15 Group Fieldwork: Revisiting an Old Anthropological Practice in India

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Taking a group of students to a distant village and staying there for about a month or so for their fieldwork training as a part of their master's degree requirements in anthropology is almost a century-old practice in India. Teaching of anthropology began in Calcutta University in 1918 and shortly afterwards in Bombay University. Fieldwork was an integral part of the teaching curriculum in all anthropology departments, legitimizing anthropology students to draw the scarcely available fund for travel, lodging and food from their respective universities. The founding fathers of the discipline in India identified fieldwork as the hallmark of anthropology and society as the anthropological laboratory. Anthropologists working on museums and hospitals were never accepted as full-fledged anthropologists. Fieldwork experience was so important for any professional anthropologist in India that any well-known anthropologist was known by the community he worked on rather than his specific theoretical or ethnographic contribution. One may recall here how Fürer-Haimendorf is associated with the Apatanis, Elwin with the Baigas, Hutton with the Angami Nagas, Mills with the Ao Nagas, Burling with the Garos, Rivers with the Todas, and so on.

Fieldwork training begins for anthropology students of some Indian universities at the undergraduate level itself. In most universities, however, teaching of anthropology takes place at the master's level only. Where the students will be taken and at what stage of their university education vary from university to university. Who will accompany the students for imparting fieldwork training also depends on conventions established in various universities. In some universities the senior faculty members 'encourage' the younger colleagues to take up this responsibility whereas in others there are

rosters to be followed by all teachers. Paucity of fund, especially in poorly funded universities, or unwillingness of senior faculty members, where there is no roster system, to take students for such training has at times led to suspension of such practice for some years. Despite several institutional, financial, and other problems associated with taking students out for fieldwork training, some of which I propose to discuss in the course of this essay, it is a tradition in almost all anthropology departments in Indian universities.

The reason I have taken up this subject for discussion here is the fact that this practice has received very scanty attention from anthropologists in India or abroad.[1] Not many have cared to write on this practice for reasons that are not yet clear although it has always been a necessary part of the master's degree curriculum of anthropology in India.

I must however hasten to add that this practice is not confined to the 'fieldwork training' of anthropology students, which is the focus of this essay. Many multi-disciplinary research projects carried out in India are based on group fieldwork wherein different members of the team collect different kinds of data depending on their interest and expertise, much like what the team members of the Haddon Expedition to the Torres Straits did (Herle & Rouse 1998). The Anthropological Survey of India, the largest government research organization in the world, has carried out several national projects like the All India Anthropometric Survey and All India Material Trait Survey after carefully training groups of field investigators on the tools and techniques of data collection and sending them to different parts of the country for the purpose of conducting fieldwork. The practice is followed by the organization even today. Hence, group fieldworks are quite common in India.

Anatomy of group fieldwork

Here I propose to describe group fieldwork as it is practised in India.[2] A group fieldwork needs a lot more planning and preparation than an individual

[1] The nearest references I can think of are two articles by V. K. Srivastava (1990, 1999).

[2] I do this here on the basis of my experience of being taken for fieldwork training to a hill village in West Bengal, when I was an MA student in 1979 and as a teacher guiding students several times (1991, 1994, 1997, 2008) under different field situations. Also see Misra (1974) for an outline of what fieldwork involves.

fieldwork does. Even when the team merely consists of family members Paul Starrs (2001: 74) shows how it needs far more caution and logistic details than fieldwork by oneself. He also mentions the pleasures of being in the field with family members. In particular he shows (ibid.: 77) how one gets easy access to families and society when one is with family. I have experienced this myself when I took my nine year old daughter to Katteri Village in Mandya District, Karnataka with a group of master students in 1997. But one may also recall here how unapproving of married couple and family fieldworkers Evans-Pritchard was for he believed that such a unit would be emotionally self-sufficient and that would create a barrier between the fieldworker and the field (cited in Srinivas 1983: 3). While Srinivas appreciated the access to information on women through the wives he doubted if the information collected by lay wives would help in understanding the native cultures (ibid.: 4).

Taking a group of students belonging to the age group of 22 – 26, consisting of both the sexes and numbering about 20 to 30 anywhere even for a single week needs an operation of sorts. In many universities in India the students come largely from a common linguistic and cultural background but there are numerous universities where the students come from rather different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds making them act at times very differently from each other. Some are beef-eaters, others abhor beef; some eat pork, others are vegetarians; some sleep early, others never before mid-night; some laugh while they sleep, others snore; some are well-mannered, others real brats; and so on. So even what shall be cooked is often difficult to decide. Similarly the arrangement for bath and washing clothes can be difficult especially if the group is large.

What normally happens in a group fieldwork is as follows. Preliminary explorations are made about the feasibility of taking a group of 20 to 30 students to the proposed village much before they complete their 3rd semester. Care is taken to see that the village so chosen is big enough or is adjacent to other villages where students of physical stream might need to go to collect adequate samples for their respective topics of research. A school, community house, primary health centre, etc. where the students could be housed must exist there because to pitch tents for so many students does not make logistic sense. Arrangements for travel, cooking utensils, chemicals, consumables, instruments, medicines, etc. are also made well ahead of the fieldwork.

Although the students are advised to read at least something on the people and place before they leave, no one really does so, leave alone do the highly desirable literature review, as they are mostly busy preparing for the 3rd semester end-term examination, and usually have to leave for fieldwork soon after that. The importance of language in fieldwork is taught in the class room but it is not possible to practise it at the master's level. Misra (1974: 4), an experienced fieldworker, points out that this rarely happens even in a doctoral fieldwork, which relies heavily on interpreters. As a result the students may need a large number of interpreters. Often interpreters from neighbouring villages or towns are requisitioned for the purpose.[3]

After the students have settled down in terms of where they would sleep, cook food, store water or firewood, they start to move out of the camp to first conduct the village census and identification of village landmarks. If the village is too big and the number of households too many census of every household in the village is avoided because that takes a lot more time than they have at their disposal. They need to collect data on their respective topics on which will be based their evaluation. Normally census and mapping of the village is done for the first 3 to 4 days after which the students start to collect data on the topics assigned to them on the basis of observation, interview, measurement with the help of instruments, and so on. The collection of quantitative data by physical stream students and qualitative data by cultural stream ones shows that there is something wrong with our pedagogy and training in anthropology. The physical students collect a much larger volume of data in much shorter duration, whereas the cultural students take a much longer time to collect much less data. I think there is a need for an internal dialogue in anthropology on if students belonging to the same discipline ought to be doing things so different from each other.[4]

[3] In both 1997 and 2008 I requested the students of Mysore University in South India, to assist my students in their fieldwork in Karnataka, as none of my students knew a word of Kannada language and very few in the village could speak English and even fewer Hindi, the national language of India.

[4] The differences between physical and cultural stream students are also seen in the ways they present their data and make use of different terminologies such as pedigree, mate, consanguineous marriage, etc. by the former whereas the latter use words like genealogy, spouse and incest in lieu of the same, respectively. In the dissertations submitted by the former data visibility is very high but analysis is often mechanical whereas data visibility is poor in the latter making their analysis look over-stretched.

Towards the close of their camp they often eat with the people in the village. As the days come closer for departure from the camp the villagers get into a kind of frenzy to give us food and gifts, note down our addresses and phone numbers, request for photographs, and so on. The hour of actual departure often turns out to be emotional. Evans-Pritchard would of course consider the fieldwork to be a failure if the villagers as well as the fieldworkers did not experience the sorrow of parting (cited in Srinivas 1983: 8f).

Before I close this section I must dwell briefly on pre- and post-fieldwork training. The students are offered various courses in the first three semesters that are expected to help them conduct fieldwork on their own and give them a broad orientation on understanding societies. The physical stream students in particular learn how to use various instruments of observation and measurement in their practical classes. In short, they undergo theoretical preparation for three semesters of six months' duration each before they are finally taken to the field. Equally important to note about fieldwork training is what they learn after they have come back from the field: how to process the data they have collected, how to classify them, how to make tables, graphs and charts, how to generalize, cite references, write bibliographies and so on. In other words, they learn to prepare dissertations and when the same is ready they all experience a sense of accomplishment that is not shared by other discipline students who do not have to do all this. Without this requirement to write a dissertation on the basis of fieldwork the students would certainly be deprived of the opportunity of writing about the people they study.

When I compare the PhD research proposals prepared by anthropology students with those prepared by students from other departments at various inter-departmental academic committee meetings I see a clear edge our students have over others. Even the huge majority of them who do not go for

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Due to rather clear distinctions regarding their methodologies, mediums of observation, measurement, and lexicons the integration of the two sub-disciplines has been rather strenuous in India whereas they have taken different directions in most European universities. Even in the US the integration of these two sub-disciplines is rather vague leading the practitioners to doubt whether or not anthropology is a single discipline. Many senior anthropologists in India, who were trained either in the UK or in the USA regret this divergence and wish that the discipline should truly remain integrated for a truly biological and socio-cultural understanding of human beings.

PhD find plenty to cite from their fieldwork experience in the 4th semester class tests and examinations.

Revisiting group fieldwork

In this section I wish to discuss some of the merits and demerits of this age-old practice. The following are some additional merits of group fieldwork besides those stated in the earlier section.

Fieldwork as fun

Fieldwork done by single individuals can at times be very depressing for various reasons one of the most important of which is the sheer absence of someone 'to talk to', someone who speaks the same language and shares the same symbols of communication, and someone who one could call a friend and could confide in. The vast network of land phones as well as mobile phones in India, that extend even to the remotest of rural areas, has made it possible today for a lonely fieldworker to call a friend or family member and share his/her day's experience. But this is not always practical and is often an expensive proposition.

On the other hand, a group fieldwork is fun. Anyone who visits a field camp of students can hear them talking loudly, shouting, chasing each other, pulling each other's leg, singing, dancing and laughing away all the time till late into the night. I can imagine various reasons for such excitement but I needed to clamp night curfew after 10 pm so that the neighbours who slept early did not get disturbed. There is always someone available from similar background to talk to, to share one's excitement and frustration. If someone is scared to go out at night for urinal there is always more than one friend available to give company. In short, there is little or no scope for any member of the group to suffer from a sense of depression. If anyone is found quiet and brooding for some time others will notice soon and make him/her laugh or talk again. In other words, fieldwork is rarely a boring and lonesome experience leading to frustration and depression common among many individual fieldworkers.

Fieldwork and friendship

Group fieldwork gives the rare opportunity to come close to each other, to know each other, share available resources, tolerate each other, know each other's strengths and weaknesses, explore each other's talents and even private life. Even the teacher who in the typical university classroom set-up maintains a degree of distance with and authority over students is made to share a bit of his personal life. Until they happen to live together there is always a distance of sorts between a teacher and students and even between students themselves, which is sustained by the lack of adequate and appropriate opportunities to interact closely in the university campus.[5]

After living together for about a month or so in an alien environment the distance between students as well as between students and the teacher accompanying them vanishes almost completely. The teacher at the end of the stay is simply the first among equals enjoying no special privileges and authority over the rest of the members of the camp. While certain distances are never bridged even at the end of their stay the students are several times more comfortable talking and interacting with the teacher they lived with in the field than with those they did not. Every teacher who has lived with his students in camps for about a month would agree with this generalization. And this dynamics of friendship between the teacher and his students continues to some extent even after they all return to the university set-up.

Learning from each other

Living together for about a month or so also gives a rare opportunity to learn from each other. This is somehow not possible in a university campus where

[5] It is perhaps necessary to briefly dwell on the position of university teachers in Indian universities for the benefit of readers across the globe. There certainly are variations in their position within India, but the teachers are addressed as "Sir" or "Madam" by all students and the latter do not smoke or drink in front of their teachers. At North Bengal University in West Bengal, where I taught for seven years, there were separate canteens for teachers and students and the latter touched our feet for our blessings when they returned from vacations or when they met us after some duration. Teacher-student relationships in Indian universities are, therefore, broadly characterized by power rather than solidarity. I guess this is also largely true of universities in the West although the terms of address used by students for their teachers indicate otherwise.

they 'meet' but rarely get time to 'mingle'. A lot of such learning in the field camp incidentally takes place by merely seeing what others are doing in the camp. When some members leave the camp for the field they create a psychological pressure on those who get up late and have not yet left the camp. Similarly, when some come back and check their data or discuss their preliminary observations with the teacher or with their camp mates others do not want to be left behind. A few serious students have tremendous demonstration effect on others in the field that does not seem to happen in a classroom. The informal discussion in the camp on various aspects of their study leads to clearer understanding of various social issues among them.

Mutually secure

Individual fieldworkers generally suffer from an acute sense of insecurity in the field, particularly if they are women. A slight sound in the roof or vicinity of the house is enough to wake them up at night and wait for the worst to happen. I have heard such nightmares even from those women PhD students who did their fieldwork in their own societies, which is the trend in most universities in India. They have narrated to me how it was more challenging to spend the nights than what they experienced during the day. I must add here that even my men PhD students, who have also worked on their own societies, have complained of insecurity feeling in the field. The sense of insecurity may be more if they did their fieldwork in "other" societies, although that is perhaps not the reason why other culture studies are generally avoided by doctoral students of anthropology in India. Working in one's own society has huge practical advantages such as the ability to speak in the native language and familiarity with local customs and manners but it is perhaps time that we reviewed this increasingly popular practice of auto-ethnography in Indian anthropology. One of the reasons why I feel so is the relative ease with which a student conducts his doctoral fieldwork because at least some of his people feel it obligatory on their part to help him. He need not make any great effort to build rapport with his people and he can at times even demand to be answered. I would also think that he takes too many things for granted or commonplace to be noted thereby missing out on minute but vital cultural details that could be invaluable in analysing the data. Finally, there is something wrong about studying one's own culture as the Other and describing it

in the third person because anthropological methodology is developed for the study of other cultures.

Such insecurity does not exist in a group fieldwork. The presence of several persons who are known to each other very well in the same room or house is highly reassuring. There is no need to keep the lights on through the night due to a sense of fear for darkness and for beings associated with it. Where there is no electricity the brightness of a candle or kerosene lamp is certainly limited, yet no one really feels insecure at any time of the day or night. I think this greatly helps them maintain a normal, mentally and emotionally healthy life in the camp.

Highly economic

Fieldwork is an expensive activity today even if one chooses to go to a nearby village with very limited dependence on market. There are many universities in India where the university funds for fieldwork are so scanty that the students cannot go far from their campus and cannot live in the field for more than two weeks or so. Even a relatively better funded university like North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong has a ceiling of 25 days including travel time, although it has no objection if the students stay longer at their own expenses. The expenses on hiring of vehicles, interpreters, equipment, food, etc. are quite considerable and are never fully covered by the university funding.

In a group fieldwork, a lot more work is done in a lot less time and expenditure. When research activities like taking measurement and recording the same, or interviewing and audio-visual recording of the interviews are done by two persons instead of one it leads to greater efficiency of work. Experience shows that this is always more satisfying for the researchers as well as the researched than if the interviewer interviews as well as records the interviews by himself. The time each student needs to spend towards cooking food, fetching water, cleaning cooking vessels, etc. is also reduced by as many times as the number of students in the camp. Even the per capita expenditure is less simply because the expenditure is shared by a large number of students.

Group fieldwork, however, is not free from certain limitations, as illustrated below.

Overwhelming the villagers

I have noticed that the people get overwhelmed especially if the village population is small and the group of students large. When the group is broken into small bands of two or three students each and spreads out in a small village almost every household is engaged in answering to one or the other band members, and at times have to engage with several such bands through the day and evening. Unless it is a post-harvest time or some lean period for economic activities it can be very demanding for the villagers to cope with the queries of so many bands swarming the village. In Dalu, a Garo village of Meghalaya in India's Northeast, where I took a group of students in 1994, the otherwise very simple and accommodating people once got so fed up with our students that they hid themselves inside closing the doors from outside. This is understandable because each band of two or three students takes turns to interview or measure the respondent, which means each band takes about two to three hours with each respondent and no sooner does one band leave another arrives, leaving no scope for the respondents to attend to their daily chores. For each band it is just two to three hours of a respondent's total time, but for each respondent it is an unending task to sit before the students and answer to their queries and perhaps even provide tea and snacks for the students and their accompanying interpreters from the village or nearby town. I have noticed that even the interpreters or field guides get tired a lot more quickly in group fieldwork than when they accompany an individual fieldworker. As a result they at times tend to give evasive answers.

This impact can certainly be minimized if the students are divided into two or three groups and sent to equal number of adjacent villages rather than sending all of them to the same village. But this is often not practical in view of the distance they might need to cover each day while commuting to neighbouring villages.

One commits, all suffer

It is not possible to keep a close watch on the activities of every member of the group in the field or to give effective advice to every one of them on how to conduct themselves in the field. The students come from different family backgrounds and have different habits all of which are not congenial in an alien environment. Being away from their own parents and societies they

often try and push the limit of their personal freedom and even are a little adventurous because the authority of the teacher is not as effective as in a classroom situation.[6] As a result, one member of the group commits a mistake, consciously or unconsciously, and the villagers quickly generalize about the whole group. "They did this", "They said so", "They went there" are the common expressions people in the village use whereas it may be just one or two members of the group who committed what in the eyes of the villagers was a mistake. The simple 'mistake' may at times be given the status of a 'crime' because it is not committed by an ordinary, illiterate villager but by a highly educated university student accompanied by a university professor all of whom are outsiders.

One suffers, all suffer

In a group of 20 to 30 students it is quite natural to expect one or more than one of them to fall ill at least once during the fieldwork. Minor ailments are usually taken care of with whatever emergency medical kit the group has, but at times it can take a serious turn requiring one to be hospitalized and even operated upon. If the illness is serious the work of several other members of the group gets affected and it can at times bring the activities of the entire group to a halt, as it happened in 1991 in Darjeeling district of West Bengal

[6] I may briefly narrate here an incident that took place on our way back from Kodagahalli village on 4th February, 2008. As our vehicle left the Guwahati Railway Station for Shillong it entered a roadside filling station and stopped. Before I could realize I saw two of my students trying to beat a local person and one other student trying to stop his classmates. By the time I saw what was happening and stopped them the damage was already done. In next to no time more than 300 people surrounded our vehicle, took the vehicle key away, and threatened to set our vehicle on fire with the students inside if we did not hand over the boys who beat the local person. Two policemen with sticks appeared after ten minutes but ran away from the scene within seconds of their arrival. I negotiated with one of the local persons in pidgin Hindi and finally succeeded in getting all of us out of the Guwahati city safely but the escape was indeed very narrow judging by the lack of humanity the mob showed on the streets of the same city on 25th September 2008 on which day a young Santal tribal woman was stripped naked and dragged on the streets whereas several others belonging to her community were beaten up.

where I had taken a group of 23 students from my university in Shillong for their fieldwork training.[7]

Old ties remain

I have always found it interesting to observe my students in the field and record my responses to their behaviour towards each other and towards the people in the village. My attempts to tell the students that fieldwork gives us the rare opportunity to transcend our past and be a part of another world with different set of norms and values have rarely borne fruits. I have rarely seen any student experiencing such transcendence. Exceptions apart, the students remain what they were before they left for the field. This is obvious when one observes who sits with whom, who are sleeping adjacent to each other, who are band-mates when they go out in the field, who they spend most of their time with, who cook together, go for bath or washing clothes together and so on. In short, old ties are remapped in the new space they have occupied temporarily. The explanation perhaps lies in the very fact that they are in a group, which does not allow them to go beyond their old ties and create new ties for the need for doing so probably does not arise in group fieldwork, as reminded by Malinowski above.

If the group is not able to shed its old ties and engage itself deeply with the people they live among I would take it as a failure of group fieldwork. If the group remains obsessed with itself and is unable to venture out the fieldwork is perhaps incomplete. Any day a student is found spending more time and energy with other members of the group than with people outside the group. Of course, living together with one's own classmates for the first time is itself a novel experience for each one of them and it can be quite an overwhelming experience in itself. However, not being able to come out of the group to interact meaningfully with the villagers is certainly one shortcoming of a group fieldwork as an anthropological practice. But I guess this is inevi-

[7] One evening, one of the women students developed acute stomachache and vomiting tendency, which showed no signs of subsiding till midnight when I decided to take her to the local hospital. The local government hospital had no bed to spare for the student and she had to be taken to a military hospital several kilometres farther from the camp and had to be operated the same night to take out her about-to-burst appendix. This affected the work of everyone in the camp for a couple of days.

table in group fieldwork because no member of the group feels lonely enough to compel himself to build rapport with the villagers and interact with them.

Group fieldwork in *'The Remembered Village'*

I now present the experience of taking my students for their fieldwork training to *The Remembered Village* (1976) of M. N. Srinivas in January 2008 as a case study. The real name of the village and where it was located were for long known only to a few persons like A. M. Shah, who accompanied Srinivas during his second visit to the village in 1952 and Srinivas's nephew and Professor of Sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Panini, and of course Srinivas himself. Many anthropologists from Mysore in the state of Karnataka reportedly asked Srinivas about the real name and exact location of the village but they failed to get the necessary information from him and the same remained 'unknown' until a group of anthropologists working with the Department of Anthropology, Mysore University and the Anthropological Survey of India's Southern Regional Office in Mysore were, according to their own claims, finally able to identify the village and confirm it after meeting some persons of the village.[8]

I gave a course on "Fieldwork Methods & Techniques" to the batch of students who I was to take for fieldwork training in the winter of 2007/08. We often discussed in my classes where they would like to go and why. None of them wanted to do their training in Northeast India and all wanted to go to Andaman & Nicobar Islands that I had visited half a decade ago and knew how difficult it would be to take a group of 30 students there. Hence I persuaded them not to insist on the latter destination, particularly in the interest of their poorer classmates who might not be able to pool in a lot of extra money for their travel should they decide to go to Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Meanwhile I came to know from my Mysore friends that the famous 'Rampura' village was 'discovered' by some of them. Not yet too sure about

[8] It appears that there is an element of heroism in the claims made by some anthropologists in Mysore. It is true that Srinivas was reluctant to divulge the real name of the village and its exact location for whatever personal or professional reasons he might have, but his field assistant A. M. Shah, a well-known professor of sociology at Delhi University, who accompanied Srinivas to the village in 1952, certainly could have been contacted for the same.

this 'discovery' I quickly accepted an invitation from the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore to attend a meeting regarding the New Linguistic Survey of India Project and planned an extra day there to visit the village and see if that was really the village where Srinivas had done his fieldwork from January to November 1948. The famous 'Pipal' tree that Srinivas mentions nostalgically in his book did not exist there anymore but I was more than convinced that Kodagahalli was none other than Srinivas's 'Rampura'. The sketch maps of the village and the house where he lived inserted between pages 10 and 11 of his book (1976) were a great help towards this. Srinivas's house had not changed structurally although the post office had moved out of that house and the house itself had deteriorated considerably because no family lived there any longer. The area where bullocks were sheltered at night at the time Srinivas lived in the house was now used for storing bamboo wickers for growing silkworms. But the rooms occupied by Srinivas and his cook and the veranda where he received the villagers and interviewed them were still clearly identifiable. As if all this was not enough I requested someone who accompanied me to the village to ask an old man sitting next to Srinivas's house if he remembered anything about Srinivas and he confirmed this clearly in the native Kannada language.

As the 3rd semester started drawing closer to its end preparations for the field like requisitioning medicines, buses, etc. from the university and making railway reservations started and we were all set to leave Shillong in the afternoon of 31st December 2007. We celebrated the New Year at Meghalaya House in Guwahati with a small cake my wife had baked for all of us. The next morning we boarded the Guwahati-Bangalore train at 6 am and spent the next three days in the train to arrive in Bangalore in the afternoon of 4th January 2008. Those three days in the train passed under some stress because only 3 out of 30 students had ever taken a train journey previously. I also had to pay a hefty fine to a Southern Railways official for not carrying the reservation slips, which according to the official concerned were mandatory to be carried by us. Our identity cards and other evidences of our bonafide, including valid tickets, were completely ignored. He even threatened to get us all arrested and produced before some magistrate in Chennai if we did not pay the fine. After arriving at Bangalore station we took a local train to Mysore where we spent the night at the CIIL premises. The next morning we picked up some cooking vessels, plates, glasses and gas cylinders from the Depart-

ment of Anthropology, Mysore University and proceeded towards Kodagahalli where the village headman was waiting to welcome us with lunch in one of the oldest houses of the village located opposite to his own with the Patel Street in between.

Just outside this old house was the well from where Srinivas's cook Nachappa negotiated with village women to draw water. In the veranda surrounding the central courtyard were laid thin mattresses for us to sit and take our lunch. We had to sit with our legs folded crosswise, which was certainly not one of the most convenient sitting positions for us, particularly for my tight hipster jeans-wearing women students who I had suggested not to wear the same several months ahead of the trip. Then some women started serving us the food that my students had never tasted except the white rice. There was a curious mixture of a desire to eat and a propensity to say no evident on our faces, but perhaps the hunger got the better of us and we actually ate quite well and the headman and the serving women looked pretty satisfied at our performance.

The headman had planned to keep us in the primary school compound where we were first taken after lunch. The school kids were still around when we arrived. The room earmarked for girls could be habitable after cleaning, but the room meant for boys was in no way habitable because it was not used for ages except as a dumping place for broken basins, bricks and furniture. The toilets behind the girls' room were blocked with dry stool and stones and only one toilet under lock and key meant for the school teachers was usable. There was no place where the girls could take bath anywhere near nor was there a place where they could dry wet clothes. As if the girls were not concerned about all this, one of them asked me, "Sir, where shall we charge our mobile phones?" Indeed, there was no place in the entire compound where they could do it and that indeed was the new requirement, perhaps a priority, at fieldwork site that was not required when I took the students for their fieldwork training to a neighbouring district of Karnataka in 1997. Although no one protested against this decision their body language was too clear to indicate that they were not happy. There indeed were many details the headman had not gone into before deciding to put us up there, including informing the school authorities about our imminent arrival and stay.

After an hour of standing in front of the school while the headman spoke to the school authorities over his mobile phone I interrupted him and asked if

he could show us any other place for us to stay. I explained to him the academic need for all of us to stay under the same roof and he showed us the vacant house of his elder brother who was once a member of Karnataka Legislative Assembly. The moment we entered that house our students were jubilant. It had two floors and a nice terrace where they could sit and dry their clothes and perhaps smoke and drink while I was not in the house. There was also an attached kitchen and a toilet cum bathroom but that could be used only as a bathroom because the toilet was not connected to any septic tank. But the headman offered his toilet for use in case of emergency at night, especially for girls and requested a neighbour to let our students use his toilet as well. Above all, there were three places in the house where they could charge their mobile phones whenever there was electricity, which was sometimes only in the forenoon and sometimes only in the afternoon. Since boys were fewer they chose the upper floor and girls took the more spacious ground floor and the terrace was common for both. There was one other small room next to the toilet in the ground floor that we offered to the two scholars from the CIIL, who did their own research as well as interpreted for my students.

As we started to interact with the villagers one of the first things they wanted to ascertain was our community backgrounds but when they realized that they had not heard of names like Khasi, Mizo, Hmar, Ao and Angami they soon gave up and categorized us into Hindu and Christian only. They also came to know soon, obviously from my own students, that we eat the meat of dog, cow, snake, frog, etc. I think they took this information with a pinch of salt, but what really shocked them was when they discovered that one of our girls smoked and when they saw our boys taking bath at the Kaveri River canal that separated the settlement area of the village from its cultivation area or at the huge lake, where Srinivas went to enjoy the beauty of the setting sun, with just their underclothes on. One of the elderly villagers asked me to tell my students to wear proper shorts with the length up to the knee while bathing.

Every evening I sat with some village boys on a cemented platform next to our camp. I did this deliberately because this would give some space to my students, especially to those who wanted to smoke and drink on the terrace. Sitting there I also got reports on my students' exploits from the village boys who often accompanied and interpreted for them. The boys told me which

villager was telling our students honestly and who was taking them for a ride. They also told me which student was serious and should be given good marks and who are lazy and do not deserve to be given good marks. They even told me who among the students smoked and who drank. Of all the village boys there was a 14 year old boy called Mahesh who was extraordinary in terms of how well he knew my students and how much he helped them interpreting and transporting them on his bicycle from one end of the village to another several times a day.

Our group consisted almost entirely of students belonging to the Mongoloid tribes of Northeast India and we were all initially mistaken to be Tibetan refugees living in Mundgod and Bylakuppe settlements in Karnataka state since 1959, who they had seen before they met us and who very much resembled us. One Sunday, as we were visiting some tourist places in Mysore, we were asked to pay the extraordinarily high entry fees meant for foreigners, as they thought that we were Japanese or Korean people. A local friend of mine vainly tried to explain to the men at the counter that we were Indians. Indeed the clothes my students wore were often imported. Some village boys asked me to tell my girl students that they should not wear 'sexy' clothes for that may have a bad influence on the village girls. I knew only a few of 19 girls wore what the village boys would consider 'sexy' but I could do precious little in this regard besides telling them in the course of my lectures that we should try and conform to the values and norms of our host society to get their acceptance and cooperation.

How my students found the people in the village was equally interesting. One of the students came up to me on the fourth or fifth day of our arrival there and said, "Sir, in this village almost everyone is related to everyone else". I replied to him saying that there is nothing surprising about it. "But Sir, even husband and wife are related to each other!" It was certainly getting a little more interesting than I expected. We soon learnt that the villagers practised cross-cousin marriage. Another student reported, "Sir, more than 20 men in the village have the same name and so many of them look very similar!" I ignored the report by jokingly saying that we all look the same for them. Equally strange for my students was the way the Harijans, or the so-called 'untouchables', were treated by the upper caste people in the village. The Harijans were not allowed to wash clothes upstream, enter tea-shops, and were served tea in plastic cups whereas the high caste members were served

in steel or breakable glasses. They were also shocked to find that the Harijans had their own temples and they needed to go to the nearby Bannur town for their hair cut or shave because no barber in the village would do this for them. While they all – high and low castes members – looked very similar in terms of skin colour and other physical characteristics the social distinction observed between them was a new experience for our students.

Despite rather different cultures existing in the camp and outside it we managed to live in the village for almost a month and if the number of villagers who turned up to bid us goodbye is any indication of our success we had a successful fieldwork. Many villagers came all the way up to Mysore railway station and some travelled back with us even up to Bangalore, which was much beyond our expectation. The language gap notwithstanding the link with the villagers is still strong and some of us are sincerely working towards the preparation of a book titled *From Rampura to Kodagahalli* based on our fieldwork. A book many villagers of Kodagahalli, including the 14 year old Mahesh, are eagerly waiting for.

Conclusion

Before I draw this essay to a close I shall briefly describe my own fieldwork training in group about three decades ago. In the summer of 1979, 22 of us were taken to a hill village called Sindipong in Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling District, West Bengal for our fieldwork training. Our stay was arranged in a cooperative society building. We had our own cook and cooking utensils. We also had the luxury of sleeping on folding camp cots.

The topic for my research then was 'Land and Politics' on which I had read several books prior to fieldwork besides being familiar with the land-ownership, land use pattern and land tenure systems in the hills of Darjeeling. But without the teacher around I would not be sure how to collect land data, how to convert the local units of measurement into metric units, how to relate such data with politics, how to ascertain the relative importance of land vis-à-vis other competing factors like education, occupation and income in influencing village politics, etc. Although our teacher often did not explain why we should follow his instructions carefully they began to make sense as I started to write my dissertation and relate my findings with those of others in the field.

Therefore, I think fieldwork training at the MA level is helpful for students, although such training can never be adequate and no matter how well we train our students there are always things they will need to experience and learn themselves. It is certainly more complex than learning to conduct laboratory tests where standards are easily available in textbooks and the roadmap is often very clear. In anthropology, on the other hand, we have countless accounts of fieldwork written by some of the best known anthropologists in the world but no one has been able to prepare a blueprint for a good fieldwork. While this makes a young anthropologist somewhat uncertain about taking his first strides it gives him a unique opportunity to use his intelligence and imagination to turn an adverse field situation in his favour and give himself a sense of authenticity and accomplishment.

Some of the questions one may still ask about this tradition are: Is this the kind of fieldwork training our anthropology students ought to be given? Is this kind of training adequate for them to handle a fieldwork situation later on their own? Is there a better way of training our students on how to conduct fieldwork?

An alternate way of training students for their PhD work is to offer courses in theory and methodology at the MPhil or PhD level, as it is done in some universities in India. These courses help the students acquire both theoretical depth and methodological skills necessary for a good fieldwork, but such courses were no longer considered necessary for PhD students in many universities since mid-1990s. What might be necessary to note here, however, is the fact that this training at MPhil or PhD level, no matter how valuable, is still theoretical and based on classroom lectures. The students do not yet know what kind of challenges they might face in the field and how to overcome them. They do not get the benefit of seeing their teacher engage with such challenges or answer their numerous questions right in the field itself. The encouragement and counsel of an experienced teacher in the field itself can rarely be compensated with a year or longer theoretical and methodological training in classrooms at the MPhil or PhD level.

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