

Native subjectivity as a means for uncovering the “truth”

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Introduction

Anthropology’s most prolific phenomenologist, Michael Jackson, writes that “one’s ethnographic understanding of others is never arrived at in a neutral or disengaged manner, but is negotiated and tested in an ambiguous and stressful field of interpersonal relationships in an unfamiliar society”. Here Jackson seems to address the typical audience of western anthropologists who classically do research among others. I always thought this to be true particularly as a native ethnographer studying my own society. My attempt in this paper is to discuss subjectivity as a way of uncovering “truth”, which is not the ultimate truth but the local “perception” on various phenomena. The discussion is based on my recent research on ethnic integration in post-war Sri Lanka.

I added descriptions to the methodological sections of my bachelor’s and master’s dissertations intentionally, to indicate that I was able to achieve objectivity during my research. It was not a story of deliberately cheating my teachers or examiners. Rather, it was an indication of how much I got confused and also became a prisoner of local social science teaching practice, which was too beholden to the natural science research tradition. The common conception of science is that it the best systematic method of uncovering the truth of the world. This view has heavily influenced the subject of sociology and other social sciences to follow scientific methods; “should be science of society” (Letherby, Scott and Williams 1; Gupta and Ferguson 17). Nevertheless, this notion of thinking has been highly debated by those who believe that the social sciences are closer to humanistic science in which the subjectivity of the individual social scientist plays a key role in knowledge production (Letherby, Scott and Williams 1; Jackson 2013, 3).

With the development of education, locals from developing countries (Gupta and Ferguson 16; See Chawla 2) such as Sri Lanka, were able to acquire social sciences and research methodology knowledge, which was originally produced in the west. The local researchers commenced doing ethnography in their “home” countries or else among the known “subjects”. Those “foreign” researchers could distance themselves from local realities and do so-called “scientific” studies, which assured “objectivity” since they did not have special attachments. Nonetheless, the local researchers do have various attachments, but, not necessarily prejudices. Thus, I believed that I would not be able to become totally “objective” and see the truth emanating from my subjective perception of the world.

What is subjectivity?

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), defines “objectivity” as “the ability to consider or represent facts, information, etc., without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions”, whilst it explains “subjectivity” as “the quality or condition of viewing things chiefly or exclusively through the medium of one’s own mind or individuality”. There is a high possibility of involving personal feelings, thoughts and concerns to the latter. I wish to treat subjectivity as “the way a person understands the world or his environment based on his/her personal opinion or life experience”. Viewed from that standpoint, my subjectivity is “something” developed in connection with my family members, neighbours, friends, enemies, politicians and others. In another way, it is “something” developed based on how I deal with other subjects in the society. Viewed from that point of view, it is intersubjective in nature.

This subjectivity is essentially embodied; it inherits the capacity to naturally shape my

interaction with others. I use the idea of "embodied subjectivity" from the phenomenological point of view following thinkers such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Moran 193). For them, being a "subject" (self) is fundamentally to have a body. Their thinking is that consciousness alone must be embodied. Simple thinking is understood as an action that comes through the body. It is a part of the existential aspect of their lifeworlds.

It would be very difficult for me to gauge what aspect of my everyday thinking is subjective and objective. My notion of subjectivity is a combination of both at the same time or different times. Looking from that point of view, it is close to what Michael Jackson calls intersubjectivity that is, "the interplay of subject and object" (Jackson 6). Researchers who live in societies, burdened with ethnic tensions cannot be totally "objective" as natural scientists assure in the laboratories. We get emotionally shaken up at one time and not so on another occasion. Therefore, the local ethnographer's perception of the world is a combination of both subjective and objective characteristics. From that perspective, I agree with what Jackson writes quoting Satre and Crapanzano; "what we call 'subjectivity' or 'selfhood' are simply arrested moments artificially isolated from the flux of 'interindividual' life. The subject and object partition is an artefact of our interventional acts of 'measuring' reality; in fact, selves are no more single existences than are atoms and molecules" (Jackson 6).

Development of my subjectivity

Let me to explain my socialisation process, possibly it might have an impact on the development of my embodied subjectivity. Here, I follow the contemporary understanding of subjectivity as "synonymous for inner life process and affective states" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 6). My embodied subjectivity is crucial to my understanding on inter-ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, troubled by an ethnic conflict. As Michael Jackson understood, the "selfhood" or "subjectivity" "arising from and shaped by ever-altering modalities of embodied social interactions and dialogues" (Jackson 6). I was born as a Sinhala-Buddhist but socialised sharing happiness and sadness and with the Indian Plantation Tamil community, an intra-ethnic Tamil-Hindu group in Sri Lanka. The British brought them from South India since 1870, to work in tea, rubber and coffee plantations on the island. The British planters established pure Tamil-Hindu settlements in the Sinhala areas and they were given special benefits (De Silva 18; Nissan and Stirrat 27). These migrants have formed a colony within a colony with nothing inherited or could be claimed legally and also surrounded by Sinhala landless peasantry whose lands were taken over by the colonial state for cash crop cultivations. Since then, they were discriminated against by the Sinhalas, mainly non-estate based Tamils including Jaffna Tamils (Daniel 3). The Indian Tamil community was strongly established which led to a situation in which Jaffna Tamils were pitted against the Batticaloa Tamils versus Indian Plantation Tamils (Tambiah 66-67; Arasaratnam 306).

My family along with other Tamil neighbours went to the village temple, *kovil* where all the people expect the support of the goddess Mariamma, often identified as goddess Pattini of Hindu pantheon, to address various issues ranging from diseases to economic hardships. We never quarrelled over the ethnicity or the place of origin of the goddess, the lay clergy (*poosari*) or the Tamil language predominantly used in the *kovil*. I played cricket with my friends on open land within rubber trees that we treated as a playground. We went swimming in a water tank created by building a small dam across a canal to pump water to the rubber factory of the estate.

I started thinking about the causes for divisions for the first time, when I saw how a politically backed Sinhala mob came to attack my neighbours during the 1983 July riots. I was ten years old then. We worried that we would also be attacked. My grandpa and other elders protected the Tamil neighbours keeping them inside our home. The Sinhala mob did not have any intention to kill Tamil persons of our area unlike it happened in Colombo and other cities. I rarely heard instances

of physical attacks against the Tamils in my village but I saw how their chickens and goats were looted. Once I wept with my grandma and other relatives when some of the Tamil families of our neighbourhood permanently migrated to India, following the 'Sirima-Shastri pact' to send Tamils of Indian origin to India. My good friends, Morgan and Lasanthan, who were brothers of the same family went to India also with their parents. They were my playmates, intimate partners, reliable companions and also really trustworthy, who often took my side when we were engaged in fights among young fellows.

The need to think of subjectivity in a new way

I see the world through my subjectivity. If not that leads to a situation wherein neither I can understand it nor do people in the field sites recognise me (See Chawla 2). If my perception is not compatible with the locals, there is a high possibility of misunderstanding me as a mentally retarded person. That is the ground reality in which the native researchers do their ethnography. It does not mean that the local researchers are familiar with every aspect of their society. My or any other local ethnographers' research always inclines to be based on an unfamiliar setting due to various micro and macro cultural (subculture) and contextual based variables; e.g., caste, class, gender, regional, ethnic, religious, and cultural differences. Of course, my training in anthropology facilitates me to "step back" and analyse or interpret phenomena. For local researchers the social realities under investigation are however part and parcel of their embodied subjectivities (Kath Watson 166). From the phenomenological point of view the living body is recognised as an "existential null point...from which our various engagements with the world - whether social, eventful, or physical-are transacted" (Desjarlais and Jason Throop 89). In the context of my own research in Sri Lanka this includes many hotly contested issues that have emerged from the three-decade-long ethno-racial crisis. Building on my own experience doing fieldwork with communities in my own country, in the forthcoming sections I will illustrate how my subjectivity played a part in the course of the research and affected my analysis and writing.

The above-discussed notion of my embodied subjectivity pushed me to think of my research on the inter-ethnic relations among the other people who live in mixed-ethnic communities on the island. Before proceeding to a broader discussion on the subjectivity of my research let me give a brief background to the problem now. The island of Sri Lanka has a multi-ethnic society of approximately 20 million people. The population comprises Sinhalas (74.9%), Sri Lankan Tamils (11.2%), Indian Tamils (4.2%), Muslims (9.2%), Burghers (0.2%), Malays (0.2%) and others in small numbers. They mainly use Tamil and Sinhala for everyday communication. They belong to a few different religions; Buddhist, Hindu, Roman Catholic, and other Christian, and Islam. The country is frequently portrayed as burdened by "ethnic conflict". This led to a three-decade-long bloody war between the armed forces and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) that ended in May 2009. The post war country has been heavily criticised by the international community, including transnational bodies such as UNHCR and also western nations. The main allegations centred on war crimes and massive human rights violations alleged to have taken place during the final phase of the war. In addition, there were other concerns regarding decaying democracy, the rule of law, freedom of expression, displacement and involuntary disappearances. It also appeared that there were attempts at replacing new enemies with the fallen since that is a tactic of the ruling elites to maintain power. In such a context, there is no need to describe further how people's lives became miserable.

In such an environment there is no sustainable solution to address either the ethnic problem or the sufferings of the people who still have to live social lives in a mixed ethnic society. Day-to-day social relations in many parts of the country indicate that members of different ethnic groups live together, sharing many events in their lives, despite the ethnic conflict, nationalisms, political manipulations, and traumas that prevail as causal factors in the literature. This raises the question of

how people of different ethnic backgrounds in such a volatile country can develop inter-ethnic relations. In my research I took up this question. The ways and means adopted by the men and women of heterogeneous ethnic society to live together coping with ethnic-politics, ethno-nationalisms, even when there is no clear indication of a solution in the near future. I named this sort of people's strategy and/or struggle as commongrounds construction.

Phenomenology as a way of making un-noticed ethnic border negotiation noticeable

I adopted phenomenology as my methodology in which embodied subjectivity plays a key role. The phenomenology, spotlights on the experience of an individual, we recognise matters as they become visible to us. The ultimate truth would be totally different from what we notice; yet it is difficult for us to know how things "truly" are. "This is because everything we encounter, we encounter through our perceptual apparatus. Everything we experience, we experience subjectively" (Carel 10). I wish to suggest that we have to have a new look at subjectivity. I propose that we have to look at subjectivity in a new way during our ethnographic research following Biehl, Good and Kleinman. They propose to treat "subjectivity as both an empirical reality and analytical category" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 5). It accommodates to have "empathic" understanding of the members of the community as subjects with full emotional involvement with their society.

In my research, I mainly dealt with concepts such as ethnicity, citizenship and nationalism. Intersubjective relationship building with members from dissimilar ethno-religious backgrounds was the main field of study that assisted me to study the above in action. I followed the constructive tradition of ethnic boundary negotiation initiated by Fredrik Barth. Apart from him I employed discussions of Simon Harrison, Neofotistos, who suggests that the inter-ethnic boundary negotiation is possible in conflicting societies. Eriksen suggested that "ethnicity is thus constituted through social contact..." (19) and also "ethnicity occurs in social contexts where cultural differences 'make a difference...'" (32). My embodied subjectivity and also which is perceived by other "subjects" heavily supported me to understanding ethnicity in practice; its variations, the contexts that operate, and the ways and means that people make it porous. The potentiality of my subjectivity developed in ethnically mixed environment was further highlighted when it was compared with my research assistants.

I spent seventeen months in four research locations in Sri Lanka. Two locations were from the eastern province; Pānama and Pottuvil, which were considered as border villages during the war. The other two locations; Melwatte and Crow Island were from Colombo. I adopted a family based approach in order to include diverse demographic categories (See Hudson, Phillips and Ray). I continued regular contact with a significant number of families, which enabled me to study their links with families of other ethnic backgrounds. The long stay among different communities facilitated me to gather lived experiences going beyond talk-centred research. I participated in various activities of these communities such as, picnics, pilgrimage, rituals, weddings, funerals, various festivals and other community activities.

In order to understand common-grounds I analysed the relationships among the members of the society via their social networks of informants. The nature of social networks requires further discussion beyond groups' boundary creations and maintenance as discussed by Barth. To overcome this barrier network sampling (or snowball sampling) (Bernard 192-94) was followed to contact respondents. The networks of people transcend the ethnicity and ethno-national borders through diverse unique personal qualities. The ethnographic study contained examination of the nodes of a network and the links through flows of gifts, things, ideas, love and other similar things and services. The identification of the connections was done "following the informant." I employed participant observation, in-depth interviews, and group discussions while I was gathering knowledge about the nature of flows and respondents.

My whole research was a common-grounds building enterprise with members of different ethnic, religious, regional, class, caste, age, and gender groups. Indeed, good fieldwork in anthropology is always an exercise in creating commongrounds. Establishing good relations with all groups in general and diverse ethno-racial groups in particular was necessary to obtain consent and maintain peace in order to achieve the objective of data collection. Thus its success is evidence in itself that embodied local subjectivity includes strategies to make either peace or war.

Research findings

All four locations exhibited that they could create common-grounds across rigid politicised ethnic boundaries (See Tambiah 334, 101). The respondents have adopted strategies that best match their social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds. These strategies are adopted by people in order to live a social life, discussed as commongrounds is a reality that has been taken for granted within a context frequently highlighted by social divisions, and ethno-political clashes. People adopted more novel strategies to live with ethnic others in parallel with the changing ethno-politics and discursive practices. In a way, this embodied practice of subjectivity and intersubjectivity similar to what Bourdieu calls habitus, “which become...the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences” (Bourdieu 78). The common-grounds is always not peaceful but tense, ups and downs and also it moves, shifts. This commongrounds has taken various shapes in four locations according to the unique social, economic and political contexts.

Members of the heterogeneous community in Cow Island have a lifestyle shaped by a middleclass socio-economic value system in which they all wanted to establish a peaceful life with a sense of dignity. They wished to maintain more formal friendly and unfriendly relationships that are unique to middleclass way of life and taste. Melwatte was a low-income shanty (*watta* community) wherein people lived in congested small houses and struggle a lot to cope with inflation and government regulations. Often military and police operations took place to curb drug dealings and underworld gangs. Their interaction with the neighbours is shaped by everyday socio-economic realities and hardships. They often related to each other as neighbours, friends, and relatives. Furthermore, disputes, brawls, exchanging heated arguments were short lived and a part of everyday life.

Contrastingly, Pottuvil and Pānama had more cultural resemblances unique to the eastern region of the country where people are united broadly under socio-cultural spheres. Chiefly, this bilingual; Sinhala and Tamil community was holding similar religious beliefs and value system nourished by the cult of goddess Pattini, Skanda, god Kōvalan, and Pulleyar. They all held almost similar matrilineal marriage pattern and dowry system. They all engaged mostly as agricultural farmers and fishermen. However, there was unique differentiation between Pottuvil and Pānama in terms of inhabitation in the locality. Pottuvil had Muslim majority while Sinhala and Tamils were low in number. The village of Pānama constituted Sinhala and Tamil traditional villagers while their social relationship is shaped by caste, marriages and kinships as well as via religion connected with the cosmos.

My long term association with the people of all four locations clearly indicated the possibility of living together, amid ethno-political or ethno-nationalist's plea for separation. This is surely not something that politicians created as their vowed “miracles” appeared in election manifestos but the inherited capacity of people with a diversified cultural background. The commongrounds, discussed as a main thesis in this paper is a “peace agreement of the ordinary people across the diverse ethnic groups”, strategies adopted by ordinary people in order to have a social life within the socio-economic realities of the country. It appeared that the individual/local social classification that largely fall; “good-bad” or “compatible-incompatible” categories made inter-ethnic relation possible.

Still the ethno-political entrepreneurs of national and local levels are capable of arousing ethno nationalist sentiments to gain political and electoral wins (See Harrison).

Conclusion

This paper explained the need of looking at the subjectivity in a new perspective. It helped me as a means to comprehend the social lifeworlds of others as well as an analytical tool. This is a key area that native ethnographers should be conscious of without much worrying on positivist research tradition. As an example, I explained how my embodied subjectivity facilitated me to discuss commongrounds, the everyday strategies people adopt to create everyday inter-ethnic relationships in Sri Lanka. This enabled them to live in an ethno-politicised society, which killed many thousands of people by fighting for the sake of liberation of ethnic groups.

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