

Chapter 3: Fieldwork Methodology

Anthropological work usually depends for its information on fieldwork which takes place in a certain time period and in a certain geographical location. Needless to say, there is a limit on what a researcher can collect as “data” in these circumstances. Much more importantly, anthropological data is largely created in the relation between a researcher and the people studied. The text presented here is about the Bhutanese, and “the Bhutanese” are often the subject of the sentence. However, it is ultimately “my” narrative that is the narrative through my eyes and through my experiences. Clifford’s words, that ethnographic truths are partial truths (Clifford, 1986: p. 7) have relevance here. What I am going to write is within the knowledge of what I saw and experienced during the fieldwork. And what I saw or experienced depends on who I am, both individually, socially and historically (Caplan, 1988: p. 10). Therefore it is essential to clarify the individual dimension of fieldwork. This chapter aims to provide information about the location and the context I was situated in during my fieldwork. As Crick remarks, context is defined from two sides. That is, as the ethnographer is theorising about the people studied, they too are imposing meanings on the situation (Crick, 1982: p. 25). The chapter is about how the Bhutanese saw my role and how I found myself in that society.

3.1 Location and Context

When I started research on Bhutan’s development in 1995, nobody, including myself, was sure if long-term fieldwork would be possible in Bhutan. Various inquiries I made to people related to Bhutan in one way or another only held little prospect. The only encouragement I heard was from a person who kept strong ties with the Bhutanese. He said, “A strong point for you is that you are Japanese. The Bhutanese have a very good impression of the Japanese.” How much my nationality actually affected the consideration of my research proposal by the government is beyond my knowledge, but during my stay in Bhutan I encountered many comments

which supported this statement. Among people from developed countries, the Japanese are clearly distinguished from *pchillip* (the Westerners) in Bhutan. *Pchillip* literally means “outsiders”, but in the present usage it only refers to Westerners. One Bhutanese told me that the Bhutanese tend to think that Japan is located just beyond Trashigang.¹ Another Bhutanese remarked that the Japanese and the Bhutanese share attributes of politeness and sensitive consideration towards others, while *pchillip* are self-confident, selfish, and sometimes arrogant. Those comments show their feeling of closeness to Japan compared to other developed countries. Considering these views it may be the case that my nationality and appearance have resulted in the collection of different data from what could have been collected by Westerners.

In June 1996, on the verge of giving up the idea of research on Bhutan, I visited the country for the first time. During my three week stay as a tourist I was given opportunities to meet many government officials and talk about my research. My tactic was to keep my research agenda flexible to their views and demands. I was looking for a person who was open-minded to academic research. These meetings turned out to be a lesson in reading between the lines. The Bhutanese generally do not like to give a negative reply, so even if an actual answer is “No”, they do not say so explicitly. For a person who had not had much direct contact with the Bhutanese until then, it was not an easy task. I somehow managed to see a few people who seemed to be understanding towards my research, and from discussions with these people an idea arose: I should be attached to the Education Division during the fieldwork and that the research would focus on young people. My research interest was therefore constructed not only by my theoretical concern - as presented in the previous chapter - but also by this particular situation.

After coming back from Bhutan, I rewrote a research proposal and sent it to the Ministry of Health and Education. What

¹ Trashigang is an eastern district of Bhutan.

followed was a nerve-racking and patience-testing seven months. During that period many people asked me, “Why is Bhutan so closed?” “What do they want to hide from the outside?” Those questions came out from sympathy towards me, as I was experiencing days of frustration and badly wanted to go back to Bhutan. However, I was still uncomfortable with these questions. The questions reveal prejudices and one-sided expectations that countries are normally open to outsiders and that those countries which are closed are to be regarded with suspicion. Bhutan does not maintain a cautious stance to the outside without reason. The officials told me that they do not want a flood of tourists, pollution, environmental degradation and the decline of traditional life style which many developing countries experience. On the other hand I was surprised during my three week stay by the accessibility of high officials. Ministers, deputy ministers and other officials of various ministries were kind and hospitable enough to give time to a student who visited the country as a tourist and to listen to an idea about research. In which country on earth are such high officials so accessible? There is only a very fine line between “mysterious” and “suspicious”, and both attributes encourage speculation. In this uncertain situation it was not only people around me but also myself who speculated about the prospect, thereby frustrating myself even more.

During Easter 1997, I got a phone call which delighted me. It said that my research proposal had been approved by the government. In late April 1997 I went to Bhutan again, expecting to stay for one year. I was attached to the Youth Guidance and Counselling Section (YGCS) of the Education Division during my fieldwork. The data on which this study was based was collected during this time by “a Japanese single female Ph.D. student in her late twenties studying in London”. What does this description mean in Bhutan?

The fact that I am from a so-called developed country and that I am well educated from their point of view meant that people expected me to say something about Bhutan’s development and its education programmes. I had two

interviews with the BBS (Bhutan Broadcasting Services), the only broadcasting company in Bhutan, and I was asked to give a talk in the college. Being female and single, on the other hand, did not seem to impose a specific role on me socially. In fact the Bhutanese generally do not ascribe specific roles to either sex or a certain marital status to an age group. As Imaeda writes, both men and women are involved in domestic chores. It is widely observed that men take care of their children, his younger bothers and sisters and sometimes nephews and nieces. It is not unusual that women are the main income earners in a household (Imaeda, 1994: p. 228).

During the course of the fieldwork I tried to make arrangements informally to visit schools and training institutes to talk with young people. Some people I came across were kind enough to help my research. They introduced me to young people from various parts of society, educated and non-educated, from single mothers to shopkeepers. As I came to know more people it became easier to make such arrangements. With the help of some teachers I managed to visit a few high schools. Some people in different ministries were also helpful towards my research. Some young people I got to know through the research became very good friends. With them I went on weekend picnics to temples and an overnight trip to see one of the endangered species of birds, and enjoyed several dancing and drinking evenings. Also I discussed with them social structure, culture, tradition, and social changes. The research went better and I immersed myself more in Bhutanese society. In everyday life, the distinction between “work” and “fun” became a blur. The phone in my house kept ringing and friends made typical Bhutanese “all of a sudden visits”, knocking on the door without advance notice, and I heard complaints from friends that it was difficult to catch me. Hundreds of cups of tea were consumed and I was getting “data”.

At the beginning of the fieldwork, I struggled to grasp underlying assumptions and the social background of what people talked about. A simple sentence like, “He is going to

Bangkok for training”, raised many questions. What is training for them? What is Bangkok for them? Why is she telling me so proudly that her husband is going for training? Gradually I learnt that I needed to feel as they feel. That was more than finding a context. That is to say, for example, even if a researcher knows that an altar room is important for them, without feeling spiritual, it is hard to behave properly in the room. Similarly when I heard that someone was going for training, I was supposed to be pleased as his friends were, not more, not less. I found the Bhutanese sensed a subtle difference between understanding and feeling. My behaviour was probably telling them whether I understood or felt. “When in Rome do as the Romans do” is probably a useful saying for anthropologists, but I learnt that in order to do as the Romans do, first I need to feel as the Romans feel. I found that the Bhutanese accurately assessed how much each foreigner adjusted to Bhutanese life, and their way of treating foreigners was different according to the degree of adjustment that had been made. Naturally as one behaves more properly, accommodates Bhutanese diet more, and shows more appreciation to Bhutanese life more generally, they open the door more widely.

Since most time during the fieldwork I lived in Thimphu, the capital, many of my friends were well-educated in the modern education sector and spoke English very well. Apart from staying in schools, I spent much time with them, researching them and having fun with them. Inevitably my view has been affected by their point of view. For example, they asked, “How is your research going?” I answered, “I went to [insert a name of a school] and stayed there for some time.” Then they commented, “Oh, many students of that school are from an urban (for example) background.” It would probably be included in the researcher’s task to analyse this kind of comment itself. Who commented? From what point of view? What is the position of a particular school or a particular mode of education in the society? However, I admit that my analysis itself has also been influenced by this kind of comment to a certain extent. This point will become clearer in the next scene. Sometimes I would be asked about my

findings and my own views about young people. In Thimphu these days young people have become an issue: drug abuse and juvenile delinquency, though small in scale, are a concern in urban society. When I said something which was the same as the socially acknowledged fact, people did not make a further question or comment but simply agreed. But when my view was different from a socially acknowledged view, people tended to say, “You have first hand information, because you actually talked with the young people. My view is just what I feel from everyday life.” I tended to reflect more and try to justify my position when what I thought I had found was different from the socially acknowledged view; while when it was the same as the socially acknowledged view I tended to leave my own perception as it was. Finding the socially acknowledged view is finding a context, and this is an essential part of anthropological fieldwork. But at the same time a researcher’s view also tends to be more or less influenced by this socially acknowledged view, and this would probably be one of the inherent biases of research. In my case this bias came primarily from a well educated group of people who live in an urban area.

Living in the capital seems to have given an urban bias to the data. Although a few chances of travelling in a rural area gave me a glimpse of rural life, it did not constitute sufficient material on which I could give a proper analysis. If I had stayed in a village for some time and talked with young people engaged in agriculture who had not been to school, a picture of Bhutanese society might have been different from the one I present here.

3.2 Sampling

Young people in this book are both students and working people mainly from eighteen to thirty years old, but in some cases it includes students of sixteen and seventeen years old. It must be clearly stated here that “young people” in this book are the young people whom I met during the fieldwork. I interviewed about two hundred students and about fifty young people who have a job. This is not a statistically

significant portion of young people considering the fact that students in all levels of education in Bhutan number over ninety thousand (Education Division, 1997). I did however try to see young people from all three education sectors, namely English medium modern education, Dzongkha medium monastic education and the schools in the middle ground which teach Bhutanese culture and language in Dzongkha (Dzongkha medium education), and also early school leavers. I spent the first three months visiting various training institutes and schools in Thimphu and Paro in order to identify relevant fieldwork sites for later stages of the fieldwork.

For modern education, there were several options. I made several visits to Motithang High School in Thimphu. However it seemed to me to be difficult to engage in a substantial conversation with them and to know their lifestyle because almost all students in Thimphu are day scholars. I happened to know young teachers of the Drukgyel High School in Paro, western Bhutan. Since they offered to help in my research I decided to stay there for three weeks. Most of the students in that high school lived in student hostels and these young teachers were also matrons. I stayed with the young teachers and tried to spend as much time as possible with students. The fact that I was staying with the teachers gave me the concern that students might tell me only “a good answer” rather than honest answers. I tried to talk with them when teachers were not around. I interviewed about forty students from Class 10 to 12. Many students in the high school were from urban backgrounds, and, though there were students from rural areas, many of their parents were civil servants or businessmen. It should be noted that in Bhutan not all students go to the nearest high school. Therefore students in any school are from both rural and urban backgrounds and geographically they are mixture of people from all over the Bhutan. The main difference is probably that of the proportion from different areas in each school.

With regard to higher education, I could stay in the Sherubtse College in Kanglung, eastern Bhutan for about two weeks.

Within this limited time I tried to see as many students as possible. About seventy students across various departments engaged in casual conversation with me. Compared with the Drukgyel High School where I could see the students only after classes, the varying timetables for each student in the college helped me to utilise time efficiently. I made an “appointment” with students, hung around with them from morning till evening, and chatted. We sat and talked on the grass or in the student canteen. In Thimphu, I also met young people who were educated in the modern education sector and who already had a job. They include civil servants, businessmen, traders, teachers, doctors, housewives and so on.

To gain an understanding of Dzongkha medium education, I stayed in the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies, Simtokha and talked with about forty students, who were mainly from a rural background. I stayed in one of the student hostels for about a month. Here I literally lived with the students: in the morning I went to the Simtokha Dzong with them for morning prayer where I sat with them for about half an hour while they were chanting prayer, then had breakfast in the students canteen and attended morning assembly. I enjoyed “my own time” while students were in class. I took my fieldwork notes, and thought about the questions I would ask. In the afternoon I chatted with the students, went to evening prayer which lasted between one hour and two hours depending on whether it was an auspicious or an inauspicious day. The evening meal was followed by so-called study time, which I could also utilise with the teacher’s permission to talk with students. Since this was the first school I stayed at for some time, I revisited it a couple of times to ask new questions which were raised during my visits to other schools. I also made a few visits to the Institute of Traditional Medicine in Thimphu where doctors for so-called indigenous medicine are trained. The students in this institute are all from the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies.

Interviews with young people in monastic education were the only occasion which created some inconvenience for a female researcher. I could not stay in monasteries overnight, therefore I could see monks only during the day time. Moreover, these monasteries are often far away from the capital, preventing me from undertaking in depth research on monks. I visited Dechenphodrang Shaydra in Thimphu, but I could only manage to talk with a few of its inhabitants. Monks working in the Special Commission for the Cultural Affairs also cooperated with my research, but in this case also, I visited them only once. Data collected from monks should be seen as supplementary to data from other groups of young people.

The definition of “early school leavers” in this study is those who did not pass Class 10. These days, in Bhutan passing Class 10 is a point which divides the educated and the not well-educated. Whether a student passes Class 10 or not also makes a lot of difference with respect to the possibility of him or her taking an office job. Early school leavers were found in the Wood Craft Centre in Thimphu, and I also visited some textile weavers, wood carvers and painters who were often not well educated people: I made several trips to each of their workplaces, and chatted with them.

Questions asked during the interviews were more or less the same for all sectors. Questions were divided into two sorts. One set was about their career and their own vision of “a good life”. At the beginning of my fieldwork my main aim was to examine various visions of “a good life” among young people. I started to ask why they had chosen the present school or job, what their parents, brothers and sisters did, where they lived, and what the interviewees wanted to do in the future and why. Answers were often developed to the extent that they become a life history. I also asked about how important money, family and friends were for them, what would improve their life and so on. Another set of questions were about Bhutan’s development, culture and tradition. Questions were about the pace of development, positive and negative aspects of modernisation, what Bhutanese culture and tradition

meant for them, what were the most visible changes in society, and where they wanted Bhutan to be in thirty years time. During the sessions I made sure that interviewees felt comfortable with both the interview situations and my questions. My prime intention was to create a friendly atmosphere. Because of this consideration I did not take notes while talking with young people. Some were surprised, because they expected me, as a researcher, to take notes. Some did not notice until halfway through an interview that this was actually an interview for research purposes.

The second point I concentrated on was to stick to a flow of conversation rather than a list of the questions I had in mind. Sometimes I could not get enough information. But prepared questions seem to me a simple reflection of my expectation of what is important and what is not. The danger of an expectation is that it sets a form of question and thereby sets an answer. When I asked the students in the Sherubtse College what they would like to be in the future, for example, conversation was not lively at all. I tried to let them speak through different questions, which were nevertheless based on the assumption that what they “wanted” to be was an important question for them. At last they spoke out, not about what they wanted to be, but about how my questions were irrelevant for the situation. They taught me that since there were only a small number of options regarding jobs, what they first thought about was availability of jobs rather than what they wanted to do. In this case I was fortunate because they made me realise how biased I was, but the next example reveals a real difficulty of fieldwork and made me reflect on how much I might have misinterpreted Bhutanese context. One day in London I was asked by a British friend of mine how useful the Japanese tea ceremony was. In Japan people in general do not think about a tea ceremony in terms of its usefulness. It is rather considered to be a form of art. But being asked about its usefulness I tried to think about it and gave an answer. I did not even bother to tell him that the Japanese do not usually think about tea ceremony in terms of its usefulness. It was not a conscious choice, but the unconscious response of simply answering a question. I was

in his position in Bhutan. It is frightening for me to imagine that I would never know how many of my questions were of this sort and how many were context conscious questions. Bias in questions is recognised as bias only after a researcher notices how his or her question is somehow missing the point. Through following the flow of conversation I tried to find what was actually significant for them, and thereby to find a context. Unexpected answers had the potential to give me a clue about how to get away from my own expectations and to get more into the context. When an unexpected answer puzzled me at first I tried to understand the context further by asking an interviewee. But when it could not be solved, I relied on good cultural translators. They could be other students in the same school in which I was conducting research at that time, or they could be one of my friends in Thimphu.

Some teachers in schools which were far away from the capital offered to help my research by distributing questionnaires and sending them back to me. I was not very keen on the idea of distributing questionnaires. It seemed to me that the information I could get through a questionnaire was of a very limited type. However asking students to write down something in a short essay style proved fruitful in getting an honest answer. This method was particularly useful in the early stage of the research when I was not familiar with either young students and the context they were in.

The language used in fieldwork is often a big consideration: in this case I tried to talk in English as much as possible. Although I was learning Dzongkha during my fieldwork, my command of Dzongkha was not good enough to conduct interviews, and also Dzongkha was often not a mother tongue of interviewees.² Moreover I saw direct communication with interviewees as important. Although it depended on the character of the field assistant, it was often the case for me

² According to Driem (1994: p. 87), there are nineteen different languages spoken in Bhutan.

that when someone mediated the communication, the atmosphere tended to become less relaxed. When I needed an interpreter I asked some of my Bhutanese friends, who spoke several local languages.

Meeting with young people was often an exciting and interesting experience. Some students in the college imagined that I was a fortune teller, since I asked about their future career. Most of the time interviewees were my age group and it was easy to make a friendly atmosphere, and I actually became friends with some of them. Towards the end of my fieldwork I held a presentation and seminar in the Education Division to lay out and discuss my findings. Not only educationists but also officials from other ministries attended. One of them asked me how I was able to have a close relationship with the students, pointing out that in some cases I was asked advice by students who were considering leaving school. That was also my question. Although I did not see myself as keeping a particularly close relationship with interviewees, the response I had from young people sometimes overwhelmed me. Another participant suggested that although I was attached to the Education Division, young people saw me as neutral compared to teachers and thereby felt it easier to open up.

Apart from “chatting” with young people, various other people who were knowledgeable about Bhutan’s past, culture and tradition were also interviewed. On Bhutan’s development policy, information largely relies on government publications and discussion with officials in various ministries.