A blessing in disguise!

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During the time of my fieldwork in the rural village of Pandariya in the Indian state of Jharkhand, I happened to learn the world around in a different way. Being a student in the MPhil program in Development Practice at Dr. B R Ambedkar University (AUD) based in New Delhi, I realized my personal vulnerability when I was living among people from different cultures. My work was to undergo an in depth ethnographic study of the whole village along with the local people and the language they speak. It had to be a thorough study of the social, political and economic dynamics of the village and how this affects human behaviour and everyday life. I had been to several journeys but particularly this one became central to my life as I understood myself better while studying this village and its different people. My identity as an urban Indian Muslim girl, a meditator practicing yoga and a believer of a world beyond discrimination and violence was most vulnerable during this period. It was a year that changed the meaning of my being an "empowered woman". I found the true meaning of my life during this unforgettable journey.

The fieldwork was based on the methodology of immersion stretched for eight months during the period of 2018-2019. Immersion as a methodology is a unique aspect of the Action Research course of the MPhil in Development Practice. It is about developing a relation between the researcher and the people of the village community by co-living with them in order to develop a deeper engagement leading to a collective and collaborative transformative action and simultaneous reflection on it. Immersion as a method is an experiential approach which deals with two subjects: I (the researcher) and the village community.

This process of immersing in the field brought me unexpected experiences and anxieties. Firstly; being a native from Delhi, this immersion made me living in two contrary realities: rural and urban. Secondly; my identity particularly as a Muslim woman made my position more vulnerable in the village. Being interested in meditation and yoga, I have always believed that the only way to bring the slightest change in your surrounding is to strive towards self-transformation. My four-year long journey as a meditator taught me the power of self-realization which is the key to self-transformation and later on, social transformation. Therefore, the immersion as a methodology of this action research became crucial for me: not only regarding my self-reflection but also in my working with the community. The research was focused towards bringing the community together and making them a co-researcher where critical engagement with the people of the villages is an important tool. At the same time, it is important to realize and evaluate the factors that could become a roadblock while engaging with people from different tribe, caste and geographical identities. The village of Pandariya is an OBC ('other backward classes') dominated village with a high population of Hindu and a few households of Adivasi (Oraon and Khadiya) people.

Since the immersion method involved living in the village with the community, I was provided a home of an OBC family through an NGO called PRADAN[1]. Through continuous negotiations, I had rented a room with that family. But later, I found that people in the home were reluctant to accommodate me. They were suspicious of my identity as a Muslim woman. My identity became a roadblock as people would avoid interacting with me and engaging in any conversation. In my host family, I was not allowed to enter the kitchen and touch the utensils. This untouchability is practiced in the village only with the people from ST (Schedule Tribe) and SC

(Schedule Caste) groups. Being a native from Delhi, my food habits were certainly different from the village people, but I had no choice than to adopt to their practices. Along with my Muslim identity, my daily yoga practices also became a suspicious matter to the family. At multiple times, I have faced harassment in the village where men on the streets harassed me for being a woman and a Muslim woman in particular.

Village people, especially from tribal communities have been read and seen largely as a 'vulnerable group', the under-privileged, un-developed who are reduced to objects in the hand of development agencies and outside researchers. During my initial conversations with the village people they would tell me that they assumed that I would leave the village after extracting data from the villagers, like other researchers and NGO workers did. Somehow they have become conscious of their own vulnerability and that is why they would hesitate to engage in my research work. They have fear of getting exploited, following their experiences with other NGOs. The socially and politically heated atmosphere has further aggravated the situation. And as a consequence, they used the same lens to view me, an outsider and a threat to their community. This has been a major reason behind my struggle, where my own positionality both as a researcher and a Muslim woman was questioned.

At another level, this became a roadblock in persuading village people to become a co-researcher. Though, it also depends on the research question and its acceptability within the community. A more sensitive research question receives more resistance from the community, because it can create frictions with regard to social customs and values. In order to preserve their community's pride, gender issues that deal with patriarchy and women's freedom tend to attract more opposition. The community therefore strongly resisted my work on gender, except for the six women with whom I have worked. This is how immersion made a difference, since I as a researcher through co-living developed an empathetic attitude for working *with* the community and not *on* the community. The six women I worked with were conscious of their daily oppression through patriarchal forces and understood that the community would start giving some relevance to gender issues and also provide some space for discussions. However, resistance kept prevailing within a part of the community.

Although I had the chance to exit from the village and leave my research, I stayed there. As mentioned above, I want to contribute to social transformation by working on self-transformation. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I felt discriminated and abandoned where all my efforts to make relationships within and outside the household were going in vain. But my daily yoga practice helped me to stay patient and resilient in this process. It came as a realization for me that as a female researcher, I am more vulnerable in the community. Along with this, it became evident that the on-going social and political upheaval in the country affects people at ground level. The unstable political situation and persistent issues around caste and gender have made people more suspicious, which has created a negative feeling and mistrust among the people of different caste groups. As I belong to an "un-privileged" gender and a "minority" caste group in this country, I became victim of this suspicion. While facing constant rejection and strong resistance from the community, I kept contemplating and self-introspecting that how ethical it would be on my part to leave this research? Consuming the expression of resistance from the community has remained a difficult part in this journey which required a lot of resilience and it is during this period that I could shed off the layer of resistance in myself towards other people and strive for self-transformation. At the end, I realized that unless one is willing to transform oneself, collective transformation would not happen and therefore I became empowered not by fighting against the discrimination and the resistance I have faced but by consuming it gracefully and constantly trying to bring a perspective change within me and in the community. This is how this

unimaginably un-pleasant journey gave me the most sublime experiences of my life.

Notes

[1] PRADAN is an NGO which work in tribal dominated areas of central Indian states like Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. PRADAN is also the partner organization in MPhil course of AUD which provides field for village immersion in the mentioned states above. Please connect them at this address- http://www.pradan.net/