention to come to the village for academic research. The novelty of anthropological research methods was appreciated, especially participant observation and long-term stay in the field, which enabled the researcher to bypass this fear. Moreover, the researcher's familiarity with the indigenous people, due to earlier intensive fieldwork among them, helped him to establish good relationships with the people.

In fact, it was not too difficult to meet or communicate with the people. Of course, from the very beginning, everyone was looking at each other and asking, "Who is this man?" "What is he doing here?" They considered the researcher an *alga lok*, a stranger. Surprisingly, having seen the researcher's fairer skin color, some of them assumed that the researcher might be a *padri* – father of the Church. Some of them even considered the researcher a new teacher, as he was visiting the schools of Prochesta. When traveled on village roads, many school children popped up from their homes and expressed their respect, saying, "*namasker*, sir." The researcher politely let them know who he was. Many villagers wanted to know about the research, and it was sometimes found difficult to answer their questions, such as: "What would be our benefit?" "What would be your benefit?" or, "What can you do for us?" In fact, a number of questions had to be answered before establishing good relationship with them. The researcher tried his best to let them know about the research, and inform them that he was neither a *padri* nor a "sir"; rather, wanted to become their *dada* – "brother."

Two important strategies were found effective at establishing good relationships with the people. The first was addressing them in fictive kin relation terms such as "uncle" (*kaka*) or "brother" (*dada*) for males, and "aunt" (*kaki*) or "sister" (*didi*) for female. The second strategy was to accompany people to their work place. The researcher went with them to their agricultural fields when they ploughed or planted rice, and would sit at the *ail* – the boundary between two lands – and gossip with them. They were surprised to see him go to their work and not mind his shirts and pants getting dirty by mud and water. Sitting beside the women when they cooked, simply asking, "What are you cooking?", or meeting the men when they fed their cattle, often broke the ice. Taking their photograph and giving them photos were other effective ways of

establishing good relationships with the people under study.

Participating in their everyday activities proved to be a very useful way of collecting data for this research. When they observed the *shidhu-kanu* day – a day to commemorate the heroic fights of Shidhu and Kanu (two Santal men) against the British in 1857 – the researcher actively took part in the ceremonies. Thousands of indigenous people attended. Surprisingly, the Santali people requested me to deliver a speech on that occasion, which could not be denied by the researcher. The issues of indigenous people's exploitation through low wages and the discrimination they faced in their everyday life were highlighted in the speech. Government officials who attended the meeting took note of these issues and assured the indigenous people that they would address their concerns as soon as possible. It is believed that the researcher was nominated to speak in favor of the indigenous people on that occasion on the basis of the good relationship that had developed with them over time.

Pains and Pleasures of Fieldwork

Fieldwork is a painstaking process, especially when it is conducted in an unfamiliar environment. Although the researcher was a native Bangladeshi and was also cordially accepted by the indigenous people, the physical environment of the village was not so supportive. Although Bangladesh belongs to a moderate climatic zone, the environment of the Barind Tract of north-western Bangladesh has gradually become extreme due to excessive deforestation and low water level. In summer, the water level falls sharply, and it becomes very difficult to get water – even from deep tube wells. When the fieldwork was conducted, a heat wave, locally called *lu hawa*, made life almost unbearable, with skin diseases and dehydration.

During the summer, village ponds, ditches, and tube wells dried out. Only a few tube wells could reach water level, but extreme pressure was needed to obtain water from them. Women were seen pressing very hard only to get a little water. People washed cattle in the same ditches in which they, themselves, bathed. The researcher needed to bathe in a pond about one kilometer from the residence, but the water was not clean and it became very hot in the afternoon due to excessive heat throughout the day. The situation forced the researcher to live without bath-

ing for days. Due to scarcity of water, only face could be washed with a glass of water in the morning. Because of excessive sweating, the researcher suffered from severe dehydration, but there was no doctor in the village to consult. There was only a local man who ran a dispensary came to treat the researcher, but he was too afraid to receive his medications. He was advised to go to Rajshahi for medical consultation, but that was about 40 km away. There was only one bus – in the early morning at 7:30 – to go to Rajshahi, and had to wait the whole night to catch the bus the next morning. The doctor in Rajshahi Medical College Hospital gave medications and advised him to rest for at least a week. A couple of weeks later, the researcher again suffered from flu and went without treatment.

Food was also a problem. Even having enough money could not ensure food, as there were no restaurants in the village. Only a few small shops provided some snacks with expired dates. There was a woman in the office who cooked for us, but she could not come on Fridays, as they were holidays. Due to scarcity of fish and vegetables, the researcher had to eat only pulse/lentils (*dal*) and potato for consecutive days; this was also the major food for the indigenous people living there. As mentioned earlier, snakes were another problem. The villagers informed the researcher that, due to excessive heat, snakes could not stay in their holes and, thus, would come out. The villagers and NGO staff advised the researcher not to walk along the village roads after dusk. Moreover, the villagers taught how to survive a possible snake attack by running in a curve (zig-zag) and wearing long pants and high shoes. In the early days of the fieldwork, the researcher was not very afraid of snakes, but became particularly worried one day when he was walking along the village road. Suddenly, he saw a snake that had caught a frog in its mouth. In fear, the researcher shouted loudly, jumped and ran away. Hearing the hue and cry, people came quickly and told that the researcher was safe, but only because the snake had captured the frog. On several occasions, the villagers were found killing snakes and measuring their length to see how big they were.

CONCLUSION

While fieldwork is often painstaking, it is the bread and butter of anthropology. Intensive

fieldwork is not only the differentiating factor between anthropology and other social sciences, but it also gives anthropologists their particular identities as “anthropologist.” It is fieldwork that paves the way for anthropologists to come closer to their subjects, interact with them, learn of others’ life and culture, and gain substantial knowledge of them. The fieldwork experience, outlined above, illustrates the significance of experiencing the life of subjects under study and conveying these experiences to others through thick ethnographies. Fieldwork, thus, exposes ethnographers to the reality of life; the experiences encountered in fieldwork impact the ways in which data is collected and ethnography is produced. Despite practical difficulties of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, fieldwork experience must be valued as a foundation of thorough, profound and thick ethnography. The experiential aspects of fieldwork must be appreciated because they provide the researcher with in-depth and holistic understandings of a cultural phenomenon. In an ethnographic research setting many things may happen beyond the immediate observation and data collection of the researcher. A researcher who has a strong sensual capability may be able to grasp the impact of these non-observable phenomena through *sens pratique*. Thus, a combination of fieldwork experience, detailed observation of the surroundings, and the data from interviews may enrich the thick apprehension of the issues under study and must be appreciated by any researcher engaged in ethnographic research.

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