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Shruti Mukherjee

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ARTICLE



Gendered Embodiment of the Ethnographer during Fieldwork in a Conflict Region of India

Shruti Mukherjee

Department of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Stony Brook University, New York, United States

ABSTRACT

Militarization and various forms of state repression are continuous factors shaping daily life and practices in Manipur. Within this context my paper grapples with the impossibility of preparing for ethnographic fieldwork in a conflict region. What does it mean to work as a lone woman researcher and to negotiate various subjectivities like gender, class, and caste during fieldwork in a conflict region? I unpack the experience of preparing for 'fieldwork' and what it entails by focusing on the gendered experience of power differentials and negotiations of various subjectivities. I explain how I negotiated my identity as a researcher in the field, what it entailed, and how my gender and marital status affected my interactions. I entered the field as an autonomous doctoral researcher but was reduced to dependency as a presumed unmarried woman. When I faced challenges working with a women's collective on the issue of religion, it reoriented my study. Finally, I look at some ways in which I practiced self-care through seeking support from informal networks of friendships, support from my partner, journaling and giving time to myself to process the conflicting emotions I felt during fieldwork.

KEYWORDS

Embodiment; fieldwork; ethnography; India; Armed forces special powers act

1. Introduction

Manipur is a state in the Northeast region of India with a history of ongoing militarized social structure. 'Northeast' is a term used to label an entire region by the Indian state, which has a lot of diversity and complexity, and has been challenged historically. I use this term acknowledging that it is not a static description of the region. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), passed in 1958, regulates the use of special powers by the armed forces in regions termed as 'disturbed areas of the country'. The AFSPA was implemented in the whole State of Manipur in 1980. Since then, there is a constant presence of the Indian army, such as the Assam Rifles regiment in all public spaces of the State, except the municipalities of Imphal from where AFSPA was removed very recently. Army patrolling streets of Manipur with rifles, driving through neighborhoods in armed trucks, and standing guard at nationalized bank entrances is a common sight.

Militarization and various forms of state repression are continual factors shaping daily life and practices in Manipur. Most of the literature I reviewed for this paper discussed the impunity the armed forces enjoy because of the institutionalization of their power. The nature of militarization has not really changed since the Indo-Naga ceasefire because the Indian armed forces keeps violating the ceasefire agreements (Haksar 2009). Militarization in Manipur has been normalized to the extent that with no lived experience and epistemic knowledge of this context, I found it hard

to grapple with. My interlocutor from the Naga People's Movement for Human Rights pointed out that the armed forces have now been engaging in 'military-civic activities' like building schools, giving donations, and reaching out to villages to build goodwill in order to make Indian occupation more palatable. Therefore, the structures of the armed forces are deeply engrained in the life in Manipur. In this tense political terrain, this paper emerged out of my interaction as a feminist ethnographer in Manipur with a grassroots women's collective (voluntary community-based organization) Naga Women's Union and Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association of Manipur.

During everyday walks from my place of residence in Senapati Bazaar to the office of Naga Women's Office (an organization I was researching), I often noticed several state armed personnel on both sides of the road. Whenever the trucks carrying crude oil passed the bazaar and Naga inhabited areas, the army was deployed to assist their movement. The armed personnel made hand gestures to communicate with the truck drivers and other soldiers on the road. Since Northeast India has rich oil fields, the Indian State has been tapping into it. They are resisted by the indigenous peoples who block the roads using tree trunks and burnt tires and garbage piles but there are also several people from the community who join the Indian army. The armed forces also guard national banks in Manipur where they monitor the movement of people inside the bank.

I have been able to navigate this tense and ambiguous terrain of the culture of militarization within which I was doing my fieldwork by collaborating with my interlocutors in the field and paying attention to the everyday embodiment of both myself and research respondents. But I felt the burden of guilt emanating from my Indian nationality constantly. My research questions in this paper are – how can a researcher prepare to do embodied ethnography in a conflict region? What subjectivities or identities of the ethnographer get mobilized in the everyday interaction with the interlocutors? I argue that doing ethnographic fieldwork in a conflict region requires constant negotiation of the researcher's situatedness with the 'interlocutors' making these paths of negotiations unpredictable. The interlocutors are people who I am in conversation with about my research project. This requires embracing the uncertainty and the anxiety of doing 'embodied' fieldwork as a critical framework to navigate the field rather than suppressing them. Because for me, embodiment was lived through psychic, emotional and bodily functions.

There is significant scholarship available on 'embodied fieldwork' and 'embodiment' in general. The focus here, however, is only on feminist scholarship from geography and anthropology to analyze what embodied fieldwork looks like in a conflict region (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Katz 1996; Nagar 2014; Rouhani 2004; Zadronza 2016). Feminist scholars have argued about the need to disrupt the idealized image of the lone, ungendered, unbiased researcher, going into the field like a neutral, empty vessel, which will be filled with data (Katz 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Valentine 2002). I agree with existing feminist scholarship in arguing that the knowledge produced during fieldwork is determined by the researcher's subjective position and power relations (Valentine 2002; Sultana 2007).

Bourdieu's ideas about embodiment give me a useful framework for processing how my lived emotions are formed within research fields. According to Bourdieu, a field is a specific site of cultural reproduction with norms, boundaries and forces of power at work. It is a cultural and social reality, an objective context within which relations of power and types of capital are evident (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). Bourdieu used the term *habitus* to describe how culture is lived and enacted in the body in relation to fields (Bourdieu 1990).

In this paper, I explore embodied ethnography as emotional frictions and collaborations across differences using scholarship on ethnography used by anthropologists (Tsing 2005) that ask the interlocutor and the ethnographer to negotiate, reimagine and recast the boundaries that separate them as they become interpolated in each other's projects. I build on existing literature which argues that 'situatedness' here is a matter of renegotiation, which requires constant negotiation (Haraway 1991; Rose 1997; Mahmood 2004; McQueeney and Kristen 2017; Mohanty 2013; Nagar 2014).

I started dwelling in my field back in 2017 during my work on the fieldwork research grant proposals. The questions asked by grant agencies prompted me to think about my own position as a researcher in the field. There were multiple identities I struggled with, like my caste, gender, class, and nationality while writing my research proposal. To begin with, I had to start imagining what exactly my fieldwork would look like and work backwards somehow. It was a strange predicament to work with. It is also impossible to know beforehand (beyond basics like accommodation) what the field site will entail and how to prepare oneself prior to reaching the place. Living the everyday messiness was the only way of knowing for me as an ethnographer.

How could I possibly know what and how my fieldwork is going to pan out without being in the field? The academic setting within which I was asked to write was far removed from the everyday lived realities of Manipur. I was based at Stony Brook University in New York and my dissertation fieldwork was to be carried out in the northeast region of India, in Manipur. I am studying the role of two grassroots women's collectives and one NGO, to understand the relationship between transnational NGOs and women's movements, how gender subjectivities are produced in a conflict region, and how gendered violence by the army is resisted by various women's groups. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, I explored the role that NGOs working on gender empowerment play in armed conflict regions of India, and the ways in which they interact with the women's resistance movements against militarized patriarchy (Yambem 1976). The qualitative data in this paper are from ethnography with one women's collective in Manipur called Naga Women's Union based in Senapati district which is the apex body of all 20 Naga women's groups.

I navigated the tense political terrain in Manipur by working with my interlocutors. For instance, when I wanted to get introduced to any organization or person, I always used a referral. This is because as an Indian, if I approached anyone with my research project, I would be perceived with suspicion. Scholars doing fieldwork in politically tense contexts have noted how their research practice gets labelled as the work of agents and spies (Verdery 2012). This affects both the ethnographer and her work by creating discomfort and anxiety, limiting access to information, and challenging ethical and methodological presumptions (Kovats-Bernat 2002).

Furthermore, scholars have also noted the difficulty in establishing rapport in the field and becoming subject to observation and surveillance (Zadronza 2016). In order to address these anxieties in approaching people, I used my friendships and previous collaborative relationships with interlocutors. This also resulted in being at the mercy of my interlocutor's time schedule. When I first arrived in Manipur, I was restless for the first week, as my interlocutor could not find time to introduce me to the Naga Women's Union. I was living five hundred m away from their office in a guest house and yet I could not just walk into their office and demand their time for my research. I had to be patient and wait. This resulted in the uncertainty of all kinds related to the timeline of my fieldwork. Every day while writing fieldnotes, I grew anxious about access to Naga Women's Union.

I use the already existing scholarship to argue that the 'field' is not a confined discreet entity, bound by space, but it is a fluid concept where the researcher negotiates her position constantly to define the field (Katz 1994; Bondi 2003; Billo and Hiemstra 2013). In the next section, I look at my everyday negotiations, experiences, and existence as a researcher. In the following sections, I explain how I negotiated my identity as a researcher in the field, what it entailed and how my gender and marital status affected my interactions. I entered the field as an autonomous researcher but was reduced to dependency and I faced challenges when I had to address issues of religion which reoriented by a study by using the method of periscoping. My identity as an Indian citizen influenced how I read my field situations and it induced the feeling of guilt. Finally, I look at some ways in which I practiced self-care through seeking support from informal networks of friendships, support from my partner, journaling and giving time to myself to process the conflicting emotions I felt during fieldwork.

2. Negotiating Identities as an Ethnographer

There were several challenges I faced before going to and after living at the field site which I could not prepare for prior to going to Manipur. There were several questions I was grappling with – What would happen if I don't get introduced to Naga Women's Union? How will this affect my research, and will I be able to change the direction of my dissertation? No amount of coursework and graduate seminars in the U.S. prepared me for these emotional frictions. After 2 weeks, my interlocutor found contact details of someone in the Naga Women's Union and walked me to their office to make a personal introduction. My interlocutor was from a Naga tribe in Senapati, so I was not perceived as a suspicious entity.

Before going to the field site, material realities dictated how long I could plan to do fieldwork. Getting a grant to research militarized patriarchy in India was very challenging. I had to explore how I could carry out such a research with no external funding. My doctoral fellowship at Stony Brook University required that I stay in New York and taught an undergraduate class. Due to visa restrictions on an international student and immigrant like me, I could not work more than 20 h in a week legally in the U.S. Preparation for fieldwork included saving whatever I could at the end of the month from my fellowship, because the possibility that I will not get funding to carry out my research was very real.

I had to contemplate my future embodiment at the field site in terms of material existence – rent, groceries, transportation cost, phone bills, internet and a one-way air ticket to India. My travel from New York to India was funded by the Graduate Employee Student Union. Four years into the graduate school and no funding for fieldwork also pushed me to think of other ways of doing my research, which did not require fieldwork at all, but I ultimately managed to come to Manipur.

My interlocutors asked probing questions about my personal life such as – where I was born, age, marital status, children, family members, religious affiliation, and caste. These questions made me reflect on my own embodiment as a researcher and what it means to grapple with the discomfort of revealing various aspects of my life to strangers. How did my interlocutors feel when I asked them similar questions in the course of my research? Though I do not practice any religion, my last name revealed that I was born in a Hindu, upper caste family. This position of privilege in a region where the vast majority of people are recognized as scheduled tribes and follow Christianity (which is a minority religion in India) revealed the power dynamic between me as the researcher and my interlocutors. My caste and class position helped me access education at universities across India and then in the US, which is difficult for most people from subjugated minorities in India.

The way I got gendered in the field every day complicated the power dynamic. My gender and marital status affected how I was perceived in the field, though this was not an isolated incident happening only to me. Several interlocutors who were unmarried or looked unmarried were asked similar probing questions. Feminist geographers have argued that gender profoundly impacts ways in which people interact during research and it has a significant impact on the researcher's personal stance throughout the research process and I used this to unpack the process of gendering I underwent during fieldwork (Cope 2002; England 1994; Valentine 2002). Here I am not arguing that gender is a standalone identity or subjectivity which determined my fieldwork experience, rather I am arguing that my gender interacted with other identities such as caste, class, religion, to produce an affect which was very peculiar, unpredictable and constantly changing.

In Senapati District of Manipur, I was living at a guest house run by a Naga woman, in the main bazaar. On my way to the Naga Women's Union office (my field site), I had to walk through the market area every day where the curious gaze of the shop owners followed me. While buying some stationery items from a shop, the shop owner introduced himself as someone from Bihar and asked me where I was from and what was I doing in Senapati. On learning that I was a doctoral student doing research in Senapati, he said 'I thought you married a local Naga man and that is why you were here'. The assumption was that as a visibly 'Indian' looking woman, I could not have come to Manipur

on my own. Because I was not accompanied by a man, my movement in public spaces like the bazaar presented a dilemma because it could not be easily categorized.

I will explain this point a bit more to give the context for the mistrust which I embody as an 'outsider' Indian citizen. Doing ethnography as a woman in India is generally difficult, because of limited mobility in the field, especially if one is not married or is perceived as unmarried. The latter was true for me. I did not wear any symbols of marriage and often got asked 'How are you still single?'

To begin with, one of the interlocutors who was higher up in the organization's hierarchy at Naga Women's Union was not very keen on engaging with me. She was busy with various activities which required her travelling out of town every week. When I offered that I can travel with her so that I could understand her work, she declined. At the same time, she offered that I could come to their office and talk to anyone else I wanted. She helped by introducing me to other people who I could interview, and this reveals a complicated negotiation I had to go through, where I was required to constantly reposition myself in relation to my interlocutor's preference, needs, time and refusal to participate in my project.

This same interlocutor put me in touch with a contact, hinted that the man is single, introduced me as a 'pretty girl doing research', and referred to the said man as my 'darling'. I used humor to deal with this awkward position and declared that I was in fact married. In proposing that I should be interested romantically in the man I was going to interview for my research, my interlocutor blurred the boundaries between the positions I had defined in my research. I was uncomfortable to deal with the emotions emanating from this ethnographic encounter because my interlocutor refused to let me interview her for my project, but at the same time went ahead and looked for potential dates for me. Not being taken seriously in the field because one is unmarried or is perceived as unmarried demonstrated the ways in which women get gendered as researchers and their work trivialized. This echoes with feminist scholarship on patronizing protection provided during fieldwork, especially in difficult fields only through association with a man. 'Protective surveillance' is gendered, which for a female ethnographer means control of her as a woman (Zadronza 2016).

I entered the field as an autonomous doctoral researcher but was reduced to a position of dependency in need of a husband which re-oriented my research to get access to people and spaces. Returning to the field site after 2010 when I went as an MA student, I reached out to interlocutors who I formed friendships with on my own, and who did not share any professional relationship with my master thesis advisor. I felt compelled to do this, to retain some semblance of autonomy, while being fully aware that autonomy during research is a very messy idea. The researcher's subject position cannot be independent of the power relations embedded in the field. And since I was reentering a conflict area again, I had to rely heavily on my interlocutors to secure housing for 6 months, plan for my travel and negotiate my everyday existence. I strongly felt that my appearance as an unmarried, childless woman determined how people around me interacted. Their concern over what will I do with a PhD degree if I am not married and do not have a child somehow trivialized the research questions I had set out to ask in the field.

3. Conflict Region and Grappling with Indian Identity

My physical presence as an Indian was affected by the attitudes and realities of the conflict zone which were followed by the conflicting feelings of guilt I experienced. I am going to discuss some of the issues I faced while doing fieldwork next which are to do with my nationality, gender, caste and religion (Patel 2017). My own position as a researcher based in the U.S. doing research on India was a challenge. Some of the questions I grappled with were: How do I reconcile my outsider position, when fieldwork both in geography and anthropology conjures up images of colonizing forces? Would I become a native informant in the academia? At the same time, as a South Asian woman born and raised in India, I also occupied a complicated insider position in India. In Manipur, I was visibly an outsider because of racial differences. I was constantly slipping into a very messy and ambiguous

insider-outsider position, the boundaries of which were not very clear after a point. My physical presence in Manipur became a cause of curiosity in the neighborhood I lived in.

Scholars from Northeast India have argued that the region which is now called Manipur was occupied by the Indian State after independence from British colonization in 1947 (Baruah 2005; Bhaumik 2009; Hazarika 2004; Kabui 1991; Parratt and Parratt 2001). There are multiple, overlapping claims to sovereignty in this region. The Indian State has played a role of fueling the ethnic divisions between Nagas, Meiteis and Kukis for its own assimilation project of nation building. This assimilation project is further complicated by the Indo-Naga peace talks going on for the past 70 years (Thong 2016). Scholars have used the term Manipuri to refer to all the 'indigenous' peoples of the State (I continue to do it in my research as well), namely Nagas, Kuki, all other tribal communities, and Meiteis as well as the Pangal community of Meitei Muslims (Jilangamba 2015; McDuie-Ra 2016). At the same time, Manipuri is a problematic term because it often gets associated with the Meitei ethnic group only. I get identified as a Mayang in Manipur. Mayang in Manipuri language is commonly used to refer to non-Manipuri in Imphal, though there are different words in tribal languages.

There is a very strong sentiment against illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and outsiders like Biharis, Marwaris and Nepalis, who run shops and work on construction sites. The immigrants are perceived as a threat to indigenous lands and identity (UCM 2005). This sentiment of hostility especially against Marwari merchant class in Manipur comes from the history of exploitative British export policies and control of rice mills by Marwaris. My field site was a politically tense space with multiple, intersecting identities at play. This is further complicated by the presence of the Indian army who assert a significant power in the region, are the face of the Indian State, and often occupy the most fertile lands to build their camps. Therefore, given this history of colonialism and ongoing State repression, I embodied an 'outsider' who could not be trusted.

Since my research was based in a conflict region, where the idea of India has always been challenged, I was very worried about how I would be perceived by people who I was going to work with. Similar emotions have been expressed by other ethnographers working in conflict areas, where building trust is always a very contentious issue. Postmodern and feminist critiques helped me highlight the issue of power relations between the ethnographer and the interlocutors, question previous research approaches as biased, and problematized the ethnographer's status as often privileged, abusive or oppressive towards the local population and culture (Abu-Lughod 1991; Bachmann 2011; Clifford 1988; Delamont 2009; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Moore 1987; Wolf 1996). In some contexts, field sites might turn out to be difficult or dangerous (Kovats-Bernat 2002; Nilan 2002) and the research topics may be considered sensitive or risky (Ashtalkovska 2001; Verdery 2012), making the presence of the researcher barely welcome, which I experienced in Manipur. My palpable difference with the community I was working with was visible in the very bodily existence I inhabited every day.

'Where are you from' is a question I found very difficult to answer during fieldwork. Primarily because of the feeling of hostility which is embedded in the societal structures, and because of India's militarization in Manipur. I have given different responses to this question, depending on who I am engaging with. If it is a person who is *Mayang* or non-Manipuri, I told them where I grew up in India, and where my family was from. If I am engaging with a Manipuri, I often started introducing myself as a doctoral researcher based in the U.S., given the history of violence by the Indian State in this region. I also realized that using my graduate student identity was not a refuge for too long for me, because in the Global South, the U.S. is perceived as an exploitative empire.

The idea that I could maintain objectivity and somehow maintain an emotional distance from my research respondents is a very masculinist idea of doing research because it assumes that we as researchers are not implicated in the societal structures where we produce knowledge. For instance, in my interaction with an interlocutor whose husband was executed by armed forces called 'extra-judicial killing' in Manipur, I had to let myself feel the emotional distress during our interactions which let me question my ability to process the data in my project. I used feminist scholar Donna Haraway's work to argue that any knowledge produced is always partial, situated, and can never make claims of universal application (Haraway 1988).

The culture of militarization in Manipur continues through routes other than Armed Forces Special Powers Act like the recent official notification by the Indian government that the Assam Rifles personnel can search a place and arrest anyone without a warrant in North Eastern States of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram (Sangai Express 2019). Given this context of everyday militarization, protests, and conflict, it took an emotional toll on my psyche and body to keep up with changing the political climate. I felt very strong emotions of guilt in my interactions with my interlocutors because I knew I could leave Manipur after my fieldwork and many of them could not. Though I did not live through or experience abuse by the armed forces, many of my interlocutors did. It was emotionally draining to listen to their stories, and I had to devise ways to deal with these narratives of violence.

4. Challenges with Established Methodological Approaches

I faced two methodological challenges while doing ethnography. First, I was not getting any access to my interlocutor initially and second, versions of Christianity were guiding the women's organization I was studying. It posed a challenge to my research methodology in terms of assuming that I will have access before coming to the field site and my inability to process the close relationship between the Catholic church and feminist work of this women's organization. I was, however, able to find various ways to manage these situations by using methods such as periscoping. A research method employed in the field of feminist geography, periscoping aims to reveal systems, processes, and experiences typically out of view that have previously been left uninterrogated due to lack of awareness or access (Hiemstra 2016).

I had assumed that once I got introduced to Naga women's Union, I would be able to make space for myself and find ways to collaborate with them for my research. But many things did not go according to my plan because there was no way for me to transnationally include my interlocutors at the planning stage of my project. The refusal to interview by my interlocutor also pushed me to reflect on the colonizing nature of my research methods like interviewing. Why did I feel entitled and demanded time from my interlocutors? Scholars working on decolonizing theory have argued that refusal can operate on multiple levels, particularly in the settler colonial context powerful tactic of refusal by communities to engage with the colonial logics that structure research processes and this helped me unpack my fieldwork interactions beyond just mere refusals (Coddington 2016; Louis 2007; Wilson 2005). This presented some opportunities and blockages for me which I navigated through employing the concept of periscoping. In the case of grassroots women's collectives, periscoping became an activist methodology, an intentional political strategy that sought to interrogate power relations and disrupt epistemic violence.

In Manipur, grassroots women's collectives have been operating in a context of militarization and underground insurgent movements which challenge the Indian State. Therefore, suspicion of anyone from India is understandable. I was not able to access spaces and form relationships with my interlocutor because my body and its presence ruffled feathers and possibly made the interlocutor from Naga Women's Union uncomfortable. In time-bound research like doctoral study, with a lack of funding for pilot fieldwork, I did not have enough time to nurture and build relationships. I gave up the idea of interviewing my interlocutor and tried to have as many casual conversations with her as possible. The ethical challenge was that I would not be able to use any of those conversations in my dissertation as data, but they helped me get access to other spaces where I could participate and observe. By using periscoping as a method, I was able to bypass the stalemate I was facing with this interlocutor who was not ready to engage with me but was happy to give me contacts of other people in Naga Women's Union who were interested in my project.

I started going to Naga Women's Union every day in the hope to volunteer my time and learn something about their work by listening and observing instead of interviewing. This also demonstrated how as a researcher, I embodied powerlessness, and how I had to deal with uncertainty and unease about my research methods being challenged. Since the key interlocutor of the organization did not take an interest in my research, it affected how much access to information I got in the fieldwork. Another interlocutor in the office offered me some older annual reports of Naga Women's Union to look at. While reading the annual reports, I found that they were in the process of typing the reports

because they did not have a digital copy and no access to a scanner. They wanted to put up the reports on a website they were designing for the organization.

I volunteered to type the reports on my laptop. The seventy-page annual report I typed had nothing to do with my research because it was a report on traditional dresses in various Naga tribes. But while reading it, I understood the cultural importance of sarongs and shawls in the Naga society. Each tribe had a unique way of doing embroidery, which was closely associated with the binary of genders, and class. Women and men have different dresses, and each color signified various social processes like birth, marriage, death, festivals. The annual report ended with a poem by an author titled 'prayers of an unborn child'. The poem was a plea from a fetus to its parents, to not abort it. The poem disturbed me because the language employed was in sync with anti-abortion groups across the world (Naga Women's Union 2018). And this opened a new line of inquiry in my research, which was to do with gender and religion. The work the organization was doing was argued as indigenous feminisms, but at the same time, the church was an integral part of it. They found strength in the Church when faced with difficult situations in their everyday work and church was also a space where Naga Women's Union mobilized the community.

Scholarship on feminist ethnography helped me to embrace the idea that I had to be flexible with the idea that my field site was not static, and it was constantly in flux, which meant I grappled with any change I was encountering instead of shutting it down in my research (Billo and Hiemstra 2013). My fieldwork was nonlinear, meaning I had a set of research questions guiding my research, but they were getting challenged in the field and I was not certain which direction the project would go. For instance, I had not considered religion as a possible topic I wanted to probe when I was formulating my research questions. I could not foresee religion as an integral part of grassroots women's movement in Manipur because religion is invariably critiqued in the mainstream feminist scholarships and very rarely embraced as an ally.

Therefore, my feminist commitments to reproductive justice and rights got challenged in the case of Naga Women's Union because of their close association with the Church. Though the Indian government legalized abortion in 1970s, as a measure to control the growing population, this anti-abortion stand of Naga Women's Union complicated the debates on reproductive rights for me and I had reoriented my study which induced a range of unpredictable emotions.

5. Addressing Emotions through Self-Care

Doing ethnography in a conflict region posed various emotional issues for me as a researcher which I addressed by using the idea of self-care. Nothing in graduate school prepared me for the uncertainty of doing ethnographic work.

Anxiety, disillusionment, confusion, hopelessness and emotional exhaustion were some of the feelings I had, in preparation for doing fieldwork and these emotions stayed with me at the field site. These emotions to an extent guided how I prepared for my fieldwork. Self-care is a problematic concept for me in an exploitative neoliberal economy because it puts the burden of well-being on the individual ignoring structural inequalities that I faced as a graduate student. Nonetheless, there were moments in the fieldwork when I had to pause and give myself some time off to process and deal with emotional toll and dilemmas of doing an embodied ethnography.

The constant guilt from planning to take a break led to many days of burn-out where I found it difficult to be fully present during fieldwork. I coped in a few different ways. I found cooking food for myself, reading fiction, and writing personal journals as therapeutic. I also invested in sleeping longer hours to cope. The constant need to perform and keeping proof of one's research performance during fieldwork also emanated from able-bodied assumptions of the researcher's body within academia (Nairn 1999; Fitzpatrick and Longley 2014).

After dark was the time when I felt forced to end my fieldwork every day. The unspoken curfew shortened my working hours which might seem like less work, but, in fact, it made me compensate by doing more research work inside the house to feel useful, like a conversation with my landlady about everyday caste practices in Manipur, cutting newspaper articles relevant to my research, and

writing detailed fieldnotes. The presence of the army dictated my fieldwork hours. It bothered me to negotiate with this unsaid omnipresent feeling of being watched.

I negotiated my situatedness in the field where I had to constantly re-position myself and the routes of these negotiations were very unpredictable. For instance, my own emotional needs were not on my radar when writing my doctoral prospectus in Fall 2017. Before I travelled from New York to India for fieldwork, I had to grapple with my emotional needs as a graduate student. Not much has been written on this aspect, especially on dealing with transnational personal relationships during research. Since my partner works in the U.S., I had to face the reality of a transnational partnership, in a context where I did not have access to internet connection and phone network regularly to keep in touch. Indian government kept shutting down the internet to curb protests in Manipur. It took me and my partner months of negotiation, therapy, and uncertainty of what was in store for us emotionally. Seeking therapy prepared me and my partner for the unknown.

I understand self-care as a community-based exercise and not an individual, isolated endeavor. Therefore, it was very important for me to develop support networks while doing fieldwork in order to process the ethnographic encounters and the emotional exhaustion. Having another person to whom one can verbalize difficulties, feelings and outlooks is highlighted in some scholarship (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). My support networks formed during fieldwork were both organic and planned and helped me process what was happening to me in the field in terms of logistical, epistemological and methodological dilemmas.

The guesthouse owner where I rented a room became one of my support systems in Manipur. Apart from the rooms she rents out, the common kitchen and dining room functioned as drinking spaces for men who pay money to get illicit liquor and cooked food. Campaigns by the Meira Paibis or Meitei women's collectives against alcoholism and domestic violence in the 1980s led to the Manipur Liquor Prohibition Act 1991. Buying and selling liquor is banned in Manipur. Members of the armed forces are exempt from the ban and often re-sell alcohol to shops and connected individuals. Alcohol is also purchased at border markets and smuggled into Manipur. By providing a drinking space in her kitchen, my guesthouse owner earned some extra money to support her family.

After living with her for almost a month, she asked me if I drink alcohol and if I would like to try some with her since she has no woman to accompany her. Since drinking publicly is strictly a male affair in Manipur, my accompanying the guest house owner helped me forge a friendship. Her everyday experience as a divorced woman found some resonance with my position as a lone researcher who was living apart from my partner because of fieldwork. Our association evolved into a friendship where we both valued our interactions.

Family members, friends, graduate school colleagues and professors who kept in touch with me regularly helped me deal with the feeling of loneliness. There were several aspects to doing fieldwork which both me and my friend doing ethnography in another part of India shared, such as being unmarried or perceived to be unmarried, and childless women. In several telephone conversations over the months of our fieldwork, we found space to talk about affective anxieties in the field. For instance, how do you respond to your interlocutors setting you up with a potential date? We discussed our position as graduate students based in the U.S. and noted that there are visible class differences which are very difficult to undo, which led to a constant feeling of guilt when interacting with interlocutors in the field. My friend and I also took a break together for a week and travelled to another city in the North East region of India, which allowed us to sit together and discuss our ongoing fieldwork. I recognized and valued the experience of having such support structures in the field that were crucial for me as a doctoral researcher. I was trained to do the ethnography as a lone researcher at the university, but I was very much dependent on many people for my survival at the field site.

Since I did not have much access to the internet for the duration of my fieldwork, keeping in touch with the world outside Manipur was always a challenge. I had to depend on the friendships at my field site for my daily human interactions. Managing the emotions of the family members was an ongoing challenge because of their concerns about living in a conflict area. The phone networks

were often shut down by the Indian government in Manipur to control the protests against the Citizenship Bill which proposed to give citizenship to persecuted Hindu minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The protest movements argued that this bill was communal in nature and threatened the existence of indigenous peoples in entire Northeast India (Sangai Express 2019). Internet and phone networks have democratized the space to build communities at the grassroots level and it is also increasingly become a tool of the Indian government for both surveillance and control. For instance, a student leader in Manipur was arrested on charges of sedition because of his Facebook post criticizing the Citizenship Amendment Bill, so I had to constantly watch what I was writing online with fear.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I unpacked the complications and challenges of doing embodied fieldwork in a conflict region of India. As a researcher, I was always implicated in the societal structures within which the ethnography was taking place because various identities like gender, class, caste, sexuality, religion become points of interaction, where ethnographic data emerges. Doing ethnographic fieldwork in a conflict region requires constant negotiation of the researcher's situatedness with the 'interlocutors' making these paths of negotiations unpredictable, as exemplified by how material realities dictated how long I could do fieldwork. In addition, I was constantly slipping into a very messy and ambiguous insider-outsider position, the boundaries of which were not very clear after a certain point. My interlocutor's probing questions about my personal life, like where I was born, age, marital status, if I have children, religious affiliation, and caste made me reflect on my own embodiment as a researcher and what it means to grapple with the discomfort of revealing various aspects of my life. I have been able to navigate these tense and ambiguous terrains of militarization by collaborating with my interlocutors in the field, paying attention to the everyday life processes of both myself and research respondents. There were instances of refusal to engage in my research by the interlocutor, which presented problems to access information for me, and revealed how it is not always the researcher who is in the position of privilege. By giving access to information and blocking it, my interlocutor was able to exert considerable influence on the direction of the research. My fieldwork was nonlinear, meaning I had a set of research questions guiding my research, but they were getting challenged in the field and I was not certain which direction the project would go. Beyond the stage of writing dissertation proposal, and grant applications, there was an immense amount of uncertainty on an everyday level about how and when the research could change, pointing out that at any stage during fieldwork my project was a negotiable document in the making.

Acknowledging difference instead of denying them and developing support networks while doing fieldwork in order to process these awkward ethnographic encounters became critical for me. Navigating everyday militarization, keeping up with ongoing protests, and having conversations about conflict with my interlocutors took an emotional toll on me. These emotional frictions in embodied ethnographic research were central to the project. It is impossible to know what exactly the fieldwork will entail before being in that space, so all speculations about research design can be challenged. Instead of becoming impediments, I argue that anxieties around fieldwork, accepting refusals and silences from research participants, can produce more complicated and grounded ethnographic knowledge.

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Notes on contributor

Shruti Mukherjee is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Stony Brook University, New York. She is currently writing her doctoral dissertation based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Manipur, India. She studies militarism in South Asia, widowhood, grassroots women's movements, women's activism, NGOs, and feminist research methods. She was awarded the Faculty Staff dissertation award for her ongoing research at Stony Brook University.

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