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An ethnography of the ‘labour lines’: how access shaped my study?

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Abstract

Tea plantations being an institutional setup, getting access was a major challenge for ethnographic research. This paper illustrates the challenges I faced in getting access to the field and subsequently describes the process of entering the field, the question of insider and outsider and lastly how access shaped my study. The access led me to study the plantations through the experiences and meanings of the people staying in the labour lines. I contend that access is the key to ethnographic studies. Access does not only influence the ways we collect data but can have a profound implication on the findings and therefore shapes the overall study. Through this access that I gained during my fieldwork, I go on to examine the role of mobile phone in the everyday life of the people staying in the labour lines of a tea plantation in Assam.

Key words: Tea Plantations, Labour Lines, Ethnography, Mobile Phone.

Introduction

This paper is developed through the field encounters of my doctoral research, where I am exploring the embeddedness of mobile phones in the everyday life of the people staying in the labour lines of a tea plantation in Assam. The rationale behind choosing tea plantations was to locate the ubiquity of devices like mobile phones in the daily life of tea garden labourers and their families who were historically kept isolated. The reason for using the ethnographic method was to see the mobile phones in a holistic way and not reduce to the technology itself (Horst & Miller, 2006, p.11) and delineate the experiences of the people instead of defining them by standardized and imposed measures (Slater, 2013, p. 11). Also, the mobility aspect of the handheld device made it important for me to observe and participate in the everyday. Ethnographic studies call for a prolonged stay in the field where the ideas to immerse into the life of the people being studied.

Getting access to the field is the first and the most crucial step. The problem in getting access to the field, reveals the nature of the field, it provides insights into the social organisation of the field (Hammersley & Atkinson 2009, p. 41) in my
case it is the institutionalised set up of the plantations. Plantations are colonial enterprises and still bear semblance to it. The sociocultural and political distance of plantations creates a unique cultural history of itself (Chatterjee, 2001, p.5). They present an interesting contradiction, on one hand they are embedded in the socio-economic realities of the region they are located, on the other hand, there is a clear distinction from it (Banerjee, 2017, p. 11). The present day labourers are the descendants of the indentured migrant labourers brought by the Britishers from Central India. The labourers were forced to stay in the housing lines irrespective of their social and ethnic background, the labourers were under constant surveillance and all aspects of their daily life was disciplined and controlled, and had very little or no contact with the outside world (Sharma, 2011; Behal, 2014). Over the years the management has become lenient, it became evident during my fieldwork too. Dwindling production and lack of work in the tea garden has forced more and more people to go to the nearby town and villages. However, still very restricted number of outsiders visit the plantations, and the entry to the labour lines is prohibited (Xaxa, 2019, p. 31).

Taking the issue of access as the central theme, this paper focuses on four aspects of my ethnographic research in the plantation. First, I will describe the challenges I faced in getting access to the field. Secondly, I will describe how access is not permanent but has to be negotiated all along. Thirdly, my personal attributes and multiple identities with the community remained crucial to my access in the lines where I lived, observed and participated in daily life. Fourth and lastly, I will elaborate how access shaped my study and helped me focus on the ‘everyday’ in plantations which includes both work and social life. My research is not limited only to the labourers but include their families too. I contend that as an ethnographer, it is imperative to be open to the challenges and let it shape the study instead of going with some rigidly held notions about the field and line of query.

**Gaining access: pre-field reflections**

With the initial aim to capture the nuances of mobile phones in tea plantations, I started exploring ways to get permission to conduct my field study. I chose the district of Sonitpur in Assam, given my familiarity and the contacts I had in the tea gardens located there. I spoke to one of the Assistant Managers of a tea garden over the phone (10\(^{th}\) October 2017), he asked me to write to the Manager. I clearly stated the purpose of my study and sent the necessary documents in the email, duly acknowledged and backed by my supervisor to the manager. However, I did not receive a reply. I also wrote to authorities of the various tea gardens located in Sonitpur. All my attempts to get access had failed. In the meantime, I met one of the managers of a tea garden (10\(^{th}\) January 2018). He checked the application in his computer in my presence. He allowed me to visit the tea garden for a few days.
However, I was not allowed to visit and meet the labourers on a regular basis. He remarked sarcastically, “Even I want to know how people in the tea garden use the mobile phone, as they are not educated enough and I have seen them using”. The manager further asked me to contact the Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association (ABITA). I visited the office of the Tezpur Zone of ABITA and met the Zonal Secretary (11th January 2018). He told me being a ‘local’ woman, I should not have faced any problem in having access to the tea gardens. However, for the last 5-6 years, the tea gardens are apprehensive about allowing researchers to conduct studies inside plantations. He said researchers in the past have misused the access given by the gardens, leading to a negative impact on the image of the tea companies. He also spoke about the need to strengthen mobile phone network inside the gardens as it would also facilitate management activities in the garden.

During my fieldwork later, I found that despite poor network, most of the families have at least one mobile phone in the household. However the labourers say mobile phone was not needed for the work in the tea garden, rather it was mostly used by the people who go out to the nearby town and villages for work. I was also asked to contact Guwahati and Kolkata Office of ABITA and other associations like Tea Association of India (TAI).

In the meantime, I got permission from one of the biggest private individually owned tea company in Upper Assam. The owner told me they would extend all support and would allow me to conduct my study in one of their tea gardens. However, given my own experiences in finding access as well as based on the advice of my doctoral committee, I decided not to go through the owner as it might narrow down my perspective. The means through which we get access to the field affects with whom we can speak to and how the participants respond (Reily, 2009, p.5). Given my own experiences in getting permission to conduct the study and after consultation with my doctoral committee, I decided to enter the field through a Community Radio station based in Dibrugarh. The radio has access to the tea gardens. I joined Brahmaputra Community Radio Station (BCRS) popularly known as Radio Brahmaputra as an intern, assisting the community producers in conducting their live programs and also helped them in creating awareness on socio-economic issues.

**Entering the labour lines as an intern**

Access to the field remains one of the major challenges in ethnography, from entering the field to building rapport, problems related to access remain throughout the data collection process (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, p. 41). After contacting the station manager of the community radio over the phone, and sending him necessary documents, I first went to conduct a pilot study in the first week of April 2018. I visited a few tea gardens with the help of Radio Brahmaputra community producers and assisted them in conducting and recording radio programs. I selected
two tea gardens based on the access and the rapport that I developed by visiting the
tea garden multiple times during my pilot study. The purpose of selecting two tea
gardens was to compare and contrast and find out how the distance with the town
leads to differences in adoption and adaption of mobile phones by the people
staying in the tea garden. With the help of the community producer and station
manager, I fixed a house in one of the labour lines for my stay. I realised while the
study was a priority for me, and all my endeavours revolved around it, when I came
back after a gap of two months for my prolonged field study, access has to be
negotiated again. I believe that the authority of the station manager might have
forced the community producer to agree to my field visit and the stay. When I came
to the field for a longer stay in June 2018, it took me considerable time to convince
the host family in the labour line. In the meantime, I continued to visit the tea garden
along-with the community producer and with other people from the radio station to
build contacts. The problems and the time constrain made me revisit my proposal
and rethink my approach towards the study, and I decided to restrict my field to just
one tea garden.

I was in the field between June 2018 to February 2019, and stayed in one of the
labour lines between September 2018 to February 2019. During my stay, I came to
know why the family was at unease when they came to know that a woman from
Guwahati is going to stay at their house. There was also a wedding in the house,
they discussed among themselves for many days, how a woman from Guwahati can
stay with them with minimum facilities? Finally, after the wedding, they agreed to
my stay. The woman in the host family in the line was one of my key informants,
she was a sardar (garden supervisor). She happened to be the first woman sardar in
the tea garden where I conducted my fieldwork. On Sundays, she used to take me
to the various lines and made me familiar with people in positions like sardar, line
chowkidar (watchman) and few families of the labourers. After visiting once with
her, I used to go the lines alone and visit the households on my own. Also, since I
had visited the lines with the people working in the community radio, few young
men and women were already known to me with whom I exchanged phone
numbers. My rapport with the community producer who also hailed from one of
the tea gardens and my stay at the woman sardar’s house was crucial in my
acceptance at the community level.

Insider and outsider

In ethnography the key instrument to data collection is the researcher herself. I had
two experiences in the field, which made me realise how my social background and
personal attributes were crucial to my access to the plantations. During the initial
period of my fieldwork (June 2018), there were two interns at the community radio
hailing from Delhi, intrigued by the exotic nature of the tea plantations which they
were visiting for the first time. They decided to go on their own and start clicking
pictures during working hours. The field manager noted, and the Assistant Manager was called in. They were asked to give the camera and destroy the pictures. On one hand, this instance made me exercise caution during my fieldwork and I made sure my activities don’t disturb the labourers during the working hours. On the other, it reminded me of my familiarity with the field, the difficulties I faced in getting access to the field, and the field for me was not exotic and was part of my growing up. The second instance happened during the last leg of my fieldwork, in February 2019. I met a researcher from one of the public universities in India. She also hailed from Assam, but she was of different ethnic origin. With the help of the community radio, she visited the field for a week. After seeing the problems in getting access to the people and management, she abandoned the idea of researching the people in the plantations. Later while conversing with me, she assumed how her ethnic background, which has a history of conflict with the people she intended to study, could affect her fieldwork and prevent her from getting an insider perspective.

The ethnographer’s role is to socialise with people and community they are studying, the idea is to gain both ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspective (Fetterman, 2010, p. 11). If the researcher is studying an unfamiliar setting, it might take time to mingle and gain insider perspective, while if the researcher is studying their own community there is a chance that they might miss certain aspects. The community, I am studying is not the one I belong to, at the same time being born and brought up in Assam, it is also not a community, that I am completely unfamiliar with. Growing up in a village in Sonitpur district, living around three to four kilometres away from a tea plantation and surrounded by ex-tea garden labourers, it was not a completely ‘unfamiliar setting’ neither it was ‘home’ as my interaction and understanding were limited. I was aware of the morning factory siren, the noon siren, the evening siren and also the sound of the clock pendulum inside the tea garden indicating the bagaan (garden) time that is 1 hour ahead of Indian Standard Time. The sound of the films that were screened during Durga Puja and Diwali, everything was audible, however, it rings more in my ears now when I am studying the lives inside the tea plantations. Therefore, throughout my ethnographic journey, a sense of self-reflexivity allowed me to evaluate my own position.

Besky (2014, p.35) argues that it was her familiarity with Nepali language and her appearance that she could just walk in the Darjeeling plantations during her fieldwork. My own identity as a Bihari married woman and familiarity with Sadri language was quite pivotal in building rapport with the people. Given my own background, there was no major make-over that I needed especially for the field stay, however, I made sure that I look married by wearing the symbols of marriage like sindoor (vermilion) and bindi (coloured dot worn on the forehead mostly by married women). These symbols remained the first point of query for the people whom I was meeting for the first time. The second line of the query
was for how long I have been married and whether I have children. Being married helped,
especially to mingle with girls and married women and it also gives a sense of security in unfamiliar surroundings (Coffey, 2009, pp.79-83). Though one of the queries was, how can my husband allow me to stay with strangers? For the women in the tea garden, even going to their relatives' house is very restricted and if the wife tends to stay out for long, I was told, she will be looked with suspicion.

Being a female researcher, I had access to women gossips, their warmth and affection. They confided in me and shared about their mother-in-laws, their natal homes and the day-to-day problems they face in the plantations. Also, few young men and women, who were either studying or were literate to varied degree remained very accessible to me and helped me in conducting interviews and discussions. The young people being the avid users of mobile phone remain the most interviewed group. From being an intern at the Radio Station during initial visits to the field to being referred to as gotia (guest) both these identities led me to engage with the community at various levels.

The ‘everyday’ and the labour lines: concluding remarks

The plantations are unique spaces, which are both the work and living spaces for the people staying in the lines, so when I say the field, the field for the participants is the place where they both live and work. As mentioned previously, the difficulty I faced in accessing the plantations made me restrict my study to just one plantation. It made me to look at the social life of the labour lines and how the spaces are produced and reproduced, taking the labour lines as the unit to understand the plantation. Further, my study included people across age groups and not only the labourers who work in the tea garden but also the retired labourers, other people who work as daily wage labourer, teachers, the young students. As the study progressed, I excluded the managerial perspective and instead confined myself only to people staying in the labour lines, which included the majority of the people, the labourers, the sardars, and the chowkidars.

The everyday life was central to my study, the motive was to consider the everyday communication activities and locate the mobile phone in that. I preferred observing the everyday life in the labour lines, where economic life is interlaced with the social life. I did not want to interrupt the working hours as the tea pluckers got paid more when they plucked more leaves. What then exactly constituted participant observation in my field study? In my case I stayed with the people I was studying, I lived with them. I participated in their everyday life by cooking and eating with them or by visiting the market. The embodied ethnography led me to observe and participate in the everyday life of people staying in the lines, their festivities. Even
when I stayed in the line, it was not easy to conduct interviews and discussions as both men and women used to go for work, women were mostly busy in tea garden work and domestic chores. The labourers come to their house after day long work. I was advised not to venture out after it gets dark. The school going and college going students were also not available during holidays as they go to the town to work as daily wage labourers. Besides, as most of the people did not converse much with people outside their lines or the garden, they were often left bemused with my queries and I had to ask in many ways. It was mostly during the winter season (December 2018 to February 2019), that I was able to conduct interviews and discussions, as there is not much work in the tea garden. On working days, I visited the Anganwadi centres and schools as the labour lines mostly becomes empty with only very young children and elderly people staying at home. The access to the households and the various events and functions taking place in the households and the lines provided me with deep insights which I would have missed had I not stayed there. The mobile phones while deemed very important for emergency situations mostly lie at the periphery of the daily lives. Every line is an entity in itself, after the family, it was line affiliation that matters.

The institutional nature of the field called for a sensitive approach in conducting ethnography, it influenced much of my research methods. I was immersed in the field for 8 months, continuously reflecting on the life inside and outside the plantation. While the community radio helped me in accessing the tea garden, later it was my engagement with the community that helped me in carrying out the study. The purpose of my research initially was to focus on the role of the mobile phones in the everyday life of the people staying in the plantations but as the research progressed and I delved deep into the literature and immersed more into the field, I noted one missing aspect of the plantations life in the available literature, the plantation labourers are often looked through the lens of backwardness and marginalisation, the everyday details remain missing from accounts. Most of the studies are either quantitative or collected from tea pluckers while they are at work in the tea garden, the access and the acceptance of the community makes my work go beyond their working life and attempts to bridge the gap between the working and social life. The homogenous construct gets destroyed when we look into the details.

Notes


1 The name of the tea company, tea gardens has not been disclosed for ethical reasons. Even for the tea garden under study I am using pseudonym.
Community radio is basically a radio station where local people participate and produce their own programmes. The radio caters to local information needs, address social issues.

BCRS is the first non-commercial community radio station of the north-east India. It was set up as a part of the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research (C-NES). Since 2009, the radio station caters to the information and communication needs of the people staying in the tea gardens, river islands and other villages and urban slums located nearby Dibrugarh. BCRS is located in Maijan Borsaikia village near Paltan Bazar, Dibrugarh.

For those who go to study and work outside, the garden time has become obsolete. However, for the tea garden labourers especially women it still holds importance and they adhere to that for their daily routine.

The language has its origin in Chotanagpur plateau, it acts as a connecting link between the people belonging to various castes and tribes staying in the tea garden, who are originally from diverse background. As a Bhojpuri speaking person, I understand the language.

REFERENCES:


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