

Elites and Field of Power: Methodological Reflections from Bikaner

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Abstract: *This paper explains the relationship between elite practices and elite claims. It argues that empirical focus on the discrepancy between elite accounts of their self and their practices can be one of the core areas of the methodological dimensions of elite research. It would demonstrate the complex of nature social inequalities and its reproduction. It concludes by arguing that field work in elite research can be made more fruitful by paying close attention to observational data and hence empirical research may look beyond “what is said” and to reach closer to “what is done”.*

Keywords: Elite, practices, space, subjectivity, fieldwork, social inequality, state-society relations.

Introduction

Studies on elites engage with questions about the nature of power and production of inequality. These studies demonstrate the dual challenge of “reaching to the top echelons of the power” firstly for individuals as part of mobility of their career and status and secondly for researchers to conduct interviews. It provides an opportunity to examine the nature of state-society relations through the character of elites located in different fields. In recent years, the central methodological debate for elite studies has been mostly about i) accessing the elite, ii) constructing the general structure of the elite sphere to establish an empirical pattern of their social life and iii) recruitment of individuals to these elite positions.

A major methodological issue in the elite studies is regarding the normative concerns related to the study of “elite”, particularly when it is referred with negative connotations. Studying the development in polity and economy thus also hinges on moral issues like egalitarianism and justice, and with it

comes the critical evaluation of those who are in the positions of wealth, power, and privilege. The sociological theory deals with these themes, via a more concrete analysis of the phenomenon of social mobility and patterns of dominance instead of moralizing the debate.¹ For instance, social scientists have found it difficult to theorize elites and democracy together. Therefore, a *sociological* study of the elite should necessarily demarcate the *normative* questions from the empirical ones (a dictum by Max Weber). The study of elites should focus on the way the social structure is organized; and how the privilege is organized; spaces of mobilities for lower classes; change within the elite groups with the process of democratization etc. Thus, the objective is to examine the institutionalization of power. Nevertheless, doing research on elites is much more complex than said. Elites usually ‘establish certain barriers to set themselves apart’ from other social classes (Hertz & Imber 1995: viii). This is more so in studying urban elites. During the fieldwork, I could access elites in Bikaner relatively easily (although not always) in comparison to elites in metropolitan cities like Delhi or Mumbai. While locating elites in a rural setting is relatively even easier than in urban areas. Rural elites would also perceive a university researcher differently. In other words, spatial context does have a crucial role to play in the response of elites for opening up to researchers’ gaze. Thus, elite’s relation to research also is influenced by the various kinds of social processes.

Modern social science methods have gone through considerable elaboration in studying the elite relations. From the survey methods to the qualitative ethnographies, this diversity of method also depicts the essential differences in the questions asked and consequently studied (Moyser & Wagstaffe 1987). Depending upon the theoretical assumption behind the definition of elite, unit of analysis is identified in the empirical studies. In many cases, the identification of “elite” itself becomes a key theoretical advance. The operationalizing of the concept of the elite in field-based research raises a key question of “boundary” for elite studies. Though *boundary making* has been crucial to understand the questions regarding ethnicity, class, identity formation, it has been scarcely studied in the elite studies². Bourdieu’s work has been foremost among the studies on class boundaries between working classes and middle class. This is where lies the role of symbolic resources (e.g. titles, claim making, royal heritage etc.) in strengthening the social and political identities of competing groups. In his work on class practices of consumption and taste, Bourdieu (1984) argues that dominant classes tend to define their own culture as superior to that of lower classes via the symbolic binaries constructed in the realm of consumption. Symbolic boundaries also then separate one group of individuals or groups from others

and by articulating and legitimizing certain “status” people monopolize key resources (Lamont & Molnar 2002: 168).

The analytical distinction between the economic domain and political domain is one such blind spot in elite studies. Drawing their theoretical model on various sources, scholars emphasize one over another in explaining the power relations and forms of inequalities. It marks difference in approaches of Marxists, functionalists and classical elite theorists. For some Marxists, class power defines the nature of state and politics, for others state is able to maintain “relative autonomy” from the capitalist mode of production. Thus, political power is differently organized and cannot be reduced to economic order per se.

On the other hand, functionalists would explain the difference between economy, polity and society as part of historical development. Drawing on the insights of Durkheim and Parsons they argue that society gets differentiated with the process of social change and development. Functionalists explored the growing differentiation of institutions and specialized roles of elites in different institutional realms (Eisenstadt 1963). Accordingly, elites tend to regulate the allocation of sources in their own domain and influence such processes in other connected domains as well (Eisenstadt 1963). The provoking debates between pluralists and elite analysts have opened up new areas of research. The empirical research can further elaborate upon the boundary making among the elites and the sources through which these boundaries are institutionalized. The issue of “boundary” indicates toward another theoretical concern in elite studies i.e. the community variable. Studying “community power”, within the context of the local town, has been the most interesting within the elite studies research (see, Waste 1986; Hunter 1953). Floyd Hunter popularized the usage of “reputational method” to study the community elites in the local power structure. It also provides insights to explore how elites build symbolic boundaries to distinguish themselves from others.

Elite research: Challenges and Questions

Mike Savage & Karol Williams (2008) suggest that instead of studying elites as structural positions, there should be attempt to study via the concept of *social resources* that several individuals or institutions hold and how do these resources contribute to the formation of certain class groupings (Savage & Williams 2008). In the recent studies on elites, empirical questions, regarding what elites practice and what they project, have raised methodological issues of conducting fieldwork. For instance, Shamus Khan

in his study of an elite school St. Paul's boarding school in New Hampshire, argues that there is difference between what elites "say" and what they "actually do" (Khan & Jerolmack 2013). Emphasizing the importance of ethnographic "observational data" these authors suggest that study of elite respondents must not rely solely on interview data, as it presents only a partial picture of their everyday life (Khan & Jerolmack 2013: 11–12). In the absence of the observational data the study would show only an "idealized and well systematized world view" of the elite respondents, which is actually a form of their posturing as "learned capital" and misses the way privilege is constructed (ibid).

The Indian Context

Studying the elite structure in an Indian town is important to understand the *regional* dynamics of power, stratification and social change. As we know, the recent writings on power and middle class have remained limited to the study of metropolitan India and the emerging social currents in Indian towns remain to be studied empirically. During 1970s many significant studies were conducted to understand the formation of political parties on small towns, emergence middle class, transformation in rural authority, but most of them focused either on formation of political parties or on changing agrarian structures (for instance, see works by Chakravarty 1975; Bayly 1975). The larger "field of power" in town remains to be studied in a systematic manner. Recognizing this gap in existing scholarship on elites, this research aims to interrogate the changes in the power structure of Bikaner town. Instead of focusing on one community and its elites, this study has examined the town elite structure as a whole.

Most of these researches are conducted on rise of political leadership in rural contexts in different states of India (Sharma 1976; Chakravarty 1975). A major emphasis in good number of studies has been to analyze social background of the elites i.e. rural/urban, linguistic identity, caste and religious composition, and education and family background (Navlakha 1989; Sharma 1988). Unfortunately, these studies lack any engagement with the internal life practices of elites and their relation to each other. Social background studies compare the social indicators of elites and general population and identify prerequisites of elite careers. Social anthropological studies on the patterns of marriage and networks among these rural elites depict their rise in the post-independent India. Political leaders are the most researched group of elites in Indian social sciences. This fact also shows their "visibility" in the public domain. Even these elites are also interested in sharing their

success stories with academic researchers. The social science research also legitimizes their mobility through its own research. In contrast to this, business elites are hardly “visible” both in public domain and in academic researches. Since their constituency lies in economy, they tend to avoid public scrutiny. This point also emerged strongly in the present research. It appears to them that this kind of research might ask questions regarding the sources of their wealth formation and economic position³. Not just the organizational hierarchies but also their social settings prohibit critical enquiry of their everyday knowhow and professional secrets. On the other hand, politicians were always excited about the interview and its publication; this relates to the fact that these elites are intrinsically connected to public domain. They also take deep interest in news coverage of their programmes, rallies, polls and opinion surveys.

There are numerous studies on rural elites and emergence of ‘dominant castes’ in late 1970’s, on changing agrarian structure and labour relations in countryside, also on changing class profile of communities in the context of educational and occupational diversification. During the late 1990s spate of researches have come which study urban middle classes in terms of their politics, their occupational profiles, formation of middle class in lower castes and minority communities etc.

Entering the Field: Bikaner City

This study aimed to understand the macro process of democratization of the political sphere and continuity of economic differences within the town. It sought to understand how traditionally marginalized social groups negotiate with the power structure. Initial exploration of the Bikaner’s town elite sphere raised questions of differentiated elites. For instance, during the pilot study locals described Bikaner elite circle through the binary of “maharaja and *chunav* (election) leaders”, “kisanneta and vyapari” etc. On probing further, it came out that these different leaders also come from different castes and spheres of society. In yet another interaction with a local councilor the issue of different interests and fields emerged prominently. For instance, one did not hear of any business elites entering electoral politics in Bikaner. Therefore, it was important to understand empirically whether political sphere is completely isolated from business or there exists an organic connection. The field provided the rationale for elite classification. Along with the changing profiles of legislative members in political sphere, it was important equally crucial to map the changes happening in the field of economy. To explore the dynamics of elite formation

across these various spheres the universe was broadly categorized in three broad fields: economy, polity and culture.

The traditional segregation of space and symbolic value attached to city space remain significant for contemporary political process. Similarly, the politics of a name also provides access to mark the space of the city, its historicity, and the identity of its people in a clear and unequivocal manner. The name of each city is marked and fixed in a particular time and space, that is how people tend to affiliate and develop a sense of belonging, and community life. The question of *naming* indicates the contradiction of claims and contestation of power relations, resources, community relations and so on.

Elite Networks & Field of Power: The relationship between “what they say” and “what they do”

My first encounter with business leaders of the Bikaner happened on a visit to local *baba ramdev mela* (fair) in September of 2015 when I met a prominent *bhujia* businessman Ram Agarwal (names changed to maintain anonymity). This was my first experience of local culture and customary routines of such figures. However, my position as a researcher was strengthened by the contact through which I had come to visit this fair. During my interview with him, I tried to introduce my research work to him. Unlike the laymen who would not have such experience of being a research subject, he was aware of the market surveys and media projections about him and his product. He was candid in describing his family background, while others around him were yet to become normal of my presence in the small informal gathering. It was a gathering of these elites with their family, relatives and close friends. These business leaders were dressed in traditional attire of white *kurta pajama* and were waiting to start the *pooja* and *arti*. After that Ram Agarwal invited me for a dinner with them along with other office bearers of Bikaner Vyapar Mandal, the professional body of business groups in Bikaner. In the background one could hear the *marwari* songs being played, and people reciting the warriorship and philanthropic works of local deity named *Ramdev*, a Tanwar Rajput. As scholars working on elites know, these are the informal spaces where one could also further gain contacts of other such elites and also observe their interactions with masses. The elites organize their philanthropic works around such religious and cultural programmes. More than the belief and worship, these occasions are avenues of public image construction of these business personalities.

Writing on the methodological aspect while conducting interviews with business elites on philanthropy in United States, Galaskiewicz argues that prior information about scheduling interview is quite essential (Galaskiewicz 1987). To document their cultural engagements, Galaskiewicz suggests scrolling through the local newspapers, magazine articles in order to get a sense of business elites' future programmes and events (Galaskiewicz 1987). Elite interviews are quite effective to provide the attitudes of both business and political elites. I did not experience any difference in the willingness of the respondents in terms of their political affiliation. What mattered, however, is the way most of the political elites wanted to portray their regional image and interest to move beyond their district politics.

Bikaner being a town allows more space for business elites and political elites to mingle and meet often in public gatherings, religious fairs, and administrative meetings. Even though few of them had lost in the latest elections, this did not quite affect their public interaction and administrative contacts. Rather, in many instances it can be seen that individual remains powerful and has more maneuvering capacity than political parties have. Madan Joshi is one such case, being an MLA from Congress party in 1970s, who is famous for his sweet and snacks shop. While in 2008 and 2013 he again contested elections from the ticket of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and became MLA. He was very soft-spoken during interviews and skillful in using Marwari language for political satires.

Another example can be given of a senior Congress leader, Suresh Malla, who has been part of congress leadership for a very long period of time. He has been a cabinet Minister in erstwhile Ashok Gehlot government and served as important minister for Bikaner region. He comes from a predominant Pushkarna Brahmin community of Bikaner. During the interview, Kalla seem quite polite and patient on the question of political diversity in local Congress. He was quite candid in raising questions on the conflicts among congress leadership. He was full of accounts of hard work and ground work that he did since his college days. Whereas in the observational data on his campaigns, his 6-7 days fast at public park, his behaviour during the party meetings and interaction with juniors, contradict his interview accounts. He is well known for being a very dominating leader, and someone who can successfully mobilize his lobby to minimize the rise of another powerful leadership within Bikaner Congress.

Elite Authority on Display: Limits of Interviews

Another name among district political elites who has quite strong hold individually is Bhupi Singh (a senior most politician from Kolayat). At the same time, it was obvious during the interviews that to understand their descriptions and narratives in fuller view, one required to have “double hearing” during the interview. The *first* is to hear what the respondent is particularly *wants to share* and tell me about the field and his position. The *Second* is to understand from the overall mood, body gestures and nature of responses, what they *do not want* to tell you. This “double hearing” helped me a lot to frame questions with different kinds of elites to compare the “double responses” of different elites. Interestingly, another crucial aspect of this field experience was the continuous display of authority by elites. This gives researcher the impression that this how elite live their lives. It brings to an important point: how do elite inhabit privilege. This paper, hence, makes a case for combining the observation data on what do the elites practice, what they say in their interviews. The problem with this possibility is that elites are mostly spoken to, rarely observed.

Elites writing about themselves: Self-fashioning and construction of Imagery

One of the very interesting things from the fieldwork was to locate the literature produced by elites themselves. Though only few elites have contributed to the writing about their role, family history, and future endeavors, these are quite informative accounts of their social life. Moreover, these literatures add on to their agenda of public image building. The contradiction of confidentiality and public advertising through the research is another important revelation from the fieldwork. Most of the business elites had conservative opinions about the politicians. Almost everyone agreed that there is a “lack of political will” among the leadership of Bikaner and which has cost in terms of business projects, developmental programmes one could have bargained from the state or central government. In the case of political elites, it is comparatively easier to access them in their offices or homes. In addition, due to their public profiles, it is quite possible to verify the biographical information these elite provide. Their engagement with any political event or program can also be sought through other participants such as media personnel. This general awareness about the interviews, surveys make political elites more responsive to academic research.

For example, Rathore princely elites of the Bikaner town have commissioned several works on their family history and organized many scholarship programs to celebrate the birth and death anniversaries of their ancestral family members⁴. The recent generation members like Karni Singh and his daughter Shree Kumari have organized systematically their family documents and historical records of treaties of the Bikaner State.

On the other hand, the non-royal upper caste elites have also produced their own literature about their success and kinship networks across the country. These community magazines are quite popular among these elites and help them in spreading their social works and community welfare activities. Some of the popular magazines read and distributed in Bikaner city are *Pushkarna Jagat*, *Marwari Samaj*, *Marwar India*, *Manak Rajasthani*, *Brahmin Swarnkar*. These magazines more often than not also provide a platform to find marriage partner for the members of the communities. Scholars have highlighted the difficulties associated with the getting information about the business groups and companies⁵. The business elites of the town lack documentation of their career and corporate structure. For example, unlike the national level data available in the form of *Who's Who* in Indian Business, these elites hardly have any such database to reveal during the interview. Even the recently formed companies and industrial units show nothing more than the company's executive position and financial performance in a given year. It is due to these reasons the *social history* of economic institutions (Bikaner Vyapar Mandal, Jila Udyog Sangh etc.) becomes crucial to develop a framework for the organization and changes in business groups.

Among the above-mentioned various variables what might influence the nature of information gathered and obtained from the elites is my location as a researcher based in a nationally recognized educational institution. Different elites interpreted my own location as PhD research student in different ways. While for some politicians, I was there in Bikaner to map out the conditions to suggest the candidature for next elections, for some others I represented audit personnel and have come to Bikaner to audit these economic elites. Similarly, during the interviews my caste identity was also crucial for these elites to know and decipher "who" is collecting the information. According to their convenience during interviews, I was "outsider" in terms of the castes who are currently dominant in Bikaner, but due to the proximity of my native town, many of them were quite relaxed and pursued discussion with enthusiasm and great passion. Knowing that I have been collecting the information of major business groups and

their strategies of domination, many of the business elites actually suggested me to work and help in building their online portals after the completion of my PhD project.

Conclusion

The analysis of field notes on research on elites has contributes to the idea that mere elite accounts about their lives cannot stand in for their actual practices. Instead, these accounts must be seen as a form of action aimed to posture in a certain manner to confirm their identity as elites. Many sociologists doing elite studies have avoided any examination of what elites do, and instead have primarily focused on what elites say they do. In other words, these scholars concentrate their attention on the cultural frameworks or interpretive schemes their respondents utilize and bring into the discussion, or the values they claim to hold, or self-reports of their behaviour. Sociological literature on action and individual suggests that it is imperative to understand, how actors think, yet elite studies can open up the debate to contest the above-mentioned hypothesis. Thus, even in interview accounts, researchers infer the behavioural intent of the respondents instead of focusing on mere intent or claims or values. The attention is directed to hypothetical action through the accounts.

During the course of my fieldwork, I have found that political elites tend to be very comfortable with interviews and seem like they are always ready for the questions and the format of the whole process. Because of the exposure of political elites to journalists interview and popular media blitz, they have learnt the art of how to present themselves during the interview. In a way, they have developed a form of capital through the experience of being in front of camera and large audiences. During the interviews, many of these political elites would be comfortable about openness in politics, praising the value of hardwork, educational qualifications and diversity. Whereas in observational settings, they might be seen practicing nuanced and subtle form of social closures i.e. whom to include in meetings, invite for program, who can access them, marrying their children to people from other communities, and so on.

Notes

1. Studies on elite have also maintained this dictum rather sharply as the study of elite also poses question for their 'moral' character as their

privilege and domination is put in parallel to the powerlessness of the masses and poor. An empirical research aims instead to highlight the processes through and within which certain social phenomena might take place and has implications for larger society. For a brief summary of various modes of doing elite research, see Ursula Hoffman-Lange, 2007. 'Methods of Elite Research.' In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* edited by Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann: 919–928. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2. Even though a Marxist analysis on class boundaries and middle class is quite popular in class studies, studies on elites' boundary making are quite rare.
3. Almost every business elite whom I had contacted for conducting interview clarified it in the first place whether my research is, in any possible way, related to income tax department or financial audit.
4. For example, Rajya Shree Kumari, the granddaughter of Maharaja Karni Singh has come up with two such publications on her family history. See Rajyashree Kumari, *The Lalgarh Palace, Home of the Maharajas of Bikaner* (2009). Dev Books: New Delhi. Rajyashree Kumari Bikaner, *The Maharajas of Bikaner* (2012) New Delhi: Amaryllis. Few of the books were written quite early, for instance see K. M. Panikkar, 1937. *His Highness, The Maharaja of Bikaner: A Biography*. London: Oxford University Press; Rathore, L.S. 2007. *The Regal Patriot: Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner*. New Delhi: Roli Books; Karni Singh, 2011 (1974). *The Relations of the House of Bikaner with the Central Powers*. Bikaner: Books Treasure Jodhpur and Maharaja Ganga Singhji Trust, Bikaner.
5. One of the interesting accounts of the ways to access the business executives is provided by Micheal Useem (1995). For a detailed view of several techniques utilized to gain information, see Michael Useem, 'Reaching Corporate Executives' in Rosanna Hertz & Jonathan Imber (eds) *Studying Elites Using Qualitative Methods* (1995). Sage Publications: California: 18–39.

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