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GATEKEEPERS: FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES IN OLD DELHI

Introduction

Although the origin of anthropology is attributed to the need to document the people for better governance and the curiosity to understand those who were considered different by the 'so called' civilized Europeans, yet anthropologists, since then, through their fieldwork, have demystified the native cultural phenomena to the world. It will not be an exaggeration to say that from the very beginning of anthropology, fieldwork has been the *condicio sine qua non* of the discipline which is substantiated by the works comprising of early and later anthropologists such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Geertz respectively. Anthropologists are accredited to have set the trend to study people in their natural habitat and gain the first-hand experiences. A detailed description of the people necessitates the anthropologist to live among them and do the holistic study of the society (Haviland et al. 2008).

Anthropologists take help of a local person or an outsider, who is well acquainted with the area and the people, to familiarize them with the field situation. Such persons who help the researcher in getting acceptance in the field are known as 'gatekeepers' in anthropological vocabulary. Generally, the gatekeeper is of a high stature and one has to gain the confidence of the gatekeeper so that she/he can help the researcher in getting familiarized with the people and area.

The notion of field and fieldworker varies depending on the "situation and the experiences" (Godina, 2003:473). During the colonial heydays the notion of the field was limited to a European being the observer and the natives her/his subjects. This notion of 'traditional fieldwork' has been challenged by those who brought 'anthropology at home' (Jackson, 1987). The curiosity to understand own people and the disappearance of the 'exotic fields' have intrigued 'native anthropologists' to study their own community (Godina 2003:478). This can be attributed to two main reasons.

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The ability and competence of native anthropologists: Till the middle of twentieth century, the natives were studied by the European 'enlightened few' due to colonial rule. Improved economic and educational statuses have made the natives more competent to study their own people. Moreover, the questions asked by the researcher at home "…about culture society and so on are equally relevant anywhere in the world" (Godina 2003:478). The second reason is the thought of overcoming others' biases as they believe that the classical anthropologists have had their biases towards the people they studied, and to study the culture more holistically due to relatively unguarded access to it, has encouraged people to study their own people than studying others where the challenge of being an outsider remains intact[1].

Earlier attempts of the colonials to study the natives were mainly to document them for better governance and to understand their norms and behaviour so that they could foresee any kind of resentment and prepare for the subsequent revolt, if any. However, while doing so they have documented the endangered societies which are of historical importance. This kind of study of preserving the endangered society is known as 'salvage ethnography or urgent ethnography' (Haviland *et al.* 2008).

Auto-ethnographies, where the researcher and the people being studied belong to the same community, have also been criticised for being too subjective and shallow in nature. In fact Edward Said has gone on to state that "no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society" (Said 1979:10).

In this paper I have tried to explain, based on my experience, that there can be different kinds of gatekeepers in the same field and the religious gatekeepers, unlike the perceived notion, are not always the religious leaders, the others members can also act as a gatekeeper consciously or unconsciously. I have also shared the challenges of de-familiarization and rapport establishment which I faced as a researcher who shares the same religious identity but hails from a different part of the country.

Getting a Room

Working on a doctoral thesis on religious beliefs and practices among the Sunni Muslims of Old Delhi, I decided to settle down in Old Delhi to get an insider's (emic) view of the people. And "for gaining such knowledge, the fieldworker is generally advised to spend not less than one year with a community of people, in their natural habitat, collecting information about all social and cultural aspects, so that in the end he has a fair idea of typical annual activities" (Srivastava 2005:18). First of all, I took the help of various online sites which provide rooms on rent, contacted brokers online but it

was a futile exercise. Then I contacted my friends who live in Old Delhi, they somehow managed time to look for the room but all of them were on the first, second or third floor which were completely inaccessible to a specially abled person like me. Old Delhi is a commercial area, most of the buildings have shops on the ground floor and the people reside on or rent out upper floors of the houses. The stairs are so steep and narrow that only an experienced Delhiite can climb up. The second option was of staying in a hotel, the cheap hotels were inaccessible and the accessible ones were out of my budget as they were asking for eight to nine hundred rupees per day excluding the food.

After many failed attempts in getting a room, I thought of commuting to Old Delhi from the hostel where I reside in North Delhi, which is around eight kilometres away and generally takes twenty to twenty five minutes by road and thirty to thirty five minutes by metro. I started my fieldwork in June 2015. I was suggested by my friends, who are acquainted with Old Delhi, that I should go and meet *Imam* Ahmed Bukhari, who is a revered person not only in Old Delhi but also amongst the Muslims of whole India, as their family has been serving as the *Shahi Imam* of Jama Masjid since the reign of Shah Jahan who is also the founder of Old Delhi, the seventh city of Delhi earlier known as Shahjahanabad (Ashri 2010; Risley 2005)[2]. We, as it was my first day in the field I was accompanied by my elder brother and a friend from hostel, went directly to meet the *Imam* at Jama Masjid. After climbing thirty two stairs of Jama Masjid, we reached the air conditioned office which is situated on the left side of gate number one of the mosque[3]. We were unaware about the fact that the *Imam* does not meet anyone without appointment; however, his younger brother met us and introduced us to someone who he thought could help us. The man was an English speaking Urdu journalist. After knowing my objectives and the purpose of my visit, that is to get a room, he said "*Delhi bhot berahem jagah hai janab, yahan ke logon ne apne Badhshahon ko bhula diya, aap kya ummeed kar sakte ho inse"?* (Delhi is an unrelenting place, mister; the people here have forgotten their kings, what can you expect from them?)[4]. Then he claimed that, I had chosen a wrong place as my field, according to him Seelampur[5] would have been a better place to study as the people there are more compassionate.

After a month of my field, I met Maulana Jamaal, who is known for his public sermons. He asked one of his aides to help me in getting a room. The aide promised to get room for me within two days, with an assurance that if I did not get a room I could stay with him. That was the last time I met him, calls to him went unanswered. I continued doing my fieldwork by commuting daily from my hostel. The main challenge for me, after entering the field, was to find someone who could introduce me to other people in the field, to be precise I was looking for my gatekeeper.

Gatekeepers

The first day meeting with few people whom the younger brother of Imam introduced was the first and last one. Just like the field, the notion of gatekeepers also varies from one place to the other. Unlike traditional setting of field, which is generally among simple society, where the researcher gets access to some extent or sometimes full access into the society by just a single gatekeeper, the complex society provides a limited access to it, and there are multiple gatekeepers at different places at different time of the field.

In simple non-industrial society, due to interdependency of people we generally find face-to-face relationships among people, with a smaller territory and a homogenous population. As a result, only a single gatekeeper may help the researcher in getting the access to the whole society. The people, who have achieved statuses, whether religious, economic or political, are revered in such societies and if the gatekeeper is one of them the access to the simple society is generally unguarded. During my masters' fieldwork we went to a village in Udaipur, Rajasthan. The *Sarpanch* of the village introduced us to the older people of the village. From that day on we were regarded as their guests, the *Sarpanch* in between used to pay us a visit and enquire whether we had any problem[6].

On the other hand the complex industrial societies have means to end relationships due to self-sufficiency of resources. Heterogeneity, comparatively larger territory, and time constraints are other traits which make it difficult to have face-to-face or to have any interaction with others at all. Achieved status in complex society is enjoyed by a large number of people due to better educational, economic and political opportunities, which give rise to competition rather than cooperation. In such scenarios, the interpersonal bonding, if any, is limited to religious and business purposes rather than social bonding. In Old Delhi most of the people know each other as they meet frequently in the nearest mosque, however, the relation to each other is limited due to time constraint, as most them have their businesses to take care. During my field, I tried to interview some of the restaurant owners and the shopkeepers. One can herself/himself see that they do not have time, still, one as researcher, has to take interviews to know their views, as the observations have to be substantiated by the interviews without which the data will be partial and subjective. Some of them refused to be interviewed and those who agreed, out of 'sympathy', asked me how many questions I was going to ask[7]. I had to give up the thought of any possibilities of them introducing me to someone else as most of their answers were one liner or in yes and no.

The religious leaders, who often play the role of gatekeepers to researchers in simple homogenous society, are bound to have limited interaction with the people in industrial societies and hence, cannot play a very important role in the rapport establishment of the researcher. In Old Delhi, there are mosques located at every hundred metres and all the mosques

have their own *muezzins*[8] and *Imams*. The shopkeepers and the residents rush to the mosque after *azaan*[9] and return to their respective works as soon as the *Namaz* is over. Here, the role of the *Imam* is limited to just a 'religious man' who guides people during *Namaz*, which is very much in contrast to a simple society where the *Imam* plays multiple roles due to special regard ushered to him because of his achieved status. However, *Imams* of the mosque can be easily approached as a respondent, and I have interviewed many of the Imams for hours.

So, does it mean that there are no gatekeepers in the industrial societies? The answer is there are 'multiple gatekeepers' rather than a 'single gatekeeper'. Unlike a 'universal gatekeeper' in simple society which may help the researcher to get access into her/his field to a large extent for the entire field duration, the access provided by a gatekeeper in industrial society is limited to a particular time and place. I was introduced to some people in a mosque located in *Churiwalan*[10] by the *Imam*. However, the interaction was limited to me and them in the mosque itself. This kind of gatekeeping is limited to someone who is an outsider in the field irrespective of her/his caste and creed.

On the other hand, 'religious gatekeepers' are far more in number and they act as a gatekeeper, consciously or unconsciously, irrespective of one being outsider/insider or older/younger. At Jama Masjid, most of the people act as gatekeepers, irrespective of their caste, class, and status. For example, everybody acts as a gatekeeper towards the foreigners. They are not allowed during *Namaz*, inside the mosque, and if anybody will see a foreigner inside the mosque during those hours, she/he will directly go to the guards at the gates and the guard, in spite of being polite and asking her/him to leave the premises, will literally throw out the foreigner outside the mosque. Once, I was standing with a foreigner, I was trying to know his views on Indian Muslims, near the *'wuzu khana'*[11] of the mosque, someone complained and the oldest guard came running, grabbed his collar and threw him out. I was stunned and could not do anything except for being apologetic. These people, who act according to the rules of the mosque, it has been clearly mentioned at the entrance of the mosque that the foreigners are not allowed during *Namaz*, can be referred to as 'conscious gatekeepers'.

Wearing footwear inside the mosque is not allowed, although you can carry them inside your handbag or can keep them besides you while offering *Namaz*. During summer the floors of Jama Masjid's courtyard get extremely hot and sometimes one can get sores also. Once, I saw an elderly man coming towards the *wuzu khana*, he was carrying his slippers in his hand. When he could not bear the heat he tried to put on his slippers, the moment he kept it on the ground someone from inside the dome shouted "*Chacha jaan! Chappal nai, Allah ka ghar hai ye*" (Dear uncle, no slippers please, this is the house of Allah). Muslim women have certain prescribed way of dressing; one of them is

to cover the head. Once, a girl was going towards the dome without covering her head, an elderly man who also works in Jama Masjid shouted at her *"Musalman ki bacchi ho tum, adab se rehna sikho"* (You are daughter of a Muslim, learn to live with modesty), and he asked her to cover her head with the *dupatta*[12]. It is not that they had this duty of stopping people from doing what is not expected inside the mosque, their acts were spontaneous and they were asking others to act according to the norms of the community in which they were brought up. Therefore, they could be referred to as the 'unconscious gatekeepers'.

The second challenge after entering the field is to familiarize or de-familiarize with the people. If the researcher is from a different religion and region she/he has to familiarize with the people, and if the researcher is from within the community she/he has to de-familiarize herself/himself from the people being studied. However, if the researcher is from the same religion but hails from a different place, as in my case, she/he has to de-familiarize and familiarize herself/himself with the people at the same time. De-familiarize as she/he belongs to the same religion and is familiar with most of the beliefs and practices, especially in case of Islam which has relatively uniform beliefs and practices, and familiarize because one is outsider if she/he is not the member of the community by birth or socialization. So, as a person hailing from different place I was an outsider and I had to become insider, and at the same time I was an insider because of the same faith and I had to become outsider to tackle with the problem of being too familiar towards the study being conducted.

Outsider becoming an insider

When the fieldworker is not born or socialized in the chosen field, she/he is considered as an outsider irrespective of caste, class, religion and occupation. In Old Delhi, I was an outsider (as a student of anthropology) who hails from a different State. In the field before the researcher becomes an interviewer, she/he has to become the interviewee to satiate the curiosity of the people in the field, and there is no assurance that there would be a role reversal, as it is the absolute freedom of the respondent to answer or not. A person whom I used to meet every day in the mosque refused to answer my questions after interviewing me for half an hour, he enquired everything about me; from my birth to my being in the field. I, as researcher, still had to thank him as it was also an experience in itself.

The greatest fear among the people was of me being a government official, so most of them used to enquire whether the data I am collecting will go on in official record or not. Some of them were so conscious that they did not tell me their names and few people came back to me after the interview requesting to strike off their names. During *Ramazan*[13], I was interviewing a woman, whose son had gone to bring eatables to break the fast. Her son, after

seeing her talking to a stranger, started yelling at her. He even asked me to tear off the page; however, he was stopped by her mother from doing so. The fear of insecurity amongst the Muslims of Old Delhi is also due to political reasons which may not be relevant to discuss here.

The researcher instead of his capabilities and training may be considered as "…incompetent, awkward, rude and largely irrelevant" (Godina 2003:475). On the very first day of my field, I was suggested by the Urdu journalist to read the original text of Islam in Arabic, so that I could gain the Islamic knowledge. According to him, what people say and what has been written in the books by foreign authors is not accurate as most of the people have learnt Islam from secondary sources. And all the *Ulemas*[14] who have studied Islam go unheard as most of them do not speak English. However, while saying so, he neglected the personal biases and subjectivities, these *Ulemas* might have. He also made a claim that the westerners have always been biased towards Islam and they have tried to malign the image of Islam.

The fear of being judged by an outsider, who is considered as more educated by the inhabitants, can prevent the informants from answering and may also lead to fabrication of data. Many of my informants, who did not know the answer, tried to avoid answering my questions by claiming that 'I was more educated and I must know better'. At the same time the researcher can also be asked, how much she/he has learnt by someone who considers herself/himself to be more knowledgeable or who does not know anything but is smart enough to know from the researcher. This can, sometimes, be very beneficial if the researcher tells them the wrong thing, as they will start telling the researcher what is right according to them. However, the researcher has to be very careful not to offend them. The sweet mistakes are easily ignored by them as they consider, most of the time, the researcher to be a fool asking irrelevant questions which can be found in textbooks.

The second reason of being considered as an outsider is the place to which the researcher belongs. And the rapport in the field may be influenced by the image of the place to which the researcher belongs. The image of a person who is from a different state may not be good in other states including Delhi. Most of the people from certain less developed states migrate to other states in lieu of better economic and educational opportunities. As a result the local inhabitants start facing unwanted competition and sometimes overcrowding starts bothering them. Due to a lack of education, most of the migrants have to settle down as labourers and rickshaw pullers. In the field, the people might consider the researcher who is from a different state as a custodian of the place and culture she/he belongs. They might start asking why so and so happens in your place or culture. Once a respondent, when he came to know that I am from a different state, asked "How can you guys stay away from home for so long? Many who are from other states, who work in my shop, go to brothels for physical satisfaction and their wives might also be

having extramarital affairs, why don't you ask your people to go home more frequently?"

However, there are also the perks of belonging to a particular place. When the researcher finds someone from her/his native place, the 'we-feeling' thus developed, can help the researcher to form a strong bond at the first encounter itself. And that person can unravel the hidden truths of the field. The *muezzin* of a mosque in my field was from the state from which I hail, someone whom I had finished interviewing, shouted at him, "*aap ke gaon se koi aya hai muezzin sahib!*" (Dear *muezzin*! Someone from you village has come!), and the *muezzin* came running from his small room which was situated near the *wuzu khana* of the mosque. He was more than happy to meet me, and introduced me to many people who used to offer *Namaz* in that mosque and for that I am deeply indebted to him. He has been living there since twelve years and as a result he is well informed about all the activities happening around him. He did not hesitate to tell me, what the inhabitants tried to hide out of fear of being judged or bringing a bad name to them.

Insider becoming an outsider

Auto-ethnography reduces "the problems of mastery of language or codes of behaviour, problems connected with the climate, strange food and different standards of hygiene and so forth" (Godina 2003:479). It also reduces the time required to learn various practices and the meaning attached to it, for example as a Muslim I was familiar with various postures and procedures involved in offering *Namaz,* As a result, I was able to participate and observe them at the core level without doing it wrong and offending them. However, this does not imply that a person who belongs to different religion cannot do it, only the time and effort required in doing so will be relatively more than that the time and effort required by an 'anthropologist at home'.

The trust issue is taken care of when the researcher is an insider. At first the people of Old Delhi were sceptical about my identity, most of them used to think that I was a government official, but after knowing my name their behaviour used to change. The feeling of pride that someone from their religion is doing Ph.D. and working on his own religion used to make them more responsive and their doubts of me hampering the data and tarnishing their image used to vanish in a moment[15]. However, some of them still used to warn me that I should not put the Muslims of Old Delhi into a bad light, as according to them "the image of Muslims has already been tarnished by the west (*maghribi mulk*) to a great extent".

However, the researcher while working among her/his own people is not free from challenges as she/he has to make familiar unfamiliar. Burgess made a suggestion that "additional effort is required to ensure that the insider

researcher does not take things for granted or overlook situations that at first sight appear all too familiar" (Godina 2003:479). The researcher has to 'distantiate' herself/himself from his own people as "each anthropological study requires an observance of distance from the object of study; even when one may be a natural member of the society (by birth and socialization)" (Srivastava 2005:23). With the help of anthropological expertise the researcher can make familiar unfamiliar and at the same time unfamiliar familiar.

However, can the people of the field adapt to the objectives of the researcher keeping their subjectivity aside, as they might not have the anthropological training and might not have encountered such situation before. There should be a balance between how much one should familiarize and de-familiarize. Too much de-familiarization can sometimes offend the inhabitants, especially in the religious matters, where the researcher claims to be from the same religion. During my field, despite them knowing that I wanted to know their views, some of them used to get annoyed by the fact that a 'Muslim pursuing Ph.D.' wanted to know about Islam. They will cut short the interview and bid adieu. This behaviour can be attributed to two main reasons: First, the knowledge of Islam through secondary sources. Most of the Muslims of Old Delhi know about Islam through secondary sources, due to poor literacy rate, including public sermons. While being asked about the fundamentals of Islam, most of them answered what they had heard from their elders and mosques during public sermons and the answers were related to being ethically and morally correct, viz. do not do bad to others, help and love everyone, etc. Some of the respondents would get nervous while answering and ask, "What kind of Muslim you are? You do not even know the fundamentals of Islam!" And the second reason is time constraint, as most of the people have their own businesses to take care of, they will say, and I quote "Brother! You are doing Ph.D, you must know things better, and we are not that literate[16] what can we tell you?"

Disability and the field

Success in the field is not just dependent on the social skills; it also depends on the physical capabilities to a great extent. The researcher's physical fitness can enable her/him to cover a large portion of the field area in a shorter span of time. The physical impairment of any kind can reduce the efficiency of the researcher and it will take relatively more time to collect the same amount of data. Physical impairment affects the researcher as much as the social stigma attached with it. I, as a specially abled person, had to face such situation many times. A man once suggested to me that "you should thank Allah that he did not make you blind or did not give you any deadly disease, you are handicapped because of his will and at the same time excelling in life which is also his will". Once a person claimed that, I was wasting my time as there is a 'reserved' government job waiting for me. Some made suggestions that I should

get married as a 'physically fit' person can get married in old age; however, that is not the case with the specially abled persons.

However, the sympathetic behaviour of the people towards the specially abled person can prove to be beneficial in making rapport in the field. As whenever, someone will see me standing or sitting by her/his side will approach me by asking "where do you come from? You do not seem to be from this area, can I help you in anyway?" So the problem of me approaching them as researcher used to be taken care by my crutches[17]. While climbing the stairs of Jama Masjid I used to get help from others without asking for it, and the rapport used to establish before entering the mosque. However, the physical barriers imposed by the inaccessible architectural design used to limit my movements. Once after climbing up the stairs of Jama Masjid I used to hold up the urge to relieve myself as it was not possible for me to climb up and down thirty two stairs of the mosque to go to the washroom which is situated at the entrances of the mosque. However, as a researcher, one must not get discouraged due to the physical and social barriers as they can be tackled by the will and objectives with which the researcher sets her/his foot in the field.

Conclusion

Since beginning anthropology has immensely contributed in the understanding of mankind. The motive of the study of a particular society by the researcher or the government, as in the case of colonial rule, becomes secondary, when the study leads to a better understanding of that particular society. However, this does not imply that the society should be exploited in any way. Malinowski, as discussed earlier, was heavily criticised due to his opinion on the Trobrainders when his personal diary was published. However, the light shed by him, on the functional aspect of the Trobrianders in the form of Kula exchange, lead to the 'functional approach' to study society. He also popularized the long term field work tradition in anthropology.

The approaches and methods involved in studying a society have been different at different points of time and places but the motive of anthropology has been the same — to study the society holistically. The fact, that a society is being studied by an insider or outsider, matters to the people of the field to some extent as they do not have the 'baggage of anthropological methodology' (Srivastava 2005:23). However, it should not matter to a researcher if she/he keeps his biases aside, and familiarize and de-familiarize herself/himself based on field situation.

The field situations can vary depending on the 'place and the researcher'. The problems imposed by an industrial society and a simple society may be different, but the theoretical aspect of anthropology, gives a beforehand idea of the field, and mentally prepares the researcher for the same. Anthropology not just teaches the researcher about experiences of

others but also makes the researcher to experience the others by means of fieldwork.

NOTES

1. Malinnowski has been the critique of his own work among the Trobrianders in his book *Coral Gardens and their Magic* and his biases towards Trobrianders were heavily criticized when his diary was published in 1967 (cf. Godina 2003:473-487).

2. The person who leads the *namaz* is called *Imam*; and *Shahi* means royal.

3. Jama Masjid is one of the largest mosques in India, built by the Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, it is situated on an elevated platform which is about twenty five feet from the ground.

4. I did not expect to hear this phrase again; however, most of the educated lot quote this phrase to outline the apathy of the people of Old Delhi towards their own kith and kin. Once I was told by a respondent that the people of Old Delhi do not welcome their relatives how can you expect them to welcome you.

5. A Muslim majority constituency situated in North East Delhi.

6. The head of the village is known as *Sarpanch,* he belonged to the Bhil tribe and the village was a multicaste village. The caste groups were economically stronger than the tribals, still he was the most influential in the village due to interpersonal relations and the political status he enjoyed. He was also one of our key informants. And despite it being a multi-caste village, we were welcomed by all from the very first day.

7. They were sympathetic because despite my special abilities I was visiting them every day.

8. Caretakers of the mosque.

9. The call for prayer.

10. A small locality near Jama Masjid.

11. The place where people perform ablution before *Namaz*.

12. A piece of cloth used to cover the head of women in South Asia.

13. The holy month of Islamic calendar, during which fasting from dawn to dusk is mandatory to all the Muslims, who are capable of fasting.

14. Islamic scholars.

15. Most of the Muslims believe that the image of the Muslims has been really bad recently, due to terrorist activities.

16.   They will quote the class up to which they have studied.

17.   While sitting, most of the people used to know about my special abilities due to crutches. They will also enquire, "From where I have got them? Do I get it free from government or buy it".

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