Revisiting 'Nativity': Doing 'Anthropology at Home' in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract

Auto-anthropology is where anthropologist works in his/her own society. It is often taken for granted that doing such 'auto-anthropology' or 'anthropology at home' is the easiest option for anthropologists to carry out ethnographic research. Since the 1980s, many researchers have, therefore, enquired into the lives of the rural women in Bangladesh and in some instances the tendency was to research Bengali women as they share with them a common culture, particularly the language. However, as their fieldwork testimonies suggest, they had problems gaining village women's trust, and becoming insider researchers, despite their roots in Bengali culture. In this article, I explain similar difficulties in accessing the lives of the poor women as well as men in the village settings of Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, Rajbari, Bangladesh by discussing the research methods I used during my PhD fieldwork. In this context, I consider my engagement with the villagers during my research, and focus on my reflexivity as an insider researcher (belonging to the study community) while working in an outsider institution (belonging to the academic research community). I also clarify my 'positionality' in relation to the people I studied, and discuss my ethical concerns in the field. The major ethical issues concern my social position of belonging to a certain class, gender, age and educational group. Additionally, I discuss the role of village factional politics and family rivalry, in shaping my research experience. I have argued in this article that doing fieldwork in one's home situation is not easy with obligations as a researcher, family member and Muslim female.

Introduction

Doing 'anthropology at home'

According to Pierano [1-12] 'throughout the twentieth century, the distances between ethnologists and the people they observed – once seen as "informants" - have constantly decreased' (1998: 105). This was the result of native anthropology, when studying one's one culture, appeared as 'a major concern among the contemporary anthropologists in Asia and the Pacific region', as an attempt by anthropologists of developing countries to represent their people, usually in their own language and from native points of view' [13]. The underlying idea of native anthropology, according to Kuwayama, was a response of natives to their excluding as active participants in ethnographic research, but as he noted, scholars of developing countries prefer to call such research 'indigenous anthropology' rather than 'native', in order to avoid the historical 'Western colonial representation' of the colonizer versus colonized, and researcher versus researched. Jackson [14] identified certain factors that attract anthropological researchers to work at home. They are: 'a) objections by many new states to research into what they call 'tribalism', and a suspicion of neo-colonial imperialism. b) discovery of large areas of ignorance about one's own circumstances and c) the ease of access to one's own society and a reduction of the time and the money needed to enter the field'. Strathern [1] argued 'that as ethnographers, anthropologists on familiar terrain will achieve a greater understanding than elsewhere, because they do not have to surmount linguistic and cultural barriers' (1987: 17), but they may overlook things as being 'obvious', and not to question native assumptions, such as religious beliefs. The concept of native is, as yet, contested [13,15,16]. Kuwayama, for instance, argues that native anthropologists are native in a secondary sense. Moreover, 'insider' or 'outsider' is a shifting identity, as anthropologists' identity 'shifts according to the situation in which researchers find themselves' [13]. With the turn of the postmodernists' in anthropology, the reflexivity of researchers has gained importance for 'analyzing how their identity has now shaped the process of knowledge construction' [17]. Narayan

[15] in her essay 'How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist?'Also focused on the 'shifting identities' of anthropologists. She stressed the subjectivity of Anthropological research, rather than the objectivity. She explained, how 'knowledge is situated, negotiated, and part of an on-going process', and argued that anthropologists are at the same time shaped by life experiences and professional background, which assigns to them a 'hybrid and positioned nature'(1993: 682). According to her, by having roots in a locality, does not always mean that an anthropologist is a 'native returning home to blend smoothly with other natives' (1993: 675). As Weil [18] put it, 'anthropologists can be natives – as strangers, just as often as they are strangers - as natives' (1987:197). I am a native – stranger in Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur, as one of the Muslim women working with the Hindu men and women, having the background of being brought up in the city, and being the daughter of a wealthy landowning family, studying the rural landless. Following Narayan [15] I question my position as a 'native', having power and prestige as an 'insider'. Though I belong by birth to Char Khankhanapur, and by marriage to Decree Charchandpur. I have only visited the villages, previously, for a few days, in vacations, and for social occasions like relatives' marriages, births or circumcision ceremonies. I follow Narayan and consider myself as a 'partial insider' (1993: 678) rather than an 'insider'. I am not an outsider because of my visits to the villages for different purposes and my father's constant influence on village politics. Such partial membership allows me to see the villages from a partial outsider's perspective. For example, it was difficult for me to understand and interpret the rural custom of *purdah*, and I learned about farming from

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the point of view of an outsider, because of my city based socialization, I lacked agricultural knowledge. My identity as an anthropologist, was portrayed differently, at different times, and by different people which, following Rosaldo's contention, I term as 'multiplex subjectivity' (1989: 168-195) with many cross-cutting identifications' [15]. For example, in Char Khankhanapur somemen and women accepted me *as gramer meye* (daughter of the village) while others considered me as *bidesh ferot otithi* (guest coming from abroad), rather than an anthropologist undertaking academic research. Poor men suspiciously labelled me as *borolok er meye* (rich man's daughter) enquiring into their lives. Hindu men were often dubious about my intentions, when I made repeated visits to their places, and passed hours in conversation with the women. Some thought I was in the village doing a job assigned by foreign government, and would be providing *bideshi taka* (foreign money) for poor men and women. Yet, local men and women, both rich and poor, generally considered me as *boroloker meye* (rich man's daughter) who belongs to their village. When I visited wealthy, middle class women (like the local union council chairman's wife), they took it as a *berate asha* (informal visit), whereas many poor women thought it was *ghoraghuri* (wandering around the village having nothing else to do). Some poor women saw my role as helping them solve their problems, notably related to land disputes (as the local union council chairman was my father's friend) and also to mediate with the Grameen bank over microcredit instalment payment difficulties, because of my good relations with the bank officials. Hindu middle class women regarded me as polluting for being Muslim, despite my elite social status, and previous acquaintance with them. They did not allow me to enter the inner parts of their houses and swept their houses immediately after I left. Poor Hindu women did not show such feelings and accepted me as being naive about their culture, encouraging me to learn about their lives. In Decree Charchandpur, my identification was barir bou (wife of the house) for all villagers. Some rich families welcomed me as *borolok barir meye* (daughter of rich household) according to my affluent paternal family status. Poor women mostly saw me as *shohorer ahladi bou* (posh, urban wife), and were puzzled to find that I had not children even after 8 years of marriage. Some of them were sympathetic to me as a wife with no child. Many advised me to try to have children, thinking me *oshustho* (sick due to infertility), *bajha* (infertile) and *porakopali* (unfortunate). This upset me, though I knew why they were behaving so, because they had difficulty relating my position with theirs, as wives and mothers. The reason that I have since become a mother is a consequence of such fieldwork pressure.

At both the villages, as a partial insider, I was thus 'drawn closer in some contexts' and 'thrust apart in others' [15]. These shifting identities shaped my fieldwork experiences, and affected my attempts to establish a rapport with the respondents, and also influenced my choice of research methods.

Dilemmas during Fieldwork and rapport building

For anthropologists, fieldwork is often likened to 'a rite of passage' [19] as they pass through the stages of separation, lamination, and reincorporation (separated from their usual life, by being immersed into the study community, and then reintegrated in the academic community to analyse the data and write up the ethnography). It reflects the process by which an outsider tries to be an insider [16]. Although I did fieldwork in my native village, the fieldwork was indeed a rite of passage for me as an anthropologist. Fieldwork often ' purports to be about a whole society or culture, but it is usually undertaken within a single community–typically a village within a particular society, and it is assumed (often on shaky grounds) that the particular community

is somehow "representative" of the wider society' [20]. I think Char Khankhanapur and Decree Charchandpur are representatives of some villages in *Bangla*desh. There are certain reasons why I chose these villages. Working in my home village allowed me to gain in-depth understanding of rural culture; it let me revisit the people, and their lives, which I had known for many years; I could communicate well with people in their own dialect (slightly different from the formal Bangla language) and, it allowed me to cope with the limitations of budget and time, when undertaking research for my PhD. I had worked in Char Khankhanapur previously, in 2005, when carrying out one month's research for my Master's degree in anthropology. I interviewed Hindu women and men of different castes about their views of womanhood. I found evidence of a clear division, not only between men and women, but also among women of different class and caste. The lives of Hindu women are not homogenous, as they perceive their world from different social positions. In my PhD research I sought to understand how Hindu women and men of Char Khankhanapur conceptualize development and wellbeing. I had to build rapport in Decree Charchandpur from scratch, by establishing a social network with many new families.

According to Ellen [20], 'fieldwork, inevitably, involves a lot more than just sitting around watching things and asking questions'. It is natural that the people being studied are equally curious to know about the motives of researchers as they are interested to learn about lives. A researcher has to conform to the norms of behaviour and try to blend in with the community, so as to make the respondents feel that he/she is familiar with the culture. It may be necessary to learn many new skills, which are not part of his/her cultural practice. Ellen [20] identifies this as a form of secondary 'socialization'. During my fieldwork, for example, I learnt many village etiquettes like observing *purdah*, dressing in a sari, understanding ways of social interaction, with men and women of different ages, class and social status, without upsetting them and making local cakes and sweets to share in their lives.

Being a partial insider, it was important for me to build relations of trust. I was very aware that I should not select key informants whose social positions might influence my work. I did not, therefore, ask union council members and other influential, rich people, to introduce me to poor men and women, knowing that poor people might not feel comfortable in such people's presence. I tried to be informal, for example, by asking common questions about children and families. In many instances, I shared my own life story and personal feelings, in order to develop relations of mutual friendship. In most cases I used *apne* (you) to address my respondents, which is used in *Bangla* language to show respect to people. Older men and women, who knew me from my childhood, addressed me as *tumi* (you) but some of them addressed me *apne* (you) considering my influential social position as an university teacher and my father's position in the village. Some rich men and women addressed me *tui*(you) to express their affection towards me, or as a token of their long term relationship with me. In order to comprehend the hierarchy in Bangladeshi society, it is important to understand how people address each other in Bangladeshi society, which is based on their degree of relationship. In Bangladesh, *apne* is used to address older persons who are respected, such as grandfather, father, mother, elder brother, elder sister, uncles and aunts. People also use *apne* to show respect to someone being addressed, and for formal, as well as informal, correspondence with strangers. *Tumi* is a more familiar term used when speaking with people of the same age, or younger people, such as siblings, cousins and friends. Sometimes *tumi* is the preferred way to address older

relatives, in order to express love and intimacy. Often, it is used when talking to grandmother, sister- in-law and brother-in-law. Men often use *tumi* to address their wives, expressing their close relationship. Tui is commonly used to refer to informal relationships with juniors, such as younger siblings, children and occasionally close friends. However, sometimes rich people use tui to address poor people such as maids, labourers and farmers who they believe possess low social status. Poor men use tui to address their wives, sister- in-laws and daughter-in-laws, since these women are considered, by them, to be inferior. Sometimes, I used terms like *chachi/kaki* (aunt - for middle aged women), in–law – for *bhab/boudi* (sister-younger women) and *dadi/ thakurma* (grandmother- for old and aged women). For men I used similar terms like *chacha/kaka* (uncle), *bhai/dada* (brother) and *dadu/thakurda* (grandfather) depending on age. Older respondents called me by my name, while younger ones identified me as apa (sister) or bhabi (sister-in-law). Such cordial terms helped me to get closer to people, and often let me be part of their daily conversations, where my presence was seen as friendly, not interfering.

During interactions with the chairman and members at the union council, I had to be formal. I discussed my proposed research with them, in order to assure them that I was not an audit officer, inspecting their activities. Although I did not receive much cooperation from them at first, they started to help me when they were convinced that I was doing academic research, which would not cause any harm to them. My professional identity, as a lecturer at the University of Dhaka, was a help in this regard. For example, when I first went to visit the *upazilla nirbahi* (sub district officer), he was not willing to talk to me regarding development issues. However, when I approached, and showed him my professional identity, as a university teacher and researcher, he let me access much useful data available on the government database. As government officers were sceptical about my work, and they were available only for limited hours, I adhered to pre-set, structured questions, focused on development. I was aware that they might give me false data, on benefits of government led development schemes. To minimize this, I repeatedly visited the offices and talked to different people. Discussing personal experiences of microcredit, migration, health and illness, was not easy at first, but by the third month of my fieldwork, when women stopped misinterpreting my presence as a government or NGO official, things improved. Initially, I visited the women just to chat with them in their homestead courtyards, kitchens, or on the balconies of their houses. I heard stories of happiness, anxiety and grief. Sometimes, I found it difficult to talk with younger women, who preferred to remain silent in front of their mother-in-laws. I met them at fishing ponds or grazing fields, where they were more relaxed, and not seen by their husbands or in laws.

While building up rapport, I did not show any haste to collect data, nor did I press them to tell me everything about their lives. I just let the women talk about their lives. Not everything they told me had relevance to my research. Conversations with older men and women took longer times, when they expressed an interest to talk about the many personal issues of their relationships with other members of the family, particularly sons and daughters-in-law. Poor women, who thought I could solve some of their health or money problems, shared many of their daily experiences, which included stories of happiness as well as deprivation. Such conversations sometimes helped me understand their perception of *unnoyon* (local development) and *bhalo thaka* (wellbeing).

Seasonality influenced my fieldwork. Like Islam [8], I found meeting farm women difficult during the post-harvest period, when they were busy with paddy husking, rice parboiling and drying, seed and grain storing. During this time, men were at home, and women did not feel comfortable speaking to me in their presence. However, the men were eager to talk, and often took control of the conversations, and we discussed their experiences of development and issues, such as health and wellbeing. It was easier to talk to men in their houses, than sitting with them in their fields, as I had to follow the local norms of *purdah*, i.e. not to engage in conversations with men in public. Moreover, talking to men in their homes, reassured me of the women's support to carry on discussions related to health, illness, work, migration and others. Doing fieldwork in winter, the festive season, many of the women offered me *pitha* (handmade cakes) as a token of their hospitality. I took *pitha* to build rapport. I also asked them to show me how to make *pitha*. It proved an effective way to get closer to them, as they not only taught me how to make *pitha*, but also talked more freely about their lives, their hopes and aspirations.

In the winter dry season, when many poor women were engaged in road construction works, I found it a struggle to meet them. They were busy in the evenings as well, cooking dinner, and so had little time to talk to me. In some instances, I tried to visit them at their work places, but their employers did not like it, as they stopped work and gossiped with me. I managed to convince some road construction contractors in Char Khankhanapur, through the intervention of the local council chairman, to allow the workers to talk to me. Sometimes, I gave the poor women a small gift of money, for the time they spent with me, but often, I found that poor women tried to solicit such monetary gifts by telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. 'Most ethnographers are involved in gift-giving; to establish rapport, to maintain relationships and to repay moral and material debts' [20]. For rapport building within a short period of time, I also tried giving gifts to some poor women, who were in real need, to help with their health costs, or paying for children's educational expenses. Sometimes, I gave them some clothes and stationary for their children such as pens, pencils. For small children I always took sweets. They were happy to see me, and accompanied me while I walked through the village. For old women, I took paan (betel leaf). Besides rapport building, I also gave gifts to the poor women and children because of their expectations from me. My social status and affluent family background created hope among them that I should give them money and some *bideshi upohar* (foreign gifts) such as chocolate, soaps, shampoo and other toiletries. Such expectations from them, sometimes acted as a pressure on me to give gifts to show my family's social status of being borolok (rich).

Though I gave gifts to some poor women, I was careful not to be manipulated. Some poor men at Char Khankhanapur asked me to negotiate their personal disputes with the local union council, and a few women pursued me to help them get benefits from vulnerable group development programmes (VGD), widow allowance and other social safety net programmes. I had similar experiences with some poor women at Decree Charchandpur, who tried to manipulate my acquaintance with the Grameen bank officers, for help to reduce the loan interest rate, or to allow them more time to repay loan instalments. I handled such situations tactfully, while politely declining their requests. Though it created some frustration, in the long run I managed to make them understand my position as a researcher.

Sometimes, I walked and chatted with the poor women when they were returning from work. Often these walks were escorted by one of my male relatives. Firstly, this was because of the local norms of *purdah*, secondly, because the local understanding of *shamman* (prestige) that a respectable woman should not go out of home alone in the evening,

and thirdly because of my father's concern of my safety (to minimise chances of physical attacks by his rivals, who were involved with him in an ongoing land dispute).

Experiences of data collection

Fieldwork was a transforming experience for me and changed my understanding of the social world [21]. I found it stressful to conduct fieldwork in Char Khankhanapur, because of the ongoing property dispute between my father and another rich family. The dispute involved violence, and I was not free from the risk of possible physical attacks by the rivals. In such situation, to ensure security, I was motivated, by my father's request, to interview people who were under his patronage. For example, I selected to talk to men and women in farming communities, and in the Hindu *para* (neighbourhood) belonging to our faction, because of accessibility and for my physical safety. I was in real danger of becoming the target for attacks by rival groups, as avenging family members is ingrained in the local culture, as a means of exhibiting enmity. While land based violence is a common feature of char lands in Bangladesh, the property dispute between my father and the Khandaker family (influential and rich, who have recently migrated to Char Khankhanapur) is a reflection of this enmity. Primarily, the dispute did not involve violence and was limited to filing dispute cases in the district court, but during my fieldwork, the Khandaker family tried to gain illegal access to the disputed property, and this generated scope for violence. They bribed the local police, and hired thugs to exhibit their power. This provoked my father to exhibit his social and political strength, to safeguard his access to the disputed property. He, along with his supporters, counter attacked the Khandaker family, which injured one of the members of the Khandaker family. These fights triggered the politics of revenge and counter revenge between two rival parties. As the Khandaker family was looking forward to avenging one of our family members, I was at the greatest risk of getting attacked by them.

The insider status affected my fieldwork and this had implications for my data. For example, there were some people in Char Khankhanapur who were envious about my father's social status, and did not cooperate with me. Knowing that my research was required for my PhD degree, they hindered my fieldwork, and spread rumours that I had some evil intentions, and would get some people in trouble. They represented me as someone harming rural women, by asking personal questions, and misguiding them, by telling them about women's empowerment. Some people thought that I was fuelling family conflicts. Such non-cooperation, meant that I was identified more as the daughter of an influential person in the village, rather than as an outsider anthropologist. Being a Muslim, I found it difficult to research rich Hindu women in Char Khankhanapur, who restricted my access into their lives despite belonging to our political group. My interviews centred more on Muslim women, as we shared a common religious background. This is reflected in my data that represent Muslim views of development, than those of Hindus. This supports Narayan [15]'s point that although having roots in the locality, it is not always possible for an anthropologist, doing anthropology at home, to blend in with others' lives, either as an insider or as an outsider. I used various methods to 'ensure the integrity of the data' [22], adjusting them according to the field situation. For example, I used group interviews to collect data about poor women, and some poor farmers, because it was convenient to interview farmers when they were available at monthly agricultural meetings at the union council office, and when women did daily chores or relaxed in collective settings (such as washing utensils and clothes in ponds, returning from work in construction sites, or sitting on balconies in the afternoons). For understanding the wellbeing of both poor and rich women, I preferred in-depth, ethnographic interviews with individuals, because I wanted to get detailed case studies about their perceptions of *unnoyon* (local development) and *onunnoyon* (underdevelopment). For rich men (such as local union council chairmen, members and influential political persons of the area, landlords and businessmen), I used interviews based on semi-structured questionnaires, because they were not always available, and when they were available, they were also busy with their own activities, and so could not spare time for lengthy discussions.

To learn about the perception of development and wellbeing of older men and women and migrants, I relied on life histories, by focussing on their own interpretations of useful life events. The reason of relying on life histories was that they recollect their experiences from past to compare with present and I could collect useful data from the experiences they shared with me in the form of stories. I depended on a wellbeing ranking exercise, to identify indicators of wellbeing that vary with age, gender and social status. My social position shaped this as I believed that some people did not always give me their honest interpretations of development and wellbeing, because of my father's position. To crosscheck and minimise misinterpretation of such data, I repeated the wellbeing ranking exercise when possible.

Taking field notes

Field notes form the core of my ethnographic record. I preferred to take notes of my daily observations. For this purpose, I used a pocket note-book for jotting down useful information, while spending time with people, and engaging in conversations. I also used a laptop computer to store field data, so as to make records of interviews easier and less time consuming, I organized them thematically, for analysis after returning from the field. I avoided taking notes publicly, as it could be embarrassing and cause suspicion among informants. People were dubious about note taking and misrepresented it as census work, and sometimes as NGO work. In such situations, I preferred to take mental notes [23] which I wrote down when alone. The reason of doing this was not only because people were dubious about my note taking in their presence, but also because I was worried that by doing so I might decrease my social status, as well as that of my family. I thought that writing something in front of them might make them identify me as a NGO staff or census data collector, which many people see as less rewarding and poorly paid jobs with little social prestige.

Participant observation and interviews

Understanding that participation in peoples' lives can promote relationships [21], I worked as 'participant-observer' [24]. Since I was not brought up in the village, it was not always possible for me to participate in all the village affairs, as an 'insider'. I did not want to make a sudden appearance in people's lives, and start doing strange things beyond their expectations. I was, also, conscious not to participate in any activity that can decrease my social status. For instance, I could not participate in poor women's post-harvest activities, such as threshing, drying and parboiling, and caring for domestic animals, because such participation could make my presence questionable, and doing so might influence poor men and women to think that I do not have any *shamman* (prestige), like other members of my family. I also refrained from participating in such work to avoid being ridiculed by poor men and women as a *dhongi* (pretender) and so making fun of their daily lives. Once I tried to help some poor women to grind rice with a *dheki* (wooden foot pounding device), but they interpreted it as *boroloker ahlad* (artificial showiness of the rich). Such reactions influenced

me to remain an 'outside observer' [20]. Besides these incidences, protecting my father's prestige and my own dignity, as a Muslim woman, required me to observe *purdah,* so I could not participate in farming activities with men, or their work in the local bazaar (market). Often, poor women did not allow me to take part in their daily cooking and household chores, because of the fear of my father. They thought that by letting me doing their household chores, they would commit *beyadobi* (bad conduct). Occasionally, however, they let me make *pitha* (seasonal cake) after repeated requests.

Due to of my, only partial, insider status, I could not learn how poor farmers prepare their land and manage their farming, based on their indigenous knowledge of farming. I could not gain knowledge of how they manipulate their indigenous ideas of preparing organic manure, and how to plant local varieties of crops and vegetables on their land. I failed, also, to understand their local coping mechanism with seasonal cropping difficulties. Sometimes, I found it difficult to get answers from the poor farmers, when I asked them about their experiences with modern agriculture. Some of them were confused, for they believed that if they said something against modern farming, they would be in trouble when attempting to secure land for sharecropping from big farmers and rich landlords.

As I was of not able to participate in poor women's lives, it was not possible for me to learn their skills. For example, I could not learn how some poor Betei women weave baskets, or how the Ghosh women prepare mishti (sweets) and the poor Bagdi women catch fish in shallow ponds. I did not understand why during crop processing poor women separated certain portions of crops and vegetables for seed storage, instead of selecting the whole. It was not easy for me to understand poor women's work in crop processing, such as rice, jute harvest and gur (date palm sugar) manufacturing. I became aware that, because of my gender and social status, I could not ask some types of questions of the poor, as well as the rich men and women. For example, it was embarrassing for me to ask rich and poor men about their perceptions of sexual illness. I could not also discuss with most of the rich men and women about their property, and related disputes, so as to avoid confusion and safeguard my security. I had to be cautious during my interviews with local union council members, and the chairman. I avoided asking questions related to mismanagement of development projects as asking such questions might endanger my father's relationship with them and create scope for developing enmity. Therefore, due to my partial insider status, I was not able to learn about some of the rich men's and women's development experiences. Casual, unstructured interviews [25] were guided by conversations, without imposing any specific topic on the participants. Semi-structured interviews focused on certain topics, needed for my investigation, such as seasonal crises and vulnerability, livelihood strategies, migration, microcredit, health and wellbeing. However, in doing so, I was conscious of not pushing the interviewees to think in my imposed categories. I did some interviewing, based on life history and oral history [25]. These interviews helped me understand how people perceived their livelihoods at different times of their lives, and how they saw present development as relating to their past.

Davies [21] argued that since those in power are not readily available for informal discussions, common ethnographic research methods are not possible, so I arranged to interview some elite persons at their work places. If it was not possible to set up a formal interview, I invited them to my place for tea, and engaged them in informal discussions about their understandings of rural development. These interviews were mostly conducted in upper class Bengali language (as spoken in cities), bearing in mind the expectation of hearing such from me, as a university lecturer. Sometimes, using modest Bangla, troubled my communication with them, as they tried to use the same with me, and ended up distorting the meaning of what they wanted to say. Communications worsened further when they tried to speak in English with me, in order to display their elite identities, and pride in their education statuses; often I could make little sense of such conversations. In such cases I maintained a 'multiple native strategy [26] and spoke in formal Bangla with mixture of some English words and local dialects. Due to the limited time I had in the field, I used non-random sampling [25]. I targeted participants who were easily accessible. For example, as I have said earlier, I avoided selecting participants from rival groups, to ensure my safety, and carefully interviewed poor dalit lower caste Hindus, such as the dalit (cleaner, leather worker), while not attempting to participate in their lives, such as not sharing their food, so that my father's reputation as an influential landlord, as well as rich businessman, was not put at risk. Narayan [15] supported such a position, arguing that a fieldworker may sometimes, intentionally, incline towards particular groups over others. Due to me not being able to interview rival participants, and poor dalit Hindus, I could not gain knowledge about how they perceive development, in terms of their useful economic resources, and participation in local politics.

It was clearly not possible for me to be a 'native' and fully participate in rural life. Since I came from the village, and, to an extent was an insider, so this was an ethical question for me. I was bewildered, for instance, when informants sought my personal assistance with their practical problems. I struggled when respondents tried to manipulate me, and use me as negotiator with the local government. I was also upset when people confused my research with a development project, and thought I was a cheat, when they understood that my research was not going to bring them any immediate economic benefit. These reactions could be the same for any outsider, or foreign researchers, who were not getting involved with factional politics. For me, helping poor people, personally, could be interpreted by many as part of my father's patron-client relationship with the poor.

Arranging group interviews

As I found it possible to interview women in groups, during my previous fieldwork, I decided to conduct group interviews to stimulate new ideas and discussion [27]. Women, usually, felt comfortable taking part in conversations when they were with others, while carrying out household chores, or just chatting in the evenings. Such occasions were interactive and enabled me to investigate how the women's worldviews varied. Group interviews and focus group discussions, helped me collect within a short period of time, information from men as well. In farming community, men readily talk about their perceptions of good or bad harvests, sustainability in farming, seasonal crises and crop management. In these discussions, a central principle was that wellbeing is not perceived in terms of individual welfare, but characterized as a means of shared happiness. I used group interviews in the first two months of my fieldwork, to get an impression how local people, generally, understood 'development as a process', and in the subsequent months, to delve into specific topics like illness, migration and microcredit. In using group interviews, I aimed to single out the similarities and differences of the respondents, with respect to their perceptions, experiences, interests and attitudes toward 'development'. While selecting groups for interviews, I preferred to keep poor women and men separate, because women did not talk freely in the presence of men, due to them observing *purdah* (seclusion). I also interviewed young women and older women separately, so as to avoid potential

conflicts (e.g. between young wives and mother-in-laws) during the interviews. I did not interview poor and rich women together, as the rich would dominate the conversations, and silence the poor, reflecting patron-client relationships. For similar reasons I avoided interviewing rich and poor men together. While conducting focus group discussions among poor farmers, sometimes some persons silenced others, and I had to facilitate discussion by gently requesting them to allow everyone to speak, and encouraged shy participants to take part in conversation. I used timelines [28] for identifying the life events,that might impact on local livelihoods. I preferred to employ the seasonal calendar [28] to evaluate livelihoods, and see how different farming seasons are shaped by the seasons. The seasonal calendar, that I constructed, was used 'to draw out and further explore the timing of a number of significant activities, and the potential relationships between different biophysical and social economic event domains, which are cyclical' [29]. For example, it helped me to understand seasonal labour migration of both men and women.

Difficulties with wellbeing ranking

When asked to identify and rank their wellbeing, respondents interpreted it as a wealth ranking exercise. They thought that I was expecting them to rank the rich and poor of the village hierarchically. They used poverty as a sole indicator of wellbeing. However, poverty being a multidimensional concept and possessing material as well as non-material features, I looked at certain aspects such as health, education, fulfilment, and livelihood sustainability, along with economic ones such as owning a brick built house, water pump or tilling machine, savings and possession of land. While carrying out the ranking exercise, I found that it was convenient to divide the villages into paras (neighbourhoods) due to it containing a large number of households [30]. My father's ongoing land dispute determined the selection of para. For example, I preferred to work at *Kundu para*, Shah para and *Dakhshin para* and adjacent areas of Char Khankhanapur, as they were considered to be safe areas. In Decree Charchandpur, I conducted the ranking exercise at Mallik *para*. From each *para* I selected a group of participants (both men and women). The composition of such groups was often homogenous, as described above, though poor men and women were not always available at the same time. I ensured, also, that rich and poor men were not put in one ranking group, as this might influence poor men to rank the rich incorrectly, from fear of getting harassed later. During the ranking exercise, I gave participants two different sets of cards with names of household heads and wellbeing indicators on them. I read the labels for non-literate participants. After distributing cards, I asked them first to sort the wellbeing indicator cards, and then rank the cards hierarchically with household head names. For instance, at Char Khankhanapur one group of participants ordered wellbeing sequentially as wealth, good health and happiness and categorized different households accordingly. At Decree Charchandpur the ranking was different and wealth in terms of possession of land appeared as one of the crucial indicators of wellbeing. It was sometimes difficult to take land possession as an indicator of wellbeing because of the changing patterns of land ownership. At Decree Charchandpur, some migrant families tend to spend more on buying land, considering it an exhibition of social prestige and wellbeing. This impacts on land ownership system significantly. I noticed many poor farming families losing land to pay for migration expenses or repaying microcredit instalments whereas I found some rich families buying more land with their surplus income from agriculture or remittance. Often, land being important, people provided false ranking of land based wellbeing. My position as the daughter of a rich land owner of Char Khankhanapur also had an influence on representation of land information, due to the

lack of trust in my interest to know about land possession. Therefore, I cross checked the data, by repeating the wellbeing ranking exercise a second time.

Though I used ranking to understand rural people's perceptions of wellbeing, I acknowledge that local indicators can change over time, as people face different constraints during their lives [29]. Besides this, I was aware that perception of wellbeing is subjective and varies from person to person, shaped by their situations.

Use of photography and audio recording

With the consent of the research participants, I took photographs of seasonal work, like post-harvest activities, microcredit meeting sessions, and informal health clinics. I sought to capture aspects of local people's stories. Often photography helped me to ease my relationship with poor men and women. Sometimes taking pictures of women and children made them feel proud, as they could not dream of having a camera of their own. I used a digital camera with a high quality data storing capacity. I tried to involve local people in decisions about what photographs to take, and how they interpreted them in context. In some instances, I handed my camera to respondents to take photographs, and tried to understand what issues were interesting to them. To get an idea of the dynamics of household relationships, I asked them to take pictures of people whom they considered important. For example, poor women often took pictures of their children, to show their wellbeing was to involve their children. In using photography, as a method of collecting data and rapport building, I was conscious that images could have multiple meanings, and different people could view them in different ways (Bryman, 2008). There were situations where some persons asked for my camera to take pictures of themselves, or their relatives during festivals such as wedding, religious gatherings (eid and puja) and I allowed them to do so, which helped me with rapport building.

Reflexivity and ethical concerns in the field

In participatory research, it is the task of the anthropologist to provide an opportunity for multiple voices to be heard, especially those of the weak [31]. In so doing, the question arises, whether a researcher can remain objective, overcoming his/her own biases. Pottier et al argued that since researchers have their own beliefs and values, they can 'as an interest group, side with others and (unconsciously) attempt to validate their own viewpoints and positions' (2002: 223). In this context, I was particularly aware of the elite biases that were ingrained in my identity. As I belong to an influential landowning family, it is possible that I could have overlooked some issues that could be problematic, or embarrassing, for my family's reputation in the village. The preamble of the code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) points out, that anthropologists have moral obligations towards their own communities to which they belong [32]. I hold the same belief. I could not do anything that might upset my father's social relationship with others in the village. I had to rearrange my choice of my field sites, and respondents, according to my father's suggestion. This may have a derogative influence on my understanding of some peoples' development. Due to my obligation to maintain my family's social prestige, it is possible that some of my data interpretations are biased. Moreover, as Barry [33] argued, it is usual for ethnographers to become changed by their researches, from 'being' one identity when they enter the field, to 'becoming' a different one. For example, I realise that before carrying out fieldwork among poor men and women, I was looking at them from a 'rich person's perspective', but after I have completed the research, the 'rich' perspective has got transformed into a more

sympathetic and realistic one, inspiring me to work for their *unnoyon* (development). There were also some instances when I became sensitive about domestic violence towards women. For example, when Ansar Ali, a rickshaw puller, who was beating his wife for being late in cooking his lunch, I was overwhelmed with sympathy for her, and could not help myself interfering in the argument. Karim [34] identified such gender consciousness, as important in ethnographic research. According to her, it may happen that feminist sympathies emerge, through the experience of fieldwork generating sympathy for women. She, also, asserted that in some instances female ethnographers try to improve women's position in society, which is nothing but a reflection of the ethnographers' gendered position of being women [34]. Sillitoe [35] observed that methodologically it can be challenging for Bangladeshi researchers to work in their own culture. He argued, if they belong to a privileged position in the farming communities, such as landowners, affluent farming households, or absentee landlords, they may not wish to research into the knowledge of poor farmers, or the landless, as it may undermine their own 'authority' or 'power'. He suggested that it may be difficult for indigenous researchers to overcome their class and minimize the unequal power existing between them and those they research. Given their religious beliefs, as he further pointed out, indigenous researchers may not dare to engage themselves in research which is considered blasphemous.

My affluent status had an effect on my fieldwork, as many poor people withheld information, for fear of being socially or politically harassed, if they spoke against the local elites. Many of them provided me with false data, in particular, where it was related to income and wealth. They tried to show me that they have less wealth, as they believed that, by doing so, I might provide them with financial help. Rich people were also sensitive about disclosing information regarding their economic and social lives [32], in order to minimise chances of potential threats by local thugs. In such situations, I assured people that I would not use their real names in my thesis, and would not pass their information to anyone else. Throughout the thesis, I have also used pseudo names for the poor people so as to avoid revealing their personal information to the public.

Though informed consent is crucial in research, I did not use the consent forms on all occasions, in my research, because for some people, particularly those who were not literate, it was a barrier to open conversation. I preferred to use verbal consent before interviewing them. Some Hindu men and women thought that the consent forms would be for recording information about their wealth and income. I had to convince them that my research was only for academic purposes, and it had nothing to do with record keeping of their assets, and putting them into trouble. I used written consent, always, when I approached literate informants (such as union council chairman and members of union council). However, I did not try to force them to co-operate, if they were not happy to be interviewed. I probably took certain local practices for granted without further inquiry given my cultural intimacy [36]. For example, while I took part in seasonal festivals such as *nabanna* (the ceremony concerned with the harvesting of new paddy, and the making of rice cakes), I might have overlooked some inherent social meaning. I also found poor village roads difficult because of my urban living. Pollard [37] argued that a PhD student can experience vulnerability during ethnographic fieldwork, despite his or her familiarity, or unfamiliarity, with the field. She identified a list of personal and psychological feelings associated with fieldwork. These are loneliness, depression, disappointment, frustration, stress and feeling uncomfortable. I experienced most of these working in a place where there were violent factional politics. For instance, I felt depressed when my father encouraged me to stop my fieldwork, as he considered it to be unsafe. I was alone and stressed in my village residence, because of the threats made by my father's rivals. My father, sometimes, forbade me from visiting poor women and men in the evenings. This disappointed me, as it limited my chances of interviewing poor working men and women, after they returned home from work. Therefore, doing fieldwork in one's home situation was not easy, as it has to fulfil obligations as a researcher, family member and Muslim female.

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