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A 'NATIVE' AND AN ANTHROPOLOGIST: DILEMMA AND ETHICS OF DOING FIELDWORK

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Over centuries, ethnography has been the forte of 'Western' scholars studying non-Western societies in Asia and Africa. In the post-modern scenario, however, many anthropologists have emerged from among the once-studied communities who started studying themselves, and their own societies. These 'native' anthropologists, while studying their own groups and societies, and believed to be at an advantageous position, have in reality faced many difficulties – both practical and academic. The present paper discusses the problems of doing fieldwork, as a 'native' anthropologist. It also discusses the dilemma and ethics of doing ethnography in the 'native' context.

Introduction

"How native is a native anthropologist?" questioned Kirin Narayan in an article which appeared in the *American Anthropologist* in 1993. Those who are anthropologists in the usual sense of the word are thought to study 'others' whose alien cultural worlds they must come to know after a long term study. On the other hand, those who are termed as 'insiders' 'native', and 'indigenous' anthropologists are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity. This in reality, is however, accompanied by complex issues leading to a disadvantageous position, at times. Citing her own example, Narayan (1993: 671) argues against the "fixity of a distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' anthropologists".

Traditionally, anthropologists studied cultures different from their own over an extended period of time, sometimes revisiting the field again and again. They interviewed informants, engaged in the everyday life of the group, and recorded their encounters and observations in written field notes or field diaries. The researcher aimed for objectivity while participating in, observing and ultimately representing the culture studied. However, the advent of postmodernism in the mid-20th century challenged the idea of one grand or meta-theory as the ultimate truth for understanding or representing the world. Postmodernism led to not just one, but many possible realities. Members of the groups studied by ethnographers questioned the legitimacy of the representations of their world. This "crisis of representation" challenged the claim of objectivity in ethnography and brought with it new forms of research and writing. One of which is autoethnography and native ethnography, the latter a variant of the former.

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Native ethnography is written by researchers who share a history of colonialism or economic subordination including subjugation by ethnographers who have made them subjects of their work (Ellis, 2004). On a similar vein, Reed-Danahay (1997) says that such native anthropologists are people who were formerly the subjects of ethnography and have now become the authors of studies of their own group. In the description and delineation of the term, I too fall in the group of 'native' anthropologists or 'native' ethnographers.

I was born into a Garo family in the city of Guwahati (Assam, India). Besides ours, a few Garo families did reside in the city though at a distance from each other and in different areas and localities. Garos are a tribal group of people, well-known in anthropological world for being one of the few matrilineal societies in the world. Garos follow matriliny at five levels – lineage, residence after marriage, succession to power, inheritance of property, and a significant status accorded to the maternal uncle. Garos majorly reside in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya state, and in numerous villages in the states of Assam, Tripura, and Nagaland, in Northeast India, and across the political divide in northern districts of Bangladesh. As expectedly, Garos have many sub-groups, based originally on geographical locations, with distinctive culture traits. However, we (me and my siblings) grew up in the heart of Guwahati city, which is dominated by Assamese speaking caste groups. Nevertheless, our parents tried their best to teach us the language, and to imbibe in us our Garo identity as far as possible. As we were growing up, we made frequent visits to our parental villages (one in Garo Hills, and other in Assam-Meghalaya border), and our relatives visited us often.

I got introduced to Anthropology (as a subject) when I entered college, and since then I have not been able to get out of it. I have been connected to anthropology for over two decades, as a student, a researcher, and a teacher. For a decade, I have tried to study the Garos, my own ethnic community. Every moment in my research when I think I am close to an answer to understanding a social reality, I stumble into another complex vortex. Researching myself, and my own community led to a foray into the field of autoethnographyand 'native' anthropology.

In academic circles, it is a well known fact that, even if a 'native' anthropologist went on to make significant professional contributions, his or her origins remain a lasting qualifier. Even in the case of eminent scholar, M. N. Srinivas, his birth and 'native' background perpetually remained a qualifier. Writing the foreword to M. N. Srinivas's classic monograph on the Coorgs in 1952, Radcliffe-Brown emphasized that the writer was "a trained anthropologist, himself an Indian" and went on to add that he had "therefore an understanding of Indian ways of thought which it is difficult for a European to attain over many years" (Srinivas, 1952:v). But this in itself is a flawed statement. For many times a 'native' anthropologist would be totally clueless in understanding the real nuances of his or her society due to many circumstances. For one, just as Srinivas went abroad to study, many

'native' anthropologists went abroad or at least outside their own villages for education, thus creating their own identities which are not the same anymore. Secondly, every individual has multiple identities thus circumventing a completely new perspective. Thirdly, would the studied consider such a trained anthropologist as one of their own? This is a question open to diverse interpretations.

Despite not wanting to be tagged a 'native' anthropologist one gets inadvertently labeled as one since many of us go back to the society we came from and study ourselves. Many times one is forced both passively and actively to take up one's own society as the universe of study as it happened in my case. This paper while discussing my own lived experiences will discuss the dilemmas and ethics of doing ethnography (and fieldwork) in the 'native' context.

A 'Native' in Anthropology

The tag of being a 'native' anthropologist in opposition to a 'real' anthropologist is rather intriguing. This is as intriguing as the label of being a 'native' (read tribal) student versus a 'real' (read non-tribal) student[1]. As an undergraduate student, in a class of non-Garos, I would be asked to explain the Garo social customs in detail. One day, I was asked to explain the intriguing Garo custom of 'marriage by capture'. I explained the custom where a prospective groom is captured for marriage amidst much force and against the groom's wishes. This is a custom that is still followed in remote villages in Garo Hills, where a boy belonging to the correct and preferred clan is captured (Marak, 2011). I narrated this to a small group who laughed and enjoyed listening to my narration. Today, as a teacher when I narrate the same custom, I look at it objectively, and contexualise it discussing the intricacies of Garo kinship and social life. As a student, I looked at all such queries positively, and took the opportunity to explain with gusto what I knew. In hindsight my foray into 'native' anthropology began much before my professional venture, and rather unconsciously.

However there are many who were forced to swallow such queries as a bitter pill. Anamika, a Garo woman from Haluaghat (Bangladesh), has an 8 year old son. The young boy narrated how he felt ashamed to tell his friends at school what he ate. His reluctance to talk about Garo food was because he felt he would be mocked at if he told them that he eats pork (a taboo for the greater population), cockles, and various insects which are not eaten by the Bengali Muslims. To this, his grandfather had retorted, "It is 'our' food. Why should we feel shy or ashamed? In front of the '*ruri*' and '*bangal*' (non-Garos), do we not have the strength of ten tigers?" No doubt, this anecdote which appears elsewhere (Marak, 2014*a*: 171), reveals issues of ethnicity, and self-other perceptions; But nevertheless is a common experience for Garo students living or studying with non-Garo children.

As an undergrad my notice was brought to a book on the Garo psyche written by Tarun Chandra Sinha from the Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta,

published in 1966. The boys, who were leading the Garo Students Union then, pointed to portions of the book over which they were much agitated. How 'wrong' information could be published in a book, by a trained anthropologist, plagued them. I reproduce some excerpts below.

> "The *nokpanthe*[2] life itself is a proof of their homosexual tendency manifested in a social form. Actual anal coition between two inmates of the *nokpanthe* is very rare. Rubbing one's body against another's, pressing or even handling the private parts can be at times observed. These are definitely homosexual activities in the Freudian sense…"
>
> He goes on to say, "What is more probable is that possibly both masturbation and homosexuality in one form or another were present in the Garo society from the very beginning…"
>
> (Sinha, 1966:42-44)

He further describes bestiality in detail, an unheard of or singular phenomenon even today after 40 years since the publication of Sinha's book. A professional anthropologist generalizing a behavioural aberration, that he might have heard of, or witnessed as a fieldworker (even though he does not mention where he had conducted fieldwork or which section of the Garos he studied), is truly an alarming trend. It is highly likely that his informants could have been talking of singular cases or even pulling his legs (informants are known to do that all over the world) or replying to his structured enquiries. My contention with his work is beyond the sexual innuendos he presents. It is to do with general sweeping statements that he makes about the Garos. In his introduction he mentions that Col. Dalton talks about how the name Garo is given to them by the Hindus and that they call themselves *nunyas*, *lyntea* or *abengya*.

> "From the above mentioned names, it could be read that these names were given by more cultured plainsmen living in the borders of the hills. For the word '*nunya*' is often heard amongst the plains people of Mymensingh boarding (sic) the Garo Hills to signify the less cultured low class Biharis who are usually very unclean in their habits and eat almost anything they can get. '*Lyntea*' is very similar to the Bengalee word '*lengta*' which means naked, and lastly '*abengya*' may have come from similar Bengalee word '*benga*' which means dullards…"
>
> (Sinha, 1966:6)

As with many other authors, Sinha had a propensity to look at every term and word through his sanskritised lens. It is likely that the Garos were referred to as *nunyas*, *lyntea* or *abengya* by the 'others' who considered themselves "more cultured" as quoted by Sinha. It is, however, a proven fact that since times immemorial they called themselves *mandi* or *mande* meaning "man". This was later prefixed by "*achik*" and thus they came to be called *achik mande* which some say means "hill". My own experiences however say that "*achik*" comes from two words – *a'"a* and *chika* meaning "to bite the soil" which could also be one of the origins of the word.

Across the political divide, in Bangladesh, a substantial number of Garos reside in the northern districts. Banglapaedia is the national Encyclopedia of Bangladesh and it has an interesting entry on the Garos as given in the following:

> "The natural habitats of the Garo people are the hills, hillocks, deep forests and places near fountains, springs and other water bodies. Animals, reptiles and birds are their closest neighbours and animals that they come into contact with include rhinoceros, tigers, elephants…
>
> MIRZA NATHAN a Mughal army commander remarked that the Garos eat everything except iron. There is some exaggeration in this statement but in fact they eat all animals except cats which is their totem…
>
> Garos are matriarchal… daughters are more cared and loved in a family because the sons are to leave the home after marriage and are not treated well in the family if they do not marry in time. They wail at the time of leaving the home and in their new residence, they remain down-hearted in the initial days… Often, a newly married husband runs away, but is caught and brought back…
>
> Polygamy is not forbidden in the Garo community. After the death of the husband, the wife can claim anybody without a wife in the husband's clan to become her new husband".
>
> (Banglapedia, 2011)

All these excerpts make entertaining reading, but far from the truth. Ellen Bal (2008:1) talks about such images as "image frozen in time". These images become difficult to erase from the minds of the larger society, who continue to look down upon the tribal groups, leading to more questions on conceptualizations of self and the other.

Thus when I took up anthropology as a subject of study, I was prodded by many towards unfreezing these frozen images and indirectly requested to 'right' the 'wrong'. Despite these noble thoughts, my interest in anthropology grew as a personal quest in understanding myself and the ever changing society of which we all are a part.

The Observer and Observed

Over the years, I have worked, and have been working on the Garos of different regions – Assam, Garo Hills, and Bangladesh, and on a myriad of issues. The language spoken in all regions is Garo with variations in varying degrees and intonations. I possess a minimum working knowledge of the language, so I am able to make some sense of all the dialects. Every time I embark on a field trip, I am filled with apprehension, doubts and misgivings. I worry whether I would be able to be 'one' with the studied people, or whether they would treat me as an 'outsider'. Many times, I am plagued by whether I would be able to make sense of what I observe.

Fieldwork and data collection in all the three locations was rather complex and difficult. I reproduce below one of my problems of data collection, when I was working on food politics.

> "Many times, it was hard to make the respondent comprehend the question, and since at times it would be answered jokingly it was difficult to gauze the correctness or authenticity of the answer given. Again, on many occasions, the questions put were answered with a shy smile '*Naa masiaba*,' meaning 'You know the answer.' It was a rather unfair statement for in reality my 'native world' was totally different from theirs. This, I realize, is one of the greatest drawbacks of being a researcher of the 'same' culture..."
>
> (Marak, 2014*a*:12)

This perception of the studied people that I was 'one' of them was no doubt a positive stride in my fieldwork, but it came with its academic drawbacks. I had no way of knowing the cultural behavior of a group of people who stayed far away from Guwahati city.

I am a Garo, but brought up in Guwahati. Therefore, my 'native world'[3] was completely different from my informants. Therefore, I, too, faced the issues that Narayan had faced in her study. Just like a 'real' anthropologist, I needed to know the whys, hows, and whens behind a certain event. Many times, even though I could understand a conversation, I could not make sense of it. Just like a 'real' anthropologist, I had to take the help of field assistants, field guides, and at times even interpreters. Just like any other anthropologist I needed to be enlightened about Songsarek[4] rituals taking place in remote Gondenggre. In fact it took me months to understand the meanings behind agricultural rituals like *Mi Amua* and *Ahaia* (even though I understood the words and could observe what was happening), and how these rituals were integrated and interconnected. Therefore, mere observation was a farce. It had to be juxtaposed with context, and explanation, which ultimately made sense.

However, many times, the observer becomes the observed and the subject of animated discussions among the studied people. As a masters student we were taken to a Garo village in Goalpara District in Assam. In India, fieldwork is an integral part of a BA or MA course in Anthropology. However, many universities conduct group fieldwork where a group of students are taken together under the supervision of one or two teachers (Subba, 2009). All the students are given separate and individual topics on which they are to collect data and submit reports for evaluation for the degree.

On this group field trip, in the year 1999, the first day was uneventful. From the second day onwards till the day when we left, the people kept asking me about my family, and my short stories[5]. It so happened that many in the village knew my father, and so I was now expected to behave in the 'proper' way, talk in the 'correct' manner, and dress 'appropriately'. I was the only Garo student in the class, and therefore I was given a running feedback (by the studied people), on how appropriately or inappropriately my classmates were behaving. I was informed how one friend was dressed incorrectly, for she had worn a skirt with a long slit; how another had behaved inappropriately by asking improper questions; and how

one other was a borderline case of being friendly and openly flirting. Much of my time with the people was spent in listening to their animated talks about one girl or another boy.

Thus, as we try to observe as minutely as possible, we in turn become the subject of their observation – sometimes even more minutely and more accurately than we achieve as anthropologists!

As mentioned earlier Garos are matrilineal by descent, and all members of a clan consider themselves to be of one family even though in many cases blood relationships cannot be traced. When a child is born, he/she gets enrolled into the clan of the mother. Thus, if the mother belongs to the Raksam clan, all her children will be Raksam. All Garos who are Raksam will consider themselves part of the same family. This social reality is advantageous for a fieldworker, for it can guarantee access to families and complex situations. On the downside, however, it would give access to the people being studied to become a part of the researcher's life and work, and hence objectivity might be lost completely. Additionally, due to this 'familial' relationship, certain sensitive questions cannot be broached and discussed. The maternal uncle is accorded the highest status and respect in Garo society. His position therefore cannot be taken lightly, nor can he be slighted or made fun of. In such a scenario, a native anthropologist has to tread carefully in his/her interactions with the newly associated 'maternal uncle'.

The clan is the basis of all Garo social life. It is also the institution which regulates marriage and marital alliances. For every clan, there exist clan groups that are preferred or prohibited for such alliances. Thus, a Raksam cannot marry a Raksam, nor any of the other allied clans. However, there are other clans who would be preferred for a Raksam boy or girl. When two individuals belonging to two such clans meet, their interactions, though limited, is closely scrutinized. In my field areas, whenever I came across bachelors of the 'correct' clan group, I could not elicit any information from them, for they would either go mum or on one pretext or another disappear altogether. My experience over the years has proven that these bachelors of the 'correct' clan group turn out to be 'bad' informants.

Years back, when one of these 'correct' bachelors was cooperative, helpful, and a mine of information in the field, my 'new' maternal uncle and 'new' brothers informed my parents about the eligible boy, and my supposed interest in him, cajoling them to send a formal proposal to the boy's family. They even indicated, in jest, that they could help capture and kidnap him!

Dilemma and Ethics

> "... Silchina's mother was the first-born and that is why she inherited the parental home and property. After her husband left her for another woman, she remarried a much younger man though belonging to a preferred clan group. This man, Silchina's step father, initially was

an ideal husband, but later given to drinking and abusive behaviour, in which he physically abused not only his wife, but even his elderly in-laws (Silchina's grandparents). The clan members decided, after a series of episodes where the errant son-in-law promised to change but reverted to his old self, to throw him out of the house. When Silchina's mother supported her husband, and challenged that her uncles and brothers had no power to take such a decision, she too was thrown out. Thus she no longer was the first-born inheritress.

In the absence of the mother, it is the daughter who inherits. Silchina was by now married with two children staying in a village some 200 kms away, where she taught in the local government school. She had been brought up by her grandparents and parents as the first-born inheritress, and thus was now needed to look after the now sick and elderly grandparents. She could not heed to the calls for help and distress put out by her maternal uncles due to a very dominating husband who kept on deferring her return...

…Four years ago my grandmother passed away waiting for her favourite granddaughter. In such a scenario, the male matrilineal members (uncles and brothers) deliberated over the issue of a house functioning without a resident inheritress, and ultimately decided to pass it on from Silchina to her youngest sister who was residing in the same house."

(Marak, 2014*b*, *forthcoming*)

I sat with the above story for more than four years in a dilemma, not knowing whether I owned the story, and had the right to talk about it. It was the story of my grandmother who passed away six years back. But the story was of importance to the study I had undertaken, that of the position of the inheritress. Her status and position is not one carved in rock, but rather fluid and subject to change depending on situations. I sat on it, and though about it long and hard, then mustered the courage to send it two years back to a journal for publication.

In autoethnography, this is a dilemma we all face. Whose story are we telling? Is it our own story? Whose story are we actually narrating? Do we even have the right to tell a story which we are privy of, only on account of being accepted as a part of the family or the society? Do we own a story because we tell it? A story is never made in a vacuum, as Chang (2008) says, and there are others who are always visible or invisible participants in our story.

In the course of my fieldwork in Achiksong (Assam), a 25 year old woman, the inheritress daughter of a house insinuated that her aunt (mother's younger sister) regularly stole fish from their pond. The anecdote is reproduced below.

"Frani's father got a pond dug some five years back to rear fish. This pond is adjoined to her aunt's house. Frani discussed how much money was spent in digging the pond, preparing it, buying the fish spawn (Japanese coir) from the agricultural department and feeding them (with market-bought fish feed, *maida* balls and bread). They usually waited for the fish to become big enough before catching them for consumption. Whenever they locate big fish on the surface, or jumping (*bilchroka ko nika*), they would take out the net to catch the next day. However, they very rarely had been able to catch big ones. The mystery of the missing big fish was revealed when the aunt's children talked about it — it was the aunt's husband who was regularly fishing on the sly. Tangsi, Frani's mother chipped in, "They should have

> asked us, or at least told us." Her husband retorted, "But what can you say, they are family. We have to tolerate only."
>
> (Marak, 2014*a*:55)

However, the bone of contention in the above story, the pond and the fish in it, resurfaced much later in my discussion with the aunt. We were conversing about expenses - how she and her family managed her daily food and the children's school fees - since her husband was a daily wage earner, and they did not possess sufficient land to cultivate. This is what she had to say.

> "You know my sister – the one who inherited everything. Her husband is working in a government job, and all her children are grown up. Her eldest daughter is working in a school too. They can help us out if they want. But they do not. Last year they asked for my daughter to help out with the household work, and that they would pay her school fees. But is it enough? What about my other children? What about their food? I am saying this, because it is my mother's house, my mother's land, my mother's produce that they are all enjoying. What about me? Just because I am not the one who inherited my children have to starve? You know that pond," and she pointed it out, "that pond, my husband dug it. He cleans it up regularly. My children feed the fish. But what do they do when they catch the fish? They do not give us any at all. We are joint owners too. We might not have spent money, but gave all our labour, for days together. It does not count? You tell me, does it not count?"
>
> (Author's Fieldnotes, 2006)

When I was made a part of the conversation and was asked the above question, I was in an ethical dilemma. I did not know what to answer, and what to say – for I already was privy to the bone of contention. It would have been wrong on my part to divulge what one was saying about the other. All I could do was nod my head, and make some noises. However, the above incident, like many others, proved one thing – that among Garos things have changed. Reciprocity, which was once the backbone of Garo society, is on the decline. This has markedly gone down, and "kinship is no longer enough" (Marak, 2014*a*: 158).

Conclusion

The label of a 'native' anthropologist is a matter of constant self-introspection. Besides, being a Garo, which is an ascribed status, I am also an anthropologist by choice. However, in this self-identity, I am constantly surrounded by many other identities, some of them constant, while others constantly shift. In this changed setting, it is more profitable to focus on shifting identities in relationship with the people and issues an anthropologist seeks to represent. Even if one can lend into a particular social group without the quest of fieldwork, the very nature of researching what to others is taken-for-granted reality creates an uneasy distance.

I was born to a Garo mother and Garo father, but my mother came from the Assam-Garo Hills border areas with its own complexities, and my father from the

Garo Hills region. They both spoke different dialects, and acted and behaved differently in different situations. As my own fieldwork in different areas have revealed there is no one grand Garo culture anywhere in the world. Added to this complex family front, I grew up among non-Garos, and studied and lived among non-Garos my whole life. In my growing up years, I have tried but found myself in the periphery of the greater Assamese culture. On the other hand, I have also tried, but found myself different from the greater Garo Hills culture. Over the years, I have learnt my experiences of the Garo and Assamese cultures have led to my identity, and the anthropological gaze that I have developed. No doubt, all of us has multiplex identities – but some of us more than others.

While doing fieldwork, it is because of newly formed ties and associations that make our task either easier or harder to accomplish. Thus, if a 'new' brother is the priest, or a 'new' sister the priestess, it would give entry to all intricate rituals. However, if a 'new' maternal uncle is embroiled in a dispute with the village headman, this could lead to complications. Additionally, if one of the informants is later found to be a bachelor of the 'correct' clan group for a Garo woman researcher, than he might just do a disappearing act. This reveals that every researcher while doing fieldwork in the 'native' context, has to constantly face and sift through situations that are culture-specific.

Much of the dilemma and ethics that plague 'native' ethnographers also plague other ethnographers. The question of what to write and what not to, what to reveal and what not to, and what to do and not do in crises afflicts all. It however becomes acute in the case of autoethnographers writing about their own societies since after the deed is done, they will go back to their respective societies. The risk is not that the secrets and confidences will be spilled to outsiders, but that such confidences will be exposed to members of their family, friendship or kinship networks.

Notes

1. A tribal is considered 'backward', 'primitive' and one living amidst nature even in a state like Assam, where a large number of people belonging to different tribal groups inhabit. As students, tribal children are considered weaker (in studies) than their non-tribal counterparts. Thus, being called out a 'tribal' is considered an insult to many.
2. The *nokpante*, wrongly spelled as *nokpanthe* by Sinha (1966), refers to the bachelor's dormitory existent in Garo society. This was a place of socialization and education for young Garo boys. The question of sexuality or sexual promiscuity inside or within the premises of the *nokpante* is unknown and unheard of. This is likely since the institution was considered sacred, wherein many spirits resided.
3. I was born in the city of Guwahati in the state of Assam (India), and lived with Assamese neighbours and played with Assamese friends. I was a Garo by birth, but I lived and grew amidst non-Garos. Thus my 'Garo world' was substantially different from my informants.
4. Songsarek Garos continue to follow their traditional religion with beliefs in a number of gods and goddesses. A number of rituals exist for the propitiation of these deities which

they believe would lead to bountiful produce, good health, and wealth. At present, over 90 % of Garos are Christians, and the Songsareks comprise a minuscule minority.

5. As a High School student, I used to dabble with creative writing – short stories and poems on Garo life. These regularly appeared in a monthly magazine which reached almost all the Garo inhabited areas in Northeast India. On this occasion, the villagers knew who I was and the stories that I had penned.

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