FIELDWORK IN INDIAN RELIGION: SOME NOTES ON EXPERIENCE AND ETHICS

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Field research in India is always a challenge, especially the investigation of religious experience, which has been my area of research. Questions about integrity are relevant ones in the study of religious experience, and more generally the question of integrity is important to explore. What does it mean to "do it right?" For instance, I have had informants share experiences that they have never discussed before, and that they value highly. For some, these experiences were the defining moments in their lives, the most cherished and precious moments. How, then, do we treat the experiences of others with integrity?

There are many levels to respect, and many ways that data can be misused. A colleague in anthropology told me of the distress of his own advisor, whose work on the hill tribes of Cambodia was used by the U.S. government as a map for bombing during the expansion of the Vietnam War. Here is a gross case of misuse of data, where research led to destruction in the informant's culture. However, informants can be treated badly in other, more subtle ways.

For me, integrity means honoring the religious views of my informants, not belittling them to their faces (as missionaries and Communists have done) or behind their backs (like academics who reduce their experiences to economic or political ignorance, pathology or sexual repression). People can be belittled in many ways—they used to be ignorant or benighted and pre-logical savages, now they are puppets of governments or slaves of hegemonic ideas, or hypocritical seekers of power. I respect the religious experiences of my informants by not analyzing and contextualizing them out of existence—which is not a popular position in a field with a liking for sociological models. I consider such reductionism a violation of my informants' trust.

Is it legitimate to get information from informants and use it as we choose, or is it stealing, as many Native American informants have claimed? Stealing depends not only on how the information is given, but also on how we treat it. Native American complaints have fo-
cused on the gain to the anthropologist (especially in terms of wealth and fame) and the loss to the tribe of its secrets. I would say that if the informant's experiences are devalued, used as chess pieces in academic theories that reduce religious visions to mercenary concerns, then yes, their ideas are stolen. If we respect the values of our informants, both at the time their experiences are shared and later on, then information is not stolen but shared, a gift that is given and appreciated. I think that the Kantian ideal of treating people as ends in themselves, rather than only as a means to an academic goal, is an important one. Perhaps a good test might be the willingness of the researcher to show the published research to informants.

Can we ever really understand another person's experience, especially a person from another culture? For Van der Leeuw, even one's neighbor's experience is alien, and there are many debates on the limits of understanding. But being a foreigner is relative—in rural West Bengal, people from a village five miles away are foreigners. And being a colonialist is relative as well. For Santal and Mahata tribals that I have interviewed (especially Jharkhandis), Hindu Indians are colonialists, stealing their land and using it for building projects, and rejecting their culture as primitive and superstitious. In fact, we see the same ambiguities that are shown in many missionary writings, as Hindus reject the lifestyle and beliefs of the tribal people, yet idealize their "simple" way of life. Outsider and insider are not black and white, they are shades of grey on a large continuum.

It can be argued that colonialist Hindus caught it from the West, but I think this misses the point. People have free will, and people throughout time have imposed their will upon others, be it their neighbors or their children. Now we have the Rationalists in West Bengal, who see themselves as Marxists, and dedicate themselves to wiping out superstition and religious beliefs. The anti-superstition clubs start in elementary school, with children sent out to throw rocks at sadhus and patrol the trees and caves where they used to sleep. This is a new form of religious persecution, organized by the adults and performed by the children. If it is colonialism, it starts early.

Our closeness or distance to the culture is another sort of question, as is our style of interaction. Should we live in poverty like our informants, or have big houses and servants like the zamindars of older times? Should a fieldworker get involved in political activity if it is involved with religion, smoke hashish with yogis to gain entrance into their world, or sleep with informants to gain information?