

Concept Note

Challenges of Doing Ethnography Today

Introduction

Ethnography is the systematic study of people and their cultures. It is designed to explore cultural phenomena where the researcher observes society from the point of view of the subject of the study. As a consequence ethnography has come to be equated with qualitative research project wherein researchers provide a detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice or an understanding of the culture of a group from its point of view. It has been associated with the method of participant observation and with the field of anthropology; it is common to use ethnography and anthropology interchangeably. The study of the 'exotic' and the 'traditional' dominated its repertoire because it was assumed that the latter were manifestations of the micro and thus represented the simple; that which could be studied through an encounter between ethnographer and the subjects (Hammersley, 1992).

Thus ethnography/anthropology has been defined as a qualitative research process and method (one conducts an ethnography) and the product (the outcome of this process is an ethnography) whose aim is to make a cultural interpretation. For decades, Indian sociology has been associated with this definition of ethnography and this can be seen in the innumerable studies of villages, the most famous being Rampura (Srinivas, 1976) or the many studies on single castes or tribes of India. When students of anthropology/social anthropology do research they state that they are doing field work.

Various developments in the discipline of anthropology and a critique of its ideological moorings have led it to redefine its identity; it no longer studies the exotic or the traditional and their cultures. Today ethnography investigates contemporary social life. This radical change in its focus, character and identity has dissolved its singular association with anthropology and the contemporary ethnographer may be a historian or even an economist and the research more often than not, is moored in interdisciplinarity. As a consequence, ethnography has incorporated a plethora of new methods to report events and details of experience. Nowadays ethnography explains how people represent their culture and how they construct the lives which they live and in so doing it tries to comprehend which other methods it has to incorporate to obtain the complete picture.

Though in its practice, which involves direct and sustained contacts with social agents, ethnography remains moored in its original identity, its critique of the consciousness and understanding of the social agents has changed its orientation. Nowadays ethnographers accept that the encounter between them and the social agents records and represents both the interpretations of agents and that of the ethnographer. The recording and respect for human experience and its irreducibility remains its focus but it also attempts to evaluate how these are objectified. Thus sociological perspectives and theories of knowledge constructions are now

intertwined in ethnographic studies. Pierre Bourdieu (1999:135) suggests that ethnography is a unique embodiment of human existence and consciousness captured in corporeal knowledge that provides a practical comprehension of the world.

In this context, Paul Willis and Max Trodman (2000:6-7) has suggested that contemporary ethnography is

- an approach of “presenting, explaining and analysing” various cultures of experience.
- is about recording how experiences of the subjects are embodied in “the large and small flows of contemporary history”, of comprehending these histories and assessing how these are “maintained and enacted”.
- about human beings as “part subjects’, part objects and voluntary agents of cultural determinations” which they are not conscious of nor are voluntary participants of...

Today ethnography combines a multiplicity of methods as it takes on its new avatar. Some ethnographers use post-modernist, post-structuralist and post-colonial methods whilst doing ethnography; thus ethnographers now deconstruct methods and techniques used in the field such as the field notes and ask how these are constructed, used and managed by the ethnographer. Others use historical methodologies such as personal diaries, government documents and biographies to excavate the complex interconnections between experience and representation. Still others have used literature, poems combining them with the understanding of experience through life history methodologies to assess how dispositions and practices are organised. (Atkison et al, 2001)

No wonder, contemporary definitions of ethnography do not highlight its anthropological identity. Rather ethnography today is open to social scientific methodologies in traditional disciplines such as sociology, history, political science, economics, geography, linguistics and literature. Currently across the world including India it has been revived to apply creatively in interdisciplinary domains such as cultural studies, feminist and sexuality studies, urban studies, media studies, labour studies, health studies, dalit studies, adivasi studies, environmental and sustainability studies.

This workshop will invite students who work in six different interdisciplinary domains: gender, labour, urban, dalit and tribal studies, conflict and sustainability studies to reflect on the way that they are using ethnography and the challenges that they face when they use this methodology. This workshop will help them to make a critical assessment of their ethnographies and expose them to the new trends and approaches of doing ethnography in India. Experts in gender studies, labour studies, urban studies, dalit studies, environment and sustainability studies & conflict studies will be the chair and discussants commenting on students’ presentation and guiding their next steps in organising their research.

Organisation of the workshop

This workshop is for doctoral students who are doing field work or have completed their field work and are in the process of writing their doctoral theses. It is divided into six sessions in

addition to a keynote and a valedictory. We plan to advertise this workshop in all Departments of Sociology in the country and invite applications with abstracts. 18-20 students will be chosen for this workshop and 30 local participants from universities in the Northeast will also be invited to be present. Each session will have 3-4 presentations by doctoral students and each of their presentation will be discussed by Resource Personnel.

The resource personnel are; Abha Chauhan, Professor of Sociology, University of Jammu; Biswajit Ghosh, Professor of Sociology, University of Burdwan; Sujata Patel, Professor, University of Hyderabad; Paramjit S. Judge, Professor of Sociology, Guru Nanak University; Satish Sharma, Director, Academic and Director Institute of Conflict Studies and Resolution Strategies, Sanghol (Punjab); Antony Palackal, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Kerala. The keynote speech will be given by N. Jayaram, Visiting Professor NLSIU and the Valedictory will be presented by VirginusXaxa, Professor and Deputy Director, TISS Guwahati.

References

Atkinson, P., A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (ed.s), 2001. *Handbook of Ethnography*, London: Sage

Bourdieu, P. 1999. *Pascalian Meditations* Cambridge: Polity Press

Hammersley, M. 1992. *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* London: Routledge

Srinivas, M.N. 1976. *The Remembered Village*, Delhi: Oxford

Willis, P. & P. Trodman 2000. Manifesto for Ethnography, *Ethnography*, 1 (1): 5-16

Programme

26th December 2016

Inaugural Session-9:00 am- 10:30 am

Chair: Sujata Patel (President, Indian Sociological Society)

Introduction to the Workshop: ChandanKumar Sharma, (HoD Sociology, Tezpur University)

Keynote Address: N Jayaram (Visiting Professor NLSUI BengaluruFormer Director ISEC)

Doing Qualitative Research Today: Problems and Prospects

Vote of Thanks: (Dept of Sociology, Tezpur University)

10:30 am-10:45 am TEA BREAK

Session 1 – Gender Studies-10:45 am- 12: 15 pm

Chair & Discussant: Abha Chauhan (Professor &HoD Sociology, University of Jammu)

Presentation 1:15 min

Presentation 2: 15 min

Presentation 3: 15 min

Discussants Comments: 15 mins

Open Discussion: 30 mins

Session 2 – Labour Studies-12:15 pm- 1:45 pm

Chair & Discussant: Biswajit Ghosh (Professor, University of Burdwan)

Presentation 1:15 min

Presentation 2: 15 min

Presentation 3: 15 min

Discussants Comments: 15 mins

Open Discussion: 30 mins

1:45 pm -2:30 pmLUNCH BREAK

Session 3 – Urban Studies-2:30 pm- 16:00 pm

Chair & Discussant: Sujata Patel (Professor, University of Hyderabad)

Presentation 1:15 min

Presentation 2: 15 min

Presentation 3: 15 min

Discussants Comments: 15 mins

Open Discussion: 30 mins

4:00 pm-4:15 pm TEA BREAK

Session 4 – Dalit and Tribal Studies-4:15 pm- 6.00 pm

Chair & Discussant:Paramjit S. Judge (Guru Nanak University, Amritsar)

Presentation 1:15 min
Presentation 2: 15 min
Presentation 3: 15 min
Presentation 4: 15 min
Discussants Comments: 15 mins
Open Discussion: 30 mins

Dinner: 7. 30-8.30 pm

27th December 2016

Session 5- Conflict Studies-9:00 am- 10:30 am

Chair & Discussant: Satish Sharma (Academic Director, Institute of Conflict Studies and Resolution Strategies, Sanghol Punjab)

Presentation 1:15 min
Presentation 2: 15 min
Presentation 3: 15 min
Discussants Comments: 15 mins
Open Discussion: 30 mins

10:30 am-10:45 am TEA BREAK

Session 6 – Sustainability and Environmental Studies-11:00 am-12:45 pm

Chair & Discussant: Dr Anthony Palackal (Assoc. Professor, University of Kerala)

Presentation 1:15 min
Presentation 2: 15 min
Presentation 3: 15 min
Presentation 4: 15 min
Discussants Comments: 15 mins
Open Discussion: 30 mins

Lunch: 12.45-1.30 pm

Valedictory Session 1.30 pm-2.30 pm

Chair: N. Jayaram (Visiting Professor NLSUI Bengaluru Former Director ISEC)
Valedictory Address, Virginius Xaxa, Professor and Dep. Director TISS, Guwahati
Challenges of doing interdisciplinary Research on Marginal Groups

Wrap-Up session: 2.30-3.00 pm

Chair: Virginius Xaxa
Distribution of certificates
Vote of Thanks: Chandan Kumar Sharma, (Professor & HOD, Sociology, Tezpur University)