

Commentary

EMBODYING THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER DUALITY: NOTES FROM THE FIELD AND THE DESK

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“Where are You From?”

The setting was the mayor’s office in one of the major cities in Province 5, now known as Lumbini Province. It was early spring of 2019, but the heat and humidity were palpable as we waited, along with a handful of other people, under a whirring ceiling fan that would turn on and off depending on an erratic electricity supply. Once we sat down in front of the mayor, my colleague and I introduced ourselves and explained the purpose of our visit—to interview him about the city’s youth employment policies. Before we began, the mayor (a hill Brahman man possibly in his 40s) looked at me and asked, “Where are you from?” I was not surprised. As I had encountered the same question multiple times during my fieldwork, I gave him an automated response (with a smile)—“I grew up in Kathmandu, but my ancestral home is in Taplejung.” He went on to explain how he had been on a short visit to Taplejung to observe its booming cardamom industry and how friendly the locals were. He concluded that it was *rāmro thāū* (nice place) where *sāmpradāyik dvandva* (communal violence) did not take place—“*Kasaile pani tā cucce, tā thepce bhanera fight garenan*” (Nobody fought saying you have pointed nose or flat nose).¹ I (a *Janajāti* woman in her 20s) raised my eyebrows but chose to stay silent, and the official, on-the-record interview began.

¹ In his original statement in Nepali, the mayor did not mention “nose” specifically, he used the words “pointed” and “flat.” I have taken the liberty of contextualizing his statement, based on my “insider” position, to show how he was referring to the shape of a nose (and other physical features) to indirectly condemn ethnic identity politics in Nepal.

Once we left the room, I wondered if I should have said something about his racially charged comment. Considering how difficult it was to access those political and bureaucratic spaces, and the fact that I was associated with an institution, I thought it was best to remain agreeable, professional, and detached. My academic training had also homed in on how a researcher should listen and observe in an *unobtrusive* manner. Yet, I could not help but feel anger at my own complacency. That day, I jotted down a few questions in my research diary: How do we address discomfiting moments and microaggressions that in fact reveal the underlying social tensions and power structures? Should a researcher just observe but never engage? Do we only become reflexive and critical when we write for a select few people trained in similar worldviews, jargon and sensibilities?

The Field, the Desk and Reflexivity

In this reflective essay, I will draw upon two years of fieldwork experience in Nepal as well as my higher education training in the UK to explore the meanings and praxis of reflexivity in and beyond the field. I will reflect on how I was perceived by my interviewees, and what they might reveal about the nuances of researcher-subject relationship, and the existing societal structures and fault lines. Then, I will consider the “outsider within” (Collins 1986: 28) position in academia and what it means to be a “researcher,” especially as a member of an ethnic group that has been the “subject of inquiry” and “the others” as opposed to “the knower” and “the knowledge producer.” First, I will briefly discuss the concept of reflexivity rooted in feminist literature.

Madhok (2013: 189) claims that reflexivity should not be understood as a “passive reflection” on researcher’s social identities, and how they are located within the context of their study. Nagar (2002: 183) further argues that an “identity-based reflexivity” conflates different kinds of dilemmas associated with fieldwork—ontological, epistemological and ethical—and it exclusively frames them as an issue of ethical relationship between the researcher and the subject. Reflexivity, however, is much more than that. Nagar (2002: 183) advocates for a “deeper political reflexivity” that considers the wider socio-political implications of the researcher’s theoretical frameworks, analyses and interpretations, choice of language, as well as accountability and responsibility towards the communities in the study. Nagar (2002) urges academics to critically reflect upon how they write, for whom they write,

and the implications of their research beyond knowledge production. In that sense, the discussion on political reflexivity aligns with the wider discourse around representation and decolonization in academia (Clifford 1986; Ali 2013; Ortner 2016; Chua and Mathur 2018).

I find Nagar's emphasis on political reflexivity useful as it highlights how reflexivity is not only about identities but also interrelations and interconnectedness. It also extends the remit of reflexivity, whereby it should be considered not just in relation to fieldwork practices, but across the modes and institutions of knowledge production that shape the researcher and their research. I will draw upon this conceptual understanding of reflexivity to make sense of social encounters, performances, discomforts, tensions, and relationality in the context of both "the field" and "the desk." I recognize that "the field" is not a fixed bounded entity but it is characterized by mobility (of subjects, ideas, things) and interconnectedness (Clifford 1992; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). In this essay, I use the term "the field" to refer to all the different spaces that I navigated—from private living rooms to government offices—and the encounters and interactions that I had within and across them. Meanwhile, "the desk" is used to signify the situatedness of researchers within institutions of knowledge production, and the traditions and parameters that they must adhere to. However, the separation between the two is open to contestation, as Mosse (2006: 937) highlights how often the "desk collapses into field," in the sense of what we do in the field, what we write at our desk, and how the research subjects will respond to our writings will always demonstrate the relational nature of knowledge production. I will now begin by reflecting on my fieldwork experiences in Nepal.

Navigating the Insider-Outsider Duality in the Field

Between August 2017 and July 2019, I was involved in various research projects related to local elections, women's political participation, post-war transition, and youth unemployment in Nepal. I was officially employed as a researcher/consultant in two non-government organizations (NGOs). Most of my fieldwork was based in Madhes region, and a few districts in central and mid-hills. During my fieldwork, there was a set of questions that I encountered time and again to the extent that I would be surprised if they did not come up in the conversations.

"Katā ho ghar?" (Where is your home?)

“*Thar ke paryo?*” (What is your caste/ethnicity?)²

“*Bihe bhayo?*” (Are you married?)

Depending on my interviewees’ age and their perceptions of my age, most of my interviewees would address me as *nānī* (young girl) or *bahinī* (young sister). On the one hand, those questions and fictive kin terms could be considered as part of everyday conversations that characterize social encounters in the given context. On the other hand, their banality conceals the underlying societal structures and power relations. To elaborate, those seemingly innocuous questions function as a medium for interviewees to make sense of the researcher’s *stranger* status, situate them in their worldview, and assess where they fall within the insider-outsider spectrum. For example, the question on the home is not just about the place of residence, but it is a deeper inquiry into forefathers and patrilineal ancestry that serves to locate a person within the given social context and geography. Likewise, the question of caste/ethnicity not only reveals a person’s position in the existing social hierarchy, but also their traditional homeland, history, and their relationship with the Nepali state. When I mentioned that my surname was Limbu, I received strong reactions from some of my interviewees in Madhes. As they had heard of the *Limbuwān* movement,³ and following their assessment of my ethnic minority status, they displayed an openness to engage with me considering how federalism and self-determination were significant issues for them. However, the same ethnic identity also triggered passive-aggressive remarks as highlighted in the vignette at the start of this paper.

The question on marriage could be interpreted as a response to an “anomaly” embodied by a relatively young woman who is traveling alone, asking questions, and claiming to be a “researcher”—all activities and images

² The meaning and interpretation of this question could vary depending on the context. For example, the term *thar* refers to clan, as opposed to caste (*jāt*) or ethnicity (*jāti*). Within an ethnic group, this question could be asked to find out which clan the person belongs to, and not all ethnic groups practice social hierarchies akin to the Hindu caste system. However, during my fieldwork, this question came up with the intention of understanding my broader caste/ethnic identity as opposed to my intra-ethnic group clan identity. I am thankful to Anudeep Dewan for discussion around these differences.

³ One of the ethnic movements in Nepal that demanded an autonomous state and the right to self-determination.

that are predominantly associated with men. It also functions as a way of assessing a person's conformity to gender norms and traditions. In fact, gender identity and performance are crucial in mediating access to different people and spaces. For example, having a male companion made it socially acceptable for me to sit down at tea stalls, *pān* shops, hotel restaurants where men, in particular, congregate to socialize. Often those informal discussions, rather than formal interviews, offered rich insights into how local people (or men) *actually* thought about different topical issues. At the same time, as a woman, I was occasionally invited beyond the threshold of the house into the interior living spaces where I could interview women and get a glimpse of lives that remained concealed and guarded. However, the questions that had not been asked were equally revealing. For example, my female and queer friends with short hair have experiences of being questioned about their gender identity—"Keṭā ho ki keṭī ho?" (Are you a boy or a girl?). I was never asked that question, but it further reflects how researchers are assessed on their gender performance. In the field, I carefully considered what clothes to wear and for what occasions; and how to make myself approachable and socially acceptable to build a rapport with my participants. I often wonder to what extent such considerations are about cultural sensitivity or my own complicity in reproducing the system.

Questions are not the only medium through which we situate one another: factors such as physical appearance, accent, body language all come into play. Based on my appearance, I was often perceived as an "outsider," either Chinese or *videśī* (foreigner), by my interviewees. When I introduced myself with my Hindu name and ethnic surname in Nepali, their facial expressions and body language would change. I would then be perceived as an "insider" and other questions would ensue to assess the level of my "insiderness." The way I spoke Nepali (interspersed with English words) would lead to questions of where I had studied, and what my father's profession was. I can recall three different occasions where, after questioning me about my ethnicity and schooling, the interviewees (a hill Brahman businessman, a *Janaṅgati* bureaucrat and a Newa academic—all men in their 40s and 50s) directly assumed that I must be a *lāhure*'s daughter.⁴ Without being prompted, they gave a lengthy lecture on what they thought about Gurkha recruitment and offered unsolicited advice on what I should do with my career. The

⁴ Colloquial term for Nepali men who serve as Gurkha soldiers in the British army, the Indian army, or the Singapore Police Force.

unanimous advice for me was to join *lok sewā* (civil service) in Nepal using *Janajāti* quota. It was striking that none of them mentioned gender quota, perhaps because of their own assumptions shaped by the dominant discourse on “hill Hindu high caste women” as the default subjects of gender politics in Nepal (Tamang 2009).

Understanding Researcher-Subject Relationship

Conducting fieldwork as an “insider-outsider” researcher is a reminder of how deeply implicated we are in social structures and power relations. It challenges the notions of “all-knowing” researcher and value-free, objective research that has long been criticized by feminist scholars through emphasis on *situatedness* of all kinds of knowledges (Harding 1987; Haraway 1988). In her article “How Native Is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” Narayan (1993) argues that, rather than perpetuate the myth of “native/insider/indigenous anthropologist” as if there is an “authentic” narrative to be uncovered and retold, it is important to recognize how all researchers occupy multiple subject positions, and how they are situated in relation to the subjects of their study.⁵ Overall, Narayan (1993: 682) emphasizes the importance of understanding “shifting identities” of researchers, and how knowledge is situated and negotiated in research. While in agreement with Narayan’s assessment of a multiplicity of identities, I am uncertain if such an analytical approach is enough to explain how boundaries are maintained and how to comprehend moments of discomforts, unease and tensions that may characterize the research process.

The relationship between the researcher and the subject is not unidimensional. Both the researcher and their participants will occupy varying degrees of privileges and marginalities that will shape their encounters, negotiations, and exchanges. Just like the researcher, the participants also engage with the dilemmas of how to situate the researcher within their social context and worldviews. They actively assess where the researcher falls within the “insider-outsider” spectrum—are they an ally, threat, neutral party, historically invisible? Are they someone young, female, minority and therefore, less intimidating? In doing so, they are also trying to determine how to frame and respond to the researcher’s inquiries.

⁵ I am thankful to Dipti Sherchan for recommending this reading.

The power-laden researcher-subject relationship further reveals underlying and unresolved social tensions and fault lines. It demonstrates that the everyday politics of how different social groups and communities relate to one another and negotiate social boundaries can be rigid, dynamic, and complex. Meanwhile, the “insider-outsider” researcher will always find themselves entangled in that process, and those entanglements are often revealed through moments of discomfort and unease. Chadwick (2021: 564) argues that engaging with discomforts that emerge during fieldwork, rather than their avoidance and denial, can be an “affective force with epistemic significance,” as they are integral in “recognizing and countering the reproduction of harmful and systematic ignorances.” I would further argue that those moments of discomforts reveal not only the researcher’s ignorance, loyalties, and biases but also the existing societal boundaries.

I will now turn to the modes and sites of knowledge production embodied by “the desk” and the experiences of navigating those spaces as an “outsider within.” I will particularly reflect on my experiences as a student in social anthropology. Collins (1986: 29) uses the term “outsider within” to discuss the experiences of minority groups such as black women, black men, working-class individuals, white women, other people of color, religious and sexual minorities, and other individuals, who are entering higher education institutions in the West that have historically excluded them. The terms “insider-outsider” and “outsider within” are often used interchangeably, but I also consider there to be some key differences. As an “insider-outsider,” the researcher begins with some level of cultural familiarity, and they are often structurally embedded in the social context of their study. Whereas as an “outsider within,” as used by Collins, the researcher begins from a position of an “outsider”—an interloper entering institutions that were never designed for them to begin with. While recognizing the multiplicity of identity, I find both concepts of “outsider within” and “insider-outsider” relevant in articulating experiences of exclusion, discomforts, and privileges. In the next section, I will primarily rely on academic literature to substantiate my experiences that also demonstrates the protocols of academic writing.

Negotiations at the Desk

Despite the burgeoning discourse on decolonization and democratization of knowledge, research as a professional training and practice predominantly remains embedded within formal institutions encompassing diverse actors

and interests.⁶ Various bureaucratic protocols and institutional guidelines govern the process of research including its feasibility, methodology, design, fieldwork, ethics, outputs, impact, and dissemination. One of the academic protocols that I grappled with during my fieldwork is to what extent one remains detached as an observer. When you gain rare access to spaces that could have policy implications, do you intervene and engage in those discussions because marginalized voices/groups have been overlooked? Is it ethical to go beyond the standard qualitative research protocol of “active listening” and “asking probing questions” to proactively engage in conversations that would also require the researcher to reveal their viewpoints and positionalities? How do you process and navigate discomfiting moments and social tensions that characterize researchers’ interactions with their subjects, particularly with those in position of authority? Do we only use our critical voice when we write? These are common dilemmas encountered by feminist and many other activist researchers who consider research to be both a theoretical and political project for change (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Mahmood 2005; Hesse-Biber 2012).

Within academic institutions and traditions, the end goal of research is rarely social or political change, but more so about advancing disciplinary understanding and approaches. However, there have been some new developments; for example, there is a growing emphasis on attaining impact beyond academia by many research funding bodies (such as UKRI 2021). The attempt to expand the scope of academic research is not always externally imposed. Within the discipline of anthropology, Ortner (2016: 63–64) observes a turn towards “activist anthropology” particularly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This turn is characterized by the proliferation of studies where researchers are not just observers but directly involved in social movements for change. Anthropologist Charles Hale defines activist research as

a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with

⁶ I acknowledge that this assessment could be contextual as reflected in initiatives such as the one to promote “barefoot researchers” by Martin Chautari (2020) that highlights how the dire state of formal academic institutions warrants involvement of non-university research organizations and individual practitioners in knowledge production.

them to shape each phase of the process, from the conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results. (Hale 2006: 97)

Hale stresses the importance of rethinking field methods and material relations of knowledge production in addition to reflecting upon how we write and represent. Mahmood (2005: 196), however, argues that analytical work should not be reduced to politicized requirements, in part because the analytical labor is different from the one required by the demands of political action—both in its scope, temporality and impact. Therefore, the political and the analytical should not be compounded together. These arguments raise an important question about who the knowledge production is for.

Navigating Academia as an “Outsider Within”

The common advice that I receive as a doctoral student is to think about what my contribution to knowledge will be and, of course, any kind of research pursuit always begins with the identification of knowledge gaps in the existing body of literature. However, for whom are we generating this knowledge? Who is our audience? Who has access to this knowledge? And who is the collective “we”? The usage of “we,” founded on an opposition with “the others,” is pervasive in anthropological thoughts and writings. Chua and Mathur (2018: 1) argue that the anthropological “we” is not only a “collective disciplinary identity” or a “literary trope,” but also “an epistemologically, morally, and politically freighted device that has profound social and theoretical connotations.” These criticisms stem from ideological and theoretical shifts in academia that are situated within the larger socio-political context (Clifford 1986; Fox 1991; Ntarangwi 2010). The world today is much more interconnected and the influence of capitalism across different societies is ubiquitous (Fox 1991: 3), while the imperial domination of the West has been challenged by post-colonial discourses and the entry of “indigenous researchers” into the discipline (Clifford 1986: 9). What these changes have done, Clifford (1986: 10) argues, is that anthropology can no longer claim to speak with the automatic authority for the others assumed to be unable to speak for themselves.

The questions of how to deal with the colonial past, and how to address the prevailing dichotomy of “we” and “the others” premised on global inequalities in knowledge production are not just relevant and imperative in the context

of anthropology, but across the dominant Western system of knowledge. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999: 42–43) argues that the Western system of knowledge is not a monolith, but rather a “cultural archive” with different and competing traditions of knowledge and ways of knowing. However, there are some shared rules of protocols and practices in relation to what is recognized as knowledge. Within these contexts, what does it mean to be “insider/indigenous/native/local/colored/ minority researchers”—the erstwhile members of “the others,” in Western academia? As discussed in the earlier section, the relevance of such a binary identity has been critiqued (Narayan 1993), while the discourse centered around “the West vs. the rest” approach is deemed inconducive (Chua and Mathur 2018: 3). There is instead an emphasis on recognizing multiple identities and relationality that shape knowledge production.

However, I am often reminded of the salience of binaries and boundaries. For example, when I tell my friends and colleagues that my academic background is in gender and anthropology, the word anthropology in particular sparks strong reactions. On multiple occasions, I have been asked why, as a “person of color,” I studied such a “colonial discipline” that fetishizes non-Western people and societies. My standard response tends to be that I am interested in the possibilities of ethnography—an immersive, longitudinal research methodology with nuanced storytelling that draws out meanings from the seemingly mundane and engages with theories without losing sight of people. I further add that my research interest is influenced by contemporary ethnographic writings on the anthropology of state and bureaucracy. However, ethnography is used across different disciplines, and the common conflation of anthropology and ethnography has been critiqued (Ingold 2014). What I find striking though is the need to justify my disciplinary affiliation with anthropology that, to an extent, reveals the challenges of navigating academia as an “outsider within.”

Collins (1986: 28) argues that those who are entering and becoming part of academic institutions and structures that have historically excluded them occupy a unique “outsider within” position. While this position is replete with tension, it also embodies “creative potential” whereby the “outsider within” researchers can draw upon their personal, cultural experiences as “a valid source of knowledge” to critique the dominant facts and theories (Collins 1986: 28). However, reflecting on their experiences as women academics of color in the US, Navarro, Williams and Attiya (2013: 450) argue that there is an underlying power dynamic in terms of who gets marked as “native” academic

and who does not. There is often “conflation of research and researcher” whereby “native” researchers are seen to represent the perspectives of the natives yet, at the same time, their credibility as a scholar is undermined by their proximity and entanglements with their research topic and subjects (Navarro, Williams and Attiya 2013: 450). In her lucid autoethnography, Rai (2075 v.s.: 63–64) reflects on being an outsider and the process of *becoming* a researcher. Rai belongs to an indigenous community in Nepal and chronicles her experiences of coming to Kathmandu from a rural region where her understanding of *kām* (work) was limited to agriculture, animal husbandry, fuel/fodder collection, and other everyday livelihood activities. Rai (2075 v.s.) ruminates that developing subjectivity as a researcher required coming to terms with the realization that activities such as reading, writing, and participating in discussions are also *kām* through which one could make a living.

I can relate to Rai’s (2075 v.s.) experiences in the sense that I also come from an indigenous community where research/knowledge production is not a known profession. As a first-generation university student, I find myself grappling with varying levels of privileges and marginality. On the one hand, my father’s military profession as a former British Gurkha soldier has enabled me to access higher education spaces in the UK that has positively influenced my job prospects and enabled me to move across London and Kathmandu for work. On the other hand, there are different forms of capital and economic capital does not automatically convert into cultural capital and social capital.⁷ That requires a great deal of learning, training, and developing subjectivity that is not directly derived from one’s lived reality or community’s worldview. However, while there is compliance and conformity to become part of these dominant institutions, there is some space and agency for criticism and resistance.

Engaging with the Decolonization Discourse

Throughout my higher education training, the discourse on decolonization featured prominently in classroom discussions, particularly among non-white students. From questioning the Euro-American-centric curriculum to the limited diversity amongst academic staff, the term decolonization

⁷ In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986: 16–17) differentiates between economic capital (money and property rights), cultural capital (embodied as dispositions of the body and the mind, cultural goods, and institutional qualifications) and social capital (connections and networks).

provides a generative platform to shed light on some of the important ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political concerns. Decolonization often provides a framework for minority students to claim and mobilize our “outsider within” position, as in reconciling our embeddedness within the Western academic institutions, with some form of lived experiences and connections that remain marginal or outside the purview of the dominant academic tradition. Yet, I also remain conscious of how we perform the claims to pluralities and alternative politics. Opening statements such as “Where I come from ...” or “I am from [country] ...” are commonly used to introduce alternative explanations. While such an approach helps in contextualizing and situating the speaker, it also perpetuates homogenized narratives whereby we often end up becoming “the spokesperson” for our country, region, social group, or community. We end up claiming to know those spaces and societies and their complex dynamics better than anyone. Making such assertions without any acknowledgment of our intersectional identities, privileges, and complicities is equally problematic as the discourse on decolonization is complex and multilayered.

The homogenized, colonial narratives that are often perpetuated in the decolonization discourse have been subjected to criticism. For example, Gergan’s (2017, 2020) incisive study with indigenous Lepcha community in Sikkim, India, shows how the community’s encounter with the Indian state is manifold. In fact, the state itself has had multiple manifestations: first, as the British colonial state with its racialized colonial governance strategies; second, the Sikkimese state under Namgyals with the imposition of Buddhism on minority groups such as Lepchas; and third, the contemporary Indian state with reservation policies and the rhetoric of cultural pluralism. Therefore, Gergan (2020) argues how the decolonization discourse would require an engagement with multiple histories, temporalities, colonizations, and identities. In the context of Nepal, such a decolonization discourse would entail revisiting Prithvi Narayan Shah’s “unification/colonial” nation-building project, the imposition of Hinduism on minority groups, and what the condition of “non-postcoloniality” (Des Chene 2007) would mean in relation to its neighboring countries. After all, as Wilson (2008: 6) argues, “research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers.”

Postscript

The notes from the field and the desk that I have presented in this reflective piece reveal some of the discomforts and contestations that characterize the field of academic research and knowledge production. I have reflected on my fieldwork experiences and academic training as an early career researcher. In doing so, I have explored the nuances of researcher-subject relationships, and the experiences of navigating the field and academic institutions as an insider/outsider. These notes are not intended to provide a conclusive resolution or a fieldwork guidance of sorts, but rather, they serve as a reminder of the sustained vigilance that is required in understanding our relationality and research practices, and the ways in which we make claim to knowledge and alternative approaches.

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