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Empathy and Embeddedness in Social Science Research: The Contrasting Methods of Malinowski and Elwin

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Abstract: *Empirical, field-based research in Social Sciences, are neither bereft of empathy (the will to do good to and feel for others) and embeddedness (involving oneself with the process of transformation, while, at the same time, drawing consciousness about it) nor are they obstacles in the way to draw an understanding about social reality. This is the social science tradition that we inherit from Marx and the post-Marxists (the scholars of German Critical School, Gramsci, Althusser and so on), Levi-Strauss, C. Wright Mills, and the feminists starting Simone de Beauvior to Julia Kristeva or Judith Butler. The phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz have taught us how empathy for others' subjective experiences and cognition is the central component of the reflexive method through which the subjective knowledge can be transcended into intersubjective (hence universal) knowledge. This is in the space of the humanist social science tradition which does not conform to the "scientific" non-normative methodological tradition popularized by Comte, Durkheim or Weber. In this paper I have discussed about the essences of the "scientific" (read objective) and the empathetic methodological traditions of two noted anthropologists, Bronislaw Malinowski and Verrier Elwin, which represent two contrasting methods (although one cannot claim that Malinowski never expressed empathy for the native people he studied), and find out if one could strike a balance between the two traditions while highlighting the significance of empathy and embeddedness in field-based research.*

Keywords: Empirical research, fieldwork, participant observation, positivism, empathy, embeddedness, fieldwork as interaction, negotiated information.

Introduction

One way of doing social research is the positivist way, where the researcher is a distant, dispassionate observer-analyst of the social events, institutions or facts, dedicated to follow the rigors of "scientific method" in production of objective, universally valid knowledge. All textbooks on research methodology would teach us to do research of this kind. In reality, however, this prescription appears idealist, impracticable, ineffective and mythical, because, even the crudest of all positivists take normative positions, explicitly or implicitly, in their writings. In research, in social sciences, we primarily follow the humanist tradition, where the ideologies, values, interests, the philosophy of life, the practicality all these factors come into play and we end up producing "discourses" or social science concepts, in Foucauldian sense, which combine the philosophy, text and a guide to social action (Hall 2004: 345-349).

There is no denying that all social science research should aim to reach at objective knowledge and the researchers are trained to produce value-free and shared knowledge unravelling the truth of the well-defined social facts by studying the facts dispassionately, while distancing from the objects of study by resorting to "value reference" rather than "value preference" and without taking a normative position. This is precisely what we learn from Weber's interpretative methodology. However, any form of research and production of knowledge is rooted in the praxis of bringing about social transformation, following the Marxists and existentialists, and Foucault, who assert that every discourse prompts an array of actions by the freedom-loving individuals in their efforts to tear apart the hegemonic structures. The social location, ideological position and interests of the researcher and her empathy for fellow human beings are difficult, if not impossible, to "bracket" (meaning, 'to keep aside' in phenomenological sense) in social science research. Rousseau, one of the ideologues of French Revolution, whom Levi-Strauss hails as the "father of anthropology" (Levi-Strauss 1963, 1966) and Levi-Strauss (1962, 1963, 1966), the French anthropologist, and many others, have discussed the significance of empathy, which works at the root of all social relations and actions, including research. Empathy (the will to do good to others and respect others' views), a universal human quality, makes the researcher humble and drives her/him to reach out to the knowledge produced by other scholars and thus elevate subjective knowledge to intersubjective knowledge.

Fieldwork has been a proven method to draw "objective" knowledge in sociology and social anthropology. The idea behind fieldwork is to get to the roots of the subjectively constructed of realities of the individuals and communities we study. In other words, in research we try to capture the cognitive world of the individuals and groups and look for the common patterns and also explore the "unconscious" following Levi-Strauss' prescription. In an earlier article I have argued that there are three possible ways "empathy" works in field-based research (Roy 2020: 168-180). First, fieldwork, which has been the "heart and soul" of research, especially in the field of social anthropology and sociology in the ethnographic tradition. In fieldwork, the researcher gets into close-range interaction with the people who constitute the field. While interacting with the people the researcher is generally driven by "a will to human good". In field both the researcher and the researched operate as independent agencies and every bit of information is thus negotiated. Second, empathy has been widely used as a medium of drawing both subjective and intersubjective knowledge. The phenomenologists like Husserl (1982) and Schutz (2004), and anthropologist like Levi-Strauss have effectively used empathy as a means to arrive at universal and shared knowledge. Third, empathy works in application of knowledge to bring about the desired changes in society. Social science in Marxist tradition is founded on the principle of using philosophy for social transformation. The Marxists in general refuse to separate the process of thinking from the process of doing, which they hold, work in an endless feedback. Michel Foucault, endorsing the Marxist position, has observed that every discourse translates into social action.

In this paper I would particularly discuss the importance of empathy in anthropological and sociological fieldwork. In this task I would draw from the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and Verrier Elwin to give an idea of two extreme and oppositional approaches to empathy and argue, drawing from my own research, that what we need is a balance between the scientific and the humanist traditions.

Empathy in fieldwork

In anthropology, "participant observation" is still considered the "ideal" method of authentic data collection and scientific research. But there are variants of participant observation and the researchers have to address the universal "ethical" question as to whether the researcher should empathize with the subjects of research and "go native" (to be an integral part of native life) or remain a disinterested, distanced "other" out to collect "objective data". The researcher also confronts the questions whether "embeddedness" and "empathy" are avoidable in field-interaction and if such an attachment is detrimental to production of "objective" knowledge.

The term "participant observation", in practice, is broad enough to cover a range of fieldwork methods from non-participation through passive, moderate, active and complete participation (Spradley 1980: 59-62), but we can delimit its scope to a situation where there is at least some interaction and involvement, with certain degree of empathy, with the people being studied. Using Spradley's description (1980: 60-61), this would mean either maintaining a balance between insider and outsider (moderate participation) or doing what the people are doing (active participation), not merely gaining acceptance, in order to better understand cultural rules for behaviour. Therefore, the adjective "participant" becomes crucial for denoting interaction with and involvement in the society being studied (Baker 1887: 15). The information about peoples' lives and about their perceptions about their experiences and culture could be subjected to interpretations with varied degrees of abstraction, depending on the ethical standard of the researcher and yet there will always be a claim of authenticity and objectivity in the narratives thus produced.

Claude Levi-Strauss has upheld the value of empathy in drawing ethnographic knowledge. Levi-Strauss borrowed the idea from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he regarded as the father of modern anthropology (Levi-Strauss 1962). Pity or empathy, for Rousseau, entails a "desire for identification with others" and a "total refusal of identification with [oneself]". The ethnographer can use himself "as his own instrument of observation". He can "learn to know himself objectively and at a distance as if he were another person." To do so, he must identify with "his" essential humanity – what Rousseau called the humble third-person "he" within himself. Only this "other" person within him can empathize with (or pity) the concomitant others within those the anthropologist observes. In this self-mediated and intersubjective context, ethnographic identification, subsequent communication, and eventual objectification are possible. Levi-Strauss argues that "the principle of 'confessions', written or unacknowledged, is … basic to the work of every anthropologist". In this sense, Rousseau's celebrated formula "the me is another" heralds both the emergence of "unconditional objectivity" and the resolution of the epistemological schism between self and other, outside observer and native participant (Levi-Strauss 1962: 11-12).

Bronislaw Malinowski: The Unempathetic, Unembedded Fieldworker

Bronislaw Malinowski, the "mystic hero" of participant observation (Levine, citing Stocking, 1985: 339) wrote the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), which has been credited by Levine as "the first principled instantiation of participant-observation as the *ne plus ultra* (the high point) of anthropological field methods" (Levine 1985: 339).

Malinowski had put two and a half year long intensive fieldwork in writing the anthropological classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). He made three long expeditions to the islands in the Pacific; he spent the first a half year on Toulon among the Mailu, and two years on the Trobriands (June 1915-May 1916, and Oct. 1917-Oct. 1918). During these periods Malinowski developed his methods and carried out his research, which was later to be seen as an important breakthrough in methodology and a major landmark not only in British social anthropology but in social anthropology around the globe.

With his training in physics, mathematics and the scientific method Malinowski made efforts to develop anthropology as a science based on a scientific method. In the introduction to Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) he proclaimed:

> No one would dream of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the apparatus used . . . (etc.) In Ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the full searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts and produce them before us out of complete obscurity' (1922: 2-3).

As early as in 1913 W. H. R. Rivers, the British anthropologist, made a similar prescription:

> The essence of intensive work ... is limitation in extent combined with intensity and thoroughness. A typical piece of intensive work is one in which the worker lives for a year or more among a community of four or five hundred people and studies every detail of their life and culture ... by means of the vernacular language' (Rivers 1913: 7).

Malinowski asserted that a field-based researcher must fulfil three primary conditions: (1) that "the student must possess real scientific aims, and know the values and criteria of modern ethnography", (2) that "he ought to put himself in good conditions of the work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives", and (3) that "he has to apply a number of special methods of collecting, manipulating and fixing his evidence" (Malinowski 1922: 6).

Anthropologist like Hsu has questioned Malinowski's honesty about his own prescriptions. Hsu (1979: 518) has observed that had Malinowski not been stuck in War time entangle, isolated by the war (The World War 1)[1], he would not have endeavored to stay in the field for so long. His explorations in the field, in Hsu's assessment, have made Malinowski the first to make anthropology an observational science by living near the natives, although he never "went native" showing empathy for the people he studied and his participation in the cultural activities of the natives was an act of well-calculated strategy, a rational action driven by interest, in Weberian sense.

Although Malinowski is widely held as the trend setter in participant there is ample scope to doubt his honesty about his participation in native life. The fundamental question is if Malinowski had developed any empathy for the Trobriand Islanders, who had hosted him for more than two years and made him famous or if he was a shrewd "calculative rationalist" in using the natives. The world of anthropology had to wait till the publication of his Diary in 1967[2]. The Diary brought to light the shocking notes written in Polish which stablish, beyond doubt, that although Malinowski nursed a scientific temper, he was a disinterested fieldworker and lived among the natives with a great deal of aversion. The Diary reveals that he did not have the temperament to relish life among the natives. One gains the impression that the long field expeditions were like an interminable ordeal, and that only his self-discipline and uncompromising ambition drove him on.

Malinowski was an unwilling fieldworker in the Trobriand Island as he nursed a "feeling of hopelessness and despair" and had the symptoms of "culture shock". He wrote: "I had periods of despondency, when I buried myself in the reading of novels, as a man might take drink in a fit of tropical depression and boredom" (Malinowski 1922: 4).

Malinowski recommended that a good fieldworker should "really be in contact" with the natives but his presence in the field should be inconspicuous, so that the natives carry on in their natural course, rather than the ethnographer empathizing with them. For him, "the native is not the natural companion of the white man, and after you have been working with him for several hours … you will naturally hanker after the company of your own kind" (1922: 7). Drawing on the native perception of him Malinowski wrote: "as the natives saw me constantly every day, they ceased to be interested or alarmed… In fact, as they knew that I would thrust upon my nose into everything, even where a well-mannered native would not dream of intruding, they finished by regarding me as part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco" (1922: 7-8).

Fink (1955: 62) calls Malinowski's type as "incomplete participation", in which the there is little integration with the field and the anthropologist remains an external observer. Malinowski was honest in admitting that he was by no means trying to live as the natives lived; living among the natives was for him a far cry from what is now called "going native". Powdermaker (1967: 36) has observed that Malinowski's "extraordinary empathy" is nothing short of a myth. Noted anthropologist Clifford Geerts, who read the *Diary* in 1967, commented that the publication of the Diary not only "destroyed one final idol", but also shattered the image of anthropology. The image of the fieldworker, who was largely acknowledged as "the fieldworker with extraordinary empathy for the natives", stood shattered as Malinowski turned out to be a "hypocritical narcissist" (Geertz 1967: 12). Although Malinowski never claimed to be driven by empathy for the natives, he actually despised them in his Diary saying: "As for ethnology, I see the life of the natives as utterly devoid of interest or importance, something as remote from me as the life of a dog" (1967: 169).

Many entries in the Diary speak of Malinowski's dislike for the natives and his own "longing for civilization" (1967: 155). Instead of being a theorizing tool, the diaries were used as a therapeutic release for all kinds of pent-up frustrations. Often, if he is not complaining about his poor health or telling of his longings for his fiancée, he is cursing the natives as "bloody niggers"[3], Hsu (1979:518) counted some 69 entries in which Malinowski expresses various degrees of aversion toward the natives. A glaring example is the expression: "On the whole my feelings toward the natives are decidedly tending to *Exterminate the brutes*" (emphasis in original) (1967: 69). These entries seem to be hard to rhyme with such (sparse) statements as in the introductory chapter of Argonauts, ". . . with the capacity of enjoying their company and sharing their games and amusements, I began to feel I was indeed in touch with the natives, and this is certainly the preliminary condition of being able to carry out successful fieldwork" (1922: 8).

Malinowski was not an "active" or even "moderate" (Spradley 1980: 60) participant, except on very rare occasions. Only once he writes in his Diary: "To encourage them to play … I began to *kasaysuya* myself (a circle dance/game). I indeed exercise, moreover I could learn more taking part personally" (1967: 280-281). One might classify him in Spradley's typology (1980: 59) as practicing "passive participation". He held the place of a petty lord with servants, dealing out tobacco to insure tolerance from the natives for his incessant interrogations. Indeed, Malinowski was a questioner who worked a great deal with informants; and he was a systematic observer, for few people would have accumulated so much data: statistical documentation reduced to charts for an overview of the societal framework; minute observations of daily life; and a wide range of original material, including myths and folklore, transcribed in the native language. An unbridged gap existed between Malinowski and his *Trobrianders*. Some scholars (e.g., Firth 1957; Fortes 1957; Nadel 1957; Leach 1963 cited in Geertz 1967: 12) attribute his frequent misinterpretation of Trobriand magic, religion, kinship, economy, law and psychology, to this gap. Wax has observed that although he gave the natives "flesh and blood", which is seldom found in anthropological accounts, he made the error in his theoretical interpretations of portraying them as "Europeans in dusky skins" (Wax 1972: 12).

However, a more balanced account of Malinowski as an anthropologist is quite possible. The two field visits, the first among the natives of the Mailu in New Guinea and the second among the aborigines in a gap of about four years between 1914 and 1918, which resulted the Diary (1967) and the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922)*, bring to light Malinowski's differential approaches, one full of disliking and devoid of empathy and full of likings and empathy for the natives. Clifford Geertz (1967), as we have shown above, was harsh in his review of Malinowski's Diary, where he was which was in his true self venting the frustration of a young man away from his love and own people, trying to grapple with the odds of life in the midst of an alien tribe and inhospitable condition. The Diary, for Malinowski, was a kind of dialogue with himself. About 20 years later, Geertz gave a balanced assessment of Malinowski as an anthropologist in his book *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). In this book Geertz took a broader view of Malinowski as an anthropologist as was reflected in his published writings and revised his earlier assessment. In his ethnographic writings, Geertz opined, Malinowski "tried to project two antithetical images of himself – on the one side the empathetic Absolute Cosmopolite with fellow feeling for the savages he studied, and on the other the Complete Investigator (Geertz's terms), dispassionate, rigorously objective." (quoted from Raymond Firth's new "introduction" to the Diary of 1989 edition, pp. XXIX-XXX). According to Geertz, "High Romance and High Science … easily yoked" in the writings of Malinowski (Geertz 1988: 78-79). Thus, if we go by Geertz's reading of Malinowski, the Diary represents only one and not to be told unempathetic side of Malinowski but going by his other writings it is difficult to say he was completely unempathetic towards the natives he had studied.

Being in positivist mould, Malinowski treated the social facts as external to the researcher and was driven by the wrong perception, as did Durkheim, that the external facts are like "things" and could be studied like the "objects' of material sciences with precision and in totality and the anthropological knowledge thus produced would be "objective" and universal. Treating social facts as dry objects, in essence, means overlooking of the human sentiments, passions, the world of feelings, the uncertainties in cognition, and romanticism, which constitute the inseparable parts of any social relation or the way of life of the people. During the course of his fieldwork, therefore, he remained detached from the objects of study as an external dispassionate observer. He forgot a fundamental fact, which was made clear by Max Weber and the phenomenologists, that there could be a gap between the "fact" and the "understanding about the fact" at the level of social participants who we study and at the level of the anthropologist.

Verrier Elwin: The Empathetic Fieldworker

One can find an alternative approach, so different from that of Malinowski in the work of Verrier Elwin, who had come to India as a missionary and established Gond Seva Mandal (Society for the Services of Gonds) with his team in Karanjia in erstwhile Madhya Pradesh. He always tried to be an integral part of the people among whom he had worked and worked for their wellbeing. Elwin lived 22 years in Madhya Pradesh and married a Gond girl, who accompanied Elwin in almost all his field trips in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. In Elwin's admission, this helped him making initial contact and rapport building with the local people (Misra 1971: 102). His love for the tribal communities in India finds reflection in tribal development policy for the North East, the *Panchsheel* (See Nehru 1953-54), which he had drafted for the Government of India. His commitment to the tribal cause was total as he relinquished the British citizenship and his membership of the Church, to become a follower of Gandhi and later an administrator in the Government of India.

While working among the tribal communities Elwin did not intend "to take an exclusive interest in the tribes but were concerned with everybody who was poor and exploited" (Elwin 1964: 105). His objective, as he proclaimed, was "to build up a settlement to help the people and to base our policy and way of life on a mixture of Franciscan and Gandhian ideas." But once he decided to do intensive research among the tribes where he lived, as well as those in other parts of India, he remembered the responsibilities of a social scientist despite his empathy for the people. Elwin's humanistic approach influenced his methodology but he did not see it as a hindrance to his scientific pursuit. This is how he explained his position: "there is nothing whatever hostile to scientific enquiry in having an intense and affectionate interest in the people one studies, in desiring their progress and welfare and in regarding them as human beings rather than as laboratory specimens" (Elwin 1964: 141). He approached his anthropological studies with a literary bias and was proud of having a humanistic background. This is why he declared: "the study of folktales and myths, which some people regard as unworthy of the notice of a serious scholar, brought home to one the importance of the fears and anxieties of the people and the need to ensure that we did nothing that would intensify them" (Elwin 1964: 142).

How embedded he was with the people he studied could be gauged from the following words in his Autobiography:

> For me anthropology did not mean "field-work": it meant my whole life. My method was to settle down among the people, live with them, share their life as far as an outsider could and generally do several books together.... This meant that I did not depend merely on asking questions, but knowledge of the people gradually sank in until it was part of me (Elwin 1964: 142).

So much was his embeddedness with the people that studying people and living amidst them became his way of life; he refused to segregate his "empathy for the people" and the responsibilities of an anthropologist. For him, it became a way of life.

Elwin's method to comprehension was an integral part of his initiatives for the wellbeing of the people. He often drew the attention of the administrative for the betterment of "his people". He believed:

> This need not mean any lowering of the standards of research, still less a bias towards any particular theory. For it is the glory of science to direct the radiance of truth into the dark places of human life and transform them (Elwin 1964: 132-33).

Elwin's field diary, 1932-1935, titled *Leaves from the Jungle: Life in a Gond Village*, provides the background for an analysis of his basic theoretical problem in each of the four monographs (*The Baiga* 1939, *The Agaria* 1942, *Maria Murder and Suicide* 1943, and *The Maria and their Ghotul* 1947), and the analysis of the contextual and human aspects of the field situation in each case. The diary gives a vivid picture of the situation in which he lived, and his method of establishing rapport with his informants. It also gives an overall view of his life, explaining his drive for undertaking later scientific inquiries. A review of the diary in *The New Statesman* contains the following comments that reflect Elwin's work at the time and explicate the nature of his mission. About the ashram that Elwin had set up in the midst of the Gonds, which he used as the meeting point with the locals, the reviewer writes:

> Mr. Elwin's ashram with its chapel and dispensary, its school and its rest house and its leper colony, is built in the Gond manner, but with little details of sanitation, etc., that the Gonds have overlooked, and with flowers everywhere where flowers will grow. Here where all creeds are honoured and Christianity is practised rather than preached, Mr. Elwin and his Indian friends live and work (*The New Statesman*, London, October 24, 1936, p. 8).

Speaking about this contextual situation and the human aspect of field methods, Elwin said: "My nearest English neighbors were a hundred miles away: I was thus compelled not only to work but to relax in tribal company" (Elwin 39: xxviii). As a "participant community-worker" rather than just an observer, he was able to identify himself with other members of the community and thus obtain information about the feelings of the people. Such a situation gave him the opportunity to understand the people, their traditions and problems in great depth. By identifying himself with the people and their problems and at the same time observing with an eye of a scientist, Elwin lived up to a social scientist's standards. Benjamin Paul observes: "Participation implies emotional involvement; observation requires detachment. It is a strain to try to sympathize with others and at the same time strive for scientific objectivity" (Paul 1953: 441). But to Elwin, "scientific objectivity" meant not to solve a particular "small-scale hypothesis" but to understand the core-problem of a culture in order to device means of preserving the culture rather than allowing it to fall before an alien culture. Further, he had a role more unique than that of an academician, a missionary or an administrator. This in one way gave him the opportunity to understand the culture in its many-faceted expression. Elwin wrote:

> I had the further advantage of being neither an official who might seem too alarming nor a missionary who might seem too respectable. I was simply regarded as an amiable and eccentric person who was interested in everybody and everything, and to whom people could say anything that came into their heads. I was the Bhumia-sahib (Elwin, *The Bagia*, 1939: xxviii).

In Elwin's admission *the Bagias* had accepted Elwin as their own man, *bara bhai* and a *mamuli admi* (an ordinary man). Elwin wrote:

> One of the greatest compliments an ethnographer could be paid was given me by a Baiga in Pandaria. We had visited his village and been received with great friendliness but none of the fuss and deference which the touring officer generally receives. One of my company was annoyed at this and said to the villagers: 'Here is a sahib; he must be someone important. Why don't you make proper arrangements for his reception?' The Baiga laughed at this. 'We know it's only *bara bhai* (the usual name for me). He is such an ordinary man (*mamuli admi*) that when we see him coming, we say, oh, it's only *bara bhai*, there's no need to bother' (Elwin 1939: xxviii-xxix).

By not following a routine path in the collection of folklore and by devoting himself to a cause, Elwin created his own methodology in the field. No method can be right for all situations; since methodology helps in understanding a situation and new situations demand adjustments in methodology. In *The Baiga*, Elwin collected short autobiographies of men and women "for these give a clear and immediate insight into those things which the Baiga themselves consider memorable." (*The Bagia* xxviii). At the same time, he was in a position to check his data with the help of these autobiographies. In addition to this particular methodology in corroborating his observations with the autobiographies, Elwin also described his unique experiences and the native people's assistance to him in cases of physical distress. He recalled one such situation:

> The next morning, I was standing in the forest when a large pig lumbered up to me with a leaf in its mouth which it dropped at my feet. I was rather moved by this-sort of Francis among the bird's touch, I thought and then forgot all about it. But no sooner had I returned home than I went down with a violent attack of fever.

> The local magicians waited on me, and soon diagnosed the cause-the witch of Bohi, annoyed at my presence in the village, had put magic into a leaf and sent it to me by her pig. They immediately took necessary measures and I recovered (Elwin, *Autobiography*, p. 149).

This is a true account of the participant observation, which demonstrates Elwin's keen observation and analytical power, and, at the same time, gives him raw anthropological facts about that which Malinowski has called the "imponderabilia of actual life".

The central theme of *The Agaria* (1942), Elwin's second monograph, was the "marriage of myth and craft." In this book he highlighted the importance of a long stay in the midst of the tribal communities in order to grasp the essence of their life. He castigated the hit-and-run approach of the anthropologists saying:

> There is a tendency to scamp personal investigation on the spot, to make brief visits of a fortnight or less to a district and then write about it, to conduct inquiries from the veranda of a dak bungalow (*The Agaria*, p. xxxi).

Elwin also criticized such an interview conducted by another investigator in his presence and with the help of a police officer since he was convinced that this method will never take the anthropologist anywhere close the facts.

For the purpose of obtaining exploratory information on the Agaria, Elwin made several trips to different areas to get first-hand information about the distribution of the tribe. He understood clearly that reliance on government records and officials was not helpful. Dependence on assistance from administrators in that particular period of time was unsuitable for scientific consideration, as Elwin explained:

> ... the Tahasildars of certain districts in the Province were asked to compile lists of villages in which there were Agaria smithies. This, you would say, was a simple enough business and, since government taxes the smithies, almost a specialty of Revenue officials. Yet every list was hopelessly inaccurate and useless, not only for the purpose of science but even as guide to research (*The Agaria*, p. xxiv)

Reaffirming his belief in the necessity of fieldwork in such a situation, Elwin declared:

> You cannot observe mankind from the howdah of an elephant. There is no substitute for fieldwork. There is no substitute for life in the village, among the people, staying in village houses, and enduring the physical distress as well as the possible misunderstandings that may arise (*The Agaria*, p. xxxi).

Elwin believed that "the truth is told to those who are loved," and data cannot be "bought by presents of liquor and tobacco." To be a fieldworker among the tribes of India requires "long residence, intimate personal contact, knowledge of local idiom" and "trained Indian assistants." For this reason, as indicated earlier, he frequently criticized hastily-made generalizations.

On this count Elwin criticized W. Reuben monograph on the Asur tribe entitled *Eisenschmiede und Dimonen in Indien* (1939) saying: "Reuben's monumental *Eisenschmiede und Damonen in Indien* was written after a sojourn of only a month among the Asur of Chota Nagpur. No scholar, however brilliant, can expect the results of such hastily gathered inquiries to be accepted" (The Agaria, p. xxxii).

Elwin's comments in *The Agaria* were not based on hypothetical assumptions relating the iron smelters with the mythological Asurs but, instead, on contemporary beliefs. Describing how mythology vitalizes crafts and how beliefs are ingrained in the life of the people, he writes:

> Special reverence is always due to fire: it must not be kindled for some days after a death; it is dangerous to swear by fire; if a man urinates on fire, his penis may become swollen and covered with sores. This happened to an Agaria boy in Bhanpur (Karanjia). He tried many remedies without effect: at last, he gave food-offering to Agyasur and recovered (*The Agaria* p. 117).

The Agaria is full of such personal observations which reveal his intimate relationship with the people, "the people that lived every moment of their lives for an ancient craft and by a living myth." He championed their cause based on what Elwin considered the decay of the industry, which created anxiety, fear and poverty among the people. S. C. Roy, in the foreword to the book, lauds Elwin for his method, which combines scientific method with empathy:

> ... we are filled with admiration at the clear and comprehensive, accurate and scientific and yet deeply sympathetic delineation of the life and manners and mentality of one of the poorest and lowliest but withal most interesting forest tribes of India. Indian ethnology is fortunate in securing the wholehearted (and let us hope lifelong)

> services of a consummate scholar and a sturdy champion of the poor and the oppressed in Mr. Verrier Elwin, whose name is now a household word among the aborigines of the central provinces (*The Agaria*, p. xxxii).

In sum, in *The Agaria*, Elwin depends on the collection of folktales, beliefs and myths of the people connected with the age-old craft of iron-smelting. Particularly in the section on myth, he quotes a number of his personal experiences and observations, a technique that is a rarity in anthropological or folkloristic work in India. These observations give a lucid picture of the human aspect of the field situation.

In *Songs of the Forest* (1935) Elwin (along with his collaborator Hivale) collected folk poetry of the Gond. Examining any of Elwin's tale or song collections, one easily finds that they meet the standards of a scientific exercise. Unlike many of the Indian Folktale collectors, Elwin strove to present his collections as authentic documents of tribal life. In a review of the Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal, Norman Brown explains:

> ... Mr. Elwin, himself a man of literary skill, feels the literary content of his stories throughout, though he scrupulously refrains from any doctoring or "improving" or even from excluding stories that have little, if any, artistic quality. With high appreciation of the value these stories have to the people among whom they circulate, and of the worth of these "primitive" people and their culture, he offers them as ethnological material. They are given in direct and most commendable-and for Indian folk-tales unusually-un bowdlerized form (Brown 1948: 186).

Elwin's methods of collecting various genres of folklore varied according to the situation and the problem of language in the areas concerned. Working among the tribes of Madhya Pradesh he "went native"; he stayed among them, became one of them, and through his love and affection for the people won them over. All members of the community were his informants, and they "opened their hearts." (From the comments of Prof. Walter Kaufmann). He did not set out to find singers or tale-tellers; they were all around him. Elwin collected everything, with the help of his team, while around the firesides in the little villages, on his tours through the hill areas of Madhyapradesh. In addition to texts, he included vivid descriptions of the social function of the telling situation. In one such description he said:

> We will give two more examples of the tales told by the fireside in these little villages among the Satpura Hills. They were given us

> by Hothu the Baiga in a remote village of Bilaspur. It was a strange and absorbing sight to watch in the firelight the wild handsome faces of the Baigas as they listened to Hothu, himself a tall, striking-looking man, naked save for a scanty loin-cloth, his long hair tied in a knot hanging on one side of his head, in his ears large rings of white and blue beads. Certainly, he had the gift of speech. He told his stories with slow expressive gestures, long pauses, a touch of poetry in his repetitions, and an inimitable trick of crumpling up his forehead at the funny bits. His first story was in form exactly parallel to the Saila songs, a theme progressing gradually through various grades of innocence to a highly vulgar termination (Elwin and Hivale 1935: 28).

My Fieldwork Experience in an Urban Setting

I chose to work on the *Life of the Middleclass Aged in Kolkata* for my PhD, which has been published as a book (Roy 2019). Two things dragged me to social gerontology when I was looking for a research topic for my Ph.D. First, my close proximity with my own grandmother and grandfather and empathy for the other elderly whom I interacted with in course of growing up, and second, the media-created view that the elderly are the victims of neglect and ill-treatment at the hands of their own children and family members.

I conducted my fieldwork in phases for over two years between 2013 and 2015, covered 120 families for background survey and conducted 64 case studies of the families of the elderly persons, in Salt Lake area and in two old-age homes in South Kolkata. The families in my study were all from middleclass background, largely free of economic hardship. All had high level of education, many were doctors, engineers, college or university professors, high officials and so on.

I had to use all personal contacts to reach out to the elderly persons and use all my cultural capital to build some kind of rapport based on mutual trust and liking. There were a few cases of rejection and in some cases the interactions remained at the level of formal interviews. I took all my informants as the "givers" while I was the "taker" and therefore I approached them with all humility and gratitude. For them, I was the next-door girl, naïve, who could be shown some "pity", given some advice and trusted to be taken in the private space of lived experiences. Because of my past interaction with my own grandparents as their granddaughter helped me draw an empathetic discourse about the elderly (a combination of cognition, articulation of the cognition in language and treatment of them) which, perhaps, worked consciously or unconsciously as the foundation of my approach and interaction with the elderly in the field.

I was living in Salt Lake during the period of my fieldwork, in the same neighbourhood of many of my informants. We used to meet in banks, market place, on the street, at the auto stand or bus stand, on social and political gatherings, and so on. The brief and informal interactions helped trust building. Having known that I was a trained singer some of my informants started inviting me to perform in the family functions as well as some social functions. Many of my informants were singers themselves or had interest in Rabindrasangeet. Having known each other's interest in music we turned many interview meetings into performance sessions. While working in the old-age homes, I attended many of the evening prayer sessions, and sang prayer songs along with the elderly boarders and participated in their collective social functions.

One thing that I really cherish about my field work is that through close interaction with the elderly I managed to establish a very strong bond with some of my respondents, and the relations that turned out to be intimate, based on mutual care, love and respect. After the interview sessions got over many of my respondents invited for lunch or dinner before I left for my native place (Siliguri). Some of them asked me to visit them whenever I get time and sing some songs for them. The most wonderful thing is that even after returning to my native place I am in regular touch over telephone with some of the respondents with whom I have developed intimacy. They call me asking about my health, my music and insist that I should visit them whenever I go to Kolkata next. I visited them as a researcher, a stranger, yet brief spells of interactions have helped establish life-long bonds. I was the taker and the respondents were the givers and the exchange was never reciprocal yet they showered on me unconditional love and "pity". A close look at the problems of the senior citizens made me a mature and sensitive self and tied me into relations of mutual empathy. Rousseau's idea of pity, which has been endorsed by Levi-Strauss, as one of the foundational rules of social relations (or social structure) always fascinates me. I look at my life and the people around me in the same light. My interaction with my respondents, which was a thoroughly learning experience rooted in empathy and embeddedness, changed my approach towards life and my relationship with my parents and all the elderly people I live with and see around me in the social setup. I went to my field as a researcher but came out as a granddaughter.

Conclusion

I did not stay in the field for a long time as Malinowski or Elwin did since they studied "other societies", which were so different from that of their own. Malinowski's was a reluctant stay in the midst of the aboriginals and he had to stay longer because of disturbing political developments and he could not come out of his rootedness in European culture and develop a liking for the aboriginals. Malinowski, however, was not completely bereft of empathy for the "primitive" but the demands of production of "scientific knowledge" kept him detached and unembedded ethnographer. Elwin, in contrast, "went native" breaking free all his cultural inhibitions, married a tribal girl, lived amidst the tribal population and empathise with them, yet came out with ethnographic accounts of great scientific value. Empathy and embeddedness mixed with the demands of scientific knowledge production constituted the backbone of Elwin's method. It is almost impossible to emulate either Malinowski or Elwin in modern day fieldwork, one can however, combine the strategies of both these iconic ethnographers in fieldwork depending upon the demands of the research project at hand and the field situation. The scholars who study their own and known society and culture are always (albeit unconsciously) a participant observer; because they can easily relate the findings from the field with the own lived experiences. The formal fieldwork is a kind of planned extension of an otherwise normal course of social interaction. Through social participation and dialogue the researcher can come out with a negotiated insight of the life of the population under research.

Right from our undergraduate days we have been taught that sociology is an objective science, an idea that has been endorsed by Andre Beteille and many other sociologists and anthropologists in India (Beteille 2002) and that we have to detach ourselves (in emotive and value terms) from the subjects of our study (Weber 1949). But when we approach our field of research and start interacting with the subjects of our study, we tend to take it as a form of social interaction in which both the parties (the researcher and the subject) approach with all the human qualities like emotions, passion, pains, and sufferings and will to care for the fellow human beings. From my year-long field work experiences, I have learnt that when the two sides trust each other they relate to each other with certain degree of compassion while often transcending the rules of a formal meeting and travel to the private space (in the space of mutual feelings). They share their problems, pains and joys, achievements and regrets of life to each other with an unconscious will to relate to the other with a hope for moral support. Even mere sharing of each other's pains can have a therapeutic effect. In this interaction the researcher is the one who is the taker and therefore the primary beneficiary of the interaction. But she cannot approach the interaction in the line of "calculative rationalism" (in Weberian sense or as Malinowski did at times); rather she travels into the private space searching for "grandparents" in the elderly, who, in turn see an image of their children or grandchildren living in distant places. The subjects in the field too try (mostly unconsciously) to connect to the researcher (in varying degrees, depending on the degree of mutual liking), and share their emotions, sufferings and joys. I understand that without this emotive and empathetic connect the fieldwork remains formal and the data, thus collected, remain superficial. The fundamental question therefore is can two sensitive persons remain unconcerned about each other's problems? Probably not. The other relevant question could be whether the outcome of such research would be "objective". I would answer in the negative to the first question and "yes" to the second one. Because without the emotive and empathetic connect with the subjects, the fieldworker is most likely to return with the superficial numeric information and the outcome of such research would be without heart and soul. As has been demonstrated by Verrier Elwin in all his ethnographic accounts, empathy for the local population does not come in the way to the production of true accounts of their life. Discourses, thus produced, will also include a strong will to bring about "desired changes" in the life of the people.

Notes

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1. Being a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, he was formally seen as an enemy and was required to report regularly to the Australian police (Skalnik 1982: 32); and because of the wartime situation, he was prevented from doing any but local travel. It was

with the help of his anthropological friends that he gained permission to do fieldwork in New Guinea.

2. Malinowski's second wife published his field diaries under the title *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* in 1967, after Malinowski's death. Malinowski wrote the notes expressing his anguish and frustrations as he felt culturally estranged amidst the people of a completely different culture. Questions have been raised on why Malinowski did not publish the Diary himself and if he would have approved the idea of publishing it.
3. It has been claimed that the word "niggers" is an incorrect translation of the Polish word Malinowski used in his field diary and his students and close associates were firm in their opinion that Malinowski was, by no count, a racist. The appropriate translation should have been "natives" (See Raymond Firth, the first "Introduction" to Malinowski's A *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967).

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