

The field and field-work- whose question is it anyway?

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After a train journey of 36 hours through many a stopovers through our train rolled into Ranchi and we heaved a sigh of relief. It was 24 December 2015 and Christmas eve. Ranchi is home to many a Christian sects and as part of the Christmas celebrations there was a small makeshift church made from bamboo canes with a statue of Jesus Christ. We left Ranchi for Khursuta, one of the many field sites where PRADAN teams work, and one of the many villages where research students from the Centre for Professional Development (CDP) are housed at as part of their immersion. Immersion is an important process in initiating a researcher's entry to the field. In this case, the field is to be treated as a site, a site that overlaps with PRADAN's area of work and the host family with whom the students stay and play, important access points to the village and village life. Immersion cannot be treated as field work. Why and how?

Unlike the anthropologist, whose arrival story marks her entry to the field site, in action research, the formative and summative research are co-constitutive (Flood, 2007)¹. There cannot be a formative cycle and summative cycle. These two cycles are not separate and shape the field of enquiry, field as site and field as collective action. In a sense, the two phases of field immersion are formative and summative, and its yields actioning the research question through a collective, is part of a summative cycle. After the immersion, students go through a reflective praxis in classrooms and develop a research proposal based on their immersion. While these immersions facilitate the entry of the researcher, in this case the MPhil student of development practice, in the field through a pre-given field of PRADAN, are we already setting the field of enquiry? Thirdly, it is expected the research question should emerge in the light of the immersion study reports. In this phase the researcher has to negotiate between her area of interest, the needs of the community and possibility of generating a collective. Fourthly, the pressure of forming a collective as part of actioning the research question.

Three main concerns are addressed in this paper; the purposes of immersion, discussion on why it is important to form a collective and the importance it holds in framing action. Why is collective seen as a site of co-production of knowledge? How do existing forms of collective, as part of developmental models be seen as instrumental in creating or furthering the idea of collectives? And finally how do these processes shape the registers of field, fieldwork and collaborations for the community in question, the village that is intercepted and re-interpreted in these collaborative projects. What ideas of community do our projects lead to?

In doing so, my field is the classrooms of development practice, a foray into the field of the field of an action researcher and a comparative reading of two MPhil thesis' that throws

¹ Formative research implies identification of possible issues to work, the action to be taken, improvements to be made and summative research is the basis for experiential knowledge- what Flood calls reflective praxis.

light on why ideas of community and collective are important in actioning of the action research. In both these projects the collective is not seen as a means to an end, instead to draw from Rashmi (2014) it is a work to study the efficacy of collective in action in the social, cultural, political, economic and governmental context. In the opening chapter, Rashmi traces how models of collective have been invoked in the developmental schemes for community work. She says she wants to add to the efficacy of the existing collective. Amit (2015) in his work chooses to bring about a transformation of what he calls a political community. He does it through looking at joint forest management and at the very outset he outlines how he proposes to understand community as a political entity in which dynamism is infused by the exercise of political agency by the members of the community (Jain, 2015).

Immersion and fieldwork

Having outlined the role of the immersion in the design of the MPhil curriculum of development practice it becomes imperative to pose a few questions. Etymologically immersion's roots lie in the 15th century Latin word *immersio*, meaning to plunge in, to dip. Secondly, the word is also associated with a meaning of absorption, (that is, complete involvement in some activity). Thirdly, it implies a method of learning foreign language by being taught in that language. Fourthly, there is a connotation of Christian rituals associated with baptism. Baptism by immersion as a method is separate from baptism by pouring and sprinkling. Immersion in other words has several possibilities and its adoption into the folds of development practice needs to be contextualised against these meanings that are historically specific and of diverse disciplinary orientations. For the purpose of our discussion of immersion and village stay the two meanings that emerge in the context of baptism and adaptation of a foreign language are particularly significant.

Though the logistics of immersion is co-coordinated with the PRADAN team and separate field supervisors are allocated to students during the village stay, the immersion is both a rite of passage for a researcher in action research, as well as orienting a researcher to study a village through its own rubrics of language. It is expected the researcher must learn the language of the village through living and working in the village. Immersion, in this sense implies undergoing a full initiation whereby the pedagogy of practice begins with immersion. This leads to several anxieties and explorations. As the researchers settle in their respective villages, days of immersion allow them to undergo self-transformation and often the researchers' lapse into personalised terms of reference for the field sites, my village, my family. While such personal connections help to understand and experience the everyday life of the village rather than being a participant observant, often this language becomes a hindrance to exploration of self and the other. Self, the researcher and a fuzzy demarcation around the various actors this other is comprised of, the village, the community and the issues. What begins as a journey of enunciation of practice of everyday becomes a challenging network of personalised network of relations that has to be mediated through a language that emerges in the field and not that emerges in the classroom. Anthropological field journeys allow us to mediate and negotiate between two languages, the language of the field and of the discipline but students of the development practice undergo a process of immersion, a ritual lived through everyday-ness of village life worlds. However, unlike the anthropological counterparts, students of development practice experience a lack of

translation as soon as they go back and forth between texts and field sites. The challenge of translating or rather communicating in a single language makes us rethink the significance of field as site and as a process.

Field as a site and a process

Esposito (2010) alerts us that it is an 'ignored assumption that a community is a property belonging to subjects that join them together.' In this ignored assumption it becomes a way of attributing a quality to community. It becomes an attribute where commonality of interests become a governing factor in understanding what brings subjects together and Esposito makes a departure from this dialectic through turning our attention to *communitas*, to offer a radically different view of community not based on what is common. Community, according to Esposito is marked by what it lacks. The source of this lack need not be understood from an anthropological perspective but could be a transcendental one. It is at this juncture, it is important to review why an understanding of community has to be understood from its lack rather than common.

Taking this idea, it is important to situate the debate in anthropological understanding of the field vis-a-vis community. For this purpose, let's consider one of the classic ethnographic work on urban youth by Foote Whyte (1943) '*Street corner society*'. In this project, Foote Whyte (1991) claims he had taken the help of the community in interpretation and analysis of the data. He jointly wrote articles with community members. In another seminal work on a biography of a sugarcane worker, Mintz (1974) had requested his respondent to keep a diary. Don Taso is the protagonist of the work. Through his words, we get to know the worker in the sugarcane industry and changing rural life of Puerto Rico. How do we situate these ethnographic works of collaborations where the field emerged from the politics of encounter between the researcher and the researched. Foote Whyte (1991) in a later work, commented on these processes and reiterates an important point regarding these collaborations. He says there have always been instances particularly by anthropologists and social anthropologists to carry out participatory research. However, he adds a caveat, 'In those cases², my practitioner partners probably had some expectations that our collaboration would do some good for some people at some time, but we had no action objectives. The expectations that such collaborations can give arise to have been central to discussion on ethics, role of subjectivity and objectivity in field work based research. In other words, participation or collaboration has always existed. Some collaborations have begun in the field and translated in collaborative project writings. As research projects diversify and researchers from various disciplines come together to collaborate on a research project, there is a move away from the fixity of the field as a site. In fact, commemorating the celebrations of twenty five years of Writing Culture, Marcus (2012) in an article writes about the six conditions that the Centre for Ethnography, University of Irvine has moved towards. One of the six conditions is impulse to collaborate. Centre for Ethnography, University of Irvine, in fact has come up with an interesting project called ethnocharrette which documents different stages of doing ethnography. In collaborative projects it is emphasized that various para-sites can emerge where additional data can find adequate expression. Apart from that some collaborative projects instead of using studio

² Referring to his own collaborations

design as para sites, use studio design as inter-referencing in the form of a research platform.

Kanngaiser, Neilson and Rossiter (2010) in their article explore this idea of a research platform to move beyond the activities of the monastic scholar who writes theory and the sole researcher who does fieldwork. As part of the project of transit labour there were three cities Shanghai, Kolkata and Sydney, and each of the cities was the site of a research platform. Research platforms are based on combinations of online and offline methods to gather researchers from across the world and bring them into collaborative relation with local participants through workshops, site visits, symposia, exhibitions, mailing lists, blogs and publishing. This entails a process of inter-referencing across the three cities and the aim was to create a common production of knowledge through multilingual environment. In a sense, the collaborative method and processes across disciplines vary and with digitisation, there are various ways in which the digital space becomes one of the important sites of inter-referencing, para sites and many others. In other words, the idea of field as a fixed space has undergone a change and digitisation has impacted this move. It is also important to reiterate that collaborative projects have re-shaped ideas and methods of treating field as a fixed site, it has also generated multiple ways to produce knowledge. Yet, this co-production of knowledge is often between disciplines rather than between communities being researched upon.

Need for a collective

I am tensed about the collective. Will people agree to form one? What happens if the collective dissipates?

These are the three common anxieties that the students voiced during the framing of the research proposal. Two sorts of tensions are evident here. Firstly, that action has to be collective oriented and secondly, collective is a means and not an end. Rashmi in her dissertation gives us a journey of how collectives has been used in developmental work in the form of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), micro credit initiatives, and how her entry to the field through one of the predominant collective models that PRADAN is known for is instrumental in framing her research and facilitating the research process. Students are hosted by villagers associated with SHGs and several works were shaped by the class/caste/tribal position of the SHG members, the researcher and the collective that was being forged. The issues, most often it is claimed, are a collective issue. Processes of transformation in most research works are seen as collective struggles. This makes us step aside and think why is it in actioning of the research do we need a collective?

What are objectives of forging the collective? Here, I depart from Rashmi and many others who believe that a collective is forged to voice their issues. The collective makes the process participatory. I argue that we need to forge collective to make action participatory, to make our action value-rational. Is collective produced through self-identification of commonality of interests? Can a collective stem from ideas of difference? Foote Whyte's (1991) idea of participatory action research and demonstrate that at the empirical level the collective serves a dual function, that of being participatory and of being representative of community interests. If the immersions in the village familiarise the researcher with the existing

collective, why do we still feel the pressure of forming the collective? Is it because we treat ourselves as the outsider? Or is it because we feel we are faced with the complexities of studying one's own society? There are several intersectionalities of identities that shape the individual's position within the collective, and it is these intersections that also help us to break the myth that collective is forged on commonality. If a collective cannot be forged on commonality how and why do we perceive community?

Finally, to conclude with the community at an empirical level is constantly shaped by how it gets cultivated. Anthropologists like David Moss have shown us how development is cultivated. Further critiques of development have demonstrated creation of the centre and the periphery, satellite and the centre. All these critiques allude to development and its meanings reside in its practice, (that is, its politics). Politics of development and its anchoring has been central to specialised disciplines like development practice. The centrality of politics has never been strongly felt as the course curriculum requires the research students to dwell in action research. As an anthropologist teaching a class of students of development practice along with fellow colleagues from psychology, gender studies, sociology, political science and economics, one of the central issues that remain is how is the field constructed and who are the fieldworker/s in this co-production of knowledge. It is important to recognise that the questions we choose to research define the field and its fieldworkers.

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