

INSIDER V/S OUTSIDER: STUDYING THE HMARS OF NORTHEAST INDIA

Teresa L Khawzawl

This paper will attempt to highlight the experiences of the author and the dilemma of being both an insider and an outsider while doing ethnography. In autoethnography, the researcher studies the 'self'. It involves the writing of the self and the social - the ability to transcend everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life. It is, however, noteworthy that in spite of being an 'insider' the researcher can be an 'outsider' due to different situations - be it cultural or physical. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight the experiences of the insider v/s outsider's viewpoints of doing autoethnography. Besides, it will also draw attention on the social life of being a woman in the Hmar society and how gender plays an important role in fieldwork.

"Stay back. Do not go anymore. I shall sing a song for you everyday", said my old man friend². "You made me sing all these days, whether I wanted or not. Once you are gone, I am going to remember you a lot. You made me feel like I have an important work all these days, and now you will be gone again...That too forever", he added.

I call him my old man friend because he had become 'my friend'. Initially, the villagers informed me that he aimlessly roamed the village, and even when I visited him he would say, "I have to go somewhere". But this did not keep him away. He came looking for me at the home where I was lodging during the course of my PhD fieldwork. He used to sit on makeshift bamboo benches outside the house, and smiling with half the air out of his mouth, he would say, "Well, what song do you want to hear?" I would reply, "The songs that you and your friends sang during your youth." With the walking stick on his right hand forcing it to the ground and weeding at the same time, looking left and down to the ground he would answer with half a smile "I don't remember any song. I cannot sing them either. My voice is not loud any longer".

Nevertheless, he would follow me to the kitchen. The kitchen in the Hmar society holds an important place, it is the hearth, the dining place, the parlour, and the guest room. Among the Hmar, there is no concept of separate sitting-room (parlour) and bedroom. Thus, the kitchen is where the hearth is. It is this place where data was collected. There are exceptions, however, in the present days. Some of the families have started constructing separate kitchen and bedroom. Nevertheless, there are arrangements for sleeping purposes for guests in the kitchen. Thus seated in one of the stools in the kitchen, he would shyly stare at the camera initially, but eventually sang reminiscing the days of glory.

Address for communication: **Teresa Khawzawl**, UGC-JRF, Department of Anthropology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong- 793022. *E-mail:* terekhoz@gmail.com

This is how autoethnography began in my life as an anthropologist. Autoethnography defined as “self- narrative critiques the situations of self with others in social contexts” (Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). As Reed- Danahay (1997: 2) points out ethnography stands at the intersection of three genres of writing, one being “native anthropology”, in which “people who were formerly the subjects of ethnography become the author of studies of their own group”. Thus this story professes doing native anthropology and the experiences that I have lived of “shifting identities” and “dualism identity” of an insider and an outsider. I understand ‘autoethnography’ as simple a way as of studying, researching scientifically, and having a deeper understanding of our own group of people. By own group of people I mean the tribe or community one belongs to. I would rather not get into the long definitions of what we understand by the term ‘tribe’ and ‘community’ - but I would like to point this out, that, we are born into one tribe or community and this becomes our identity.

Shifting and Dual Identities

In this section, I would like to illustrate on ‘shifting identities’ and ‘dual identities’ that I encountered during the course of my fieldwork. In the words of Narayan (1993), “How ‘native’ is a native anthropologist? How ‘foreign’ is an anthropologist from abroad? The paradigm polarizing ‘regular’ and ‘native’ anthropologists is, after all, part of received disciplinary wisdom. Those who are anthropologists in the usual sense of the word are thought to study ‘Others’, whose alien cultural worlds they must painstakingly come to know. Those who diverge as ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ or ‘insider’ anthropologists are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity”. How intimate affinal relations can a native, indigenous or an insider maintain in the field when the researcher is an outsider in spite of being an insider? How can a researcher be an ‘outsider’ when she/he is already an insider? Arguing that culture is not homogenous, a society is differentiated and a professional identity that involves problematising, lived reality inevitably creates a distance, scholars such as Aguilar (1981) and Messerschmidt (1981) conclude that the extent to which anyone is an authentic insider is questionable (*ibid*).

In this article, thus, I relate to the questionable shifting identities that are in question. Choosing to work on women’s role in decision- making at the household level, it required me to take two areas for a comparison in the North Cachar Hills District or Dima Hasao of Assam (India). Accordingly, a village situated in the remote area of Mahur township, namely Tuolpui, and another village closer to the town area with modern facilities of Haflong, the district headquarter, namely Muolhoi, were taken respectively. This was done to look at education and employment as the parameter enabling, disabling or vice-versa in the decision-making process in the household. Belonging to the Hmar tribe, one of the Scheduled

Tribes of India and also the third highest population in the District where the study was undertaken, I had an added advantage. To add to it, the villagers knew either my parents or my siblings or relatives. Therefore, it became easy to establish rapport. Being born and brought up in Mahur, I had my schooling in Haflong away from home and in a different environment from my own community. Thus, this fieldwork brought a kind of enthusiasm to delve deeper and merge myself in the community.

In the words of Srinivas, thus, on returning from Oxford to live in a village, “my study... would enable me better to understand my personal, cultural and social roots” (1976: 5). It is to be noted that Srinivas was educated in Oxford. On Radcliffe-Brown’s advice, he planned to conduct fieldwork in a multi-caste village called Rampura. His father moved out from rural Mysore to the city where his children could be educated. Likewise, in the places where I have conducted my fieldwork, I am the ‘native’, the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘insider’ due to the identity I carried as being born in the Hmar tribe but an ‘outsider’ per se when it comes to location and habitation. The villages which I have chosen are away from my hometown. Thus, the question arises as to whether Srinivas was accepted as an ‘insider’ in Rampura? The answer definitely is no, for he was an educated urbanite and a Brahmin. So the same question relates to me when I look back at my field experiences. I was not definitely type-cast as the ‘urbanite girl’ but, yes, the ‘educated Hmar girl’.

On the first day as I went to visit the village head man, he showed keen interest towards my research. Being educated himself, he had his own opinion and chimera about research. I was confounded at his comment: “What kind of research topic you have? Instead of finding new things you want to know these simple things about our society. You can simply sit back, imagine and write your thesis.” The biggest challenge I faced as an anthropologist in the field was that of being taken seriously towards the interpretation of my topic of research. When I enquired on some issues, I would unexpectedly get a curt reply, “You are a Hmar yourself, and you ought to know these matters”. This made me think whether I had questioned incorrectly or is it that it was too unnecessary for them. However, like everything else, as a student of Anthropology, I knew that everything has its own set of differences in diverse situations. Therefore, this posed as a dilemma for me as to the sameness of situations even in diverse places. Many a time I received vague replies asking me to have patience till I marry and one final day would know how it is to run a household. Yet, given the diversity in culture and across social groups even the most experienced of ‘native’ anthropologists cannot know everything about his or her own society. The shift and dual identity roles I carried, therefore, traversed me to such complications of belonging and not belonging at the same time.

Varied expressions of anguish on my ignorance were meted out. These, however, had multiple outcomes. My informants questioned my ignorance, “You are a Hmar yourself and are not familiar with these things.” On the other end,

some who understood my situation and were considerate and said, “She stays less in the village, so how would she know.” “These are all new to her,” some others would say almost mockingly sympathizing with me. Many times, therefore, I played ‘dual identities’ - of belonging to the community and not belonging at the same time. I found myself forced into being part of the people when all along I belonged to the same identity as did the people. Fighting with my inner self and trying to be part of the society was a struggle in some levels. I found myself stranded several times. Nevertheless, having my roots in the society, I was still a ‘native’ blending with the other ‘natives’.

Gender Affinity

In the words of my informants, a small little girl (meaning me) can study so much. Thus, there is praise, but at the same time, a hidden sign of derogation of being a woman. “What happened to our men? Why are they lacking behind the women especially the present generation? When we see the educated rungs, women fill it all! Men are invisible!”, many would retort. This portrays the problem of patriarchal notions existent in the studied group, and that men are and should hold higher positions and power in all fields.

Carol Warren has stated very clearly that the myth of the researcher as any person, without gender, personality, or historical location, who would objectively produce the same findings, as any other person has been increasingly challenged (1988: 8).

The development of an epistemology of fieldwork has made both women and men more aware of the influence of the personal characteristics of the fieldworker, the methods and objective of the study and the context (Golde 1970, Roberts 1981, Harding and Hintikka 1983, Bowles and Klein 1983). These studies show clearly that gender is only one of many personal characteristics shaping the course of fieldwork; age, social class and race or ethnicities are other influences. Still the fascinating question remains: in what way does gender- as the most obvious ascribed factor, and one that is visible to everyone- shape access to the field, the collection of data and the interpretation of the findings (Narayan 1993). “From the entrance into fieldwork in anthropology in the early twentieth century, women scholars did their research against the background of taken- for- granted andocentric assumptions about social life. Over time, these assumptions became the object of inquiry, resulting in a self- consciousness about issues related to women in the field” (Warren 1988: 8).

I remember my encounter with the social life during my fieldwork. It is not a confrontation with the andocentric concepts but more generally of what I understood and perceived of some of the patriarchal norms that women researcher face in the field.

Like everything else, this too had its own roots. Looking back at my society I would like to talk a little about gender role. When I say gender role here, I refer

basically to the activities that are tied with each gender. As a girl who is brought up in a place where there are majority of our own tribe as our neighbours, it is unintentionally planted in our mind the dos and don'ts of our society. In spite of receiving education outside my hometown, it was relatively the same when it came to the socialization process. Holidays were targeted for this socialization process. Hence, ingrained in the mind, heart and experience, this gender role was difficult to do away with even in the field. There were times I was expected to clean the house and leave and in other situations I saw myself forced to do those chores, I would be doing had I stayed home. Well, helping should come automatically I believe. However, here I am talking about the obligations for such activities due to the norms and practices that have already been put in me since childhood.

This definitely did not harm much of my work and I felt it as 'duty call' and imparted it religiously. What I want to point out otherwise is that of the socialization system that is instilled in us how and what should be done. These activities not only brought me closer to the family I stayed with, but gained their trust and confidence in leaving the house under my care when necessary.

I felt good and relieved however, for doing my part. As in the words of Schenk-Sandbergen (1998: 271), "Relieved because I realized that for me, as a woman, fieldwork methodology require me to intervene and to be concerned with the people involved. I understood the human and scientific dimensions and meaning of what later was called a 'feminist' methodology of conscious partiality, a view from below, research 'for' people (and in particular women), and not 'on' people."

Peggy Golde too writes: "Simply growing up as women in American society would have made the contributors (who were all women) aware of the kinds of subtle and conflicting pressures that may be exerted on women. Their own personal adaptation as professionals would have demanded that they develop heightened sensitivities about sex role, and I believed that this awareness, including an acceptance of 'perceptiveness about feelings' as appropriate to the feminine role, would make the assessment of the influence of sex easier for women than it would have been for men" (1970: 3).

There is a vast and growing literature on gender and fieldwork relationships. Besides restriction to particular worlds within settings, women fieldworkers are portrayed as more accessible, person-oriented, communicative and less threatening than men are. In a way, what I experienced in the field is that of 'being protected' by men. I was hardly alone except during the days. Even during daytime, there were men escorting me whenever they were available from their work. I took a little advantage of this following those men who knew much about our culture and tradition; in that when I am interviewing had I missed out on any aspect these men gave in their inputs. Besides, freedom to move around in the village found little place during my fieldwork. It is an unwritten and unstated norm that is followed unspoken and unquestioned- that a lady does not roam about in the village. There

was a part of me that said, “you are not aimless.” “You have a purpose in moving about in the village, sitting and chatting in the small tea stalls with some group of people, listening on matters pertaining to the society”. However, this did not come easy. Until the last day of my fieldwork, I was hesitant to move freely in the village especially the one under the urban area. These norms and values are not merely verbalized by people but they can be seen to have actually influenced the choices and behavior in real life situations.

In the Hmar society, like in many other societies all over the world, there are unsaid and unwritten norms laid down for members of the society. One such among them is the freedom of movement and speech for the women folk. Well, when I am saying freedom of movement and speech there is no laid down boundary. However, a woman does not move about aimlessly. A woman does not speak in the midst of men especially when the men are speaking or discussing. These are stereotyped for the female gender.

Recalling my night visits in one of the informant’s house, the husband would sternly look at the wife or nag her to stop intervening in the middle of our talks. This behavior made me fearful of him until the end. The picture that has come about from the field is that married women do not speak much, especially when their husbands are ‘doing the talking’. To be the perfect wife, the woman has to be submissive and show respect to the husband and not raise voice when he is speaking. This respect shown by the wife to the husband reflects the ‘manliness’ of the husband. Talks like, “*nuhmei mawng mei mei*” which literally means “mere words of a woman” portrays the symbolic status and value that a woman enjoys in the society. A woman does not have an identity of her own; she is a mere ‘partner’ to the man.

The Hmar society is patriarchal in nature, which is therefore, responsible for the development of hyper- masculine bias thereby tending to push women to traditional familial roles. A woman had no rights within the family and society in the traditional society. As a matter of fact, she belonged in body and mind, from her birth till her death, to her father and brother and to her husband after her marriage. The woman possessed nothing even though she did most of the work within and outside the house. The following sayings, among many others, clearly testify the inferior status of a Hmar woman in the past: The wisdom of a woman does not extend beyond the banks of a river; a woman (wife) and old fencing can be replaced any time; let women and dogs bark as they like; women and crabs have no religion as they like, etc. (Dena 2008).

In the present context, women however have come up in all walks of life. Their condition has changed. They move about when work demands. In spite of the progress and empowerment that have come about in the society, nevertheless, certain unsaid traditions are kept alive and followed. In the words of one of the male informant who found difficult to conform to change:

“Women never said a word at home when it came to decision making. They accepted everything silently. They were kind of ruled over by men. But today women have taken so much power in their hands. There is so much change; change is good, but these changes have more bad qualities than good could do.”

Advantages of Being a Woman Researcher

The constant turmoil that I fought between insider and outsider within me seemed to be of less consequence in the village; For people there were deep rooted in their feelings towards the tribe/community. People in the village were ethnically strong - they loved their tribe, and were united in these feelings. There was a strong emotion of belongingness attached to being from the same tribe. This feeling of oneness can get anyone from the tribe accepted - whether one belonged to a different village or a far away town. Being a Hmar and coming to a Hmar village was all that mattered. Besides the villagers accepting me as an insider, there is an important factor that has otherwise made a smooth entry. That is my gender of being an ‘educated woman’ gave me a bright and open entry into the village. People showed their interest in education and were keen to help around in the village.

One particular incident that brought me closer to them was when I wanted to conduct a Focus Group Discussion with the literate and illiterate women; they (women) agreed without any hesitation and openly made suggestions of how to make it successful. The women of the studied villages have a formalized association of their own. The leaders of this association quickly circulated among all about my impending Focus Group Discussion. The turnout was not huge but the information and the issues relating to women that were shared on the occasion were tremendous. The main focus of the discussion was how far women are involved in decision-making in the household. I was relieved when they shared their stands or positions with regard to decision- making. From the discussion, it was clear that women do play a part in sharing opinion. However, they were mostly acting as mere partners. In the words of one informant:

“It is not education and employment that equip women with authority in the household. Our qualifications do not let us over-power men. Over- power here implies dominating the man and or being authoritative over man. High income too does not give full power in the family. Our status as women remains unchanged, unaltered, impassive and unaffected. Nonetheless, we are the helper, the partner to the husband.”

This event made me realize their pride and support towards me. In their words, “How can we not come forward and see to what our young lady needs. Today the women are leading in education and other spheres and we are proud of that. We need to support each other to grow.” The connection and transparency that was revealed from this event was made possible because I am a woman myself.

The undaunting and altruistic support I received for being a woman researcher helped me get closer to the people and finish my task. Maria Mies’ firm statements on the extra quality and capacities of committed women social scientists can be

stressed here. She expands upon this and says that this extra quality comes from the fact that:

Women and other oppressed groups, out of their subjective experience, are better sensitized towards psychological mechanisms of dominance... Due to this inner view of the oppressed... women social scientists are better equipped than their male counterparts to make a comprehensive study of the exploited groups. Men often do not have this experiential knowledge, and therefore lack empathy, the ability for identification and because of this they also lack social and sociological imagination (1983: 121).

Mies' analysis of the cause of women's extra qualities as fieldworkers is similar to that of Peggy Golde's women's socialization. But, in the interpretation of the effects of this socialization, Mies states that women should realize that their own existence as women and scholars is a contradiction. Out of this contradiction grows a double consciousness which must be taken into account, not as an obstacle but as a political and methodological opportunity to do committed action- research. Mies recommends that the special talents of women fieldworkers should be used to contribute to the cause of emancipation of women.

The fieldwork context is, however, often more complicated and that raises the point Warren (1988) makes that women's special talents for fieldwork can also be seen from a different perspective: as a feature of the politics of gender dominance and submission that characterize so many cultures. Thus, the very positive characteristics of women as accessible, person- oriented, communicative and less threatening are also the ones which make women very vulnerable and allow for stereotyping.

Malinowski's precautionary suggestion to avoid contact with 'one's' own kind only subsumes the larger fact of being 'native'. Had I avoided, there would have been no fieldwork for me. It has been an enriching experience only to realize the 'selfless' support people are willing to render. To quote one of my informants, "Tell us whatever you need, we will display them for you. We want 'our girl' to excel. We want people to know us through you and your writings... If a small girl can come this far why can we not help..."

Doing autoethnography is not all a rosy picture. Here I would like to stress on the dual identity that I carried- of not belonging to the villages yet belonging to the community that the people I am working with. There co- exists certain boundary where delving on issues is easy and at the same time difficult. Easy because belonging to the 'native' they are close with you. They are satisfied sharing their opinion and their lives experiences. On the other hand, it is difficult because of belonging to the 'native' in the sense that since I belonged to the 'native', I am supposedly responsible to 'know' about the native's ways of live. Therefore, it was tremendously a daunting task that lay before me, to be able to draw a line in the kind of questions I posed and to the extent that even my behavior had to conform to the unsaid and unwritten norms that prevailed in the Hmar society.

Conclusion

I have presented the way I perceive anthropologists as 'insider' as well as 'outsider' and the shifting and dual identities that I played while conducting fieldwork among my 'native' people. I have highlighted the advantages of being a Hmar woman while deliberating issues that are sensitive as well as one that reveals the true position of a woman in the society. This experience has made me realize the fact space can create limitations and aloofness from 'our' own people but this does not matter to the 'native' once we establish contact and stay closely with them.

I would conclude quoting one of my informants who had lost his only son:

"My family is very impressed with the work women accomplish. When my little son passed away suddenly in a matter of a night, as a father who has only one son, the world fell apart for me. However, I am renewed and strengthened now seeing how women take the reign of education and establish them in the world. I am not sad but filled with happiness that one day my daughters will grow up to be responsible children."

Note

1. My 'old man friend' is one of the oldest men in Tuolpui village, North Cachar Hills, Assam, India. I met him while conducting household census of the village. During his youth, he led songs on several occasions. Thus, to find out the various kinds of activities in the olden days, I collected information from him. I also recorded many songs sung on various occasions. I call him my 'old man friend' because in Hmar language there is a term '*pu pu tar*' equivalent to 'old man' in English. Likewise, '*pi pi tar*' which is 'old woman' in English. With continued rapport building, we became close during the fieldwork, making him sing and sometimes dance. I called him my friend, '*ka ruol pa pu pu tar*' where '*ka ruol pa*' signifies 'friend.' Hence, 'old man friend' is an extraction from the Hmar language referring to an old man who is my friend.

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