

# Negotiating Identities in a Dangerous Field

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Who the researcher is and where the research is conducted are the two key dimensions of fieldwork. This note provides an account of how the researcher's outsider ethnicity in Gujarat influenced the fieldwork and ethnographic data. It further examines the multiple identities the researcher brings to the field, and how these insights vary as the researcher switches between identities. The manner in which the researcher presents these identities and the manner in which they are perceived or decoded by participants and stakeholders in the village community or social group influence rapport formation, informants' acceptance and access to ethnographic information.

Fieldwork is one of the most important characteristic features of the social anthropological discipline, connected to two basic dimensions: first, where it takes place and second, who performs it (Godina 2003). What ethnographic methods and ethics apply in a society in which ordinary interrelations and social institutions are often surpassed by unrest, instability and fear (Kovats-Bernat 2002)? In conducting fieldwork in hostile and conflict-ridden regions, there is a strong possibility of the researcher's victimisation in the field.

Hence, there is a need to deploy and devise field strategies to address researcher concerns, in risk-prone regions. In encountering contested realities in settings of pervasive fear and even threats, customary approaches, methods and ethics of fieldwork are at times insufficient, irrelevant or ineffective in capturing the truth. This note provides an account of my personal experiences in Gujarat and how my outsider ethnicity influenced my fieldwork and the material of ethnographic data.

## A Perilous Field

The state has a history of communal violence in the post-Independence period.<sup>1</sup> The year 2002 became a watermark for the "ethnic cleansing" of the Muslim minority in Gujarat. In the period thereafter, urban space has become pockmarked with community-based segmentation. Some media accounts, academics and activists have argued that things have returned to normalcy in Gujarat but my experience was quite to the contrary.

The fieldwork experience began on 10 May 2008 when I arrived in Ahmedabad railway station. Six years had elapsed since the pogrom orchestrated by the state. My head was covered with a dupatta and I spoke in Hindustani on the

mobile phone to inform my mother that I had reached Ahmedabad safely. Even before I could tell the autorickshaw driver at the railway station where I wanted to go, he quickly presumed that I needed to go to Juhapura, the city's largest Muslim ghetto.<sup>2</sup> When I asked what made him think I would want to go to Juhapura, he said:

Behan (sister), I could infer from your conversation, when you said *salam* and *khuda hafiz*,<sup>3</sup> that you are a Muslim. All Muslims live in Juhapura after the Gujarat riots. No one can afford to reside in mixed faith colonies.

It was thus evident that in Gujarat, or at least in Ahmedabad, urban space had been fully polarised and segregated along the binary lines of religious identity markers. My next reality check came while looking for an accommodation.

As a Muslim woman researcher, it was an arduous task to find a place in supposedly urban, gated localities in the city of Ahmedabad. My ordeal started when seeking rented accommodation, I approached a couple of real estate agents. After I had described to them the kind of accommodation I was looking for and other details came a rude jolt. Despite having the resources, I was qualified in terms of degrees, but my religious identity was a stumbling block. Good civic amenities were a luxury not to be sought by those from a particular religious community.

At first, many agents agreed to provide accommodation according to my preferences if money was not a problem. I told them that the areas I was interested in were the upmarket localities of Vastapur, Bodakdev, Satellite, and Navrangpura. One agent even said that getting rental accommodation was not a problem for the "foreign return" (in local parlance), with money. Then they asked my name.

An elderly real estate agent was the most straightforward. Requesting me to not get offended, he said that it would not be possible for me to get accommodation in any of my desired areas. The majority community inhabited the so-called posh areas; Ahmedabad was a total contrast to his youth days. Most of the housing societies had decided not to

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rent out or sell any house to Muslims. He instead argued for my personal safety, and proposed pockets where Muslims comprised a numerical majority – Juhapura or the Lal Darwaza (old city) area. Somewhat unnecessarily, he also noted that food would not be a problem, given that “you people cannot stay without meat”. He courteously provided contact details for a few Muslim real estate agents dealing with the predominantly Muslim pockets of Juhapura.

A Hindu Gujarati friend proposed paying guest accommodation. I finally gave in to the prospect, although not without wondering if it would work out either. Then came another turn of events. The family that had earlier agreed to host me as a paying guest in one of the posh mixed neighbourhoods said frankly that in the present circumstances, staying with them would require that I conceal my identity, and undergo a temporary change for a pleasant stay. They had no problems if a Muslim stayed with their family. They had many Muslim friends when they were living in the United States (us). But here, the expectation was that I would perform, pretend and live incognito with an adopted name. They even went on to suggest a Hindu name by which they would address me in the colony. If a person in the housing society asked for my name, I was to maintain secrecy. The disguise would provide a license to move around and interact without any hindrances. My fellow researchers and friends agreed that accommodation in one of the so-called posh colonies required living with a disguised identity.

My mannerism, attire and conduct did not match the usual image trappings of “Muslim”, popularly circulated in the idiom of media truth. Also I was a researcher coming from Germany and my name was common among the Parsis. My Muslim identity became burdened with stigma. Once again, I came face to face with the stereotypes that permeate urban space.

This was why after a short stay with some of my Muslim Gujarati friends, I decided to head straight to my field site – Sabarkantha, which had witnessed some of the most intense and violent communal clashes, with Muslims suffering arson,

attack and rape in the villages as well towns.

### First Impressions

As ethnographic fieldwork data is obtained through interaction with informants, the personal characteristics of the researcher directly affect the process of fieldwork (Powdermaker 1967). My fieldwork experiences were quite peculiar, a product of my social identity and the dynamics of the social environment which I confronted. As a participant observer, I chose to live within the Mathnaa community,<sup>4</sup> in order to observe and comprehend the everyday processes, interactions and life events of actors in the village. Participant observation as a method encourages researchers to immerse themselves in the day-to-day activities of the people they are attempting to understand (May 2001: 148). As a result, this method helped me as a researcher to understand and study the complex sociocultural and political phenomena as they arose, and provided me with an excellent opportunity to gain deeper and better insights through first-hand experience. The method helps the researcher to collect information about every aspect of a culture, even if the researcher is investigating only one particular area. A holistic hypothesis, i.e., the idea that the various aspects of culture are interrelated and that knowledge of the nature of this interrelationship is crucial to the understanding of how even a single institution or set of institution works (Srinivas 2002: 545), makes participant observation an important tool in research. An interpretative approach includes the researcher's beliefs and behaviour as part of the evidence presented and considered in research activity (Harding 1987). Following this argument, my own role and biases as a researcher with multiple identities (explained in detail later) must be duly acknowledged.

When one enters rural India, it paves an opening to the world of caste and its influences on research in many ways (Srinivas 2002). Hence, in the larger sociocultural field, being Ashraf in the Muslim caste hierarchy, tracing my roots to a brahmin family converted to Islam centuries ago,<sup>5</sup> played a significant part

in my research by facilitating and at times hindering my research. My Islamic identity created conditions for me to break away from some of the rigid traditional brahmin mores of social relations, especially caste-based distinctions, and helped me interact with and reach out to the different caste groups in Mathnaa.

I first stayed in a taluka,<sup>6</sup> but then gradually shifted to the village. Mathnaa is a small village in the east of Sabarkantha district. A bumpy 10-kilometre ride on a narrow road leads to the village from the main highway. Mathnaa is surrounded by the high hills of the Aravalli ranges, and the above-mentioned narrow road off the main highway leads to the *chaupal*, which is the main square of the village and a common meeting place for the settlement's men. The chaupal has one tea stall, a small grocery shop, a panchayat office, a village dairy, a village hall and a bus stand as well as a through road to other settlements. The main temple of the village's local deity (*Kanku Mata*) is located here (Naz 2011). Mathnaa is connected to the outside world by government bus, jeep or carrier rickshaws, which are referred to as *tempu* by the villagers. Often, local transportation is overloaded, so frequently one can see people sitting on the roof of a bus or a jeep. Mathnaa has one primary school with three male teachers, where children from the lower caste stratum study.

After primary education at school, for further education, the next destination is the main town, situated at a distance of more than 15 kilometres from the host village. On the health front, Mathnaa is bereft of any medical facility, and the nearest health centre is also approximately 15 kilometres away. There is, however, one traditional healer known as a tantric baba in the village, who is more popular among the adivasis in the village and also acts as the priest attached to the temple of *Bhathi Dada*, which is popular amongst the villagers. He is consulted about family- and marriage-related problems and is believed to have supernatural powers that can cure many illnesses.

The village has several clusters of settlements along the lines of caste, called

was in Gujarati. From the main square of the village, near the bus station, one can see the narrow mud lanes leading to the caste-based (jati) residential abodes or *was* (Beteille 1965). There is a clear-cut demarcation between each caste, whereby upper-caste houses are identified with a tulsi (holy basil) plant in their main courtyard, complemented with a lamp lit daily in the evening in their concrete houses. The distinct feature of adivasi houses are their walls, painted with traditional tribal folk art. Their floor is made up of mud and cowdung paste. The usual structure, based on mud and a thatched roof, is easily identifiable in agricultural fields where it is ritually located.

### Negotiating Caste

In Mathnaa I chose to stay with the adivasi family, who were at the midway position between the upper caste (Jadejas and Thakores)<sup>7</sup> and the dalits.<sup>8</sup> Mathnaa was an *Ankada* village,<sup>9</sup> where the leading adivasis (tribal heads) were made *Ankadedars* of the villages and were responsible for populating the hilly regions, serving the border land of the state and collecting revenues for the state in the form of fixed amounts called *Ankada* (Gazetteer of India 1974).

Due to its *Ankada* roots, Mathnaa adivasis enjoy good relations with all the other castes in the village, as they believe that their ancestors were the founders of the villages in this region. This research and my relationship with the community would have been extremely different if I had stayed with the dalit, Thakore or Jadeja families. In due course, suspicions were bound to come up as I spent my time with the womenfolk from the adivasi and dalit communities as much or more than the menfolk.

I also faced suspicion from the elites of the village, due to this intermingling. The upper caste initially allowed me inside their kitchen. But when they came to know I was dining with the dalits, they did not extend me the same courtesy. Nevertheless, I still managed to maintain cordial relations. They served me tea at times.

Due to my urban and Muslim background, certain prejudices were never

attached to my participation and engagement because of the lack of a rigid caste system based on the principle of pure and impure in my faith. Exceptions were made for me. In spite of my relationship with the dalits I was welcomed. My metropolitan Muslim identity made my entry point easier and helped me in gaining acceptance because of my tolerant, pluralistic approach towards caste rituals.

The fieldwork process presented occasional hurdles due to my language skills and limitations along religious and gender identity, but overall the Mathnaa community was very accepting and approachable from the moment of my arrival. In the initial days, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) representative was always present on the pretext of helping me when I conducted my interviews or met the ex-watershed committee and user group members. In his presence, the villagers were very careful in what information they provided and in the manner in which they interacted with me. Moreover, he only introduced me to people who gave a rosy picture of the watershed project. Furthermore, during my initial dealings with the women, they interacted with me only in the presence of their male members and were not allowed to speak to me directly when I asked any questions; either their husband, older brother or some elder male members answered my queries. It was a reminder of how women's voices were empowered through the male pivot!

It was later, when I started staying within the Mathnaa community, that it became possible for me to gain access to all strata of the community and have moments of privacy with individuals and groups of respondents, especially women. As time elapsed, it was in closed group discussions and informal meetings that the participants revealed the informalities of Mathnaa community's involvement in the watershed project, as well as other important water-related issues.

During the initial days, observations made in the field diary proved very handy, as they helped me compare, sporadically, people's views and perceptions including the formal and informal positions they took on a variety of issues concerning village politics, water, the

watershed project, *Jyotigram Yojana*,<sup>10</sup> borewells, groundwater markets<sup>11</sup> and caste and social relations. I realised that there was a qualitative difference in the perceptions I had of the Mathnaa community with the passage of time, and this contributed immensely towards a better understanding and analysis of the villagers' perceptions and events.

### Enacting Identities

During the fieldwork, I enacted various identities in relation to different research subjects, at times bringing opportunities and at others times challenges for my research. My interaction with the local NGO was as a researcher with an urban background, studying in Germany for a PhD. NGO members felt I was trying to monitor their project work in terms of its impact-response benefit for overcoming water scarcity, and trying to evaluate whether their efforts would lead to community participation in the truest sense and on realistic grounds.

Conversely, my interaction with the dalits (ex-untouchables) and adivasis made them feel proud, because of my brahmin roots and because I had rejected caste rigidities. For them I was *behan* and one of them. My local informants deduced that my work would help their grievances over water be heard in Delhi, the seat of the central government, or at least in Gandhinagar, the state capital. The dalits and adivasis felt that I would bring about change in terms of overcoming water scarcity through my work, which they viewed as the purpose of my temporary habitation in their village. Moreover, they expected me to highlight discrimination against them in Mathnaa. On numerous occasions, I had to clarify my role as a researcher and my purpose in visiting their village.

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For government officials at taluka and district headquarters, I was a non-Gujarati Muslim woman researcher, wanting to study Gujarat's water issues. I often encountered questions about my apprehensions concerning Gujarat. Given the massive communal strife the state witnessed in 2002, such inquiry was to be expected. Questions around my safety and insecurity were subtly raised. The selection of Sabarkantha district on my part brought some twists and discomfort, often from official ranks.

Several times, block-level and district-level officials with whom I conducted interviews on government policies pertaining to water, irrigation and watershed projects, often asked me why I chose to study Gujarat, when other states in India also had similar water problems. Some of them initially thought I was Parsi due to my first name and commented about how Gujarat has given so much to the Parsi community. Later when I disclosed that I was Muslim, they again mistook me for being Ismaili Muslim,<sup>12</sup> and often mentioned the Aga Khan Development Foundation's contribution to Gujarat's

development sector and praised the Ismailis for being modern, progressive and highly successful abroad. I further clarified that I was not Gujarati and a non-Ismaili Muslim; this led to volley of questions. The reaction was that I did not carry the typical Muslim outlook and appearance.

During our conversations, they often attempted to insinuate that Muslims were responsible for their backwardness. They further criticised the Muslims of Gujarat for blaming the state government's policy of indifference. Also, some of them warned me that as a researcher from the Muslim community, I should not give a biased view of the state or let my religious identity induce a portrayal of their state in bad light.

One government official even accused me of being an American spy aiming to project the Gujarat government as anti-minority. He further voiced cynicism about the very group of researchers, journalists, activists (civil society), all of whom were against the Narmada Dam Project and did not want to see Gujarat prosperous and developed. My stance

forced me to defend my intentions and objectivity amid prejudice, denigration and labelling.

State publicity and propaganda have described the Sardar Sarovar project as a magic wand to solve all the water problems of the state. Alternative views of the project thus incited reactions and caused passions to flare up. One had to be always circumspect speaking against the Narmada project among the government officials, since it was seen as a marker of Gujarati sub-nationalism (popularly called "asmita") and pride; speaking against it was considered anti-Gujarati positioning. This perception does need scrutiny for its appeal in political circles and particular social groups.

Upper-caste villagers, on the one hand, identified with me as an upper caste Muslim with brahmin roots. My social origins gave them a sense of ease and caste purity, although they were disappointed to know that my family had converted to Islam. Brahmins have traditionally occupied a ritualistic and sacred legitimising power in the village power structure. Hence, my brahmin

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ancestry helped appease them at the beginning. Moreover, caste in itself was an extremely dominant factor in the power matrix of Mathnaa, because caste determined living space in Mathnaa. The village had varied clusters of settlements or was divided along the lines of caste.

The upper castes' primary interaction with the Muslim community had been with the Ghanchi Muslims, who were traditionally involved in the manufacturing process of cooking oil. (But many of them had shifted to petty businesses or become transporters.) Altogether, a "Brahmin" Muslim was a discovery in their worldview, and a matter of pride.

Some of them suspected me on occasion of being a government spy under the garb of researcher. They imagined that I had come to record the rampant practice of land-grabbing by powerful upper castes, and the way in which the watershed project was implemented and monopolised by certain people. During my various interactions, I always maintained and clarified my manifest identity as a researcher studying their village, but still had to encounter several contradictions and inhibitions based on their perceptions about my identity. Hence, I conducted research by applying conventional as well as unorthodox field methods, often negotiating my identity in ways unique to my particular alien circumstances.

As a non-Gujarati, language posed a challenge in my research. In order to overcome this hurdle, I took language lessons before going into the field. Though Gujarati has various dialects, my working knowledge of the language made gaining acceptance easier in the Mathnaa community. A series of other events also posed a challenge to the research, including the condemnable serial bomb blasts that rocked the city of Ahmedabad on 26 July 2008 and then Modasa on 29 September 2008. These occurred while I was still carrying out my fieldwork. The bomb blasts led to the resurfacing of communal tensions in Gujarat, in general, and in the city of Ahmedabad, in particular. For a non-Gujarati Muslim woman researcher, it was an uncomfortable situation which also posed certain

concerns in terms of the viability and adaptability of the fieldwork, as the aftermath of those blasts could have incensed and stoked internal civil disturbance. Nevertheless, contrary to my fears, the people of Mathnaa did not allow this communal tension to affect our research relationship; in fact, despite knowing my religious identity, they showered me with their support, love and affection.

In conclusion, informal strategies, tactics and techniques sensitive to danger, can facilitate an adaptive approach to data collection (Kovats-Bernat 2002). The identities the researcher brings to the field have a profound impact on the fieldwork process. The manner in which the researcher presents these identities and the manner in which these identities are perceived and decoded by participants and stakeholders in the village community or social group influences rapport, informants' acceptance and access to ethnographic information.

#### NOTES

- 1 Gujarat has witnessed a series of episodes of communal and caste violence, such as those in 1969, 1974, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1992 and most recently in 2002.
- 2 Juhapura was a small suburb until the mid-1980s, but after the series of communal riots over the late 1980s and 1990s, a large number of the Muslims migrated to Juhapura from the Muslim and Hindu-dominated areas of Ahmedabad to settle there.
- 3 *As-Salam-Walikum* mean "peace be upon you" is greeting which Muslim exchange with each other and *Khuda Hafiz* means "May God protect you".
- 4 Mathnaa is the pseudonym of the village under study in Sabarkantha district, where I carried out my PhD fieldwork on sociocultural implications of water scarcity and water management in 2008-09. The empirical materials presented in this paper draw from the research conducted in north Gujarat.
- 5 Indian Muslim society is divided into three broad categories: (1) Ashrafs are those who trace their origins to foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan or Afghanistan and all those upper caste Hindus who converted to Islam; (2) Ajlaf are middle-caste converts whose occupation are ritually clean; (3) Arzal are the lowest caste, mostly untouchable castes who converted to Islam (Sachar et al 2006).
- 6 Taluka is also known as block; it is the political administrative unit between village and the district level.
- 7 Mathnaa is a multi-caste village. Tribes also constitute a significant proportion of the population. There were a total of 200 households at the time the study was conducted. Caste determines living space and is the basis for social interaction in terms of water in Mathnaa.

- 8 In Mathnaa, dalits belong to the Chamar sub-caste.
- 9 Ankada was the revenue paid to the state by the villagers in precolonial Gujarat.
- 10 Under this scheme, separate electricity supply is provided to domestic and agriculture-related activity in villages in Gujarat. The scheme was initially launched as a pilot project in eight districts of Gujarat, but by November 2004, it was extended to the entire state, assuring 24-hour supply for domestic use and eight hours for agriculture.
- 11 A groundwater market is a village-level arrangement through which owners of borewells sell pump irrigation services to other farmers of the village, i.e., sell water to other farmers from their wells for use on crops.
- 12 The Shia Ismaili Muslims are a community united in their allegiance to his highness Prince Karim Aga Khan (known to the Ismailis as Mawlana Hazar Imam) as the 49th hereditary Imam (spiritual leader), and direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad. For details on Shia Ismaili Muslims, see Daftary (1990).

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