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Getting Behind the Walls and Fences

Methodological considerations of gaining access to middle-class women in urban India

Abstract:

This article presents and analyzes two cases of ethnographic, topic-driven, fieldwork among upper caste, middle-class women in urban India, which is a field dominated by hierarchical social relations of class, caste and gender. The aim of this article is to discuss the methodological challenges we encountered in delineating, ‘constructing’ (Amit 2000) and getting access to the potential field-sites. Prospective informants lived their everyday lives criss-crossing between different types of social arenas within the city, inducing us to take a multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995). Moreover, these everyday social arenas were clearly demarcated and initially closed to outsiders by physical walls and social distinction, rendering the process of gaining access rather challenging. Here, we discuss these challenges and how we attempted to solve them. A central point is that ‘gaining access’ for most ethnographic researchers is a long process of meticulous planning, serendipitous encounters and ‘dead-ends’, that in itself is part of the ethnographic material. Furthermore, we discuss the relational aspect of qualitative research, wherein the researcher ‘puts his or her own body on the line’ (Okely 2012:1). We argue that the manner by which the researcher is being positioned by the people studied – processes characterized by resistance, avoidance or even exclusion – often contain rich ethnographic information which must be taken into consideration. By highlighting this, we aim to demystify challenges often overlooked or under-communicated in ethnographic research.

Keywords: Ethnography; Methodology; Serendipity; Middle class; Women; Positionality; Urban fieldwork

Introduction

In this article, we present and analyse methodological challenges found in two cases of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken among middle-class women in Indian mega-cities. Both researchers employed a combination of participant observation and qualitative semi-structured interviews in order access the everyday social arenas of our informants to grasp *their* point of view.¹ One of the authors did fieldwork among high-caste women in Bangalore in 1993-94, and the other author among upper middle-class households in New Delhi in 1997-98. Thus, both cases were carried out among privileged groups in Indian mega-cities, where prospective informants lived their everyday-lives at social arenas that were clearly demarcated and initially closed to outsiders by physical walls and social distinction. By highlighting in rather detail, the challenges encountered in delineating, ‘constructing’ (Amit 2000) and getting access to prospective field-sites, and how positionality and serendipity played into this, this article aim to demystify challenges often overlooked or under-communicated in ethnographic research.

Predominant research traditions within Anthropology and Development Studies focus on marginalized groups in the periphery.² Furthermore, the typical ethnographic fieldwork, as prescribed by the forefathers such as Malinowski and Boas, used to be based on certain underlying features of time, place, depth and immersion. This required that the researcher was able to spend several months in the field, live in a local household and thereby truly participate with the locals in their everyday tasks. Moreover, the ideal ethnographic fieldwork was also originally modelled on the notion of cultures as virtually isolated islands where fieldwork entailed getting access to a well-defined physical site, such as a village, where everybody knew everybody else and presumably shared the same ‘culture’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).³

¹ When we use the term ‘ethnographic fieldwork’, we refer to the fieldwork tradition from Malinowski which has become the standard, ideal-type fieldwork within anthropology and which is characterized by its long-term, mainly qualitative methods and bottom-up perspective on everyday life (See i.e. Bradburd 1998:11; Eriksen 2010:1; Howell and Talle 2012:1, Madden 2010).

² See Nader (1972) in her critique of Anthropology, and for instance Apentiik and Parpart (2006) and Bernstein (2005) for how Development Studies by its very history and topic has focused on marginalized groups living in poverty, and the ethical questions of power thereby raised within the discipline.

³ This perspective on ‘culture’ goes hand in hand with the idea of ‘cultural relativism’, in which the anthropologist sets out to do fieldwork in order to understand ‘the native’s point of view’. Since the 1970s onwards, this culture-concept has been criticized for lacking an understanding of heterogeneity and thereby ignoring power-relations and inequality (Keesing 1990). See also Marcus & Fisher (1986), Kuper (1999).

In a lecture on participant observation for anthropology-students at the University of Oslo in the late 1990s, the well-known anthropologist Fredrik Barth talked about how easy it is to gain access to the field. Using his own fieldwork in a small Papua New Guinea village as an example, he entertained how he initially had gained access by just sitting down on a tree-stump in the village observing life. Very soon, Barth explained, people had started coming over to him, asking questions, and as a result he could smoothly start carrying out participant observation from day one.

That particular method, let us call it the tree-stump method, might have worked well in clearly delineated settings such as small villages, where everybody knows everybody else, and where the infrastructure and power-relations ensure that a large part of social life takes place in open public arenas. However, since the 1990s it has become increasingly common for ethnographers to follow Marcus’ (1995) call for doing multi-sited fieldwork of what he termed ‘the world system’, and what Ortner (2000) termed ‘the post-community’, that is, in settings very different from the clearly delineated Papuan village which Barth used as a model in his lecture.

The two fieldwork-cases discussed here, although typical ethnographic in that they were based on long-term fieldwork with participant observation as a main method, and by entailing a bottom-up approach on social life (see footnote 1), fall into this ‘new’ trend within Anthropology and Development Studies of studying privileged, powerful groups and organizations in urban, global locations.⁴ First, they were undertaken in Indian urban locations with prospective informants living their everyday lives in social arenas⁵ - such as elite clubs, temples and family-households – throughout the city, thereby defying the notion of the anthropological demarcated field-site (Kurotani 2004). There was no obvious ‘centre’ in the form of a ‘village plaza’ or a visible community organization, and no ‘village elders’ to approach (Kurotani 2004: 205-206). Second, our fieldworks were undertaken among women and families belonging to privileged groups, which in the gender-segregated and hierarchical context of India implied the challenge of ‘studying up’, or studying ‘sideways’ (Nader 1972).

⁴ For a recent example of this new trend of ethnographic development research, see for instance Sande Lie’s study of the World Bank in Uganda (2015).

⁵ We regard ‘social arena’s as everyday meeting places where social, meaningful interaction takes place, and draw upon two theoretical traditions in our use of the term: 1) Goffman’s actor-inspired concept of ‘arena’ as a place for interaction between people (Goffman 1971), and 2) what has been termed ‘activity spaces’ among geographers, which is a more structural perspective that highlights how ‘...activities are lived out in particular, relatively localized chains of sites..’ (Jackson and Thrift 2001:394).

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The families and individuals we were seeking, lived most of their lives in social arenas that were initially closed to outsiders such as us by means of physical walls or elaborate social rules of distinction. In terms of gaining access, these two factors implied that the 'tree-stump method' – i.e. sitting down on a street-bench as a way of getting to know people – probably would have left us stuck with our own company. In our cases, on the other hand, 'the field' was topic-driven with prospective informants found in different, and mostly closed, sites across the city. Hence, we had to 'construct the field' ourselves (Amit 2000).

In a step-by-step approach, we will now outline how we went about 'constructing our field' (Amit 2000) in order answer our respective research questions, but more importantly to tease out the particular challenges of gaining access and getting data in the gendered and hierarchical context of Indian mega-cities. To us, gaining access to the field was not only a question of finding a gatekeeper who, once located, might virtually open up the gate and take the researcher swiftly from 'outside' to 'inside'. Rather, it turned out to be a long process of meticulous planning, serendipitous encounters and, what we at the time experienced as, 'failures'. This is rarely a linear process, but rather a 'twisted road' where one gets access up to a certain point, before encountering additional barriers. We will argue that this process is an important part of data production in its own right, which is often overlooked.

Furthermore, we emphasize the relational and serendipitous aspects of ethnography, and how these two aspects are intertwined in the process of gaining access and getting data. Rivoal and Salazar understand serendipity as 'accidental wisdom' (2013:178), in the sense that it is not only a question about chance and the unexpected, but equally about sagacity and knowledge of the field. At the same time, because ethnography is about finding people to relate to, the researchers' social roles and personalities indeed impact on the ensuing access and data. Rich ethnographic information can be teased out of the manner in which the researcher is being positioned in the process of getting access to the field. Thus, we show how the instances where we encountered resistance, avoidance or even exclusion, and thus initially classified as failures, turned out to contain important information. Given such challenges, we show that it might be wise to change tactics and try new avenues for getting data. Such new avenues might be found through careful planning, but more often than not take place through serendipity.

This article is structured around detailed presentations and analyses of our two cases, of which the first examines aspects of Sissel's fieldwork among high-caste women in

Bangalore in 1993-94 (Egden 2000), and the second examines Anne’s fieldwork among the established middle-class in Delhi in 1997-98 (Waldrop 2001).⁶ Below we show how careful fieldwork planning, combined with serendipitous encounters with people and field-sites we could relate to, and conscious decisions regarding a change of tactics whenever needed, have played important parts in all phases of our fieldworks, from constructing and finding relevant field-sites through the process of gaining access, meeting resistance and data production. To make comparison easier, the two cases are presented according to the same structure. An introductory background is followed by a detailed description of how we set out to locate adequate field-sites, and how positionality, serendipitous encounters and barriers affected the process of getting access.

Studying middle-class women in the Indian ‘urban swirl’

Before turning to the cases in detail, it is important to outline three characteristics common to both our case studies, and the ensuing challenges: First, our fieldworks were carried out in urban locations and were topic-driven rather than place-specific; second, that we by aiming to study high-caste, middle-class families in India, encountered particular challenges with regard to studying up/sideways; and third, our gendered perspectives led us to seek access to women’s everyday familylife.

In his writings on anthropological approaches to the city, Ulf Hannerz used the term ‘urban swirl’ to capture how the ‘city is a place of discoveries and surprises’, where you ‘encounter people who are not like yourself’ (Hannerz 1992:173-174). In principle, in terms of doing fieldwork in mega-cities such as Bangalore and New Delhi this ‘urban swirl’ opens up possibilities for serendipity and chance meetings. However, the city is also characterized by a ‘contrast between physical closeness and social distance’ (Hannerz 1992: 63). Thus, in most cities in the world, and certainly in Indian cities where hierarchical notions of caste distinction inform class relations and social interaction, everyday social life takes place within enclosed social arenas, such as households, grocery stores, working-places or clubs. This creates methodological challenges for the anthropologist interested in a bottom-up everyday perspective and in ‘getting on the inside’ of social communities. How should the

⁶ It should be noted that although both projects had several similarities and we both were based at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo during overlapping time-periods, the projects were independent of one another.

anthropologist proceed to locate suitable social arenas that will provide data on meaningful interaction of people belonging to the group she intends to study? Moreover, how should she proceed to get access to these everyday social arenas?

It is no coincidence that some of the most famous qualitative studies of the early Chicago-school were place-driven and focused on social arenas that were clearly demarcated in terms of physical borders from the city at large - such as Wirth’s study of the Ghetto (1998), first published in 1928, and Cressey’s study of the Taxi-Dance Hall (1932). Such studies of enclosed field-sites – also referred to as ‘villages in the city’ (Gans 1982) - were perfectly suited for participant observation since they offered a ‘transplanted variant of the small-scale community studies that have been a trademark’ of anthropology (Fox 1980:105; see also i.e. Clifford 1997). These types of studies were predominant among anthropologists setting out to do urban fieldwork. Several of the early anthropological urban studies used this approach, such as William Foot Whyte’s *Street-Corner Society* in Boston (1943) and Oscar Lewis’ (1961) study of poverty in a housing complex in Mexico City.⁷ This approach has continued to be popular and used in studies all over the world, but with a majority focusing on underprivileged groups or slum-like neighbourhoods in cities.⁸

In contrast to these examples of place-driven urban fieldworks, our fieldworks have been topic-driven. Although our upper middle-class informants were based in their family-homes within middle-class neighbourhoods, they lived their everyday lives criss-crossing between different types of social arenas spread out over large areas within the cities. ‘The field’ had no obvious or natural border, and at the outset resembled ‘a string of single-sites’ (Kurotani 2004:203). In order to capture the lived everyday experiences of our informants, we found that we first had to locate a few of these single sites that we assumed would be key social arenas of our target group, and then try to get access to these. In this sense, our fieldworks were multi-local, and the field sites became delimited by the topic in focus (Madden 2010). This implies that in our two cases – and also for many qualitative fieldworks in cities and transnational settings that are topic-driven – the field is constructed by the

⁷ One notable early exception was the so-called Copperbelt Studies that from the 1930s onwards set out to combine qualitative with quantitative methods, and also developed ‘the extended case method’ in order to understand urban life and modernization in the mining-towns of today’s Zambia. See Hannerz (1980) for an overview, and i.e. Mitchell (1973) for an example.

⁸ See for instance: Hannerz’ *Inquires into Ghetto Culture and Community* in Washington DC (1969); Wikan on a poor neighborhood in Cairo (1981); and more recently Pellow on the Zongo in Accra (2008).

researcher along the way, and over time, as she follows 'the paths' of her targeted informants. Thus, when starting out, the first step for this kind of fieldwork is to identify some relevant social arenas to begin with, i.e. to start 'constructing the field' (Amit 2000).

The next step is how to get access to these social arenas where the social life of one's prospective informants takes place, and it is here our focus on middle-class people in powerful positions entailed further challenges. In India, where the 'new middle class' (Fernandes 2006) has been accused of being self-centred and consumerist (Gupta 2001, Varma 1998), privileged people increasingly live in enclaves with physical barriers, such as gates and fences, that are not easily traversed. Furthermore, in India where caste notions of hierarchy still permeate social relations, and where class position continues to overlap with caste position (Joshi 2010, Fernandes 2006), the social arenas of the middle class are largely closed to outsiders, not only in physical terms but even in social terms. Thus, in contrast to the many classic ethnographic urban studies undertaken among underprivileged groups⁹, where parts of the social life unfold in open, public streets and where the researcher can start looking for prospective informants through the 'tree-stump approach', we had to start by first trying to get behind the communities' 'walls and fences', and then pursue fieldwork from there.¹⁰

The last challenge we discuss here pertains to the fieldwork's gender dimension. As has been noted by many researchers, men tend to get easier access to research among other men and women among women (Ardner 1975, Gullestad 2001, Wikan 1982). With this in mind, we set out to focus on Indian women. However, in the Indian setting where most middle-class people are high caste (Sridharan 2011, Fernandes 2006, Ganguly-Scrace and Scrace 2009), and where control of women's sexuality still underlies high-caste gender notions (Seymour 1999, Sarkar 2001), gaining access to women was not straightforward even for two women researchers. In the 1990s, it was still the norm for married, high-caste middle-class women to live their everyday lives within the family-household, and rarely venturing out

⁹ Some examples are: The study of *The Hobo* first published in 1923 (Anderson 2014); Whyte's study of youth-gangs in a Boston slum, first published in 1943, (Whyte 1993); and Wikan's study of everyday life in a Cairo slum (1981).

¹⁰ We are not implying that it necessarily is easier to get access to the 'intimate spaces' of underprivileged people. Several studies have illustrated the many ways informants might exclude, or even deliberately misguide researchers, in order to keep what they regard as intimate knowledge secret. See i.e. Chagnon (1983) and his experiences amongst the Yanomamö in Amazonas when he tried to map tabooed rules of kinship. Our point here is that the barriers for first encounters are less physical in such settings.

to social arenas outside the family circle (Donner 2008, Hancock 2000, Wadley 2008).

Although with globalization a growing professional imagery has caught hold of the younger generation of urban middle-class women, and it has become the norm to continue working after marriage (Clark 2016, Waldrop 2012), women still shy away from public arenas and travel by car if they have one. Thus, even within the fairly secluded, quiet middle-class neighbourhoods of Delhi and Bangalore with small parks dotted around, middle-class women are a rare sight, and can mainly be glimpsed while popping out of the gate when the vegetable-*wallah* with his cart passes by, or while getting in and out of their cars.

With the intersections of gender, class and caste in Indian mega-cities outlined above, we found that in order to get data on social relations of middle-class women, we had to first trace, and then get access to, some of the fairly closed, social arenas where women lived their everyday lives. Of these, the family-household stood out as the most central one, and in line with other researchers doing ethnographic fieldwork on everyday life among middle-class people in Indian cities (Frøystad 2005, Donner 2008), we also both started out with the aim of gaining access to family households as a means of studying women's everyday lives. As it turned out, however, and as Okely (2012) since then has discussed thoroughly, our own roles and positions impacted on our fieldworks more than we had anticipated, which we will see in the two cases below.

Using yoga to gain access to the field of high-caste women

We now turn to Sissel's fieldwork in Bangalore in the early 1990s, where she explored the traditional roles of high-caste Brahmin, middle-class women and the challenges these women encountered in upholding their social status and high-caste position in a society in rapid change. Of the two cases we discuss, this probably comes closest to the classical ideal-type of an ethnographic fieldwork (Bradburd 1998:11, Howell and Talle 2012:1, Madden 2010): The fieldwork lasted six months, and the researcher, being a young unmarried woman coming to the field alone, managed to find a high-caste household where she could stay as a paying guest. This household turned out to be a perfect arena to get a long-term 'inside' perspective on the everyday lives and ritual practices of high-caste women. The house was located in a Brahmin-dominated part of the city and could be said to resemble 'a village in the city' (Gans 1982), in terms of its secluded character. The neighbourhood had its own typical architecture

with a specific street planning, high fences which created a withdrawn atmosphere, and a history as a high-caste location.

However, negotiating to stay in a household as a paying guest within this secluded high-caste neighbourhood was not a straightforward process. A mix of meticulous advance planning, letters to prospective gatekeepers, and serendipity upon arrival in the field, all proved significant. This illustrates how access cannot be regarded as an end in itself, but must be seen as an ongoing process that even provided valuable insights. Furthermore, the researcher’s positionality vis-a-vis her informants might hold multifaceted meanings, which in turn may impact on access. Here, the group of middle-class, high-caste Brahmins had more economic, cultural and symbolic capital than the graduate student researcher. It can thus be argued that this is an example of ‘studying up’ (Nader 1972). At the same time, this being in the early 1990s when economic liberalization and globalization were gaining momentum, Sissel’s position as a middle-class Western graduate student, ascribed her with a sense of new ideas and dreams about “the West”.

Finding the first gatekeeper

Sissel was well aware that she would be entering a fairly closed social arena. Having spent half a year in Bangalore earlier, she understood that her first challenge would be to locate where high-caste women of her target group would meet without compromising their identities as proper Hindu women. She also knew full well that getting behind the gates and fences and into those meeting-places and subsequently be allowed into the women’s houses was a considerable task. Being a young woman in her twenties, single, without children and ‘from the West’, i.e. not high-caste and somewhat ‘impure’, Sissel could not approach the women as one of their peers.

She realized early on that she would need to get an invitation from someone of a high social position. A contact had tipped her about a female yoga instructor running a yoga centre in Bangalore, and suggested that Sissel could write to her. Despite having followed this lead, Sissel had not received any reply. After arriving in Bangalore, she decided to find the yoga instructor’s house, in a quiet, upscale neighbourhood outside the city centre.

Turning up unannounced, Sissel was quite relieved when the yoga instructor welcomed her, acknowledged that she had received the letters and was indeed expecting Sissel to arrive. During a rather short first encounter, the yoga instructor informed Sissel about the particular yoga tradition at her centre, as well as other courses and *ashrams* to visit, - since Sissel was ‘to stay for so many months’. Obviously, the yoga instructor saw Sissel as a new, foreign yoga student, and seemed flattered that Sissel had come such a long way to study yoga with her. Realizing the misunderstanding, Sissel promptly explained that although she was interested in yoga, she was mainly there as a student of anthropology wanting to learn about everyday life of Indian women, and interview them about their life stories, traditions and marriage arrangements. Much to Sissel’s surprise, the yoga instructor picked up on marriage arrangements, explaining that there were a variety of traditions, since the women at her centre belonged to many different groups, and that she was sure this would be of great interest to Sissel. Somewhat relieved Sissel understood that the mentioning of marriage arrangements, traditions and rituals had rung a familiar bell with the instructor, and that these were things she could relate to. This first encounter ended with a new appointment when Sissel could to come to the yoga class and introduce her two-fold interests. In the meantime Sissel decided to follow up the marriage-ritual track.

Analysing briefly this first step of the process, we see that if Sissel had not clarified that she was not there as a student of yoga, but rather came as an anthropologist, the research would have got off on a different footing. Not only would it have been highly unethical to pose as something else than a researcher (Madden 2010), but it would probably also have steered the research off track. As it were, Sissel managed to make the best of the situation and communicate her true intentions. When the yoga instructor gave her a lead, namely marriage rituals, she had to make a decision on the spot, which turned out, by serendipity, to work very well. The mentioning of marriage arrangements and women’s rituals spurred a resonance (Wikan 1992) with the yoga instructor. By using ‘accidental wisdom’ (Rivoal and Salazar 2013:178), Sissel was able to seize the moment and decide to emphasize ‘marriage arrangements and women’s rituals’ as her main research interest when meeting prospective informants at the yoga centre the next day.

Widening the circle of informants and getting ‘deeper’ into the field

Thus, when introducing herself to the women at her first yoga class, she emphasized both her interest in yoga, as well as her research interest in marriage rituals and women's roles in religious-ritual life. In the subsequent weeks, she regularly attended the morning yoga practices, but although the women initially gave the impression of being interested in talking to her, they seemed to distance themselves from her by hurrying home after class. The exception was one woman, here called Shoba, who showed a keen interest in getting to know Sissel.

During these early weeks of fieldwork, Sissel was looking for a suitable place to stay in the area of the yoga centre. This turned out to be much more difficult than anticipated. Weeks went by, and in this housing-search Shoba was quite active and also encouraged all the women at the yoga class to help look for suitable accommodation. Sissel's position as a single, young woman was helpful. Thanks to Sissel's association with the yoga-instructor and her interest in staying in the immediate vicinity of the yoga centre, many of the women made an effort to help her. Later Sissel learned that being hospitable was a core religious element in this context (Ortner 1974). The combination of this social codex with the high status of the yoga instructor allowed Sissel into the group, and she thereby got to know several of the women in the class a bit more.

However, what became the real break-through in terms of getting to know the other women better, was when Sissel after several intense weeks of house searching, was able to move into a rather orthodox Brahmin (Harper 1964) household as a paying guest just a few blocks from the yoga centre. Again, as a serendipitous happening, being associated with the orthodox Brahmin household helped her informants to 'make sense' of who she was and to accept her to some degree as part of their group. As they observed how Sissel adjusted to her host family's expectations towards her both as a guest and as a young woman of the household, the women were able to place her in a position familiar to them. Now Sissel, being a young, unmarried woman - and thus in the eyes of the high caste women at the yoga centre without a male protector - was cared for by a family, which is a highly valued position. Although still positioned outside the caste hierarchy and thus regarded as somewhat impure, Sissel, by making an effort and adjusting to the gendered rules of proper behaviour, managed to position herself into a known social setting. Thus, it became less 'risky' for these high-caste women to socialize with her.

Since Sissel had an interest in studying women's everyday-lives with a focus on religious practices, she wanted to get a 'thick description' of this part of the lives of the women (Geertz 1994). So, parallel to the processes of gaining access to the yoga group, Sissel got a chance to accompany some of the women in their weekly visits to a nearby temple. In this process of widening her circle of informants and getting to know the other women better, Sissel experienced new challenges with regard to her first two gatekeepers, Shoba and the yoga instructor, respectively.

With Shoba, the problem was twofold. One aspect was that Shoba was a follower of other main deities than the other women, and expressed great discomfort when Sissel started going to a temple associated with a village goddess with the other women. Although none of the women sanctioned each other's religious activities, this temple represented an ongoing religious syncretizing process where the meaning of womanhood was problematized through their use of the temple and the deity. Thus, this controversy had to do with different conceptualizations of what Shoba on the one hand, and the other women of the wider yoga-group on the other hand, understood as correct female brahminess. In addition, Shoba may have wanted Sissel – probably seen as an interesting foreigner - as her own exclusive friend. Sissel felt loyalty to Shoba, as the first of the women to befriend her, but also would like to have a wider circle of informants. Hence, to Sissel, the difficult dilemma was whether to continue socializing with the other women without letting Shoba down.

As for the yoga instructor, the problem was different, because of the other women's double-edged relationship with her. On the one hand, considering her status as a highly skilled yoga instructor running an acknowledged yoga centre, the Brahmin women considered her to be of a superior position. On the other hand, because the instructor was not a Brahmin, the other women looked at her with disdain. Thus, when Sissel tried to spend time with the yoga instructor outside of yoga classes, to her great surprise she found that both Shoba and the other women made an effort to manoeuvre her away from the instructor. When being outside the yoga centre, the women always emphasised the non-Brahminess of the yoga instructor. As the yoga instructor was in fact the one to have welcomed Sissel into her group, Sissel found this kind of manipulation uncomfortable.

As her fieldwork progressed, however, Sissel realized that this resistance she experienced from the other women over her spending time with Shoba and the yoga instructor, actually illuminated caste hierarchies and the contested meaning of 'proper

Brahmin femininity’. With time, Sissel realized how some of the women from the yoga group sometimes over-emphasised being Brahmins, and sometimes under emphasised this. Inside the yoga centre, the yoga instructor obviously had a key role, while her position in the class-caste hierarchy was more ambiguous outside the centre.

When Sissel realized that Shoba, the yoga instructor and the women participants, although all practicing yoga together in the same yoga class, did in fact belong to different religious groups, she learnt something important about the social caste-relations of her informants. She still had to face these dilemmas, however. Since the different informants pointed her to different aspects of being high-caste women, maintaining all the relations, not choosing one above the other, was of utmost significance. One way of solving this, was to keep socializing with different women through different activities, and under-communicate the activities to the women who did not take part. With time, Sissel could be more open with her contacts, and found that some of the women then started socializing more. Shoba for instance, started inviting women from the class over to her house, including some of the women who visited the goddess temple Shoba disapproved of. Sissel thus understood how the women chose to act out and thematize caste in some contexts, and not in others. In addition, she learnt that some of the dilemmas were not possible to solve at all, and that she had to manoeuvre around them, as did her informants.

Access by serendipity and resistance as valuable information

To sum up this case, we have pointed out the significance of gatekeepers, but also how access was an ongoing process wherein different factors such as serendipity, positionality and resistance from the field all played important parts. As already mentioned, we draw upon Rivoal and Salazar (2013:178) in their understanding of serendipity as accidental wisdom. In this sense, serendipity – as something the researcher knew through her prior knowledge of India combined with pure luck – came into play at various stages of the fieldwork. First, when Sissel first introduced herself to the yoga instructor, and later on to the other women, she struck a chord when she presented her main interests as a combination of yoga, women’s roles and marriage rituals, which made the women more welcoming. Furthermore, that the household that took her in as a paying guest turned out to be a highly respected orthoprax Brahmin family, was a serendipitous circumstance in this high-caste setting.

However, it is also important to emphasize that Sissel here used her background knowledge of India, and assumed the role of a young female guest in the household. As Okely (2012) shows us, all field roles we are given or taken, necessarily come with opportunities and disadvantages. Being an unmarried women, travelling without any male protector gave Sissel a somewhat anomalous position. Sissel was thus positioned as an ‘unmarried daughter’, which opened the door to the orthoprax household, and enabled her to accompany the women to the temple. However, being a foreign woman without high-caste position also closed certain doors.

In any ethnographic fieldwork, the researcher is herself one of the most important methodological tools, putting her own ‘body on the line’ being ‘at the disposal of the subjects’ (Okely 2012:1). Thereby, the resistance and sanctions Sissel met in the process of getting access turned out to contain valuable data which were not always detectable until later. The resistance of the informants was both implicitly expressed, or through circumvention, such as the uneasy instructions by the other women regarding whom to meet where and when. Sissel found this frustrating at first, but realized as the fieldwork progressed that this gave important insight into the heterogeneity amongst the Brahmin women. This case is thus a good example of how access can be regarded as a process in which resistance from the field can give valuable insights.

Using motherhood to get access to middle-class women in New Delhi

The second case looks at Anne’s fieldwork in New Delhi in the late 1990s where she set out to study how the established, ‘old’ middle class in New Delhi maintained its class position at a point in time when the middle-class segment in India expanded from below and when the poor, lower castes increased their political support. In view of other researchers’ experiences of ease of access to informants of the same gender as the researcher (see i.e. Donner 2008, Sharma 1986) and in view of the rather strict gender segregation in India where it is still quite common for high-caste women in rural areas to practice *purdah*¹¹, Anne also assumed that it would be easier for her as a woman to get in touch with women. Thus, she wanted to focus on

¹¹ *Purdah* means curtain and is the term for female seclusion in South Asia. See Papanek (1973) for a long theoretical analysis, and Gjøstein (2014), Seymour (1999), and Wadley (2008) for empirical variation.

home-working women's role in maintaining household middleclass position through for instance gossip, networking and helping children with homework.¹²

Anne came to Delhi together with her spouse and two young children aged 2 and 4 years. Bringing one's own family to the field has many advantages (Cassell 1987), which Anne also over time experienced, but one disadvantage was that Anne thereby was unable to access everyday life of her informants through living in a middle-class household. She had to find other ways of accessing data on the topic of class distinction and reproduction from an everyday-life perspective. Anne and her husband therefore set up their own household in an upper middle-class area. Trees and green parks were found between the houses, and the uniform architecture set the area apart from surrounding areas. It was located rather centrally in South Delhi and consisted mainly of townhouses with two or three flats per house and with servants' quarters at the back. In contrast to Sissel's fieldwork, which mainly ended up being concentrated at three sites - the yoga centre, the household where she lived, and the temple for the village goddess - all within the same neighbourhood, Anne had to take a much more multi-sited approach from the outset.

The first three months: Alone and frustrated at 'the gates'

Anne arrived in Delhi in September 1997, and was joined by her family two weeks later. Since she had lived and worked in Delhi as an expatriate for two and half years in the early 1990s, she had written to a few good contacts within the established middle class prior her arrival, hoping to use them as access points. One of these contacts was a couple in their fifties, who lived in one of the upper middle class neighbourhoods in Delhi, of which the husband had made arrangements on behalf of Anne and her family to rent a flat in a house close by. To Anne this sounded to a perfect arrangement since she then would be living within an upper middle class area, with this couple as contacts. Although Anne had corresponded with the husband only, she assumed that once in Delhi, she would get to know his wife as well. Anne had also identified two other relevant social arenas where she assumed she could easily gain access to middle-class women. These were a yoga centre in a middle-class area with classes for women only, and the playschool that her two young sons would be attending.

¹² Anne was in this regard inspired by Sharma (1986) and her study of urban, mainly middle-class women in Shimla, and by Papanek's notion of 'household production work' (1979) and by Bèteille (1991).

Anne spent the first few weeks in Delhi getting the empty flat ready for accommodation. In this regard, the husband of the couple was helpful, making use of his many contacts for renting furniture. During these first weeks, Anne thus ended up spending quite some time going around to offices and shops together with him. She was a bit disappointed that the wife never came along, but assumed that it was because it was the husband who had the contacts.

At this early point in time, however, Anne was not worried as she assumed that once the flat was in order, she would gradually get to know the wife better. But this did not happen. Now, when there was no practical reason any longer for meeting up, the encounters with the couple became rarer. In the hope of keeping the contact ‘warm’ and in particular in the hope of getting to know the wife – who after all was Anne’s main ‘target’ – Anne started popping over to her neighbours’ house once or twice a week around 10 am, when she knew the wife would be up. However, Anne ended up sitting and talking with the husband, while the wife disappeared to the inner parts of the house. Even when the wife opened the door, she would call her husband saying ‘Anne is here for you!’, and then disappear.

This went on for several frustrating months, during which time Anne also tried to get to know middle class women through the two other tracks she had identified prior to fieldwork. Both with initial limited success. Knowing how Sissel had managed to gain access to the high-caste middle-class women in Bangalore through a yoga group, Anne leafed through *Time Out in Delhi* and found an organization that arranged yoga beginners’ classes for women in a nearby middle class neighbourhood. Hoping that she after class could hang out with some of the women and slowly get to know them and get to interview them, Anne joined this yoga class. In reality, however, this track was totally unsuccessful in terms of getting to know middle class women. Anne and the other women learned a lot about breathing and yoga exercises, but yoga being a very introvert activity, there was no time or possibility to talk to the others. And after class, the other women not knowing one another either, just hurried off to their respective cars leaving Anne alone and frustrated.

The third track Anne tried was to get to know the other mothers at her children’s playschool. In particular, with the two other tracks going awry and apparently not leading to any data, Anne put more effort into this and started picking up the children herself in the afternoon rather than letting the *Ayah* (nanny) do so. The hope was that she by turning up right before playschool was finished, would be able to strike up a conversation with some of

the other mothers also presumably waiting outside the gates, and thereby get to interview them and from there hopefully get access to their network of friends. However, like the yoga track, also this playschool track was at first unsuccessful. Most of the women picking up the children were *Ayahs*, meaning they were neither middle-class women nor belonging to Anne’s target group, while the few middle-class mothers who did come, waited in their cars outside the gate and just drove off once their child arrived.

This lack of community among the other mothers – of something shared that would prompt them to come out of their cars and chat while waiting for their children – surprised Anne. Although she was well-versed in the ethnography of gender roles in India, and knew that women according to norms of honour and shame belong in the home and are not supposed to hang out at public places (Jacobsen and Wadley 1992, Liddle and Joshi 1986), she had assumed that the gates of the playschool would have been considered a kind of semi-public ‘safe, female arena’, similar to what Sharma (1986) found in her study of middle class women in Shimla, where women would meet and gossip while washing clothes in the river. Or, if not exactly meeting to gossip, Anne had expected these highly educated mothers of the upper segment of the middle class, to be interested in striking up a conversation with one another while waiting.

The first three months of fieldwork was thus an exasperating period. Although she had anticipated that gaining access would take time, and she knew that she was not the first anthropologist feeling alone and frustrated, it is something entirely different to experience the rejections personally. Furthermore, although changing focus arguably is part and parcel of doing ethnographic research (Okely 2012:48), it is difficult once in the field to finally decide when to change focus or tactics. In Anne’s case, since she already had many contacts in Delhi from her previous expatriate stay, and thereby thought she knew the setting quite well, and furthermore, being a middle-class woman herself, she had assumed that it would have been far easier to get in contact with middle-class women.

The last six months: Changing tactics and serendipity

Over time, however, Anne did manage to access several social arenas and gather substantial amounts of data on the established middle-class on which she afterwards based her doctoral dissertation (2001). Looking back at Anne’s fieldwork, two things are important lessons

regarding these first three frustrating months. First, that the rejections and closed gates, which eventually led Anne to change tactics and partly change the topic, from focusing on only women to focusing on family-households, in fact turned out to contain valuable data about what this segment of middle-class women considered to be proper female behaviour and as 'women's place' (Seymour 1999, Donner 2008). Similarly, with regard to the wife next door and her shying away from Anne during the first months of fieldwork, and the husband's role in looking after the foreigner, these also mirror typical gender roles in India of the woman as belonging to the home and embodying Indian traditions and the man as the protector of wife and home (Chatterjee 1993). It was, however, only after returning home that Anne had the emotional distance to 'discover' these rejections as data in their own right, and could see the process of fieldwork in a new light. Second, that equally important as serendipity, is the notion of changing tactics, here understood as the conscious, deliberate decision-making regarding what to follow up and when to decide that enough is enough.

Out of the three social arenas that Anne struggled to gain access to during the first three months of fieldwork, she made a conscious decision to drop the yoga track altogether. As seen above, the fact that Sissel used a yoga class successfully as an entry point to middle class women, rested largely on three factors other than the yoga-class per se: First, that she had a contact who was a respected yoga instructor for women; second, that she through her contact was allowed to introduce her topic for the women so that the other women in class knew that she was a researcher interested in their lives; and third, the yoga class was a social arena where the other women knew one another. In Anne's case, neither of these factors was relevant, and after three months she realized that it was no point in continuing on this track, as it had no potential for getting to know the middle-class women.

As for the other two tracks that Anne started out with – the couple living nearby and the playschool – she continued pursuing these, but changed her approach. In order to get to know the wife next-door better, Anne realized that it was not enough to wait for them to come over, and it was not enough for her to pop over to visit her neighbours either since the wife then would retreat to another room. Anne thus decided to rather deliberately visit the couple when she knew the husband would be away, and to use her role as a mother to find a topic that would resonate with and be of interest to the wife (Wikan 1992). So, once Anne knew that the husband was travelling, she went over and asked for advice about arranging a birthday party for her eldest son who would be turning five. The wife responded with

enthusiasm to this request, and provided several helpful suggestions. While she was there, Anne also told the wife that she would like to interview her in connection with her research and made an appointment to come back while the husband was still away. After this, Anne met with both husband and wife when she came over, and she realized that an important reason that the wife had not come along during the first weeks of getting the flat organized was partly because some of these places were public places where we would have to interact with lower-class male strangers, and partly because, as she later told Anne: 'I am a homely woman', by which she meant that she was an ordinary Indian woman that preferred to stay at home rather than going out.

The playschool turned out to offer an avenue into social activities such as birthday parties going on outside the playschool itself. In her role as a mother, the playschool thereby offered Anne an access-point to the social arena of children's birthday parties, and since mothers – and sometimes fathers – usually also would be present there, they more importantly also functioned as a social arena where Anne got to know middle class women. In fact, one of these mothers turned out to become an important contact and friend who invited Anne along to her club and other informal gatherings. Furthermore, by having her children attending a playschool with Indian middle-class children, she learned a lot about the anxieties of the other parents about getting their children into what they considered a 'good' school. Thus, like Nichter and Nichter (1987:76), Anne experienced that bringing children to the field had several positive impacts, like, for instance, in terms of gaining access to upper middle-class mothers, and in terms of getting richer data on the concerns of these middle-class mothers.

During the three first months of struggle and frustration, Anne also changed tactics and decided that she had to widen her search for field sites beyond the three she had started out with. When she got to know that her Hindi teacher was participating in a rotating saving club – a so-called kitty-party – together with other female middle-class, middle-aged women, Anne decided to ask if she could come along to their meetings as a participant observer. Thus, by chance and serendipity combined with consciously seeking new avenues for getting data, Anne got to participate in six of the group's meetings, which became an added social arena for understanding middle-class making.

Fieldwork as process

Just as we saw in the case of Sissel's fieldwork in Bangalore, the most important learning outcome of Anne's fieldwork in New Delhi is that the process of getting access – the resistance from prospective informants, the dead-ends and the breakthroughs – turned out to contain layers of data regarding femininity, gender roles and class distinction of her informants. However, because these data to a large extent were expressed indirectly and implicitly through avoidance, silence and/or body language, and not in the form of straightforward answers to research questions, it took time to recognize them as such.

Bringing her husband and children to the field and thereby not being able to live within a household, and also because there were no community house or common playgrounds in the area where she stayed, Anne's fieldwork necessarily took on a more multi-sited approach from the outset. She had to seek out ‘a string’ of what she assumed would be strategically situated single-sites (Kurotani 2004:203), thereby ending up interacting with people 'who were widely dispersed' and had few ties with each other (Ganguly-Scrace and Scrace 2009:19), not necessarily linked by other means than being upper middle-class. It thus illustrates the importance, when starting topic-driven fieldwork in urban settings, of not worrying about the old anthropological ideal of centring your research within one well-defined physical site where everybody is part of the same community. Rather, a multi-sited approach, trying to gain access to several social arenas, might be better so that if some prove difficult to access, others might prove more successful.

Concluding remarks

We have here presented two cases of ethnographic topic-driven fieldwork undertaken among middle-class women in Indian mega-cities. We have described step by step how we in each urban fieldwork setting went about delineating and 'constructing' a field (Amit 2000), and the process of gaining access when studying up in the specific hierarchical, gendered field of India. In line with Okely (2012), we have shown how access regarded as an ongoing, almost never-ending process of meticulous planning and serendipitous encounters, of resistance from the field and of positionality, contains significant layers of data.

What we can learn from both these cases is how the resistance that some potential informants showed towards the fieldworker, provided important information about central values and social structures of this particular field. For instance, in the case of Anne and her

many seemingly failed attempts when trying to get to talk to the wife next door, we saw that what Anne perceived as avoidance by the wife was in fact linked to gender roles and norms of proper femininity in India (Hancock 2000, Sarkar 2001, Wadley 2008). Likewise, in the Bangalore case, the importance of power structures of caste was clearly revealed when Sissel moved into an orthoprax Brahmin household and finally was accepted by the core group of Brahmin women at the yoga centre. In the process of encountering resistance from the field, both researchers questioned their own success and exasperated when not getting the desired progression. It was only towards the end of their fieldworks – and even afterwards – that they realized that the resistance in fact contained important data in its own right. Processes of resistance and rejections should therefore serve as important information, and not be read as a ‘failed fieldwork’ or ‘failed interview’.

This point is of particular relevance when studying up and sideways (Nader 1972). Avoidance and silence might inform the researcher that something might be at stake, although not exactly what this 'something' consists of. Whatever is at stake might differ in each case, but instead of just giving up, the researcher could shift tactics, follow other leads and use different approaches.

In the two cases, we have also shown that ethnographic fieldwork to a large degree depends on the context and on the researcher, so that positionality becomes key feature. We have for instance seen that getting access to middle class women through yoga worked well in the first case in Bangalore, where the researcher had a contact that was a respected yoga instructor for women. In the case in Delhi, however, this was not relevant. Rather, in this case, positionality came into play when the researcher got access to the playschool of her children and managed to get to know the other parents in her role as mother (Cassell 1987). In this capacity, Anne also learned about the anxieties of the parents in terms of getting their children into what they considered 'good' schools, and ended up adding the importance of private schools to her analysis of middle-class reproduction.

We have shown how the experience of 'failing' in terms of getting access, can lead to new discoveries by using a combination of conscious decisions to change tactics and sudden serendipitous encounters (Okely 2012). Linked to this, we have pointed out how serendipity understood as a combination of chance and sagacity plays an important part in any ethnographic fieldwork with an inductive approach (Rivoal and Salazar 2013:178). Thus, during Anne's fieldwork in Delhi, when she managed to participate in the bi-weekly meetings

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of the rotating saving club of her female, middle-class Hindi teacher, this was the result of a combination of serendipity and conscious changing of tactics. Similarly, when Sissel in Bangalore managed to find a household in the vicinity of the yoga centre, this was at first the result of tactical considerations. However, when this family turned out to hold a high standing in this caste-conscious community, and thereby helped 'opening the gate' to the other high-caste women, it was because of serendipity.

The two cases vividly illustrate that although Sissel and Anne did fieldwork among what seemingly were similar groups in India, what works for one researcher might not work for another. Because gaining access, constructing a field and data-production are intertwined, how the fieldwork develops depends on who your contacts are vis-a-vis the others one tries to gain access to, one's own role, subjective personality, positioning in the field and serendipitous encounters. Furthermore, as Hastrup (2016:62) has noted, 'the field' is made up of several historical, present, cultural and natural aspects, emphasizing its plasticity.

Thus, there can be no replication of ethnographic fieldwork. The increasing emphasis on an academic audit culture and management by research indicators, including demands for sharing one's data with other researchers, can be seen as being based on a positivist research perspective which is contrary to the plasticity, subjectivity and serendipity of ethnographic research. Thus researchers should rather aim at transparency and describe as candidly as possible the exact details of what we did to construct a field, gain access and get data. In so doing, others may hopefully learn from this when they set out to do their own research.

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