Exploring the Gender Dimensions and its Psychological Impact on Self: An Ethnographic Appraisal

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Abstract: *Fieldwork constitutes the heart of the empirical study in the realm of social science. The field is both a terrain for academic investigation and a repository of unknown unfamiliar experiences that deconstruct and reconstruct stereotyped notions,views and attitude of a researcher. This paper focuses on the psychological impact of fieldwork that I experienced while conducted it in a village of Murshidabad district of West Bengal during 2003-2004 for data collection in a research project. Precisely, I will critically analyze my field experiences centering around the question of my mobility in and access to the public places. Since my research methodology was ethnography, it demanded free mobility all over the village and uninhibited socialization with the people. So, on the basis of my fieldwork experiences, I aim to investigate the gender dimensions of mobility in the public places and socialization with different people and consequently, its psychological impact on my ideas, attitude and mentality. The paper concludes that fieldwork not only offers academic knowledge but results in significant psychological transformation of the researcher in broadening life views and ideas to understand the 'otherness' of the field and its people with empathy and to analyze reality with rational patient mentality.*

Keywords: *Ethnography, Field, Public Places, Free Mobility, Gender, Psychological Impact.*

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Introduction

Fieldwork in ethnography marks the journey of the researcher out of her/his familiar zone of theories and discipline-specific comfort to the world where dust, risk, excitement and newness on the road, uncertainty in work, insecurity, hopelessness and of course, warmth in relations with the neighbours and cohorts come up as a part and parcel in everyday life. To a researcher who is pursuing this genre of empirical research, the field is not just a space for academic investigation but a repository of unknown, unfamiliar and exciting experiences that deconstruct and reconstruct her/his basic stereotyped notions of life and most importantly, her/his self. This was evident to me when I had been pursuing an ethnographic study in a village of Murshidabad district of West Bengal during 2003-2004 for which I stayed over there for around six months for data collection in a research project. This paper is an attempt to delineate and analyze my fieldwork experiences in rural Murshidabad from gender perspective that had a deep psychological impact on my views, ideas and attitude as a female researcher. This endeavour has been undertaken with focus on the question of free mobility in and access to public places by a female ethnographer and her socialization with different people in the field. In fact, women's access to public spaces is a crucial concern in the rights discourse and feminist movements. On the basis of my own experiences as a female researcher, in this paper, I have delved into the following questions- How does a female researcher interact, negotiate and understand unfamiliar public places in the field? Do these experiences bring transformation in her ideas, attitude and mentality?

Literature Review

A rich array of literature on women and public spaces reveals critical gender analysis and entrenched gender discriminatory attitude and ideas in patriarchal society. To begin with, research project on "Gender and Space" undertaken by Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade(1) in Mumbai from 2003 to 2006 finds that women are permitted conditional access to public space on the ground that they maintain gendered behaviour and their presence in public space is necessitated by a respectable and worthy purpose. Thus, they will have to be conscious of their respectability while accessing the public space. When women are discouraged to take risk and not to go out for their own safety, it represents their brutal exclusion from public domain. Prem Chowdhury(2) shows how the public spaces in rural North India are highly masculanised where power and legitimacy of masculinity are displayed and preserved. Women's presence in these public spaces results in uncomfortable attention, ridicule, sexual harassment and even violence. Renu Desai, Vaishali Parmar and Darshini Mahadevia(3) in their study on mobility of poor women in and aroud Ahmendabad and the related problem of safety find that women's mobility is contingent to their gendered role that they perform in the household. Therefore, long distance between their workplace and home affects their mobility that ultimately, results in loss of livelihood in the Ahmedabad city. Overcrowded conveyance cannot be availed because of fear of sexual harassment. Again, Rani Rohini Raman (4) asserts in her study that single women in Hyderabad are viewed by the local residents as 'outsiders'

who are subject to scathing criticisms and male gaze, precisely, sexualized gaze, when they go out in the evening independently. More importantly, they pose a threat to the existing 'order' of the society where women's space is primarily within family. Free mobility of 'outsider' women can evoke similar such aspiration among local women. Saraswati Raju and Tanusree Paul (5) express that without explicitly excluding women from public space, patriarchal society permits women to access male-dominated spaces only if it is purposeful and they conform to patriarchy-delineated 'appropriate' behaviour. They further highlight that urban spaces in India are actually reconstituted and redrawn in such a way that it preserves traditional gender roles and gender relations. Hence, despite women's participation in these public spaces like the IT sector, the public-private binary remains entrenched within the paid labour force itself. Anke Reichenbach(6) in her study on young Emirati women of Dubai finds that they have to construct respectability by strategically managing their presence in public places like they avoid certain places at certain times. Thus, women ensure their mobility in public places in highly creative ways through daily practices.

Objective

The focus of the paper is on women's right to free mobility in the public places and freedom of socialization with the people therein. By drawing upon the argument of gender inequality from the existing literature, my attempt is to explore the gender dimensions of public places in rural Bengal and how a female researcher negotiates and interacts with these places to make her fieldwork fruitful. In this sense, this paper enhances the argument of gender-insensitivity of public places in India by examining it in rural Bengal and adds to the gender analysis of public domain. The distinctiveness of my approach to public spaces, different from the existing studies is that not just I have tried to critically analyze public places in rural Bengal from a gender perspective but reflects upon the psychological impact such gender dimensions cast over a researcher in deconstructing and reconstructing her ideas, approach and attitude with the acquisition of new experiences. In brief, the paper aims to highlight both the gender and psychological dimensions of my fieldwork in Murshidabad.

Central Argument

The central argument of the paper stands that to a female researcher, fieldwork reveals not just gender discriminatory patriarchal character of the public places in rural society of India, simultaneously, new reality of the field centering this issue results in deconstruction and reconstruction of her pre-conceived ideas, attitude and mentality so as to enable her to broadly understand the distinctiveness or 'otherness' of the field, its people and their culture, outlook and values.

Introducing The Field

The village where I had conducted ethnography belonged to Bhakuri-I Gram Panchayat (GP) in Behrampore block of Murshidabad district of Bengal. The village, Tarapur (name of the village has been changed in adherence to the principle of research integrity) consisted

of 265 households (till May 2005) as estimated on the basis of household survey. Basically, Tarapur was quasi-urban in nature i.e. neither rural nor urban. While National Highway (NH) 34 stretched all along its front part, its rear part was dotted with agricultural land. It was an attractive area to the people of other villages for its town-adjoining location, just five kilometer away from Behrampore, and for the following advantages. First, Tarapur offered high wage rate to the agricultural labourers than other villages. Second, there was scope for varied informal occupations like small trade, work in small factories and garages, domestic help. Finally, there was easy availability of transport to reach Behrampore. As far as economic profile of Tarapur was concerned, majority of the villagers used to earn from small trade and informal work. A small section was engaged in agriculture, and just a few persons were in service sector, namely, defence service and school teaching. The social fabric of the village was numerically dominated by "Haldars", a scheduled caste community. Two general castes, namely, the "Mondals" and the "Biswas" were next in numerical strength. The village was Hindu-dominated. Only two families were Muslim.

Research Methodology

Ethnography, a genre of qualitative research methodology in the arena of social science emphasizes direct interaction with the people and participation in the life/ culture/ community that is being studied. In brief, fieldwork constitutes the essence of ethnographic study. At the kernel of ethnography lie the narrations, experiences, understanding of the people about their own life, activities, culture, society, beliefs and so on that they speak themselves. Actually, it is an attempt to understand another life world and that too by using self. To elucidate, she/he goes and stays in the study area, community, environment to get hold of the views of the insiders. She/he is involved in both observation of the subjects and participation in their culture. Since I adopted a qualitative method of study, it included use of multiple tools of ethnography. These tools were informal discussions, semi-structured and structured interviews, focus group discussions, household survey, village mapping and intense observations. Keen observations of the visible matters in the field help to get initial inferences without human interaction. At the initial phase of my fieldwork, I emphasized unstructured informal discussions for rapport building with the people. Simultaneously, I had to draw a notional map of the village to understand its geographical location and administrative demarcation. After completion of these initial tasks, I could begin in-depth discussions and interviews with my key respondents. Noteworthy that in ethnography, instead of quantitative strength of the repondents, emphasis is accorded on profound long-term exploration of the views, attitude and experiences of a select few individuals. A total of twelve persons were my key respondents. Of them, five were men and the rest were women. Simultaneously, keen observations of the incidents, situations and persons where and when direct interactions were restricted or impossible proved to be quite effective in my study.

Table 1: *Profile of the Key Respondents*

	Male	Female	Other	Total
Sex				
	5	7		12
	General	SC	Other	Total
Caste				
	4	8		12
	Hindu	Muslim	Other	Total
Religion				
	11	1		12
Educational Level	Primary	Secondary	Unlettered	Total
	5	5	2	12
	20-40	41-60	Above 60	Total
Age Group				
	8	3	1	12
Marital Status	Unmarried	Married	Other	Total
	4	8		12

The Revelation: Gender Dimensions and its Psychological Impact

The first interaction with the field and its people began with my search for accommodation. In the patriarchal rural society, finding out an accommodation was the first challenge I faced as a female ethnographer. The accommodation problem and later on, other field experiences proved that one of the basic problems in ethnography has remained gender bias. The ethnographers are found to be more men than women. Thus, no wonder, a female researcher in rural Murshidabad was unfamiliar to the people. I remember three house-owners who flatly refused to rent out to a single woman on the ground of 'risk'. Finally, the wife of a defence serviceman agreed to rent out a single room of their house but on following terms and conditions:

- To ensure caller's identity before permitting anyone to visit me.

- To return house by dusk.

- Not to permit too many people at house.

Compliance to these conditions would ensure security in absence of her husband in the house. Since the beginning, restrictions on mobility and social mixing appeared to be crucial gendered norms to be adhered to in my field.

As days were passing by, I was trying my best to understand as well as to cope up with unknown village life. I came to know from some of my key respondents that I had become a subject of discussion among the people. How a female researcher was spending days alone in the village, my way of speaking, walking, food habit, attire, where and when I go, who with I interact- all constituted an interesting topic of discussion. Therefore, Mascarenhas-Keyes (Keyes quoted in Srivastava) (7) asserts that behaviour of female fieldworkers is more closely scrutinized than that of the males. Most importantly, my mobility all around the village and

socialization with different people irrespective of age, sex, religion and class were under scrutiny. My visit to male-dominated public places of Tarapur and the nature of socialization, particularly with men, were crucial in portraying my image to the people. I realized that public gaze was unavoidable in my rural life. While I used to go to market or to any public place, inquisitive eyes always accompanied me. Consequently, my urban independent feminist mentality created a mixed sense of uneasiness, embarrassment and annoyance within me. Sometimes, too many personal questions used to irritate me because I viewed it as an 'encroachment' in my personal life. Strict segregation of private-public on the basis of gender and consequent denial of or restricted access of women to the public places was 'normal' in the village.

Table 2: *Gender-specific public places in Tarapur*

For Men	For Women
Tea stall	In front of any woman's house (till dusk)
Book store	Open field (till dusk)
Public phone booth	
Under the tree	
Open field (any time)	
Grocery shops	
Local clubs	

My frequent visit to a local book store and the only public phone booth of Tarapur exposed the gendered character of the public domain. The owners of these two popular hangout were my key male respondents. Significantly, these spots offered sufficient scope to interact with their varied customers. Given the patriarchal culture, my presence and free interaction with men in these places were bound to invite criticisms. For instance, a few aged men either expressed blatantly or through facial expressions their disapproval of my mobility in male-dominated public places. Once a male respondent of mine asked, "*Didi, don't you feel uneasy to speak to unknown men? Actually women in our rural society are not supposed to socialize liberally with men. If she does, she is called 'behaya'* (shameless)". Similar observation was reiterated by some of my women respondents. No doubt, my free mobility represented defiance of patriarchal norms and therefore, my ideas and orientation, distinct from 'normal' rural woman of the village was unacceptable to many. So, in a patriarchal society, women ensure their access to public spaces by manufacturing purpose. This observation appeared appropriate when my sudden casual visit to a tea stall in Tarapur and informal discussions with its shop owner raised eye brows of his male customers. Their facial expressions and behavioural change suggested their strong disliking of my presence. Moreover, often I experienced that men preferred discussing with me social, cultural and religious matters of the village to political and administrative affairs. This reservation emanated from their patriarchal attitude, reflected through sexist comment like "*women do not understand political and panchayat matters*". In these circumstances, it was my

constant struggle in the field not to succumb to patriarchal taboos, otherwise, it would lead to death of my ethnographic research. My identity as a woman often overshadowed my identity as a researcher and professional research endeavours were obstructed by gendered limitations. My mobility, socialization and attitude were subject to assessment by the patriarchal principles of 'morality', 'respectability', imposed upon women. Therefore, Phadke et al and Reichenbach rightly assert that women construct respectability strategically in order to enjoy freedom of mobility. On the other hand, my female respondents had a mixed bag reaction vis-à-vis my access to public places. Some of them expressed deep concern over my lone mobility everywhere on the ground of 'security'. Some others appreciated my liberal courage and expressed their dormant aspiration to enjoy the same.

Distinct from my urban middle class culture and values, these experiences were gradually bringing my psychological transformation. My pre-conceived ideas and mindset that I carried with me to the field were in constant negotiation and tussle with the new socio-cultural reality of Tarapur. More and more I had been interacting and socializing with the people, I realized that my initial disliking and uneasiness due to certain behaviour and comments actually indicated my failure to understand the cultural values of the others. For instance, rural people were found to give high regard to community feeling instead of privacy because the former produces a sense of security and solidarity among them. So, what seemed to me 'encroaching' in my urban perception, actually, it was quite 'natural' to know about an outsider in the village community. With this new perception and sensibility, I found myself psychologically at ease to cope up with new socio-cultural environment. This changing idea led me to be rational and empathetic to the views, attitude and culture of the field. In the milieu of patriarchal blockade, I felt that the art of ethnography was my resort to turn the situation in my favour. As such, by employing different tools of ethnography like informal and focus group discussions, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, I began to concentrate more on my female respondents. Finally, it started yielding positive results in terms of changing the mindset of men, if not all. After knowing from their female family members about our matters of discussions and witnessing enthusiastic participation of women in my ethnography, they were convinced of my research credibility and started showing interest in having interactions with me. Therefore, my presence in male-dominated public places and discussions with them came to be considered as an indispensable part of my data collection. Differently put, I had to strategically construct a purposeful ground to have access to public domain instead of feminist intervention in the form of assertion of equal rights for all. These experiences reveal not just my constant negotiation with the field but with self as well. Instead of imposing feminist values as a protest to patriarchal society, I attained maturity to make rational assessment of the situation and to patiently analyze the causes of disapproval of my free mobility. After all, my chief task as an ethnographer was to understand insider's views about their life, beliefs, culture and values. Given this basic tenet of ethnography, I had to primarily inculcate and develop empathy in observing the field and attitude/behaviour of the people so as to understand the basic difference between their views and mine. It was this difference encompassing rural-urban divide and the lack of gender sensitization which pointed out the gap that I had to negotiate with in the field as an outsider.

Therefore, I felt it necessary to strike a strategic balance between indigenous culture and values and that of mine without succumbing to gender discriminatory practices in the field. Simply put, to ensure my acceptability to the people, I I had to be a methodological opportunist in the sense as per field situation, nature of the respondents, I had to employ the tools of ethnography so as to keep my research goals and zeal uncompromised.

The access to public places in the field was not free from threat to personal safety on a few occasions. Leanne Johansson (8), on the basis of her fieldwork in Nigeria cautions female researchers about gendered risks and threat to security like sexual harassment and violence as a part and parcel of the field. Critically analyzed, patriarchy glorifies 'sexual purity' of women so much so that exclusion of women from public sphere is justified on the ground of their physical safety. Hence, even if women are permitted to be at the public places, they are bound by time-specific limitations. For instance, for safety reason, women are discouraged to go out at night. Any such risk-taking is considered as against gendered behaviour and the woman is viewed as 'loose', 'unrespectable'. To substantiate, my unpleasant experience on NH 34 deserves mention. After interviewing a respondent, once I was walking down the Highway in late evening towards my house. I noticed that some running trucks had been slowing down beside me and lewd objectionable comments were being targeted towards me from them. I almost ran until I reached the house. Later, I came to know from an NGO of that region which worked on prevention of AIDS that flying prostitution is a popular sex trade along the NH 34 in Murshidabad. Basically carried out in the running trucks, the drivers and the helpers constitute the clientele. There are certain joints throughout the highway where deals are struck, clients are met and the service providers are disembarked from the trucks. Therefore, night reality of the field revealed gender-insensitive unsecured character of the public places that limits mobility of women. These vulnerabilities adversely affected the course and dynamism of my ethnographic study because I had to rearrange my research work within restricted time.
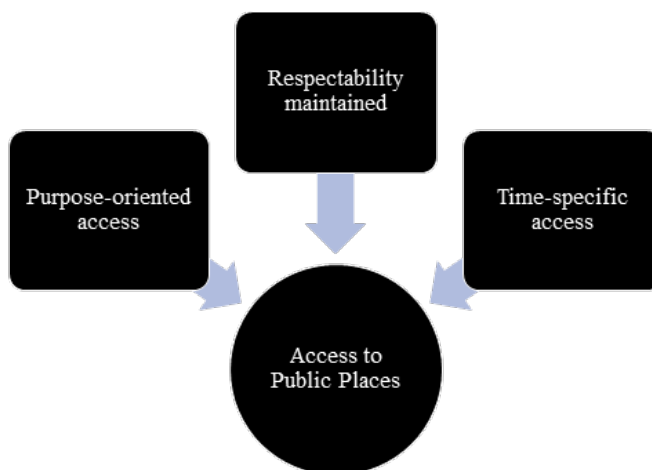

Figure 1: Decisive Factors in women's access to public places

Conclusion

My fieldwork in rural Bengal bears testimony of gender perspective of research venture in an unfamiliar terrain. The findings project an entrenched culture of exclusion of women from public sphere in India in the sense they are either denied equal access to all the places or permitted on certain patriarchal terms and conditions. However, my fieldwork experiences act as a practical lesson to develop tolerant mindset to understand the perspectives and views of the others with empathy and to analyze reality with patient rational approach. Throughout the course of my study, on one hand, I understood the dominant role of gender in directing my research journey, on the other hand, underwent a process of self-introspection of my stereotyped views and outlook. The whole process resulted in significant psychological transformation. This fact broadens the life views and mentality to empathitically understand the values and attitude of the others instead of forceful assertion of one's own ideas. In a nutshell, a continuous process of deconstruction and reconstruction of self characterizes the fieldwork. The paper, by revealing the psychological impact of fieldwork on the researcher, actually throws light on the prospect of exploring the psychological dimensions of ethnography in order to understand the relationship, negotiation and tussle between professional and personal aspects of the researcher in the field.

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