

MAPPING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING IN A CONFLICT ZONE: A PRE-PLAN TO FIELDWORK IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

The article is about the preliminary planning to visit the armed conflict sites. Although some anthropologists and ethnographers are of the opinion that there is no valid benchmark to reproduce a planned methodological paradigm to carry out a research in an armed conflict zone, however, a set of preplanned trivial and transitional methods is employed to carry out the fieldwork in such situations. This article tries to produce a map of fieldwork research on the basis of ethnographic principles. This may preferably try to explain 'how' of things and not 'what' of them.

While writing this article the researcher is in his field locale and is yet to complete his data collection, but the subjective understanding and the planning given underneath has grasped many fruitful results.

Keywords: Fieldwork, Conflict Zone, Ethnography, Methodology, Kashmir

Introduction

A series of voluminous research work has been carried out to draw the situation of valley. There is a severe lack of field-based data from conflict zone as most of the studies are conducted post-conflict' (Shah and Pettigrew 2009: 230). And I being an ethnographic researcher call it double

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absence- the ethnographic content of a conflict zone and conflict related study based on ethnographic model. Field research in conflict zones is challenging for both methodological and ethical reasons (Wood, 2006). In conflict zones, the usual imperatives of empirical research (to gather and analyze accurate data to address a relevant theoretical question) are intensified by the absence of unbiased data from sources such as newspapers, the partisan nature of much data compiled by organizations operating in the conflict zone, the difficulty of establishing what a representative sample would be and carrying out a study of that sample, and the obvious logistical challenges (ibid). Similarly, there are many ethical and methodological imperatives of research which are intensified in conflict zones by political polarization, the presence of armed actors, the people with different political ideologies, the contestants of peace and conflict, the separatists, the militants with different politico-religious ideologies and the common folks of people who suffer the most.

The complex and semi-secretive nature of life in conflict zones is a reality. Most of the times we are unable to trace the missing links by employing some straightforward qualitative interviewing methods but to infer these information it requires an engagement with the field that can only be accomplished through ethnography. The first hand observation, the participant intervention and the incessant observation and interrogation, the in-depth interviews and the semi structured interviews or mere interactions with the people from all areas and the corners of the field locale can help in coping with the complete picture of the life of people in a conflict zone.

Mapping of the Field Locale

District Pulwama, a geographical part of Southern Kashmir is my field locale, one of the total ten districts of Kashmir Division and sum total of twenty two districts of Jammu and Kashmir State. The district Pulwama has been very central to the armed conflict since its inception in 1989 in the Valley. During the last few years the effect of the conflict has got channelized towards the South Kashmir which includes four main Districts- Pulwama, Anantnag, Kulgam and Shopian. Ethnographers generate understandings of culture through representation of what we call an emic perspective, or what might be described as the “insider’s point of view.” As I belong to the same district, hence I am as an insider working in the field. There are further certain unavoidable ground realities that do not permit a researcher to widen the area of field in a conflict zone. The

mobility in a conflict zone is confined; fewer resources available, the time constraints, the research ethicalities and the possible threats to the life of the researcher are the reasons that hinder to roam outside the jurisdiction or far flung areas. Further the ethnographic researches are mostly representative and one district is sufficient to represent the whole conflict torn valley of Kashmir as the gravity and centrality of armed conflict has been non-eliminative from this part of valley since its inception in 1989.

Despite a growing literature that seeks to develop new theories and perspectives for the study of violence, little mention is made of the practical matters of survival in perilous field sites and how the anthropologist's experience of violence in the field should be considered. Drawing on my own fieldwork in Haiti, I suggest the adoption of new tactics for ethnographic research and survival in dangerous fields—strategies that challenge the conventional ethics of the discipline, reconfigure the relationship between anthropologist and informant, and compel innovation in negotiating the exchange of data under hazardous circumstances.

Kovats-Bernat, Christopher J. (2002).

Defining the term 'Armed Conflict', the Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University declares that there is no consensus about what constitutes Armed Conflict. The issue is intensively debated by experts in International Law. But a widely used social science definition of armed conflict was developed by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Wallensteen 1988; Heldt 1993) that has been cited by over 5000 times in Google Scholar, which is-

“An Armed Conflict is a contested incompatibility that concerns government and /or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which one is the government of the state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year.”

According to official figures, 200 militants have been killed by the security forces during counter-insurgency operations from 1 January till date this year (2017), which is the highest since 2010. In 2010, 270 militants were killed. However the number dropped to around 100 per year by the end of 2015. In 2016, 165 militants were killed by the security forces along the Line

of Control (LoC) and in the hinterland. There has been an increase in civilian killings in militancy-related violence as well with 54 civilians getting killed this year compared to 14 last year. The number of security forces killed in militancy-related incidents this year was 77, lower than the 88 fatalities witnessed last year.¹ So, it is obvious from the government reports that this year (2017) has been very crucial in terms of armed conflict and adds further concerns for researchers to work in such highly tense field locale. I had started my field work by establishing a preliminary understanding of the life of people in a conflict zone in the months of April and May 2017. Later in the second phase I started my field work in November 2017 which may last between four to six months. Thus my field research occurred during a period of relatively higher conflict rate in terms of the conflict related fatalities, the encounters between government forces and militants, the use of pellet guns, the protest processions, the use of smoke shells, tear gases and pava shells, the number of those injured, blinded or arrested under different laws. As these are some forms of armed conflict mostly pertained to Kashmir valley and the field locale I have been working in. In this way I am witnessing a live armed conflict both overtly and covertly and being an insider I am the very part of it. Since I have met many police officials including SSP, SP, DSP and a few SHO's from police department; the ADC (Assistant Deputy Commissioner) of Pulwama and other block level civil department officials and a few people who may have suffered by the conflict directly or indirectly to understand the very craft of life affected in a conflict zone on a variety of platforms. For example how is it challenging for state police to cope with the prevailing situation by balancing the relationship between them and common people. How are they managing to neutralize the militants who are among the very people they are dealing with, and how are able to win over the faith of these people who support militants and insurgency operations.

Being a researcher I have to maintain contacts with people from all streams- whether they are supporting State apparatus, the militants or separatists, or those neutral and all the reachable physical and geographical areas of the district. Since a systematic and all-encompassing review of methodological and ethical problems of conducting research in violent contexts does not exist (Gasser, 2006) and the traditional benchmarks validating the field work experience do not apply to a conflict situation (Mathur, 2016). Ethnographic depth thus cannot be measured in terms of duration of stay with informants whose very action is subject to military surveillance; the

presence of a stranger for any length of time draws extra attention to the house and locality. Nor can ethnographic authority be established through descriptions of the minutiae of location, moment, and action when knowledge of these will almost surely filter through to the military apparatus and endanger informants (ibid). Hence it is not possible and appropriate to finalize a benchmark for carrying out the whole research process in a live armed conflict; I have drafted a speculative and abstract term plan to carry out my field work in a possible time frame that can be explained under following headings:

a. **Locating Conflict Sites:** As mentioned above I am studying a live conflict situation and the research locale I have selected is a District of South Kashmir region-Pulwama, very prone to prevailing conflict situation which is witnessing a high conflict related deaths, arrests, injuries and property loss. In this connection I have plans to visit the encounter sites, where the killings and conflict related loss has been taken place, within a day or two after the incident is over and subject to the accessibility to the site. In this manner the common people, the eye witnesses will provide the more subtle information in the form of narratives. They will be able to share their sufferings, the day to day life they are living under such harsh circumstances.

b. **Locating Observation Sites:** No doubt the impact of armed conflict affects all people of a conflict zone irrespective of their allegiances or acquaintances to state apparatus or insurgents/militants, irrespective of gender or caste, age and place. But we need to ensure that we are observing a right and needful site or incident or situation with a proper ethnographic lens under the well planned frame of time and space. In Kashmir the incidents of killings of militants and most probably civilians are followed by strikes, hartals and stone pelting incidents which may range from less severe to extremely severe. These days are most probably the following days of the incidents or the following Fridays. It is very pertinent and apt for a researcher to visit such places on the said days to understand the structure of conflict and its impact on the people, their life, economy, education and so on. The impact of such tense days remains confined to the original sites where the incident has happened and the main towns and the city area of the district, so, these locations are worth visiting. All other areas to a greater extent have their normal life going on. Instead a normal day life excluding the encounter sites the whole district/area may be facing some sort of omnipresent impact like internet ban or inaccessibility to the major district offices, district hospitals, colleges, banks and other vital service provider

centers. All the areas may be observed in the proper context of conflict situations but it is rather more pertinent to observe around the locations where the impact of conflict is direct say on the family whose one member has got killed, the family who may have lost their home to fierce encounters, the victims of bullets and pellets, those who have been arrested and the people witnessing all this around.

c. **Locating Key Informants:** Since an ethnographic study needs in-depth qualitative interviews to fulfill its requirements. Any qualitative study may go for non-structured interviews, informal discussions, focused group discussions or mere interviews but for the ethnographic edifice the field notes are considered the bricks and mortar (Fetterman 2010) and these field notes are the outcome of the in-depth qualitative interviews mostly obtained from the key informants. Locating key informants is a rather more challenging job in terms of security issues and research ethicalities in context to the conflict zone study. In this regard E J Wood says, “I did not work with research assistants or “key informants” whose security might require particular consideration”. Key informants are mostly those with neutral attitude towards the situation. They are required to be unbiased. The prior faith building of key informants with the researcher is necessary else the important information inferred from him/her in the form of narrative may pass through many filters or will come along with some pseudo information which may bother a research and its sanctity. The research work may need only a few key informants ranging from two to five and may not exceed ten. But the informal interviews and discussions and informal interactions with the people may range between many to even hundreds.

In five case-study areas in contested regions of the countryside (El Salvador), I interviewed more than 200 civilians, eight insurgent commanders, and approximately two dozen staff members of nongovernmental organizations of various political allegiances. Through interviews and observation of meetings, I documented the history of the conflict in the local communities, the political trajectories of individuals (both those who supported the insurgents and those who did not), political divisions within communities, the relations between civilians and the armed actors, the pattern of insurgent land occupation during the war, and the origins, evolution, and political affiliation of nongovernmental organizations active in the area.

Elisabeth Jean Wood, 2006

d. **Locating Artifacts:**When studying a culture, people, their life, social setting or phenomenon collecting and analyzing the texts and artifacts produced and used by members can foster understanding. Documents in the public sphere (e.g. pictures, articles, documentaries, educational material, books) that may have been produced by or used by members of a culture or social setting, Files, Statistical records, Meeting minutes, Emails, Documents used in daily work (e.g. internal manuals, written procedures, wall posters and other public postings in a work place, chart flow sheets), Memos etc. To add more we have newspapers, e-content, Social Networking sites and more. We have some more sources of information which are particularly pertained to the conflict zones like Posters (which may include advise or severe warnings) released by militant organizations, graffiti (the slogans of freedom on walls and shop shutters) and the counter graffiti, the famous militant figurine paintings with messages on the flags and walls, the notices (by police and army personnel), the audio visuals mostly released by militants, the brochures, newsletters, pamphlets and so on.

Visual ethnography and photovoice are the modern tools used in a participatory action research where a researcher or a Social worker uses photographs of his target population, the community to infer the stories and realities hidden behind or silenced by power, oppression, and suppression. In doing so, “the facilitator or researcher can gain insights into people’s lived experiences which were previously overlooked, rejected or silenced” (Singhal et al., 2007, p. 217).

As the ethnography witnesses the day to day life of the target population by employing some research tools like participant observation, in-depth interviews, open discussions, non-structured questionnaire, and informal interactions with the people from all areas and ideologies, the researcher is ascertaining the possible and ethically acceptable ways to carry out the research. The common people- common people from all areas, age groups, gender, educational status, place of living, occupation and ideologies, is the major target of the research process. The targeted people also include security personnel, police men, separatists, or militants (insurgents) to ascertain the complete picture of life in a conflict zone.

However Social Science research has encountered several crises throughout its history; more often than not, such crises have been methodological in character (Hammersly 1993). Ideally, a

researcher must read/observe the field/context and represent the situation “as it is”. In reality, however, this activity is replete with subjective factors: how much time one spends in the field; how much prior knowhow one has; follow-ups with respondents, and crosschecking of facts among others. These are questions that animate the researcher's world, alongside concerns about rapport building, methodological lapses, financial constraints, and time management. When the field happens to be a conflict zone, the data collected by the researcher is often coloured by the researcher's own threat perception, as well as respondents' perception of and suspicions about the researcher (Shah 2017).

Conclusion

Research with people in highly conflict and politicized research settings strive to represent the sociopolitical realities of everyday life. But there are always huge gaps between what governments believe and what they do, how governments look and how they are. It is always a challenge for the researcher to maintain his/her existence as a neutral and unbiased element. The valley of Kashmir has been a pivot and breeding ground of armed conflict for about three consecutive decades. The war-fatigue people seem less responsive to the conflict related incidents. Even most of the people are less responsive or are even not ready answering a researcher. In a setting like the conflict-torn Kashmir valley, ‘being in the field’ is a frustrating experience for the field investigator today, owing to a plethora of security-related issues and other vulnerabilities (Shah 2017).

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