Navigating the field : exploring gendered dimensions of fieldwork

NAVIGATING THE FIELD

Exploring Gendered Dimensions of Fieldwork

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Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the complexities inherent in fieldwork as a method. Drawing attention to its gendered dimension, I focus on the vulnerabilities researchers face – most notably sexualized harassment – that do not always feature in the discussion of fieldwork as a method. I argue that the ethnographic standards we ascribe to, often reify particular notions of *good fieldwork* – which obliterate the risks and unpleasant experiences researchers encounter. This is not to suggest that *all* fieldworkers experience vulnerabilities or are placed in positions of distress. As Kloß (2016) puts it, fieldwork is an exceptionally valuable methodology that allows us to learn and unlearn. That being said, there is an imminent need to unpack fieldwork and look at it from a non-male perspective. I situate the essay in this space, where I do not necessarily explore the contents of my research in particular, but shed light on the layered nature of fieldwork.

Keywords: *fieldwork, gender, sexualized harassment, ethnographic fixations*

Introduction

Fieldwork occupies a prominent place in anthropology.[1] It is, in many ways, considered "a rite of passage" (Pollard 2009). Moser (2007, 243) describes fieldwork as the "basic constituting experience not only for anthropological knowledge, but of anthropologists themselves." Therefore, examining the complexities inherent in the *act of doing fieldwork* is crucial. Though anthropology has done well to complicate notions of positionality, reflexivity, and the inherent power relations in the narratives we produce, there is also an acknowledged silence while discussing fieldwork-associated vulnerabilities that researchers face. Consequently, this results in a tendency to invisibilize the experiences of trauma, violence, or risks that scholars encounter whilst conducting fieldwork (Berry et al. 2017) . Berry et al. (2017, 537) further suggest that such tendencies obscure "the constitute and interlocking racial and gender hierarchies" within fieldwork. In doing so, they join other scholars (Hanson and Richards 2019; Johansson 2015; Kloß 2016) in contending that the dominant perception of fieldwork is still masculinist, which not only associates the ability to maneuver vulnerabili-

[1] I would like to acknowledge that the fieldwork, which forms the basis of this article, was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

ties with a certain grit of character and endurance, but also constructs the fieldworker as a gender-neutral subject. These perceptions obfuscate the experiences of researchers who identify as BIPOC[2], LGBTQI+[3], women, etc., and the variegated range of vulnerabilities they experience. As such, the capacity to endure and navigate the difficulties and vulnerabilities associated with fieldwork – whether physical, emotional, psychological – is considered an important aspect of *mastering* fieldwork. In turn, they inform ethnographic standards which shape our imaginations of what it means to do fieldwork, and what it means to do it well (Kloß 2016; Hanson and Richards 2019).

Hanson and Richards (2019) coin the term "ethnographic fixations" to elucidate why and how researchers' experiences of harassment and gender-based violence are prominently left out of ethnographies. Ethnographic fixations, they suggest, are norms which researchers perceive as important while making choices regarding censoring uncomfortable encounters in the field (Hanson and Richards 2019, 25). For instance, the perceived negative impact researchers have of writing about experiences of gender-based violence and sexualized harassment in the field inform practices of self-censoring (Kloß 2016; Hanson and Richards 2019). These conversations are relegated to the margins perhaps because we are uncomfortable addressing such issues or because we mobilize certain tropes of "doing good fieldwork" which force us to edit experiences of gendered and sexual harassment from our vignettes. These conscious decisions, which are not necessarily "ethnographic refusals" (Ortner 1995), reify specific ethnographic standards about what it means to do fieldwork successfully. Relatedly, Berry et al. argue how "women-identified researchers [...] feel that these incidents [gender and sexual violence] reveal [...] [their]shortcomings as activist anthropologists" (2017: 535).

It is in this context that I locate this article: what quality does fieldwork assume for a woman-identifying researcher who is single and childfree in a region that has strong patriarchal gender norms? My doctoral fieldwork forced me to confront my own internalized notions of fieldwork and how they informed the ways in which I had come to make sense of the sexualized violence I experienced in the field. Further, it allowed me to think more critically not only about fieldwork as an episteme but also as a practice. The aim of this article, therefore, is to render visible the embodied nature of fieldwork and how the practice of fieldwork is often punctuated by gendered vulnerabilities that are usually invisiblized.

Drawing on my lived experiences, I reflect on an incident of sexualized violence I experienced during my 13-month-long fieldwork in Telangana, India[4], where I engaged with the adivasi[5] or tribal community to explore the conditions of landlessness they were experiencing. In retrospect, this incident helped me ascertain how overlapping layers of gender and

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[2] Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

[3] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex.

[4] I must clarify that this essay will not draw on the contents of my doctoral project, but will exclusively focus on an encounter I faced in the field. For ethical reasons, I use pseudonyms for different areas in Telangana and for all individuals. These are conscious choices so as to not aid the mobilization of stereotypes that may disadvantage communities and regions that are already facing marginalization.

[5] Adivasi is the term used by the community members. I would like to specifically clarify, that in this piece, I do not identify the specific adivasi communities I worked with, for ethical purposes.

power interpellated me as a researcher (Miller 2015), and how they contributed to my experiences of vulnerability and fragility (Kuijpers 2015).

At this juncture, I find it pertinent to clarify my positionality. Though I am an Indian national who belongs to the south and whose fieldwork was also situated in Southern India, I do not hail from Telangana. Further, though I did speak the regional language, my accent distinguished me as an outsider. Moreover, I am not an adivasi, and occupy a privileged position in India with respect to caste and class. At the time of my fieldwork, I was a 26-year-old unmarried and child-free woman – an anomaly in my fieldsite, where women my age were married. In this way, I occupied "multiple planes of identification" (Narayan 1993, 676), thus straddling between insider/outsider statuses. Since a rich discussion already exists in anthropology about the insider/outsider statuses, I will not delve into it (Abu-Lughod 1988, 1996; Narayan 1993). Nevertheless, I believe clarifying my positionality will help foreground the discussion below effectively.

Grappling with violation

The first phase of my ethnographic fieldwork commenced in early 2019, and was located in Mistur, a village comprising of several adivasi hamlets. As part of my fieldwork, I would go to the hamlets I had selected for my research, where I would interact with adivasis to discern how and why they continued to remain landless. While some of these hamlets were located near my accommodation, others were situated farther away. This required me to rely on public transport to reach the village-center, Mallipur, located no less than forty minutes away from where I stayed. From Mallipur, I would board a share-auto[6] to travel to the hamlets located in the interiors. The lack of proper roads also meant that many of these hamlets were connected to Mallipur only by means of share-autos and auto-rickshaws. Access to public transportation was only possible from Mallipur.

Throughout my stay in Mistur, I made it a point to wrap-up my fieldwork and return to Mallipur before sunset so that I would be able to board a bus back home. Light has always been associated with safety. Whether it was the risk assessment form I had to submit before embarking on my fieldwork, or societal norms, nighttime has been associated with heightened risk – be it sexual violence or other physical attacks. This perception, however, is not unique to my fieldsite. Exploring the impact of inadequate sanitation facilities in the lives of women living in urban slums of Uganda and India, Massey (2011) outlines how women experienced increased fear of sexual violence at night. The gender norms of Mistur were clear: women are more susceptible to violence after sunset. There was an unsaid consensus that nothing untoward would happen in broad daylight. Wrapping-up my fieldwork by sunset, therefore, was a safety strategy.

One day, in February 2019, during my visit to Bandalpettai, a hamlet located thirty kilometers away from Mallipur, I was unable to return before sunset. My adivasi interlocutors

[6] A share-auto is an autorickshaw where multiple passengers, heading towards the same direction, are transported. The cost of the trip is shared by all the passengers, thereby reducing cost.

began opening up to me, and I did not feel like leaving conversations unfinished because of sunlight. Having been to Bandalpettai several times before, I was comfortable extending my stay for another 45 minutes. Moreover, in previous interactions, my interlocutors had remarked how state officials were not always willing to spend "extra time" with them and how they were in a "hurry to get things done." I did not want to be like a state official. Being aware of anthropology's colonial past, it was important to me that I did not merely collect data and stories for advancing my career (Burman 2018; Smith 2012), but curated a relationship of reciprocity and mutuality (Sanjek 2015) – in this case, by staying and spending time. In my view, time opens avenues through which one can recalibrate relations of power with our interlocutors to build horizontal alliances. That is, since I, as a fieldworker relied on my interlocutors' generosity with their time for interviews and participant-observation, I only saw it fit that they could also lay claims to my time.

It was twilight by the time my research assistant, Jangu, and I exited the hamlet. Jangu, who accompanied me to various hamlets to help me navigate relations of gender and caste, was hopeful that we would find a ride back to Mallipur. However, we were unsuccessful: no rickshaws were available. We decided to walk in the hope of finding a ride. After nearly an hour of walking, we spotted a vehicle. We convinced the driver to give us a ride and agreed to pay him twice as much. Since I was unsure if Jangu would be able to return home safely, I felt it was my responsibility to drop him first. By the time I reached Mallipur, it was already 7:35 pm. I asked the driver if he would consider taking me to Mistur. He said he could not, and reassured me that I would find a bus or a share-auto soon. I noticed, immediately, that I was the only woman on the road. A vital norm was broken. Women were not expected to be outside after sunset. A violation of this norm was almost always perceived as good reason for any violence one may encounter. This norm was not unique to Mallipur, Mistur, or Bandalpettai. Having been able to spot neither buses nor rickshaws, I was overcome by a certain uneasiness.

I was worried of not only breaking the norm of being outside after sunset but also of being perceived as someone who did not care for these unsaid, unspoken rules. Since in many ways I did not conform to the gendered norms in my field – I was an unmarried woman who was seen *wandering* in the region – I did not want to break any other norm that could draw more attention to me.

Finally, at 8 pm, I found a share-auto that was going to Mistur. The driver asked me to hop in and wait for a few minutes. He told me that his other passengers had stepped out to get a few things from a nearby store. I got inside the auto, because I was not sure when I would be able to find a bus. As soon as I got in, I seated myself near the aisle. I have always preferred the aisle seats because they allow you to jump out of a moving vehicle if need be. The auto-driver, however, insisted that I sit at the center. I was too tired to argue, and I just wanted to get back home. About 10 minutes later, 6 men joined the autorickshaw. Two seated themselves near the driver. Two were seated behind me, and two beside me. As soon as the vehicle started moving, I began feeling hands brush against my body. Before I knew it, I was being groped and molested. The fact that the road back home was through a forest, with limited streetlights in some places and none in others, did not help. I froze. I rationalized that if I screamed or yelled, I was likely to be raped and/or killed. I let myself be violated, for I

thought resisting would result in consequences much more severe. When I was dropped at my destination, I took out the money I had agreed to pay, and I was told, "thank you, you have done enough." Those words stayed with me for a long time.

Making sense of violation

I went back home, unable to process what had happened, and wondered if this incident reflected on my skills as an ethnographer. Doing good fieldwork and being able to produce a good thesis was so important that I went back to the field the next day, the day after, and for several months. I did not speak to anyone about the incident that day. Like others (Pollard 2009), I was reticent because I believed this would affect my career as a researcher. Other considerations informed my initial silence: one, I wondered if this would be considered a failing on my part; two, I wondered if talking about this incident would produce and perpetuate stereotypes about Mistur;[7] three, I did not want to cause harm to my interlocutors who had only been kind to me.

Adivasis have faced a history of marginalization (Bijoy 2007; Louis 2000). Moreover, specific stereotypes are frequently mobilized whilst talking about them which often results in further oppression and marginalization. Though my fieldwork was conducted in adivasi hamlets, it is also true that a sizeable population of non-adivasis resided in Mistur. The reason I highlight this is because I do not want to, in any way, suggest that I was assaulted by adivasis or contribute, knowingly or unknowingly, to their marginalization. Unlike the experiences outlined by Johansson (2015) and Kloß (2016), I was not harmed by my interlocutors or the adivasi family with whom I developed a close relationship. Perhaps some of my actions of "minimizing my power in social interactions" (Johansson 2015, 60), in retrospect, may have been incompatible with the prevalent gendered norms. My ethnographic fixation, thus, was related to power relations. Being cognizant of anthropology's troubled past, I strived not to replicate similar power relations – i. e., the *powerful* researcher and the *powerless* researched. With the researcher being able to *construct* narratives, *control* their fields, and *produce* ethnographic truths that were partial and biased (Clifford and Marcus 1986), I wanted to make sure that I did not reproduce an unequal power differential. My decision to stay an extra 45 minutes in Bandalpettai could be seen as my way of not exercising control over time. What I had overlooked was how my actions to curate horizontal alliances with my interlocutors were, potentially, in conflict with the patriarchal gender norms of my field. This event exposed me to the fragility of the researcher (Kuijpers 2015). Fieldwork reveals and unsettles many assumptions related to power and power relations in the field because the underlying image of the fieldworker is masculinist (Berry et al. 2017; Johansson 2015). This image obscures experiences of "relational vulnerabilities" which are "embedded in highly asymmetrical social relations and the associated dependencies" (Kabeer 2014, 1). Thinking of

[7] For instance, several bureaucrats and social activists I interacted with had often characterized Mistur as an "underdeveloped place where nothing good can happen" (Fieldnotes, 2019).

fieldwork in terms of relational vulnerabilities helps us better understand the embodied experiences of fieldworkers, particularly along the lines of gender and race.

In this context, I view the sexual assault also as a form of disciplining (Berry et al. 2017). By breaking a sacred norm of staying outside past sunset, I was also *shown my place*, so to speak, through the assault. It was perhaps my *relative privilege* as a researcher which made me feel that not abiding the norm of returning by sunset would not result in serious ramifications. However, that privilege was corrected, and my *indiscretion* punished through the assault. It was a manifestation of power relations, which inverted the position of the researcher, and subjected them to the same disciplining that was, perhaps, also meted out to the others inhabiting this place.

Fieldwork presents a liminal space where the personal and professional collapse. It is also a space where one makes decisions that one would perhaps make differently in other circumstances. For instance, outside the field, I would not talk to strangers, exchange numbers, or accept an invitation to walk with a stranger. In the field, these become encounters brimming with possibilities and potential. While pursuing these possibilities certainly helped me build enduring bonds and relationships in the field, I struggled to negotiate overlapping complexities of gender and power that stemmed from patriarchal norms, which rendered me vulnerable.

Notions of how *good anthropologists* try to recalibrate and remove inequalities in the field that emerge from of their positionality and partake in reciprocal relationships tend to overlook how relational vulnerabilities unravel in the field. While it is extremely important to reciprocate and be mindful of the inequalities and hierarchies entrenched in fieldwork vis-à-vis our interlocutors, a discussion of this method without situating the researcher and their body within the process will necessarily obfuscate experiences of sexualized harassment in the field. Moreover, ignoring these relational vulnerabilities also have the consequence of constructing the fieldworker as a gender-neutral subject and overlooking the underlying racialized and gendered inequities that undergird fieldwork. To elucidate, Berry et al. write, "entrenched patriarchy limits women's forms of socialization and defines access to the places we can inhabit as researchers" (2017, 552). In doing so, I agree with Berry et al. in the need for deconstructing the "performance of gender neutrality in preparing students for fieldwork, encouraging intersectionality as both analytic and embodied praxis" (2017, 558).

Conclusion

As a female researcher, my doctoral fieldwork was peppered with several instances of sexualized harassment which ranged from bodily harm to suggestive remarks. While I eventually learned I was not alone in facing such experiences, what surprised me was how little of these make it to the works we produce, or to the discussions revolving around fieldwork as a method. Experiences of sexualized harassment (Berry et al. 2017; Johansson 2015; Kloß 2016; Kuijpers 2015) and rape in the field (Moreno 1995) have been documented by several scholars. Pollard (2009) extensively details the range of vulnerabilities that fieldworkers face – from fear to shame. The rejoinder to Pollard's essay, however, underscores why dis-

cussions around the underlying complexities of fieldwork are still difficult. In her rejoinder, Delamont (2009) not only suggests that Pollard's interlocutors may not have prepared themselves by reading classical anthropological texts but also goes onto highlight that "the discipline of anthropology relies on a widespread agreement that not everyone can be an anthropologist, and the survival of the misery and bafflement of fieldwork is the best way to see who is, and who is not fit to join the culture" (2009:1). Such opinions contribute to reifying notions of fieldwork that obscure relational vulnerabilities that are experienced by diverse scholars who identify as indigenous, women, BIPOC, and LGBTQI+. Moreover, this in turn perpetuates ethnographic fixations, which discount these diverse and asymmetrical experiences in conversations about fieldwork both as an episteme and a method.

To be clear, I am not arguing for a disavowal of the method. I agree with Kloß (2016) that fieldwork is an extremely valuable method that allows us to learn and unlearn. Nevertheless, a discussion of fieldwork without adequately taking into consideration the relational vulnerabilities that underpin it, reinforce a partial truth. A partial truth that sustains masculinist perceptions of fieldwork: be it about grit or the ability to endure. In doing so, considerations about how to situate the body of the researcher and their embodied experiences during fieldwork often escape. By not engaging in an ongoing conversation about the risks integral to fieldwork, particularly to women, BIPOC and LGBTQI+ persons, we run the risk of sanitizing fieldwork experiences. This, I would assume, is a significant risk to the method and the discipline. In doing so, we continue to ignore the very real vulnerabilities they face in the field – be it sexualized harassment or other forms of violence. Moreover, this has resulted in these experiences, particularly gendered and sexualized harassment, being obliterated not only from the dissertations, books, and articles we produce, but also from the discussions on the methodological aspects of fieldwork – say, alongside positionality and ethics. As a result, we continue to sustain a peculiar notion of *good fieldwork*, one in which the researcher emerges unscathed in the face of difficulties.

While universities and institutions across the world ask researchers to assess the risks in the field, these risks are almost always considered external – theft, robbery, illness. Gender and sexualized harassment that researchers may experience because of the relational vulnerabilities that underpin their identities are barely addressed when we talk about fieldwork. Consequently, such experiences are considered *personal* or *one-off* events without adequately acknowledging how endemic these might be. Anthropology will certainly do well to have a conversation centered around gender and sexualized harassment in the field – a conversation, which in its current form, is conspicuous for being in the margins.

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