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Of Women and Belonging Ethnographic encounters in the borderland of Gurez, Jammu and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT | I explore issues of identity and belonging in the field as a woman researcher, through encounters and narratives that highlight vulnerabilities in doing ethnography in a hostile borderland in Jammu and Kashmir. The contested notions of belonging – as a woman and as a researcher in the field – often proves challenging for female researchers who have to be mindful of both these identities at the same time. The field constantly reminds ‘the researcher’ of her identity as a woman, and here lies the difficult task of carrying out the fieldwork while remaining true to both. The challenges that a woman researcher faces can be overcome if she finds a way to negotiate her belonging in the field with herself, and with her participants.

Keywords: Belonging; Borderlands; Ethnography; Field; Women Researchers

I. Entry

Entering into my first phase of ethnography in one of the most hostile borderlands situated at the line of control between India and Pakistan was not without trial and tribulations of its own. Gurez, a borderland situated in North-Kashmir, is known for one of the highly contested hydro-power projects between the nation-states of India and Pakistan – the Kishen-Ganga Hydro-electric Power Project. The dam is built upon Neelum, a river which is known by the name Kishen-Ganga after it enters on this side of the LoC into India.

To enter Gurez, one has to cross the high altitude Razdan-Pass. The road leading to Gurez abounds with check-posts that scrutinize Indians and Foreigners for proof of identity and permits. I reached Gurez with my friend, a fellow research scholar in Sociology from Kashmir University. We let out a sigh of relief, as we had crossed a major hurdle. Our driver, Firdous, did not have one of the permits required to cross the pass.

Earlier, Firdous had requested me to step out when he felt that his negotiations with the police-chowki-officer (a native of Gurez) had reached a blind end. I knew that the lack of required paper would work against us, therefore I started by pressing upon the officer in charge how essential going to the field was for my project.

A few minutes into pleading on my part, his mood shifted abruptly and he started giving me unnecessary respect, completely the opposite to how he was treating Firdous a few minutes ago. He in fact ordered the high-altitude canteen men to prepare noon-chai (salt tea) for us, to which, me and my friend complied. While sipping tea he began speaking of a woman who he kept addressing as ‘the American Woman’, presumably a researcher who had arrived in Gurez for research some years ago.

He went on and said, “She used to stay at my house and was my good friend, and a guest for the entire tenure she conducted her study.”

I had to participate as a listener and kept nodding, anticipating the green signal we had been waiting for in order to move on with our journey.

“You see we would sometimes sleep in the same room, but never crossed lines as I looked up to her as my sister,” he added.

I was highly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. I looked at my male friend with a scowl. Sensing my frustration, my friend interrupted him with something, and I quickly walked away. I kept thinking on the drive downhill about the perception of a ‘researcher woman’ that some men have, and how a woman’s body is often an object of desire, especially if she is a stranger who has dared to travel alone. Hence, sexual solicitations and innuendos, even coming from on-duty police personnel, are realities which women in fieldwork have to grapple with (See also Jegathesan, and Donald, this volume, for further discussions of this issue).

II. The gaze goes both ways

Conventional readings related to the *doing* of social anthropology cannot prepare one for the unconventionality of the field. The idiosyncrasies of the field lie obscured from a distance, and the decisions one must make in *the field* are something no methodology book can teach. It is the field, and one’s relations with participants, that tells one what is to be done when one is grappling with realities

beyond one's anthropological and sociological training. One must keep listening to the field, to one's participants. The field here then, is not just the subject of one's study, but the collective milieu that constructs it.

In the morning of my first day in the town, it didn't take me long to realise how I was the only woman visible in the public sphere. The road that took us across the main market streets into the neighbouring areas had one newly opened restaurant in front of the dak-bungalow (government guesthouse). I had many meals in that restaurant where most of the civil-administrative officers were also found hanging out. During my visits, I never saw another woman dining. My meals were accompanied by many gazes from those around me.

Another dilemma was something I wasn't trained for. Hence, I chose to go by my instinct. It was a choice regarding the dress I was supposed to wear. This was a lesson that I learnt in the first two days walking into a myriad of glances and discomfiting gazes. My attire kept me at a distance, like a visitor who was just passing by, while my research required me to get closer to local life. I had two options: to purchase clothes and try to look like a local, or to continue with my own clothes. I chose the latter, as 'dressing up' would have made me feel even more of an imposter, clad in clothes that did not belong to me.

III. Danger and vulnerability, for the researcher and the researched

One the third day, we travelled to one of the remotest border villages. Located atop a hill in Gurez, the village 'Kilshey' sat right at the line of control that passed through these ranges. The last stretch of muddy road leading to it had been washed away two days before in flash-floods. The walk from the flooded rivulets up to the village was an uphill climb. Entry into the village was strictly regulated where no outsider was allowed without authorised permission.

We called upon the sarpanch (village headman) and showed him our authority letter. The house we were taken to belonged to him. The women in the house were ecstatic to see me and welcomed me with great enthusiasm. The journey into that village infused a certain sense of belonging as most of the talking there was done by women and girls who always stayed by my side. Rifat, Sarp-anch's niece, connected with me instantaneously.

The acceptance that I received in that village was soon interrupted due to heavy rains that made us leave early, and the arduous journey down-hill was one of my most life-threatening experiences. The only woman in the cab, Rehmat, a village local, a Dard-Shin who spoke 'Shina', that I could hardly understand, instilled a lot of confidence in me. We managed to cross those flooded streams just in time before those paths were inundated. Not that we wished to rush back in haste, but the various warnings we had been given about the notorious porosity and infiltration across that border made us unsure; we did not have permission to stay overnight.

The woman in the cab held my hand tightly and murmured continuously. She was saying her prayers in Shina as the cab skidded off route, barely in control on those flooded boulders and thunder hit rivulets. Then our cab got stuck in one of the smaller streams, and we only had a few minutes before the water level rose dangerously. She pulled me out of the cab, and in a fraction of a second she was swirling big stones into the water, making a makeshift bridge for me. Rifat and Rehmat Jaan have, thus, left a deep impression on me. This incident made me realise that not only can our fieldwork put us in danger, but by collaborating with

us, by caring for us, our participants can also be put in harm's way through research. This is an ethical issue we need to consider seriously.

That evening, upon reaching the restaurant in the town, the gazes suddenly stopped bothering me anymore. An all-male lifeworld, the sight of men looking back at me with eyes that I thought had suspected my presence in every possible way, suddenly seemed warm. It looked like they had been saying 'salam' hello, and me after replying 'assalam', hello to you too, wanted to curiously ask them, 'Why aren't the ladies and the girls out in public-places?'

That evening onwards, my status as an outsider, a suspicious observer, changed into a more accepted presence. This allowed me to conduct my research. My status as a woman-observer in the field felt at first like the most difficult thing to embody. Yet that same status connected me to local women, and their presence and acceptance gave me support, and a place.

The discomforting feelings of the locals staring back at me were merely an extension of what I had perceived of them on the first day. We had both been watching each other. The so called 'neutrality/objective gap' between the observer and her 'subjects' of research keeps draining us of our idiosyncrasies. I realised that sometimes it was important for those I researched alongside to see the traits in me.

IV. The researcher's body speaks up

A difficult issue I faced during research was food. Being allergic to meat, I had been surviving on eggs. The tehsil consumed more meat than vegetables. Gurez remains buried under twenty feet snow for eight months a year. During this period, most of the civil-administration abandons the tehsil and draws back to Bandipora district. It is only the army that looks after both defence and civil responsibilities in those cold months. Thus, preserving and consuming meat was important for survival.

Having not eaten properly for a week, one night it became too difficult for me to carry on. This tehsil, with hardly thirty to forty thousand people, located in remote Himalayan gorges, has people asleep by seven in the evening. One can only hear strong waves of the Neelum river gushing down in the silence of the night. Upon raising an alarm at around eleven in the night and contacting a few acquaintances, my friend managed to get a bowl of freshly cooked vegetables which I finished in seconds. Later, upon enquiring, I was told that the local staff appointed in the only functional degree college got involved and somehow managed to cook the meal for me. Next day I visited the college after an invitation from some of the professors who wanted me to speak specifically with the women enrolled there and encourage them. I did not forget to thank them for cooking that meal for me. Fieldwork involved for me key moments of vulnerability and deep dependence, that took many hues and forms. This unsettles the heroic narrative of ethnography. Our research and indeed our lives are dependent on the ways in which we are supported, we become indebted to those with whom we live and form bonds in the field.



Figure One. Author with students at the local college.

V. Locating the researcher

During an important interview conducted with high ranking military at Gurez, one officer politely noted how I do not look like I belong to Poonch, which is another borderland towards the north-west, and the place of my origin in Jammu and Kashmir. Another junior officer in a different interview, after having conversed with my friend from Kashmir University, remarked how easy it is to identify identities in Jammu and Kashmir if one is able to catch the accent. Until then his colleagues had not informed him that I too belong to the same ‘state’, as I was mostly introduced as a researcher from JNU.

I interjected and asked him, “Where do you think I am from in the State?”

He respectfully replied, “You are definitely not from K (Kashmir), so possibly you’re somewhere from J” (Jammu), immediately categorizing my belongingness as distinct from that of my friend sitting close to me. Given the colonial legacy of having refined my tongue since childhood in various missionary schools, and besides my attire, my idea of belonging was thus contestable to others. My identity was sometimes a shock for those who had served in these remote borderlands across Jammu and Kashmir and have observed identities there in their own capacity, from a distance through the institution of military (See Vivian Y. Choi, this volume, for a different example of ambiguous/mistaken identity).

VI. An altercation, and a response

One final vignette reveals the fragility of belonging as well as the safety, vulnerability and uneasy power of the fieldworker within the field. On the last day, I had an altercation with a group of boys on the street who were not being very respectful to me. Not only did I confront them, but lodged a complaint with the station house officer. They were all picked up by police the next morning. This also involved the local politician, an MLA who had won the seat thrice in the past 18-20 years. He apologised for their behaviour.

But soon after, as I was leaving Gurez, I could feel that this step would have threatened the research if I had experienced this and filed the complaint earlier. The decision was thus a crucial one, being a woman and a researcher.

I do not know how different such anthropological experiences are for men, and how they experience safety and threat in fieldwork, but gender does play a role in the field. The decision about how to respond to this situation was difficult for me. I might have chosen not lodging a complaint had it not been for my fellow scholar from University of Kashmir, a male, who took the matter in his own hands and told me why it was important to do so. Now when I look back at it, I think I made a wise choice in helping to safeguard the research prospects of female scholars aiming to study Gurez in the future.

The news of those boys in detention would have been the talk of the town that evening. Men would have sipped tea in the same restaurant discussing it, at the table by the window where I used to sit with my friend, gently responding to all those gazes one by one with a hesitant smile that always and every time said, “Assalamwaleikum to you all.”

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