

Practice in the 'field': dialogues, dilemmas and discourses

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Is practice a noun as per the British dictionary or practice both noun as well as verb as per American English? Practice is both an idea as well as doing. The noun practice could be used substantively to mean 'development practice is complicated', while it may also be used attributively to mean the 'government needs to practice development'. Practice in the Development Practice program is learning as well as doing, is it learning to do or doing while learning or learning through doing? I want to look at practice as a method, but not as a mere technique of doing research; but as an epistemological discovery into practicing, generating a body of practicing knowledge while transforming knowledge practices itself.

What I will be sharing today, are erratic thoughts that are with me as I have been navigating through a course called Qualitative Methods in Researching the Rural for the last three years as a part of the M Phil Development Practice program. This process which is ongoing, and I can only hesitatingly start to share some of the dilemmas around 'teaching' a course on methods in a program that I consider has a distinct philosophy of doing research. A program which is rooted in a philosophy of immersion, how does a faculty member having a disciplinary training in sociology try to talk about the 'field' in development practice or the field of development practice and the methods of 'engaging' with that field? So, having laid out the two interconnected problematic, practice and field, I now try to share my experience of how I am trying to encounter and experience the two.

Ethnographer to practitioner: 'Field' for most of us in sociology has been connected with ethnography and ethnographers. From Malinowski to Elwin, the field of sociology and social anthropology has various notable names and works. Among Indian social anthropological texts some of the notable ones that have provided self reflexive accounts of the 'field' in which the research happened are, *Encounter and Experience: Personal Accounts of Experience* (Srinivas, 1976), *Fieldworker and the Field: Problems and Challenges in Sociological Investigation* (Srinivas, Shah, Ramaswamy, 1979), *Anthropological Journeys: Reflections on Fieldwork* (Meenakshi Thapan, 1998).

What is significant to note is that these works seemed to be the anecdotes, long footnotes or endnotes which could not have been a part of the 'main' anthropological exploration, (i.e. the real work). In other words, the field or the findings in the field had to be separated from the challenges or relationships that transpired in the field or gave the field a real flavour. The ethnographer was an investigator, trying to scrutinise or probe so as to establish truth. The field was always 'out there' and there were certain informants or participants in the field talking to, and spending time with the researcher in order for him (usually) to get information and insight about the field, doing a thick description of the field and be a part of either a colonial project or Government of India efforts to know our villages through village studies.

As I encounter the potential development practitioner scholar in the class, I start with critiquing the conventional ethnographer, only to however say that there has to be an ethnographer in you (someone who maintains field diaries as one feature), conscious of and trying to overcome the 'total gaze', attempting to live together with Joan Scott's experience (not as merely finding voices of

oppression, but how subjectivities of subjects are constituted, where both the person one studies in the present and the anthropologist (development practitioner) are objects of inquiry), and Donna Haraway's situated knowledge where splitting and not being is the basis of episteme, 'the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another to see together without claiming to be another'. It is this splitting and not the always already formed self that makes development practice as post-ethnography or not ethnography.

Conversations to comprehension: Listening is what distinguishes a development practitioner, she is more aural than ocular, more an engaged listener than a participant observer. Much of what she will document is people conversing, singing, labouring and everyday living. Conversations and comprehension of the characters, plot, voices, place, listener, observer, critique or theory. Are the conversations around loss and the comprehension about recovery? And if the development practitioner is also one character in this plot and not one who is only observing the plot, then is it also about the loss and (re)cover of her selves?

Conversations with and comprehension of lives and practices is what seems to be the practice in development practice. It is important to underline that it is only a journey towards comprehension because the knowledge of the self, the other in the self, and the self in the other can only be partial but situated.

Comprehending would involve cultivating; the words, meanings, landscapes, sounds, hesitations, resistances of (under) development of the desire for development or the need to make a claim to the state-driven development paradigm. Knowledge generation, that is only an end point of this comprehension or rather a process of this comprehension, cannot always be a full, complete entity, there are gaps in the comprehension and therefore fractures in the knowledge.

So the field of development practice is only emerging as both a practice as well as a practicing discipline. A field that may want to learn from women's/gender studies but may also want to unlearn the boundaries and barriers that areas of inquiries create in their shift from fields to disciplines.

Site as field to self as field: There are three fields in dialogue here; the self, the village/community and development practice as field. A lesser known 1996 Srinivas piece 'Indian Anthropologists and the Study of Indian Culture' appeals to the anthropologist to take an autobiographical turn by considering the self as a field site to encounter. Sarukkai (1997) builds on Srinivas in 'The Other in Anthropology and Philosophy', by stating the need for the philosophical other to contest the self-other, subject-object binary of the anthropological other.

By invoking the Derridean trace, absence, difference what is underlined is the ethical responsibility that any field mandates. The auto-ethnography of the development practitioner is as much a field as her field site. There is a difference between knowing the field, the village and immersion in the field, with the villagers. This seems to be the difference that Ambedkar makes between division of labour and division of labourers, (i.e. between an abstract system and embodied people humiliated). Real lives are perceived or felt, real relations created, real people transformed, although only to realize that in the real there is an imaginary, in the said there are silences, in the seeing there are oversights, in the recovery there is a privileging, in the present there is a past, in the transformation

there is a lack. So the field site is not at all an abstraction out there where one visits and returns, rather it represents the beginning of an archaeology of relatedness that forms the basis of any knowledge.

In this case, knowledge for the field of development practice, praxis based, relationship dependent knowledge that is a lot different from and much beyond raising feminist consciousness that women's studies as a field aimed at. How should practice in the field of development practice be comprehended?

Change to transformation: Most research is about writing the change, while the philosophy in development practice is writing on wrongs, writing on righting wrongs, (i.e. transformation). To quote Spivak '(a)nother antonym of right is responsibility (and not wrong)' and that 'rights acquire a meaning in continuity with wrongs, to right a wrong or to right wrongs. Thus human rights is not just about claiming a set of rights it is also about righting wrongs, about being the dispenser of these rights.'

From writing about being and becoming different, (anthropologist who studies the tribal or the primitive as different from the civilised and sociologist who studies the change from tradition to modernity) to a change in nature or appearance, metamorphosis. From studying another or studying the process of becoming another (parivartan), the field of development practice is about initiating a journey towards becoming an other (rupantaran).

There seems to be a Kafkaesque insistence to uncover what is un-coverable or to recover what cannot be recovered, wanting to recover from the violence of development only to return to it, but in the process (possibly) transformed in our (failing) struggle with the history of development. From sudhrna (to improve, to correct, to be set right), to sudharna (to innovate, to reclaim, to modify), is similar to parivartan to rupantaran or from change to transformation. (I am indebted to Ashutosh, our M Phil development practice researcher in Gumla for this insight).

Mapping time, entering to exiting: Time is a crucial component of any practice. Given that it is a two year M Phil program, there is a finite time that the practitioner is immersed in the field. But when and how does one exit from the field? When I visited Bhavya's village Emaliguda last year, and lay down, barely covered by a sari that one of the didis were washing, in the river that flows through the hills and the village it seemed like a time warp. There seemed to be no end time to get out of the water. When I danced with the didis to their sangathan song on single women, time stopped and seemed to suggest that you cannot exit from this ecology, an ecology of flow, rhythm and love.

As we insist on our development practitioners to not be detached observers but passionate listeners, it only becomes difficult to decide when is the right time and not always the correct time to exit from the field of practice. What traces does the development practitioner leave behind? What memories does she carry? It is of course easy to suggest that these affinities that have been created will be there for a lifetime, but after all different lives are led in dissimilar spaces, in distinct time scales with divergent futures. At the end of the action research what ends? Or is it the beginning of a new practice that life has in store?