

Critical Ethnography: A Methodological Intervention for Understanding Human Settlement Issues

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Abstract : *Ethnography as a qualitative research method has long been explored to understand the complexities of social and spatial relations regarding human settlement studies. This chapter briefly discusses some ethnographic methods and problematise ethnography as a methodological apparatus. It then expands its understanding by introducing the framework of critical ethnography. By doing so, it not only decentres normative understanding of ethnography but also opens up possibilities for a relational and generative understanding of human settlement issues. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata, the chapter also shows how differential power relations shape our understanding of the qualitative fieldwork. Finally, the chapter argues for a decolonial understanding of research methods to grasp the complexities of human settlement issues in the postcolonial world.*

Keywords : *Critical ethnography, human settlement, spatial politics, power relations*

Introduction

When I was doing my ethnographic fieldwork in Loomtex Mill in 2017, at the initial phase, after explaining to the group of workers why I wanted to interview them for my PhD research, one of the workers asked me, “what is there for us” (Ray, 2020) This question unsettled me as I was not sure how my PhD fieldwork could be relevant for the workers. However, this incident made me aware of two things. Firstly, it made me aware of my own privilege of being a UK based heterosexual male researcher who has a middle-class urban upbringing and what differential positionality that privilege can impart between my respondents and me. Secondly, it also challenges considering respondents as merely a source of data.

This chapter positions itself within those critical tensions that exist in any ethnographic fieldwork in the postcolonial context. By doing so, it highlights the complexities of qualitative research methods and how differential power relations shapes our fieldwork experiences. To discuss these, the chapter is structure in the following way. After the introduction, the second section critically discusses

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ethnographic methods and argues how critical ethnographic methods help us for a nuanced understanding of qualitative methods. In its third section, the chapter focuses on some empirics from fieldwork in Kolkata. The third and concluding section summarises its overall arguments and finally offers a reflection on why a decolonial understanding of methods is required.

Doing Ethnography Critically

Ethnography as a qualitative method helps to unpack the complexities of social and spatial relations (Herbert, 2000). Human actions are pivotal for the production of space which makes space as ‘spheres of multiplicity’ and sites where multiple forms of politics unfold (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). However, there is a difference between everyday human encounters and ethnography. Ingold (2014) differentiates between these two by highlighting ethnography as a reflexive understanding of human interaction for to create new knowledge. He states,

“For what we could call “ethnographicness” is not intrinsic to the encounters themselves; it is rather a judgment that is cast upon them through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering, and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether” (Ingold, 2014: 386).

Ethnography also tries to focus on the participant’s perspective on certain actions (Hammersley, 2006). Ethnography relies on inductive reasoning and puts supreme importance on observations/data generated from field sites (Jackson, 1985). Ethnographic methods try to construct and renegotiate the complex relationship between researchers and participants. Thus, prolonged engagement with participants is necessary to sustain this complex relationship (Lawlor & Mattingly, 2001). The role of the ethnographer is identified as a mediation between normative and situational accounts (Suttles, 1976). Because of its relative position, Hammersley (2006) is critical of the absence of a systematic taxonomy of ethnography. This absence is mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, ethnography predominantly focuses on spatiality rather than temporality, making it a territorial approach. Secondly ethnography is often ahistorical, which undermines individual life histories shaping certain spatial relations. Normative ethnography heavily relied on the participant observation method. In doing so, it only captures the social reality for a specific time frame giving minimal importance to the historical and political construction underlying these social actions.

Due to its territorial approach, Hart (2004) is critical of traditional ethnography. According to her, ethnography often fails to recognise spatial metaphors which are constructed historically and politically (Hart, 2004). Similarly, it is also important to differentiate between ‘ethnography of locations’ and ‘ethnography of circulations’. Ethnography of circulations helps to connect the local with the global through networks of circulation (Cochrane & Ward, 2012; Raghuram et al., 2010). It also helps identify differential power relations that actors shared in an ethnographic study.

After critically discussing some of the limitations of the traditional ethnographic method, the chapter now argues how a critical ethnographic approach helps to minimise some of the limitations of traditional ethnography.

Towards a Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography acknowledges differential power relations between the respondents and the researcher and challenges the ‘detached gaze’. As described before (ibid 3), ethnography often considers respondents merely as a source of data. Hence, a ‘detached gaze’ is always created, which can be called ‘new poetics of exotics’ (Hyndman, 2001). In this ‘new poetics of exotics, we fail to recognise the other that exists within us’ (Katz, 1992). When a researcher enters into the ‘field’, their embodied experiences become a political act where their own positionalities shape how the respondents perceive them and hence also interview outcomes. Thus, a politics of representation becomes essential to unpack some of the complex power relations in the fieldwork. In their respective fieldwork in Sri Lanka and India, Silva and Gandhi observed how respondents perceived them as single woman researchers. They also highlight a change in their embodied experiences when their parents accompanied them in the fieldworks (Silva & Gandhi, 2018). Katz (2011) encourages us to develop what she calls ‘countertopography’ for a reflexive understanding. She states,

“With countertopography I wanted to produce a geographical imagination for a more associative politics — one that was scale and place crossing with practical entailments that could work across and against received distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them’”. (Katz, 2011: 58).

‘Countertopography’ helps us to deconstruct and interrogate the relationship between the self and others (Watson & Till, 2010). It also helps us decipher certain spatial metaphors and makes the apparently ‘hidden’ power-laden socio-spatial relations visible through interrogation and deconstruction- a space of betweenness (Katz, 1992). As an alternative framework, critical ethnography adopts ‘countertopography’, which makes fieldwork a dialogic process and helps create relational categories particular to a context (Chari & Gidwani, 2005). It offers different vantage points for understanding spatial metaphors and the entanglement of power relations (Hart, 2006). Critical ethnography has two essential characteristics. Firstly, by creating relational categories of subjects it offers a dialectic relationship between knowledge production and contextual histories. Secondly, it adopts articulation as a spatial practice which is dynamic where space is always dynamic and in motion and deciphers socio-spatial relations through an ‘ethnography of circulations’ (Hart, 2004, 2006). An ‘ethnography of circulation’ creates a matrix where differential histories, texts and social forms emerge and copresence with mobility and mutability of each subject (Gaonkar & Povinelli, 2003).

The above discussion shows how critical ethnography as an alternative framework creates fieldwork as a dialogical process and minimises certain limitations of traditional ethnography. By creating relational categories of subjects, it not only makes fieldwork as a dynamic process but also unpacks certain underlying power relations that entails in any ethnographic fieldwork. The following section presents some empirics from fieldwork in Kolkata and demonstrates how to adopt critical ethnography in practice.

Contextualising Critical Ethnography in Kolkata

This section provides three vignettes from my doctoral fieldwork in Kolkata. Through these vignettes, I establish how can we practice critical ethnography while doing fieldwork.

Vignette 1- familiarisation and defamiliarization

My relationship with Kolkata is always a complex and relational one. This is the city I grew up and lived for more than twenty years. Simultaneously, this is the city from where I am displaced from 2009. I am entangled with Kolkata through my memories of love, political actions, celebrations, and friendship. Similarly, because of my continuous relocations from one city to another, one continent to another, I often struggled with identifying what is home for me. Hence, home is always a 'displaced territory' for me. After living more than four years in London, now, when I introspect my every visit to Kolkata, I become a part of the circulations of my own 'displaced territories'. It is always difficult for me to separate my fieldwork in Kolkata from visiting 'home' as often I take the opportunity to visit Kolkata as a purpose for my fieldwork. Being a person of colour living in a white majority country, I often defamiliarize myself with 'whiteness'. By 'whiteness' here, I mean differential power relations and otherness towards non-white people and a perpetual structure of dominance (Dar et al., 2021). Similarly, London is also a space of familiarisation for me which is embedded in my colonial imagination by growing up in the erstwhile colonial capital Kolkata. While I am in Kolkata, my familiarisation often gets disrupted by my positionality of being an academic living abroad.

These myriad tensions of familiarisation and defamiliarization were an integral part of my doctoral fieldwork in Kolkata in 2017. At the initial phase of my fieldwork, when I realised my complicity in treating my respondents as data points (ibid 3), I changed the way I interacted with my respondents. To overcome this, I adopted two strategies. Firstly, instead of avoiding, I frequently provoked (even when not being asked) my respondents to express their expectations from me. Before every interview, I purposefully mentioned how differential power relations exist between "me" and "them". Secondly, to make my interview dialogical, I changed the design of my questionnaire by consciously providing space for cross-questioning by my respondents. This creates fieldwork as an iterative process and helps to navigate within the power networks that exist in the field. This creates fieldwork as an

[illegible]

Vignette 2- intimacy, entanglement, and care

Participant observation is an essential aspect of doing an ethnographic study. However, it is also criticised for having a voyeuristic interpretation of human actions, which often decontextualises certain practices. Shah (2017) identifies two essential characteristics of participant observation. She states it is always a dialectical relationship between intimacy and entanglement (Shah, 2017). Observing and writing field notes of 'everyday 'geographies', fluid spaces and practices enable the researcher to get entangled with the respondent's everyday life and become part of the localised histories and practices (Kusenbach, 2003).

In my fieldwork, participant observation was enacted, being part of the everyday practices of my respondents, which included walking with them in their political rallies, frequently having dinner with them at their homes and attending marriage functions of their family members. It facilitated mutual familiarising myself with the setting and my respondents. This was also a trust-building exercise

involving myself with my respondent's everyday experiences. However, my continuous attachment with my respondents also imparted certain tensions. In the Loomtex Mill area, a local tyrant initially became sceptical of my presence and labelled me as a sympathiser of CPIML Red Star (the political group involved in mobilising workers against the factory owner). However, after multiple explanations about my positionality being a researcher, the situation eased partially. On another occasion, while conversing with the local councillor in the Salt Lake area, an unknown person to me who works in councillor's office warned me that I was having tea on one Sunday with 'illegal' Bangladeshi dwellers of the squatter. I realised the state continuously surveilled me behind my back during my fieldwork.

This evidence shows moments of entanglements and intimacy with my respondents, which helped in trust-building and in another way, my presence made the state sceptical about my intentions. One of my respondents asked me to attend his sister's wedding. Once I arrived, I realised he also needed to show his relatives that he has a friend who lives in London. This moment of intimacy and sharing a personal moment automatically gets entangled with the colonial imagination of my respondent. Thus, I became part of a circulation of my locations where my field was always in motion. These continuous negotiations, conscious (sometimes latent) choices are also entangled with politics of care and sharing which is often overlooked by a 'masculinist epistemology' (Sundberg, 2003). In my case, during and after my fieldwork, the support was given by my mother through everyday activities of household chores, answering calls on my Indian cell phone after completion of my fieldwork, and arranging contact details for the local councillor. Politics of sharing during my fieldwork involved having dinner with my respondents, invitation to their family occasions, and sharing laughter, anger, and dissatisfaction over cups of tea. These politics of sharing helped me partially to be part of my respondents' everyday life and emotions. This also restricted me from a voyeuristic perception of events.

Vignette 3- visual methods and intertextuality

Visual methods are often helpful for unpacking underlying spatial metaphors of social relations. It is also important to highlight the difference between visibility and visuality. Visibility often provides a superimposed imagination of spatial practices where representation becomes a guiding factor (Rose, 2014). Rose (2014) encourages us to focus on visuality than visibility through which an intertextual analysis of the images can be conducted, and hence it creates a 'defetishized' representation of everyday practices.

The fieldwork in Kolkata used visual materials for the purpose of triangulation. Visual materials collected during the fieldwork include documenting spatial transformations, posters, and graffiti used for community mobilisations. To have a

critical analysis of the visual materials, the focus was given on visibility than visibility. Images were interpreted through an intertextual analysis. The example below shows how an intertextual analysis of collected images were done.



Figure 1. Land conversion at waiting

While interviewing with a farmer in Machibhanga village, he said they had already sold their agricultural land to a real estate company. However, he also highlighted that the real estate company still allows them to farm on that land. This was confusing for me as I realised the land ownership had changed to a real estate company. To make sure whether I had understood it correctly, I visited his land, and a small board mentioning SEZ (Special Economic Zone) was erected in the middle of agricultural land. This visual analysis helped me to understand how adhoc arrangements are made with lands in a postcolonial context (Ray, 2020).

The above image is of a poster circulated in Salt Lake during an eviction of squatter settlements. Citizen's Forum, an elite group of Salt Lake residents supported the municipality's proposal for the eviction of squatter dwellers to beautify Salt Lake. The poster says,

"We as taxpayers have a right to live in a clean & pollution free surrounding.....Bidhannagar is ours and we not only have a duty but also a right to protect it from becoming an unplanned, dirty, and chaotic township". (sic.)

This shows the elites' particular discourse of rights where dirt and planning are used as tools for exclusion and promotes neoliberal logics of 'bourgeois environmentalism' (Baviskar, 2006). This support of eviction by the elite group also shows how the civil society in the postcolonial context becomes an extension of the coercive power of the state.

CITIZENS' FORUM SALT LAKE

Join hands to protect Salt Lake

It is time that residents of Bidhan Nagar come together to save the township from losing its planned structure. We are witness to a gradual decay of our locality in terms of environment & increasing pollution caused by rampant encroachment of public space.

Pedestrians are slowly pushed out on the road as they are unable to use the sidewalks anymore. Mushrooming of shops and eateries in an unplanned manner is causing damage to the environment in an irreparable way.

We as tax payers have a right to live in a clean & pollution free surrounding. Recently the Administration has started a cleanliness drive which is extremely heartening to note. However we as residents have a duty & responsibility to see and ensure that such move gets our whole hearted support and does not get derailed by any kind of outside pressure.

Bidhan Nagar is ours and we not only have a duty but also a right to protect it from becoming an unplanned, dirty and a chaotic township.

With such an objective in mind we are going to hold a rally to voice our demands and to support the move to make Bidhan Nagar clean once again. We request you to join us as a show of solidarity.

Date - 29th October 2017
Time - 10.30 AM
Place - Sourab Abasan CL Block Canal Side
Route - CL Block to Central Park via Karunamoyee

01-96433
 98312-10200

CLCitizensForum

Figure 2. Citizen forum's poster in the support of eviction

These three vignettes help us see how we practice critical ethnography, which broadens our understanding of the territorial approach of traditional ethnography and helps us unpack some of the complexities around differential power relations, how certain colonial imaginations are embedded within the postcolonial materiality.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates some limitations of ethnography when we practice ethnography as a territorial research method. I argue that human settlement issues are heterogeneous and interlinked with each other. To capture these multiplicities and interconnectedness, we need to expand our understanding of space as well as ethnography. Following Massey (2005), I argue space is dynamic and generative. It continuously unsettles its own categories and reformulates them, which traditional ethnography fails to capture. We need to engage with critical ethnographic methods for a relational understanding of spatial issues.

The Eurocentric notion of ethnographic research methods operates through binary relations of insider vs outside; respondents vs researcher; field vs non - field. Adopting a critical ethnographic approach, it only unsettles those binaries but also acknowledges the multiplicity of knowledge production. For De Sousa Santos (2014), epistemic justice can be only achievable if we minimise universalisation. Here, universalisation becomes an essential apparatus for the extension of colonial subjectivity (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2007). To counter this, it is important to adopt epistemological delinking to make knowledge production more generative and transformational. A methodological reorientation is important to formulate a decolonial framework for unsettling the normative Eurocentric discourse. I argue that critical ethnography as an apparatus helps for that epistemological delinking. Through a continuous interrogation of self and by critically analysing various power relations, critical ethnography offers a framework of knowledge generation where incompleteness becomes an important category.

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