

Exploring the Insider-Outsider Perspective in Interpreting Indigenous Built Heritage: A Case of Sahariya Tribe in Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

Globally, cross-cultural research has become important especially for understanding marginalized and vulnerable voices allowing researchers to find answers resonating with these communities' lived experiences. A very critical concept in cross-cultural research is the insider-outsider positionality as subjective interpretations contribute towards determining the notion of heritage and influence the outcome of the qualitative research. This paper examines the above-mentioned duality in establishing built heritage of tribal communities in Indian context. In this article, I untangle this binary using ethnographic research conducted with Sahariya tribe in Madhya Pradesh. I discuss the significance of being an insider and the opportunities it provides to connect and participate in the everyday lives of the tribal people, outside of textbook learning. An insider status enables a researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the sociocultural construct and helps in more sensitive and nuanced research. I further comment on the challenges of an insider researcher and the need to build trust for a wholistic collaboration. Finally, I extend epistemological insights for future cross-cultural ethnographic studies working with indigenous communities and the impact of the insider status on conducting successful fieldwork.

Keywords: Insider-outsider duality, tribal heritage, cross-cultural research, Sahariya, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

India has a rich presence of indigenous population practicing different language, culture, ethnicity, values, and beliefs. Despite the abundant research on tribal heritage and government claims of empowerment, inequalities in living conditions, education, and lack of opportunities continue to exist. Such circumstances have led some social scientists to suggest that indigenous groups live in the *fourth world* [1]. Study of spatial construct has played a significant role in understanding their lived experiences. The physical environments reflect the cultural narratives, social practices as well as the

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historical traditions and shape their built heritage. More importantly, their socio-cultural ethos, traditional knowledge systems, songs, art and ways of living have been studied by different disciplines and often interpreted as “heritage”. Literature suggests that interpretation may contribute to expanding knowledge of cultural heritage and positively influence the formation of the cognitive image of this heritage [2]. To successfully explore the lives of the tribal communities, understanding the nuances of cross-cultural research is very important as these groups are very vulnerable and because of their poverty and powerlessness many have been coerced into research endeavors which further render them more vulnerable [1]. These interpretive studies are influenced by the

researcher's positionality of an insider or outsider while studying a cross-cultural environment.

This article stems from my ongoing doctoral research focusing on connection between the tribal habitat and cultural heritage. Here, I narrate my experiences with questions of positionality in the insider-outsider realm while conducting research with Sahariya tribe displaced from Kuno-Palpur Wildlife Sanctuary (currently designated as a National Park) in Madhya Pradesh. It further discusses methodological issues pertaining to the position as an insider or an outsider researcher and the shaping of perceptions. Drawing on the experiential insights of the last six years interviewing Sahariya people; documenting their original habitat and current dwellings, this qualitative inquiry focusing on ethnographic research contributes to an understanding of real-life experiences in a cross-cultural context. It should be noted here that ethical approval based on University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines was received from the Departmental Review Committee (DRC), Department of Architectural Conservation, School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) New Delhi.

INSIDER-OUTSIDER BINARY

In recent years, researchers have questioned the insider-outsider dichotomy [3–4], an important aspect of cross-cultural research. Positionality becomes critical when conducting research about marginalized groups especially the tribal communities, who have been othered, objectified and oppressed and still are neglected. Merton conceptualizes insider as an “Insighter” possessing special insight through “continued socialization in the life of a group.” In common parlance: you have to be one to understand one. Merton further states that one has either privileged access to knowledge or is completely excluded from it [5]. Banks describes a typology of cross cultural researchers consisting of four types: the indigenous-insider, the indigenous-outsider, the external-insider, and the external-outsider. Banks also recognizes the indigenous insider as the best typology for successful fieldwork for endorsing the “unique values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her primordial community and culture” [6]. Atal feels that in Indian context, the duality of insider-outsider is misleading. Indian society has continuously been experiencing increasing differentiation of its structure transforming an individual simultaneously a member of a wide variety of groups giving him/her a multiplicity of identities [7].

Insider status is associated with sharing common characteristics, such as language and cultural practices with the marginal group, allowing them entry in the inner circles. Insider researchers acknowledge the significance of trust to gain access to the researched group. Acceptance, thus gained, helps the researcher in acquiring knowledge intimately connected to the participants' lived experiences; allows them to observe and actively participate in their daily activities to experience the lives of the participants as one of them and understand the community. It is assumed that cultural insiders may be more sensitive and responsive while conducting research and can establish closer and trustworthy relationships with the researched community. Such proximities shape the future interactions positively; enhance rapport with local people and enable the insiders to navigate sensitive situations in sync with the social and cultural constructs. Deeper connections with the indigenous communities provide unique insights and help the cultural insiders to imbibe and present the situations accurately. Insider's approach of prioritizing the voices of the marginalized groups is a valuable aspect of the research. Liamputtong states that “it is only by immersion in the culture that researchers may have an in-depth and accurate understanding of the cultural groups” [8]. I contend that relationships based on cultural affinities and trust enhance the quality of fieldwork research and, sometimes, unearth hidden voices helping in new knowledge production. On the other hand, outsiders are often the non-members standing at a distance from the researched group. Outsiders are incapable of understanding the customs; behaviors, values, and the nuanced culture. He/she is inexperienced about what constitutes life for marginalized groups, their struggles and the victories. From the insider-outsider perspective, there is fluidity in the role of the researcher as outsider. The crossing over from outsider to insider is easier but partial. An outsider researcher also lacks the sensitivity to empathize with the “other” [3].

Both stances have significant ramifications, an insider could secure access easily and participate in production of knowledge whereas the outsider can push the envelope of inquiry. However, a researcher's status may change over the course of the research and the researcher might also be viewed as per his/her shifting identifications. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux [9]. The boundaries between native and other get diluted as we are all "another's" in the field and our multiple facets of selves connect as well as differentiate us with the researched [10]. As Merton stated, "We no longer ask whether it is the Insider or the Outsider, who has monopolistic or privileged access to social truth; instead, we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking" [5].

ESTABLISHING TRUST: ACCEPTANCE AS AN INSIDER

Self-locating of the researcher in indigenous research is complex, and its initiation is dependent on the negotiations and engagement process between the researched and the researcher [11]. For successful fieldwork, establishing trust and rapport with the researched community and being accepted as an insider by the participants is a critical step. During my preliminary study to locate the Sahariya tribe, termed as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Government of India, I connected with the forest department located at Sheopur, Madhya Pradesh. The forest department worked closely with the Government of Madhya Pradesh and Sahariya Tribe in the process of relocation in 2000s and still works closely with the Sahariyas in the matters associated with Kuno National Park (KNP). I obtained introductions to District Forest Officer (DFO), range officers, staff involved in daily working of the KNP and the people of Sahariya tribe through a network of family and friends residing in Sheopur, Shivpuri and Gwalior. The officers and staff were my initial introduction to the research context. However, a staff member involved in the complete process of displacement, allocation of compensation package, selection of relocation sites and resettling the tribal people, became the crucial connection between the Sahariya tribe and myself.

I was often introduced as a teacher working in Delhi but belonging to Gwalior, one of the cities where Sahariya tribe is also located, researching about their habitat and everyday life. This established my position as a cultural insider because of shared "social, cultural and linguistic" affinities with the local people. This familiarity with the research context resulted in a quick understanding of the traditional socio-cultural practices allowing me to cultivate trusting and long-term relationships with the community. Due to the commonality of culture, language, region and religion, I was aware of the behavioral expectations when meeting people of different ages and gender cementing the sense of belonging for both of us. Being recognized as a cultural insider allowed me freedom to take part as well as observe community activities. The participants also accompanied me and introduced me to other members of the village to help with the completion of different phases of research within my desired timeframe. During the fieldwork, I was invited inside the huts and allowed to take photographs and draw sketches. As an architecture student, I learned to visually document my observations of the built environment with the help of sketches. I used this training to make place-based observations to correlate the narratives of the participants with the realities on site. This visual method of data collection facilitated documentation of the site, allowing me to observe trends and aberrations [12]. After understanding my research interest in the built environment, I was assisted in gathering information from the people with experiences of, both, life in the forest, and after displacement. I was helped by the people in discussing different house typologies available in the village; dwellings built of "kutcha" (an everyday term used for a structure built of locally available materials like mud, thatch, bamboo, and wood) materials brought from the forest; dwellings built of "pucca" materials like brick and cement; construction of new dwellings by the community. To speed up my research process and save time, people were called to one place for interviews, sometimes near the "chaupal" (common congregational space) and other times to someone's house. It was during one of these conversations that I was offered a unique insight into their perception of dwelling and its importance in their everyday lives. One of the older participants commented:

"Everybody says that we have been given houses to live in, land for agriculture and to earn money. But what is a house? Our jungle (forest) was our house. We had freedom. We were happy. Now we only have a Kuthariya (small hut) with boundary walls."

This discussion provided a peek into their perception of home enriching my ongoing doctoral research. It also helped me to reflect on my own interpretation and understanding of this concept considering my education and upbringing. The insider status was most helpful during the process of formal consent from the participants. As victims of displacement fearful about their limited land compensation and due to lack of literacy, they were hesitant to provide written consent but happily agreed for verbal consent and allowed me to record all the conversations. As trust grew over the years, conversations became more fluid and natural. I was able to share personal experiences and discuss issues relevant to them even outside the scope of the research. Interviews with Kanti ji (name changed for anonymity) occurred over many months whenever I visited her house. Sitting under the neem tree in her courtyard, our conversations were joined by her family members and neighbors and turned into group discussions, a common occurrence during interviews with local people. There were times when I was the researched and the participants were researchers. I was questioned about my marital status and living in a city like Delhi. Their acceptance of me as an insider allowed tribal women to freely talk to me and offer advice on subjects, such as marriage and safety. Unlike others who might have renegotiated their positions within the spectrum of the insider-outsider stance, I navigated the fieldwork as an insider.

ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND GATEKEEPER

There is a deep connection between the insider/outsider positionality, language and the gate keeper in ethnographic research. This nexus is one of the most crucial aspects of engaging in cross-cultural research. Cultural issues require attention and therefore require sensitivity from the researcher to effectively capture the setting. Literature suggests that in cross-cultural research, an insider researcher should share the culture and language of the researched. Language helps us to understand human behavior, sociocultural processes and cultural meanings [13]. Language as a tool supports in navigating the complexities of a foreign culture and cultivating more in-depth viewpoints as culture is an essential component of interaction [14]. It also plays a critical role in blurring the boundary between insider and outsider. Forster feels competence in both the speech and nonverbal communication is an important and key tool to build trust and rapport [15]. Like every human wary of strangers, the Sahariya community was no different. My knowledge of the language spoken by them, Hindi (Sahariyas speak a native dialect), helped in connecting with them; understanding the meanings, concepts, descriptions, and expressions in conversations, verbally and culturally; and avoid mistrust and disruption of research. As a native speaker of Hindi myself, I could converse with the participants fluently and the participants were able to articulate their contextual situations in great depth. The knowledge of the spoken language also helped me understand the sensitive situations and changing moods of the participant. All these instances suggest that shared language and culture help in gaining access to the cultural community and provides advantages even over sensitive and knowledgeable outsiders [8].

Like language, gatekeepers also play a significant role in creating the researcher's position as an insider or outsider. In qualitative research gatekeepers act as intermediaries between researchers and participants. Gatekeepers can be individuals, groups, and organizations who help the researcher establish trust in the research process. Gatekeepers can hold some authority or control over the participants, or they can be one of the stakeholders. They are not "researched" in themselves instead they provide an efficient and expedient conduit for access between researchers and participants [16]. They are also known as key informants. The critical role played by a gatekeeper cannot be denied in a cross-cultural context. They are undervalued but essential in generating good research data and conducting successful research [17]. A strong relationship with the gatekeeper associated with the researched group helps in gaining and maintaining trust. Radheshyam ji (name changed for anonymity), a crucial staff member of the forest department and residing in the area where Sahariyas were relocated, was central to my research success. Having grown up with the younger members of the community since the beginning of the displacement process, he is well known to the tribal people and understands the community needs. My positive experience and ease of doing research can also be attributed to his continuous presence during my field visits. He accompanied me to all the villages and surrounding areas in the last few years. He informed me of new developments since my last visit; kept me out of all no-

entry zones of the KNP since the introduction of cheetahs in the forest and suggested the appropriate days for the site visits. He helped me in obtaining necessary permissions from the forest officials and the tribal people. These permissions greatly facilitated the smooth running of the research project. His familiarity with the tribal people and their trust in him proved to be immensely beneficial to my ongoing research. Any perceived threat from me was diluted due to Radheshyam ji's presence and, as mentioned earlier, I was accepted by the tribal people as an insider.

DRAWBACKS OF BEING AN INSIDER

Although insider status can be very beneficial to research, there are some disadvantages also. As a researcher, it becomes paramount to establish our position as a well-wisher in a community and learn about the participants' expectations from us. Over the past six years of conducting the research, I have repeatedly communicated the limitations of my research and my inability to solve problems they face. Despite my inability to help with their situation, all the participants supported my research and provided insightful information. This may be due to the nature of my research, the honest relationship established with tribal people, and our shared identities.

On certain occasions, I felt disconnect from their way of life, however, I did not feel the need to renegotiate my insider position on any occasion, at the same time, there were instances wherein factors, such as economic privilege and education acted as an important differentiator. Acceptance of my limited knowledge about their life helped me navigate and find honest answers. My interest in learning about their everyday life, especially the built environment, was a continuous source of amazement and amusement for them. Sometimes, in absence of any relatable answer regarding the spatial aspect, they provided me with unrealistic answers to help the research process. Insiders can also take things for granted due to the assumption of commonalities in experiences and knowledge. These false beliefs hinder the data collection and analysis process resulting in inadequate knowledge of the social world of the participants [4]. Incorrect outcomes can mislead the audience and impact the authentic knowledge production. Verification of collected data by secondary sources helped me avoid these kind, but misleading, gestures. It is critical to continuously revisit shared views and perceptions of the participants. Overlooking actual realities and characteristics of research participants may create misinterpretation of the information being gathered and analyzed leading to incorrect dissemination of knowledge [11].

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have suggested that cross-cultural research focusing on marginalized communities must employ culturally sensitive and empathetic approaches which address the narratives that are important to the participants. Indigenous communities of India are culturally othered and economically weaker, therefore, a successful cross-cultural inquiry also requires a robust ethical framework and respect for the cultural integrity of the participants currently lacking in Indian context. Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of the researched group is imperative to avoid adverse results for the participants. At times, researchers are unaware of their obligations and fail to discern methodological challenges in the field. The current research shows that the researcher's positionality influences the process of knowledge production. During my interactions with the Sahariya tribe, the insider status tremendously helped with conducting successful fieldwork and helped in a more nuanced understanding of the narratives and provided critical awareness of the context. It also allowed for deeper understanding of the issues plaguing the participants and also helped me to reflect on my own limitations.

Few epistemological insights emerged from my field study. First, familiarizing oneself with the socio-cultural context of the researched group helps to create awareness of sensitive issues and design appropriate research. Second, the researcher's identity is multilayered, therefore, it is important to reflect upon the nuances which sometimes give a peek into reality. Reflexivity, as it becomes better understood and better employed, can also be quite useful [18]. The process of reflexivity aids sensitivity and empathic understanding. Reflexive attitude allows the researcher to assess one's own subjective analysis of the research and can teach to be an objective outsider for the purpose of authentic research.

Third, it is crucial to be honest and share the research objectives with the participants so that trust can be built. When dealing with vulnerable groups empathic behavior is crucial to understand their experiences. Researchers must be open to relearning by continuously engaging with the researched community. He/she should respect the participants and show empathy but should also remain culturally sensitive and participate in ethical data production and knowledge dissemination. Finally, the research should also empower the marginalized groups and make them equal partners in their own stories helping the co-production of knowledge.

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