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**Between the village and the West:  
Local research associates and the challenge of mediation**

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*“Ethnographers have all too rarely made explicit the methods by which the information reported in their descriptive and analytical works was derived. Even less frequently have they attempted systematic descriptions of those aspects of the field experience which fall outside of a conventional definition of method, but which are crucial to the research and its results. [...] It is an attempt to portray some features of that human experience which is field work, and some of the implications of its being human experience for ethnography as a scientific endeavor.<sup>1</sup>”*

**Introduction**

During my search for a research associate and afterwards in our village stay, I realized that one of the biggest challenges of fieldwork was to strike a balance between my inability to effectively communicate with village people and the tendency of my associates to shape village interaction according to their personal views and preferences. As a first-time field researcher with little knowledge of Hindi and no exposure to Malwi, the language spoken in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh (MP), I was well aware of the importance of an associate who could work with me as an interpreter cum village guide.

For practical reasons of space and decorum in the village, I set out to look for a female associate. I was eager to find someone with previous experience in village life, knowledge of English, the ability to settle down in a village for a few months and an interest in my research topic, i.e. the articulation of collective identities in *Panchayati Raj*<sup>2</sup>. Even though the last requirement was quickly dropped, a month of assiduous search highlighted how difficult it was in Bhopal, and even more so in Delhi or Bombay, to find an associate with the remaining characteristics.

Women with higher education ready to join a stranger for a long summer stay in an MP village were extremely scarce. Those with knowledge of the English language were not to be found at all. Candidates with the above skills were mostly middle-class women

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<sup>1</sup> Berreman (1972), pp. xvii, xviii

<sup>2</sup> *Panchayati Raj* designates a system of local self-government institutions. As a means of bringing about decentralization of governance in rural India, the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill of 1993 institutionalized the *Panchayati Raj* system. It involves direct elections by the rural population to a three-tier system of village (*Gram Panchayat*), block (*Janpad Panchayat*) and district (*Zila Panchayat*) committees. These are in charge of managing, implementing and overseeing public development schemes, local tax collection, and other tasks as mandated by each state legislation so as to enable them to function as institutions of self-governance.

involved through more or less stable arrangements in the NGO or professional sectors. In metropolitan areas, they were too busy with more comfortable and lucrative government or internationally funded projects to be interested in taking up a short-term hardship assignment in the interior. In towns closer to the village, the mobility and English medium education of women would decrease dramatically. There was just a minuscule group of upper middle-class professionals who were conversant in English, but whose time was fully absorbed with family and work related duties. Scaling down to younger urban groups, with the hope of finding more flexible candidates, just compounded the problem. Family apprehensions to let a daughter go with a Westerner of potentially dubious values in the wilderness of rural MP and the extreme study pressure at a time of final and entrance exams, compelled me to shift back to my original target group while compromising further on my requirements. As the summer heat was quickly rising, I ended up having to give up the idea of a single associate and accommodate to a sequence of somewhat experienced women but with no more than a few weeks time availability each.

Changing associates looked like a major set back, made worse due to the fact that it was not an unpredictable one-time change but an anticipated routine associated with the anxiety of a multiple jump in the dark. Despite its obvious drawbacks in terms of continuity, it gave me the opportunity of appreciating the tremendous impact of mediation on my understanding of local realities. Further, it provided unexpected insights on the identity of the Indian middle-class and its relation to society as a whole. And it highlighted the *modus operandi* of many NGOs, with their largely middle-class staff, and the impact on development projects of the increasing devolution of responsibilities to them. I had the fortune of working with some of the most caring and considered human beings. They not only helped me with work-related matters, but happily shared with me tedious household chores, the same room, bed and plate, and patiently taught me how to cook Indian food with few basic utensils, wear saris and the adornments of a married woman, and perform the tasks needed for our integration and survival in the village.

### **Fieldwork as a process of mediation**

Anthropologists have long inquired into the methodology of fieldwork and the issue of representativity of the empirical data it produces. On the one hand, following the Malinowskian ideal of a “real, unbiased, impartial observation”<sup>3</sup>, fieldwork aims at a seamless integration into the local society which would reveal “the native’s point of view, [...], to realise *his* vision of *his* world.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, fieldwork as any process of social interaction can not transcend the inherent subjectivity of the counterparts involved. It becomes therefore illusive to seek an “unbiased” view of the social reality, as it can only be discerned through a double process of mediation: From the researcher’s own selective angle and from his counterparts’ perceptions of his presence. “The ethnographer and his subjects are both performers and audience to one another. [...] Each will attempt

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<sup>3</sup> Malinowski (1922), p.18

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25

to convey to the other the impression that will best serve his interests as he sees them.<sup>5</sup> In the “Prologue: Behind Many Masks, Ethnography and Impression Management,” Gerald Berreman lifts his own professional mask to provide an account of the circumstances and methods which are behind his ethnographic exploration of a remote community in the Himalayan hills. Impression management involves the hide and seek game between “teams of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation. [...] We often find a division into back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented. Access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from seeing backstage and to prevent outsiders from coming into a performance that is not addressed to them.”<sup>6</sup>

Carola Lentz in writing on her own field research in two Ecuadorian villages also highlights how, beyond the researcher’s individual capacity to adapt to local circumstances, it is the villagers’ forceful pursuit in defining her role which determines the process of research and data production.<sup>7</sup> Previous experiences with white outsiders during a history of Spanish colonialism and Creole-Ecuadorian landowners’ domination are among the determining factors of the villagers’ apprehension and identification of her. Far from branding the tensions, which led to her expulsion from one of the villages, as mere stumbling blocks in the research process, Lentz recognizes their value in bringing to light the underlying social relations within and outside the local arena.

Without going further in the examination of the methodology of fieldwork, it is important here to note that at the core of the ethnographic enquiry is the ability to de-code the meaning of role enactments for the intercultural encounter that takes place, regardless of whether these are staged for an ad hoc purpose or more solidified collective performances. What matters is to understand the extent to which this role-play, with its hidden identities and stereotypical projections, is representative of the intercultural specificity of that encounter.

To this end, the paper will focus on a particular aspect of the interactive process that is fieldwork, i.e. on the role of the local associates as mediators between the researcher and their fellow country-people in the village.<sup>8</sup> The contention here is that the challenges I faced in doing fieldwork with local associates, are the result of a particular triangular relation between the perceived “Westerner-ness” of the researcher, the middle-class urban background of the associates and the rural setting of the enquiry. This constellation has to be viewed in the context of a long-standing role of the Indian middle-class as mediator between an urban Anglophone world of supposedly homogeneous Western

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<sup>5</sup> Berreman (1972), p.xxxiii. In the “Prologue: Behind Many Masks, Ethnography and Impression Management,” in *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change*.

<sup>6</sup> From Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959, p.238 as quoted in Berreman, *ibid.*, p. xxxii.

<sup>7</sup> Lentz (1989), p. 123-151. On a similar point see also Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p.78. “Son [de l’anthropologue] ‘intégration’ est relative mais réelle. Elle ne le dispense pas pourtant d’observer les effets que sa présence induit, y compris la forme ‘d’intégration’ qui lui est affectée.”

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the above-mentioned accounts, this paper will not deal with the interaction between ethnographer and village people, but will be limited to the relation with the local associates.

institutions, outlooks and lifestyles and the vast majority of rural India insulated within deeply stratified regional, communal and linguistic universes.

It has been argued that the behavior of middle-class educated Indians working in British colonial milieus was marked by “two rejections, both of them ambivalent: rejection of the alien intruder and dominator who is nevertheless to be imitated and surpassed by his own standards, and rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacle to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity.”<sup>9</sup> With independence, as Nehru writes in his autobiography: “The rising middle classes wanted some cultural roots to cling on to, something that gave them assurance of their own worth, something that would reduce the sense of frustration and humiliation that foreign conquest and rule had produced.”<sup>10</sup> Varma describes how the middle-class (and Nehru himself) was caught between the admiration of Western concepts of modernity and the reassurance of a supposedly authentic Indian yet romanticized past. “The dilemma was all the more acute for the educated Indian, because his education exposed him to the new, even when he could not quite give up the old. [...] Modernity, as per western liberal ideology, implied the ability for rational calculation, a separation of the personal and the professional, the dispassionate pursuit of efficiency, the absence of emotion and sentiment in work, and a liberation from favoritism and group allegiances. But in India, even for the educated, all of these could be nullified by traditional loyalties to family, kin, community and caste. [...] the middle class, caught in the penumbra of the past and the present, the traditional and the modern, was unable to develop an authentic paradigm synthesizing both.”<sup>11</sup> From the mid-sixties onward the changes brought about by the Green Revolution with its new entrants into the middle-class, the end of the Congress monopoly in Indian politics and the break-down of the Gandhi-Nehru ideological consensus, as well as the economic liberalization set in motion in 1991 and the implementation of the Mandal Commission report<sup>12</sup> a year later, all contributed to deepening the middle-class’ sense of disorientation and the tension between the pursuit of a supposedly “Western” modernity and the adherence to perceived certitudes of the “Indian” tradition.

During field research, the associates’ role of mediation seemed to be inscribed within this context. For me, it was a slow process of discovery as little did I know at the outset of the cultural trappings of my relation to those genuine translators cum village guides. Prior to my departure, I had read Berreman’s and Moffatt’s accounts<sup>13</sup> of working with Brahmin associates and was mindful of the impact the associate’s caste would have in establishing a rapport with different communities in the highly stratified village society. However, as time progressed and a sequence of four associates moved through the village, I had to realize that both in relation to me and to the rural people a class, besides

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<sup>9</sup> Plamenatz, ‘Two types of nationalism’ in Kamenka, ed., *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea*, 1976, p.31, as quoted in Varma, (1998), p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Nehru, *An Autobiography*, repr. 1980, p.29, as quoted in Varma (1998), p.43.

<sup>11</sup> Varma (1998), p.48-49.

<sup>12</sup> In 1978, Prime Minister Morarji Desai announced the appointment of the second Backward Classes Commission, which took the name of its chairman Bin-dhyeshwari Prasad Mandal. But it was only in 1992 under V.P. Singh, that the Mandal report was implemented and reservations were granted to OBCs according to the lists identified in the report. For further details, see Jaffrelot (2003), pp. 320-4, pp.366-7.

<sup>13</sup> Berreman (1972), Moffatt (1979).

a caste factor, seemed to be at play. Despite their caste and character differences, it was striking to see how similarly the associates behaved in terms of their expectations of the work to be done, the process to be applied, my research and personal requirements, and the rapport they wished to establish with our village counterparts.

As a difference to Berreman, I have not experienced well defined high and low-status teams in the village, and the clear assimilation of the ethnographer in one or the other team according to his associate's caste status in society. I am not able to say whether this would have been different had any of the associates come from a community with a strong representation in the village. Nevertheless in the present case, it quickly became manifest that, villagers, far from hiding behind a united front, were eager to express their personal views whether or not they coincided with the supposedly official line of their caste group or were critical of other members within that group. At the same time, they were equally fast in pursuing their desire to get acquainted with the individual characteristics of the researcher as distinct from the associate, and vice-versa. By no means, one got the feeling that they considered researcher and associate as part of a team or relationship which went beyond casual friendship, if not, mere business. This was probably reinforced due to the frequent changes in associates within an otherwise static environment. "Impression management" on the part of the villagers played a role, as it does in all social interactions, but after an initial phase it did not seem to be much dependent on the associate's caste status in the community.

It was not that caste was disregarded in our social interactions in the village. In fact, not a single introduction occurred without villagers inquiring about my and the associates' communities of origin. After finding out that caste is alien to European society, they proceeded with a seemingly nonchalant but relentless query about the associate's caste, sub-caste, regional provenance, present residence (including the name of the mohalla), marital status, parents' professional activities etc. The answers to this checklist were not to be accepted at face value, but tested and specified during subsequent meetings, conversations with other villagers and whenever possible with outsiders having greater knowledge of the place of origin or residence of the associates. It was as if they were trying to define the associate's position along the caste-based coordinates of their universe. However what is more relevant here, is that none of the associates reciprocated with similar eagerness on matters of caste. When asked they would not withhold information on their own caste, but it was only due to my insistence that they would drop a question about the interlocutor's caste while trying to resist my further probing into the subject. The underlying message was that it was not relevant for me and my research to keep poking into such matters.

Berreman's feeling of being pigeonholed by villagers into existing social categories, seems to have been stronger than in our case due to a further difference: The gender of the outsiders. The presence of two outside men in a male-dominated society, which had experienced male intruders before, appears to be more threatening than the presence of two young women. As a difference to Berreman's situation, we were a totally new phenomenon in the village. People could not recall previous situations of that sort or draw on pre-existing stereotypes for us. We were unlikely "government agents sent to

reassess land for tax purposes”<sup>14</sup>, spies, missionaries or army personnel on a conscription round up. We attracted much curiosity on the part of men and women alike. People appeared to be more concerned about our ability to survive “alone” in the village rather than their apprehension of being scrutinized by us. Most of them believed that it was my karmic<sup>15</sup> duty which had driven me to take the dangers of such long and solitary trip, and of all places to settle down in their small village of Kankund. They seemed to feel a mixture of honor and empathy for this unusual twist in a person’s destiny. Further, the upbringing of urban versus rural women is increasingly based on such hugely different worldviews, that through the eyes of fellow Indians even my associates seemed to look somewhat alien. Particularly, with the fair-skinned Brahmin it was not uncommon to be mistaken as sisters from another part of the country or for her to be considered a foreigner as well, whose Hindi was surprisingly fluent as compared to mine. This combination of factors enabled us to move more freely in the otherwise rigid social structure.

In conclusion, besides caste, the associates’ gender and class were decisive for my understanding of the intercultural encounters taking place in the village. Despite their difference in caste, their common class made them look surprisingly similar in mediating between fellow country-people from the village, on the one side, and the Western researcher, on the other side. It was due to their gender and class, with its high level of education, English fluency, its urban professionalism and relative independence that they had emerged as “suitable” mediators for that fieldwork. However, once in the field deep-rooted identities based on religion and caste became more evident. It is the balance between a “westernized” class worldview and a traditional community worldview that seemed to define the associates’ position in village society and their relation to the foreigner’s research approach and objectives. Berreman carried out his fieldwork almost fifty years ago. His associates were probably less influenced by “westernized” cultural models than the middle-class urban youth of today’s India.

### **The setting**

In order to better understand the interplay between a “westernized” class worldview and a traditional community worldview and appreciate its implication for middle-class mediation both in the fieldwork at hand and for the meaning of civil society in India, it is important to look at the socio-political environment in which the research took place.

Kankund is a village of 1531 inhabitants spread over roughly 200 households<sup>16</sup>. It is located in Dewas block at the heart of the homonymous district in the central Indian state

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<sup>14</sup> Berreman, *ibid.*, p.xxiii

<sup>15</sup> Literally, karma refers to the Sanskrit word for deed. In Hinduism, a person destiny is determined by the sum of ones actions and conduct during the subsequent phases of existence.

<sup>16</sup> Estimates of the population size vary considerably according to the informant. The figures indicated here are from the Census of India 2001, Madhya Pradesh, Office of the Registrar General, New Delhi. The household figure is based on my own data collection in the village.

of MP. Due to its vicinity to Indore<sup>17</sup>, the commercial capital of MP, and its leather and biotechnology industries, Dewas is one of the more developed areas of the state. Despite the comparatively high human development indicators for the district as a whole,<sup>18</sup> the rural areas, where more than 70% of the population lives, still lag significantly behind. 73% of villages are not connected to all weather roads, leaving them inaccessible during heavy monsoons. Rural employment in non farm sector is just above 10% and more than half of the population can not read or write.<sup>19</sup>

Kankund has a reputation of being a “good” village with some amenities, a functioning *Gram Panchayat*<sup>20</sup> and a relatively peaceful social environment. Schools are available up to 8<sup>th</sup> standard, i.e. covering pupils with an average of 5-12 years. Due to the financial and social constraints of sending children to study outside, village girls leave school at the latest after 8<sup>th</sup> and only 10-15 boys are currently studying further. For villagers above 40 years, the literacy rate is substantially lower. Women are generally illiterate or can only sign their name, and just a hand full of men have studied above 8<sup>th</sup>. Girls get engaged at the age of 5-10. Despite a law forbidding child marriages, i.e. before the age of eighteen, village girls generally get married before sixteen. A mid-wife and a medical practitioner come to the village for deliveries, immunization drives or family planning/health awareness campaigns. A primary health care center is not available. Public water and sewerage systems are also not in place. People fetch water from wells or one of the six functioning hand pumps in the village. A tank has been recently constructed for the wealthier hamlets at the center of the village. Electricity is available, but constant power cuts allow for only a few hours of use a day. Three households own a telephone for their private use. However, during my stay they were disconnected for weeks at a time. Despite being only 15 Km away from Dewas town, commuting by local transportation can take hours. Vehicles shuttle back and forth, but would only leave with a full load of passengers and produce. What would normally seat eight people, would have to be filled with at least double the passengers plus some extra ones hanging outside. Overload, 5 Km of bumpy dirt road and bad maintenance of the vehicles, would lead to frequent delays.

Besides some commuters, people would generally not leave the village. One woman became famous, because of her audacity of going outside the village by herself. The other women would only venture outside with female villagers or relatives, and only for particular family or religious functions or some unavoidable issue to be settled. Since mid-March everyone was busy with the harvest of wheat, chickpeas and garlic. When electricity would suddenly come, the already dusty air would quickly turn into a dense yellow color filled with wheat particles gushed out of the few threshing machines which rotated through the village. At the end of April, the village started breathing again.

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<sup>17</sup> Dewas town is 32 Km away from Indore and connected by one of the rare well paved roads in the state of MP. Besides electricity, the former Congress government of Digvijay Singh is said to have lost the assembly election on December 2, 2003 due to the lack of investment in the state's road network. Bhopal, the state's capital, is about 150 Km away can be reached within a four hour bus ride.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the Third Human Development Report for Madhya Pradesh 2001, indicates life expectancy at 63.3 years, children fully immunized at 50%, and literacy rate at 61%.

<sup>19</sup> Data as provided in the Third Human Development Report, Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> See Fn.2

Money was coming in from the sale of the harvest and, despite temperatures climbing above 40° C, wedding ceremonies were in full swing. Preparations for the rainy season were also picking up. *Kacca* houses<sup>21</sup> were reinforced or completely redone, roofs were solidified with additional tiles and wood pieces, dried cow dung pies were piled on huge stacks and walled up under layers of earth and straw to preserve the fuel supply for the year.

Women, regardless of age, are completely absorbed by their daily routines. Their sixteen-hour day generally goes by with fetching water, cooking, cleaning dishes, washing cloths, sweeping, preparing cow dung pies, attending to animal and agricultural work and taking care of children, male relatives and elders. Except for the Brahmin women, who do not carry out animal or field work, women of all other castes in the village are engaged in similar tasks. The difference is whether they are forced to work as paid laborers, bonded laborers or in the context of their family. Even in the wealthier *Yadav* land-owning families, women do not have maids to help in household chores and regularly work on the field themselves. However, the heavier work is left to the poorer agricultural laborers from the lower castes. For tasks of public nature, such as cleaning public spaces after ceremonies, collecting dead animal bodies etc., the traditional caste divisions apply.

The identity of village women seems to be defined by their male-dominated kinship group. They are supposed to be hard-working and fulfill the duties in accordance to their seniority in the hierarchy of the extended family. First and foremost, their status depends on that of their male “guardians” in the sub-caste (*jati*) relations of the village. Women are defined as daughters of their fathers, wives of their husbands and as mothers of their sons. Their subordination is such, that in no circumstance they are allowed to utter the name of any male relative. Luckily, small children are often around to say the name of the heads of the household, otherwise one has to take rather baroque ways to get some genealogical data from women informants in the complex web of interlinked family relations.

From a woman’s perspective, the world seems to end at the horizon of her kinship group. To her, the outside world appears to be something of a dream. A mix of religious tales, distant stories and the distorted imaginary of local advertising or occasional media exposure. It appears to be a fascinating but dangerous world full of mystery and obscure forces beyond one’s own need for comprehension and control. One day a woman asked me how far my village was. I responded that, contrary to her assumption, it was much further than Maharashtra<sup>22</sup>, and that I had to take a plane to get there. She said that if I needed a “bird-machine” to reach it, then my village had to be located on the clouds and was eager to know how village people looked like from up there. The idea of flying to reach another place on the same planet was obviously an alien concept for a rural woman located 15 Km away from the next internet shop.

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<sup>21</sup> Houses made of *miti*, a mix of earth and dust, which as compared to the *pacca* (brick) houses can more easily get flooded during the rainy season.

<sup>22</sup> The state bordering MP to the south.

When walking in the village during the day, one would see only a few women and never any of them sitting idle. Men of all ages, instead, would frequently sit outside their homes, under a tree or in front of the Ram temple and spend time chatting, dealing with business or political matters, playing cards or half asleep in the soporific summer heat. Even when they have to engage in manual work, their tendency would be to take up largely supervisory roles or those tasks which involve handling machines or driving bullock carts. I have rarely seen male agricultural laborers with their backs bend the whole day on the field; and only one man in the village fetching water and carrying the heavy metal pots back to his home.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to dwell further on the features of village life, suffice it to say that Kankund is a mixed caste village. About 75% of its population belongs to nine OBC castes<sup>23</sup>. The dominant one being the owner-cultivator caste of the Yadavs. About 20% are Scheduled Castes (Balai-weaver, Camar-tanner, Doli-drummer, Balmiki/Metar-sweeper), 5% are Scheduled Tribes (Bhil) and only one family belongs to a General caste (Brahmin). Muslims are not present in the village, but populate the nearby smaller settlements just half a kilometer away.

By the time we reached Kankund, we had already spend three weeks travelling across Dewas district in search of a village which would meet some basic research criteria<sup>24</sup>. The search was confined to Dewas as I had received authorization for carrying out the research in that area. From my previous trip a year earlier, the political situation had changed dramatically. Assembly elections had taken place on December 2, 2003 and had seen, after ten years of Congress rule under Digvijay Singh, the landslide victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the swearing into office of Uma Bharti, a *sadhvi*<sup>25</sup> from the Lodhi (OBC) community. In a region with a substantial Muslim minority and a

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<sup>23</sup> Yadav/Ahir (traditionally Dairyman, now mostly cultivator), Lohar (Blacksmith), Nai (Barber), Sutar (Carpenter), Bairagi (manning Ram temple), Goswami/Ghir/Gosain (manning Shankar temple), Kalal (traditionally Wine-presser), Gari (Goatherd), Darzi (Taylor). According to Hindu religion there are four castes (*varnas*): Brahmins (priests/scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (crafts/tradesmen) and Shudras (servants). In addition there are two groups which due to their ritual pollution are considered outside of the caste system, i.e. "Harijans" and tribals. To counter the discrimination suffered by the low ranked communities, over the decades a series of commissions have developed a system of "affirmative action" such as reservation of seats in government jobs, elected offices etc. To this end, two broad categories have been drawn. The first three *varnas* are considered General or Upper Castes. The other ones are defined as Low Castes and are entitled to "positive discrimination". These have been regrouped under administrative terms which, with some variations in the case of specific *jatis*, approximate the traditional categories in the following way: Shudras as Other Backward Castes (OBCs), "Harijans" as Scheduled Castes and tribals as Scheduled Tribes.

<sup>24</sup> In accordance with my research hypotheses, I was looking for a village to carry out a first in-depth case study which could then be used as a benchmark to draw comparisons with other sites. Four criteria defined the selection of the village: (I) As a study on *Panchayati Raj*, it had to be the seat of a *Gram Panchayat*. (II) Due to the focus on inter-case relations, the population had to be of mixed castes with enough members each to have their own community life. Overall, the population size had to be small enough to remain manageable within the timeframe of my research.

(III) The village had to be located enough in the interior so as to maintain its own independence from major sources of outside influence such as towns or big roads.

(IV) The absence of factors shaping village life in an extraordinary way, i.e. strong seasonal migration, criminal gangs, wide-spread alcoholism or drug addiction etc.

<sup>25</sup> According to Hinduism, a woman who has taken the vows of renouncing the world.

history of Rajput dominated princely states, her fiery speeches interspersed with references to the *Ramayana*<sup>26</sup> had a strong appeal to Hindu sentiments and nationalism. Having been part of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)<sup>27</sup> since the age of eight, she pursues her political career as a religious mission. In mid May, when national election results gave Sonia Gandhi a mandate for premiership, Uma Bharti was quick to hand in her resignation so as to lead a nationwide agitation against the “foreign intruder”. In Jhabua, a district to the West of Dewas, just over a month since her coming into office, RSS activists had become violent in their attempt to reconvert Christian tribals back to Hinduism.

In addition to the total ban on cow slaughter, which Uma Bharti introduced right away in fulfillment of her campaign promise, she declared three cities<sup>28</sup> in MP as holy banning the sale of meat, fish, eggs and liquor during religious festivals. Despite protests from the fishermen and farmer *jatis* of the area and outrage on the part of non-vegetarian or more secular-minded Indian communities, sales licenses for hotels and restaurants were cancelled. One of the holy sites is the temple city of Ujjain just 37 Km from Dewas. During the time of my stay, Ujjain hosted the great bathing festival called *Simhast (Kumbh) Mela*<sup>29</sup>. For over a month, masses of people, pilgrims and *Sadhus*<sup>30</sup> of some of the most esoteric spiritual traditions of Hinduism, converged through Dewas from all over India and abroad. At the same time, religious fervor spread like wildfire across the countryside.

In Kankund, after *Navratri*<sup>31</sup>, the nine day worship of *Durga Mata*<sup>32</sup>, followed a series of other *poojas*<sup>33</sup>. The biggest one was a *Yagya*<sup>34</sup> meant to “purify” the village atmosphere. This was a major ceremony led by a *Pandit*<sup>35</sup> from outside Kankund and organized through the support of a village youth group, *Maha Bharti* (Great India), with the self-proclaimed mission of eradicating “social evils” and bringing about communal harmony.

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<sup>26</sup> Text of Hinduism recounting the sacred epics of Lord Ram, the prince of Ayodhya, who as an incarnation of Vishnu rescued the world from the dark demon Ravana. In 1987-8, an adaptation of the text was shown as a serial on national television. It was one of the most popular serials, which contributed strongly to the formation of a national Hinduism. For more information, see Jaffrelot (1993), p.389. Even in Kankund village, people recall the time when the whole village gathered to watch the serial together on the only available television.

<sup>27</sup> World Hindu Council, created in 1964 from a meeting of 150 religious leaders with the aim to unify the myriad of independent Hindu traditions under a common framework, so as to better counter the perceived threat of Christians and Muslims. For more details, see Corbridge and Harriss (2000), p.112.

<sup>28</sup> Maheshwar, Amarkantak and Ujjain

<sup>29</sup> The festival is celebrated in a cycle of 12 years and commemorates the falling of nectar into the river Kshipra during the fight for Amrita between the Gods and demons. Today, the ceremonial bathing in the river is considered most holy.

<sup>30</sup> Hindu holy men.

<sup>31</sup> Literally, nine nights, as the religious functions are held at night over nine days.

<sup>32</sup> *Mother Durga*, an incarnation of Parvati, the wife of Lord Siva, the creator and destroyer through whom the universe evolves.

<sup>33</sup> It is a generic term for worship. As a difference to the *pooja*, the *yagya* is a specific worship which can only be performed according to certain rituals under the leadership of a qualified Brahmin priest.

<sup>34</sup> See Fn. 33.

<sup>35</sup> A teacher, priest, wise man or Sanskrit scholar.

To participate in the *Yagya*, the Yadavs had paid 2100 Rs<sup>36</sup> per couple plus extra donations for a total of 80 000 Rs to be dedicated to the construction of a new temple for Lord Shankar. In exchange, they were allowed to proceed a step further in the *Sanskritization*<sup>37</sup> process and increase their ritual status. Even though *Shudras*<sup>38</sup>, head shaved and after a week-long purification, Yadav men were symbolically elevated to Brahminical status by receiving the holy thread. Some scheduled caste villagers had also convened at the *Yagya* to show their religious devotion, but were chased away and confined to an area in the back of the site.

### **The difficulty of letting go of predetermined research approaches**

My field guides have all been women between 25-28 years of age, i.e. belonging to that small group of still unmarried but already fairly experienced professionals. As many potential candidates I interviewed, they also seemed to belong to a new generation of, what could be called, young “development managers”. They had at least two years of professional experience working with NGOs, international donors or semi-government organizations, spoke English and had a higher university degree in social work, natural resource management or related fields. They came from mostly middle-income, high-caste, urban families. Some were quite familiar with village life as they would regularly visit relatives in rural areas. At work, their cultural role model appeared to be one of “westernized” professionalism, i.e. a managerial, apolitical, problem-solving approach to social phenomena, a sense of schedule, efficiency and punctuality, and an expectation of having to produce some kind of tangible output. What appeared alien to this model and previous practice was an appreciation for the need to plunge into the deep layers of local society and attempt to rediscover it by releasing preconceived notions about its nature. It was not only the associates’ lack of proactive inventiveness in this direction, but a clear resolve to resist any such experiments on my part.

“We can easily complete the work in a couple of weeks.” This was the initial reaction to my description of what I perceived to be the major tasks of the fieldresearch. To me, it seemed a daunting endeavor to try to untangle the complex web of sociopolitical, cultural and economic linkages that shape the collective identities of village communities and its relation to the *Panchayat* system. For my guides, it was a straight forward undertaking.

To give some concreteness to otherwise abstract concepts and better explain to the guides what I was trying to achieve, I prepared a questionnaire including both questions on basic sociodemographic data and more complex ones on collective behavior, informal institutions and expression of hierarchy in village life. The questionnaire was never disclosed to village people, as it highlighted my research strategy and interest in what are

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<sup>36</sup> The exchange rate at that time was 54 Rs for 1 Euro. The daily wage of a female agricultural laborer in the village is set at 35 Rs. This is the equivalent of the cost of 5 kg of harvested wheat at local market prices.

<sup>37</sup> The term was first defined by Srinivas, as a process in which a low Hindu caste, tribal or other group changes its ritual status by emulating higher castes, thereby accepting their value system as the legitimate one and admitting their superiority.

<sup>38</sup> See Fn.23.

considered sensitive topics, such as inter/intra-caste relations, religion/caste identity and political affiliation etc. The questionnaire was periodically reviewed in the privacy of our room to keep track of the data collection process and ensure continuity between changing research associates. Despite my constant reminders that the questionnaire was only there to keep us focused, it became clear that in the mind of my guides filling out the questionnaire was the actual objective of the research. Whether official records seemed reasonably accurate, whether we managed to gather first hand information and whether that information could be cross checked with different sources, was not a matter of great concern. The goal of the exercise was to fill out the questionnaire one way or another, and get out of the scorching heat and the discomfort of our humble village life. After all, the obvious purpose of our suffering was to get me some data, so that I could “go back to my husband, write-up a report, complete my study and, finally, start my own family.” In case the information seemed hard to find, gaps could be legitimately filled based on the guide’s knowledge of the issue in other villages or her reasonable expectations. In any event, the assumption was that I was at least as eager as her to terminate the uneasiness of our village stay, and would therefore appreciate whatever shortcut could be found to complete the work faster.

Testing different research approaches and developing some sort of research strategy for more sensitive or complex issues, was not something to worry about; for example, to identify places where people would meet while going about their daily routine and try to extrapolate some patterns of collective behavior by engaging them in spontaneous group interactions. Only after some insistence on my part, a few steps were reluctantly taken, but seeing no tangible result they were quickly dropped. Two considerations in the mind of my guide seemed to justify a rather unimaginative interview type approach. First, that I as a foreigner with little command of the local language, could not possibly figure out much of what would be going on around me and, therefore, would accept whatever information would be given to me. Second, that she already knew the habits and routines of village people and there was no point in carrying out potentially embarrassing or fruitless initiatives. Not to mention, that none of my guides on this or previous trips had any curiosity to find out more about my research approach by glancing through the research proposal, despite all of them declaring to have a keen interest in the subject.

Usually, the work would start once I clearly defined the tasks for the day. On their own initiative, nothing would move. At times, when they found it useless to visit specific people or areas, I had to clearly state my determination to follow through unless they would come up with a better proposal. All our outings had to have a clear-cut objective, otherwise the best would be to remain within the four walls of our room, hide from the sun, chat about the idiosyncrasies of Western and Indian cultures, entertain neighbors’ children, who were determined to make our room their favorite playground, prepare food, eat or rest.

“Why do you want to go there. There will not be anyone this time of the day. Let’s send someone to check whether he is home and tell him to come meet us here,” was a common refrain. We were living in a room next to the former *sarpanch*’s<sup>39</sup> house, who is still one

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<sup>39</sup> The head of the *Gram Panchayat*. See also FN.2.

of the most powerful persons in the village. Calling someone to meet us there, could intimidate the interlocutor, stifle the spontaneity of the interaction, send a message of superiority and arrogance on my part, invite the interference of our landlord, risk our “enclivage”<sup>40</sup> within his network as well as prevent us from seeing the person’s living conditions, neighborhood and interact with his family, friends and neighbors. Besides, we would lose an opportunity to meet other people on the way and be part of the village life. However, to my guides all these shortcomings did not seem to matter as much as the risk of a walk in the heat without the certainty of finding the person home. After some insistence, we would finally leave our room. On the way, many people would invite us in their homes, share their views, inquire about us and tell us some of the news and gossips in the village. By the time we reached our actual destination, several hours would have passed and we had gathered a lot of new insights in the sociocultural texture of the village.

One day, the newly appointed block *panchayat* Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and his staff paid a surprise visit to the village. As part of his role of monitoring and coordination, he was eager to get a first hand view of the *panchayat* accounts in the village. The fiscal year was coming to a close and the records provided by the village *panchayat* were still lacking information on implementation of schemes, beneficiaries, fund transfers etc. For me, it was an invaluable opportunity to get a long-desired reality check. We were lucky to have run into the CEO as soon as he entered the village, so as not to have to justify our acquaintance with him to any village person. As a sign of hospitality to a foreign student, he did not object to me accompanying him on his round. After some convincing, my associate agreed to skip breakfast and tag along with us. I had for weeks tried to organize a meeting of at least some of the village *panchayat* members. Despite the rule of holding monthly meetings, the *gram panchayat* had never in four years managed to convene with the minimum quorum for taking decisions. The present *sarpanch* is from the SC caste of the *Balai* and had won the post on a reserved ticket<sup>41</sup>. Being illiterate and “untouchable,” he was totally dependent on the main architect of his electoral success, the former *sarpanch*. The latter was now holding the newly created post of treasurer of the village development committee.<sup>42</sup>

The most interesting part of the CEO’s meetings began when he had gathered all the important *panchayat* functionaries in the village and started reviewing each budget item while questioning the deficiencies of the records. The atmosphere was extremely tense. Everyone seemed to have forgotten about our presence, and we could finally witness the

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<sup>40</sup> The term is taken from Olivier de Sardan (1995), p. 101, to mean the voluntary or involuntary assimilation of the researcher within a selected clique of people which could risk estranging him from other groups and the understanding of the society as a whole.

<sup>41</sup> *Panchayat* elections include a system of reservation of seats of 33% for women and for SC, ST, and OBC in proportion to the respective population size of their community in the area.

<sup>42</sup> The village development committee was introduced by Digvijay Singh in 2001 as part of the *Gram Swaraj* system. The aim was to make the *panchayats* more transparent to village people and reduce the overwhelming power of the *sarpanch* by introducing a committee of nominated village people (village development committee). This would oversee, with the help of a treasurer, the funding being handled by the *sarpanch*. The system failed to achieve its aim. It shifted power away from an elected to a nominated office, not subject to the reservation of seats for SCs and STs. In many cases, this has allowed existing power-holders to further strengthen their position.

dynamic within the group without being at the center of attention. At this point, my associate stood up from the round and pushed me to leave. She was hungry as it was almost lunch time, and whispered into my ear: “We have to go, this is going to be too embarrassing for Babuji [the old *sarpanch*]. We can not stay while the CEO makes him look so bad. Don’t you see how he is feeling.” Needless to say, after some back and forth between us, the momentum was lost. For a few critical moments we had become again the center of attention while highlighting the intrusive nature of our presence.

This was not an uncommon instance. Previous associates would routinely go to the old *sarpanch*, our landlord, to ask his approval before going for our village meetings. They felt that this was part of the respect we owed to his authority and hospitality. Before leaving, one associate even felt obliged to ask his permission to allow the next associate to stay on his property. Hearing that her first name was not Hindu, she considered it my moral duty to get the landlord’s approval before allowing a potentially impure person to stay there. For most guides, the quality and independence of the research, was of no relevance as compared to the infringement of social norms they felt most obliged to respect.

### **The question of “objectivity” in translation**

The seemingly lethargic attitude of my guides, dramatically changed once we managed to pull out of the room and dive into village life. It was as if their critical role as interpreters, at the intersection between counterparts who were as eager but also as incapable of communicating effectively with each other, would suddenly give them new energies and turn them into lively and opinionated interlocutors. In fact, most of the time they got so involved that they would quickly take charge, set the tone, select and censor and visibly shift from interpreters to independent third parties in the conversation. It was not uncommon, to find them providing advice to villagers on how to go about their lives or giving them explanation on issues on which they considered themselves to be more knowledgeable.

Also the translation back to me was at times more an opinionated summary of their lively discussions with local counterparts. When I hinted towards bits of information which I felt had been missed out of the translation, the common response was: “This is not so relevant for you,” or “he is not giving you the correct information, so I explained to you how it actually is.” Or “I can not repeat what he said.” Only after realizing that my curiosity would inevitably skyrocket in response to such an answer and that I would not let go unless I would be given a full translation of the supposedly embarrassing account, then they would make mental note of it and, later on, when pressurized again by me, attempt to convey the gist of what had been said. For example, descriptions of impure practices by “untouchables” such as skinning dead animals or “bad” words, which despite their ethnographic value, would run into the screen of religious, caste or gender taboos of some of my guides.

Similarly, during my stay I was unable to gain substantial insights about the relation between the village and the neighboring Muslim settlements. On the last stretch of the

main road approaching Kankund one could glimpse low lines of brown *miti* huts, but only at a close look it was possible to detect through the glare of the sun and the dusty air, the appearance of two slim minarets. They stand like thin pillars in a dry plain, whitewashed and soberly decorated with green paint. The two mosques of the neighboring villages are so small, that if it were not for the minarets soaring above the mud houses one would not recognize them at all. Five hundred meters away the road enters into Sanjay Nagar, the mohalla of Kankund mostly populated by the “untouchable” Camars. Beyond this point the road goes down a slope over a dried-out river bed and then takes a big turn to dive into the centre of the village. From there, Sanjay Nagar and the Muslim villages can not be seen, hidden behind the curve, the river bed and the slope that follows. To my knowledge, in our conversations in Kankund the Muslim neighbors had not figured prominently. This was not one of the favorite topics of our village counterparts. Nevertheless, it was difficult to overhear the Muslim vicinity in the village. Particularly in the early hours of the day, just before sunrise when life in Kankund was still fast asleep, one could feel their presence through the call for prayer resonating in the darkness. Many times I asked the associates whether they had heard the call for prayer and whether they had any idea from which direction it would come, but could not get more than the typically uncommitted headshake. As straight questions on the topic did not seem to get us far, I tried to sound out the issue more casually. Despite my periodic reiterations, I could not get any answer on the matter except for the reminder that, as village people had told us several times, there were definitely no Muslims present in the village and the occasional contacts with the neighbours to the West had always been friendly.

When I tried cross checking information or getting more details about an issue, the guide would often consider it a repetition and simply give me her recollection of previous answers, whether it sounded like a reasonable and complete explanation or not. This would end up forcing me to disclose my strategy to the counterpart, and reiterate to the guide that occasionally I would raise similar questions to probe the credibility or sociopolitical orientation of informants or the accuracy of certain findings.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, also the conversations between the associate and the local people were marked by her often colorful descriptions of the social customs, living conditions and habits I was believed to follow in my country. In many cases these were a mixed of stories heard from previous encounters with Western people, “common knowledge” about the West, information extracted from the English and then re-interpreted by the local media, and my own opinions shared with her on these matters. When my language skills permitted, I tried to interject, to the disappointment of my associate, that not every stereotype about the West with its all-pervasive wealth, amenities and technology, the weakness of family and moral values etc. would apply indiscriminately to all countries and all people living there.

I was left with the impression that the position of the guide came with a sense of superiority vis-à-vis both village people and me. With regard to me, it was a natural sense of superiority due to my ignorance of the local context and my limited ability to express myself, understand my counterparts and establish an independent rapport with them.

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<sup>43</sup> For more details on triangulation in fieldwork see Olivier de Sardan (1995), p. 92 ss.

With regard to the village people, in addition to the latter, it appeared to be a well-meaning but paternalistic attitude. I am not able to say whether the high-caste status of most of the guides compared to the village people also contributed to this attitude. As mentioned above, Kankund is a village with only a single family from the General Castes. Besides this Brahmin family, all other village people belong to Other Backward Classes, Scheduled or Tribal Castes (SC/ST); whereas the guides were either from Brahmin or Rajput castes or non-Hindus, i.e. outside the caste system all together. In any case, the associates' attitude seemed legitimized by the fact that despite their age, they had seen the world outside the village, enjoyed the freedom and mobility of young urban women, had higher education than anyone, male or female, in the entire community, and mastered the medium of modernity, i.e. English, which also allowed them to be the personal guide of the first "Westerner" to be staying in the village. Varma writes that with independence: "[...] English had become an instrument for social exclusion: the upper crust of the Indian middle class presided over this linguistic apartheid; the rest of India consisted of victims and aspirants. [...] It was the criteria for social acceptance. Those who could were People Like Us. Those who could not were the other, the 'natives', bereft of the qualifying social and educational background."<sup>44</sup>

### **Social research amidst civic apathy**

Most of my associates felt aloof about politics. To some of them it was the domain of a bunch of corrupt people who had no better way of making a living than stealing from the public. Politics to them meant patronage, corruption and party electoral gimmicks. In the words of one of them: "Politics means to be smart." There was no bitterness or cynicism in such observations, rather a sense that they had nothing to do with politics as such. In this context, it was difficult to explore matters related to politics even if defined in more abstract terms, e.g. as the process of negotiating power distribution in a democratic system or as the struggle over socially constructed identities. The disillusionment over politics was coupled with a lack of interest or knowledge of public affairs and civics, in general. Even on our occasional trips to Dewas, they hardly felt the need to read a newspaper or keep up with current electoral issues. There was little enthusiasm to take a second look into this realm and embark into a research on how social forces and political actors shape democratic institutions beyond their procedural terms.

One day a friend of the former *sarpanch* came to visit from Dewas town. As in most cases, he was proud to introduce us to his friends and would take them to meet us at our place. It was a brief interaction. I remember the guest saying that it was great news to have a Western lady settle down in the simple village of Kankund. Due to the distorted images provided by the media, some Indians expect people in the West to lead the lives of Hollywood actors or rock stars. In response to someone asking me whether I would wear saris in my country as well, a village mate replied: "No, womenfolk in the West only have small cloths." A few days after the guest had returned to Dewas, a journalist and a photographer from the Dainik Bhaskar, one of the leading Hindi newspapers, appeared at our doorsteps. They were eager to write a story on my experience in the

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<sup>44</sup> Varma (1998), p.61

village. They wanted to know about the career of my husband, what I thought of caste divisions, of development in this rural area, problems of electricity and roads, and make a comparison between India and the West. The electoral campaign was at its climax. It could have been a juicy story to write about a fellow countrywoman of the main opposition leader, bashing the “India shining” campaign of the government; and this, right in the core of a BJP stronghold. To my associate, it was not worth mentioning that a journalist was going to be sent to the village for an interview. Besides, having an article in the newspaper was something to be proud about. We ended up agreeing with the journalist on a short column with some praise for the local food and customs. Regardless, the following week two more teams of journalists and cameramen from local TV channels appeared in Kankund with the same intention.

I have come across a sense of political apathy, if not dislike, in many women belonging to higher caste, middle-class urban families. In this regard, four factors seem to play an important role: First, the extremely competitive environment for education and jobs increasingly geared towards technical fields, pushes young urban women to fully concentrate on their technical education. Squeezed between the requirement of their education or job and their family duties, they are not able to develop an understanding, and much less an engagement, in the sociopolitical reality in which they live.

Second, the pressures of the job market and the urbanization of the last decades have brought large sections of the middle-class into suburban metropolitan colonies. There, women, in particular, feel the loss of close family networks and the estrangement of living in unfamiliar neighborhoods within rapidly changing and aggressively competitive cities. In this environment, rather than civic engagement, it is the search for emotional and material security that prevails. Through the refuge in religion and protection behind the comfort of fenced colonies many middle-class urban women try to escape the anxieties of a world beyond their control and the every-day confrontation with the neglect and poverty of the surrounding masses.<sup>45</sup>

Third, the media is increasingly politicized and even programs meant for mere entertainment are used as political indoctrination. Hindu nationalist organizations support the production of popular serials. The typical heroine is a rich, beautiful and well-educated woman who despite her modern/westernized life-style strictly adheres to traditional Hindu role models. The subordination of women under the traditional family rules, serves to consolidate the fundamental building blocks of the *sangh parivar*'s political support. It is not uncommon for well-educated young urban women, to find pride in religion and a justification for their submission to family duties, which would otherwise not be reconcilable with their level of mental and financial independence. Religiosity then becomes a way to accepting ones subordination in the family, but also of detachment from public affairs and the “impure” domain of politics.

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<sup>45</sup> According to Varma, it is also the very doctrine of Hinduism that sets the pre-eminence of the „self“, and its extensions in terms of kinship and caste, over the society as a whole. “His [the average Hindu middle-class person] cosmic view held an individual to be a microcosm unto himself. There was no need for his path to meander into the needs of others, who even if they were obviously in need of succour, were only suffering the consequences of their own karmas.” Varma (1998), p.128.

## **Development management as a mindset**

It was through my village experience with young associates from the NGO sector, that I started wondering about the everyday professional life of this new generation of “development managers.” In development discourses, NGOs are often seen as representing the people, the weaker and marginalized sections of society, in juxtaposition to profit-driven firms and unresponsive, if not corrupt, government bureaucracies. Ideally, NGOs are seen as organizations pursuing a strong civic mission, with a solid base at the grassroots and the necessary independence from government and international donors to work as credible intermediaries for the uplifting of the poor. However, often NGOs around the world, and Madhya Pradesh seems to be no exception, are aid-driven organizations. Work programs are defined based on the funding they can secure whether or not it fits with their capacity, expertise, grassroots presence or a consistent mission. Some are established for the implementation of specific programs and inevitably act as the donor’s delivery arm at the grassroots. Once program funding comes to an end, they also cease to exist. Others monitor the aid market and hop from one project to the next reconfiguring themselves based on changing development discourses and priorities. Whether the call of the day is fighting AIDS, preserving the environment, or empowering women, they deliver a broad range of development outputs in an ever wider geographical area. As the organization’s mission and local root become increasingly blurred, they gradually turn into yet another fungible intermediary in a long chain of development sub-contracting.

Through different associates with an NGO background, I slowly found out that most of the assignments as project staff or resource persons involve well defined tasks in which a prolonged stay in a single village is not needed. They seemed to know well how to perform certain activities, such as lead an awareness raising initiative, a training session, information gathering or rapport building exercises in a multi-village program. This usually involves commuting from a block/district level office into one village, performing the activity, going back to a block/district-level accommodation for the night and continuing on the following day to the next village. In case of long-term programs, the same set of villages would be visited again at different time intervals. On a personal level, some of the guides were familiar with village life due to their family ties. However, the idea of settling down in an alien village for a months-long research seemed to be an unnecessary effort for a task that, according to their experience and to the expectations of their donors, could be accomplished much faster. They are well aware of what foreign project staff expect from them, and in the best case scenario will try to efficiently deliver on project log-frames and checklists. Whether that helps in narrowing the huge divide between local realities and development programs is an entirely different matter.

There was one NGO in the village engaged in development activities, such as setting up Self-Help Groups, carrying out awareness raising campaigns on women and child health issues etc. Despite the NGO’s rule of having one field staff permanently reside in the village, in practice the person would only spend the night there, leave in the morning to work in the NGO’s office in Dewas town and spend the free time with his family in

Indore city. He had rented a very modest housing with no flooring, water, or cooking facilities located at the outer edge of the village. The hamlet, Sanjay Nagar, was established in the '80s by the old *sarpanch*'s brother through a central government's shelter scheme for Below Poverty Line people, and was mostly populated by the "untouchable" SC community of the Camars. Except for specific events, which were part of the NGOs standard work program, the fieldworker did not seem to have much interaction with the local people. To the villagers, he appeared to be an outsider who occasionally had to get some work done, but who had no place or ties to the village communities themselves. Partly, this alienation could have been reinforced due to the fact that being a staff from an exclusively Christian NGO he was supposedly the only non-Hindu resident of the village, and was probably considered to be a low-caste Christian convert.

In the eyes of my guides, accustomed to the modes of development management, it seemed confusing to adopt an open-ended style of inquiry. From me they expected a set of tasks, which they could help execute, not a request for creative engagement. It came with a sense of surprise, if not unease, that I encouraged them to move in different guises across the tightly regulated and closely watched grid of village interactions, that I inquired about the meaning of whispers, blinks and wall paintings, and that I pushed them to probe the limits of our space, trigger unexpected reactions or gauge phenomena in the shadows. The effort to keep both eyes and ears wide open to catch much of the reality of village life which was not to be disclosed to us, was far too burdensome for what they did not cease to consider a straight forward research on *Panchayati Raj*. No amount of insistence on my side, managed to get the message across that besides hard fact gathering, there was also the need to engage in an anthropological immersion into the deep layers of village life if we were to get a sense of complex sociocultural phenomena, such as determinants of political coalition-building between representatives of different *jatis* or of collective behavioral patterns, let alone issues of group identity.

## **Conclusion**

From the first time I visited Bhopal four years ago, the city appears to be rapidly changing. Young women drive around on scooters dressed in tight jeans and shirts. Most have cell phones and the latest Western accessories. Many shops sell Western-style cloths and products. The market for mortgages, car loans and new financial products seems to be booming. ATM machines are mushrooming at every corner. And schools for learning European languages are increasingly in demand. For many of these youngsters, the rural areas just a short drive away are unknown and uninteresting territories. They appear more at home in the TV or internet worlds of metropolitan Bombay and Bangalore. For some of my associates, it seems that the opportunity of experiencing a real life "Westerner" from up close, besides making some extra cash, was the biggest incentive of joining me in the village.

As for many middle-class urban women of that generation, also my associates seemed to be caught between two worldviews: One defining their class identity and the other their identity within a community. The first, characterized them as independent modern

professionals in a world modeled on supposedly Western values of women emancipation, independence from family duties, merit-based careers, financial success and a dose of Anglo-American urban pop culture. The second, characterized them as loyal and proud members of a community, defined by family, caste, religious, and regional ties. From this perspective the world seemed to be organized through a dense conundrum of deeply engrained religious beliefs, traditional customs, fairytales, fantastic epics, dreams, stereotypes, myths, and taboos. What seemed weak was a secular public space neither filled with individual professional ambitions nor with collective spirituality. It almost looked like the energies of a new generation of urban women had found expression in their drive for independence in terms of professional careers, but had not visibly touched the deep roots of their collective identities within a metaphysical, if not strictly religious, worldview.

These antagonistic worlds, one occupied by the individual/westernized professional and the other by the collective/traditional community, emphasized the lack of an a-communal public domain in which the individual could take responsibility for the entire collective in terms of a secular civic engagement. This is a phenomenon that I found typical of the rapidly changing urban middle-class and of their struggle between these two conflicting value systems. Despite the guides' attempt to stick to their individual professional identity, inevitably their community identity would creep out. The balance between the two was strained by their position as mediators between two aspects of their own inner world. During fieldwork, these appeared to have suddenly materialized. On one side, were their fellow countrywomen, for whom the individual faded away in the community with its traditional worldview. At the other end, was a foreigner, who, rooted in the supposedly modern worldview of the West only seemed to have her individual identity to defend.

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