CHAPTER 8

Immersion, Diversion, Subversion: Living a Feminist Methodology

C. Sathyamala

INTRODUCTION

This chapter tells the story of my fifteen-month ethnographic study in a village in Tamil Nadu, India, for a doctoral degree. When I set out for my Ph.D. “fieldwork”,¹ even if inexperienced in ethnography, I carried to the “field” a certain worldview shaped by Marxist and feminist theories along with critical readings of other axes of oppression such as caste and race. In addition, irrespective of whether it was for the purposes of research or not, there were certain ethical values that I considered indispensable while working with people. These were to respect people, not practice discrimination and above all to do no harm. I would term these universal

¹I place the word fieldwork within quotation marks as I am not comfortable using this word to describe interactions with people particularly after I found out that it is also a military terminology (Asher, 2019).

C. Sathyamala (✉)

International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, The Netherlands

e-mail: sathyamala@iss.nl

values as foundational for good research not because of their instrumental utility in accessing good quality data but as central to the ethics of care and ethics of being (Krause & Boldt, 2017). In this chapter, I begin by tracing my journey from the time I, as a physician, took one of the first decisive steps in my life to opt out of tertiary level clinical medicine to work at the primary care level in rural India. I look at how in this process I gathered theory, methods, politics and found a way of being. This is followed by a narration of my experiences in the village where I conducted my “fieldwork”. I observed the village people’s everyday lives, as reflected and refracted through multi-layered class, caste and gender lenses even as I negotiated my everyday life in the village. Although I did not begin my research with the explicit intention of applying feminist methodology, my research has all the important elements that underscore a feminist approach. Reflecting on the methodology I adopted, I conclude that methodologies need to be lived rather than applied.

JOURNEYING FROM NATURAL SCIENCE TO SOCIAL SCIENCES

As a public health physician, with a background in natural sciences, my decision to do a Ph.D. in social sciences reflected a desire to engage in a trans-disciplinary approach.² Tentatively entitled, “Food, work, and health: class, caste, and gender perspectives”, my research was to focus on the impact of a flagship poverty alleviation programme in India, the “National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme”, on the nutritional health and well-being of its beneficiaries. Until then, as an epidemiologist for me to study “causal” associations meant carrying out large quantitative surveys. Knowing that for every study that “proved” an association, there could be an equal number disproving it, I was increasingly convinced that yet another population-based quantitative study would not necessarily provide new answers to my research question. The methodological challenge was three-fold: (i) how to move away from reductionist bio-medical models which de-contextualized ‘dis-ease’ causations by dismissing the complexity of people’s lived experiences as subjective and therefore of little relevance; (ii) how to listen and incorporate the voices of people,

²The intention was to go beyond just combining academic disciplines in order to break disciplinary boundaries and move towards a new holistic approach.

particularly the marginalized; and (iii) how to counter-pose these realities to the one-truth of logical positivists. Without wanting to minimize the importance of quantitative data, my respect for qualitative data grew as I began to view these methods as not in opposition but as complementary in the task of unravelling the connections between complex social realities and people's stories.

My central research question evolved from assessing a specific poverty alleviation programme to a broader issue of the persistence of the problem of nutrition in India. The theoretical framework for my study combined Foucauldian genealogy, and eco-social theory with explicit political economy, political ecology, and psychosocial perspectives (Sathyamala, 2016). I found ethnography, with participant observation of everyday lives, "eminently suitable to understand both how the discourse and interventions in nutrition operate at the micro level and why they do not succeed in their avowed purposes, in a milieu where the natural environment comingles with the social to produce the pattern of the problem of nutrition" (Sathyamala, 2016: 20). My thought transformation did not occur all at once or particularly smoothly because I had to first come to terms with my past and unlearn much.³ My choice of ethnography indicated a definitive shift in my ontology and epistemology.⁴ I chose the extended case method which "applies reflexive science to ethnography" where the "individual participant observer carries out all the tasks of the research process in collaboration with her subjects" (Burawoy, 1998: 5, 28).

During the formal presentation of my research design that was required before commencing data collection, questions were raised about my inexperience in qualitative methods, particularly ethnography. I was able to convince the committee that I was capable of carrying out high quality data collection drawing upon my considerable experience of working with economically poor and socially marginalized people, in both urban and rural India. My engagement with this sector of Indian society can be

³My first major struggle was to accept "social" sciences as "science" because from school days "social studies", as it was known, were allocated for students who could not make it to the natural science grades.

⁴Though I received help from many, for their guidance during this period, I am particularly grateful to my promoter Ashwani Saith, co-promoter Amrita Chhachhi, John Cameron and Shanti George. Special acknowledgements are due to the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) for opening the door of opportunity, and to the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP) for financial support through much of my Ph.D. years.

traced to when I dropped-out midway in my post-graduate training in clinical medicine and moved from an urban tertiary teaching-hospital facility to work in rural areas at the primary care level. I tried to live with the ethos of an ancient Chinese poem (attributed to Lao Tzu—sixth century BCE) which had become a sort of an anthem for those working in community health:

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say “We have done this ourselves”.⁵

While my initial decision to work with the people was impulsive and emotional as I was moved by their suffering, it later drew its inspiration from Marxist and left-wing literature. Though an instinctive feminist from the age of five (Sathyamala, 1998: 7), I discovered feminism by being part of the autonomous women’s movement in India⁶ and together with others spearheaded some of the important campaigns in reproductive health rights.⁷ I learned to listen to the wisdom of the “have-nots” as they negotiated their lives against unimaginable odds,⁸ and in the process I learned social theory from them. For instance, in a training programme

⁵This saying by Lao Tsu is well quoted on the web but it is difficult to find exactly which writing it was included in. For more on Lao Tsu see Wei-bin (2001).

⁶In India, the autonomous women’s groups emerged in the late 1970s, comprising mostly middle class educated women, many of whom were from the left tradition, but who had become disenchanted with patriarchy and sexism experienced there (Sathyamala, 2005). These groups were non-party affiliated and refrained from taking external funds to support their work. For a critique of the autonomous women’s groups in relation to the caste question, see Rege (1998).

⁷Notable among these are the campaigns against the E-P drugs (high fixed dose estrogen-progesterone combination drugs), sex-determination tests and sex-selective abortions, and the hazardous long-term contraceptives such as the injectable Net-En and Depo-Provera.

⁸For instance, it was by listening to the survivors of the Bhopal gas leak tragedy of 1984, in Bhopal, India, that I and my two male colleagues could design a study in 1989 that challenged the faulty categorization of injuries by the medical establishment. This later formed the basis of interim relief for the survivors (see Sathyamala et al., 1989).

for women village development workers in Uttar Pradesh, India, during a discussion on gender equality, a young woman⁹ challenged me:

Behanji (sister) when you talk of equality, are you talking of equality with my husband who is a landless labourer, or of equality with my landlord who owns 60 acres of land, or of equality with you who earns about fifty times my wages? (Sathyamala, 1995: 15)

It was when I began to read theory after joining the Ph.D. programme, that I learned that the multiple, multi-layered inequalities had been conceptualized as intersectionality by Crenshaw (1989).¹⁰ Without any formal grounding in the social sciences, coming from a country where inequalities of every sort are present in every walk of life, and are clearly visible to the naked eye, I had positioned myself as a Marxist-feminist,¹¹ conscious of other intersecting inequalities due to caste and religious identities. I concluded that public health required “taking sides”, a positioning which I explored in a co-authored book, with the same title, on the political economy of health (Sathyamala et al., 1986). Training in a care-giving profession,¹² gave me the ability to observe, to listen with the eyes and empathize, as I tried to live up to the German physician Rudolf Virchow’s (1821–1902) maxim, that “a physician is a natural attorney of the poor” (Brown & Fee, 2006: 2104).

For my Ph.D. “fieldwork”, although I have never lived in Tamil Nadu, I chose a village from this state as Tamil is my mother tongue and I am well-versed in it. I went through an elaborate process for selecting the study village: two major considerations were, one, that it should be of mixed caste groups and two, be large enough to provide adequate

⁹She tragically died later of a non-pregnancy related cause for want of timely medical help.

¹⁰Although bell hooks had talked about sexism and racism in 1981, the concept intersectionality is attributed to the American black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). See Davis (2020) about contestations over who owns intersectionality.

¹¹“Marxist feminism explores how gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity structure production in capitalism” (Armstrong, 2020: NP).

¹²Here I would like to acknowledge the faculty at the Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, Punjab, India, where I trained as a physician for inculcating in us a strong sense of the ethics of care.

numbers for statistical purposes but not too large to make participant observation impossible. As I describe below, the final village selection was based on intuition and emotion both of which are valued in feminist methodological approaches.¹³

CHAPTEENGALA? (HAVE YOU EATEN?)

During my preliminary visit to the village, the first person I wanted to meet was the panchayat president, the elected leader of the village council, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the president was a woman.¹⁴ I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit which was to do a research (*aaraichi*) about food and its impact on health and well-being.¹⁵ She was a woman with a kindly face in her late forties and the first question she asked after this exchange was “*chapteengala* (have you eaten)?” When I told her that I had left home at 7.30 am, she became concerned that I had had nothing to eat since then and that it was already 3 pm, way past lunch time. She said that it was not possible to buy food in the village at that time and that it would be another two or three hours before I reached home. Although I said that it was alright, she conferred with the other three village women in the room (two of them had accompanied me) as to which household in the village would have food to spare at that time. Soon a medium-sized stainless-steel tiffin box containing *sambar-sadam* (rice mixed with a spicy lentil-based curry) was brought for me to eat. I felt uncomfortable eating alone without sharing it, so I ate a little to satisfy them and the rest of the food I offered the women who had accompanied me. I took these women’s kindness to a total stranger as a positive sign and given my research topic the offer of food seemed almost like a propitious omen!

¹³My research was based on multiple sources of data ranging from direct observations (with regular journaling), interviews, discussions, documents, village records, newspapers as well as two quantitative surveys.

¹⁴The *gram panchayat* (village council) is a democratic body at the village level with the council members elected by the village people. To encourage women to be elected as presidents of the village council, a specified number of villages in a state are reserved for women Panchayat presidents.

¹⁵The word *aaraichi* appeared to be well understood as “finding out”.

Later, living in the village, depending upon the time of the day (morning, noon, or evening), the query “*chaapteengala*”¹⁶ inevitably followed a greeting when I met someone (both men and women) who knew me well. This way of greeting was mostly rhetorical but was also meant to convey concern and care. The hospitality of the Indian people, particularly in rural areas, has been noted by others. Gold (2015) writes about her experience in a North Indian village,

[u]ttered at appropriate times of a day, ‘Have you eaten?’ often seemed to me to be more or less a meaningless interrogative greeting equivalent to ‘how are you?’, or ‘How’s it going?’ ... I saw the perpetual offers of food as an almost bothersome aspect of traditional village hospitality. However, a reconsideration of this everyday exchange shows the ways food is used to express solidarity and enact morality. (Gold, 2015: 548–549)

I visited the village again in 2010 and my initial feeling of ease was confirmed, and, after my design seminar presentation at the end of my first year of doctoral studies, I “entered” the village to live and formally do my research from January 2011 to March 2012.

THE PROCESS OF PRODUCING “DATA”

To her interaction with the participants, the researcher brings her location, culture, motivations, limitations, ignorances, skills, education, sources, familiarity with theory and methodology, the trained incapacities of socialization in dominant institutions, and an outside perspective that may be useful as well as troublesome. (Gorelick, 1991: 469)

¹⁶This intonation is different among urbanized upper caste people which is “*saapteengala*”.

I lived in the village, which I anonymize as “Oru-oor”,¹⁷ for a period of fifteen months covering an entire agricultural cycle from harvest to harvest. The first three months were spent on getting familiar with the village and, more importantly, for the village people to get to know me. The first draft of my ethnographic experience was written midway through my “fieldwork” when I returned to The Hague. This was important because it provided me with a necessary break from the arduousness of work and the necessary distance from the “field” to write a reflexive piece. Moreover, I could perceive gaps that needed to be filled when I returned to Oru-oor. Until I completed my “fieldwork”, I did not read any “fieldwork” accounts by other anthropologists, whether from India or elsewhere as I wanted to negotiate my everyday life in the village unencumbered by the experiences of others. It was only when I was finalizing the chapter and needed to embed it in literature that I read other scholars.

The final chapter in my thesis describing my “fieldwork” was approximately 21,000 words.¹⁸ It described how my identity as an upper class (relatively speaking), upper caste (relatively speaking), urbanized, unmarried woman, highly educated qualified physician, belonging to a “minority” religion,¹⁹ and who has lived in the north of India almost all her life, was perceived by the Oru-oor people.

¹⁷I have given the pseudonym “Oru-oor” to the study village, words which mean, literally, one village/city/town. In Tamil Nadu, the administrative word for a village is the sanskritized word, *kiramam*, but village people refer to their village as *oor*. However, in practice, this word denotes only that part of the village where the upper castes reside. The area where the former “untouchable” groups reside is called *cheri* or colony. By naming it Oru-oor, I reclaim the word to denote the *entire* village comprising both the upper caste and lower caste localities. Moreover, it is a Tamil word which has no religious connotations. I thank S. Gopalakrishnan IAS, for brainstorming a pseudonym for the study village and for suggesting the categorization of caste groups as given in footnote 22.

¹⁸I had more than 1000 pages hand-written “field notes”. In the final submission of my thesis, I excluded or glossed over incidents which could cause harm were it to be placed in the public domain and also those that did not add to the substance of the chapter.

¹⁹I was born in a family practising Catholicism, but I gave up organized religion during my teen years. It is since the early 1990s, that with the rise of Hindutva forces in my country, I have had to grapple with my ‘minority’ status and the meaning of my religious identity at birth; Christians of all denominations form approximately 2% of the Indian population. See Sathyamala (2017) for a discussion on the dilemma it poses in contemporary India.

In the following sections, I provide brief excerpts from this chapter on how my identity as a researcher and how my gender, caste and class location played out in the Oru-oor context. This is to illustrate the interpretive approach I followed in my research and how, as Hennink et al. (2011: 19) put it, my “background, position, or emotions [were] an integral part of the process of producing data”.

MY IDENTITY AS A RESEARCHER

As I began my Ph.D. “fieldwork”, I was faced with a serious ethical dilemma. During my Design seminar, I had stated that I was,

...entering the village with the knowledge that this study is not being conducted because of the village people’s expressed need. Doing so will be a first time for me as my other research work, where I have been personally involved in data collection, have been on issues which emerged directly from people’s expressed needs. (Sathyamala, 2010: 48)²⁰

To resolve my dilemma, I decided to be as transparent as I could be about my intentions in carrying out the research in the selected village. I did what Bernard (1994) advises,

The key is to take the role of a researcher immediately when you arrive at your field site... Let people know from the first day you arrive that you are there to study their way of life. Don’t try to become an inconspicuous participant rather than what you really are: an observer who wants to participate as much as possible. (Bernard, 1994: 182)

Right from day one, when I spoke to anyone who asked me what I was doing in the village I said that I was doing *aaraichi*. Initially, I carried a notebook openly but when I began writing, I realized it made people very nervous because I was writing in English. Therefore, I stopped taking out my notebook to write immediately after a conversation or when I was with people who were not familiar with me. It also made me realize the importance of writing in Tamil so that it could be read by others if they felt curious and the process would make them feel less anxious and

²⁰The reason why I had refrained from choosing for my Ph.D. research any of the issues that I had been actively associated with in the past as an activist was due to reluctance to capitalize for personal benefits the trust I had gained through my activism.

threatened. So, while I continued to write in English in my diary²¹ my survey instruments were almost all in Tamil. Soon people became aware of my “English writing” as anyone who paid me a visit in the morning could see me writing in my diary. There would be friendly jokes and leg-pulling about what I was writing about “them”, but I sensed little anxiety.

That the research was for a study leading to a Ph.D. degree was understood by a few better educated people and my use of the Tamil word *veli naadu* (outside country) to refer to where my university was, was varyingly understood as Delhi or a foreign country. At times it was difficult to dissuade people from the belief that my survey would lead to their material betterment, but over the period of my stay, people accepted my word that my research was just what I explained it was and that it would not bring any monetary benefits to them.

MY CASTE LOCATION

Choosing a place of residence in an Indian village is a critical decision as there are no neutral spaces. I found out that the place of residence of an ethnographer locates their identity in the village people’s perception and colours their interactions in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Oru-oor village had three major settlements, a central part where the upper castes resided known as *male-oor* (high village), flanked on the East and West by settlements of the lower caste groups.²² I took a considered decision to reside in that part of the village where the lower caste people resided as I felt that my acceptance by them was critical for my research and this could be facilitated only if I lived among them. I found *keezh-oor* (low village) on the east better suited as the larger proportion of the lower

²¹This was both because I am more fluent in English and because I did not want anyone to read my unedited and un-anonymized account of everyday lives, containing personal stories, conversations, often of confidential nature. When I was in the village, I carried my notebook with me all the time, even sleeping with it under my pillow.

²²The groups I categorize as “upper castes” were almost all belonging to the “Other Backward Classes” or “Most Backward Classes” as per classification by the Tamil Nadu government. Those I categorize as “lower castes” belonged to the former “untouchable” caste groups. Untouchability was abolished legally in post-independence India and the “untouchable” caste groups were categorized as “Scheduled Castes”. The term *Dalit*, (oppressed) has been adopted by some of these groups particularly in the western and northern parts of India, as an emancipatory term. Caste is a hereditary system of inequality legitimized by the Hindu religious texts and maintained by strict endogamy.

caste residences was located there and the approach road to the land on the east side of the village passed through this (see Fig. 8.1).

I found that at an everyday social level, more than class or economic status, caste was often the defining identity in the village. I should have realized that this would be a sensitive issue because in Tamil Nadu the lower caste people have had a long history of emancipatory struggles. This was brought home to me during my preliminary visit when I went searching for the house of the woman I had met during an earlier visit. I knew she lived in the lower caste part of the village and not being familiar with the village, I asked some people the *jaadhi* (caste) that lived there. One of them responded that they were all the same *jaadhi*, *manusha jaadhi* (human caste). I had not thought that my question would give offence. Because of this experience, in the first quantitative baseline survey (carried out in the fourth month of my stay in the village) I did not include the caste question. Later, I learnt the word *aatkal* (people) was an inoffensive way of enquiring about caste and would produce the caste name without much hesitation.

Choosing a residence

Fig. 8.1 Map of the village (graphic representation)

Such reticence was not exhibited when it came to enquiring about my caste status. I have always maintained that I do not subscribe to any caste or religious identity, but I realized that in Oru-oor I could not evade this issue because I was Tamil. My lighter skin, relatively speaking, when I first arrived in the village, having spent more than a year in the sunless Netherlands (!), made people, including my house owner, think I was a Brahmin, the top caste. I wanted to avoid a sense of uneasiness and suspicion that my “no-caste” identity might evoke and be perceived as an evasion, as everyone I interacted with at some point in the conversation asked me my caste. I had known vaguely that I belonged to a family which would fall in the upper caste category but had to find out from my parents the precise caste name. After that, when I was asked for my caste, my first response would still be that I did not believe in caste but if the person insisted, I would give the caste name. My answer worked mostly to my advantage as the discourse it created provided me with important insights. For instance, when I first began looking for a residence in the lower caste area, many from the upper caste, directly and indirectly, tried to dissuade me from it. They were then confused about my caste status when I said that I wanted to reside with the lower caste groups.

While the obvious forms of untouchability are practised only rarely, it is still mediated through the sharing of food and water and through marriage. Although my choosing to stay in the lower caste area was viewed as a way of demonstrating that I did not discriminate, it was only when I went to the puberty feast of a young girl and sat down in the *pandi* (seating arrangement in long rows) and ate the cooked food, that people realized that I did not practice the all-pervasive caste taboo. It was there that I learnt that while the upper caste people from male-oor attended the ceremony (as this family was wealthy) and brought gifts, they would not eat food cooked in lower caste households, but fruits and bottled soft drinks could be consumed as these were not “polluted” by “untouchable” hands.

However, some months into my village stay, when I was asked to shift as my house owner needed the rented room, I decided to look for accommodation in the upper caste area (because I felt it was time I observed that part of the village by living there). I was surprised that it was no longer easy for me to find a room, unlike my initial days when I was being offered homes there. There was a vacant house belonging to a family that was away in Mumbai, but the relatives in whose care it had been left did not want to rent it to me because they were unsure of my caste status

because now I resided in the lower caste *keezh-oor*. The irony was that the caste my family was said to belong to is supposed to be higher than the owners of the potential rental house. It appeared that my prolonged residence in the lower caste area rubbed off on me and “polluted” my caste identity and made me also “untouchable” in the upper caste view.

MY CLASS BACKGROUND

In Tamil Nadu, one way the wealth of a family is assessed is by how much gold jewellery the women of the family wear. I generally wear very little gold on my person, and it was in the second month of my stay in the village that I learnt that my lack of gold jewellery had been discussed among the women. One day, in the course of a conversation, a woman burst out in anger against me, saying I was play-acting at being poor. This woman was well-known for being abrasive and outspoken. It was alleged that she had once slapped her son-in-law for beating her daughter, his wife. Still, I was taken aback both by her charge and by her venom. When asked to explain, she said I must have lakhs of rupees²³ worth of gold ornaments at home and here I was pretending to be poor by wearing brass earrings, a gold-plated chain around my neck and no gold bangles. She said I behaved just like the upper caste women in the village (she was from the lower caste group), pretending to be poor when they had a lot of gold ornaments which they brought out to wear only during festival days. I told her that my small earrings and the chain around my neck were made of gold (but gold ornaments made in north India have a different hue than that in the south because of the proportion in the alloy) and that I had always been averse to wearing heavy gold. She was not convinced because I had also once worn costume jewellery which I had not known then that it was worn only by those who did not possess gold ornaments.

There was another reason why women thought I was play-acting at being poor. Initially, I chose to wear synthetic saris. This was because the cloth did not crease, and one could sit anywhere, even on the dirt floor (all it required was a pat to get rid of the dust when one got up), were easy to wash, drying within minutes under the hot sun. But it was unbearably hot to wear them as synthetics do not absorb sweat and retain heat. I soon discovered that the cotton saris that the Tamil Nadu government

²³One lakh = 100,000.

supplies were very suitable for the heat. These are made of cotton, hand-woven, and given as free gifts for the harvest festival *pongal* through the ration shops (they are called *elavasa pudavai*—free sari; later the term changed to *villai-illa pudavai*—unpriced sari); old age pensioners also get an additional sari during the year. They are light, easy to wash, and I thought were pretty with contrast-coloured borders. I bought about six, at an extremely nominal rate ranging from Rs. 25/- to Rs. 50/- (25 to 60 euro cents) each. Only old women wear them, but other women sell them as they prefer to wear synthetic saris. When I wore these saris, it evoked unexpected reactions. Many marvelled that I wore them at all as they are easily recognizable. I received mixed reactions; some felt that it was not worthy of my status given my level of education and position; others said that these saris looked much nicer on me than on them. However, the women found it difficult to reconcile to the fact that I liked wearing them. Occasionally, when I was invited to a wedding, I wore a silk sari. Again, these were found wanting by some of the women, since they were simple and did not have heavy gold borders. After a while, as I continued wearing the *elavasa pudavai* on and off, these kinds of comments stopped as women got used to my “differentness”.

In the later months I found out that wealthy upper caste women indeed kept their economic status hidden. During festivals I found many women from the upper caste who looked not-well-off during ordinary times, wear a lot of gold on their person. Later I wore some moderately heavy gold bangles to show that I did indeed possess them but that I chose not to wear them every day. The days when I wore my gold bangles, every woman who met me (on the lanes, at the bus stop) would pull at my arm to take a closer look at the bangles and make an estimate of how many *pavuns* they were and its value in the then gold price.²⁴

By the end of my stay, there was general agreement in the village that although I came from a very rich family I chose to live without any outward show of wealth. This fitted with their worldview that it was not the traditional rich but the nouveau riche who flaunted their money.

²⁴One *pavun* is equal to 8 gm of 22-carat gold. While I could not make out the difference between gold ornaments and gold imitation jewellery, the women were very apt at seeing the difference.

GENDERED LIVES

As part of my feminist consciousness, I have made it a practice in my life to perform most of the household chores myself in a country where, in middle class homes, it is the norm to employ other women for housework.²⁵ Therefore, it was natural that in the village too, I had decided to perform all the household chores myself although I knew it would absorb considerable amount of time from my “research”. I also wanted to send out a signal that I was quite capable of carrying out these daily tasks of living in the same way as the other women in the village. The only task I was prevented from doing was to fetch water from a public tap a few yards in front of the house. An elderly woman, past her seventies, who lived in a broken-down part of the house where I resided, insisted on carrying out this task for me. This was as a mark of affection and was genuinely affronted when I offered her cash for the service. During my stay in the village, she became a close companion and her photograph is no longer at the end of this chapter (Fig. 8.2).

Since in India marriage is the norm for both men and women, my status as an unmarried woman was a major source of astonishment and concern. In the initial period of my stay, when someone struck up a conversation with me, the conversation would go like this:

Woman/man: And ... (a pause), where are your children?

Me: I have no children

Woman/man: No children?

Me: No, I am not married

Woman/man: Not married?

Woman (looking at me pityingly): tsk, tsk, *Aiyo paavum* (you poor thing!)

Some of the older women would ask in a lowered voice if I had any “body problem” (*udal prachinai*); this was because in their experience, women who remained unmarried had a problem with their reproductive system (for example, they did not “come of age” by menstruating). When I assured them that there was nothing wrong with my reproductive organs they would look bemused. My unmarried state was generally viewed as a tragedy, but the fact that I had parents still alive as well as a brother, meant I was not that pitiable creature, a destitute woman. This attitude

²⁵This was a hotly debated topic in the early period of the Indian autonomous women’s movement.

Fig. 8.2 My elderly woman companion whom I called *Paati* (grandmother) holding my thesis (permission to use photo granted)

surprised me because it signalled that for them it did not matter that I was educated, had an independent income and had been living alone and making independent decisions for most of my adult life.

Sometimes I was a bit facetious in answering the question why I did not marry. Once, when I was asked this question by a group of women at a work site, I responded: “What is in a marriage? If you get married, he will drink, beat you up, steal your jewellery and so why this headache! (*avan kudippaan, adippaan, nagai thiruduvan, yenn inda thali vali*)”. This was greeted with laughter because this was the reality in most of their lives. After the women dispersed as I went around chatting with them, I saw two women sitting alone, weeping. When I asked them what the matter was, they said that what I had said described the reality of their lives. They were siblings and both had experienced domestic violence in their married lives. I felt terrible that my remark had hurt them. They assured me that it was not my remarks that they were hurt by; I had only

stated the reality. But it had set them thinking about their own unhappy married lives and how their father had died because his heart was broken when both his daughters returned to their maternal home driven out by their husbands.

The men, depending on their age, reacted differently to my unmarried state. Two men, both educated and outsiders who came daily for work in the village commented on separate occasions that I must have had a “jolly” life (jolly was the word used, *appo jolly daan ponga*) and looked at me meaningfully, broadly hinting at a life of promiscuity. I was taken aback at this comment dripping with sexual innuendo that they would not have made (dare to make) to a married woman living with a husband. One 80-year-old man was so troubled that my parents had not done their duty by me that he declared that he would visit my parents and persuade them to find me a groom or else he himself would search for a groom for me. But the question “why did I not marry” persisted. I do not know how much of my explanation that I became too focused on my work to think of marriage, or that I valued my autonomy too much to want to exchange it for the protection a marriage offered, were accepted as good enough reasons.

EMBODYING A DIFFERENT LIVING

I went through severe physical discomfort and mental anguish during the stay in the village. The village was spread over a large area and walking under the blazing sun day in and day out, I developed sunstroke during the month of May. Eating food and drinking water wherever and whenever I was offered to show that I did not subscribe to the caste taboo, led to recurrent attacks of diarrhoea. Although I tried to be extremely careful, I became infested with head lice. I developed a chest infection because of living in a house with damp walls and a leaking roof. Once, I was bitten by a dog, which had stealthily crept behind me when I was talking to some women. It was not a stray, but dogs were rarely chained and all of them somehow sensed that I did not belong to the village. Fortunately for me it could catch only a mouthful of my sari; perhaps it too was play-acting.²⁶

²⁶Behaviour modifications, also known as observer effects, have been shown to be self-revealing about social order (Monahan & Fisher, 2010). We were all in some sense play-acting although it was difficult to maintain the façade for long.

But the worst times were when there were needless tragedies in the village. For instance, a young woman committed suicide by setting herself on fire when I was in the village. The death of another young woman, who I had diagnosed with tuberculosis and had helped to initiate treatment from the government Health Centre, left me with a sense of utter helplessness. When she lay dying, I ran from pillar to post trying to get support for her from various individuals in the village. Once again, I was faced with the inability of modern medicine to deal with diseases of poverty and deprivation, the reason I had opted for public health in the first place.

Many began to commiserate that, living in the village, I had become thin and dark like a dry fish (*karuvaadu*). Gone was the rosy bloom of my Den Haag days. When a young woman spontaneously burst out that my feet had begun to resemble theirs—dark, dusty, and dirty—I realized that I had indeed “de-classed” myself without intentionally setting out to do so. She, of course, did not mean this observation as a compliment.

Poivittu Varuhiren: GOODBYE, FOR THE TIME BEING²⁷

The day I left the village was charged with emotions. I did not want to say goodbye formally to anyone although over the week I had told everyone I met that I was leaving. Some said that I should come live in the village and that they would arrange for a ration card that would signify my permanent resident status, while others felt that it may not be a good idea because then people would lose their respect for me and that I should keep my distance by maintaining my non-resident status. My old woman companion was inconsolable and refused to say goodbye and kept repeating that this was why one should never get close to another person. As I left, she forced me to accept a note of Rs. 100 (worth a little more than a euro but was one tenth of her meagre monthly pension). This remains as one of the most treasured mementoes of my life in Oru-oor.

It was when my father died two months after my “fieldwork” was over and I had returned to The Hague that I realized that I had been accepted.

²⁷In Tamil culture one does not say a definitive goodbye when leaving. It is always *poivittu varuhiren* (translated as ‘I will go and come back’ and pronounced *poittu vaaren*) and the response would be *vaanga* (come back). Only when paying a visit for commiserating a death (*thukkam visarippu*) does one say *pobiren* (am going).

On the day of the funeral, eleven persons from the village, belonging to different caste groups, came to pay respects to the departed as is done for close relatives and neighbours. They had hired an auto-rickshaw, and had come in the morning, foregoing that day's wages, and waited till I arrived at 2 P.M. from The Netherlands. I was surprised to see that four of them were men as they did not interact with me as closely as the women did. My offer of auto fare was refused. Others came on the fourth day as per custom to offer condolences to the family. When I said that I was moved by their visit and concern, their response was that I was now a part of their family. I felt that I must have done some things right to have overcome the caste/class/gender barriers.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the time of my "fieldwork" I have continued to maintain contact with several of the Oru-oor village people on a regular basis. When I am in The Netherlands, I speak to them via telephone conversations, and during important festivals to exchange greetings.²⁸ Except for 2020, due to Covid-19, I have visited Oru-oor every year. When I visit the village, I am generally dragged by the hand to someone's home to share a meal or have tea. That people of all walks were keen to know the results of my *aaraichi* was brought home to me when a bus conductor who had earlier worked on the study village route but was now working on a different route asked me, as he punched my ticket, if I had completed my thesis. In 2017, a few months after my defence, I visited the village to show the photographs and my newly minted thesis. Although almost none could read English, my book was held tenderly, flipped through, as each one tried to guess who the woman was on the cover (as I had blurred her face). With a general delight in my accomplishment, they felt that they owned it because it was, after all, their stories between the covers.²⁸

REFLECTING ON MY METHODOLOGY

In this research, although I did not enter the "field" with the explicit intention of applying feminist methodology(ies) to my study, my research has all the important elements that underscore feminist research: It

²⁸While I have tried to share the broad findings of the research at every opportunity, the promised summary and Tamil translation is yet to be made for wider circulation.

focused on gender as an analytic category, on women's experiences as a scientific resource, and used a "gender-sensitive reflexive practice" (Harding, 1987: 31).

The account provided in this chapter demonstrates the reflexive practice I followed as I observed the village people's everyday lives, as reflected, and refracted through a multi-layered class, gender, and caste lenses as I negotiated my everyday life in the village. A Thirukkural (sacred couplet) by the poet saint Thiruvalluvar (?300 BCE—sixth century CE), that was transcribed inside the bus²⁹ that I routinely travelled in to Oruoor was a regular reminder of power dynamics and the need to interrogate the one who speaks:

எப்பொருள் யார்யார் வாய்க் கேட்பினும் அப்பொருள்
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்பதறிவு. (Thirukkural, n.d. No. 423)³⁰

[Explanation] Thiruvalluvar says no knowledge can be built based on authority... He suggests a person in search of truth should get out of his [sic] past wisdom in order to build new perspectives. (Venkatachalam, 2015: NP)

Schooled in positivist science, I found the problematization of the notion of value-free science and research liberating. Harding and Norberg (2005: 2011) identify feminist methodology and epistemology as part of the post-positivist movement that prioritizes "studying up"—studying the powerful, their institutions, policies, and practices instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern". In the past, Indian ethnographers have, in general, chosen to reside in the upper caste residential area of their study villages.³¹ My decision to reside with people who are still viewed as "untouchables" allowed me to "study up" the upper caste

²⁹All buses under the public Tamil Nadu State Transport system have one of the Thirukkural couplets transcribed inside the bus.

³⁰Translation by the author: To discern truth, wisdom lies in enquiring into what is said and what is heard, irrespective of who has said it.

³¹Kumar (2016: 36, 37) comments that 'none of the researchers and founder members of Indian Sociology [M.N. Srinivas, Andre Beteille, A.M. Shah] stayed in Dalit localities', because of which their studies could not 'portray a reality of the social structures ... they were studying'. Mangubhai (2014) and Priya (2001), stayed with the *dalit* community during their respective fieldwork period because their study focused on these communities. I could say that I am perhaps the only one, so far, who chose to stay with the former 'untouchable' caste groups to study the entire village.

groups from the vantage point of the lower caste people. Taking residence among the economically and socially marginalized community became not only a strategy to gain a deeper appreciation of their worlds, but a political act of reversing the gaze from top-down to bottom-up.

Feminist researchers have grappled with the power relations between the researcher and the researched and the dilemmas around “knowing, representing, and advocating for others” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007: 41). Carastathis (2008: 30) argues that.

a feminist politics of solidarity distinguishes between being positioned or *situated* in relations of oppression and privilege—an ineluctable fact of life under prevailing conditions—and positioning or situating oneself in relations of solidarity with “communities in struggle” [and that] one must actionally confront ... one’s *complicity*—in structures of domination’ [italics as in original].

This position is underscored by Sharmila Rege (1998: WS39, WS40) as she argues that within the framework of “difference”, issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the dalit women’s organizations, and that the focus should shift from “‘difference’ [...] to the social relations which convert difference into oppression”.

The several acts of non-discrimination I practised throughout my stay in Oru-oor, reflected a “conscious partiality” as advocated by Maria Mies (quoted in Gorelick, 1991: 461). Living in the village as an individual researcher, as an unmarried woman, without any protection (individual or organization) also meant being in a situation of extreme vulnerability. It was a considered choice I had made. To gain the trust of people I felt it necessary to shift the balance of power by putting myself at the receiving end of unequal conditions. By choosing a lifestyle similar to that of the village people I hoped to demonstrate the seriousness with which I wished to understand their lives and struggles. Relationships thus built led me to be invited into people’s lives in a meaningful way. Although, until I left, my stated intentions of *aaraiichi* continued to be under scrutiny, I think people sensed my sincerity and reciprocated it to the extent possible by being as informative about their lives as possible. Their respect also grew when they realized that I was not a push-over who was easy to fool.

One of the major challenges throughout this process of “participant observation” was how not to be perceived as the surveilling eye of the state. The irony was that during my stay in the village, it was I who was

under constant surveillance by the people. Every move I made was noted and commented upon, in a role reversal of the observer being observed. But despite trying to act as equals, the reality was that power differentials existed albeit operating both ways. While the control on how they were to be represented lay in my hands, I was only too aware that my life in the village completely depended upon their good will. Throughout my stay, I was constantly stressed and on tenterhooks, afraid of making some serious mistake which would impact adversely on my well-being. That I would not be able to complete my research was not my most abiding fear or concern. I sensed the presence of an undercurrent of violence which was ready to erupt into physical violence at a moment's notice.

My research was sensitive to not only gender but paid attention to the complex interplay of class, caste and religion in the everyday lives of the Oru-oor people. I continued to position myself as a Marxist-feminist which makes a critical distinction between the concepts of oppression and exploitation (Foley, 2019: 11). Using class not “as an identity or an experiential category, but class analysis as a mode of structural explanation” (ibid: 11; Mojab & Carpenter, 2019; Wallis, 2015) and by applying gender and caste sensitive lenses to the entire population of Oru-oor, allowed me to conclude that:

Given that undernourishment and undernutrition affected almost the entire population [in the study village Oru-oor] it calls for universal remedies and care needs to be expanded to all individuals which is appropriate for their age, gender, work output and special nutritional needs in the context of their caste and class location. Finally, only when all bodies assume equal importance in the biopolitics of a nation-state and unambiguous life-affirming changes coalesce in a collective action towards structural transformation will the depletion of the individual and social body begin to cease. (Sathyamala, 2016: xxiii)

One of the goals of feminist research is to design research “that actively intervenes in social relations and power structures” (Tandon, 2018: 13). The conclusion of my research resonates with the goal of social justice through “recognition and redistribution” as argued by Nancy Fraser (2007) which encompasses all oppressed and exploited peoples.

Gorelick (1991: 469) points out that the “researcher is transformed in the process of research—influenced and taught by her respondent-participants as she influences them”. For me, the experience of living in

Oru-oor was transformative in several ways, not the least of which being the further clarity of purpose that I gained about my own life. I could also say that perhaps for those I closely interacted with in Oru-oor, my presence was transformative. The values my everyday living exemplified, and the stereotypes which I sought to break down, demonstrated other possibilities and a different world to the village people. I am left wondering if feminist methodologies can be applied, rather, I think they may need to be lived.

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