



On methodology: research and fieldwork in Northeast India

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The anxiety to produce good research work is inherent in academia. Particularly, in the social sciences, research work that requires fieldwork and demands an encounter with the larger society that is outside one's respective department and the university produces various kinds of experiences and feelings. Among anthropologists, one can be lost in the field, fall in love, get frustrated, or go native. Yet, the tension between capturing what one witnesses during fieldwork and producing a piece of work that contains a sharp theoretical analysis and an introspective narrative is often challenging. This essay is not a prescriptive note about methodology, but it is rather my attempt to reflect on doing fieldwork and the circumstances under which we carry out research work in Northeast India.

Look – a map of Northeast India hangs on the wall. On the map are small points, dotted red and green lines showing the borders of the state. Within these lines are letters that spell out the names of places, rivers, forests, and mountains. On the bottom right hand edge of the map, a hand written note scribbled with the seasons and contact details of people. We are looking at the same map of the region, and the general topography that delicately marks the homelands of various communities and everyday anxieties of living under militarization. Think about the unspoken feelings that mutate into a variety of experiences and practices across the region, and careless ways in which the complex histories and lives of people living across Northeast India are categorised in development programs and policy documents. There are so many ways to see this place, to write about the world here, and the hopefulness and despair that redeems or paralyses families, friends, and communities simultaneously.

How can I make sense of all these? I often wondered, as I started my doctoral fieldwork along the foothills of Assam and Nagaland in 2006. From village meetings, weekly markets, to harvest festivals, people talked endlessly about the most interesting things in their lives and the details of their daily lives. None of these encounters during my fieldwork were marked on the map on the wall. The variations and interpretations of their respective social worlds were rich and produced understandings of societies where economic and political systems and processes were shifting. Engaged in agriculture, plantation, seasonal migration, and trading, contemporary societies across Northeast India were undergoing immense transformation. On the one hand, there were strong iterations of traditions and customs and on the other hand, the growth of the market and patterns of consumption. Within these two dominant narratives, I began to engage with accounts of lives that were often glossed over or erased in the process. I

was drawn towards the cultural and social lives that circulated and thrived in between these two poles – tradition and market. The point I seek to make is this. I believe that no amount of reading, writing, or fieldwork will help us to produce good research work unless we are able to; (a) communicate clearly and spell out why our work matters, (b) be mindful of the swamp known as methodology.

Focusing on the first point about communicating research. Unless we are clear about our writing “voice”, we cannot be taken seriously. The writer’s voice may mean many things, but for me it is not only the ability to express oneself but also about mastering the clarity of getting one’s point across to the reader. I am not referring to what kinds of journals or themes that researchers should select to publish their work. Niko Besnier and Pablo Morales offer an excellent essay on guiding researchers about the specific guidelines and structures that particular journals lay down (2018). In line with the scope and aim of *The Highlander Journal* that seeks to create a space for ideas and empirical works, it is pertinent to underline that ideas and concepts are strengthened only through reading widely and intelligently. This means having the curiosity and passion to read works (classics and emerging works) within one’s discipline and also outside of one’s discipline.

Coming to the second point. I am convinced that the researchers’ emotional melodrama and existential crisis during fieldwork is due to their dependence on a rigid methodology. Now, let us be honest. When I read an anthropological research proposal with two sentences in the methodology section that spells out that he/she will also carry out archival research in addition to conducting an ethnographic fieldwork for eighteen months, the researcher needs urgent rescuing. It is just another moment of mumbling through the methodology section because that part is often regarded as an appendix to the research proposal. As anthropologists, the key methodology in our tool kit is ethnography. It is this particular method of conducting an intensive period of fieldwork that allows us to describe experiences and lived realities that make the discipline and its methodology distinct. We all probably know what we wish to study and can safely say that we believe in some ways that our work will be relevant and perhaps go beyond the confines of our discipline, and regional and the national boundaries. Such aspirations should be nurtured but we must reflect on how our topics can influence and make an impact to connect local experiences to global concerns. Let me be honest, I was bad at this. I only need to open my old files from my graduate student days to realise that I am one of the thousands who avoided reflecting on the methodology section.

The question about what we will do during fieldwork might be hazy before students enter the field, but everyone possesses a general methodology tool kit that has a series of research methods to collect data from the field. Any good research committee examines the methodology section closely to understand how the researcher will carry out the research project. No researcher who conducts fieldwork is free of the methodology anxiety. This is expected. In most cases, the process of carrying out long drawn field research is daunting. Especially in anthropology, the foundations and development of theory and the debates that follow rest on long term ethnographic fieldwork. It is here we find the intimate connection between theory and ethnographic work. Nevertheless, confusion still persists. What helps to demystify the relationship between theory and ethnography is to understand three basic points:

(a) while theories and concepts help us to understand the field site and highlight certain practices in societies; (b) ethnography helps us to revisit and interrogate the gap between existing theories and concepts and the lived reality on the ground; (c) together, they enable us to make significant contributions to and start new debates in our respective fields by highlighting the analysis of our research findings.

Someone might accuse me of being rhetorical and nagging. I disagree. You might notice how myriad lives and stories remain trapped within the map of Northeast India hanging on the wall. This makes it easier to offer a piece of advice right away. *There is nothing exotic about Northeast India*. Consider this. What were you before you became a “research scholar”, *hayo potsow*,¹ right? What kinds of pressure do researchers undergo to be taken seriously? What are the responses of the academy to your research project? What kind of journey did the research work take you through? Did it fulfil the expectations of your research committee? Is it even necessary to carry out this research? Have you ever asked these kinds of questions?

In Northeast India, the lines between leaders and scholarship is often blurry particularly in cases where the “research scholar” is an enthusiastic male who is praised for being articulate and well versed in village and ethnic politics. The attributes of being intellectual are even more resounding if the “research scholar” has had the fortune of meeting with one of the “uncles” or “leaders”, enduring terms that are given to insurgent leaders and officers. Anyone trying to write and explain the political history and transformation of the region suffers from the pain of carrying his/her entire people/village/community within the pages of the thesis and research project. What do I mean by this? Stories about doctoral students or “research scholars” from this or that tribe and ethnicity are often highlighted as a sign of pride and joy. Often, it is assumed that the particular scholar’s task is to work hard and devote their lives to write and “discover” the histories of their village/clan/tribe/district. He/she is meant to be open minded only as far as the boundary of his/her state or district extends, and ensure that the community history and politics is represented well.

It is perfectly fine to have political commitments and pick topics that are close to the researcher’s heart. But describing events on the ground and providing information can only go so far. How will you locate this piece of data within the contemporary debates and struggles? In what ways will you draw the attention of your peers and readers from different parts of the world? Think about what drove you to pick up that ethnographic text and fall in love with the work that came from Ecuador, Malawi, Nepal, Alaska, or Indonesia? Open that text again and reflect on the persuasiveness of the author to draw you in and show you something so spectacular and distinct. Doing research is not an intellectual contest or a theoretical marathon. Of course, academic writing is an important topic. It has become popular among researchers to think about what it means to write for the academy and the significance of reaching out to the wider society. In addition, it is also important to pay attention to matters such as vocabulary, grammar, or the importance of prose and style. But in my case, above all the points I have shared, research is a deeply political process and a humanizing journey. Every encounter in the field and conversation I carry out constantly reminds me of the margins in

¹ *Hayo postow* in the Lotha language means ‘oh lord’.

our lives – as human beings that share the world with many other beings – we are constantly tempted to invoke our humanity and indifference simultaneously. Structures, networks, hierarchies, and power relations leave a deep imprint on every human society. Ultimately, there are more similarities than differences– being born, suffering, dying – and the ability to redefine theory or methodology rests within us as long as we are able to connect the academy and the “research scholar” as members of the larger society.

References

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