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# MEANDERING THROUGH FIELDWORK

## ETHNOGRAPHY IN POST-TSUNAMI, WAR-AFFECTED BATTICALOA

KATHARINA THURNHEER

When I formulated the title for my research project – «Life Beyond Survival» – in early 2004, I did not imagine that I would get as close to its direct meaning concerning life and death as I eventually did. The destruction and suffering caused by the tsunami at the end of that year as well as the deterioration in internal Sri Lankan political relations, had a direct impact on my research. On the one hand, these developments actually helped highlight my principal interest in exploring social processes for coping with disruption and insecurity in the island's war-torn east. On the other hand, the notion of survival became particularly meaningful after the tsunami and amidst the daily violent incidents arising from the armed conflict. Conducting research in such a context was often not self-evident and I came to rely to a high degree on improvisation and adaptation.

As I present my project in this article, I take the opportunity to consider some of the challenges raised by undertaking ethnographic work in zones experiencing instability and conflict. I wish to address this issue by introducing the specific circumstances of my fieldwork, outlining some of the problems I encountered and some of the strategies I resorted to. For instance, what

was my role to be in a situation where armed persons directly threatened the life of research participants? And how can data be generated and protected in such circumstances? Looking at the specific may reveal the commonality of some experiences. In that sense I would also like this article to invite us to rethink some of the core issues relevant to fieldwork in less extreme situations.

### APPROACHING THE NATURE OF THE CATASTROPHE

My fieldwork took place in the semi-urban coastal area of Batticaloa, Eastern Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>. This is an area ravaged by more than twenty years of armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) along with other related conflicts. A ceasefire agreement made in February 2002 never fulfilled the hopes for peace in the region, and the split of the eastern commander from the overall LTTE leadership two years later led to a tremendous deterioration in the local security situation. The tsunami of 26 December 2004 overran large areas of the coastline killing almost 3 000 people and rendering more than double that number homeless in Batticaloa district alone (Joint Report of

<sup>1</sup> The main fieldwork period extended from February to November 2005 and was sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and the Commission for Research Partnership in Developing Countries (KFPE). It was preceded by a preparatory stay of three months in 2004 and followed by a seven month period in 2006 and a further two months in 2007 (during 2006 and 2007 I was working part-time as a consultant in the field).

GoSL and Development Partners 2007)<sup>2</sup>. Soon after, representatives of international humanitarian aid arrived on the local scene, rapidly and significantly increasing the number of foreign organizations. Poorly coordinated interventions characterized the relief and reconstruction work while the political parties wrestled over resource allocations to meet their own agendas. Within a year of the tsunami, the outbreak of yet another period of armed hostilities was imminent. By 2006, the country had returned to a full-fledged war, including shifts in the de-facto areas of military control (International Crisis Group 2006).

Developments in Sri Lanka thus point to the importance of social parameters regarding the impact of natural disasters and the subsequent reconstruction processes. As Frerks and Klem (2005) argued early on, the effects of the tsunami in the Sri Lankan national context must be understood as a further consequence of the war. Conversely, the politics of aid may have contributed to the renewed escalation of armed conflict (cf. Goodhand and Klem 2005; Gazagne 2006). The significance of gender relationships, with respect to both vulnerability and the capacity to cope with disaster, has been demonstrated in other global contexts (cf. Enarson and Morrow 1998) and this is confirmed by the gendered death tolls reported for the tsunami<sup>3</sup>. Since women and children made up the majority of the casualties, it has to be assumed that men had a greater chance of survival due to their particular locations at the time the waves struck the coast (e.g., out at sea, fishing, where the waves passed underneath their boats) or that they were better prepared for life-preserving behaviour (e.g., they were more able to climb up trees or more prepared to save themselves before others).

Against this backdrop my research aims to explore the social processes involved in dealing with the collective crisis brought about by the conjunction of the destructive forces of the tsunami and the socio-political and socio-economic instability resulting from the armed conflict. What specific dynamics develop in a war-affected area in the aftermath of a natural disaster? How do women and men re-establish, if at all, a sense of «normalcy» in their everyday lives? In what ways are personal and social relationships negotiated and transformed in these processes?

These are the core questions guiding my research; some of the practical challenges they present are described in the following sections.

### «EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING SUDDENLY TO US»

In March 2005, I started to work with families from a fishing village that had been completely destroyed by the tsunami. Having survived the waves that swept away their former settlement – reducing it within minutes to a desert of sand, rubble, knocked-over walls and miraculously still-standing palm trees – they had moved from hospitals, temples and schools to camps for the displaced in public school compounds in Batticaloa town. In such surroundings life meant staying with strangers who might become friends and with relatives whose control over oneself one may not want to tolerate. The camps brought people together in their grief and anger, paved the way for mutual support and blame, formed a stage for personal dramas and violent fights, and helped craft love stories and humiliations. External interventions encouraged a dependence on distributions in cash and kind, fostered mutual rivalry for such goods and may well have also contributed to an increase in alcoholism. There was fun and disillusionment to be experienced with those who came to fill in forms, play with the children, listen to (female) victims, consult with (male) camp representatives, or scold the women for dirty toilets and wasted drinking water.

Suddenly, one morning – after weeks of rumours – people were all told to move to their transitional shelters on the same day. The news resulted in a struggle over house numbers, the packing up of newly acquired belongings, tears of anger and stress as well as some degree of happy anticipation concerning the possibility of life in a new place. Since that day in 2005, the families have been living in tin-sheet huts built with foreign money, «boiling» in the heat, putting up with the risk of their «children's necks being cut by tin-sheets» when strong winds blow – as was said to have happened during the tsunami – and getting their huts flooded during the rainy seasons. While the construction of their permanent houses had only just begun as this was being written, the families' camps and

<sup>2</sup> Sri Lanka counts among the countries worst affected by the tsunami, with more than 35 000 people killed and almost a million displaced (Joint Report of GoSL and Development Partners 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Gender disaggregated data is only available from Ampara district but there is considerable evidence that in general more women than men died in the tsunami. In Ampara 3 677 women as opposed to 1 926 men lost their lives (Joint Report of GoSL and Development Partners 2007).

their surroundings have had to accommodate more than one hundred thousand newly displaced persons seeking refuge from the shelling occurring just a few kilometres away. Even before these mass movements of people happened, though, the evidences of war (with its daily explosions, intrusions of armed personnel in uniforms or plain clothes, murders, abductions, and mass «cordon and search» operations by security forces) had come to be a «normal» feature of everyday life once again.

## FIELDWORK STRATEGIES

Not surprisingly in these circumstances, managing to keep a constant balance between simply observing events as they unfolded and getting involved as a concerned person proved to be a major challenge. Particularly in the beginning, I found it important to single myself and my assistant out as «only researchers» or as «just students» in order to build up relationships that would not primarily be perceived as potential sources of material benefit. Given the surplus (rather than lack) of resources in the context of post-tsunami aid, that position was (from a material point of view) not too difficult to maintain, despite the often appalling conditions in the camp and the people's voiced anger about the nature and/or the results of foreign interventions. What seemed obvious to me was the existence of a gap in meaningful communication between representatives of the relief and reconstruction sector and the affected men and women, the so-called beneficiaries. Obviously it was interesting to take note – as a researcher keeping her distance – of the resulting chaotic events, rumours and atmosphere of mutual suspicion that reigned in the camps. At the same time I had access to sources of relevant information concerning, for example, relocation plans, and it would have been quite unthinkable for me not to share such knowledge with the families with whom I was interacting daily.

Other difficulties in the field pertained to the collection and protection of data. The method of life-story interviews, for instance, which had seemed so appropriate to me before commencing fieldwork, suddenly seemed unsuitable. Basic requirements were hardly being met. The crowded camps did not allow any privacy and the constant movement of people coupled with unpredictable events (fights, sudden meetings, the arrival of large numbers of people due to rumours about the possible distribution of goods, etc.) could never have assured interviews free of interruption; the level of noise also made audio recording impossible.

Furthermore, the very act of recording – a performance of «foreigner interviewing a tsunami victim» – would undermine my image as a student and fuel the resentment felt by camp residents concerning the greater chances some might have of obtaining more relief items by means of personal contacts compared to others. By the time my assistant and I had become more familiar figures to the families and life in the transitional shelters had changed enough to allow some privacy, the security situation had further deteriorated. In fact, the day we had prepared everything for doing interviews, hundreds of army and police swarmed in, repeatedly and explicitly threatening the people with immediate death if they were found to be involved in, or supporting, «terrorist» acts. Later again, frequent incidents involving armed criminality further accentuated the local conflict situation – I finally left the field without any audio records. The risk of having intimate personal accounts falling into the hands of security forces or gang members was one I was not willing to take.

Overall, participant observation proved to be the most appropriate method of data collection in this context of general unpredictability, lack of security and of mourning for deceased family members. Our longer-term presence and the many informal conversations we had paved the way for observing how life in the camps and shelters was shaped by outside interventions and how individuals had their own particular ways of influencing them. Such an approach allowed us to discern patterns concerning which particular memories would be evoked in such situations and to gain some insight into the roles that the different armed groups played in the present (and had played in the past) in everyday life. We would also listen to painful personal accounts retold in unexpected moments. Thus, the strength of social anthropology's core research method, with its emphasis on close relationships with participants, was confirmed. However, more problematic aspects of the method became similarly obvious, problems concerning, for example, the confidentiality of information. During the course of fieldwork we increasingly refrained from taking notes on the spot. Instead we trained ourselves to memorize the events of the day, the information we had obtained or the content of particular conversations. In what was at times a painstaking team process of reconstruction, we would write down detailed fieldnotes later in the evening or during the following days, covering up the most sensitive issues with acronyms and/or by writing in German, as opposed to English. These protective measures in turn demanded, from my perspective, particular efforts in order to make

my research interests transparent to the participants. Yet again, ambiguity was desirable when confronted with armed persons. When this scenario occurred, it was actually very interesting to note how everyone present would contribute in order to create some kind of credible fiction to explain my presence<sup>4</sup>.

In conflict zones, the very real risk of being physically harmed may thus bring to light the tension between concealing and sharing, between richness in details and protection of data sources, and between interference and disengagement, inherent to any ethnographic work. The potentialities and limitations of a method which generates data by means of friendly and trusting relationships may become even more accentuated in contexts where the matters discussed are so intimately linked to life and death, and where the information acquired may be so potentially harmful. For example, during highly emotional accounts or in moments involving aggression and threats, I preferred to rely on a basic familiarity with concepts of mediation than on a mere background in social anthropology. I regretted not having better skills in human rights monitoring, too. I often witnessed different forms of harassment of civilians by government forces or other armed groups. While my presence during such events – sometimes coupled with interventions that could be as simple as asking the aggressors for some explanations – was appreciated by many who experienced the intimidation, any notion of being able to give any form of protection would evidently be illusory. More to the point, the greater my involvement, the greater the risk may have been for those concerned. My attitude was therefore based on discussing, directly or indirectly, the possible dangers and opportunities of redress with research participants. In this respect, paying attention to silences in conversations was important for their security as well as for that of my assistant and my own. In the course of fieldwork relationships with participants developed an intensity that ultimately gave the reason for me to return to the field in the following years. Yet, as Stacey (1988) remarked in her critical assessment of a feminist ethnography – outside of any armed hostilities or natural disaster – the risks of «betrayal» can hardly be resolved in social-anthropological work: every new tragedy in the lives of so-called informants provides more interesting material for the production of scientific texts.

#### «WITNESSING»: OBLIGATION OR PRIVILEGE?

Ethnographic work in conflict zones raises questions that are in many respects familiar to ethnographers working in more conventional fields. The urgency with which these questions emerge, however, transforms the normal into the extreme and may render some of the customary ways of dealing with them inappropriate. As Kovats-Bernat (2002) argues, fieldworkers in violent contexts need to improvise their methodologies while the discipline as a whole may be challenged to rethink some of its basic assumptions: «What are needed are updated field strategies that address the unique considerations and concerns of the anthropologist conducting research in *dangerous fields* – those sites where social relationships and cultural realities are critically modified by the pervasion of fear, threat of force, or (ir)regular application of violence and where the customary approaches, methods, and ethics of anthropological fieldwork are at times insufficient, irrelevant, inapplicable, imprudent, or simply naive» (ibid.: 208f.).

The difference between ethnography in conflict zones and other settings lies in this all-permeating, existential dimension of danger. It renders it impossible, as I found in my research, to perceive instability and violence as merely the context of something else one is examining. Or, as Kovat-Bernat (2002: 212) argues, it precludes «circumventing» violence, and any attempt to select pure data not contaminated by it. The ethnographer her/himself cannot avoid this pervasive force. More often than not, s/he is entangled in these dynamics and finds her/his own security depending on the knowledge of research participants and other interlocutors in the field. Viewed from this position, Kovat-Bernats criticizes recent postulates of the American Anthropological Association in its *Codes of Ethics* and *Principles of Professional Responsibility* suggesting that they create more confusion rather than supporting fieldworkers in «dangerous fields». Calls for the protection of participants' physical and psychological welfare conjure up antiquated visions of the researcher as the one in control of situations and can hardly be helpful for anthropologists in highly insecure field situations. In this respect, fieldwork in conflict zones may emphasise a need for a more modest and honest consideration of the roles and possibilities of ethnographers, one that acknowledges the ways researchers (and assistants) are involved in what is under review, one that reflects on the part of participation in

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kovats-Bernat 2002 and other accounts from researchers in zones of violent conflict (e.g., Hoffman 2003; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Pettigrew et al. 2004).

observation and one that critically considers relationships of power and dependency. In terms of techniques for collecting data, it may become crucial to value more pragmatic and improvised approaches in situations where formal methodologies reach their limits or fail to yield further insights. This does not mean working in methodologically naïve ways, nor, as in my case, advising systematically against particular techniques such as audio recording. Rather, it means being faithful to the understanding that methodology is situational and that research methods cannot be separated from findings. As Kovat-Bernat (2002) implies, ethnographies would then be asked to account for the ways in which the field has influenced the object of research and shaped the relationships with participants.

In conclusion, I would like to turn to Scheper-Hughes' (1995) call for «witnessing» as the obligation to take action – on behalf of the people directly affected by lawlessness or suffering – in the name of anthropology as a discipline. While I am aware of my partiality – namely siding with the research participants – this does not easily relate to any particular political actor in the field. Rather, my position would shift in relation to the particular setting. Again in line with Kovat-Bernat (2002), it seems dubious to attempt to monolithically define an entire discipline's standpoint in contexts where even individual angles are hard to capture. As an alternative to this, I would suggest formulating advocacy in personal rather than in disciplinary terms and in terms of privilege rather than obligation. My fieldwork rested on pragmatic approaches developed in concrete situations and through direct and nuanced discussions with research participants. I was also conscious of my privileges as an outsider, especially that of entering and leaving the field as I felt like. Local and international human rights networks are similarly more accessible to someone not directly threatened and provide channels outside of the academic ones for sharing insights gained through social-anthropological research. Through this, the relevance of ethnographic work in conflict zones beyond disciplinary boundaries is further confirmed. Within social anthropology, in turn, fieldwork in volatile places may provide additional opportunities for a reconsideration of methodological approaches, as discussed above. Such reflection may begin by looking more closely at the different forms of violence and conflict, at the nature of relationships between researcher, assistant and participants, and at the ethical decision-making processes invariably involved during fieldwork, whether in so-called dangerous or whether in peaceful circumstances.

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