

Riddhi Srivastava

ON EXPERIENCING THE FIELD: SOME ISSUES

Fieldwork tradition is the soul of anthropological research. It is an empirical method which forms the base of a good ethnography. It is a highly engaging, trying and a learning experience because every field throws open unique and infinite challenges to the researcher which at times require impromptu yet always rational dealing. An account of a researcher's fieldwork experience articulates the nature of his/her exclusive interactions with the community, trials, understanding of myriad and complex subjectivities, methodological limitations and their pragmatic resolutions and most importantly a better understanding of 'self'.

Training given for fieldwork in the discipline of Anthropology is very rigorous. It prepares young prospective researchers to intensively understand and practice its most cherished tenets of holism, plurality, empiricism, humanism, comparison, empathy, 'emic' perspective and 'quality' (qualitative analysis) while studying any culture. Anthropological methodology although having borne the attacks of post-modernism still continues to assert, without compromising, on qualitative ethnography and understanding of (and of course guarding against) juxtaposed subjectivities. However, even such a training cannot assure a researcher of an unchallenging fieldwork as one has to come across diverse personalities and situations on the field. Along with a new and distinct cultural settings, researcher's own personality traits and background also contribute to a 'bumpy ride' in the field. Hence, learning about methodology can only point out the obvious errors but the actual and peculiar challenges are always understood and resolved empirically by the researcher during the course of the fieldwork.

The present essay is an account of fieldwork experience of the author in Kathwara *gram panchayat* of Bakshi ka Talab development block of district Lucknow, U.P. The topic of research was on quintessentially beguiling and forever contemporary institution of caste.

Bias and Selection

Before setting out to describe my fieldwork journey it is necessary to elucidate that subjective bias is an unforced and an unavoidable reality.

RIDDHI SRIVASTAVA, UGC Post-doctoral Fellow, Upgraded Department of Community Medicine and Public Health, King George's Medical University (KGMU), Lucknow.

Howsoever much we are trained to deal with it or consciously try to avoid it we cannot always win a situation. The very first step towards research i.e. selection of topic of study blatantly reflects our inclination towards it. It is nothing else but our bias. Mine wasn't a different case either. Selecting a study on social stratification was something I was sure of opting for my research. It crystallized further into a study on the institution of caste as it has always interested me since my first academic encounter with it. The adaptive and dynamic nature of caste and its overarching influence over the Indian sub-continent is so curious that it perpetually calls for studies and analyses of it in cross-cutting planes. Thus, my first step of research totally 'laden with bias', propelled me to study the institution of caste. Such a 'bias' rather encouraged me to make sincere efforts for pushing myself beyond my known potential. However, to avoid any hasty conclusion on apparent endorsement of bias (a quick assertion thereby), subjective bias is time and again rightfully rejected in Anthropology and other social sciences when it is used in its etymological sense of unadaptive and rigid predisposition.

Selection of the topic of research followed the selection of area where the fieldwork had to be conducted. The chosen development block i.e. Bakshika Talab is one of the biggest development blocks of district Lucknow. It lies to the north of Lucknow city. Before leaving for field, literature was read on both the topic and the area selected so as to have a good understanding of the same. Readings available on caste are copious which in the initial stages seemed a colossal task and at times unmanageable to me. Besides, there was a constant fear that what if I may miss some good work on caste. Even though aims and objectives of the study were set out clearly, still every work on caste seemed relevant to me. It was only after much effort that I could curb my over-ambitious attitude. Delimitation proved the key to streamline my review. I thereafter selected my readings more judiciously.

At the outset I wanted to study the institution of caste from a comparative perspective given my 'allegiance' to the elemental tenet of Anthropology i.e. comparison. I decided to select some villages which had good approach roads and were near and in frequent contact with the neighbouring urban centre i.e. Lucknow and some villages which were far off and not in frequent contact with it so as to get a comparative understanding of the nature, functioning and impact of the institution of caste in the selected area. Thus, while doing an initial survey of the chosen block I came across many villages which fell in the category of multi-caste type villages. Initially along with some other villages revenue village Kathwara (not the entire Kathwara *gram panchayat*) was selected. Such a selection of villages seemed very promising to me as it conveniently 'fit' my research into the particular established convention of comparison. However, frequent initial visits and interactions with the people of Kathwara clearly put things in perspective for me that what actually should be chosen as the universe of study. People of Kathwara

revenue village, during the initial interactions never enumerated it alone while describing the village life. Their description always included its associated hamlets (*purva/gaon*). A statement very often spoken by the natives was *Kathwara mein aath gaon laagat hain* (eight villages are associated with Kathwara). The count of eight villages however is not administratively viable today but people still continue with their own understanding. The issue did not remain till the count alone, it altogether had an important social implication as well which was the active inter-caste interactions i.e. the *jajmani* ties (although on a decline) that provided an organic solidarity between the revenue village and its hamlets. For a resident of Kathwara revenue village or any of its hamlets any description of the village life isolating the two is unimaginable. Besides, for understanding the nature of political affinities of the people a study of the entire *gram panchayat* (which I hereafter call village in the text) was also essential. It was then I actually understood what village as a unit of study meant, not only administratively but also according to the local context.

Thus, ignoring the native categories of affiliation, both social and political, would have only fanned my fantasy of following a 'norm' and consequently having a superficial understanding. Uncritically 'fitting' the research into an established criterion threatens the quality of research whereas understanding and accepting 'emic' perspective always rescues a researcher from making a detrimental choice.

Challenges of gaining a formal entry and rapport establishment

Situations unanticipated begin the very moment one steps into the field. This is a unique way of pragmatic teaching offered by the field itself. During my fieldwork I had a unique opportunity of witnessing two *panchayat* tenures (in parts) under two different *gram pradhans* (village heads), which were ironically 'structurally' opposed (caste wise). First *gram pradhan* belonged to the traditional landowning upper caste (also a dominant caste) in the village and the second one was from a traditional lower caste. The first *gram pradhan* had a privileged status of belonging to the most affluent and politically influential family in the village. In order to gain a formal entry into the village I personally tried to meet the village head so as to explain the purpose of my visit to the village. However, even after numerous visits I could not secure a chance to meet him as I was told by his subordinates about his inability because of 'other important engagements'. I was told that he shall be informed about my work. I thus started my work as such. It was only when the *pradhani* term changed that I could meet the highest formal political authority in the village. The new *gram pradhan* was more open to meet outsiders as it was his first *pradhani* term, and also for the villagers a first of a kind experience when any traditional lower caste individual became a village head (on a reserved Schedule Caste *pradhan* seat) in a Thakur dominated Kathwara.

Another challenge during the early phase of fieldwork was establishing rapport. It was a challenge for me as the village which (including entire *gram panchayat*) I had selected was very big. There were over a thousand households, as such doing door-to-door census was practically impossible. The point to be driven home is that the kind of visibility and familiarity door-to-door census provides, was not at my disposal. The only way to make it possible was by making regular visits in the village. These visits were made to create an acceptable position for myself and also to establish rapport with the natives. This was a tedious task as almost a fresh start had to be made in the revenue village as well as every hamlet of it, as would have been required in any unrelated village. Randomly moving and interacting with people in the village was not useful, it had to be done methodically. Therefore, I chose to formally enter into the village through its social spaces. By social spaces I mean the famous temple complex in the village, government and private schools and *anganwadi* centres. In the local schools many local children were enrolled. Every government school had a native villager appointed as *shiksha mitra* (a teaching assistant) and a few locals working as support staff. The private schools present there were run by the locals. As I visited the schools daily, thus, the children started recognizing me. Sometimes the teachers sent me along with them to their respective homes or to a particular caste household which I wanted to visit. Accompanied by the local children, the villagers found it less doubtful to interact with me as these children acted as the 'initial local guides' for me. They introduced me to several others in the village. In their *tola* (neighbourhood) they boasted of knowing me, referring as '*miss ji*', who visited their school daily and felt privileged that I came to visit their home. Besides, frequent visits to the temple complex to collect data on it allowed me to interact with the service providers and also the temple management authorities. They all were local residents. As I regularly visited the temple complex to know its religious significance, thus, people liked my keenness for the local religious life. This worked in my favour as they and other local devotees who regularly visited the temple started recognising me. On seeing me in the village, they were quick to reciprocate and interact.

The *anganwadi* centres acted as another medium for my exposure in the village. I visited them for getting the population and household details. Local women visited it frequently. On seeing me there they enquired about me and later while visiting the village they only explained my purpose of visit to others. In this way my visibility as well as rapport in the village grew a lot with the help of the locals. Exposure through public spaces in the village proved to be the secure gateways for me to develop the initial rapport. With this my rapport with the natives grew thick and they started welcoming me to their home. The very fact that a city girl came down to their village, interacted with them to learn about them, softened the local perspective towards an outsider like me. This was not a first of a kind exposure for the locals. Earlier many government officials doing various surveys and some random visits by students

had also taken place in the village but the kind of interaction this time was different. As per the people it was in depth and sustained. I was 'accused' of asking questions which no other official, student or outsider ever picked.

Understanding the local culture requires a lot of efforts. My acceptance in the village depended solely on me. In order to manage an impression of acceptable personality in the village I remained open, unbiased and empathetic. I patiently listened and interacted with the locals to know about their beliefs, practices etc. Never in the slightest way did I try to offend the people and their culture. No difference in attitude was followed while interacting with upper and lower caste respondents which proved quite helpful for me.

As Kathwara is still a traditional village, thus, I kept my way of behaving, greeting, dressing, speech etc. such that it did not offend the local culture. People were very fond of my use of a typical lexicon which included the term '*aap*', which I was reminded time and again reflected my typical Lucknow upbringing. Since the beginning I used local kinship terms to address people like *chacha*, *chachi*, *baba*, *dadi*, *bua* etc. This brought a close mutuality between me and the locals. I was put in the typical role of a daughter of the village whom the elderly very fondly called *bitiya* and the younger ones called *didi*. Some middle aged people called me madam. Using local kinship categories favoured me a lot as at times I took advantage in certain situations like understanding and contesting the local logic on various controversial issues related to caste which otherwise would have been difficult to know. On certain occasions I initially found it hard to obtain answers especially on the cases of family excommunication and its exact reasons, temple politics etc. but in the later stages of fieldwork this was overcome.

Reference to a person's caste was not made during the initial contact as directly asking a person for it could have created discomfort especially among the lower castes and those lying in the category of *parja* (ritual service providers). It is so because both the categories occupy a low place in the local hierarchy. Thus, I always began my interaction by discussing about the constitutional category to which a particular person belonged to and only later turned to the finer details of their caste status and traditional occupation.

It is essential to mention here that even though people interacted with me openly but undeniably, what Berreman (1963) calls 'back-region' information and Geertz (1973) 'thick description' was obtained only during the advanced stages of my fieldwork. This really perplexed me as till then I wrongly assumed that I had won complete confidence of the people. Even though I tested the validity of the data at every step still it was only during the later stages that people came up with finest details of the village life. People's confidence in me was strongest when I was about to wrap up my fieldwork.

Challenges of Data Collection

Data collection is a complex process. Every field has its own peculiarities which poses several challenges to the researcher. One of the major challenges of data collection was people's lack of seriousness towards a commitment to an appointment. Initially people never refused for an appointment even after being repeatedly asked about their availability on a particular day, but on the actual visit they had their family and local obligations placed over and above everything else. On multiple occasions this led to the postponement of the appointment to another indefinite date. Important political figures in the village had a more dilly dallying attitude as they didn't like discussing upon certain issues which were 'safely guarded' in the village. Such information was more easily revealed by intermediate and lower castes, as they were the ones who were at the receiving end. However, with time when people understood the seriousness of the work became quite accommodating.

In the initial stages the respondents gave only 'safe' and technically correct answers during interviews to avoid any 'untoward problem'. It was so as no one wanted to be named as the one who revealed something intimate about the village. This, to my 'annoyance', lacked quality in the data but as the days passed by and rapport became strong this hindrance was overcome. At times people did not open up about some sensitive issues. For such topics I had to rely upon my key informant who provided finer details of the same. A key informant is one who is well informed and trustworthy, has a good analytical ability of his/her own culture and most importantly shares a great rapport and a level of understanding with the researcher. But a pertinent point is that besides having all these qualities, undeniably the person also has his/her own set of bias as well. On some very important topics related to local electoral politics and factions I initially depended heavily upon my key informant. He had good knowledge of it because he himself had been actively involved in it in the past. He explained his understanding of the local political dynamics to me very well but never revealed other important names that could have further provided me good information. By then I had met only those political figures whose names were obvious in his descriptions. Still there were other individuals as well who were although not very prominent political figures but had good knowledge of the local politics. My key respondent knew those names but he didn't reveal them to me. It was only by rigorous snowballing that I came across those people. Thus, bias of the key informant also works in the field which essentially should be guarded against in order to save the quality of data.

People with a patronising attitude and overtly friendly individuals were avoided as at times they guided me on where to move about in the village, whom to dine or interact with or not. Some particular caste households and some individuals were identified by such people, whom I was suggested to

avoid. In such cases I maintained a neutral and an unbiased attitude so that I may not be identified with any particular caste or family.

The dialect used in the village was Awadhi. It is not unknown in city but as it is not colloquially spoken here so I didn't have a good command over it. Thus, I learnt the dialect in order to interact with the people fluently in it. People took great pleasure in teaching me the pronunciation and meaning of some of the commonly used words and phrases of Awadhi dialect. This actually led to a development of a better rapport.

A Note on Methodology

For a qualitative study limiting oneself to any rigid criteria of selection, sampling method or technique does not prove useful. A prudent combination of suitable methods and techniques is necessary. In the previous paragraphs I have already discussed about the selection of the universe of my study and the role played by 'emic' perspective in it. To believe that every individual or household falling in the selected sample would necessarily give a good in-depth data on every topic is not true. All are not equally equipped for qualitative details on important and sensitive topics. Along with this, as the bias of the key informant also hampers the quality of data, thus, total dependence on him/her is also not possible and should be avoided for all sort of crucial information. It was for this reason that besides using stratified random sampling method I essentially relied upon a purposive sample drawn after rigorous snowballing. Snowballing provided me unbiased referrals which proved to be extremely helpful in collection of high qualitative data.

Use of hypothesis in any research totally depends on its aims. For my study I wanted the data itself to generate an understanding of the nature and present dynamics of caste in relation to other social institutions of the village. Here, I did not intend to test a previously formulated hypothesis to see the validity of some selected variables as for my study it would have only limited the abundant scope of understanding of caste dynamics. Thus, rather than proving or disproving an established theory I wanted my interpretation to provide a theoretical understanding. Beteille (1965) in his study in Sripuram, a south Indian village, has also completely avoided the use of hypothesis citing its unsuitability in serving the aim of his study.

The interviews conducted and the observations made in the field were done with local consent at all phases. Recording of data in the form of copious notes was avoided. Certain situations like interruption while conducting individual interviews were handled by improvising them into impromptu group interviews. Thus, every effort was made to collect data without compromising on its quality and also keeping in mind the native's convenience.

‘Self’ and the Field

A researcher is an outsider or an external element in the field. His/her presence obviously draws inquisitions among the natives regarding his/her identity. Here, identity does not mean only name, residential, educational or professional details rather it includes the social category as well i.e. caste in a traditional Indian village, to which that person belongs. From early stages of fieldwork till late I was asked about my identity i.e. my caste affiliation.

People very promptly asked me about my caste affiliation (*‘tum kaun log ho?’*). More than my first name they were interested in knowing my last name as it is indicative of my caste. In the traditional caste category I belong to a caste of scribes, an upper caste. Traditionally, the main characteristics of this caste are learning and record keeping apart from farming (in rural areas). Upper caste households directly asked me for my caste affiliation, after knowing which they further warmly welcomed me as I too belonged to an upper caste. They offered me food in their most prized utensils. Pursuing higher studies was considered natural for me as people of my caste very often go for it, do white collar jobs etc. Thus, I had the natural approval of the local upper castes as I was performing a ‘role’ naturally expected of me. The situation in the lower caste households, however, was a little different. These people were hesitant in asking me to have food at their place as it is not customary (in the village) for an upper caste individual to have food prepared in a lower caste household. At times they arranged for food that was ‘neutral’ like packed biscuits from the market as it is not cooked at home, believing that there is no issue of any defilement with it. Mostly it was offered in the packed way itself so that there remained no involvement of any utensil that may cause embarrassment on either side. Sensing their discomfort and in order to ease them and to have a smooth interaction I accepted drinking water and any food item whenever offered at lower caste households. This though surprised them. When I told my upper caste key informant that I accept food and water at lower caste households, though he reserved his serious disapproval for it but he never became unwelcoming towards me in any way. In the intermediate caste households I experienced both openness and hesitation in people while offering food. It is so as those who claimed a very high status among intermediate castes unhesitatingly offered food to me whereas some hesitated (those considered of doing not so ‘clean’ jobs). However, all the castes remained warm towards me. I would add that it was my successful passing of the ‘food test’ which garnered good rapport for me. The upper castes cooperated with me as they liked the fact that I was pursuing higher education just as expected of my caste affiliation. On the other hand lower castes considered it a good gesture that a city bred upper caste girl had no problem in having food at their place.

It was only in the field that I actually realized what significance and ‘social baggage’ my last name/caste carried. My last name/caste was asked by the natives so that they could determine the extent of familiarity that could

be extended to me. It does not mean that people there are unwelcoming or intolerant of lower castes but the social pressures of hierarchy created by caste governs people's actions while interacting with other castes. Such is the grip of caste on people's psyche. This actually triggered vulnerable thoughts in my mind during and after the fieldwork was over. What if I belonged to a traditional lower caste? Would that have influenced the extent of my acceptance in the village and reach to the data? In essence, what constantly intrigued me was, has my caste status affected the outcome of my study? The answer to this can neither be a true affirmative nor a true negation, but surely it cannot be undermined that the 'ease' which my upper caste status provided me to gain acceptance in a traditional village, conduct fieldwork with openness from the natives and collect intensive data was more than if I were of a traditional lower caste. 'Ease' here means acceptance with no prejudice extended by a caste absorbed community to an outsider like me. It explicitly, unrepentantly and ironically always favours the upper castes.

Beside caste status, the gender of the researcher also acts as an important factor while conducting fieldwork. Kathwara exhibits a pattern of gender segregation i.e. the male and female social spaces are clearly marked. To any household I went in the initial days, being a female, I was straight away led to the females in the family. This although helped in seeking the females' understanding of caste and its ritual aspect but their description lacked details of political and economic dynamics as they mostly remained indoors, specially the upper caste women. Lower caste women had a better idea of economic situation of the family as they contributed significantly to it, still they lacked intricate details of village politics. Initially it was somewhat difficult for me to cover the male social space. Gradually my constant insistence to interact with elder males in the family led to the collection of good data on agricultural practices, land politics, village politics etc. In due course I was able to obtain a neutral disposition for collecting data from the male and female social spaces after breaking past the 'barriers created by my gender'.

Thus, it is during fieldwork that a researcher is able to have a finer understanding of 'self'. It is so because when a person is juxtaposed to something 'other' or different then only one comes across one's real self.

Conclusion

Fieldwork is a fine learning experience. It allows exploring multilayered social and cultural realities. While exploring these realities a researcher is bound to face many unforeseen challenges. First hand experience from the field itself provides the actual skill to pragmatically handle these challenges, besides initial training.

For a qualitative fieldwork, a strong rapport with natives is essential. Finer the rapport better the quality of data. Besides, understanding and relying

on 'emic' perspective should be the foundation of fieldwork as that only helps to grasp social reality. Field exposes a researcher to various forms of subjective bias. A perspective gained from a wider understanding of native's view is worth than solely depending upon any individual's view point, be it of the key respondent's. Thus, subjectivity should be dealt with very judiciously.

Being on field does not assure a high quality data unless the researcher's attitude is open, unbiased and empathetic. Methodological rigidity does more harm than good whereas meticulous flexibility enhances quality.

Summing up, fieldwork is not only an empirical study of a culture rather a better understanding of 'self' is a 'by-product' of it. Fieldwork enhances a researcher's potential. It trains him/her to believe in and accept difference and to grasp newness so as to reach a deeper understanding of social reality. Every individual has a unique personality and a body of past experiences which guides his/her choices and decisions. People cannot be coerced to provide data. Thus, data collection requires skill, patience and respect for pluralities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Present essay is an outcome of the research conducted as a part of Ph.D. programme. The author is greatly thankful to UGC for providing the financial assistance (JRF/SRF) for conducting the concerned research. She is also thankful to the Department of Anthropology, Lucknow University from where this research was pursued under the thorough guidance of Prof. Indu Sahai, former Head, Department of Anthropology, Lucknow University. The author is immensely thankful to Prof. Nadeem Hasnain, former Head, Department of Anthropology, Lucknow University, for giving his insightful and enriching reflections on the paper.

REFERENCES

- Beattie, John
1964 *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods and Achievements in Social Anthropology*. London: Cohen and West Ltd.
- Berreman, G. D.
1963 *The Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*. California: University of California Press [Second edition 1972].
- Beteille, Andre
1965 *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press [First Indian edition 1966].
- Beteille, Andre & T.N. Madan (eds.)
1975 *Encounter and Experience: Personal Accounts of Fieldwork*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.
- Brewer, J.D.
2000 *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Epstien, A.L.

1967 *'Introduction', in A.L. Epstein (ed.) The Craft of Social Anthropology.*
London: Social Science Paperbacks.

Geertz, Clifford

1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays.* New York: Basic Books,
Inc., Publishers.

Srinivas, M.N.

1996 *Village, Caste, Gender and Method: Essays in Indian Social
Anthropology.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Srivastava, V.K.

2004 *'Introduction', in V.K. Srivastava (ed.) Methodology and Fieldwork.* New
Delhi: Oxford University Press [Third reprint 2011].