DOING ETHNOGRAPHY REMOTELY: RETHINKING METHODOLOGIES OF FIELDWORK IN GABURA OF SOUTHWEST BANGLADESH DURING THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This article describes the possible processes of conducting ethnographic fieldwork remotely through mediated ways among the Gabura Islanders in Southwest region of Bangladesh during the global COVID-19 pandemic. As observed, due to the impact of COVID-19, a crisis of choosing the 'field' and conducting 'fieldwork' has taken place in writing ethnography that requires both methodological and theoretical rethinking. However, the basic of anthropological fieldwork is physical immersion into the culture as much as possible. Also, it has become nearly impossible to conduct field research in such an intimate way during the period of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic situation has forced the ethnographers to stay home and have had to find new way of gaining access to the field. To this backdrop, this article depicts the possible processes of conducting ethnographic fieldwork through mediated ways such as using digital communications and engaging research assistant in the data collection process. Thus, the article presents author's own experiences and challenges of doing ethnography remotely through mediates ways by gaining rapport and making interaction with the Gabura Islanders in Southwest Bangladesh during the covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, this article does not advocate that in-person immersion of fieldwork should be replaced by alternative means or mediated ways, rather urges to consider the changing methodologies as choices not as necessity of conducting conventional ethnography.

Keywords: Ethnography, Covid-19, Methodology, Online Interview, Research Assistant, Gabura, Bangladesh

Introduction

"I am an environmental anthropologist in the making. I study environmental

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changes, particularly on the Southwest region of Bangladesh where salinity intrusion, periodic cyclone, flood, riverbank erosion are very frequent. Are you going to Bangladesh for fieldwork? Yes, I will conduct an ethnographic fieldwork, it is a must for someone like me who has a formal training in anthropology. Are you sure of it? Pandemic is still with us … Ok, I am not sure, but I can't imagine writing my ethnography without fieldwork. Wish me luck! Oh, sure. Good luck. Bye!"

This was the 'elevator pitch' I had to deliver almost every day to my friends, classmates and even professors regarding my fieldwork strategies for 'Research Paper' (RP) in the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands. I was there as an MA student majoring in 'Agrarian, Food and Environmental Studies' (AFES) from August 2020 to December 2021 during the peak of covid-19 pandemic. The more I spoke about the prospect of doing ethnographic fieldwork repeatedly to my friends, the more I doubted its possibility and became less confidence. The pandemic scenario began to deteriorate rapidly in every month. It was extremely difficult to travel internationally by airplane during that time. I was frustrated and stopped talking with my friends and peers about the fieldwork possibility in Bangladesh. At the end of the coursework, one of our professors told in the classroom, 'last year, many students couldn't conduct in-person fieldwork but still they managed to produce excellent research paper. So, don't be worried much about the in-person fieldwork'. Hearing that, I began to rethink my own fieldwork methods and strategies for writing research paper.

After few months of intensive coursework, our journey with research paper started at the middle of term 2. We were told by our major's convenor that we could approach personally to any faculty members as part of choosing supervisor for our research paper. When I wrote to one of the faculty members that I am interested to work with her, she immediately responded. My supervisor is an environmental anthropologist, did ethnographic fieldwork in South Asia and published numerous articles and books on environmental issues. It was a very easy decision for me to take her as my supervisor since my principal research interest was on water management in Southwest Bangladesh. So, next day, we met in the department, had a long and fruitful conversation about so many things, including our common research interest, water. I immediately expressed my anxiety about the possibility of going to Bangladesh for conducting in-person fieldwork due to the uncertainty associated with covid-19 pandemic. My supervisor also agreed with this difficulty and suggested an alternative plan: to go for archival research on water management since the Dutch has been helping Bangladesh in the coastal water management for a long time. But we both immediately realized that archival materials would be in

Dutch language and getting access to the archives would be another hassles due to the Covid protocol, lockdown and even curfew. So, I showed my eagerness to write my research paper on the environmental issues of Bangladesh. However, after few hesitations and further conversation with the previous batch students who conducted remote research, I finally took the decision not to change my research topic and, because of the covid pandemic, I redesigned my fieldwork as a remote exercise.

But my initial preparations and conversations didn't reduce my methodological anxieties (Marcus, 1995) and the fear of losing the classical virtues, technical skills and ethnographic self of an ethnographer (Fine, 1993) during the actual fieldwork which I learned as a trained anthropologist. So, in this article, I narrate the ways I tried to overcome these difficulties during the writing of my research paper at the ISS. Also, this article is neither theoretically ambitious nor methodologically innovative conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Bangladesh. More specifically, this article deals with the methodological choices I was forced to make for conducting a remote ethnography during covid-19 pandemic. By bringing the idea of remote ethnography, anthropology from home into this writing, I put forward some critical reflections on anthropological understanding of 'field' and 'fieldwork' in the context of writing ethnography during the covid-19 pandemic.

My research (Zaid, 2021) dealt with how local people are managing fresh water on a coastal Island in Bangladesh where water is very scarce due to saline intrusion, shrimp cultivation and periodic cyclones and embankment collapse. The research was conducted on Gabura Island, which is under Shyamnagar Upazila (sub-district) of Satkhira district in Bangladesh. I used political ecology, infrastructural studies as well as science and technology studies as theoretical and analytical perspectives to show that the failure of community based water management, mainly supported by NGOs, gives rise to household and market based water management in the study Island. This transformation also accelerates water commodification in the study Island very rapidly.

First Step towards Imagining a place

However, distance between my study Island and capital city Dhaka is 340 kilometres. I first visited Gabura in 2010 just a few months after cyclone *Aila* hit on the Island. I went there as volunteer on behalf of a network of NGOs whose primary job was to provide safe drinking water to the Islanders. I spent few hours on the Island and observed the scar of cyclone everywhere. That brief encounter with

the Island remained in my thoughts for the next few years and beyond. However, after eleven years, while working on my research in ISS, when the opportunity presented itself to conduct research, I immediately thought about returning back to Gabura. My research topic and question were expected to be explored by ethnographic observation. But, due to pandemic, the impossibility of going back to Bangladesh for in-person fieldwork was in part of an issue of personal safety. It was also an ethical dilemma for possibility of my role in spreading virus among the research participants. Despite this being a challenge, I use this as an opportunity to rethink the idea of 'field' and 'fieldwork'.

The first concrete step was writing a research design and presenting it in front of the supervisor, second reader, peer discussants and classmates. During that moment, I was sure that I couldn't travel back to Bangladesh for fieldwork, and I decided that I would hire a research assistant and use online interviews. Before presenting the research design, my second reader asked me, 'are you nervous?'; I replied, 'yes, I am, why not'. She again said, with a smile, 'don't worry. It would be a friendly meeting'. When I presented my research design in the seminar, I received a tons of advice and suggestions regarding fieldwork, theoretical perspectives, research questions and objectives. All the participants were curious about how I would manage my data collection without directly going to Bangladesh for fieldwork. One of the participants even raised the question of whether my research should be called as 'ethnography' due to the lack of in-person fieldwork. After the seminar, I started to read several articles on how ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork is being affected by the Covid pandemic and how to overcome this difficulty. 'My seminar is a success'- I began to think!

After the research proposal seminar, I received an email from the Institute mentioning that I need to take fieldwork clearance from the authority before I start collecting data. A form was sent with instructions by updating with information like the Covid situation of my study site, how would I conduct my fieldwork, what would be the role of research assistant, what would be the challenges and how would I overcome the situation, how would I ensure the 'no-harm' policy. I sat with my supervisor for few long conversations. Then, the form was sent to the Institute and within few days, I was granted the official permission to carry out my fieldwork for the research.

From 'being there' to 'being everywhere'

As my research was on the environmental changes in a particular local setting,

observing physical environment is extremely important for doing any environmental research. Besides, geographical existence of the 'field' and 'being there' in-person is intertwined into ethnographic inquiry. What lacks in my fieldwork was the 'being there' aspect of ethnographic research. This absence of 'going out' in a clearly defined place didn't presuppose a spatial distinction between 'home' and a place of discovery (Clifford, 1997, p. 186). Rather than resting on this type of binary, I started to rethink about the idea of 'field' before my 'fieldwork'. When we meet any anthropologists, we ask the most common question after the initial introduction, 'where did you conduct your fieldwork?', or 'where is your field'? I acknowledge that the Malinowskian image of fieldwork in a territorially bounded, localized community, or 'a culture' in a highly connected world is contested everywhere (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 4; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997a, p. 1). Side by side, the representational crisis of ethnographic writing, use of reflexive dimension, critique of objectivity and neutrality and revisioning the positivist epistemology were long been discussed in Anthropology (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford, 1986). As a result, the almost taken for granted belief that 'field' is associated with a concrete place, a committed localism (Marcus, 1995, p.100) for the ethnographer, suffers serious challenges in modern anthropology during the 1980s. The shifting idea of 'field' as a single, geographical place to 'field' as a series of sites and networks helped me to reorganize my methodology for this research.

And yet, not being able to be in-person in the fieldwork place adds a considerable layer of epistemological tests. In particular, as this research is about environmental challenges that local people face and experience, not being able to observe the people in their actual physical and social environment adds another layer of difficulty. Though fieldwork in a particular geographical location creates a sense of 'being there' (Borneman & Hammoudi, 2009), my research was completely done without such direct in-person fieldwork. Under this circumstance, the idea of 'field' is being reframed as a series of sites and networks (Burrell, 2009) rather than a single site or location as an alternative configuration. As a result, I conceived of the field composed of several sites such as my room in the Netherlands, the Island Gabura and the internet as an intricately connected space. How could I imagine 'people' and 'field' as a researcher when I am not 'there' in person? I was continuously questioning the idea of 'field' and its 'single-sitedness', and my own experience and role as a researcher in it. For me, 'field' is everywhere. Sometimes, it is my room, sometimes, it is the people and place, or the internet space. In fact, it is the summation of all. The concept of 'being there' should be understood in a different

manner, perhaps by being present in time instead of in space or place (Podjed, 2021, p.289) mediated through research assistant and digital communications and it was a transformative feeling for me moving from the 'being there' to 'being everywhere' in the process of my research.

Involvement of the Research Assistant

Through my personal connection, I hired a research assistant, Md. Helaluzzaman, who is 24 and a student of the University of Dhaka. He was born and brought up in the Island. His father owns two acres of shrimp farms and is respected by the community people. After our initial conversation, we exchanged our WhatsApp number, and our regular conversation became part of my daily life. In fact, I looked for a research assistant who should be a student and also familiar with the Island environment. Also, university attending students are usually familiar with research and trained in handling technologies. Besides, in the pandemic context, a research assistant from the outside would be difficult to be accepted among the local people. It would have also been unsafe for the research assistant from the outside to travel during the pandemic too. I was in a farm conviction that a local from the Island would be in a better position to explain the environmental change of the Island with its background stories. He was also well accepted by the community people as not many youths from the Island have had the opportunity to attend university before him. Besides, he was well connected with the outsiders like NGOs staffs, journalists, members of the Union Parishad. Initially, we talked about the socio-economic structure, the physical environment, shrimp farming, water bodies, embankments, cyclones and riverbank erosion etc of the study Island. After the first phase of familiarity, our conversation was more and more focused on my research topic and questions and how this research should be conducted. As he didn't have any previous experience with ethnographic research, we talked in detail how to conduct unstructured interview, how to take fieldnotes and write field reports etc. I also sent an interview guide so that he could effectively conduct in-depth interview with the local people.

Though I am aware of the fact that there are arguments against the fixity of a distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' (Narayan, 1993) and also the supreme advantage of local as 'authentic insider', research assistant comes into the field with their own values, biasness, norms and perception as it is generally accepted that one's position within the social world influences the way (s)he see things (Turner, 2010). Let me give an example. One of the major causes of manufacturing freshwater scarcity in the study Island is shrimp cultivation in the

saline water. Though there are different categories of shrimp cultivators among the Islanders, from 'shrimp elites' to small shrimp cultivators, father of my research assistant owns a very small shrimp farm, and I was aware of the fact. Interestingly, he acknowledged the fact that shrimp farming causes freshwater scarcity in the Island but also confessed that he couldn't go against it as many livelihoods are dependent on it. That is why I always looked for different sources regarding the shrimp farming and its associated activities. But research assistant was very open about its harmful effects on the Island ecosystem, and it was helpful for me for his understanding.

Women are the chief collector of fresh water for household activities in the study island and one of the major difficulties for me taking information from the women's folk. Because village patriarchal culture and gender norms are little bit stricter about talking with women. My research assistant also showed a little bit reluctance to directly talking with women for this purpose. Besides, I am a complete stranger with whom village women would deny talking over telephone for a long time. I intended to bring a gender perspective to my research work since women are the exclusive collectors and users of fresh water in rural areas. To overcome this, I sought help to my research assistant's family. I talked with the mother and younger sister of my research assistant over the telephone to get a glimpse of the women's involvement in water collection.

What I tried to do was to resist the simplistic understanding of research assistant as a data collector in the filed on behalf of myself. Rather, I wanted to show how he is a constitutive part of the field itself. From the very beginning, I started to think about the research assistant as an extension of myself, rather than separated. Besides, there was 'employer-employee dynamic' (Middleton & Cons, 2014, p. 284) in my relationship with the research assistant. I was granted a small fund from the International Institute of Social Research (ISS) for hiring a research assistant. I strongly believe that the commodification and economic recognition of research assistant's labour generated more seriousness and rigorousness to his commitment. Beyond that, my relationship with the research assistant was almost free of any barriers. I am not a foreigner to the research assistant and that's why there is no language barrier. The age difference between us was under 12 and we speak the same language. The only difference between us is I teach at the university where he studied his graduation, though not in the same department. I was eager to meet him in person when I arrived in Bangladesh after completing my study in abroad. I invited him in my office for lunch and we had a great conversation about my in-person visit in the study Island for further research.

Online Interviews

Although online interview was once restricted to video platforms like Skype, there has recently been a surge in the options for communicative technologies like Viber, WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, Instagram, Voip (voice over internet protocol) which makes the interview with the research participants much easier and quicker. When the research assistant took a break from the data collection due to his final examination in the university, I intensified my online interviews with different medium. Before starting the interview, I already made a list of participants with whom I am going to interview, but the purpose of my first call was building rapport with the research participants.

I conducted online interview with two types of research participants. I conducted interviews with some NGO staffs, government officials and local journalists via WhatsApp and Messenger. But I used Voip call when I talked with all the Islanders. I managed to create some forms of relationship with the research participants, even though it was online. Interview with the local people did take place in a time when they had more leisure, especially during the evening when people came back from their work, had dinner and finished their prayers. So, the local people didn't find the interview moments as burdensome.

However, online interview moments were also charming in many senses because Islanders had curiosity about me, particularly due to my location in a European country. I never used video call during the interview due to poor connection from the other side, but, at the end of the interview, many participants wanted to see me or have a look on the landscape of Netherlands. In one such occasion, when I was requested by the research participants to show them the natural beauty through video call, I showed them the flowers and trees of the Royal Garden, a place very close to my hostel and where I frequently went there for walking. Sometimes, interview was reciprocal. During one interview over the phone (VoIP), interviewees asked me questions like, 'in which country you are in? What is the corona situation there? Did you get your vaccine? How is the snow?' etc. Questions like these from them were very common and their inquisitiveness pushed me more to share about myself and made the interviewing process more interactive. On one occasion, the interviewee showed me the study Island ecosystem and I also had the chance to see my home country, its nature, river, forest, shrimp field etc.

One thing I noticed that online interview gives a relative flexibility to the research participants. Every time, I called in a convenient time to the research participants and asked for spare time to have a conversation. I hardly got the reply, 'I am

completely free now. Let's talk'. Rather, they gave me a convenient time for conversation, for example, after office hour, evening prayers or after dinner. In few occasions, they failed to attend my call in their promised times. In the next day, I followed the same procedure and received another 'calling' time from them and succeeded. So, it was easy to reschedule the interview procedure without much botheration despite the time difference between Netherlands and Bangladesh.

Use of *Google* and *Facebook* also helped me to imagine the research site in several ways. I down-loaded a map of Gabura, printed and hanged it on the wall in front of my reading table. Looking for Gabura in *Google Maps* was a bedtime habit for me. Those cartographic imaginations helped me to think about the study Island in a more creative way. Besides, I joined in a Facebook group called, *Gabura Welfare Society,* which had 3500 members during that time. Group members always shared local news and discussed several problems like embankments, cyclones, shrimp cultivation, tiger attacks. From their posts and comments, I also received a plethora of socio-economic and ecological life of the Island and Islanders.

Fieldnotes, personal e-Diary and e-Letter

The first advice my supervisor gave me was to take fieldnotes and write personal diary as much as I could during the process of data collection. Finding time for writing fieldnotes was not difficult for me due to the lack of physical mobility during the time of pandemic. The most suitable time for writing fieldnote in details was just after finishing each interview. During the conversation, despite the fact that I recorded our conversation with permission, I mostly did jottings. After ending every interview, I elaborated my jottings into descriptive and analytical fieldnotes. I filled my fieldnotes with descriptions, drawings, maps, sidenotes, analytical notes with hand writings, some of which were hanged on the wall during the whole process of research.

Personal diary was written directly in digital form in the laptop. After the arrival in Netherlands, I started writing personal e-diary as a curing practice from loneliness in a pandemic environment where social life was highly restricted with quarantine, lockdown and even curfew. I wrote twenty thousand words in the form of personal e-dairy during my sixteen months of stay there. My e-dairy was filled with so many personal things like covid situation in Netherlands, my trip to Belgium and France, my seven days stay with a dairy family in a Dutch village, our department's trip to a Dutch Island called Ameland, my experience with online classes, stories from the hostel life, party, visiting museums, clubs and pubs etc. When I started

writing research proposal for the thesis in the middle of the semester, my personal e-diary started to occupy a space in the form of hopes, anxieties, frustrations and amusement regarding my research.

There was another mode of writing practice through which I shared and stored my research journey. In the history of the discipline, we found that anthropologists usually wrote numerous letters from the field to their families, friends and teachers. Those letters, written by the lone anthropologists, were not only the bearer of being alive and healthy in the field but also sharing the field stories helped them in many ways. Nowadays, people talk and share a lot of things over telephone conversation. In my cases, I did two things simultaneously during my research. When my supervisor went for summer vacation for few weeks, she advised me to email my progress report. In every week, I wrote to her about my working progress. During this time, I also talked regularly about the fieldwork, writing process with some of my close colleagues and friends in Bangladesh. Those conversations and long letters in email form were also part of an exercise which I took for my research.

Ethical Issues

One of the most challenging aspects of doing remote research is to address the ethical issues. In my case, it started from the paper works for the thesis before the official data collection process was started. I had to submit a full form to the Institute on how would I handle ethical issues during the fieldwork. When I received the final authorization from the BoE (Board of Examiner), it meant that I was allowed to start my data collection in the field. However, some conventional ethical issues in any ethnographic and qualitative research are consent, privacy, harm and exploitation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 209).

The conventional way of informed consents in ethnographic research, such as taking permission before talking, recording or taking pictures, was strictly maintained during the data collection process. Conversations between the research assistant and participants was recorded with the oral permissions; all the images and photos were captured and used with permissions too. Particularly in the pandemic context, I was always vigilant and monitored research assistant to be careful about the process of physical interaction with the research participants. After the outbreak of the Delta variant in India, and because of the long and porous border with India (4,156 km), the government of Bangladesh closed the borders for several weeks and postponed all trade exchanges. With people nonetheless crossing the border every day, the Delta variant spread in Bangladesh. This was also one of the reasons

we didn't conduct any focus group discussion to avoid gathering. As my research assistant was a native to this island, he was constantly updated about the local covid situation. Also, use of online interview from my part in the data collection process was also a viable option to avoid in person contact as much as possible in the context of pandemic. Besides, all names mentioned in the thesis were fictionalized except the research assistant.

Helaluzzaman had to sign a 'non-disclosure' form when he agreed upon the terms and conditions as a research assistant in my research before, he was engaged into this research. Besides, I sent money to him for buying a new mobile handset for telecommunication with a high speed internet package. In many occasions, when I talked with the local people over telephone, we used the new mobile handset. All digital costs were taken care of by me during the entire data collection process. The research assistant observed all covid protocols (social distancing, face masks wearing, regular handwashing), whose logistic costs was also paid by me. Also, I clarified to the local people from the outset that this research would not bring any material benefits for them. Though I would expand this research into books or publish articles in the future, that does not bring any materials benefits to me either. Also, I made clarification to them that I am doing this research for only academic reason.

Conclusion

I am an anthropologist by training as well as employment and I 'worship' ethnographic fieldwork. It is really difficult to imagine doing and writing an ethnography during the time of covid-19 pandemic without in-person fieldwork. When I can't physically be with the people, when I can't travel to the place I want to see, when I can't share the everyday life of the research participants, when I can't see physical environment, when I can't sit in a tea stall for an *adda* (chat) with local people, when I can't share meals with them, how could I manage to write an ethnography? Every anthropologist has faced this question during the covid-19 pandemic.

But this pandemic is not over, it is still with us and perhaps will be in the next. Its impact on field research, particularly in ethnographic and qualitative research where in-person immersion with the local people in their natural setting is extremely important, will continue. Every crisis is also an opportunity, and it has motivated ethnographers to revaluate the existing methods by bringing new means, ranging from digital technologies and research assistant. As this article has outlined the

mediated approaches that I used in writing my research, rethinking methodologies could generate quality data and meaningful insights from a far. The emergence of 'digital ethnography' already provides important and critical contribution on how our daily life is being succumbed into online space. Ethnographic methods are changing and adapting in new situation, so does ethnographic relationship between researchers and participants (Kim, Williams, Eldridge, & Reinke, 2021). Besides, bringing research assistant for data collection in the field would also encourage for more collaboration and authorship in ethnographic and qualitative research where local expertise could provide important critical aspects to the dominant discourses (Howlett, 2021, p.13). While we don't know exactly what the 'post-pandemic' situation will look like, an 'anthropology from home' (Góralska, 2020) or 'remote ethnography' (Postill, 2016) could be rediscovered. I am not advocating that in-person immersion should be replaced by alternative means, rather I would urge to take these as choices, not necessity of doing ethnographic fieldwork in a changing condition like the covid-19 pandemic situation.

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