

## RELIVING MY FIRST RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

*Lucy T V Zehol*

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### **Introduction**

This paper is an account of my first research experience as a student of anthropology and a woman at that. This does not include strange encounters with 'primitives' or 'savages' in a remote place or an island. Here my encounters are more with concepts and methods than a people in true sense. Even when the encounter is with the people there is no sense of 'othering' them in me as it is common in most anthropologists.

My supervisor, A P Sinha, made me first go through the process of problem formulation. First, the topic of my research was tentatively identified. But very soon I realized that the topic was rather vast. As I was getting closer to seeing the boundaries of my research field I knew that the scope required further pruning and sharpening.

### **Formulation of Research Problem**

Formulation of the research problem is very important before embarking upon any research. As a diligent student of anthropological theory and methods I tried to do this to my

best possible extent. I was aware of the difference between a synopsis and a research design: both were similar in many ways but the latter would require much more detail than the former. The former could be a brief statement of the broad outlines of the scope, context, methods, and relevance of a proposed study but a research design would obviously demand more than all this. Further, the former would be prepared, in most cases, to fulfill a routine formality necessary for a formal approval to undertake a particular research proposal. In other words, the former would be meant for the experts who would be evaluating the proposal and see its relevance and feasibility among other things. It was also necessary for administrative formalities. But not the latter. The latter was meant for the research student, for her/his own direction and guidance. It was her/his blueprint of how exactly the research would be conducted. The latter was therefore normally prepared only after the synopsis was approved and there was 'go ahead' signal for the research student.

Any student of social science who has some research experience would appreciate that formulation of a problem is one of the most important exercises in any research. A problem may be formulated in many different ways by different scholars depending on the kind of training and exposure they have prior to taking up the research venture. But no matter how a problem is formulated there is no denying the fact that a problem well formulated is half the research done for it shows the clarity of thought, sense of direction and purpose, and chances of minimising both time and resources by the researcher. It is for such reasons that funding agencies like Indian Council of Social Science Research and University Grants Commission give a lot of emphasis on the formulation of problem.

Let me now account how I formulated my problem of research. This was done in three phases. In the first phase, I decided that I would do my doctorate on 'The Tribes of Manipur'. I had two reasons for deciding on this topic. First,

I was a resident of Manipur and belonged to one of the tribes there. Second, there is no indepth and up to date account of the tribes in Manipur. Most writings on the tribes of Manipur are either written half a century ago or are so sketchy that no meaningful conclusion can be drawn on the basis of such works. In the last couple of decades, there are quite a lot of publications on the tribes of Manipur but these publications widely vary in 'quality' as well as scope. Some of them are based on fieldwork or primary data but they are conceptually poor or analytically inadequate whereas others are highly journalistic and impressionistic accounts of the people of this trouble-torn state. None of these publications can be considered as a comprehensive ethnographic work.

In the second phase, I was dealing mainly with the problem of classification of the tribes there, which were officially classified into three categories: (1) Naga group of tribes, (2) Chin-Kuki-Mizo group of tribes, and (3) the intermediary group of tribes. In other publications there are usually only two classes of tribes there - the Naga and Kuki groups of tribes. The intermediary group of tribes includes those which for quite some time now have been trying to redefine their identities. Many tribes formerly under the Kuki group are now trying to assume either an independent identity for themselves or are trying to adopt the Naga identity. I have followed the official classification of tribes in Manipur because of the interesting dimension the intermediary group of tribes provides there.

In the third phase, I made an effort to provide a comprehensive account of the tribes of Manipur for use of those who are involved in the development process of the state. Such an account would be based on secondary literature on the tribes of Manipur as well as techno-economic or socio-economic surveys of the tribes there. It has been the experience of this study that the macro-survey data are not incompatible with the micro-data collected by individual scholars and writers. In fact, the combination of these two sources of data would give a fairly accurate picture of the

tribal situation in any state and would make a sound basis for planning and implementation of tribal development programmes.

### **Tribal Identity**

In the very beginning of the present study it was realized that the question of identity of the various tribes of Manipur would be a very challenging task for me. As a member of a tribe I was myself aware of the magnitude of this problem, sensitive as the subject is. The question of identity was not something new and confined to a few tribes: it was there with every tribe and sometimes even with a sub-tribe. Therefore, I decided that I would examine this question thoroughly and for this I thought a comprehensive account of the tribes as well as non-tribes living there was absolutely necessary. The necessity of looking into the identity of the non-tribal peoples there may be briefly elaborated here.

The question of identity is always a relative phenomenon. It can never be understood in isolation of other peoples living in the neighbourhood, whether tribals or non-tribals. Besides it has to be appreciated that if the non-tribals were not included the picture would remain incomplete because Manipur has both tribal and non-tribal population. Such an exclusion would also deprive one of the comparative perspective which is necessary in this regard.

Most of the communities living in Manipur are in a state of flux as regards their identity. I have lived through this myself as a member of one of tribes there and this provided me with reasons to expect the same among the members of other tribes as well. To my own tribe I was an insider but to myself I was there with the members of my tribe and not there at the same time. I was always conscious of my identity as a student of anthropology doing my doctorate work there in the midst of people who were familiar to me in every sense of the term. For me, therefore, the crisis of identity was doubled up - one that I acquired with my birth and the

other with my education. I thought it was not necessary to sacrifice either of them.

### **Fieldwork among My Own People**

I began to realize gradually that fieldwork among my own people was quite different from the other culture fieldworks which are described in most anthropological literature. An other culture fieldworker would be a stranger in every sense of the term: s/he would most probably not know the language, food habits, customs and manners of the people s/he would be studying. S/he would be full of apprehensions about what might happen to her/him, how s/he might be accepted by the people and the like. In my case I had no such apprehensions. It was not at all difficult for me to have access to information even from some of the leaders of the state. Many of the informants knew me personally or knew my parents or relatives. So they were very cooperative and spent a lot of time with me discussing the subject matter of my research. There was absolutely no problem even when I did not know the informant personally because I knew the language and I could explain to them the purpose of my visit and interview without any difficulty. I could also get direct access to their replies and they were not inhibited by the presence of an onlooking interpreter. They were not only cooperative but even proud to meet an educated person of their tribe.

This experience has been very enriching for me as I had spent most of my earlier life in a protected, urban environment. If I am to single out what I learnt from them I would say that I learnt to be proud of my culture and identity. My culture and identity began to make much more sense to me than what they did prior to taking up this research for my doctorate degree.

As a student I remember being taught about how Malinowski did his fieldwork. I also remember his precautionary suggestion to avoid contact with 'one's own

kind'. Imagine what would happen to my fieldwork if I wanted to avoid contact with my own kind. There would be no fieldwork! Even if I wanted to listen to Malinowski's advice it would simply not be possible. I had my friends and relatives volunteering to help me and I could not possibly refuse all that and stick to what he had said. I was also asked to speak in church congregations and youth meetings. All this took me closer to the people of all walks of life and of all age groups. But I also remember his emphasis on knowing the native language and the advantages of that. Nobody would perhaps be able to appreciate that more than I could when I was doing my fieldwork. Language, as I thought earlier, was just a medium of communication. It is, I realized later, much more than that. It also provides an emotional link, a separate communication channel, and a line of trust.

My readers are free to draw conclusions as they like but I must share this experience. At the time of my departure from a village quite away from my own place in Manipur a dinner was hosted in my honour by the village council members and a traditional male shawl was presented to me. It was perhaps my turn to be surprised. I never expected that I would be given so much respect that a shawl would be presented to me and that too a male shawl! I accepted the gift with all humility but a corner of my mind was restless about it. It was only later that I realized that offering me a male shawl was symbolic of the village according me the status of an 'honorary male'.

### **Fieldwork as a Woman**

The above episode brings me to speak about my experience as a woman. Many a woman anthropologist has done fieldwork in one's own or different cultures but not much is known about such experiences. Most anthropological experiences taught and known to us are the experiences of the male anthropologists. Anthropologists though we may be, the sexual differences between the males and females

seem to make a difference in our fieldwork experiences as well.

Being in the field as a single woman was a unique experience for me. It was first of all protested by my own family members and relatives, leave alone the faces of disbelief and wonder on my informants whether in the town or in the villages. Late Rajalakshmi Misra had discussed with me the problems of doing fieldwork in India for a woman. One problem she had pointed out was that it was odd to see a lone woman in a railway platform or a bus stand. However, she reminded me that one great opportunity for the women anthropologists was to enter into the domain of women's world which was normally closed for the men anthropologists. Changing the subject matter of my doctoral research was not possible at that stage but her words rang clearly in my ears throughout my fieldwork.

On the conceptual and methodological level, I have often realized that anthropology is meant for the males only unless revolutionary changes are brought about in its concepts, methods, and theories to accommodate the women's thoughts and aspirations. The women in India still do not seem to live a life of their own: they either live through their men or for their men. One might ask here: can a woman's perspective of the society or culture she studies be really different from that of a man? The answer is yes. Why else do I feel a sense of greater affinity with Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Judith Okeley, and her kind than the better known Malinowskis and Radcliffe-Browns? The journey is yet to begin but there is a lot of excitement at the very thought of undertaking it.

#### REFERENCES

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