

## Articulating the field for the Northeast India

*Anannya Gogoi<sup>1</sup>*

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### Abstract

Understanding society and social phenomena in social anthropology and sociology requires fieldwork; for society is dynamic, evolving and holds opportunity of new empirical knowledge and the basis of theory building. The researcher not only gathers information but applies various methods in the field for the purpose, keeping the objective of study in view. Therefore, defining and knowing the field is an essential step in social research. But the process of defining the field may pose various challenges depending on the nature of societies which are to be studied. The challenges are experienced by social scientists, particularly social anthropologists since colonial times in studying societies of the Northeast India with its diverse races, tribes, religious and linguistic groups, and ethnic communities. The region not only presents ample scope for social scientists to explore diverse social and cultural phenomena, but also throws field challenges due to this diversity. Engagement in empirical research by a social scientist in this region holds challenges which require a fresh and proper approach to understand the specificities of these societies before defining and selecting the field. Therefore, an attempt has been made in this article to highlight some of the issues and challenges that are related to the definition of field in the Northeast India.

**Keywords:** Field, The Northeast, Boundaries, Social Categories, Hierarchy and Saturation

### 1.0 Introduction

The field is an important element in social research. Fieldwork refers to data or information collection for any study done among people or communities to understand a certain activity issue or phenomena. It is a systematic method of studying a particular phenomenon. The term field has many meanings and these meanings keep changing over time. In its conventional meaning it refers to a place that is situated outside the usual office. (Scott & Marshall 2009: 256). In Social Anthropological and sociological research, the word field usually denotes a place, a bounded society, a community, or a space (Nadai & Christoph 2005: 2 and Srinivasan 1998: 60). Such conceptualisation of the field has been done since the beginning of fieldwork in the study of societies and culture. In social anthropology, the field and fieldwork was defined and standardised by pioneers like Malinowski (2013). In social anthropology the field is particularly associated with the 'other' (Beattie 1964), because the anthropologists of the colonial era engaged in the study of societies which were different from theirs and whom they considered primitive.

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, Pin:786004.  
Email:ananyagogoi19@gmail.com

A change in this idea of the 'other' in the field came when these fields were studied by an insider rather than an outsider of the community. The idea was explored and elaborated by the M.N.Srinivas in India (Srinivas et al. 2004) which guided latter social anthropologists and sociologists who studied various aspects of Indian society. But, Indian society as a field is multi-dimensional due to its pluralistic nature and diversity across regions, religions, ethnicity, and languages. The emergence of the post-colonial literature further reinterpreted the field in social research. The practice of field work ceased to be the understanding of the exotic other and instead became the exploration of new and unexplored facets of the 'self' thus generating a better understanding of the social or cultural self (Thapan 1998: 10 and Srinivasan 1998: 62). However, in social research the field is still associated with the idea of a bounded community or society.

Contemporary understanding of the field presents us a different idea of it. Globalisation, information and communication technology revolution, new social movements have had a profound impact on the organisation of societies and social life. Migration, international socio-cultural exchange and improvement of standard of living have led to the creation of new social types. The study of these categories and non-categories requires new ideas and definition of space, place, community, system and organisation. Therefore, Marcus gives the idea of a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995 and Clifford & Marcus 1986). This new idea of the field further changes the conceptualisation of the field as the 'other'. Field in post-modern ethnography is fragmentary (Clifford & Marcus 1986: 131) and therefore, the idea of the 'other and self' associated with the field requires closer examination. Post-modern ethnography cannot be organised around categories such as kingship, economy and religion, since these concepts no longer represent a comprehensive and holistic category but express themselves through differential and fragmented experiences (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

A multi-sited field of study carries new implications in terms of understanding the field. Nadai and Christoph (2005) therefore, call the emerging ethnographic fields as *Fuzzy fields*. Fuzzy Fields emerge from collection of forms of practice which may be found in different but completely connected sites. For example, the market as a field is no longer limited to a bounded physical place, rather it consists of numerous practices related to the market that have emerged in the global networks of markets connected through communication and technology. It is the practice that creates the boundaries of these fields beyond normal sense of physical space. The conception of the field as associated with the concept of space is further challenged by the notion of temporality of the field i.e. the idea and the practices visible in the field are not fixed but emerge only through practices. Hence, fields like practices are prone to change (Dalsgaard & Nielsen 2013).

If we stick to the original idea of the field then the selection of the field in social research is based on our research questions. What do we want to study, our research questions, where do we want to conduct our field work and even the testable hypotheses that we undertake for the scientific analysis. However, finding the field in a bounded and limited form is not without scrutiny in the contemporary methodological discourse of the social sciences. The definition of the field may itself require multiple dimensions of discernment. These problems and challenges associated with the definition and identification of the field are evident when we try to understand the multifaceted and constantly changing social universe of the Northeast India.

### **1.1 Field and administrative boundaries**

Social anthropology has from the beginning defined the field in terms of a bounded community such as a tribe inhabiting a particular geographical and topographical location (Brown 1933 and

Malinowski 2013). Similarly, there were village studies in India which focused on a bounded self-sufficient social unit (Srinivas 1959 & 1976). The studies done in the cities also concentrated on the analysis of territorially bounded neighbourhoods such as the Pols, Thoks and Muhallas<sup>1</sup> (Rao et al. 1991). In the Northeast India the early social anthropological studies done by Verrier Elwin similarly focused on the identification of the tribes that were defined on the basis of their isolation from the other communities (*see* Xaxa 2001 and Misra 1971). The study of the exotic cultural and social practices of the communities was conducted considering them as contained social units. However, after India attained independence, and even during colonial period, these communities are not exclusively contained within the same geographical locality. We can cite the example of the Oraons, the Mundas and several other tribal groups of the then Chotanagapur (now Jharkhand) who were brought by the British and settled in tea gardens of Assam. These tribal migrants formed into a different community away from their original home as tea garden workers but having intra-ethnic and cultural distinction. Studies are not available, for example, on the Oraons settled in different tea gardens of Assam as a community, as they do not inhabit a contiguous territorial space, as a bounded community in individual tea gardens or in tea gardens taken together. After independence, there is voluntary migration of people from territorially remote areas to the newly urbanised zones in search of new forms of livelihoods and better social ambience. The emergence of the tribal middle classes indicate that tribes are no longer confined to the isolated villages but are very much present in urban spaces in the mainland and this has altered their culture to a certain extent (Misra 2014: 5). The presence of the tribal middle classes is seen in new spaces such as social media, in the academia of the Indian mainland and in other political and economic spaces which integrate them into the mainstream Indian civil society.

The identification of the boundaries of these newly emerging social worlds in the Northeast India is now coterminous with the administrative definitions provided by the state and the centre. Both the political institution at the regional level as well as the national level defines categories like the tribe, ethnic community, the city, town, village or rural community. The field Northeast itself is identified in comparison with the centre or the main land India. The question remains whether we can use these administratively given definition of the field in our social research in the changing scenario.

The impact of the cartographic determination of states in the Northeast India during the colonial rule (Zou & Kumar 2011) and the linguistic division of states after independence had been discussed by social and political scientists at length (Kikhi 2009; Rao 1972 and Oinam 2008). The later have critiqued this exercise of dividing the states by the state agencies (Baruah 2014). The identification of a region and the societies which compose it require multiple vantage points (Aloysius 2013). The definition of such social units cannot be limited to territorial aspects or even the calculation of traits of material culture. A more recent understanding of societies in the Northeast India imagines each society as the idea of a life world. This idea of a life world is created by the interactions and sharing of common experiences of a community of people in their everyday life (Sharma2021; Chakravarty & Ray 2014 and McDui-Ra 2016).

The upcoming idea of the Northeast as a region also influences the idea of the field in the scientific understanding of the region. The field therefore becomes not only multi-sited but also fluid. It transcends the boundary where the people feel a sense of belongingness and from where they gather a stock of knowledge. The field has an abstract presence derived from the experience and emergence of the self. It is fluid in the sense that the field travels to the spaces where a shared experience was felt. An example of this fluidity was seen in the following study conducted by the author.

The difficulty in identifying the field was felt when I conducted my doctoral research. The study was about sexual harassment as faced by girl students studying in educational institutions located in urban areas. To identify and delimit the field urban setting was defined on the basis of the municipal area, a unit of local administration. However, after interviewing the respondents, it was found that the urban was not what I had thought of. The urban setting or the field ran parallel to the sites where these incidents of sexual harassment occurred. One of the kinds of space where these incidents occurred was the vehicles in which the respondents travelled. The public and private shared vehicles where the incidents of harassment occurred were not fixed in one location but moved in spaces that are administratively defined as urban and rural. Therefore, it cannot be stated that more incidents of sexual harassment occurred in the urban spaces or in the rural spaces, and thus one is safer or unsafe than the other. The site of the occurrences of these incidents transcended the rural and the urban, the public and the private, the home and the outside. These were fluid spaces. They are multi-sited but fuzzy. Yet it presents to us a composite character of a social phenomenon.

## 1.2 Field and the social categories

The field in social anthropology is often identified through the community i.e. a group of people having a shared culture and social characteristics. This community may also be identified on the basis of their shared experiences such as memories of migration and settlement in a common locality (Bourdieu 1999). The problem of identification of the boundary of the field arises when the community under study cannot be clubbed under a single socio-cultural parameter such as class, caste or ethnicity. Quantitative and comparative studies require that responses and data should represent all these categories under study. However, the social universe of the societies in the Northeast India is so very diverse that an exclusive definition of a class, a caste group or an ethnic community sometimes becomes problematic.

Referring to the above-mentioned doctoral research, when the respondents were asked to identify their caste, they did not adhere to the sociological (Ghurye 1993) or census definition of caste categories. Some respondents mentioned their ethnic identity instead of caste while some others referred to the constitutional categories of general castes, Scheduled Caste (SC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). Some of the respondents also referred to themselves as Scheduled Tribe (ST). Therefore, there was no uniform definition of either caste or an ethnic community for the respondents. Out of 320 respondents 95 % of them used one single term denoting their ethnic group or tribe or constitutional status (such as Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste) to denote both their caste and community. Therefore these categories were overlapping and porous from the respondents' point of view. The terms used by the respondents to identify their caste and community do not strictly correspond to the constitutional and census categorisation. The way in which the respondents identified themselves was very different from what was expected by the researcher. At the same time presenting the respondents with the pre-given categories of caste may distort the responses and the data. Therefore, it is essential to define the universe and the field from the point of view of the respondents or the community of people under study. The emic view of the categories that defines the communities through which we identify the field is however, different from the etic view of such categories and the field (Geertz 2017).

This emic view of the identity of the respondents is an indication of the presence of multiple social categories in the Northeast India that cannot be arranged in a single hierarchy. There are ethnic identities like tribes that do not belong to the caste system. The category of other backward classes (OBC) has undertones that are both Socio-cultural and economic in nature<sup>2</sup>. Further, there is overlap between the categories of tribe and ethnic community<sup>3</sup> (Sharma 2021: xxi). Thus, a pre-defined idea of the community to identify the field of study in the Northeast may not be best suitable for an in-

depth understanding of societies and social phenomenon of this region. The definition of the field in this region of India appears situational and fluid.

### 1.3 Hierarchy and Saturation of the field

There are also other challenges that arise in stepping into a predefined field. One such challenge is to transcend the overbearing political and administrative determination of the issues related to the field. The Northeast is not simply the North and the East; it is the Northeast region of India. The idea of this region emerges in comparison with the national boundary (Aloysius 2013). It creates a binary of the centre and periphery. The periphery is always defined in relation to the centre, which is again originally an administrative centre. The Northeast is seen as a periphery because of its geo-political location, the political history of its identification during the colonial and post-independence period and the contemporary political practices (Baruah 2014 and Misra 2000).

Along with the political and the geographical demarcations, the culture of the societies in the Northeast India is also marked as different from that of the centre or mainland India (outside the Northeast). The culture and life worlds of people from the Northeast may not bear any resemblance to the culture of the centre. Example may be given of the religious practices specific to individual communities found in the periphery. Religious practices, beliefs and occultism that are found in societies in the Northeast region of India have elements of animism and naturalism. These practices may not have any resemblance to the major religions of the country that are embedded in the discourse of nationalism. In such a situation the scientific articulation of the topic of research becomes difficult when the Northeast as a field is looked through the lens of or side by side with the mainland. Do we call these practices of the periphery as sub-cultural or counter cultural elements? If we do so, the nature of these cultures is predetermined by research as 'other cultures' and is based on the hierarchy of centre and periphery. A hierarchy of these abstract spaces, which are the bases of imagining the field, is created because the periphery is identified from the vantage point of the centre. The centre here becomes the point of reference whereas the meaning of the periphery is always derived from the centre. This is how we again revert to the colonial anthropological categorisation of the field as a site belonging to communities with other cultures (Beattie 1964). Research itself becomes an act of 'othering' rather than the pursuit of objective reality. It is the process of research that preconceives the societies to be studied as different and characteristically distant from the people and communities that conduct the studies. In reality both researcher and the researched may have more similarities. Thus the preconceived idea of a field such as the Northeast may lead to the creation of binaries and hierarchies of fields in comparison to 'mainland' in social research.

The classification of the field as centre, periphery and even borderlands<sup>4</sup> often influence the kind of scientific social and political analysis that are carried out in the Northeast India. This practice is tied to the issue of formulating acceptable research question that one is trying to explore. To rephrase this point, the issues and problems of the field in the Northeast India are pre-identified by certain political and administrative concerns related to the idea of the periphery and the borderland (McDui-Ra 2016 and Chakravarty & Ray 2014). The issues and problems that are explored in the present Northeast are mostly concerned with the issues of territorial security, insurgency, and political integration of the region with the centre. There are important but numerous works in insurgency, counter insurgency and conflict related to the North East India in the contemporary social science discourse (Baruah 2014; Kikhi 2009; Misra 2000 & 2014; Bhaumik; 2009 and Hazarika 2003). This leads to the characterisation of the region in research as a field as an arena of political and social instability. The accentuated idea of the field leads to saturation of research questions related to the field, here the Northeast. Social phenomenon, institutions, and practices other

than the political concerns do not get enough attention in contemporary social science research. This typification of the field limits it as a subject of investigation and distorts it. The continuous engagement of research in specific issues such as social conflict, movements, insurgency, and the like tend to create the image of a field that is fertile with only specific kind of research issues. This is true not only of the Northeast India but particular and localised fields of social research. Again, the agency of the researcher to explore the field in its immediate moments of surprise and through the narratives of the subjects of the study is essential. Such an analysis is likely to help in bringing issues and social phenomenon to light that have not been studied, documented or recorded earlier. This in turn would help in a holistic understanding of the society under study. It would also help to understand the social causes and consequences of the already explored events and issues as well as help in finding interlinkages between different social events.

#### **1.4 Unlearning the fixed idea of the field**

The above experiences of the field indicate that the field emerges from a situational reality that may vary over time and space. Both the emic and etic views are to be considered while conceptualising and preparing an idea for scientific investigation. Rather than conceptualising the field as a bounded immutable space, the idea of the field in research can be a hypothesis itself. The field is not pre-given but emerges gradually considering various vantage points. The preliminary notion of the field can be nullified, affirmed, or new fields and sub-fields can be articulated during the course of fieldwork itself.

The field emerges from the practice of observation and participation of the researcher. A similar process is discussed by Ferguson and Gupta (2002) in terms of the interplay of the state and subjects of public policy interventions, which they refer to as situated interventions. The subjects cross cut the dichotomies of the idea of the field that is spatially embedded. Such practice of conceptualisation of the field calls for self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

This exercise of conceptualising the field is again scientifically objective and empirical and not random and chaotic. It involves a process of unlearning (Savyasaachi 1998) the socially or academically conditioned habits of thinking regarding the field as a bounded community, place and category. Thus, in the scientific practice the conceptualisation of the field has new methods and vantage points. The field can be fluid and porous, multi-sited, fuzzy and situational or contextual.

#### **1.5 Conclusion**

The earlier categorisation of the Northeast during the colonial and post-independence period as a periphery and exotic terrain no longer caters to the scientific interpretation of the changing societies and social phenomena in recent times. Understanding the fluid and porous social and cultural categories of the societies and communities of the Northeast India requires this process of unlearning and relearning. Any form of fixed image of the Northeast may hinder the objective and holistic analysis of the subject of study. Fixed categories help in delimitation but they also limit the horizon of thinking process.

The idea of the Northeast as a field of research requires fresh methodological perspectives. There is need of visualising the Northeast beyond the concept of a politically disturbed terrain. There is need for the record of numerous cultural and social types, some of which are undergoing constant changes whereas others on the brink of extinction. There is also a need to look at the life worlds of the people of the Northeast India from their own narratives and experiences. Only then the

hierarchies of the field and the hierarchical image of the societies could be addressed and done away with.

## Notes

1. Pols, literary meaning being gates, are inhabited areas of family groups for mutual watch and protection. (Mukerjee 1922:355). Thok is a division of landholding in Pattidari system during Msl (Sardari) period in the Punjab (Gandhi 1999:360). Muhalla is an inhabited division of a village or a town.
2. The group of people defined under Other Backward Classes includes depressed classes, untouchables, aboriginal and hill tribes, criminal tribes, non-tribal Hindu communities deserving special treatment, all persons who meet given non-communal tests of backwardness such as low income and economically and educationally backward classes (See Galanter 1978).
3. For example, Sharma (2021) distinguishes between the legal and ethnic definition of a tribe. While relating to the state the people identify themselves in the legal sense by using the constitutional terms such as scheduled tribe. However, in their everyday life the meaning of the tribe is more akin to an imagined community, an ethnic community.
4. In the context of North East India Cederl of summarizes the concept of the borderland, given by Wilhem Van Schendel, as mutual marginalisation of certain regions for their distance from political heartland and for simultaneously being at margins of academic regions (Cederlof 2012).

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