

On Researching Organisations

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Anthropologists Inside Organisations: South Asian Case Studies

Edited by Devi Sridhar

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Anthropologists Inside Organisations: South Asian Case Studies edited by Devi Sridhar is a collection of seven case studies by young scholars from Britain's finest educational institutions including Oxford and the London School of Economics. The articles are divided between the health and education sectors, five in the former and two in the latter section, in addition to an introduction by the editor and an article which acts as a concluding essay. Despite the youth of the scholars who all present work done for their PhD or post-doctoral work, it is not unreasonable to expect good quality work from researchers with such an educational pedigree. In fact, one assumes it, at least as far as the basic tenets of anthropology are followed. Since several of the scholars are of Indian origin, one hopes, in addition, for some nicely nuanced research work.

I thus undertook the review of the book with interest and anticipation since the anthropology of organisations *is* understudied, as the editor correctly points out, and the book would fill a gap in understanding organisations for readers of a broad persuasion. 'Studying up' (as the study of organisations is referred to), as Sridhar points out, 'is very recent, [so] there have been few examples to guide researchers'. However, I might add for the sake of completion, that there is some work in organisational behaviour and management which has used participant-observation. This has been done under the aegis of funding agencies which have commissioned evaluations of NGOs whose work they are supporting, and it is here that some innovative work has been done using anthropological methods in place of the more standard SWOT analysis. Although these do not come under the academic genre and are unpublished, they form a small corpus of interesting work in applied anthropology. Perhaps there are other exceptional studies of 'studying up' in other domains too.

The case studies in this book propose to show how young scholars negotiated issues which arose in interactions with organisations, thereby formalising under one rubric what used to be coffee-room, anecdotal experiences. While this goal is clear from page one, I wish it had been indicated in the title of the book itself which is misleading: it rather implies that these are ethnographies of organisations (through the use of the words 'case studies') rather than reflections by anthropologists on fairly routine issues one has in the course of field-work- with people and bureaucracy - and which could, and indeed do, arise in any fieldwork situation. For instance, issues of where to stay, lack of local language fluency, getting permission, people renegeing on promises made, intrusiveness,

curiosity, suspicion, contacting gatekeepers, ethical ambivalence and so on. The focus is thus on the 'how' of anthropology rather than the 'what', as Sridhar claims, and to this extent a viable project with some intellectual appeal for the novice anthropologist.

Yet on reading the articles, these above-mentioned issues have been handled so as to seem banal and make the fledgling anthropologists appear too naive. Indeed, some of the issues would be hard-pressed to separate themselves from the usual problems that one has when going abroad as a tourist, or even when 'locals' try to engage with their own organisations such as schools - as ordinary people, rather than as anthropologists. In addition, many of the issues included in this focus on the 'process' of fieldwork, rather than the 'results', have been traditionally dealt with under the broad topic of 'culture shock,' and anthropological literature has been enriched by such reflections on the field and fieldwork. Such literature has also addressed methodological issues to the extent that this volume does, although the focus has been on the shock aspect arising from the cultural conflict. Many ethnographies in fact have appealed to the popular imagination precisely because they speak about doing fieldwork in a foreign culture in very interesting ways.

The 'telling' of the issues in this volume, however, did not convince me that there was anything new about them - as academic issues with conceptual, theoretical or practical implications or even as well-sketched, short pieces in the classic ethnographic style. Personal, subjective, introspective they all were to varying degrees, but what they lacked was a writing style which took them from the mundane to something which caught the imagination and held the interest. Some freshness could have been brought to old issues with a new 'tone' or 'voice' but all the researchers maintained a strictly documentary and rather dry style of writing which conveyed the issues yet did little more. For instance, they did not convey their *experience* of the culture they were studying. Nor did they convey anything about South Asian cultures. Nor, and to my mind, this is its largest problem, did they sufficiently and deeply focus on the subjective.

When an attempt such as this is made - to focus on the personal, informal, unmentioned problems every researcher deals with - then an important way to invest the mundane with meaning is the language and the style of the writer. A reference to a particular instance, or a person, a turn of phrase, dry witticism, self-deprecatory humour, wryness, pathos - one or other serve the cause of making the strange familiar or at least worthy of attention. Unfortunately, none of these were in evidence. One researcher goes so far as to say, 'The non-existence of light moments made it difficult to connect with the gate-keepers'. One wonders whether there were *any* other kinds of moments at all in this engagement, so edited out they appear to read. These moments would have elevated the collection in this book into something of an experience to be enjoyed *in their reflection*, as much as the fieldwork-related issues had been frustrating *in their experience*. In their absence, perhaps this book would be useful as background material for a research methods class for the completely insular, Western academic.

The insufficient reflection was extended to other areas including key issues such as the role of gender (except for the article on prostitutes) and the role of religious background

of the researcher. Grills and Rizvi do attempt this more from their own points of view rather than how curious *others* had been about their religious background. Unfathomably, Perwez does not deal with this aspect at all - was he working in a Muslim majority area? Had he adopted a pseudonym? Was there no response to his religion by gatekeepers? Even the fact that regardless of South Asian origin of almost all the researchers, there is an inbuilt power relationship that one is entering into, and one where usually the subjects are relatively powerless. What did it finally mean for say an English-speaking woman from Oxford to have to push her way through the red-tape and babu culture by virtue of those very characteristics? How did the cultural and religious backgrounds affect the very issues that the researchers deal with?

Undue emphasis was given to 'gatekeepers' who seemed to be too critical to the first field experience. That the researchers had not drawn upon or contacted several gatekeepers is itself very revealing. South Asia is rife with communities which have been 'over ethnographed' using the same 'informants' due to precisely the kind of approaches spoken about in this book where one deals with gatekeepers and translators. One wonders whether this is not because the periods of study were of short duration which precluded investment in creating relations of trust and mutuality – cornerstones of participant-observation. It would have been more interesting to see the process by which they honed in on the gatekeepers – who for instance was rejected and why - rather than going immediately to the ones who were identified as such – for example the NGO director who belonged to a network etc.

Further, gatekeepers are portrayed as withholding knowledge from the researchers, as if it were a very conscious strategy in all cases; it may have been a simple, practical quality that people usually hang around with others who are similar to themselves. In the absence of reflection on factors which made the selection of gatekeepers possible, such as convenience to the researcher, the anthropologist comes across as being opportunistic and then piqued when access is selective or not as wide-ranging as she would have desired it to be. For instance, Perwez, to his credit, confesses to the convenience of gatekeepers but goes on to say, quite unconvincingly, that 'surveillance and control' (:79) was the price he paid for the convenience of using an NGO as a gatekeeper. In fact, he comes across as being both rude and paranoid. He confesses that he lived in the town where the NGO Head Quarters was situated for three months and then shifted to the field village, upon which the people from the NGO become suspicious and hostile. Since he does not mention that he spoke to them prior to the move, explaining his need to access diverse people, one can only surmise that he did it abruptly. Then, why wouldn't the NGO staff who had gone out of their way to befriend him, not look at him with suspicion? It would have been like a slap in the face of friendship to them! So although he doesn't talk about it at length, he resented being put in this position of a suspicious 'outsider'. My question is this: Were there no other cultural descriptions he could have used of his gatekeepers? 'Keeping a benevolent eye on' is one of them. 'Being curious to the point of intrusiveness' is another. But 'surveillance and control', based on what he has written, seems an overreach and a stereotypically Western response to the situation where the NGO staff may have been (misplacedly) trying to help a foreign student to the best of their ability. Thus, this writer thinks that the collection would have benefited from a

reflection on the relation between selection of gatekeepers and knowledge construction or formation which would have illuminated the partial and indeed positional nature of such mediated knowledge systems.

Even the use of the word 'gatekeeper' has been quite uncritical, uncontextualised and non-reflexive in terms of South Asian culture. Anyone with the least experience of negotiating institutions here is familiar with the 'babu culture' and the peon who is the prime access to the babu. Srivastava, to her credit, draws the parallel: 'Gatekeepers in this study were, quite literally posted at the gates of the Secretariat and other Government offices. They were reception clerks and peons at government buildings or personal assistants who would typically answer phone calls. Getting past them was more difficult than securing participation from the concerned officials.' (:124). Yet, in what way is the gatekeeper concept similar to or different from this larger than life peon-as-gatekeeper metaphor in South Asia? Not one of the articles reflects on emic uses of gatekeepers yet all of them use the term as if it is completely transparent and universal. This too was disappointing and shows the lack of centrality that local language and emic conceptual maps have played in the work. Beyond a description of what actually happened, the researchers were unmotivated to explore the conceptual categories laid bare by these two terms. In another article, Guntupalli (pp 36-54), bypassed the *dalal* who is a kind of gatekeeper in his own way to the prostitutes, and chose to go to an NGO which worked with prostitutes. One wonders at the kinds of implications that would have had but are left without any glimpses by the researcher.

Some of these lacunae could have been addressed in the introductory piece itself and this would have been one way in which to draw together the articles, summarise their attempts as well as discuss some of the issues which have not been addressed. For instance, a discussion of some conceptual issues such as 'gatekeeping' versus 'snowballing' (where one person interviewed refers the researcher to others who could be interviewed and so on), could have thrown some light on the distinct methodological implications of each. In this context, it would have been illuminating to see a comparison of Perwez who reacts to NGO gatekeeping, saying: 'I realised I needed to see beyond what the NGO wanted me to see and observe' to Grills who speaks very positively about snowballing: 'I found that sources identified by other key informants were far more apposite to the research question than those chosen without the recommendation of other informants.' In general, the collection tries too hard to show that there is a 'method in the madness', and misses out the colour, conflict and continuities which an anthropologist invariably feels in the field. A sentiment such as 'During my fieldwork, I tried to be natural in the 'not so natural' Mumbai red light district' (:42) left me perplexed: should the researcher not have reflected also on what it means to be 'natural' in a cross-cultural context? It is instances like this which made reader think that several opportunities for a serious yet enjoyable book had been lost in this collection.

Overall, though a commendable project, this collection falls short of expectations in many ways. It reveals the extent to which young researchers grapple with real issues in the field without much preparation and/or reflection. They try hard, no doubt but perhaps need more understanding on the nature of the 'other' as well as the nature of the 'self'.

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