

# The Field, the Anthropologist, and I, the Researcher's Spouse.

## Preparations.

After having finished her professional career, my wife decides to enrol in the Institute of Ethnology at the Free University of Berlin as a regular student in her first term at the age of almost sixty. Right in the middle of her studies she realizes that she wants to observe with her own eyes whatever she hears or reads about, or rather become a part of it. At her initiative she is offered an opportunity to conduct field research among members of a numerically rather small tribe<sup>1</sup>. I admit that I became quite fascinated by this prospect myself and offered to accompany her. In fact, even when reading physics at university, I had already been concerned with the question, how humans of different cultures view the world, describe it, and live in it - and in distinct and different ways. Here I see the opportunity to approach these topics in empirical reality beyond the tracks of tourism and the selectiveness of books. More than a year ago I had applied for a sabbatical and was quite prepared to make use of it for this purpose.

We decide to approach the fieldwork project as a joint venture. I read a considerable amount of anthropological literature and, as a basic principle, try to learn to question any established conviction. A three week tour to India is to prepare our long-term stay by exploring the region, approaching the language, and getting to know the people over there. We are satisfied with the results of the journey and have another six months to prepare our 'expedition'. How much of technical equipment are we to take? Not much. Do we want a car at the site? No. What about a water filter? Yes. A number of such queries are being answered.

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<sup>1</sup> Within anthropology, I am told, such a tribe (numbering a bit more than a million people) is considered to be large.

### The first contact: we meet people.

We start without knowing, where exactly we are going to settle down. We do, however, have the addresses of some persons to contact. One source turns out to be very rich indeed: Deepak Kumar Behera, then at Sambalpur University, is putting us onto proper track by mediating the decisive contact. We travel to R, a small town, in the vicinity of which several villages with a majority population of 'our' tribe may be found. The situation over there is to be explored and we are advised to meet P who is teaching anthropology at the local college. He may be helpful in our search for some kind of a shelter and an assistant.

Finally we are in a village, have a place to stay, the required equipment and an assistant named S who is a student of anthropology. He speaks tolerable English, or so we think initially, and the language of the tribe. He is to help us survive in the village. He offers his services as cook cum interpreter and is confident to carry out both functions. I like him. He could be my son or even my grandson. He calls us by the English terms "uncle" and "aunty". We share with him our 'one-room apartment', though a sheet of cloth, hung up provisionally, separates our places to sleep.

S likes to cook, is communicative and has his own ideas of what we should do: We should proceed with 'data-collection'. I, too, can think of nothing better. What am I to do? We live next to the villagers and try to convey to them that we want to live as they themselves conduct their lives. We are here to study their culture they are quoting us after some time. We request them to inform us when important things are happening, such as deaths, births, or marriages but, with rare exceptions, if at all we get to know that something had been 'going on' it is after the event.

Should I remain in our little hut idling away my time? L, a young man of the village speaking some rudimentary English, helps us frequently during the initial period. The two of us make up our minds to record, who is living in which one of the houses of 'our' village. S decides to cover hamlets of the

neighbourhood and, with my help, works on a map of the village and the surroundings.

Meanwhile I take note of my wife's growing dissatisfaction. One point relates to the data-collection which she observes with almost demonstrative dislike. I fail to understand this. I want to know who among the villagers happens to be a member of 'our' tribe at all and where exactly they live within the settlement; I would have even preferred to inquire about who owned how much and what kind of land.

Yet another point is the fact that she is dissatisfied with our assistant, a feeling, which initially I do not want to share. Admittedly, his English is definitely limited. Often his translations contain a single sentence only, ending in the less than precise observation "and this like" or "and that like". Also, he likes his sleep and likes it long. Consequently, A does get very impatient in the mornings, later asking him, if she may wake him up. Of course she may. If, however, she does so early in the morning to obtain translations of female talk at the village well and the like, he turns round to sleep on, having learnt that 'data-collection' will not be on the agenda. At that time, between four and five o'clock in the morning, I, too, am awfully tired.

His conceptions of time and priorities of the day are different from ours. He likes to cook, and cook well, but this takes ages and ages and then, of course, he must always take a bath before lunch. This plays havoc to our schedule. Often he is simply gone and we find him after some time at some neighbour's or the other. In short, he rarely does, what we had earlier discussed, but likes to do what he enjoys for the moment.

Thus it is a relief, to have G appear in front of our hut one day, offering his services. He is an adult man from a neighbouring hamlet, married, father of two sons, good in English and educated. His father had been a steelworker providing the son with decent schooling. However, G had given up his job as a teacher at the government school, since, as a member of an ST (Scheduled Tribe) he felt discriminated against. He married - it was a 'run-away marriage' - a woman of his tribe and now lives in the village and the house of his forefathers on the returns of his farm which, however, he has to share with others, i.e. brothers of his father and their relatives. His agricultural property is big enough to permit a modest existence.

However, he is not personally involved in agricultural work. He offers his services to others as a reader, a writer and by doing accounts. At times he is provided with small government contracts. Furthermore he had, along with other members of his tribe, founded a private elementary school with the idea of teaching children in their mother-tongue rather than in the official language of the land, as is done in government schools, but unfortunately the institution was short-lived. The way he carries himself when he moves or when he speaks always has the air of some theatrical dignity. He is, as far as I can see, respected by the locals.

Now we have two assistants. Both G and S belong to a tribe that is culturally and linguistically related to 'ours'. Whereas S thinks he knows all about our tribe and is thus more interested in 'data-collection' or substantial facts of our village, G may be convinced that we want to experience everything on our own, first-hand as it were, even though he has difficulties and must be reminded of the notion again and again. Being a local person, he has the advantage of multiple contacts.

G seems to have understood us. He volunteers with information on deaths, births, and marriages that have just occurred or are forthcoming. He does

accompany us and is translating, though out of some hundred words we hear at the most ten are reaching us. Evidently he himself is also forwarding questions. Are they still our own ones for which we are receiving answers? It seems to me that he enjoys his role as an intellectual in the village gaining additional renown by performing on behalf of us by this important task.

Isn't it amazing? We are entering the villages as complete strangers, have nothing but ignorance to display and the fact that we have come here from afar, yet we experience friendliness, respect, courtesy, or at the worst neutrality. All the same, the days are strenuous: watching G with full attention, having an eye for the informants and for what is going on, managing one's own behaviour in an adequate style, being very well aware of the fact that I can make a fool of myself at any moment. Taking photographs after asking for permission is another issue, or writing down the regular report just as the coming to terms with the day-by-day physical intake and disposal.

Quickly I learn to trust G and enjoy to converse with him about anything under the sun. He is introducing his wife and children to us and whenever we are near his house, or some kilometres away from our hut, he invites us for a meal. Insisting that he offers his services due to his genuine interest in our work, G is instantly attempting to push aside S. The latter, evidently following the principle of seniority, is submitting himself. I think G wants to reduce S' function to that of cooking. This is hardly acceptable for us, though it may appear to be practicable at first sight. He had been employed by us as an assistant "also cooking".

### Suffering in the field

Unfortunately, G too is causing us some headache. He loves *diyan*, or rice-beer, and more so *rasi*, some kind of rice-liquor. Thus we frequently wait for him in vain, or he is late, but fully turned on and hardly helpful. Thereafter he likes to tell us, how he had been away exploring where

something has been happening and what he had found out. He is recalling his observations and we have to tell him that the information is of little value for us. We hope to see and witness almost everything. In several cases, on the other hand, our presence is, so-to-speak, announced by him in advance. We are being invited then which is really good and helpful for us.

We try to soften the status rivalry of our two assistants by assigning them to each one of us separately. This is always a balancing act and cannot continue. A is highly dissatisfied. The extent of her discontent makes me fear that she would want to give up. The two of us join in talking on many extended walks. The locals are quite concerned. Who on earth would simply choose to walk without a definite destination? As an optimal solution A would want to get rid of both assistants and I do understand her discontent, as she rather existentially depends upon reasonable results within a limited period. However, without help we might face the danger of making no progress at all. The only person of our village, of whom we know that he possibly might qualify as an assistant, never seems to be sober at all, being even more addicted to alcohol than G. Finally we agree upon the following: Since S himself has been dropping hints about our asking too much of him, we will let go of him to work on with G, provided a formal agreement can be reached. He is to work for us and be compensated in monetary and material terms.

Do relations between us change by this? So far G had conveyed the impression of being personally interested in our work and supported us accordingly. Even more so he conceives of himself a researcher of equal standing, a point which happens to agree with me, but not at all with A. I realize after all, that basic issues arise out of this. About G's agenda we are certainly in the dark. Occasionally he talks about members of the *ST* (i.e. *Scheduled Tribes*), to which his own tribe and 'ours' belong, being characterized and discriminated against by the government and the mainstream society as backward and uncivilized and accordingly he finds it

important to fight against these prejudices with a more informed opinion in a publicized form. For our stay to make sense we must clarify our own agenda<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, we do not want to exploit him. He has his own life and his own work. Devoting time to us means that he cannot look after himself and his family. Such are the thoughts going through our minds.

What - in this case - could be an appropriate agreement, since occasionally he disappears for days, just as he is frequently missing appointments. An additional aspect is S' absence (we have, so I hope, parted on good terms) and the fact that I do not conceive my role as a cook. How are we going to feed ourselves? Far and wide no restaurant in sight. Moreover cooking ourselves would cost too much time. G's wife is agreeing to supply us with a warm meal a day and with the fact that we give her something for it. She is a clear and steadfast person. When A raises the issue of her husband's liquor problem, my heartbeat is about to halt. As she is unable to understand a word of English and our linguistic competence in the local tongue is as yet too limited, G must translate.

I am flabbergasted. No trouble whatsoever follows. She simply suggests cashing the money for her husband's work herself with G agreeing without the slightest protest. He says, she can better handle it. The modalities of accounting, i.e. half-time as well as full-time payment once a week, are also agreed upon by both. Following this halfway clear pronouncement, A and I hope to find an easier way to relax when confronted with what we conceive of as lack of dependability.

Not always can we manage. An event, meaningful for the entire village, is to take place. G has promised to appear in time. A and I sit and wait in front of our hut. On the other side of the street, within the courtyard, people are

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<sup>2</sup> For me, the most important difference compared to G's agenda is the fact that we do not pursue political aims and that participating in and experiencing everyday life ourselves and directly is the focus of our work which of course, has quite a different quality for him.

gradually assembling. We are invited. A does not want to go without G. For her it makes no sense to observe something and understand nothing. Time is passing. Finally, only I walk across. In the yard the rituals are commencing. Two chairs, the only ones of the house, have been placed at an exposed site. I am made to sit on one of them, feel left alone or like counterfeit money, exposed with the empty chair next to me. Don't understand A.

Living in a geographical zone classified as tropical, we are not yet entirely able to manage the issue of hygiene. Every day the villagers take a bath in artificially constructed ponds which are filled by the monsoon and rather empty at this time. Cows share these 'bathing' facilities. We do not dare to follow suit, given the fact that all travel-guides warn of the grave diseases due to a sweet water bath in these regions, not to mention stagnant sweet water. Though I tend to look for special signs of such infections among the locals, I cannot detect any. Perhaps I am unable to recognize the signs properly. Daily the neighbours ask us, whether we have taken a bath. Embarrassing! A is the first to dare go bathing with the other women, while I continue to wash myself individually. It will take at least another two weeks for me to take my first private bath in public, earlier washing myself alone in our house at night. Against our expectations, we remain healthy.

A and I continue to reach our limits, including those of partnership. What could be the reasons, A is asking me during a walk at the end of our first stay in the village. Within the course of ten years, a further six visits to the villages, shorter or longer ones, are to follow.

[My role within a 'ladies' programme'? On finding a role in the field.](#)

I admire A's determination to get in touch with the women of the village. In this she is quite successful: whenever a group of women asks her to join in collecting firewood from the jungle, or clay to mend the facades of the houses, she goes along spontaneously and courageously. She also joins other

women for the daily bath or road-works for a day with other women. The men, as it appears to me, happen to be less involved in such undertakings. Am I more inhibited, or do I conceive of myself not quite as equal and my role rather than one of company and support?

At that time I understand myself as an -almost - equal partner of A and want to share all of her experiences. I am curious. Furthermore I seem to notice that people are rather happy to accept us, because both A and I are of the elderly kind having children and grandchildren. Belonging to the grandparental generation and proceeding together on equal footing indicates that I am not an attachment of A, or vice versa. I believe we are a good team. But I have to watch out. Again and again it happens, in conversation for example, that I have it my way and ask informants one question after the other. This, at least, is the echo I receive from A, along with her profound disagreement. Naturally, she too is asking questions, though following up with further enquiries less frequently. She rather wants to listen, to wait, and to find out what is important to the speakers themselves. This is the way she explains her point and, given these priorities, I interfere with my questions.

I do manage to understand this position, though frequently I fail to see the point in what I hear. Whether, for example, I am confronted with a banal statement or, hidden behind it, some deeper meaning, simply escapes me. Moreover, I catch myself ever so often in finding life over here rather similar to our conditions at home, say some 150 years ago. What is being said I classify within the framework of my own world-view, my own hypotheses. Having come to know the tendency of humans to forward replies of the kind, they think, are the ones expected by their opposites, I must be more skilful in my questions to avoid this trap. Since we do not really participate in their everyday lives, initially at least hardly more than in bits and pieces of what goes on in the village, I cannot test my hypotheses through my own experience. This is how I argue, or like this. I cannot convince A. Thus she frequently steps on my foot to remind me not to ask too many questions. I

feel ordered about. Am I, after all, nothing but the attached programme, as is often the fate of wives accompanying 'important' husbands when attending cultural highlights<sup>3</sup>? Indeed it is correct: A - not I - will report on her/our happenings and experiences in scholarly style. She is the 'expert', I the amateur. However, if I do not join the venture in a manner that agrees with me, I will cut a pale figure and be bored to death.

In fact, I do take a major interest in relations of kinship and descent among our informants in the village. On preparing our journey, I had read an article of A's professor on relations of kinship and marriage which I found exciting but also hard to comprehend. Now, in the midst of practitioners, I see the possibility to understand more. After initial researches I presume that cross-cousin marriage does happen among our tribal neighbours. I want to find this out and for hours ponder over diagrams which I design after enquiring about the ancestors not just of men but of their wives as well. I think I occupy myself with genealogies and learn, back in Germany, that they are pedigrees instead. Such a difference had simply not been known to me. A continues to ask me: "What are you doing over there?" However, she does not want to be concerned with my thoughts<sup>4</sup>. I am unable to advance, feel left alone. Only much later I sense, why I have failed.

What role am I to play over here? Am I myself a researcher in this village, only A's company, or even a millstone around the researcher's neck? At times, I feel I am about to lose my competence of interacting with people we meet spontaneously and naturally. Naturally A and I have, before starting our journey, talked about how to deal with the people we were going to meet, and I have read some literature on this subject as well. What are my intentions? What requirements do I want to meet? Firstly, meeting and conversing with people at eye level is not difficult, I think. Secondly, finding the proper relationship between proximity and distance to my

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<sup>3</sup> As may be seen by the prominent example – Mrs. Merkel on a state visit - or a case of the opposite gender assignments.

<sup>4</sup> Only later and on an entirely different route, A is approaching the same concern.

subject of research, as is required by anthropologists and thirdly: With whom should we cultivate closer contacts? Would some possibly prevent relationships to other important people in the village?

Thus there is S. Spontaneously I developed friendly feelings towards him, and vice versa, as it appears to me. His forefathers have all been *munda*, or what used to be the hereditary title of a kind of village headman, an office of the honorary kind and not related to material privileges. In one part of the hamlet he continues to be looked upon and respected as the real *munda*, though in the larger portion of the village there is an elected *munda* who later on will become my Saki, or some kind of a ritual friend. We observe tensions between the different sections of the village. What will be the consequences, if I very visually befriend one of the two more than the other? Are we then perhaps going to be avoided by a part of the population, thereby losing access to important information?

#### How to continue?

I continue to be convinced that we are a good team. We must have been able to manage some things quite well. We are still alive<sup>5</sup> and have only once been seriously ill with a nasty diarrhea lasting for three days. Neither the police nor the Naxalites, a militant underground organization fighting for the rights of the tribals as they claim, have threatened us. Only once a policeman, meeting us on the weekly market, wants to see our papers which we do not carry along. He says, he is responsible for our safety and wants us to accompany him to the police station. Suddenly at this point, innumerable inhabitants of our village encircle us, push away the policeman and make him understand that they themselves will be looking after our security. Furthermore, again and again we manage to discuss our difficulties, including the mutual ones.

Over the period of ten years, we have been visiting the village again and again. With every additional arrival I notice, how my role has been changing in the course of this time. I enjoy the stay there in the strange environment

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<sup>5</sup> A short while ago in the area, not far away, an Australian family of missionaries was killed.

which is no longer quite as strange. I happily leave the role of the researcher to A, who is professionally concerned with 'our' tribe all year long.

It is a relief to be no longer concerned about that balance of proximity and distance to the people in the way I had earlier attempted to, especially at the beginning of our stay. Sure enough caution is still advisable with the many sand traps one might hit. And yet I have the feeling I can carry on with people in a more spontaneous and carefree manner. Nowadays, on meeting our acquaintances and friends, we are greeted kindly, as is customary over there, by regular kinship terms, though I still find it difficult to offer the adequate reply in spite of the fact that I have really tried to learn the local language. It is simply damn difficult.

At every visit our friends and acquaintances expressed their amazement of seeing us once more. During our last one, I had the impression of real joy. Meanwhile the children have almost become adults, the adults, like us, have been aging. My Saki, or ritual friend, is concerned about the idea of what will happen, once he and his wife are no longer able to work. Who is to look after them. They do not have a son.

G has moved to R because of the schooling for his children. He and his wife accompany us to his village. As a matter fact we may stay in their house. They call A "ma" (mother) and me "babu" (father) and supply all we need.