

## A Passage to Indiana: Reflections on Fieldwork in a Reverse Direction

CHANDANA MATHUR

Lecturer in Anthropology  
National University of Ireland, Maynooth  
Chandana.Mathur@nuim.ie

My two years (1989-91) of dissertation fieldwork were spent in Southern Indiana in a small town located near the flagship plant of a major multinational corporation, the Aluminium Company of America (Alcoa). As an Indian woman anthropologist whose work centres on mainstream American culture, I have become well used to the inevitable amused chuckle drawn by this disclosure. Any exploration of the intentions underlying the project, of the fieldwork experience itself, of the particular difficulties involved in writing about it, and (most pertinently for this collection) of the residues remaining, however, requires reaching beyond the cheap paradox element of this fieldwork encounter.

When I first began to frame the project, I had been profoundly influenced by the perspectives of anthropological political economy; thus, the basic premise of my work has been that cultural processes in the contemporary United States cannot be understood without referring to the symbols, structures and practices of present-day capitalism. Initially drawn to the project by the paucity of studies of Western societies by Third World anthropologists, I have now come to realise that fieldwork in the American heartland at the end of the twentieth century has taught me unlovely and invaluable truths – say, about class, or nationalism – that may have been less accessible elsewhere or at another time.

My fieldwork dates back to an important moment of self-doubt for the discipline, to the era of the reflexive turn in anthropology. It would have been hard at the time to ignore the central insight of this moment, that my data was going to be deeply inflected by the identities of the ethnographer and the subject, by who I was and who they were. At the same time, I was uncomfortable at the prospect of casting the power differentials underlying this encounter as the main issue: it could easily teeter into self-absorption, and perhaps sideline many other questions that seemed particularly pressing. In the end, the ethnography that has been written out of this experience acknowledges the issues surrounding the power relationships underlying the encounter, but prioritises a quite different set of questions. Focusing on the narratives provided by the people I met, it tries to document how individual lives are shaped and subjectivities structured at the intersection of local history with state power and systemic transformation.

For instance, my dissertation addresses a series of questions about the nature of work as experienced by

(mainly) white male workers in traditional manufacturing jobs in Indiana. In what terms are work routines described and remembered? Is this daily experience foregrounded in a strong sense of themselves as workers, and by extension, as members of a working class? What are the political consequences of the process of identity formation evoked by workers' narratives, and obversely, what is the relationship that obtains for these workers between the labour movement and the workplace self? As globalisation and its consequences, actual and perceived, sweep through continually and unstoppably to alter the face of everyday work, how do workplace identities keep pace? I have explored the meanings that Alcoa workers have assigned to the reshaping of the labour process in the present era of flexible accumulation, which has entailed changes in the scheduling of work shifts to meet the demands of just-in-time production, or changes in management techniques such as the introduction of the 'team concept' (Mathur, 1998). Finally, my discussion of labour touches on themes that lie entangled at the junction of social memory and history, as in a chapter that traces the impact of the memory of a long, bitter and ultimately unsuccessful local strike in 1986 on the resistance that Alcoa workers were to offer towards later demands placed on them by the company.

Would it have been a better idea to focus instead on a reading of the unequal power encounter between white American males in an affluent Midwestern town and a Third World woman? For one thing, for an aspiring middle-class academic researching and representing the lives of working class men, it would be disingenuous to argue that the power balance was clearly freighted against me. Perhaps the most forceful example is provided by one of my interview tapes that has made me wince whenever I have gone back to it. An electrician was speaking to me on this tape. At one point, I finish his sentence for him, and then apologise for doing so. He responds saying, "no, no, you said it so much better than I would have". All the factors complicating the putatively reverse direction of my fieldwork are present here: the middle-class ethnographer's presumption in representing others' experience, the display of class deference from the working class ethnographic subject etc.

In an early discussion of the "relation of power involved in the very conception of the autonomy of cultures" (Chatterjee 1999, 17), Partha Chatterjee has expressed his pessimism regarding the viability of an 'anthropology in reverse'. "It is not trivial to point out here", he writes, "that in this whole debate about the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, the scientist is always one of 'us': he is a Western anthropologist, modern, enlightened and self-conscious (and it does not matter what his nationality or the colour of his skin happens to be)" (Chatterjee 1999, 17).

Under these circumstances, would my ethnographic account of small town Indiana be much different from one produced by a White American anthropologist? Or by a Black American anthropologist? Or an Indian-

American anthropologist? I would argue that the inversion entailed in my fieldwork, such as it was, nevertheless carries certain methodological implications. For instance, my dissertation also focuses on the first Gulf War, a key moment of American nationalism, and therefore, a particularly apposite time to look at ideas about collective selfhood, at 'community' and at 'nation'. "If you are not a Patriot, you're a Scud", was the anti-war slogan of the time. My goal was to ethnographically chart the processes whereby the war became the main field of contestation defining membership within the community, which was itself redefined to mean nation or national interest. Because I was a dissenter from the notion of community-as-nation, both by ascription (as ethnographer-outsider, foreigner and Third Worlder) and by choice (I did not conceal my association with the small handful of local anti-war protestors), I was constantly being brought face to face with competing notions of collective identity that were reluctantly being held in abeyance. The minister of a conservative Southern church, the coalminer and the high school teacher who were reluctant to express their opposition to the war among their peers, felt more comfortable discussing their views with me.

In terms of subject position issues, it remains unclear which way the power balance tilts with this fieldwork and my attempts to write of it. Obviously it is not an unequal encounter between a powerless Third World woman and omnipotent white American males. Yet, as we met in the field to make sense of one another, it was they who were able to confidently approach me with dominant Western categories of understanding the non-West. No matter how steeped I may be in what Chatterjee terms "bourgeois rationalist thought", I was not really in a position to counter-apply these same categories towards them. If it can accomplish little else, an encounter of this kind can definitely muddy the waters around received ideas about anthropological knowledge production, about ethnographic authority and the power of representation.

The legacy for me of this fieldwork encounter is probably not dissimilar from the ways in which other anthropologists are changed by their fieldwork experiences. One's place in the world is problematised by the experience, one gets the sense that one has better understood some phenomena while failing to understand certain others. The stakes involved in the failure to understand feel higher for me than they may for other anthropologists, though, given that we all live in a world which depends disproportionately on the voting decisions of white working class men from the American heartland.

Also, the failure to understand has left me with many questions about the practice of fieldwork. In the face of really uncomfortable realities, how far can anthropology's empathetic method of data collection take us? If we do not ourselves manage to internalise viewpoints that we deeply disagree with, and successfully understand them from within, can we be said to have moved much further

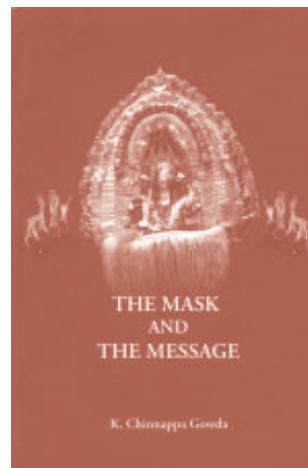
beyond a priori, pre-fieldwork understandings of these points of view? Should we be content merely to chart the global flows and local contexts within which the baffling is embedded?

## References

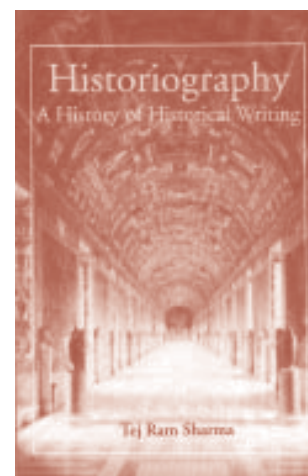
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