

Narrations of Commitment: Friends in the Field

This paper is intended to shed light on a few crucial and sensitive moments in December 2005/ January 2006 when I was in search of a suitable field site to do fieldwork among the Ho, a tribal community in Central Eastern India. Close Indian friends from Delhi, educated university people who have been extensively travelling in India and the world could not offer any assistance as they were unaware of an *adivasi* population of around one hundred million people in that part of their country and had not heard of Ho, Santal, Munda, Kharia and Oraon. I will focus here on some of those who due to their commitment and local knowledge contributed to making the project of fieldwork in that early stage materialize. They paved the way for us¹ to spot 'the field', to enter it and eventually settle down in a concrete house. Our collaboration was such that I keep thinking of them as my 'friends in the field'. As a consequence, the narrations here are written from a more personal angle and do not attempt to hide a certain subjective bias.

Paving the way into the field

The first of the three persons to mention in this context is Deepak Behera, then from the Department of Anthropology at Sambalpur University, Orissa, now Vice Chancellor at Berhampur University, Odisha. Our dependence on his assistance in search of a suitable field site was considerable, and it was utterly one-sided, for we had nothing to offer but ignorance, passionate curiosity and determination. All we knew, though, was where we did not want to go and that was anywhere close to or within the christianized stronghold in the larger Chaibasa area in the state of Jharkhand². Deepak was the only contact we had in the region at that time, but the district of Sambalpur was not Ho country - if there was anything like Ho country at all - and not even close to it. Much was at stake for us when we decided to address him, since on top of there being no alternative of which we were

¹ Whenever I write 'we' or 'us' I refer to those periods when my husband was able to accompany me to middle India.

² The reasons why we had decided against doing fieldwork in the Chaibasa area, especially in the Jesuit stronghold of Lupungutu are given in the paper on John Deeney.

aware of Deepak had made it very clear that his daily duties would not allow him to spend more than a day to help us make an informed decision.

In a busy week, on a busy day, he suggested to meet at his private place in the town of Sambalpur where we were allowed to browse through his rich library. Together we consulted maps, discussed the project of doing fieldwork among Ho people and brainstormed ideas how best to locate *Ho disum* (the country of the Ho) and a suitable field site, while his wife Rita was preparing a lovely meal for all of us. At that time, in 2006, there were only two internet entries on the Ho, as far as I recollect, so little orientation was to be gained from there. One of the two entries concerned the Koel-Karo dam project, the ecological catastrophe to be expected from it and international protests against it, the other one was about radio-active nuclear waste being dumped into the open fields in East Singhbhum/ Jharkhand causing drinking water to become polluted and babies to be born deformed by parents left uninformed about the dangers by disinterested companies and a state indifferent towards tribal people's well-being. Also, Ho people though constituting a population of more than one million, did not figure at all in the Census of India for Odisha then and they still don't to this day. So the Census of India carried through once every decade, also failed to be a source of orientation. Looking back in 2016 at the beginnings of our endeavour 10 years ago and the fieldwork 'completed' in the meantime, we realize how much we drew from Deepak's expertise. Without being aware of it at the time, we were in the middle of doing fieldwork - as yet from outside the field. Officially Odisha's Ho tribal population appeared to be a non-existent category, but, of course, Deepak knew better, as he had done fieldwork among a tribal community of middle India, the Kisan, himself. Eventually it was Deepak who had the idea to get in touch with P., a former student of his living in the proximity of what would later become the research area. After enquiries into the composition of the tribal population in the area, especially about a larger Ho population there, Deepak obliged P. on the phone to assist us in finding a proper field site. I was quite impressed by Deepak's far-reaching authority. Perhaps this was my

first encounter with the principle of seniority and its very practical consequences.

P. lives in R., a town in district Mayurbhanj, Odisha as a lecturer of anthropology at a college there. The textbooks that he uses in his anthropology classes focus on aspects of physical anthropology and methods of how to collect data in the field. In 2005 he had a Hero bike and lived in a small house, looking very much like an IB, a governmental inspection bungalow and situated on the campus of the school where his wife worked as a teacher. In 2012 he had moved into a two-storeyed, airy *pakka* house whose construction was not yet completed. In 2016 P. had moved up and rented out the basement. We were proudly shown on the top floor first the toilet facilities and afterwards a carefully decorated and meticulously clean separate room full of paraphernalia and Hindu deities to protect P., his wife and their two children. In front of the house there was now a well-kept garden, his Hero bike, a Tata car and a tall fence.

P. is a non-tribal person. He stays away from the tribal area as much as he can. But he knows about the region and its people, as the world of the tribals is part of his professional curriculum, as many of his students have a tribal background and as his brother-in-law works at the local school in M. as a teacher. The villagers of M. treated P. with respect and cautious reservation, and he addressed them with an air of polite distance and authority, but on par with them. He clearly came from outside, but did not behave and speak like a *diku* (foreigner) although he conversed with them in Odiya, his mother-tongue, and one of the meanings of *diku* is 'to speak Hindi or Odiya'. For many of the villagers, we learnt later, it is an ideological barrier rather than a technical problem to switch from their indigenous languages Ho and Santali to Hindi or Odiya as many tribals are bi- or multilingual. P., in the course of our fieldwork, would later often announce to come and visit us, but in fact he never came - only once to attend the last of our *saki* (ritual friendship; namesake) ceremonies. Sitting on one of the two chairs of the house he politely, but determined avoided the meat, the water and the rice beer that he was offered. On the other hand, he bitterly complained about our not visiting him regularly in R. Towards

others, however, who did not know better, he claimed that we would stay overnight at his home, whenever we were in R. It seemed that being acquainted with us was about to transform into some kind of symbolic capital.

P. was loyal to Deepak, his teacher. He took us around in a hired car cum driver (he absolutely refused the degradation in status by getting on a bicycle as we would have preferred), showed us the vicinity, enquired about empty houses and talked to people without any patronizing note in his voice. This surely invited people's cooperation. He explained to them our project and eventually found us a house in a village at the foot of *Parwa Buru*, a holy mountain to the villagers in that area. The house was right in the centre of the village. In front of it was one of the two community wells which was a busy site especially early in the mornings and again towards the evening, while in the day time it was used by elderly people who took their bath there. Plenty opportunities and plenty people waiting to communicate with us - or so we thought. The *diuri* (ritual guide) had his residence right opposite our front door. We could observe agricultural activities inside his huge courtyard or rituals starting off from there first hand, when those who had promised to inform us in time, continuously 'forgot' to do so. The information was given that 80% of the population were Ho, 20% Santal. This sounded like the ideal research site, but needed to be corrected later, when we found that there are no Santal at all in that particular village, but a considerable number of diverse servicing castes, *Gau* (cowherder) households and just over 50% Ho. Still, Ho is the dominant language spoken also by those who are non-Ho just as our neighbours. But all of that was not P.'s responsibility. As correct census figures have never been published for that region, nobody could have a detailed knowledge of the situation on the ground. It was up to us to explore it, if we considered it part of our fieldwork which we did, although it turned out to be quite a sensitive affair. P. had completed his job and left. The only way for us of showing our gratitude was giving a lecture at P.'s college which he arranged for his students. P. had provided us with a place to stay, even if there were holes in the walls and parts of the roof missing. It was a *diku* building for *diku*

people like us, but in a Ho environment. P. had also provided us with a young assistant, S..

As P. was a former student of Deepak's, S. was P.'s former student. P. had initially introduced to us two young students of his who were prepared to work for us as assistants, a girl and a boy, both very pleasant youngsters, both Santal. Should we ask the girl or the boy or both? When I decided on the girl to introduce me into the female universe of the Ho, she all of a sudden was no more available. Explanations were not given. I kept waiting, insisting, but to no avail. She was gone for good. Male conspiracy? P. shrugged his shoulders, S. wouldn't comment. I was grumbling, but we agreed on working with S. In the discussions concerning payment and working conditions P. did most of the talking, while S. contributed his cheerful mood and nodded his head. He seemed too excited, we thought, to join in the talk in English. P. and S. were quite unhappy that they could not talk us into providing bikes for all of us and bought two bicycles instead. This construction taught us a lesson in terms of status distinctions and classification: while I was safe on my lady-bicycle, because S. would refuse to use it at all, S. would also refuse to sit at the back of the bicycle with my husband riding it. However, he minded less riding the bicycle with my husband at the back, but he was not really strong enough for that. His favourite option was to take the bicycle, ride it himself and forget about us. We became his first employers.

S. came from Bhubaneswar where he had been in touch with anthropologists from abroad, he said. Later he would confide in us that it was there where he had experienced discrimination because of his tribal background. He stayed together with us in the one-room IB with attached tiny kitchen for the first month. He was supposed to guarantee our linguistic and gustatory survival in the field the latter of which worked out really fine.

S. was a charming, self-confident and polite young Santal, a good dancer and a good cook and very proud of both. He was impressed by how different and more sophisticated Ho dances were. It had been his suggestion to be both our assistant and our cook. Of course, this could not work out and did

not work out, but S. was so confident that we gave it a try. I hoped that by accompanying him to the markets and gardens I would learn about the region and its horticulture, meet people, find out about 'events' and get into the language with his assistance. But this kind of cooperation never happened. This was not part of fieldwork in his understanding and hence not his job. A young man with a bachelor degree in anthropology he knew what fieldwork was about: 'data collecting', filling in questionnaires, doing a census, and our approach of entering the field must have been deeply irritating for him and a complete waste of time. So instead of taking us to 'the field' he used to vanish all by himself with one of our bicycles and often came back only many hours later - with fresh vegetables for our lunch or dinner and always in high spirits. The Ho villagers, especially the young girls liked him a lot and invited him for a chat and a good long rest on one of their rope-beds outside in the courtyards. There was always a lot of giggling. Having read elsewhere about ethnographers' assistants from the coastal plains who were unable to cope with the situation in the tribal environment of middle India and who fled/quit after a short while, S. seemed to love it, he loved being there, he loved socializing with the villagers, he surely loved his warm non-prejudiced overall reception also by non - tribals. Perhaps with the experience of discrimination on his mind - this is my speculation- he said that he did not feel any of this here, but unfortunately his command of English was so limited that he was unable to explain what this 'any of this here' was. Maybe that he was allowed to hang his wet cloths on the washing line of our neighbours who were members of the cowherders' category, and to lie down on their cots anytime? This and the cooking he did so extensively that little time was left for us. Tensions came up when we insisted on his accompanying us and translating for us as our assistant in the field, as was our arrangement. Maybe we were too inexperienced in guiding him, too impatient with him and ourselves, maybe our voice was not gentle enough or too gentle, maybe he shied away from situations in which it might become obvious that his English was too limited to converse with us? Could we be sure that our demands were culturally adequate to him? Towards the end of the month he complained about tensions in his head and bad dreams

both of which seriously troubled him. He wanted to go back to his parents. I was wondering if the villagers of M. put the blame on us for making one of 'them' leave the village and did not rule out there might be unpleasant consequences for us. Before S. left he asked if I would consider in my thesis the map of M. that he had drawn in collaboration with my husband and put his name on it. I promised.

Deepak and his anthropological descendants had paved the way for us to enter the field and get going. The 'project' was on the way and we were exactly where we wanted to be. Despite irritations and occasional moments of frustration and despair we were about to understand frictions and misunderstandings as expressions of a collision of underlying divergent cultural assumptions. While we have been in touch and on visiting terms with both Deepak and P. ever since, we have never again seen S.. P. has not either and does not know of his whereabouts. I still feel about S. as our young friend, almost our son, and every once in a while, I keep wondering if we were fair enough to him.

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