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Research Brokers, Researcher Identities and Affective Performances: The Insider/Outsider Conundrum

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ABSTRACT
This paper reflects upon the role of brokers in facilitating research in conflict zones, which the researcher identifies as ‘native’ areas of research in the Global South. Researchers from the Global South, based in academic and research institutions in Western locations and having received funding from foreign agencies, conduct field research in conflict geographies which they maybe native to, or may have inhabited for long periods of time. Brokers facilitate research in these ‘native’ areas of research, leading to difficult encounters between the researcher, research subjects and brokers themselves. I analyze the intimate and uncomfortable affective encounters between researchers and research brokers from the Global South who share national or cultural identity, language and above all, spatial nativity and familiarity.

Introduction
While some aspects of conflicts can be studied from afar, with the increasing need for direct knowledge from conflict zones for both academic researchers and policymakers, field research remains critical for knowledge creation and dissemination. For a very long time, the only people who had access to conflict zones were war reporters and journalists who have written some powerful, poignant and intimate war stories and their encounters with war protagonists (e.g., Fisk 1990, 2007, Pratap 2002). While many journalists are known to have braved violence and intimidation, and some have even been killed in war zones for their dissident views (Al Jazeera 2017), journalistic ethics regarding access to information and anonymity of informants have also been questioned (McLaughlin 2016).

War journalists have always relied on brokers who operate in the war land/human scape and facilitate interviews and travels. They also develop complex relationships with brokers in the field, some of which have been documented in written texts (Middleton and Cons 2014, Giwa 2015, Sharma 2018). Increasingly,
university-based academics and researchers have also been collecting data in conflict zones, and many have reflected on their methodologies, positionalities and privileges (Helbardt, Hellmann-Rajanayagam and Korff 2010, Bush and Duggan 2013, Duggan and Bush 2014), and to a lesser extent on data collection processes especially related to navigating a tough, dangerous and foreign terrain (Helbardt et al. 2010, Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014). Academics have always distanced themselves from journalistic processes, referring to the significance of method, ethics and rigour in data collection.

Conducting research in active conflict zones is a uniquely difficult process for researchers in all disciplines. This is more complex now when the lines between battlefield and civilian spaces, war and peace zones are blurred and multiple masquerades by individuals make it impossible to identify the warring sides clearly (Parashar 2015, Sylvester 2015). Difficulties are compounded by anxious postcolonial regimes in the Global South which are increasingly restricting and even denying access to individual researchers and human rights groups, to conflict zones within their territorial jurisdiction (Helbardt et al. 2010, Bush and Duggan 2013, The Guardian 2016). In such situations of multiple precarities, the role of the research broker becomes critical in facilitating access to research subjects, assisting researchers in fieldwork, collecting independent data, interpreting and influencing the overall research processes as well as the outcomes.

**Research Brokers**

The findings of field research from conflict zones reach wider audiences through single or multi-authored publications, but it is widely known that the research process involves engaging a large community of people, especially those on the ground. These research networks are expansive over a vast geographical and temporal terrain and are maintained by researchers for a sustained engagement with the conflict region and for mitigating risks in navigating the field. Romain Malejacq and Dipali Mukhopadhyay (2017) have referred to these research networks as social networks that offer access, support and protection. They refer to research network in the metaphor of ‘tribe-building’ for the method used to do fieldwork amidst increasing violence (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016).

The tribe is a collective, in which an individual can access a kind of strength and protection she otherwise could not; but that individual, especially a newcomer, will never be in full control of her position within the larger system nor can she pretend these bonds are without their own politics. There is a deterministic quality to tribal relations, because they are anchored in kinship: who you are will meaningfully dictate with whom you will connect. Field sites are not free, open markets for the trading of allegiances; instead, agency is limited. In the midst of contentious politics, a researcher may be unable to move as she pleases from one network to the next; and previous
affiliations will shape her path going forward. In this sense, the concept of tribe reflects the limits on a researcher’s power and impartiality.

Thus, ‘tribe-building’ is a useful way to recognise that without a trusted set of interlocutors to make introductions, share hard-earned wisdom and offer hospitality and protection, researchers cannot navigate the minefields – intellectual and otherwise – of the war zones they wish to study. Within this process of ‘tribe-building’, research brokers are ‘local middlemen who negotiate or “broker” the relationship between researchers and participants and access to the research terrain.’ (Schiltz and Buscher 2018). Brokers not only have ‘local’ knowledge but also make conflict zones accessible (producing as well as mitigating risks both for themselves and the researchers) and impact the research design and process.

The term ‘Research Broker’ was initially (and continues to be) used for the translation of academic research into the policy realm. Sundquist (1978) coined the term ‘Research Broker’ to describe the role of packaging and retailing the intellectual products of the research community to policymakers. In his view,

Knowledge potentially useful to policymakers, while often available in the research community, is inaccessible to or unrecognizable by policymakers. Hence policy-making is often less thoughtful and well informed than it might be. By identifying, assembling, and translating potentially relevant bodies of knowledge into intelligence relevant to the immediate needs of policymakers, research brokers perform an essential role in the policymaking process. (Featherman and Vinovskis 2001, p. 196)

It is imperative to explain what is implied by the term ‘broker’ in the context of this paper. In business, a broker is an agent, promoter, dealer, fixer, trader, someone who buys and sells; in politics, a broker is a diplomat, mediator, go-between, negotiator; in the information world, a broker is someone who knows how to access or acquire information and who provides a gateway to information resources; in education, a broker is a proactive facilitator who connects people, networks, organisations and resources and establishes the conditions to create something new or add value to something that already exists. (Jackson 2003, p. 4). In this paper, I use the term broker instead of other labels such as agent, dealer or fixer. The preference for the term broker over other labels is an informed choice, largely based on the prevalent social and cultural settings of the locations of my fieldwork in India and Sri Lanka (South Asia). In this region, while broker itself is not the most sought-after epithet, most people would find other labels such as dealer or fixer inappropriate for their participation in the research work. Broker is a much more acceptable euphemism than fixer and dealer among the local population.

Knowledge brokers can be considered as a group of people who facilitate the exchange of knowledge and create connections between researchers and
their various audiences. The different audiences may include the intended target groups as subjects, participants, agents and recipients of the research. Thus, a knowledge broker is someone who is able to link know-how, know-why, and know-who, by traversing or even transgressing the boundaries that separate the public and private domains of the researcher and their intended audience. The triangular relationship between the knowledge broker, the researcher and the intended audience is complex and involves all three adopting multiple identities during their interactions. Research brokers, thus, may be considered as a specific subsection of the larger group of knowledge brokers.

In order to situate the concept of research broker in the larger canvass of knowledge brokering, I use the term research broker as a facilitator, a navigator, an enabler, a capacity builder who by affiliations and local knowledge introduces the researcher to the world of research subjects. It is safe to surmise that brokering does not mean simply moving knowledge from one specific agent/location/milieu to another. Instead, brokering involves knowledge transformation both by the broker and the researcher. However, a research broker enjoys much larger autonomous agency in regulating the collection, interpretation, and dissemination of knowledge. Therefore, this autonomy of the research broker is far more consequential to the research outputs than the researcher or the intended audience. A research broker may perform three pivotal roles to the conduct of the research: As knowledge managers (monitoring the flow and contents of information), linkage agents (as an interface between researcher and repositories of knowledge), and capacity builders (by regulating the access to the sources of knowledge) (Meyer 2010).

While research on research brokers is still in its nascent stages, Western researchers working in Non-Western contexts have reflected on their own ethnographic learnings and research processes, including their encounters with research assistants and facilitators and research dependencies (Jentsch and Pilley 2003, Crawford et al. 2017). Several papers in this special issue as well reflect on those encounters. My concern in this paper is about non-Western researchers from the Global South, based in research and academic institutions in the West, and who navigate the conflict field in Global South settings with the help of local research brokers (Sangarasivan 2001, Lunn 2014, Parashar 2014, Crawford et al. 2017). The difficulties for Global South researchers based at ‘foreign’ and Western institutions are compounded by how they are perceived in the Global South field sites and the complex relationship they share with brokers and their research subjects (Lunn 2014, Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014, Giwa 2015, Schiltz and Büscher 2018). They are both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, viewed as ‘native informants’ or as privileged class of natives who can benefit the brokers and research subjects. Multiplicity of performances by both researchers and brokers (who may belong to the same milieu) to navigate the conflict landscape, produces affective encounters which I describe through reflections on my own research experiences.
Research Brokers: Powerful or Powerless?

As discussed, earlier research brokers are considered as knowledge managers, linkage agents, and capacity builders, however, a researcher needs to be aware of biases and personal preferences of the broker in order to undertake a critical evaluation of the information and knowledge availed through the broker. There is an understanding that brokers can be powerful, dictating terms of their engagement and affecting outcomes, and also marginal and vulnerable figures who can be manipulated and exploited by researchers. (Lewis and Mosse 2006, Schiltz and Büscher 2018). Brokers project their personal preferences onto the research project by regulating access to individuals and resources. Furthermore, in conflict situations where the researcher is dependent on the broker to gain any access, the research broker may get to control the entire narrative a researcher gets to hear. It is one of the biggest challenges a researcher needs to navigate, and instead of taking every uttered word at the face value, the interviews should be considered as affective encounters. The researcher may also need to go beyond the simple interpretation of the spoken word and to offer complex and multi-layered readings of the uniform narratives of different people.

The term ‘research broker’ in conflict areas is not used in the same meaning as economic and political brokers. The latter are considered powerful and influential with some clout and patronage to achieve favourable outcome. Research brokers, on the other hand, are mediators and negotiators with relatively less power and patronage. In fact, one could argue that their power comes from a sense of ‘powerlessness’ as they navigate all the different sides of the conflict, without appearing threatening or overtly friendly to any side. Brokers can have strong ideological leanings, stakes and interests in the conflict but are usually capable of pulling strings on both sides.

My research reveals that government affiliates can be in touch with proscribed elements and can still be trusted by both sides as they need people to facilitate conversations, mediations and to provide information. This is especially possible in civil war situations where the ‘enemy’ is not an external actor but a civilian group in conflict with the state or another group. In several cases, conflict brokers who work with all the different camps, enjoy a degree of trust from all conflict parties (Helbardt et al. 2010, Middleton and Cons 2014). Brokers are not mere acquaintances or friends in conflict zones who share contacts but they become active participants in the research, sometimes for gains which may include anything from access to wider networks, research inputs, monetary compensation or even an enhancement of prestige and status (Sharma 2018). They are also vital points of contact and information for warring sides and could potentially be conflict brokers themselves as I discuss in the Maoist conflict narrative. Brokers can include professionals, academics, students,
journalists, armed forces personnel or even ordinary people who may not be otherwise employed.

While research brokers forge professional relationships with much ease with ‘foreign’ researchers, there are specific challenges that arise when they deal with researchers from the same social and cultural context. This paper has enabled me to reflect on my own research practices and methods; I have worked closely with research brokers in three conflict zones within South Asia: Sri Lanka, Jharkhand and Indian Kashmir. I identify issues of silence, erasures, manipulations and also the ‘insider-outsider’ dilemma that I experienced working with research brokers who treated me both as an academic based abroad with access to ‘foreign’ funding, networks and resources and as an Indian national complicit in the violence of the state (Parashar 2011, 2014, 2015). The multiple performances, masquerades and affective encounters were the result of how both sides perceived each other.

**Affective Encounters**

It is pertinent to explain the concept of affective encounters in the context of this paper. In the last few years, innovative work by anthropologists has impacted some of the Political Science and IR research methodologies, especially those based on fieldwork using interactive interviews or ethnographic research (Montsion 2018). There is a growing trend to consider the non-lingual dimensions of affect at par with conversations or spoken words. The concept of ethnographic interviewing proposed by Barbara Sherman-Heyl describes these as interactions:

> in which researchers have established respectful, ongoing relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for these to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds. (2001, p.387)

In similar vein, feminist approach to interviewing advises the researcher to recognise ‘the emotive nature of the interview, stressing the need for researchers to also be reflexive about their own emotions’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005, p. 26, Sylvester 2011). Sarah Pink describes interviews as ‘social, sensorial and emotive encounters’ (2009, p. 82). Building on this conceptual framework of treating the interview as an encounter, Ayata et al. (2019) argue that ‘all interviews are situated’ given the ‘positionality, power dynamics and hierarchies, the relevance of time and place, and the relationship between knowledge production and unequal power structures’ (p.67). However, interviews are not just entirely based on power relations alone, rather the emotional and relational dimensions of the interviewer and the interviewee referred to as ‘affect’ has a strong
bearing on the interview process. Affect denotes the ways in which people and things come together and generate, perhaps by chance, something that interrupts a situation, and by doing so brings something new into play (Massumi 2015, p. 8). ‘Affect’ refers to ‘relational dynamics unfolding in interaction’; it may trigger certain feelings and emotions, but it is not the same as an individual emotional response. ‘As a fundamentally relational impulse, affect constantly travels between or among people and artefacts and is registered in varying degrees of intensities, resonances or dissonances’ (Ayata et al. 2019, p. 68).

Affective encounter refers to how the researcher and their interlocutors tend to trigger specific feelings and emotions during their interactions and how these exchanges lead to building affiliations. In conflict situations, while the atmosphere is already charged with emotions, affective encounters may engender certain deep-seated yet strong emotional reactions that are not so clearly verbalised. Therefore, the researcher and the interlocutors may experience affective exchanges that provide far greater insights than a formal conversation could capture otherwise. Sara Ahmed explains the emotional and affective encounter that occurs in an interview:

Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, of learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against; through all of this, a “we” is formed, an attachment is made. (2004, p. 188).

Affective encounters, thus bring about a shared understanding, build a collective, and foster shared affective states, thus constructing a repository of non-textual knowledge during the interview process. The rigid demarcations of positionality are transgressed through these affective encounters as the collective ‘we’ tend to superimpose some of the individual preferences, emotions and feelings on the other. Thus, affective encounters often lead to affective performances where the clear boundaries of inside-outside are blurred. We can extrapolate this understanding of ethnographic interviewing, feminist approaches to interviewing, and the framework of interviews as ‘social, sensorial and emotive encounters’ to the relationship between the researcher and the research broker.

In the next section, I discuss the term ‘native informant’ and the ‘outsider-insider’ dynamics that underpins the encounters between Global South researchers in spatial and temporal geographies that they are familiar with, or may even call ‘home’, and local research brokers whom they engage. The positionality of the Global South researcher represents a conundrum, as the insider and yet the outsider which leads to absences, silences and erasures where both the research and the brokers are complicit.
The Native Informant and Insider-Outsider Conundrum

Insider-Outsider

Qualitative research methodologies involve a set of social interactions between the researcher and the participants. It is often argued that one of the fundamental conundrums in social research is ‘the positioning of the researcher as an “insider” or “outsider” in relation to the research process and participants’ (Savvides et al. 2014, p. 412). The issue of researcher membership in the group or area being studied has significant impact on the processes of data collection, analysis, interpretations, and ultimately on the research outcomes. It is possible that the researcher is considered an insider by the research participants; such an affinity has obvious advantages for the conduct of research. Most often such associations are derived through ethnic, cultural and even political identities and it allows easier access to people and their knowledge. However, being an insider, the researcher comes with certain baggage. Many times, the researcher gets embedded in ongoing power struggles within the community and can also project their own prejudices and biases inadvertently. The outsider researcher may seem to have more objectivity due to their lack of social and cultural affiliations. However, outsiders may lack background knowledge and be unaware of the finer nuances that come with cultural embeddedness.

The idea of separating the researcher from the participants is based on the assumption of creating identities based on group membership or creating self-other dichotomy. While this segregation caters to convenient classification, this approach is fundamentally flawed. This categorisation does not consider multiple identities an individual may adopt in order to negotiate through social interactions. Furthermore, the imposition of specific identities on the researcher and the researched also ignores ‘individuals’ agency in how they interact with the structures.

Postmodern and constructivist critical approaches have questioned the arbitrary construction of the binaries of insider versus outsider. These approaches investigate the researcher–subject relationships in a more complex and multifaceted way and consider how researchers and research participants adopt numerous, fluid identities during their interactions. Thus, the positionality and identity of the researcher and the researched are not immutable; instead, these are multifaceted and socially constructed and they function as active collaborators of meaning and knowledge through their interactions. The overlapping of identities and roles of the researcher and the participants during their interactions implies that there are inherent dynamism and instability in this relationship. This blurring of boundaries between the researcher and the researched is shaped by a number of factors, including the prevalent social, cultural and spatial contexts.

It may be deduced from earlier discussions that the degree of ‘insider-ness’ or ‘outsiderness’ is not absolute, but it is shaped by the prevalent
social and cultural configurations. Positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to ‘the other’. More importantly, these positions can shift: ‘The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status (Merriam et al. 2001, p. 412).’

These interdependencies and ongoing negotiations through the insider/outsider conundrum get more complex when a researcher based away from ‘home’ returns ‘home’ to undertake fieldwork. In such situations, the multiple and layered identities come to the fore while traversing through the complex maze of insider–outsider–‘in-between’. The complexities of doing fieldwork are based upon how one negotiates the issues of identity, access, positionality and relationship building with the participants. I locate the notion of one’s homeland by virtues of nationality, ethnicity and cultural affinities. Working in the homeland for fieldwork brings in further complexity as noted by Sultana who argues that ‘the “field” versus “home” is a problematic distinction’ (2007, p. 377).

At one level both the researcher and the participants may identify with the same ‘home’ in terms of territorial, political, ethnic and cultural dimensions. However, at another level, the researcher and the participants may belong to entirely different realms in terms of their language, class, education and privileges. As the researcher in Jharkhand, I was extremely fluent in Hindi but did not have expertise with the local tribal languages and dialects. The class difference is not just material and situational; the fact that the researcher is based in the ‘West’, lives in an urban area and can speak English are also associated with class privileges.

Ghassan Hage (2006) reminds that an insider is ‘someone who “belongs” and is mentally and bodily attuned to a specific socio-cultural space. His or her body feels “at home” within that space, usually because the body has historically evolved in relation to that space’. Being an Insider, according to Hage does not simply mean having a socio-cultural belonging or a spatial familiarity, it is also an acceptance of the informal and formal modes of being and ‘order of things’ which allows the individual to feel that their ‘I’ can legitimately speak for the ‘we’. This is the political belonging, an insider status that native researchers cannot discard even during moments of research. The ‘outsider’ on the other hand, ‘is a specific mode of being an insider’ as Hage again suggests. Outsiders are insiders within their spaces, it is only when they transgress and enter someone else’s inside that they are labelled as ‘outsiders’. Thus, there is a ‘performative’ aspect to this inside-outside conundrum where the outsider is enabled only when s/he tries to ‘become’ an insider; the insider and outsider are not in continuum and must be seen as unstable, socially constructed identities. A continuum represents a continuous whole comprising individual units which depicts a continuous progression of some sort. In any social
interactions, the multiple identities and relational experiences do not operate in a rigidly linear or uniform manner.

I refer to the riddle of being insider/outsider as a conundrum instead of continuum or dilemma. Identifying oneself as an insider/outsider poses a challenge and thus, it is a dilemma. How the person responds to this challenge by navigating different degrees of insideriness/outsiderness makes it a conundrum. By definition insider and outsider represent two distinct positions; however, these positions are contextual and are mediated through the relational experiences between the researcher and participants and how they construct each other’s identity during their social interactions. The researcher is well aware of their own identity as insider/outsider during interactions with the participants, and that poses a dilemma to the researcher. It is a dilemma since the researcher has self-awareness of their position vis-à-vis the participants; however, the more important part of this interaction is how the researcher responds to this dilemma during their interactions, which I refer to as conundrum. A conundrum by definition is a difficult problem that may have multiple solutions; therefore, the choice of a solution and the arguments made for that choice is as important as having a solution. In social interactions, a conundrum is more appropriate representation of the insider/outsider puzzle.

**Native Informant**

The term ‘native informant’ is increasingly being used to discredit the labour and voices of non-Western/indigenous researchers, activists and authors based in the West who raise troubling questions about these societies (Hancock 1998, Figueira 2008, Malik 2018). Native informants are considered collaborators of colonial and imperial regimes, who serve to undermine and even harm their native societies. Within postcolonial studies, ‘native informant’ was once useful in understanding the way certain cultural brokers from former colonies could benefit from helping more powerful Western authorities in objectifying their people (Sangarasivam 2001, Giwa 2015). In the context of colonialism, India’s ruling elite supported native informants by promoting official nationalism in post-independence India. As civil servants and white-collar professionals, the elite were actively engaged in building the state apparatuses (e.g., educational institutions) through which they derived social and material privilege and sought to exercise hegemonic power. These indigenous professionals created a class of area experts who controlled the narrative by ‘privileging the contingent boundaries of the Indian state as natural delimiters of cultural forms’ (Hancock 1998, p. 347).

Dorothy Figueira describes native informants as ‘disciplinary gatekeepers providing an authoritative version of history for the upper classes (reformers or nationalists), and the West.’ (Figueira 2008, p. 54). But in a world where these ‘authoritative versions’ are not simply academic but can also be the ideological underpinnings of military aggression, the native informant’s role is that of the
enabler. The role of the ‘native informant’ has especially been discussed in the case of Muslim women, authors and activists who have highlighted the oppressions of Islamic societies to Western audiences (Malik 2018). On the one hand, they have challenged the privilege of white western women to speak on their behalf, on the other hand, there are questions about their roles, complicity and even epistemic and discursive violence they deploy as they present a uniform caricature of their native societies.

‘Native informant’, thus, is a useful category to unpack the complex world of researchers from the Global South who are based in Western institutions and who conduct fieldwork in their native geographies (Hancock 1998, Figueira 2008, Maira 2009, Malik 2018). Apart from the usual risks they face as researchers in conflict zones, they carry the additional burden of representing and writing about their native societies, which is held to greater scrutiny and accountability. They always run the risk of being labelled native informants, working for their Western employees and funded by Western agencies, serving foreign interests. Research brokers’ perceptions about these native (insiders) and yet foreign (outsider) researchers play an important role in the information and networks they make available to such researchers and the research terrains they navigate together. The native researcher is both a dispassionate-distanced observer and a partisan native informant, in the eyes of the broker. Although the broker may not explicitly refer to the researcher as acting on the behest of ‘foreign’ institutions and governments, they use subtle messaging techniques to convey the same, sometimes even working with research subjects in the process.

There are always affective encounters between the researcher and brokers in situations where they are both ‘insiders’ and may share the privileges of local insight, cultural familiarity and knowledge. However, the researcher still depends upon the broker to navigate the research terrain and to connect with wider research subjects. In such situations, while one could expect a degree of familiarity between the broker and the researcher, I argue that it leads to masquerades and manipulations as both sides operate in an environment of trust deficit and a sense of power ‘over’ the other that is mutually shared. The brokers exercise power over the researcher both in terms of their access to the ‘authentic’ local research subjects and the narrative they can control, while constantly reminding the researchers of their ‘outside’ privilege (Hancock 1998, Figueira 2008). The researchers, as bearers of inside information, also exercise power over the brokers, who cannot always manipulate research subjects or the research terrain, as they would if the researcher was a complete outsider. The negotiations between the broker and the researchers in these circumstances occur at a daily level. On some occasions, native researchers also become brokers while the research subjects can view the native researcher as the ‘outsider’ and the broker as the ‘insider’ and even a ‘native informant’.
Native researchers perform the insider and outsider roles in their encounters with both the brokers and research subjects. In their political and socio-cultural belonging, they ‘become’ the insider, but are labelled outsiders even as they try to embrace the position of the insider. The ‘outsider’ status is conferred on the native researcher, as their research has a foreign benefactor or patron and their employers are based in the West. They are perceived as ‘native informants’ because they are insiders who can also be maintained as ‘outsiders’ (by their foreign university employers and their funders). In that sense, treating someone as an outsider is not about spatial exclusion or keeping them on the outside, but emotional performances in research processes that enable an outsider identity to be strategically deployed to counter the insider status of the researchers, which may potentially threaten the broker or reduce their sense of power over the researchers. These issues are highlighted in the narrative that follows.

Auto Ethnography from the Field

Theatre: Jharkhand, India

The Maoist conflict in India’s Eastern and Central region is both an easy and a tough terrain to navigate for an insider and outsider like me. The state of Jharkhand, where I have conducted long periods of fieldwork, is part of the Maoist ‘Red Corridor’ in Central India, carved out of the bigger state of Bihar. My Indian citizenship and the fact that I spent the formative years of life in the city of Ranchi (the capital of Jharkhand) enables particular kinds of affective encounters during field research. I know the region intimately, and I am comfortable with its norms, traditions and social mores. I feel and breathe this region and am filled with nostalgia as fieldwork takes me to areas where I spent my childhood and which I call ‘home’ as my friends and family still live in Ranchi. My outsider status emanates from my ‘location’ abroad and also from the fact that my family originally migrated from Bihar, and the tribals of Jharkhand think of Biharis as ‘outsiders’.

During my fieldwork on the development-security nexus in the Maoist conflict, I worked closely with Ramesh Singh, a high school teacher, a civil rights group member and a known mediator between the Maoists and the government, who became my key informant and research broker. He did not see any conflict between his role as a ‘human rights activist’ who critiqued and challenged the government and his employment in a public sector government school. During one such fieldwork visit in 2011, I hosted a British journalist and doctoral candidate from London, in Ranchi. He was also working on the Maoist conflict and had contacted me on email. We travelled to a nearby village in Jharkhand, accompanied by Ramesh Singh who was facilitating our interviews and our site visit. During the journey, our British visitor decided to
conduct an interview with Ramesh Singh, who was far more comfortable in Hindi and unwillingly, to save the situation and especially my relationship with Singh who had been a long-term interlocutor and broker, I had to take on the role of the reluctant translator.

In all the interviews we did together, the foreign guest expected me to ‘fix’ interviews and translate during the conversations. An everyday act of kindness and generosity towards a ‘foreigner’ and a PhD student became an intense affective experience, with the realisation that I had turned into a research broker for the white western researcher. I hosted him at my relative’s house, arranged for him to have ‘foreign’ food (mostly pasta) since he could not eat Indian lentils and rice and could not cook, helped him with interviews, data collection and became an unofficial translator. Our visitor remained oblivious to, or pretended to not see, his white male privilege, which not only made him an important figure in ‘the field’ but also allowed him access to situations and people, who would have otherwise not met nonwhite researchers, including me as the ‘insider’ so easily. In one way, being with a white male researcher enabled easy access to the field but it led to a feeling of serious frustration and anger at most times, as I realised that my insider status was not yielding any advantages, other than in my reading of the complex situations and deploying local common sense.

Our visitor insisted that he wished to see the ‘real’ poverty in India, which outraged me at multiple levels. His orientalist approach to research was visible throughout in the questions he asked and in the pictures, he took of people living in what he considered as absolute deprivation in order to explain the conflict between the Maoists and the Indian state. I was keen to meet some of the local Maoist cadres, while the visitor was keen on poverty voyeurism. He was not accompanying us to learn about the conflict; rather he looked at us (Ramesh Singh and I) as ‘native informants’ who would provide him with access to the ‘real’ poor Indians.

Together with Ramesh Singh, we attended a public gathering to commemorate the death anniversary of the tribal leader and freedom fighter, Birsa Munda. The police and paramilitary deployment were based on the Government’s view that Maoists masquerading as ordinary civilians would be present in the commemoration, and in the event of any escalation of their anti-state rhetoric, they could be arrested and the function could be cancelled. It was a powerful moment of conformity and subversion working together; the commemoration went ahead despite a large contingent of security personnel, whose presence and imposition of travel restrictions ensured that access to the event was not easy. As we approached the village, a police party armed with automatic guns had blocked the road and demanded to know the purpose of our visit. Ramesh Singh asked the head of the police team if we were restricted from visiting the venue, and proceeded to inform that he could call a senior police officer in Ranchi, to get the necessary clearance. The police head was
unimpressed with the name dropping and spoke rather tersely ‘I am only warning you of potential trouble during the event; are you trying to scare me by claiming close connections with the higher ups?’ The local police personnel are infamous for their rough treatment of common people and we feared escalation, however, unlike us, Ramesh Singh was accustomed to these delicate negotiations. Singh managed to somehow impress upon the local police team that he was anything but a commoner. Eventually, despite his visible annoyance, the head of the police party grudgingly allowed us to pass through the barricades. It appeared that while our broker was an insider among the Maoist insurgents, he also had some very useful connections within the police hierarchy.

A large number of local Maoist supporters had gathered to celebrate the martyrdom of one of the most eminent tribal personalities and India’s greatest freedom fighters, Birsa Munda. Singh pointed out to us later that many unarmed Maoist cadres were present in the crowd and even partook of lunch at a local businessman’s place. It seemed that this local businessman had managed to strike a lucrative deal with the government, and was also supported by the local Maoists under the patronage of Ramesh Singh. The entire event was marked by multiple levels of deception and contradiction: a congregation of the Maoists, gathered in support of a nationally recognised anti-colonial freedom fighter; armed cadres in disguise; cultural activists who were Maoist supporters; the presence of local politicians and the visible inequalities that had ushered in the insurgency in the first place.

Ramesh Singh was well versed with the power of the electronic media and had one TV reporter get his sound bites on the event and the restrictions placed by the police. He waxed eloquent, castigating the state oppression and heavy-handedness of the police force while eulogizing common people’s (Maoists) spirit of struggle for socio-economic equality. We had clearly entered the enemy camp and had been subjected to public visibility and media glare in the presence of the security forces. Ramesh Singh introduced us to several people proclaiming that we were ‘progressives’ (progressive in these settings also meant, anti-state and Maoist sympathiser). I was definitely not prepared for the manner in which Ramesh Singh manipulated our visit as that of Maoist sympathisers (a dangerous label for all times) who were there to attend the commemoration.

There was another visible outsider-insider dynamic at display. There was little attention given to me, because I was a ‘local’, an ‘insider’. The white researcher was clearly more in demand, even requested to garland the statue of Birsa Munda, the freedom fighter. His name and his British nationality were repeatedly announced on the public address system. He had multiple photo ops with several people at the congregation who wanted to be ‘seen’ with a white foreigner, though, he looked peeved at not having seen or photographed the ‘real’ poor people.
A couple of days after this visit, Ramesh Singh invited me and our foreign visitor to meet him at the school in Ranchi where he was employed. He requested the foreign visitor to address the students of the senior section and share his experiences, life story or whatever he deemed fit. It was clear to me that Singh wanted to display his proximity to a white Western person, living abroad, to his colleagues and students. However, much to the dismay of Ramesh Singh, his visitor seemed less keen on an impromptu speech to a bunch of Indian students. On the other hand, it was clear that Singh’s work ethics and focus on ‘extra-curricular activities’ (advocating for Maoists in the guise of ‘human rights activism’) had not endeared him to the school authorities and he was not as influential within the school as he believed himself to be. The school Principal was not enamoured with the idea of one of Ramesh Singh’s acquaintances (that too a white foreigner) addressing the students, and asked the intended speaker to submit the transcript of his speech. Ultimately, the whole idea of the British researcher’s speech to inspire Indian school children was abandoned.

Ramesh Singh was an outsider in his own school and community and within the Maoist insurgency; he was more of an ideologue or supporter and a trenchant critic of the state as a human rights activist. Publicly, he could never claim to be one of the insurgents since it would invite the wrath of the state apparatus. Had the state decided to prosecute him for anti-national activities, he was important enough within the Maoist hierarchy for the cadres to launch a counter-offensive. At the same time publicly, he could never criticise the most violent acts of the Maoist insurgents, since it would invite the wrath of the Maoist cadres and possible excommunication by the Maoists. This would mean the loss of the aura of being a public face of the insurgency, loss of prestige and power which came from being the putative ideologue.

How ethical was it for Ramesh Singh to work as a teacher in a government school where he hardly took classes, drew his salary regularly and yet worked so closely with the Maoists who had waged a violent war on the state and security forces? How did my presence at the Birsa Munda commemoration event along with a foreign researcher compromise my research ethics and nonpartisan independent research? How was I manipulated by Singh, as my research broker and the white foreign researcher for whom I ‘performed’ the role of the research broker? Was I an active participant and enabler in the manipulation, collusion and masquerade myself? In a highly polarised conflict that it is, how does my association with Ramesh Singh affect future prospects of research with policemen and paramilitary forces? Ramesh Singh died some years ago of a prolonged illness and his position and legacy remain a matter of debate and contestation. How could I have written about Ramesh Singh as an upper caste, government employee who supported subversive activities against the State in the name of Tribal and Dalit rights? What kinds of collaborative possibilities existed and how did he imagine his role as a research broker?
Silences, Erasures and Affective Performances

In the conflict theatre described above, the research broker had been in that role for a long time, facilitating research in which he enjoyed a degree of trust from all sides, and which highlighted both his power and powerlessness in navigating the field. There was some ambiguity about the broker’s role in both sides of the conflict and his employment status (he worked in a government school while remaining close to anti-state elements), which invoked great curiosity and speculation. His sympathies for the Maoists were widely known and it was also clear that he served a purpose for the government as an interlocutor or peace broker with the Maoists. Ramesh Singh facilitated my research travels and access to research subjects but he was always concerned about my ideological leanings. I was going to be a ‘native informant’ as far as he was concerned, but he wanted me to be the right kind of ‘progressive’ informant who would pick sides (that of the Maoists). Most foreign researchers he had assisted, he always told me with some pride, had ‘understood’ the conflict and had written about the oppression of the tribals, critiquing the role of the state while being sympathetic to the Maoists. It was an implicit way of dictating my research agenda, especially as an ‘insider’. It is thus, evident that the nature of the conflict decides the roles that brokers can play in research and access to data is determined by the brokers’ perception of the researchers.

The research broker may genuinely believe in objectivity but their own access to specific individuals in the target community may belie the whole notion of objectivity. The major concern, therefore, is that the research brokers not only control access to individuals and resources but ultimately, they control the whole narrative a researcher gets to hear. The biggest challenge for the researcher is to offer complex and multi-layered readings of the uniform narratives of different people they interact with. The only way the researcher can go beyond the dominant narrative is to spend more time in the field and expand contact networks, which may pose other challenges.

The duration of time spent during the fieldwork with the community or the affected population opens up challenges of balancing competing narratives from the same social collective. It can be argued that the research broker’s firm control over the access and narrative is weakened with the passage of time and the researcher’s growing familiarity with the target community may make the research broker insecure of his position. The researcher, with ‘insider’ knowledge may develop their own contacts, transgress specified boundaries, and entertain contradictory perspectives in their research. The broker may find the researcher’s behaviour as opportunistic and could thus, become anxious and insecure with the emergence of individuals and ideological challengers to their position. In such situations, the close collaborations between the research broker and the researcher can unravel disastrously with the passage of time. My own relationship with
brokers in the field has suffered from uncomfortable silences, ambiguities about expectations and outcomes, unacknowledged affective performances and even lack of communication.

I have previously written about emotions and research (Parashar 2011, 2014) and would suggest that field research produces multiple affective encounters of which brokers are an integral part. In my fieldwork, affect played a big role in how I was being impacted by my research subjects and by the approaches, comments, subtle and gendered. Messaging of the research brokers. Even though I was interested in women’s voices of most conflicts, I had to rely on male brokers and interlocutors, in very patriarchal contexts, to reach women. As a feminist researcher, I am aware of these gendered power hierarchies, and it should be recognised that men continue to be gatekeepers of most conflict sites. Male privilege works together with caste and often class privilege, allowing men to enable both native and foreign researchers to access field sites. We had two women activists travelling with us during our trip to the Maoist conflict-affected areas in Jharkhand; both were quite well known in their fields of work and widely networked with both sides. However, at the commemoration event, we did not see many people including women interacting with them; most of the limelight and attention was focused on the male protagonists (Ramesh Singh and the white Western visiting researcher) of the event.

Male brokers get extraordinary attention in conflict areas and performative masculinity plays an important role in how brokers position themselves within the community and in their interactions with the researchers. The brokers can, in such situations, appear to be in complete control of the situation. In the village in Jharkhand where Birsa Munda’s death anniversary or martyrdom was being marked in a political and cultural gathering, my presence along with the British researcher was highlighted by the broker as significant. He reiterated to the gathered crowd that we had travelled all the way with him to attend the event (reality being interpreted differently as it was supposed to be a research trip) and even arranged for us to garland the statue of Birsa Munda, announcing that we were important dignitaries. Brokers never facilitate research for greater altruism. They have vested interests which range from gaining recognition from an external audience, gaining eminence within their domestic audience, seeking other material benefits and networks as quid pro quo. Monetary deals may not always be relevant but there is definitely an understanding that the favour would have to be returned.

Like the researcher, even the research broker has to confront the insider/outsider conundrum. During my fieldwork, I travelled to the remote rural areas in Jharkhand, research brokers like Ramesh Singh were based in urban areas. The research brokers were well versed with local language and aware of the local social and cultural milieu, in several cases, they were the public faces of the underground-armed struggles. Yet, they could not be considered as indigenous-insider or the one ‘who endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviours,
beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and who can speak with authority about it’ (Merriam et al. 2001, p. 412). In most cases, the research brokers were embedded in and exercised some political authority to speak on behalf of the armed struggle. However, they were not the cultural spokesperson of the community engaged in the armed struggle or on whose behalf this armed struggle was waged. Like the researcher’s positionality, even the research broker had different social positioning among different levels of the armed militants, their supporters, security forces and the ordinary village folks.

Field identities are multiple and continually mediated constructs in response to the anticipated or experienced perceptions of how participants receive, accept, or reject the researcher’s positionalities vis-à-vis their own over the course of a research study or during single field events (Srivastava 2006, p. 214). My positionalities were constantly in flux according to the different levels of inquiry in the study. For example, my social positioning vis-à-vis rural illiterate mothers was quite different to that regarding senior elite government officials. At one level the Maoist movement needed to cultivate good contacts in the media and academia to seek popularity and even legitimacy for their campaigns, thus granting me the status of an insider to reach otherwise inaccessible areas and people. I was treated with due respect, utmost courtesy and was allowed to participate in the local festivities, almost making me appear as an insider. Conversely, since the movement intended to publicise only their benevolent side, I could only approach the people who were approved by the local leaders and the research brokers. The researcher, as the outsider, was always treated with suspicion as someone collecting information which could be later shared with the police and the security agencies. Thus, my positionalities changed because of the research design itself and a combination of personal attributes.

Conclusion

I have reflected on methodology in my published works, referring to the power ‘over’ the researcher that research subjects exercise (Parashar 2011, 2014). However, I also recognise the ways in which I erased the role and silenced the voices of the brokers who facilitated my field research. Ramesh Singh facilitated an entry into the world of Maoists but I felt less motivated to engage with my encounters with him in my writings, possibly because I felt guilty of abandoning the elusive ‘objectivity’ and distance in my research. The lack of reflection on the role of brokers could also have to do with the fact that in all cases, the success of the research, my reputation and also, to a large extent, safety, were dependent on my hosts (brokers). Writing out these encounters with the brokers was my way of coping with my own vulnerability in the research and the complicity I felt as an ‘insider’ in accounts of oppression and violence, and in the precarity that the research subjects experienced. Without the insights that I gained from the research brokers and through them, my research would not have acquired the
rich, textured narratives of the conflict, and yet none of the brokers featured in my publications (beyond the usual acknowledgements and footnotes), either as facilitators of research or co-authors. On various occasions, I had felt silenced by them (brokers and research subjects) and I reciprocated the same silencing, when I analyzed the research material.

The multitude of institutional ethics forms I have filled in the past about data gathering, storage procedures and safety measures demonstrate the detailed attention to the ethical relationship between the research subjects and the researcher. But nothing quite prepares us, as researchers to deal with the world of research interlocutors and brokers who are part of the ‘tribe building’ that Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay refer to when they mention ‘the social, political and economic equations that shape life in conflict zones’. They have aptly suggested that ‘descriptions of scholarly findings often leave out these details, intentionally or unintentionally portraying the researcher as independent and in control.’ We need to have an open dialogue about the ‘dependencies, biases and vulnerabilities of field research which will help us better produce knowledge about conflict in creative and conscientious ways’ (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2017).

Access to conflict field sites will be limited and will increasingly be mediated (even for native researchers) through research brokers and interlocutors. Revisiting the outsider-insider dilemmas can help us map those difficult ethical and affective terrains we need to navigate in our research and the negotiations that we can perhaps formalise with the research brokers. The affective performances by both sides enable particular understandings of the ‘native informant’ to emerge during the research which impacts the research output and researcher–broker relationship during and after the research. Paying attention to the ‘positionality’ of the researcher vis a vis the location of the research site will introduce greater transparency in research; it will invite more conversation, analogical thinking and reflections on research in conflict areas where the broker and researchers share spatial nativity and familiarity.

Notes

1. This was earlier only prevalent in disciplines such as anthropology but political scientists and International Relations scholars are now also getting empirical data from fieldwork in conflicts.
2. Red corridor region is demarcated to notify the districts which are affected by left wing or Maoist extremism. It spans across 10 States (provinces), namely Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.
3. Jharkhand was carved out as a separate state from Bihar to address the long-standing demands of the local communities to protect their indigenous identity and rights to resources for both Adivasi (tribals) and Moolvasi (original
non-tribal settlers). The local activists consider all the people who have come to the state of Jharkhand after 1932, as outsiders.

4. Name changed to protect identity.

5. Birsa Munda. The irony of a British man honoured with local requests to garland his statue. Birsa Munda was a folk hero and a tribal freedom fighter hailing from the state of Jharkhand. He was a led a rebellion against the British colonial administration. He fought against the forceful land grabbing which would turn the tribals into bonded labourers and push them into abject poverty.

6. Ramesh Singh, since his death, is now considered a Maoist ideologue and not a genuine Human Rights activist that he always presented himself as.

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