Navigating the 'field':

Reflexivity, uncertainties, and negotiation along the border of Bangladesh and India

Abstract

Drawing on a fourteen-month ethnographic fieldwork experience along the border of Bangladesh and India, I offer a narrative of daily challenges and uncertainties in the 'field'. Highlighting my positionality and reflexivity, I suggest that first, although a researcher may use social capital to gain access, it may raise concerns regarding the genuineness of the participant's response. Second, with careful attention, unplanned moments and spontaneous conversations can be turned into sources for valuable insight. Third, pushing the boundaries of social norms to attain a textbook example of 'gender balance' does not necessarily 'add value' to the research; instead, is likely to make it more challenging to access the same population for further research. Finally, I reaffirm that being from the same region with a similar background does not make the researcher an 'insider'. Rather, their positionality becomes more 'fluid' and constantly shifts between an insider, an outsider, both, and sometimes none.

Introduction

> It was getting frustrating! I met this person once and had arranged a meeting three times so far, however, with no success. The first day I walked into his office and introduced myself, he was reasonably welcoming. As I introduced myself and explained my purpose of the visit to him, he told that he would be happy to give me time for an interview. Then we scheduled a date and time for an interview in his office. …Upon arrival at the agreed time, we were told that he had gone out for an 'emergency' meeting and would meet us two days later. We went to his office after two days, and he was not there. His office assistant told us that he said 'sorry' and asked us to call him in the evening to fix another interview time. I called him that evening, he was apologetic about the missed appointments, and we scheduled another meeting, yet again! Confident this time, I was in high hopes! However, when I arrived in his office, he was nowhere to be found, and surprisingly (or not) his office assistant did not have a clue either. At this point, it became clear that the officer does not want to give me an interview, and for some reasons, does not say 'no' either. He was a crucial official that I needed to interview, and I did not want to give up so easily. I started searching for connections and soon found that I knew someone superior to this official within the bureaucratic hierarchy. I used that connection to schedule yet another meeting with him.
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> This time he was in the office! Not only was he there, he was very apologetic, offered us tea and snacks, and also told me that 'You should have mentioned earlier that you are XX of YY' (referring to my connections to the superior officer). What my connection was able to do was to get me an interview with the official. At the same time, what it cost me was the lack of authenticity. The official was reluctant to answer my questions; his answers were either on the surface or were elusive.
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> <div align="right">[Excerpts from field notes]</div>

As I was going through my field notes, I came across these pages. It reminds me of a common and frequent challenge that I faced during my fourteen-month ethnographic fieldwork along the border of Bangladesh and India. While the excerpt demonstrates one of many challenges of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, it also raises concerns regarding a 'fruitful' interview, ethical issues, and above all, the uncertainties that must be dealt with on a case to case basis. Dealing with such challenges cannot be taught in a methods course nor found within institutional guidelines (Sultana, 2007).

My initial plan was to conduct a comparative study between the former enclave residents both in Bangladesh and India after the enclaves were exchanged in 2015. The enclaves were small pieces of land completely surrounded by the other country. Indian enclaves were surrounded by Bangladesh and vice versa (van Schendel, 2002). People living in these enclaves were Indians living inside Bangladesh and Bangladeshis living inside India. As the international border between these two states is closed and highly 'secured', enclave dwellers essentially remained locked in these small lands. They were, on the one hand, completely surrounded by a state that did not recognize them as citizens and, on the other, were disconnected from the state they belonged to. During the exchange in 2015, the former enclave residents were given a choice to decide their state of citizenship. They could stay where they were or move to the country that they officially belonged to (Author, 2019b). The broader objectives of my research were to explore the citizenship experiences of these de facto stateless populations, to understand their choice of citizenship, and to comprehend the state-making processes adopted by Bangladesh and India. Drawing on my fieldwork, this paper describes the challenges of working on a 'sensitive'[1] topic that frequently raised doubts and suspicions about my 'real' intentions which not only resulted in tensions but also occasionally restricted my access to numerous spaces and people (Cons, 2016). In so doing, I also detail how I navigated those challenges that sometimes worked and sometimes did not. My purpose is not to present a mechanical description of how and what data I collected. Instead, I offer a narrative of my times in the field which were shaped by intersubjective experiences, positionality, reflexivity and numerous uncertainties.

Scholarship regarding ethnographic fieldwork has moved towards an intersubjective understanding between the researcher and the people s/he researches. As Kim England has it, 'The intersubjective nature of social life means that the researcher and the people being

researched have shared meanings and we should seek methods that develop this advantage'

(1994: 82). In this regard, I draw on Alessandro Duranti's work on intersubjectivity (Duranti,

2010). Building on Edmund Husserl, Duranti argues that intersubjectivity, at the least, is being

aware of the presence of Others in a way so that the Self and the Other are perceptually,

conceptually, and practically coordinated around a particular task (Duranti, 2010: 17). Following

the same logic, intersubjectivity also becomes a precondition for interaction. Thus, fieldwork is

an intersubjective experience which not only demands attention to the researcher's reflexivity

and positionality but also calls for a critical examination of the idea of 'being there' in the 'field'

(Coffey, 1999; Coleman and Collins, 2006; England, 1994; Gardner, 1999; Nagar, 2002).

At the same time, the meaning of 'field' and 'home' are critically questioned (Gupta and

Ferguson, 1997). Thus I further shed light on my experiences in the 'field' and/or in 'home'

where meanings of both these terms often blurred as I became an insider, an outsider, both, and

none (Gilbert, 1994; Mullings, 1999). The meaning of the 'field' is not fixed; rather, it is

constructed, negotiated, and made (Middleton and Cons, 2014). In their critical examination of

the 'field', Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson draw our attention to the idea of 'field' and 'home'

by pointing out that the 'field' has been romanticized as a place that is 'raw' where the

researcher 'enters' in and 'exits' from. On the contrary, 'home' is the place where the

ethnography is written and polished (1997: 12). Gupta and Ferguson argue such distinctions of

'field' and 'home' lead to a 'hierarchy of purity'. They call for a careful examination of the idea

of the field as a site, method, and location (1997: 13). My objective is not to problematize the

idea of the 'field' in this paper. However, I must mention that such distinctions became

somewhat blurred for me because of my positionality as a researcher who was born and raised in

Bangladesh while simultaneously conducting fieldwork in the same country as part of my

training as a political geographer in an American institution. Therefore, it never was an easy negotiation for the 'ethnographic self' within me (Coffey, 1999).

Consequently, the fieldwork became a constant process of negotiation, management, overcoming challenges, building rapport, gaining access, and reflecting on my thoughts and actions. It was a continuous process of 'methodological impression management' that allowed me to work and think through the sensitivity of the 'sensitive' topic I was researching along the border of Bangladesh and India (Cons, 2016; Gengler and Ezzell, 2018: 808). Therefore, the discussion that follows has three objectives. First, to shed light on the challenges of access and ways around or through them during the fieldwork, especially because of the apparent 'sensitivity' of my research topic. Second, placing my positionality and reflexivity within the research and comprehend the way they might (have) affect(ed) the research project. Third, documenting the nuances of uncertainties and ethical dilemmas that remain outside the control of the researcher which might not pose a threat to undo the fieldwork completely, yet carry the potential to jeopardize the project if not paid attention to. In conclusion, I suggest that first, while a researcher may use social capital to gain access, at the same time, it raises concerns regarding the 'genuineness' of the participant's response. My use of the term 'genuine', in this paper, does not refer to any judgement of true or false. Instead, I use it to suggest what might have been said 'differently' had I not used my social capital to gain access or changed a setting for an interaction. Second, with careful attention, unplanned moments and spontaneous conversations can be turned into sources for valuable insight. Third, pushing the boundaries of social norms to attain a textbook example of 'gender balance' does not necessarily 'add value' to the research; instead, it is likely to leave a negative impression making it more challenging to access the same population for future research. Finally, I reaffirm that even being from the same region with a

similar ethnic and racial background does not make the researcher an 'insider'. Rather, it blurs their positionality between an 'insider' and an 'outsider' (Ahmed, 2000; Zaman, 2008)

Gaining access

Scholars who conducted ethnographic fieldwork along the border of Bangladesh and India, especially in the former enclaves, all share similar experiences of challenges regarding access to these spaces. Challenges took different forms for different bodies starting from a lack of cooperation to threats and intimidation by border guards, being denied a research visa, or gender bias (Cons, 2016; Jones, 2009; Shewly, 2015; Whyte, 2002). Being aware of the sensitiveness of the research topic from the beginning, my first and foremost concern regarding access was to get the 'right visa' to India. Because of my citizenship status, I was not required to have a visa to conduct research in Bangladesh. However, to carry out a comparative study between the enclaves both in India and Bangladesh, which was my original plan, I had to attain a research visa from India. While positionality and reflexivity of a researcher are widely addressed in the literature, a researcher's visa dilemma and political identity are poorly addressed, particularly when it comes to border research in South Asia (Shewly, 2012). Thus, I started contacting researchers who had previously worked on similar issues and asked their experiences regarding a research visa to India, the first step in ethnography (Crang and Cook, 2007). It took no time to find out that none of the previous researchers were able to attain a research visa from India even when most of them were 'foreign' researchers from the US, Europe, and Australia. In sharing his experiences of working on the enclaves of Bangladesh and India, Brendan Whyte writes that he never received a research visa from India. Further, his quest for the visa delayed his fieldwork for a period of six months and he finally conducted his research on a tourist visa (Whyte, 2002). Whyte also suggests that a researcher from South Asia is in a relatively

disadvantageous position when it comes to researching border related issues as they are 'viewed with some suspicion in his own country, let alone when seeking information in the other' (Whyte, 2002: 36). In India, questioning the frontiers and unsanctioned possession of detail maps of border areas are punishable offenses and 'inquiry into these spaces, both journalistic and academic, are vigorously policed' (Cons, 2016: 36; Whyte, 2002). While similar formal restrictions do not exist in Bangladesh, such acts always generate anxiety among those who govern.

Therefore, considering the reality and insights from the previous researchers, I gave up on the plan of applying for a research visa to India from the beginning. Instead, my plan was to visit some of the former enclaves in India on a tourist visa. Thus, in my first month of research in Bangladesh, my research assistant for India and I applied for a tourist visa. Generally, it does not take more than a week or two to hear back from the consulate. While my research assistant received his passport back with a visa stamp on it, I was yet to receive mine. After waiting for almost a month, I heard back from the consulate with further queries regarding my status in the US (as my passport had a US student visa on it). Followed by silence for weeks, I finally received my passport and my tourist visa was rejected. What determined the decision remains a matter of speculation. Maybe my previous application for the American Institute of Indian Studies fellowship (AIIS), already an approved affiliation with one of the institutions in India, had raised an alert. Possibly the consulate officer simply did not find my profile fit as a tourist, who knows. Frustrated but not surprised, I followed my alternative plans, which were to conduct the fieldwork only in the Indian enclaves inside Bangladesh.

Access to the numerous former enclaves in Bangladesh was not a challenge because of my identity as a Bangladeshi. Moreover, I am from the same region where all these enclaves

were situated, I speak the same dialect, and have had previous networks established that provided access to the enclaves and enclave people. However, the biggest challenge of access that I faced came from numerous government officials, both at the field and at the policy level. I paid a visit to the UNO's office (Upazila Nirbahi Officer, the highest administrative officer in charge of a sub-district in Bangladesh) two weeks prior to the day I planned to start my stay in one of the earlier sites. While I had made previous arrangements with the UNO over the telephone for a meeting, when I arrived at his office on the agreed morning, I had to remind him about our previous conversation. After a detailed question and answer session regarding my research, my studies in the US, and my identity as a university lecturer in Bangladesh, the UNO started speaking in a mix of Bengali and English! He asked me to show official documents regarding my permission to work on the issue and to submit a copy of those to his office along with a formal application. Baffled with the sudden change in his attitude and tone, I submitted a copy of my approved research proposal, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and a formal application. Since it was an informal visit to the UNO, I left after the meeting and started preparing for my stay in that sub-district. That evening, I got a call from the UNO asking me when I plan to start, and he also offered to arrange my stay at the government guest house. Baffled again, I happily agreed to his generous offer and started arranging for my stay[2].

Although I was able to interview almost all the officers in charge of different offices during my stay at this sub-district, I could never interview the UNO or the Chairman. Every time I went to the UNO's office, I was kept waiting and finally told that he was too busy to talk at that moment or he directed me to some other officers for an interview. Sometimes, I would go to his office on a previously agreed time for the interview, and he was nowhere to be found!

I faced similar difficulties arranging a formal meeting with the Chairman of the same sub-district. When I first called the Chairman on his cellular phone, he was cordial and told me that he would call me back in the evening since he was busy at that moment. After waiting for a couple of evenings when the Chairman did not return the call, I made another call. Apologizing for the delay, the Chairman asked me to meet him at his house that evening. Upon arrival at his residence on our agreed time, I was told he had gone out as something important came up. Again, after waiting for a couple of days, I contacted the Chairman over the phone. We had arranged another meeting! With further frustration, I was told that the Chairman had gone to Dhaka (the capital city of Bangladesh) when I arrived at his house for our scheduled meeting. Although I do not have a definitive answer to what caused such repetitive missing of appointments by the Chairman or the constant denial by the UNO, drawing from other researchers, I can only speculate. Maybe the sensitive nature of my research made officials like the UNO or the Chairman uncomfortable as any issue related to borders is known to prompt anxiety within the state and among its officials in Bangladesh (Cons, 2016). The repetitive disregards of granted appointments, being asked to produce formal documentations, and speaking in a mix of Bengali and English were all a demonstration of 'othering' by tying me to the US (comments like 'oh, you people are living an extravagant life over there') (Sultana, 2007). Such denials and unpredictable acts of the officials might also be understood as acts of the 'petty sovereigns' who made the decision on behalf of the state at a given moment (Butler, 2004; Jones, 2009). Having learned my lessons from those instances and recognizing the importance of informal connections in Bangladesh, I used my social capital to gain access to officials when needed. While such cases usually allowed me to access officials, many of those ended up being less useful for several reasons. Especially those who were not interested in the first instance but

agreed after being vouched for. Generic and superficial answers, rushed interviews, frequent and deliberate changes in topic, restricted access to government documents, and condescending attitudes towards me were common. These were moments that I felt exactly what Sally Moore felt: 'If excuses were made, I could never tell whether they were lies. And perhaps worst of all, I felt I could never show anger. I hated this, but making a nice face was the price of getting on with the work' (Moore, 2009: 181). Moreover, the higher the officials were in the bureaucratic hierarchy, the more difficult it proved to keep the interviews on track. Although my interviews were open-ended, I used a checklist to ensure that they were mostly coherent. While, the purpose of my research was clearly explained to all the officials beforehand, many of them steered our conversations to a different trajectory. Although I listened carefully to every word they had to say, in many cases, it proved to be extremely difficult to keep the conversation close to the research objectives. Sometimes I would be asked a question in response to my question, sometimes they would tell me a long story of what they have done for the country throughout their professional career but would not mention enclaves or borders at all, and other times, they would tell that they are not the best person to answer such a question, rather I should go and interview X for more information.

Gaining access and interviewing elites is difficult because they are often 'quite evasive and restrictive in their discussions' (Mason-Bish, 2019: 5). At the same time, they do not like to be put in a structured situation; instead, 'They prefer to articulate their views of why they think what they think' suggest Aberbach and Rockman (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002: 647). While insights from the above study help explain my difficulties in interviewing the higher-level officials in the government, they do not shed light on the researcher in such situations. Such are moments when I felt vulnerable, not physically but emotionally (Bashir, 2019). Those were

moments I questioned my abilities as a researcher, moments when I had to seriously reflect on whether I was doing it 'right' and had to take a 'break'. These were challenges of emotion management in the field, the 'emotional labor' of an ethnographer that involved building self-confidence, emotional reflexivity, and coping with emotional dissonance (Blix and Wettergren, 2015).

Another challenge of access was to the religious minority groups who decided to stay in Bangladesh. My apparent religious identity as a Muslim, bitter experiences of being a minority, existing power relations, lack of confidence in sharing sensitive information with an unknown researcher, and above all, unavoidable presence of other curious people and gatekeepers made them uncomfortable to open up. As I was conducting my fieldwork in enclave X, I came to know about a family of three Hindu brothers. One of the brothers with his family and the mother moved to India, while two other brothers remained in Bangladesh. Excited to finally find a family that split between the two states, my research assistant Morshed and I started asking people about where they live and how to get there. By the time we arrived at their place after a long and confusing ride on a rickshaw van, we found that a curious group of people had already gathered at their house and were waiting for us. Someone had already called one of their neighbors over the cellular phone and informed them about our arrival. Frustrated with the day's work being ruined, I had some informal talk with the family in front of at least fifteen to twenty of their neighbors. I took his contact number and called him that evening to have an interview in a more private space but was gently denied. Having my lessons learned, I took extra precautions during my next encounters. While I was interviewing one of the local leaders from enclave Y, I came to know about another Hindu family that had split. The leader introduced me to the head of the family Nobanu[3] over the phone and shared his contact information. I was able to convince

Nobanu for an interview, but he preferred meeting me in the club of the enclave in the presence of the leader. The night before the scheduled interview, Morshed and I planned how to interview Nobanu without having the leader present there. We decided that after the arrival of Nobanu and a formal introduction by the leader, Morshed would ask the leader to show him the enclave to take some photographs so that I have a guaranteed one-on-one conversation with Nobanu. Morshed did his job successfully, which allowed me a three-hour conversation with Nobanu, the first hour of which was just dedicated to building rapport and making him confident about the anonymity of his answers.

While there were minor difficulties regarding access except those already discussed, I was able to overcome most of them sometimes by careful planning, with a cautious presence of mind, with the help of Morshed, using my connections, and sometimes with unexpected strokes of luck.

Positionality

The researcher, at the end of the day, is an instrument in their research. Thus, a researcher is positioned both within the research and the field by their age, gender, sexual identity, 'race', and so forth, which en/disable certain insights within the research (England, 1994; Hastrup, 1992). For instance, Farhana Sultana shares her experiences of conducting fieldwork in rural Bangladesh, where she was constantly judged for having short hair (Sultana, 2007). Similarly, Naheed Islam had to underscore her 'feminine' qualities like highlighting marital status and homemaking skills in gaining access to the Bangladeshi immigrant community in Los Angeles (Islam, 2000). Consequently, the positionality of the researcher, to a great extent, determines the outcome of the research and must be critically considered. According to England, the biography of the researcher directly affects the research in at least two significant ways. First, researchers'

personal traits such as color, gender, religion, and nationality. Second, it affects the power

relations between those who are studying and those who are being studied (England, 1994). As a

result, what to reveal and what not to reveal becomes a constant negotiation for the researcher in

the field (Zaman 2008). Nevertheless, there is no definitive answer to such a question.

Depending on the demand of the situation and the nature of the research, researchers have opted

for different options. For instance, Kathleen Blee straightforwardly portrayed her beliefs

regarding 'race' while she was conducting her fieldwork with a white supremacist women group

(Blee, 2000). On the contrary, Pete Simi inserted himself within the Aryan activist group by

portraying himself as one who believed in their ideology (Simi and Futrell, 2010). Thus,

researchers find them in constant negotiation with their positionality in the field regarding what

they reveal and what they hide. This is what Gengler and Ezzell refer to as methodological

impression management that enables 'ethnographers think through a number of potentially

thorny interactional dynamics throughout their fieldwork' (Gengler and Ezzell, 2018: 808).

Conducting fieldwork in Bangladesh, particularly along the northern region of the

country, presented the first dilemma regarding my positionality. I was born and raised in

Rangpur, the northern division of the country. Thus, I was going to my 'field' as well as to my

'home' at the same time. 'Field' versus 'home' became a problematic distinction as it blurred the

classic duality of 'entering' and 'exiting' the 'field' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Moreover,

historically within the greater Rangpur (the eight districts that the Rangpur division consists of),

there is a sense of regional coherence among the people as they share similar dialect, ways of

life, and other subtle nuances that only a person born and raised in that region is thought to be

able to appreciate. Thus, being from Rangpur made me one of 'us' easily among the research

participants. Being aware of such a feeling, I recruited Morshed, who was also from Rangpur and

even was a student in the local university. Such positionality made us 'insiders'. In almost all the interviews, we were asked where we were from, and our answer resulted in a silent nod of approval or a smile with 'oh, you are one of us' among the research participants. It made me a *deshi* (used both to mean someone who is from the same locality and can appreciate the cultural nuances). It facilitated me to gain rapport, to strike a conversation with a wide range of people like the rickshaw puller we hired or a farmer working in the field, and to connect with countless references that the research participants pointed to within the conversations which a stranger might miss but were very clear to an 'insider' like us (Berger, 2015). Being familiar with the region also allowed me a head-start with an easier entrée, knowing about the topic, and understanding participants' nuanced reactions (Berger, 2015). However, I do not claim that such commonality made me a complete 'insider'. I was, in Kirin Narayan's terms, a 'native' with complex backgrounds that sharply marked my differences from the research participants (Narayan, 1993). I could never be one simply because I was not one of the former enclave residents. I did not share the similar experiences of statelessness and violence. I was a class privileged regular Bangladeshi citizen. Therefore, I concurrently became the 'other' because of my class privilege (Lal, 1996). Being acutely aware of my differences, I constantly negotiated my positionality. I became more selective on what clothes I would wear when I visited the former enclaves. I would always sit at the same level as my research participant(s). Sometimes I would be offered a chair to sit, but they would sit on the ground. In such situations I would always decline the chair and sit with them on the ground. I would not say 'no' to their generous offer of a cup of tea (although that might be my fifth cup of tea within a span of three hours), and even sometimes would chew betel nuts with them. It was a constant negotiation of positionality. Sultana claims, 'Such little actions, however mundane, are not insignificant' (Sultana, 2007:

379). As a researcher, my positionality was not fixed within the binary of insider/outsider. Rather, it shifted through the mutual construction of myself and my research participants (Nagar, 1997).

Morshed and my gender identity as males posed one of the biggest challenges regarding interviewing women in the former enclaves. Dominated by Islamic and patriarchal values, especially in the rural areas of Bangladesh, many people believe that it is inappropriate for unrelated men and women to talk to each other (Jones, 2008). Thus, every time I went to a household, either the head of the family or another adult male would come and talk to me, although females will be standing around when I interviewed them. In such cases, women would occasionally step in and comment, but a full-fledged interview with a female in a regular household was almost impossible except two of my participants. While it was not completely impossible for me to interview more women and have a 'gender balance' among my research participants, I decided not to push for it mainly because of two reasons. Both from my experiences and drawing on other male researchers studying females in South Asia I knew that 1) in a regular rural South Asian setting women are more likely to be comfortable talking to an unrelated male when their male partners are around instead of in an artificially created private space and 2) interviews in such an artificially private space would pose questions about the genuineness of their answers (Jones, 2008; Turnbull, 2019). Of course, my intention is not to defend the 'gender imbalance' in my research but to consider realities on the ground. Consequently, I suggest that researchers must be sensitive to such realities on the ground and reflect on their positionality instead of always pushing for a textbook example of gender/racial/ ethnic/religious or such balances in their research.

Another limitation that my positionality had borne was the religious identity of a Bangladeshi Muslim. It did not matter whether I personally was a believer in any particular religion, just being born in a Muslim family in Bangladesh put me in the positionality of suspicion and doubt when I interviewed people from religious minority groups, especially Hindus. There is a latent tendency among many Muslims in Bangladesh to brand Hindus as 'spies of India', especially if they have a family member or friend living across the border. Therefore, anyone I interviewed, whose family member(s) had moved to India, were extra cautious, and their answers were guarded. The first difficulty was even to convince them for an interview. They were reluctant to talk and, in many cases, when I asked for an interview, the answer was 'What is there to talk with me? You already know better than me'. Even when I was able to convince them for an interview, their answers were on the surface and very generic in nature. My identity as a Muslim simply stood in my way to convince them to open up, as I was already 'othered' as a 'Muslim' who could not be trusted with such personally sensitive information. Even my offer to stop audio recording was not successful in probing them to share such experiences, if any. I was only able to convince Nobanu in opening up after a long, and long it was, session of building rapport. Nobanu was also more confident in opening up because of his firm position in society. He was economically well-off and was an active board member of a local political party with connections that most of his fellow Hindu neighbors lacked. Therefore, with my interactions with other religious minority groups, I became more reflective and cautious. I would not bring up a conversation regarding their experiences of being a minority or choice of citizenship until I felt I had gained their confidence. I would go to their places and meet them every now and then just to maintain regular contact and have spontaneous conversations. Such conversations were my keys to building rapport and those were

conversations when I also 'took sides' with them (Armbruster and Laerke, 2008). However, I must confess that even with such efforts, I could not conveniently tuck away my given religious identity which simply stood in my way to gain their full confidence.

While my positionality made me an 'other' in a few cases, such as those mentioned above, in most cases, my presence was accepted as a *deshi.* Where I was from, my appearance, my way of speech, positioned me 'as an acceptable outsider doing "useful" research' (Sultana, 2007: 379). At the same time, such acceptance as a *deshi* and the nature of my research resulted in a sociable image of me that called for personal curiosity and questions. Often my research participants were not shy about asking how much money I make in my job, who is paying me for doing the research, how much money I would get after I finish the research, how is life in the US, and so forth. Thus, skillfully answering such questions without offending the research participant, listening to what they had to say rather than what I was interested in was a large part of the constant negotiation of different positionalities to fit myself within the given moment (Moore, 2009; Sultana, 2007). Not only was it a struggle of fitting in within the given situation, but it was also a tussle between my positionality as a 'researcher' and a 'sympathetic' human being. As England acknowledges, there were moments when I was sympathetically listening to the struggles of the research participants and concurrently was thinking how great a quote this might be for my paper (England, 1994)! Therefore, it must be asserted that because of my positionality, among many other reasons, it has not been a comprehensive representation of life in the former enclaves, and most importantly, it was never my intention either. Thus, the research remains a partial, positionality driven subjective representation of the former enclave residents inside Bangladesh. It ultimately has been a hierarchical relationship between the research

participants and me as I was the one to finally decide what information to present and what to omit (Nagar, 2002; Sprague, 2005; Wasserfall, 1993).

Reflexivity

Being conscious and reflecting on how the researcher's positionality might (have) affect(ed) the research is simply what is understood as reflexivity. Particularly in ethnographic research, researchers are 'displaced' persons who have first to see and then speak, thus 'they go to the field as "strangers" and draws on the situation to decide on questions' (Katz, 1994: 68). Therefore, being reflective of the situation both while in the field and writing ethnography remains a crucial aspect of research. Being reflexive allows the researcher to challenge pre-given categories and narratives, and at the same time, opens up 'the research to a more complex and nuanced understanding of issues, where boundaries between process and content can get blurred' (Sultana, 2007: 376). Reflexivity is also an integral part of how the researcher inserts him/herself within the web of power relations and how that affects methods, interpretations, and knowledge production (Kobayashi, 2003).

Therefore, during both my time in the field and writing about research participants, I have constantly been reflective of what I observed, how I talked, how I positioned myself within a certain interaction, how my presence was being perceived, and most importantly, how all of these influenced the entire research project. Instead of seeing reflexivity as 'ticking boxes to fulfill some criteria', I delved into understanding how I reached my results by critically interrogating my work on a regular basis (Behar, 1996: 13). For instance, right after every encounter with my research participants, Morshed and I would have a brief chat on what went right, what went wrong, and what could have been done better. Moreover, at the end of the day's work, usually in the evenings or nights, Morshed and I would carefully cross-check our notes

that helped us to unearth what was said with what meaning and intention (Crang and Cook, 2007). I offer an example during the earlier phase of my fieldwork with a local leader to elaborate further. While having a discussion on the alleged corruption of the local political leaders, a poorly timed question abruptly changed the mood of the interview. After that question, the leader's answers became more aggressive and elusive. The mood of the room was clearly not comfortable anymore. He disagreed to be audio recorded any longer, so I turned off the recorder. After this, the leader started being more personal with occasional demeaning comments about researchers who 'think they know everything'. Neither Morshed nor I had any doubt about the gravity of such an incident and called off the day's work. We had a long discussion reflecting on the interview that night in our hotel room. After playing the recorded portion of the interview several times and careful considerations, we came to make a list of certain issues and questions to be addressed tactfully with further sensitivity. Such incidents certainly made me more introspective in thinking about and through questions like 'how do I hope participants will understand me?' (Gengler and Ezzell, 2018: 827). At the same time, it shaped me being a better 'identity manager as much as [a] data gatherer' (Harrington, 2003: 618).

Reflexivity played a central role in both choosing research participants and conducting interviews. I chose my respondents using three major techniques. First, to validate certain newspaper reports, vulnerabilities, and previous research findings, I purposefully chose some of my respondents. For instance, the families that split in deciding either to stay in or to leave the host country were purposefully chosen. Second, an accidental sampling technique to interview farmers, fishers, business people, shopkeepers, and others who live and move around the former enclaves on a regular basis. Third, snowballing to follow up stories, incidents, and significant events that I learned from my interviews using the other two techniques. Having a focus on

events and situations that were brought up during interviews and reflecting upon them opened

many new avenues of investigations that I had not considered before. In addition, using a loosely

structured checklist as opposed to a structured set of questions allowed the interviews to be more

reflexive. While I used the checklist to guide me through the conversation following broader

themes, I did not ask the same questions to everyone. Instead, questions following up on the

respondent's answers were my primary sources for the next step in the conversation. Instead of

'talking to', such a technique allowed me to 'talk with' the research participant on the one hand.

On the other, it enabled real-time reflexivity in the interactions I had with my research

participants (Nagar, 2002: 183).

Uncertainties and ways around/ through them

Every ethnographic fieldwork has its own uncertainties and challenges merely because

the researcher is not in control of the research site; they simply insert themselves in the site. At

the same time, numerous challenges arise depending on the nature of the research and its

'sensitivity', based on where the research is being conducted, and how the research participants

perceive the researcher. When I conducted my fieldwork, the enclaves did not exist anymore.

These were regular Bangladeshi territories. Yet, their sensitivity was not fully undone because of

their close proximity to the international border, their amplified history, and extraordinary

attention from the state. They were spaces that probe anxiety and tension among the state

officials (Cons, 2016; Author, 2019a). As a result, many of the government officials like the

UNO and the chairman mentioned earlier avoided an interview, sometimes a request for an

interview was denied, and other times I got carefully guarded answers. Although the government

gazettes and notices are public documents, in many cases, I was not allowed to access them.

However, unlike Jason Cons, I was not directly denied, rather was occasionally tactfully avoided as I was told that the officer was not able to locate the file among the piles of documents there (Cons, 2016). The most common incident after an interview with government officials was a casual request to not write something that 'hurts the image of the country'. For instance, I was trying to schedule an interview with a medical officer in one of the sub-districts that hosted the former enclaves. I visited him and requested an interview at his convenient time. He was reluctant and told me to contact him later. After several attempts, when I was not able to convince him for an interview, I had to dig into my networks again. I was able to find someone who vouched for me and only then the medical officer agreed for an interview. Not surprisingly, his answers remained rushed and superficial. At the end of the interview, when I turned off the recorder and was about to leave, he told me, 'Remember, this is your country too. Please do not write anything that would hurt the image of the country'.

Such reluctance from government officials in Bangladesh is not uncommon and does not occur in a vacuum. Shahaduz Zaman faced a similar situation when he explained his purpose of research to a medical professor and got a reply, 'I hope you will not just write how bad we are' (Zaman, 2008: 138). However, I believe structural and institutional factors can be identified when it comes to such contradictory (offering to arrange the guest house but avoiding an interview by the UNO) or reluctant behavior (the medical officer). First, the topic that I was researching has been historically viewed as a 'sensitive' topic by both the states and therefore, by state officials. Moreover, it was just after the exchange of enclaves when this issue was still fresh and was one of the centers of national interest. Thus, state officials were naturally not comfortable enough to discuss a 'sensitive' topic to an outsider (in the sense that I was not a member of the state bureaucracy). Second, in Bangladesh there is no institutional body to

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regulate the issues of ethics, rights, and privacy in research. Consequently, state officials find it difficult to trust the anonymity of their answers. Third, although Brendan Whyte found that researchers interested in borders are viewed with suspicion in South Asia, I believe, any ethnographer is viewed with some degree of suspicion in Bangladesh when it comes to interviewing government officials. Therefore, their first line of defense has been to avoid a formal interview. Finally, attitudes such as 'how is it going to help us?' or 'what is the use of knowing this?' result in cynical reactions to the research and condescending behavior to the researcher (Sultana, 2007; Zaman, 2008). Although I was able to overcome some of the challenges of access by using personal networks, in many cases, they resulted in interviews where the participant was already overly conscious about a 'sensitive' issue that apparently could 'hurt the image of the country'. Such situations raise a dilemma for the researcher whether one should use personal connections to secure an interview or totally give up trying if the participant seems not interested. On the one hand, such interviews, secured using personal connections, raises questions about the genuineness of the answer. On the other hand, not being able to interview at all threatens the completion of the research project.

Lack of privacy was another daily challenge in rural Bangladesh. Because the former enclaves were small and almost everyone knew their neighbors, Morshed and I attracted attention as soon as we entered the area. People in the enclaves would stop us and ask who we were, why we were there, and where we were staying. In many cases, they would insist on having a cup of tea with them in the local tea stall, and we had to oblige. Once we were in the tea stall they would introduce us to their friends and neighbors. As a result, within the first few days, almost the entire enclave would know about us or already saw us. Such attention resulted in a lack of 'privacy' during interviews. In a majority of the cases, either we were being followed by

a few people on our way to someone's house or within the first five to ten minutes in an

interview, a group of people would show up including the neighbors. Reece Jones faced similar

challenges conducting fieldwork along the border of Bangladesh and India and felt that 'the idea

of privacy is somewhat foreign' (Jones, 2008: 220). However, it did not take much time for me

to realize that even with the presence of others, participants were honest and candid. Further,

people who gathered around shared similar experiences, spontaneously participated in the

conversation, and shared their views as well. Moreover, in rural Bangladesh, people are very

much used to discussing apparently 'private' matters in front of friends and neighbors. Thus, I

had to be reflective of the context and shake off the pre-given idea of 'privacy' that I carried with

me from the class to the 'field'. I ended up conducting a majority of my interviews in the

presence of other people. Being aware of such cultural practices and with previous experiences

of conducting fieldwork in rural Bangladesh, I turned 'challenges' of privacy into resources.

Once I found that there was a relatively big group of people who showed interest in the

conversation, I took the opportunity to invite them to contribute directly. If they agreed, I would

reorganize the sitting arrangements and introduce myself again to everyone and explain to them

my purpose there. Then I would formally invite them all to participate in the research and turned

the one-to-one interview into a focus group discussion, which can be called as 'accidental focus

groups'. Morshed played a crucial role in turning the one-to-one interviews into 'accidental focus

groups'. Being from the same region and with a rural background, Morshed was very much

familiar with such situations, and he would take the first step to ask the people if they would like

to formally join. Then he would actively help with the sitting arrangement by either finding some

chairs or stools from the neighbors for everyone to sit. I drew on Lee Ann Fujii's experiences of

'accidental ethnography' in doing so (Fujii, 2015). Fujii suggests that a researcher can turn the

'non-data' into data by paying systematic attention to unplanned or 'accidental' situations in the field. 'Non-data' in this sense does not refer to a judgement of what constitutes data and what not. Instead 'non-data' refers to conversations, observations, incidents, and interactions that happened accidentally or spontaneously which the researcher might have missed as sources for useful insights because of a lack of attention or preparation. According to Fujii, paying attention to such moments can reveal patterns, logics, and practices that other structured methods cannot. Fujii suggests observing, writing down, and careful analysis are the tools to extract data from such moments. Drawing on her insights, I used observation to determine if the group was a suitable one for an *in situ* focus group, took extensive notes and carefully analyzed their conversations to turn the accidental focus group into invaluable resources. The advantage of such a group discussion is that the answers are more spontaneous, thus natural, because a) participants had an honest interest in the conversation and b) unlike pre-arranged focus groups, they were not aware of the research earlier, therefore, did not have a pre-planned answers to questions they would anticipate. I must also mention that my objective, as an ethnographer, was never to produce knowledge that is 'holistic' in nature neither it is possible as Donna Haraway claims, knowledge and its production is always partial and situated (Haraway, 1988). Therefore, turning unplanned moments into sources for insights allowed me to contextualize the partiality of the 'knowledge' I was gathering and reflect back on the 'epistemic gaps' in knowledge production that we often miss as ethnographers (Simandan, 2019).

The other challenge was to interview women who were not officials or public figures. As mentioned earlier, it is not common for women, especially in rural Bangladesh, to talk to unrelated men. While such a custom made it smooth for Morshed and I to walk around and talk to other males in the enclaves, it resulted in a less gendered perspective in my research. Although

one might think recruiting a female research assistant would have facilitated conversations with women, it was not a feasible solution either. Being familiar with the local norms and drawing on Jones's experience, I knew it would cause more trouble than provide a solution (Jones, 2008). It would be highly likely to have raised questions about the relationship between the female research assistant and the researcher. At the same time, for a female in Bangladesh, staying in a hotel without being accompanied by a male family member would prove to be more problematic, especially in the rural areas.

Conclusion

With the postmodern turn and feminist interventions, the idea of ethnographic fieldwork has moved away from the classical 'Malinowskian image' where a lone white man lives among the 'natives' for years to gather 'uncontaminated' data from the 'field' (Gardner, 1999; Stocking, 1992). Instead, ethnographers question the production of knowledge, focus on intersubjective experiences, shifting contexts, and social situatedness of the researcher in terms of their gender, race, sexuality, and differences. A crucial aspect of the research also lies in asking questions such as who is it being written for by whom with what purpose? (Nagar, 2002). Therefore, ethnographic research could be anything but impersonal and 'uncontaminated'. As England suggests, 'The researcher cannot conveniently tuck away the personal behind the professional, because fieldwork *is* personal' (England, 1994, p. 85 emphasis in original). At the same time, for research participants to have meaningful roles in the research, we must pay attention to the power, knowledge, and truth claims that are negotiated constantly (Domosh, 2003).

In this paper, I have demonstrated the challenges faced during my ethnographic fieldwork along the border of Bangladesh and India both due to the 'sensitivity' of my research topic and my positionality. I also situated myself within and through the research to demonstrate how the

research project might have been affected both in the field and in presenting the results. I further illuminated numerous tactics I adopted to overcome or negotiate various challenges. In so doing, I shed light on four issues. First, by demonstrating the challenges of access especially, to some of the government officials, I argue that even though access can be gained using personal connections, such access raises critical concerns about the genuineness of the data. At the same time, not using such connections to gain access and completely giving up on interviewing critical actors like the policymakers and officials pose a threat of undoing the fieldwork. Therefore, it remains up to the researcher's judgment and reflexivity in determining when and how to use social capital in gaining access. Second, with careful attention and flexibility, unplanned moments or spontaneous conversations can be turned into valuable resources. As in my case, turning a one-on-one interview into accidental focus groups did not only facilitate unearthing valuable insights but also effectively helped in dealing with the issue of privacy and over attention. Third, by sharing my experiences and taking realities on the ground into considerations, I have demonstrated that attaining a textbook example of 'gender balance' among research participants may not always be an ultimate goal. Instead, the researcher's positionality, cultural sensitivity, and social expectations must be taken into account while choosing research participants. This might not be the 'ideal' outcome a researcher would expect. However, seeking a gender-balance while completely ignoring realities on the ground is also unlikely to 'add value' to the project. Moreover, defiance of social expectations would not only raise questions about the researcher in that society but also would likely make it more challenging to gain access to the same population for further research. It is common for ethnographers to frequently go back and maintain connections with the community for decades, especially with those that are challenging to access (Arens, 2014; Hara, 1967). I also plan to do so and hope to eventually overcome the

challenge of 'gender imbalance' in the future. Finally, sharing similar experiences with other ethnographers studying South Asia, I reaffirm that even being from the same region, having the same ethnic and racial identity, and being a native speaker do not make the researcher an 'insider' (Ahmed, 2000; Narayan, 1993; Sultana, 2007; Zaman, 2008). The class privilege, educational qualifications, lack of similar experiences, and above all, the hierarchical position of being a researcher always make them an 'outsider'. Being not fully an insider, neither an outsider complicates the positionality of a 'native' anthropologist. Their positionality constantly shifts from being an outsider to an insider, an insider to an outsider, both and none. However, paying critical attention to inter-subjectivity, being reflective and constantly questioning one's positionality, not only help to deal with challenges and uncertainties but also, allows the research to be more politically engaged, materially grounded, and institutionally sensitive (Nagar, 2002).

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[1] Bangladesh (East Pakistan from 197-71) and India shared almost 200 border enclaves among them since the partition of the sub-continent in 1947. After a protracted negotiation, Bangladesh and India finally exchanged these enclaves in July 2015 and the enclave people were given the option to choose their state of citizenship. Out of the 55,000 enclave residents on both sides less than a thousand from Bangladesh decided to move to India while the rest of them stayed where they were and opted for a change of citizenship (Author, 2018). Since the border enclaves and their people had gained an amplified status in the nationalistic and political arenas in both Bangladesh and India for the last seven decades, this topic is generally perceived as 'sensitive' both by government officials and by the states (see Cons 2016 for a detail discussion).

[2] The Upazila in discussion did not have any hotel, motel, or guest house except the government guest house I stayed. Anyone with a legit purpose can stay in such guest houses, while government employees are given priority and staying needs a formal approval either from the UNO or the Chairman of that Upazila. As a government employee at that time, I knew I could easily make that arrangement myself. Thus, when the UNO asked where I plan to stay in that Upazila during my initial meeting I did not hide my intentions to stay in the guest house however, I did not ask the UNO to arrange it. But the UNO pro-acted and made the arrangement himself even before I formally asked. Saying, no to his friendly gesture would not only offend

the UNO but also would cause an unnecessary complexity as I had to ultimately get the formal approval either from him or the Chairman. Therefore, I did not see any reason to say 'no' and view it as a breaching of any ethical boundaries.

[3] Pseudonym.