

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK AND DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY - PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: With the advancement of time many new arenas of research and sub-disciplines are expected to emerge but that too in the tune of main line of investigation in anthropology. Anthropology distinguishes from other social sciences through the great emphasis on fieldwork which is considered as important source of generating data to know about other society and culture. A field study may last between a few months or longer where an anthropologist can easily generate data through participant observation. A principal requirement in such fieldwork consists of trying to take part in local life as much as possible. A researcher has to remain in the field for a long period in spite of various constraints. Despite all the hardships that an anthropologist faces in the field, there is no escape from this work, because it is considered to be an authentic source of generating primary data. Plenty of disciplines study culture such as, sociologists, historians, and economists but, what defines Anthropologists is that we study culture through participant observation. While, digital ethnography is central to our understanding of the social world; it can shape methodology and methods, and provides the technological tools needed to do research on society. During this Covid pandemic situation it is found that some of our fraternity members are very active in the Digital social networking platform where they are advocating in favour of Digital ethnography ; By holding camera or smart phone camera and recording any field situation and ultimately audio-visual projection in a digital platform is perhaps not digital ethnography. The superficial presentation at the digital platform on any issue, does not support for digital ethnography. To my mind, without in depth field study through participant observation the data cannot be generated to understand the social fabric of a community and inter-relation with their immediate environment or their perception on land use pattern and many other related issues.

Keywords: Ethnography, Fieldwork, Participant observation, Visual Anthropology, Digital Ethnography

Role of an anthropologist to know the unknown events, culture, rituals etc., in a word to know socio-cultural behaviour, and present those through his or her systematic write-up, which he or she has acquired during training course in colleges /universities, and placed those before civilized people or elite society that is, hard work empirical study only can able to understand the unknown events and with these idea in mind they (i.e. anthropologists) stay among the communities for a long period. In this regard Barrett (1991:3-4), Professor at the University of New Mexico, observed that “Cultural anthropologists are willing to go to extraordinary length to gather information about other human societies. What the public does not generally know is that this is an essential part of the training of nearly every cultural anthropologist. Those who intend to become members of the profession are expected to live for a year or more with some people until they have a satisfactory understanding of their society and culture. This is what anthropologist’s term fieldwork, and it is without doubt the outstanding characteristic of the discipline.

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When anthropologists write about a people, it is with the assuredness that comes from intimate association. They have learned their language, participated in the humdrum daily round, eaten their food, observed their ceremonies, and, normally, establishing lifelong friendships. They are not merely outside observers of a foreign way of life. They have made an effort, albeit temporary, to accommodate themselves to that way of life and to gain understanding from the experience. Those who have not been through the challenge of fieldwork are never thought to have properly earned their stripes. And in the competition for jobs and professional status, there is a clear preference for those who have demonstrated a capacity for effective fieldwork. Cultural anthropology is the only discipline among the social sciences that makes this a virtual requirement for professional status. Many sociologists also do fieldwork, and some employ approximately the same battery of techniques as anthropologists. But it is not a requirement in sociology as it is in anthropology”.

In fact, ethnography means thick description of culture and it is the one of the key tool in generating empirical data for anthropological study. *Cultural anthropology* is the study of human culture – our narratives, symbols, rituals, habits, beliefs and norms. Plenty of disciplines study culture such as, Sociologists, Historians, and Economists but, what defines Anthropologists is that we study culture through participant observation. Anthropologists’ use all manner of other methods too – surveys, data collection, interviews, mapping, and historical research. But active participant observation is at the heart of the discipline – the act of completely immersing yourself in another culture for a long period of time as both an active *participant* in it, and an *observer* of it. You may also join in the dance, and then analyses what the dance means. Essentially, we study culture at an “on the ground” level – looking for the individual stories, rich details, particular nuances, and thick description. You can only find by spending extended time with people in their daily lives. As opposed to pointing a telescope at them from afar, bringing them into labs to run hypothetical experiments, or amassing troves of personal data and analyzing it for the ‘big trends’.

RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH IN THE STUDY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Here in the following lines, we shall try to depict the significance of anthropological studies among a community or a village. Since the unit of observation among social / cultural anthropologists are group behaviour and to understand the intricate social behaviour, one has to stay within a community or a village for a long period; and only then the interaction between members of a community or a village can easily be understood and which in turn will be helpful for execution of any developmental programme among them.

In this connection Srinivas (1970 :120) observation was “that one of the aims of the social anthropologist in selecting a small community is that he wants to

obtain an idea of the way in which all the parts of a society hang together. Ever if he is studying only a single aspect of a society such as religion or law he tries to view it in relation to the total social system in which all the aspects are found to be constantly interacting”.

It is an attempt to answer general theoretical question by viewing it in relation to a body of self-collected data. In addition, it provides the anthropologist with some insight into rural social life all over the country. Of course, such insight is not knowledge, and once this distinction is clearly made, even a single village study enables the anthropologists to say a good deal about rural social life in India as a whole (Srinivas: 1970 :121).

The main aim of our government is for welfare of the nation / state / and the people as a whole. Since the mainstay of our country is agriculture, it is expected that government should aware of the peasantry and for such purposes there is need of accurate facts on a variety of micro matters affecting the peasant of the country , such as the extent of subdivision and fragmentation of land holdings, the nature of rural credit, role of *mahajan* (money lender) and under which condition the land is mortgage, the condition under which the landless labourers work in different set-up , the extent to which under-employment or disguised unemployment prevails in the rural areas of our country. The various aspect of rural social life is closely integrated with each other, and a detailed analysis is required for one or more related aspects and their interactions. Such as, rural credit system from a grocer’s shop in the village for daily subsistence in a family cannot ignore the existence of elaborate marriage and funeral rites, and ideas regarding how they ought to be performed. In short, an anthropologist through his intensive field study by staying in the village possesses enough local knowledge to exercise his opinion for the formulation of a proper solution which may be called practical research.

Intensive field-work experience is of very remarkable life time experience of an anthropologist during his professional career. It forms the basis of his comprehension of all other societies, including societies differing greatly from the one of which he/she has first-hand knowledge. Field work experience in anthropology is not substituted by textual knowledge or by surfing Google in the computer; because one of the tool for collection of empirical data is ‘observation’, which is totally impossible without fieldwork. In this context we would like to state that W. Ekka, Sinha and D. Murmu in their study at ‘Sardi village – A Study of Tradition and Change’ (2012 : 90) has shown that, “it is important to observe at this juncture that the similarity of occupation does not guarantee the same social status and position. The Viskarma Lohar and the Agaria Lohar undertake the same occupation of blacksmith. But , the Viskarma Lohar are considered to be higher than Agaria Lohar because, here the deciding factor of higher social status of the Viskarma Lohar is belonging to the Hindu caste group, while the Agaria Lohar is considered to be lower because they used to serve the tribal groups and use hide of cow in

blower while working”.

I am in favour of ethnographic fieldwork and thereafter by churning the ethnographic data, problem oriented focused study can be made. “Ethnography is vital to anthropology, but comparison is equally basic. The ultimate aim of anthropology is to understand the similarities and differences among human cultures and throw light on what is glibly called ‘human culture’. This cannot be attained through the contextual explanations”.”observation and the recording of the data together constitute one phase of the anthropological method, called here the ethnographic procedure. The other phase consists of comparison done in library” (Sarana: 1975: 106).

Further, we intend to present another example from Mckim Marriott’s Study (1952 : 261-272) which shows that villages in Kishengarhi in U.P. have not opposed all change, but on the contrary, have accepted new crops and new techniques of cultivation. What is even more important, he has shown that the technology of the peasant is not simple as it is popularly believed, while it is very complex one and acceptance of a change in any single component of production has direct impact on the entire system as repercussions. The agricultural practices of the ‘Indian Peasant’ can only be understood in the context of his technology , level of knowledge, legal and social institution, religion and way of life. The practices of agriculture constitutes a body of skilled knowledge which is transmitted over generation. The peasants technical system is interwoven with his socio-cultural fabric and they together form a closely-meshed interlocking entity. The introduction of any single tool or institution will have change reaction not only in the field of techniques but also in the socio-religious fabric and interaction—interrelationship with other ethnic / caste groups in the village. The technological system is closely related to the economic, social and religions system and sometimes there are constraints in acceptance of such change by the peasant. “Change is much more serious and pervasive in small and stable societies where the same people are involved with each other in a number of relationships, than in huge, industrial societies where the different aspects of social life do not form as closely- knit a whole, and where relationships between individuals are specialized and disparate” (Srinivas, 1970 :127)

It is to be pointed out that the treatise or report prepared by an anthropologist is based on his or her intensive field study, he/she cannot help comparing his or her experience with the economist or political scientist or statistician who usually deals with large areas, or with great number of people and their experience is of quite a different kind from that of the anthropologist.

To the anthropologist, the villages are valuable observation -center or a laboratory where he can study in detail social processes and problems to be found occurring in many parts of India, if not in a great part of the world. The anthropologists of present day should go to live in a village for at least 45-60 days

at a stretch or more in number of spells to cover the various seasons of a year not because he/she wants to collect information about unknown, curious, endangered and vulnerable customs and beliefs, but to study a theoretical problem and present before the people of the country for the further course of action towards development.

Thus, intensive village/community study will certainly enrich not only the data base but it also yields deep insights of intricate social behaviour.

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Digital anthropology is an emerging field focused on the Internet-related transformations that make possible a whole array of new social phenomena. Research in this exciting domain demonstrates anthropology's relevance and provides valuable perspectives regarding the relationship between technology and culture. As currently used, "digital anthropology" overlaps with terms such as "visual anthropology" and is in conversation with other fields, including media anthropology and the anthropology of science and technology.

Significance of ethnographic research on the use of digital resources, it contextualizes digital and pre-digital ethnographic research and demonstrates how the methodological, practical and theoretical dimensions are increasingly inter-twined. Digital ethnography is central to our understanding of the social world; it can shape methodology and methods, and provides the technological tools needed to research on society. Throughout the history of anthropology, scholars have produced valuable insights based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a small-scale centered.

During this Covid-19 pandemic situation it is found that some of our fraternity members are very active in the digital social net-working platform where they are advocating in favour of digital ethnography; organizing Webinar in digital platforms organizing training programme for the freshers or for young scholars. The term Digital ethnography is new with a kind of corporate smell which attracts young scholars. The NGOs and human resource departments of various IT sector organizations often borrowed anthropological tools and techniques at their institutes without acknowledging the discipline of anthropology; such as one of the chief tool of data collection to an anthropologist is through Participant Observation while, in corporate sector they call it PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) —very close to Participant Observation.

By holding camera or smart phone camera and recording any field situation and ultimately audio-visual projection in a digital platform is perhaps not digital ethnography. I saw in a seminar a Jarwa boy holding a smart phone and wear a half pant or a Birhor girl with school uniform and smartphone in her hand at her habitat signals for livelihood development. Now these are shown in digital platform and called development of livelihood pattern and termed this is digital ethnography.

Among the Birhor of Jharkhand they have two endogamous divisions, viz. *Uthlu* and *Jagis*. How a researcher can project through his camera the cognition part of such social divisions. I feel the essence and spirit of anthropology is lost in these cases.

In digital ethnographic platform the chief tool is camera through which the studied part would be projected through the lens of camera which is confined in small area while it is very much broad among traditional ethnographer who gathers all the happenings and record those by employing traditional gadgets.

There is a sub-discipline already in existence, called Visual Anthropology, where man and his culture is studied by employing Camera as main tool of investigation. The importance of Visual data for anthropological study was first realized after Margret Mead and her team made pivotal use of film research to demonstrate culturally specific patterns of behavior on Bali. Such kind of film should constitute a cultural document, a source of not only information and awareness but a powerful agency of change. Producing such a film also require a in- depth field work where participant observation is must for generating data which suit for thematic presentation of audio-visual clippings or a short film. Visual anthropology uses the camera as main instrument for the study of human behavior. At global level there has been significant progress in terms of technology for documentation of human behavior and perhaps when these are presented through internet in any digital platform, may be labeled as digital ethnography.

Anthropology and documentary filmmaking share participant observation in common. Till date like the present researcher, some anthropologists practices ethnography by participant observation and by churning those data they able to present problem oriented focused issue a praiseworthy output; and it is only possible as they live for long period in the field with the people they study and record and observe their all activities by their naked eyes.

If digital ethnography can be equated with visual anthropology, “then documentary filmmaking is based on technology that enables filmmakers to shoot and record synchronous sound with hand held equipment. Since camera and recorders permit intimacy between filmmakers and their subjects and allow filmmakers to follow events as they happen with a freedom unknown to other styles of documentary film”(Marshall, 1992 :114).

However, the documentary presentation in digital platform should be strictly scripted and planned. In digital ethnography we may view the subjects through lens like close shot / middle shot / distant shot which also should be strictly planned to project the cultural impression of the subjects.

The superficial presentation at the digital platform on any issue, do not support for digital ethnography.

In this connection I would like to share some of my empirical situations, which without participant observation data could not be generated and this is also very

much required also in Digital ethnography which is alike to Visual Anthropology.

Case studies

A.

The Dandami Maria (Bison Horn Maria) of Bastar used to manage their forest through their traditional knowledge, which they acquire over generation since their life and culture is cherished under forest environment.

In short, their whole interaction with forest may be shown in this way:

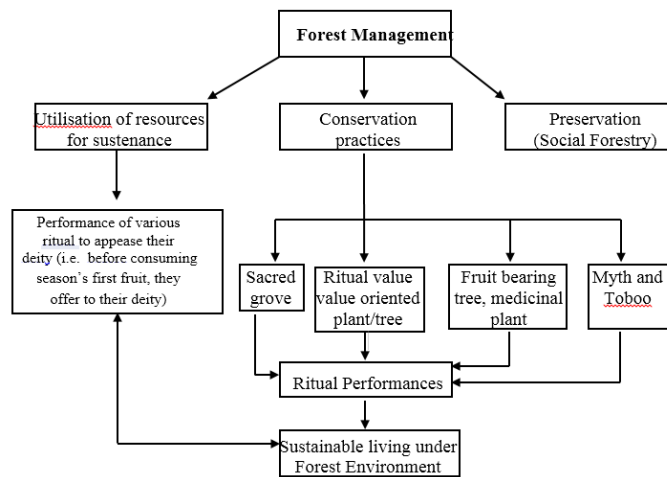


Figure - 1: Role of forest for sustainable living

B.

Livelihood Practices—Role of Cultivable Land among Dandami Maria (Bison Horn Maria)

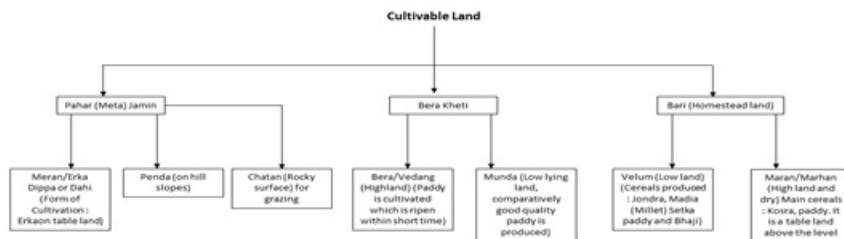


Figure - 2: Classification of Cultivable Land as per Retention of Water Capacity [Source: Sarkar (2020).]

C.

Urskul (Maria Khamba)

Now a days, the Bison-Horn Maria also prepare Maria Khamba in rock panel and in which paintings are made by the artists. This is due to non-availability of solid wood for such purpose in which there is some restriction by the Forest department. Close observation and analysis of such paintings reveals that impacts of modernization as well as communication are also reflected along with their traditional belief pattern. One may observe in such paintings that there are scenes of gun, umbrella, motorcycle etc. (Fig. 7 and 8). The most striking observation has been made in Karli village, on the way to Dantewada, that they have prepared a tomb made of cement concrete and on the top of such tomb there is one aero plane like structure (Fig. 7) which reflects their change in traditional belief, i.e. bird is replaced by aero plane through which soul can be transmitted to heavenly world more quickly. I do not know how changing value system from bird to aero plane can be portrayed without narrating the background data which are product of participant observation (Sarkar, 2016 :328-340).

With some photographs by the author this can be presented here--



Figure-3: Wooden Memorial Pillar at Faraspal.



Figure-4: Urskul- the Wooden Memorial Pillar at Bastanar.



Figure-5: Urskul—Memorial Pillar of a Stone Slab.



Figure-6: Urskul- Memorial Pillar (long standing stone slab fitted in the notch of wide and thick engraved wood at Nakulnar area.

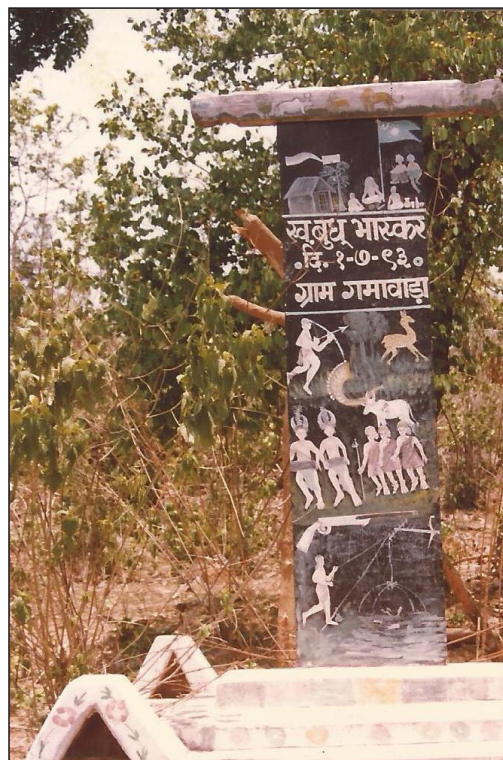


Figure-7: Urskul of Stone and Painting at Gamabada.(Present day), base is made with brick and cement.

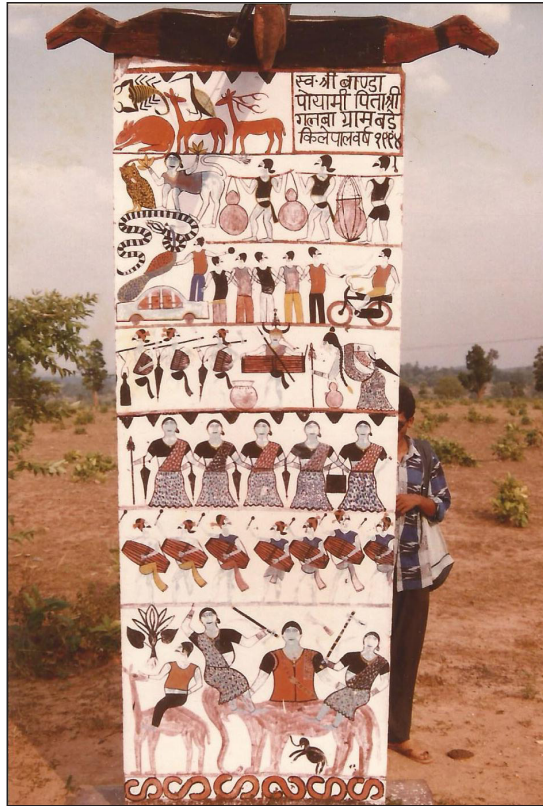


Figure-8: Urskul—Memorial Pillar (modern day) of a Stone Slab at Kilepal.



Figure-9: Urskul-Memorial Pillar of brick and concrete at Karli Village. [Source: Sarkar(2016)]

D.

Muria Kangi (Comb)

It has been observed from Vennur / Benur parganas of Bastar (now Naryanpur district, where there are 46 Muria villages, most of those villages were uni-ethnic and empirical data were collected from those villages, Sarkar, 2020 :17-23) that “every *chelik* (boy) desires to have as his *jor* (partner) the most beautiful, cheerful, energetic and presentable *motiari* (girl) in the *ghotul* and similarly, every girl wishes to have the most handsome and the richest boy and one with enterprising qualities. In theory it is up to girls to establish a partnership with a boy of their own choice. Boys are adamantly unequivocal about the particular *ghotul* rule that says that girls only sleep with whomsoever they wish. And here lays the great mystery of “excellence and expression of creativity” by the *chelik* to please their *jor*. The empirical data also suggest that *chelik* are busy in daytime in preparing an engraved wooden comb. These are minutely engraved where often their symbol of totem, natural surroundings etc. are expressed and presented to a *motiari* of his choice. Usually in preparing this comb a number of days are involved. If a *motiari* accepts the comb from a *chelik*, it indicates she has agreed to be *jor* for the *chelik* and she puts the said comb on her bunch of hair, as a cognitive symbol that she is engaged by some particular – *chelik* thereby other *chelik* will not approach her for *jor*. Usually this kind of *jor* lasts for 4 to 5 days. Possession of such beautiful number of engraved combs by a *motiari* signifies her beauty in *ghotul* and her social status. It is also reported that the *motiari* also judge the ability of her *jor* through his engraved work on comb, which signifies patience, energy, and determination. All these will be helpful for future if the *jor* partnership becomes permanent through the marriage bond” (Sarkar: 2016 :148-149).



Figure- 10: Muria combs, engraved on wood

Now, my submission is without in depth field study through intensive participant observation this type of qualitative data cannot be generated to understand the social fabric of Dandami Maria and inter-relation with their forest environment and their perception on land use pattern which are totally cognitive and the cognitive aspect cannot be captured in camera for presentation before the other researchers. In case of Muria comb and Urskul of Dandami Maria—the detail intricate value loaded sentiment generated by the researcher through his intensive field work—participant observation. But present day digital ethnography in our country during pandemic situation is far lacking to generate such type of data.. Perhaps in the name of anthropology it is curse.

Quoted from Geertz (1988 :82)“makes a distinction between ‘anthropologist as pilgrim and as cartographer’; as pilgrim he journeys through, invariably for more than a year, the nuances and matrices of a culture, usually different from his own inhibitions’ of the ‘other culture’ is an experience—a conscious experience of being enculturated—and a key to comprehend an emic view of the people, while as cartographer, the anthropologist’s task is to collect data which after being sifted and analyzed, yield the picture of a society the way it is organized and endures over time”(Srivastava: 1991:1408). My humble submission do not to misuse knowledge bank of anthropology and way of data generation from the contextual situation. It is our duty to hand over the baton to the young scholars with proper guidance which will in due course enrich not only the discipline but also the nation. No deceitful activities in this regard will be encouraged.

I personally feel under this present pandemic Covid-19 environment anthropologists, if they wish, must go to empirical situation, chiefly in rural areas, for generating empirical data, taking full personal health security measures like wearing of surgical mask, use of sanitizer in hands, frequently washing hands with soaps, avoid crowded area as guided by Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Earlier an anthropologist carried out field work for a long period over couple of months , now considering the pandemic situation, duration of such fieldwork may be reduced to two to three weeks at a stretch but visit the same area with a number of spells for collecting first hand empirical data. Moreover, rural / village area of our country are full of fresh air, less pandemic and usually devoid of any kind of mass gathering. Therefore, in my view, in anthropology there is no substitute or alternative for a fieldwork. Plenty of disciplines study culture such as, sociologists, historians, and economists but, what defines anthropology is that we study culture through participant observation. In fact, disciplines identity and survival till date exist by virtue of field studies and which earn a remarkable distinguishing mark from other disciplines, since the main research methodology is participant observation.

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