Immersive Research: Building a Perspective towards the Process of Knowing-Doing

Bishakha Mishra, Shashi Shikha

Introduction

In our day to day interpretations and application of concepts, we often function on many givens. Like those of the idea of community, of theory, of praxis, of knowing and of doing. Often these ideas exist in dialogue with one another, instead of stark separation. This separation may indicate a compartmentalization of the emotional and rational; the personal and political, even as our reality flows within contradictions. As we try and examine these separations, we try to look at the way some knowledge of communities, especially communities which have been engaged in developmental work, is produced and related to.

One could ask, do communities exist beforehand or do they come into being? Is ‘community’ a given entity, an accessible context, or does one have to create a community? Can it be both? How do we ‘know’ about communities? What processes generate such knowledge? What do we do with such knowledge’s and how?

Standard social science research, developmental work and policy interventions largely assume that there is a community, say ‘x’ which can be studied and known. We also assume that this ‘x’ can be acted upon, through intervention and implementation to generate a shift from ‘x’ to ‘y’. In our experience of conducting action researches in the blocks of Palkot and Raidih of Gumla district, Jharkhand, through the process of immersion each of us lived in a village, for a period of ten months distributed seasonally over two years. And here, we had an opportunity to critically reflect how the ‘x’ and ‘y’ were destabilized and how our own knowledge of engaging with the knowledge of the community came under scrutiny. The methodology through which we approach this staying is what we refer to in this paper as ‘immersion’ – a process of immersing into the life world of our research setting.
**The Immersive methodology**

Immersion as a methodological entry point, introduces the idea of ‘being immersed’ in a specific context. It addresses the separation of theory and practice by a different approach to knowing and doing. Standard social science research concerns itself with knowing. This requires one to have a research question to give a clear indication of what the researcher would like to know. For example, the researcher might be interested in knowing the socio-economic conditions of school drop-outs in the state of Bihar. What such research generates is knowledge of the said situation. But what is to be done with this knowledge and what this knowledge does to the said socio-economic condition or how to interact with this knowledge is unclear at times.

Often, 'knowing' becomes knowledge 'of' a community and 'doing' is seen as a form of intervention or realization that would change a community to cope and function better for itself. Though we can’t marry ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ immediately, the paper proposes that an immersive enquiry can sharpen our dialogues between the two.

**Philosophical Tenets of Immersive Research**

Immersive action research is a departure from conventional methods of research as it is premised on immersion rather than field work; on listening-relating rather than data collection alone; on researching with the community where the community co-researches, instead of researching on the community where the community becomes the object of research. It is about co-researching with the community such that the participants are able to voice their lived experiences rather than falling into the trap of reiterating their internalized notions of development – underdevelopment, progress-regress and freedoms-unfreedoms. It tries to find out why a community functions the way it functions. Here one generates knowledge with community, questions the said knowledge, an action plan is designed with the community that one tries to go through and alterations to the previously assumed knowledge is recorded in relation to the new doing.

The philosophical orientation of immersion then, is an exercise, where the philosophy of research is to form, and transform, and not to just inform (Long 2002) in (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2016, 563-583). Immersion engages with the life of the other as one tries to figure out what is
affecting the life of the other. It is to put that knowledge into action and simultaneously question it. To learn, unlearn and collaboratively work towards that which is transformable. In other words, it’s a synthesis of knowing and doing through relating/being.

One way to look at it could be that by merging action and research, we will be able to find better scientific, technical and social ways for improved living conditions and for enrichment of human cultures. While we critique that already constructed, we must also simultaneously reconstruct. We draw from the Marxist Hegelian concept of praxis and Aristotle’s phronesis (bring to dialogue the two worlds of science and rationality and theory and practice).

Immersion is grounded by feminisms because one is critical of abstract academic knowledge, taking the route to lived experience (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Stanley says of feminist inquiry,’ that the point is to change the world not only to study it (Maguire 2006). Action research and feminist research problematizes systematic relations of power in the social construction of knowledge. Taking into consideration how the complexities and diversities of both women and men’s gendered identities and experiences influence its practice and practitioners. Hence, what is elemental to immersion is learning how to act upon without being domineering, linking rather than coercing, respecting diversity and otherness rather than imposing sameness.

“To listen to people is to empower them” [(Reinharz, 1992) in (Maguire 2006)]. Immersion is based on listening to the ‘voices’ of people and relating to them by considering their complexities and diversities in context of relationships. Now, yet another critical question is to closely examine whether the people’s voices are mere reproduction of the voices of the powerful or not? From the works of (Freire, 1970), (Scott, 1986; 1990) in (Reason 2008) and others on consciousness, relatively powerless groups may simply speak in a way that echoes the voices of powerful, either as a conscious way of appearing to comply with the powerful or as a result of internalization of dominant views and values. So, immersion relies not on a glorified idea of already existing community but rather implies the necessity to critically engage with realities in order to interact with and alter it. For eg: The very notion of what is generally understood by the
‘poor’ or ‘poverty’ is confronted when an adivasi1 woman muses- ‘Khane peene aur pehene ke liye hai, toh garib kaise hue? (We have enough to eat, drink and wear, then how are we poor?)’

An immersion, through its component of reflexive analysis, takes the question of self-other dynamics seriously bringing to dialogue the conscious or rationality with subconscious2 or reasonability. It puts to perspective the question of power in relationships and interrogates even, the relationship within research. Say, the relationship of the researcher and researched, the researcher and academia, the researched and community, and deepens the understanding of what creates knowledge and what remains excluded from and in knowledge.

Guided by such philosophical frames, the immersive experience relies on contingency. An immersive engagement has the probability of in-turn informing philosophies from which it may be inspired. Engaging with life worlds more closely engenders an awareness that could be attributed to reflexive response to the situations when one is truly empathetic to the other and acutely aware of the self-other relationship. Significant to the process of actioning research is generating dialogues or doxae3. Dialogic situations are relational responsive events which have strong constructive component. Action-ing the research through immersion therefore, entails greater understanding rather than purposive problem-solving interventions. Therefore, immersive action research foregrounds relating, which becomes an active reflective presence.

Relating

What we know changes what we do, and what we do changes what we know. Iteratively they affect each other. However, this relationship is different from that of cause and effect. The immersive approach relies heavily on the ability to connect, reengage and reimagine knowing and doing. Relating twists the question of knowledge of adivasi settings because it integrates the researcher within the context in a different, more intimate way. For example, when we read about indigenous tribal cultures, many anthropological studies portrayed these spaces as having egalitarian or even liberatory gender and sexual practices. However, our immersive research in

1 We use adivasi to indicate the Adivasi-ness through which people identify themselves. In an attempt to articulate the voices of Adivasi lifeworld we move beyond the governmental categorisation of ST as poor, backward or primitive and bring fore their principles, ethics and philosophies that are different from the mainstream.
2 Accounting for philosophy after Freud
3 Doxa is a Greek word meaning common belief or popular opinion. Used by the Greek rhetoricians as a tool for the formation of argument by using common opinions, the doxa was often used by sophists to persuade the people
Jharkhand explored how these communities have been formed at the interstices of tradition, coloniality, the emergence of the Indian nation state and the strong presence of a globalizing market, to name a few. This has changed the dimensions, say of gender and sexuality in rural adivasi spaces in Jharkhand. Acknowledging this changes the nature of one’s engagement. On the one hand it gives us a glimpse of how people’s positions, their actions and their interactions are structured. On the other hand it also allows for a possible encounter with ‘doing’. For example, when we assume that a priority for adivasi women in food unsustainable areas like Gumla, is to form SHGs to address issues of livelihood then our doing, our intervention, focuses itself on generating finances and initiatives around livelihoods, which may not be one of the primary concerns for them, as indicated in the works we have undertaken in the villages of Khursuta and Baghpanja, in Gumla district⁴.

Our anthropological, historical and developmental knowledge of the area will tell us that economic poverty is the most crucial problem in the area at the moment. Our doing according to this knowledge will often bring us to questions of livelihood, to what one could ‘have’ in order to overcome impoverishment. Rights-based agendas or the framework of secular liberal rights have standard doings laid out for standard knowing’s. Say, one would witness a demand of rightful wage for informal sector workers or marriage rights for homosexuals. While these demands and doings have their own due place and merit they don’t question the knowledges on which they are based. One could have due wages, or a refuge in the recognized institution of marriage but would this having alter anything about our knowing? What is so informal about certain works and does marriage really attends to a non-heterosexual relationship would still remain a question to be asked? Iris Marion Young, a feminist political theorist whose work focuses on the nature of justice and social difference, recognizes that we often mistake rights for things, that which is rightfully ours. She writes, “Rights are relationships, not things; they are institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to one another. Rights refer to doing more than having, to social relationships that enable or constrain action.” (Young,1990,p.25).

⁴ See the section-‘ Reflecting on Other Ways of Knowing and Doing through Immersive Research’ below
The relationship of the researcher with the knowledge of the community mostly does not feature as knowledge itself. It is either footnoted or occupies a little space in the acknowledgement or preface sections. At the best the reader is left to imagine the emotional travails of the researcher in between the lines. Relating in immersion takes the front seat; thriving, building and transforming the researcher herself as she is rocked on the waves of experiences of intimacy and isolation with the community. The emotional which usually tends to be treated as unreasonable, opens up to be processed as reasonability. Practicing the ethics of phronetic pursuit entails relating the vulnerability of the researcher with the vulnerability of the community. At this point we would need to interrogate how the nature of this relating would shape and inform the process of knowing and doing in circular loops.

**Knowing and Doing**

‘Beyond the word and the deed, in a movement closer to a rethought word and deed, transformative politics lies within an ensemble of social relations placing an importance on how we live instead of what we believe’ (Dhar & Chakrabarti, 2016).

This understanding is informed through methods that are other ways of knowing (knowing emerges as we relate and relating deepens as we know, continuously evolving as they interact). The ability to hear voice of the people or subaltern/inner life of the community is informed through the methods of ‘phronesis’, ‘affect’ and ‘reflexivity’. Phronesis is a shift from knowledge as knowing. The paths of phronesis flirt and hold on to the contingent nature of human existence and its ethics, focusing on the relationship between critical knowing and reflective doing. Hence the phronetic exercise in immersive action research is that of a dialogical (Freire, 1970) interaction between observations, socratic doxa (Arendt 2007) with the community, and the affect (Anderson, 2006; Roelvink, 2010) that was generated as a researcher. The affect also informs the emotional-relational responses to the knowledge which is visible and the invisibilised. At the same time the researcher has to be reflexive to distinguish between her insider and outsider and self-other status as continuously shifting.

We engage with a thick description (Geertz 1973) of being in the field because it gives the context of an experience, states the intentions and meanings that organized the experience, and reveals the experience as a process. In that case, what is written down is itself interpretive, because
the researcher interprets while writing, attempting in the process to rescue the ‘said’ of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms” (Denzin 2009). The intent is to create the conditions that will allow the reader, through us, to converse (and observe) the field site. Building on what has been described and inscribed, interpretation creates the conditions for authentic, or deep, emotional understanding. According to Berger and Luckmann, reality is socially constructed; however, the method that is used to construct reality and its formal representation is influenced by the situation in which it was created (Berger and Luckmann 1966). We argue that, the politics of the person who is documenting, analysing and constructing the reality plays a key role.

Each party has its own expertise and “frame” as the point of departure in creating a shared framework or “local theory”. In these partnerships insiders become more theoretical about their practice and outsiders more practical about their theory. This occurs by participating in a “co-generative dialogue” where both insiders and outsiders operate out of their initial frames of reference but communicate at a level where frames can be changed and new frames generated. This co-generative dialogue seems necessary in any form of liberating learning. Paulo Freire argues for a dialogical relationship that is characterized by “subjects who meet to name the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1970, 167). In the development of local theory, the dialogue between the "teacher" and the participants is crucial. The knowledge generating process should proceed under local control action (Ibid).

Taking into account the above approaches formulated in different disciplines, immersive work builds on conceptual, methodological and emotional skills for engaging with the process of transformative social action. Immersion provides a space to bring theory and practice into a dialogue/debate. It provides a space for research and action in continuum and as complementary to each other. According to Dreze, it seems better to take a position and be explicit about it than to pretend that we stand on neutral ground. It becomes essential to engage in public discussions with people who have different views to be able to visualise an alternative perspective (Dreze 2002, 818).

In weaving the narratives from the village with practitioner’s own personal narratives of transformation, we base our expression within sociological imagination (Mills 1999) according to which every individual is situated within a biography of historical sequence and contributes in the
shaping of the society. Our mind needs to grasp the interplay of individuals and society; of biography and history; of self and world to cope with the personal troubles in a way as to control the structural transformations that lie behind them. The sociological imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, from political to psychological, from an examination of individual family expenses to the national budget. Hence, in our work we clearly navigate between the transformations that we experience in connection with the knowing of the field that we are associated with; between their narratives and our perspectives, between the understanding of their tribal life-worlds and acknowledgement of our own Brahmanical life-world.

For instance, during our action research in the village Khursuta, we chose to engage with the suffering of single/teenage/unmarried motherhood rather than framing the question in the context of teenage pregnancy which is the usual developmental approach. Or in the village of Baghpanja where we chose to engage through faith practices as a transformative praxis during times of crises rather than relying on financial social institutions such as SHGs alone. In these cases the entry into the question of research was through sufferance or Vyanjana (Ray 2004). Vyanjana means ‘implied indication’, ‘suggestion’ and ‘underlying meaning’ (Ibid, 6). It contains meanings of words that gain in depth through accompanying expressions, verbal as well as non-verbal, even pause and silence. “The developers’ heartlessness with regards to social justice, heartlessness which is heightened by life-style differential between them and those who look up to them, is likely to lessen if they are touched by vyanjana or sufferance” (Ibid, 18; emphasis original).

Reflecting on Other Ways of Knowing and Doing through Immersive Research

Our Experience in Khursuta

When we encountered the case of an unmarried pregnancy, in the first instance we perceived it as a risk from our subject location. On deeper engagement with the situation within the village we could shift the gaze and understood that there are diverse forms of cohabitation practiced in the village. ‘Unmarried’ pregnancy is often perceived as a ‘risk’, categorised mostly around teenage pregnancy and dealt with interventions around adolescent health. The primary interventionist approach caters to the issue through sex-education to be imparted along the regular curriculum in
the school. We present evidences while working through the rationale of the tribal community in pursuing a practice which is not affiliated to the institutional practice, guided either by the religion or customary norms. We also present evidences that inform different ways of dealing with the choice of partners. The parents and the community in general recognise that boys and girls have the freedom to choose their partners. The verbal sanctions are recognised and pave the way for formalising alliances.

The experiences of cohabitation in the tribal life-world build an understanding of tolerance and empathy towards the natural physiology of the growing adults in the community which are not guided by the moralising principles. Through the framing of the subjects in the tribal life-world in their own language we are able to visualise an opportunity where there could be alternate forms of framing histories of sexuality.

Hence, we moved away from the frame of adolescent health alone to discuss about things that they would like to do. It was also an opportunity to recognize that when we try and hold a group meeting on the issue which is non-economic or non-purposive in nature, it gives freedom in the ways in which people associate with each other. We intended to open up the familial spaces for initiating dialogues on adolescent sexuality as used to happen in Dhumkuria. Parallel to this, we found that the familial spaces are already sensitive to the physiological and emotional needs of the youth and therefore a close examination of existing practices of cohabitation and their present day negotiations is crucial in framing our language in which development (through health and sex education) is associated with sexuality.

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5 Oraon villages have the institution of the Dhumkuria or bachelors’ dormitory, which Dalton describes as follows: “In all the order Oraon villages when there is any conservation of ancient customs, there is a house called the Dhumkuria in which all the bachelors of the village must sleep under penalty of a fine. The huts of the Oraons have insufficient accommodation for a family so that separate quarters for the young men are a necessity. The same remark applies to the young unmarried women, and it is a fact that they do not sleep in the house with their parents. They are generally frank enough when questioned about their habits, but on this subject, there is always a certain amount of reticence, and I have seen girls quietly withdraw when it was mooted. I am told that in some villages a separate building is provided for them like the Dhumkuria, in which they consort under the guardianship of an elderly duenna, but I believe the more common practice is to distribute them among the houses of the widows, and this is what the girls themselves assert, if they answer at all when the question is asked; but however billeted, it is well known that they often find their way to the bachelor’s hall, and in some villages actually sleep there. I not long ago saw a Dhumkuria in a Sarguja village in which the boys and girls all slept every night.” Colonel Dalton considered it uncertain that the practice led to actual immorality, but the fact can hardly be doubted. Sexual intercourse before marriage, Sir H. Risley says, is tacitly recognised, and is so generally practised that in the opinion of the best observers no Oraon girl is a virgin at the time of her marriage.
We constantly faced a challenge on how to inaugurate questions of desire in a dialogic mode. We did not want to go through the PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) exercise and other mediums for stating the problem of the community. We wanted to listen, relate and communicate. And that is where we came across the possibility of an alternative where development is associated to sexuality beyond sexual and reproductive health, abortion rights and sex education. Development is related to sexuality in the ways in which they relate to each other which is an evidence of substantive freedom.

*Experience from Baghpanja*

The death of a young man in the village of Baghpanja unfolded a series of events that led people to gather in order to respond to their sufferings. So far, Baghpanja had been treated from the lens of external intervention as a poor village where crises could be attended to through resources like income generation by working with women self-help groups that saved weekly and adopted incremental agricultural practices (agricultural, horticulture, NTFP such as lac, animal husbandry). These approaches focussed on expanding people’s material and economic aspects. At the time of deep crises, such as death and disease, these solutions alone did not make up for the losses in the community. People relied on inter-relationships to navigate times of turmoil. Women of Baghpanja, directed our attention, to acts of faith (prayer group that moved from house to house lending presence and support to each other during that time) that they leaned into to seek restoration from suffering.

Interventionist approaches, often, dismiss the strength in people’s inner lives and their secret convictions, expecting things to work because they have logical integrity. However, in the adivasi lifeworld of Baghpanja, our work showed that things that people have faith in allow them to alter themselves. These axes of alterations emerged through critical dialogue and reflective relating which led people to voice their inner convictions. Where the logical integrity of intervention might face hiccups, something like prayer then might hold strong ground in communitic bonding and action. Especially, when it stems from the true world of inner faith. Therefore, after the death took place, people’s response to disease in the village turned to faith practices instead of access to institutionalized health alone.
Rethinking ‘Community’ Through Immersion

Often in community knowledge production, knowledge gains primacy over community. It occurs largely when the community is taken as an understandable whole. No community can emerge within definition; rather, finding its own definition may turn it into a community. It is thus imperative that we think of decolonized knowledge production in substantive ways for our understandings and actions to be more effective for the world in which we live. It is here that a critical attention to other ways of knowing and doing becomes important. If we are to move away from western models of understanding the adivasi world, we need to be able to generate knowledge in adivasi ways (instead of generating knowledge on adivasi ways), or even take a step to generate an adivasi way of looking at knowledge itself. What would such an epistemology look like?

Adivasi communities may have an epistemic order different from the western modern models used to interpret them. They may carve a different relationship between knowing and doing altogether. Our experiences of action researches in Gumla, Jharkhand, set in the context of the ‘third world’ adivasi life-world from which it is inspired, explain how this method of learning from the adivasi life-world could enable deeper explorations of the reality within which developmental work takes place. To analyze and critique ourselves with respect to theories, experiences and communal sharing, and looking at processes that may lead to new ways of thinking and doing.

In this regard, we end by proposing something mad, even absurd. We began this paper by giving up on the givens; we end by doing the same. Perhaps, let’s give up on the ideas of ‘community’, as a given – treating it as already existing, as a noun. A Community evolves through rethought relationships between knowing and doing; it emerges at the cusp of relating and is forever contingent. A community is not what we have but what we bring into being. It could be imagined as an ever-emergent being-in-common as conceptualized by Jean-Luc Nancy (Dhar, 2016). We hope that our small work will be a contribution, towards working through un-theorized philosophies of indigenous intellectuals and their methodologies that can shape social science approaches instead of the other way round as it usually is.
References


