Research Paper

Methodological Confusions and Challenges in Doing Field Work on Marginalised Communities in India

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The paper primarily is based on ongoing extensive field work conducted under University Grants Commission sponsored-University with Potential for Excellence, University of Mumbai, under the scheme the project entitled "Understanding Occupational Pursuits of Dalits in Maharashtra : Continuity and Change", the focus of the project is on understanding the Charmakars and Dhors traditional occupation. The Universe of the study is Maharashtra, covering regions such as Solapur (Pimpalner, Mangal Vede, Barsi, Vairag), In Kolhapur (Kale, Bazar Bhogav, Malahar Peth, Savarde, Kanchanwadi, Yelewade, Jawahar nagar) and other regions such as Karnataka (Athni), Kanpur (Unnav, Jajmoh, Shuklaganj, Tejbagh, Kanpur central. Agra (Agra-Mathura road, Agra city) and Kolkata (Banthala, Topshila, Phulbagan, Kausba, Bechulal road, Sopan Mandal, and Michael Nagar) and Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI), Chennai. The purpose of the paper is to reflect upon the changing nature of doing field work in the contemporary context, where the relations between field worker and the field has become more complex then what was in the past decades.

The paper makes an attempt to trace and understand the way the field work was carried till 1980's and then with the changing nature of economy since 80's till in the present context of globalisation and economic reforms which has resulted in change in the relations between the marginalized communities and the State. My own social location and as part of academia now leads to uneasiness of handling dominant perspectives of knowing the field, to which I look at critically and believe that some of this perspectives like (positivism) has developed a hindrance in understanding the reality which is complex and cannot be quantified, how do I tell the mainstream Sociology that Field worker needs to be independent in his thinking of understanding the field, and needs to concentrate more on subjective location and their interpretations of their own self, group, community, space, work and livelihood.

In Anthropology the field worker should try to study the community as a whole, although they knew very little about the community, and were not in position to formulate hypothesis, the early anthropology were trying to grab all that was available in the field, M.N.Srinivas was critical of early Anthropologist, he said Anthropologist writes impersonal reports, charts, tables, tries to convey objectivity, but does not convey the perceptions of himself. The local community assigns him some role, this is important in understanding his perception. (M.N.Srinivas: 1979)

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Theory and hypothesis cannot be imposed upon the field or field worker prior to engaging with the field. There are methodological confusions: about which approach the field worker should follow, how does he enter the field, establish rapport, collect data, and interpret and analyse the field settings. The Entry in the field has become difficult since the fall of Babri-Masjid; Where there have been riots in different cities after this incident the communities have become suspicious of each other because of their own and community security reasons in the region, some of the communities among the Muslim communities are not willing to speak to the outsiders and doubt their identity in the field, even when I say that I am teaching in the university, the field is not easily accessible, it has become restricted and getting data has become problematic , at times in Mumbai where in Dharavi I have been told not to come to collect information.

I believe that field worker shuttles between Sociology and Anthropology the margins of understanding are thin and blur. Doing Field work is Qualitative Research which refers to social research based on field observation analyzed without statistics. The Field worker has to be the part of the field and make his participation fruitful by observing the field holistically, although he may focus his attention on certain aspects of the field which are significant to his study. Field work is art of capturing the nuances of the subjects in the field, there are various activities carried out in the field, but field research can also be misleading because there is an element of quantitative research in the field.

The strength of field approach is that it allows you to directly go to the field and do the direct observation, without a structured interviewing in the field, the field worker attends to social transactions and collects relevant documents, photographs, letters, artifacts and if situation arise to become even a customer in the field to buy the artifacts after completing the task of researching. The data in the field is spontaneous, unstructured and unplanned, as one is reading the data one has to equally plan and organise the data. The very participation of the field worker in the field helps in understanding the design of social settings; the actors involved in the situation play the hide and seek activity to collect the information.

How to trust the data is challenging and therefore believing the informants, respondents, people have to be done rigorsly. Sociologists have been after understanding reality objectively even when reality cannot be studied so neatly tied.

Understanding the subjective reality is important, there is no intentions in manipulating the field, because the field cannot be controlled .The field has to be read like a story of everyday life and one has to put oneself in the self of others to understand the situation.

Knowing the Field

The Field can be known through various approaches such as positivism, which tries to understand the general principles

or laws that govern any set of specific events or experiences, this approach believes that objective reality exist independently of the perceiver and that we come to know it, it offers tentative laws to understand the field with help of hypothesis. Phenomenology the field worker does not subscribe to positivist assumptions, there is no condition or responsibility to seek objectivity, rather it is more interested in understanding daily life and activities from actors subjective point of view which is derived from various sources, one of the source is symbolic interactionism, Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them, these meanings are product of social interaction in human society. These meanings are modified and handled through an interpretive process i.e. used by each person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. So if no objectivity reality exists, or if we cannot know, then reality becomes what actors thinks, fells. So there is no reason to impose the external theory on the field worker to know the field / or on subjective views of the actors. The preconceived hypothesis, constructs will hinder the field worker in understanding the actors point of view, therefore the focus on the subject's point of view aggress with the philosophy called phenomology. The Idiographic approach focuses on particulars of individual, place, and time without generalize laws. The ethnographic approach, is also a method of describing a social group from the group's point of view, the ethnographer tries to obtain cultural knowledge of the group/natives. Some field research may serve framework of positivism or phenomenology, rather working with phenomenological offers better in depth understanding of the field without prior theory or laws, the field worker may speculate after collecting and interpreting the data ,when field worker attempts only to portray phenomena without testing for casual patterns , we call it description .This moves in the direction of exploratory research where hypothesis is not the requirement but only with one general question , here the data leads to hypothesis, this can help to build theory, it can fill in the gap in research. Further there are questions related to collecting data, entry into the field, ethical question, etc.

Some of the challenges in the field work is gaining entry into the field –one or two key informants, concealing identity or revealing identity, data recording (verbal –nonverbal, making notes, audio recording, video recordings and finally analysis (Dooley David, 1994)

Natural philosophers, at the birth of modern science eliminated secondary subjective qualities, and concentrated on objective measurable attributes such as motion and magnitude (Burth 1924) works of psychology- observation can never be passive, we never simply receive and register inputs from the external world, Instead we act upon the world, the observer interprets these in terms of cultural resources he brings to bear. According to Ravetz, Scientific Knowledge deals with "intellectually constructed classes of things and events" (1971)

Artificial situation – objects one infers the structure. What we see is constructed out of constantly changing sensations produced by continuous series of movement of the eye and of the body (Bohn 1965) Bruner – studies of perception / observation, should not think of observation as providing us with representation of the real world. (Controversies in Sociology:8, ed by TB Bottomore & MJ.Mulkay   (Science and Sociology of Knowledge Michael Mulkay Page 42-49)

Entry in to the field : The identity of the field worker matter a lot for collecting the data in the field, in case the field worker is insider and belongs to the same region where he is collecting data , and one approaches the people where everyone in the village knows him, the people say 'what information I should give you' , you already know the situation , if you belong to same caste on which one is researching , 'they say you also belong to the same caste and therefore you are aware of the things'(if they know your established identity) so you know and therefore does not want to share information . My own identity as an insider researching on leather workers i.e   Charmakars in Maharashtra has led two sets of problems , I was in born in Matheran a mini hill station close to Mumbai , in my own community in Matheran not many are highly educated, once I started collecting the data on the Charmakar community , it was informally and my parents become my first respondents, when I told them I want to study and research on Charmakars , they out rightly told me 'don't you have anything to study and research on when you have seen me how and in what conditions we both' i.e my father and mother are working, 'why are you after the caste , what difference it will make to you researching on this caste ,please forget this caste ,where we don't earn enough to take care of so many things, please change your topic of study and work on something else which will give you name, through our lifes we are doing this dirty occupation , I am tired of it and you still want study this, when there is nothing to study about this community , Please give up this, do something else'. I realized why he was saying all this to me, because the kind of life he was experiencing and difficulties he had to face. There was anger also in his statements. Formally when I started going to the field in Matheran many of them were doubting why I was collecting information about this community to which I already knew something , convincing them to allow me talk on different issues had become difficult because my qualifications and positions had changed over a period of time , I was trying to understand why they are refusing to give information .I was making interpretations of denial , is it because I have become qualified then the people on whom I am researching and the children with whom I played , and they grew up continuing in this occupation , I had no problem in relating myself with them , but they were finding difficult to relate themselves with me. Same community did not want to talk because the occupation is not worth discussing and because of stigma of occupation etc.

If some people wanted to give information , they would say 'please give my name for some scheme where I can get some financial assistance to do my traditional occupation , can we get loan from the government', inorder to get some information data , especially I had to lie and tell that whenever the report gets ready it will go the government and may be some schemes or assistance will come to them , some got more enthusiastic and said to me 'please interview me' ,I also gave false hope that something will happen if the report is ready so at least give information , unless you give me the information I cannot tell anything about this community to the government so with that interest they started talking to me. Some few said 'we can give detail information, but please include my name in the scheme', even when I told them I am not authority or official.

Getting access to data is difficult also because some artisans have become conscious of their skill , and say 'what if they rob my art and process of making' especially the Muslims who are engaged in tanning are alert and do not want to give access to their tanneries , some of them told me that 'we cannot give access to our work because what you will do after

going from here we don't know, another problem they said is the environmentalist are problem to their occupation and want to close down tannery industries because they say it is polluting and is giving foul smell in the neihbhourhood , what if it is printed in news paper , any way I don't want to get into problem. Another person said if 'you don't belong to the category of environmentalist we will give you information how our work is carried out', I said I will do good reporting of the work. It took time to convince, I had to develop confidence about my inquiry into their world, my sincerity and honesty of not writing anything false .In Muslim location (Kausba in Kolkata) we could not take the video of the setting   because 'they were asking me what are you searching, for whom are you looking', I took walk in the lanes of Kausba without talking to any one and pretending that I am looking for some address of person , whom I did not know , when I was walking in the lanes as passerby I was peeping inside their house and taking and storing the image of the work in my eyes, without asking them much I surveyed the field, I had questions when I came on the edge of the lane and asked the last shopkeeper about some of the things which I was not clear about the things. He asked me to go inside , I said I had looked at the work but can you tell me from where are you getting supply of raw material , to whom do you supply finished goods. 'Why do you ask me all this questions, do you know what problems our community is facing we are looked at suspicion, who you are, to whom are you going to send information. Sorry enough, "bas abhi kuch nahi ,(enough not now) ham abko jada kuch bataa nahi sakte ,(we cannot tell you anything more) ha aap teacher hey es liye thoda jankare diya."(since you are a teacher we gave you some information) this is when I revealed my identity as a teacher, so even after mentioning that I am a teacher, does not make difference in the field.'

In place like Dharavi people are tired of people coming to conduct survey to collect data / information , Some of them told me for so many years they are collecting information , people come and collect information , nothing happens , 'we are tired of giving information , every time people come they said we are from government dept. "What has government done we are staying here for last fifty years nothing has change , we thought we would get better house , but now they want to evacuate us , last time you came to collect information , and next day our houses were razed'. Although I was not responsible to this development, but they thought I must have given some information to the Mumbai authorities , 'please go away next time don't come to us', 'what are you writing in news paper about the Dharavi , Asia's largest slum , people are working here struggling , our children want to study, want to go to good school , don't you went to good school and got job with government , why don't you collect our demands about what we want, don't ask other information, I know nothing happens , you people cheat us and take the information', I can observe the anger and frustration in the field.

Field work on marginalised communities occupation , especially leather workers and tanners have different set of problems , the leather work and tanning is considered unclean occupation performed by Charmakars and Dhors , presently the Charmakar artisans feel that if they share information some people may misuse the art work which they are doing , over a period of time I have seen that if some artisan were preparing design and if someone visited him for something or the other he would stop performing till that person moved out, this was not to disclose the art, there are some who want to give information thinking that some

government assistance will come to them and this will benefit them, there was interest in giving information .The art is declining, the new generation of Charmakars do not want to carry forward this occupation , the social scientist will have to identify quickly and map the artist, because we will be losing this data in the field soon, the locations of the artisans is shifting and getting displaced and therefore it will be difficult to map the locations.

These Marginalised groups have also learnt some of the words of the learned society such as overtake (other communities taken over the occupation, margin means profit, Nil i.e zero, subsidy is government concession, quality i.e standard production.

They group studied has quest of market, and have become aware of middle men in the market who are exploiting their occupation , some of the issues raised by the Charmakars is about the Housing , Finance , Raw material , technology, capital, market, old age pension to artisans, competition from the non Charmakar community i.e communities Muslims , Sindhis, Bohris and few Brahmins.

Conclusion:

The question is what is that we want to achieve in the field work, to report the problem truly, understand the problem, provide some solution, and help them to overcome their hurdles. in all this exercise much scientific can we remain, and what kind of role do the field worker has to perform in order to maintain the objectivity, should one fall into the trap of objectivity to do research, although yes, but mere reporting does not take care of the field because the field is raising question about the heap of information the field worker is collecting and doing nothing about it in terms of empowering them. On whose side are we on (1967 Becker), we need to establish the trust , reveal the reasons for been in the field , at times the field worker has to play the role of informant and give information to the respondents , Sociological reflections are important , and to be blind in the field .Can be problematic there are lot of qualitative changes which have occurred in the last forty years , my informants in the field are not educated but they are rich source of information , they help me to establish the rapport in the field some times.

Letter of introduction are needed in the urban context, the purpose have to be mentioned. In the village collecting data to some extent is possible but in the urban centers they have become suspicious about why anyone wanting to collect information, they are concerned about their security and benefits in the society.

In the context of Globalization the traditional artisans are losing to the neo groups and castes who had nothing to do with Charmakars and their art; there is also appropriation of knowing the art making design with using modern technology to compete in market which the traditional artisans such as Charmakars and Dhors are far away from the world of technology, although on enquiring they are curious to know about the new technology in the field of making leather goods but they understand their limitation at the level of education, training, capital, technology, designing, product marketing, all this are hurdles to compete in the era of Globalization, which has raised questions about survival of this traditional art and occupations.

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