

Original article

Ethical Issues in the field: An empirical observation in a West Bengal Village

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ABSTRACT

Anthropology is a multidisciplinary field of science, which includes the study of all aspects of humankind - Archaeological, Biological, Linguistics and Social-Cultural. Anthropology has roots in the natural and Social Sciences and in the Humanities, ranging in approach from basic to applied research. A proper foundation of Ethics requires a standard of value to which all goals and action can be compared to. This standard is our own lives, and happiness which makes them livable. This is our ultimate standard of value, the goal in which an ethical man must always aim. It is arrived at by an examination of man's nature, and recognizing his peculiar needs. A system of ethics must further consist of not only emergency situations, but the day to day choices we make constantly. It must include our relations to others, and recognize their importance not only to our physical survival, but to our well-being and happiness. It must recognize that our lives are an end in themselves, and that sacrifice is not only not necessary, but destructive.

The present study conducted in the village of Purba Midnapore district of West Bengal, where some issues of ethics are strictly maintained by the researchers. During investigation, the present researchers find that Christian has seven rituals in their entire life-cycles which are very much interesting as well as informative also. Due to continuous staying with the Bengali Hindus, the Christian adopt many Bengali rituals and cultures among them. Besides this, they use to participate in Hindu festivals and gladly accept Hindu customs in those festivals without any hesitation. The present researchers always maintained confidentiality and privacy during the collection of significant information among the Christians of Mirpur Christian Pally and always care about the conveniences of the local people.

Key words: Ethics, Behaviour, Ethnographic Fieldwork, Informed consent, Social-Cultural Anthropology, Research, Field study, Ethical Dilemma

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INTRODUCTION

Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, is a branch of Philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour. Ethics is the branch of study dealing with what is the proper course of action for man. It answers the question, "What do I do?" It is the study of right and wrong in human endeavours. At a more fundamental level, it is the method by which we categorized our values and pursue them (Nanda and Warms, 2010).

Ethics are the moral principles that a person must follow irrespective of the place and time. Behaving ethically involves doing the right thing at the right time. Research Ethics focus on the moral principles that researchers must follow in their respective field of research.

Ethics is a requirement for human life. It is our means of deciding a course of action. Without it, our actions would be random and aimless. There would be no way to work towards a goal because there would be no way to pick between a limitless numbers of goals. Even with an ethical standard, we may be unable to pursue our goals with the possibility of success. Ethics is concerned with the conduct of human beings. Ethics does not prescribe a specific set of rules or policies. Instead, it provides a framework for evaluating problems and determining an appropriate course of action. Ethical analysis should reflect both internationally accepted norms and logically relevant cultural values (Baker, 1998).

Anthropological Ethics require protecting the dignity, privacy and anonymity of the people whose any field worker studies. Field work is always based on trust and as anthropologists involve themselves in continually expanding range research situations, ethical dilemmas will increase. Three main ethical principles must guide any field worker i.e. acquiring the informed consent of the people who are to be studied; protecting them from any risk and respecting their privacy and dignity (Baker, 1998). The Present Researchers face ethical challenges in all stages of the study, from designing to reporting. These include anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, researchers' potential impact on the participants and vice versa. As there is no statistical analysis in qualitative studies, the researcher has to both evaluate what he or she observes and to interpret it.

Ethics of doing fieldwork, not only involves the task of presentation of the fieldworker before the people, but it also entails an explicit statement on the methodology of data collection. All the researchers would also abide by the ethical perspectives of fieldworker.

Anonymity is an assurance that subjects' identities will not be disclosed in any way. **Confidentiality** is a promise to keep the identities of the subjects known only to the researcher. **Informed Consent** is achieved if the subject knows what the study is, understands his or her level of confidentiality in the study, comprehends the objectives of the study and agrees to co-operate (Nanda and Warms, 2010).

Considering the nature of qualitative studies, the interaction between researchers and participants can be ethically challenging for the former, as they are personally involved in different stages of the study. Therefore, formulation of specific ethical guidelines in this respect seems to be essential. The present paper aimed to discuss the necessity to develop explicit guidelines for conducting qualitative studies with regard to the researcher's role. As there is no statistical analysis in qualitative studies, the researcher has to both evaluate what he or she observes and to interpret it.

Social Anthropologists carry out their professional research in many places around the world; some where they are at home and others where they are in some way foreign. In Social Cultural Anthropology, as field study is very much essential and most of the survey based on the life-cycle, inter relationship, ritual pattern, developmental pattern and other social and cultural aspects of man, then it is very obvious to care about conveniences of the local people of the studied area.

Anthropologists should endeavour to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of those whom they study and to respect their rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy. They should try to minimize disturbances both to subjects themselves and to the subject's relationships with their environment (Zavisca, 2007).

Ethical review should protect researchers, subjects and institutions in field sites from harm. Anthropologists and ethnographers have to be aware of the range of ways their activities can cause distress to others. Ways of showing respect for research subjects can be embedded in both the content of research questions and the manner in which they are delivered. The basic ethical principles to be maintained include doing good, not doing harm and protecting the

autonomy, wellbeing, safety and dignity of all research participants. Researchers should be as objective as possible and avoid ethnocentricity. Any deception of participants should be fully justified. They should not knowingly misrepresent or attempt to prevent reporting of misconduct, or obstruct the scientific research of others.

Ethical & legal dilemmas occur at all stages of research in the selection of topic, area of population, choice of sponsor and source of funding, in negotiating access, making research bargains and during the research itself conducting fieldwork, in the interpretation and analysis of results and in the publication of findings and the disposal of data.

Area of Study & its Administrative Setting:

The area of the present study was Mirpur Christian Pally of Bedkundu Village of Purba Medinipore. It is a hamlet where majority of inhabitants are Christians.

The administrative set-up of Bedkundu village is as follows:

Mouza - Betkundu (J.L.No.164)

Post Office - Jagatpur

Police Station - Mahishadal

Pin Code - 721603

District - East Medinipore

The criteria for selecting the same were:

1. The selected area is mainly inhabited by Christian Missionaries, whose life-style attracted the present researchers very much.
2. Strong historical background of this area.
3. Examples of Acculturation or Culture Contact are seen in this area.
4. Hindu, Muslim & Christian - religious variability is found in one village.

Objectives of the present study:

The present study is mainly based on some issues like life-cycle, rituals, inter-relationship pattern and other related socio-cultural aspects of the people in Bedkundu village of Purba-Medinipur in important ethnographic study where ethics have been maintained.

The basic objectives of this study is to find out the ethical issues of interrogation and other activities as observed and experienced by the present researchers as anthropological ethnographer in the interest of the above area of study.

METHODOLOGY

The present research works are based primarily on Contextual data. Primary data has been collected by using **Intensive Interview, Participant Observation, Case study** supplemented by Census Survey of the families under study and also **Photographic study**. Structured interview and Non-Structured interview are used respectively with the help of both Questionnaires (i.e. both open-ended and close ended) and Schedule methods. Secondary data are obtained from various published and unpublished records, books and journals. As this study is based on socio-cultural and also religious perspectives of the Christian Missionaries of Bedkundu village, Qualitative research method is preferable.

The method as thoroughly followed for the present work is based on specially Intensive Interview and Narrative Case Study. In order to collect data, the verbal interview has been taken for analysis of some specific cases from some Christian and Hindu informants. Besides these, establishment of rapport with the informants is one of the most important methods in this successful fieldwork. Without it, it will be rarely able to gather this useful and accurate data regarding the learning of local norms of conduct among them.

Difficulties faced during fieldwork

During our investigation, we have faced lots of problems like hesitation in incorporation, unwillingness of the villagers to communicate with us regarding their local customs, traditions, specially as they are very much culture-specific and also maintain rigidity in different rules and behaviours as Christian Missionaries than that of the Hindus. They are very much introvert, refuses to disclose their uniformity, their culture, their dresses as well as their social and religious life. They have separate culture, separate identity than that of the Bengalee Hindus, so initially they deny to co-operate with us. But gradually this problem was solved through the help of some local people apart from the villagers.

Observations and Interpretations:

Mirpur Christian Polly is a small area under Bedkundu village where majority of inhabitants are Christian, only handful number of Hindus stays with them. In Mirpur Christian Pally, there are 130 Christian families approximately. Among them, 95 families are Roman Catholics and remaining is Protestants. The present researchers always maintained some ethics during the collection of information among them and always care about the conveniences of the local people of the studied area. Without permission, any related information are not included. I observed minutely different types of rituals among the Christian Missionaries. Photography in this case is strictly prohibited. The present researchers always maintained confidentiality and privacy against of the name of the respected and honourable persons.

According to some informants, present researchers came to know that **Catholic** believes in Lord Jesus and they used to pay homage in front of mother Marie's idol. They generally prepare showcase of lord Jesus and Marie in their home particularly in the open space or in the garden. They used to go for prayer in their Catholic Church on every Sunday morning from 6 a.m. to 6.30 a.m. On remaining days; they used to pray for Mother Marie at evening. The Catholic considers the Roman Pope as their lord who stays in Vatican city.

The **Protestant** Christians do not believe in idol of Jesus and Marie. They only believe in the holy cross sign. They have separate Church in Mirpur. They display holy cross sign in front of their house. On Sunday morning, they pray for God at their own Church. Arch Bishop is the main spiritual leader of Protestant who lives in America.

There is an interesting historical significance about the habitation of Christian Missionaries in this village. At first, it remained unknown but later this uninvented history disclosed to the present researchers with the help of some senior persons of the village. They repeatedly requested me to keep secret about their name and identities in front of public. With their full permission, the present researchers wrote down the interesting history of the village as well as the reason of appearance of Christian Missionaries.

According to the local people, approximately, 400 years ago, Bargis spread their kingdom in India. That time the king of Mahishadal was late Sree Debaprashad Garg. To protect his land, he invited Portuguese from Goa. He offered them permanent settlement. Later on, Rani

Janaki Debi gave permanent settlement to these Portuguese at Geonkhali. Once upon a time, approximately, 150 Bargis attacked this Geonkhali. That time, the Portuguese defeated the Bargis in the terrific war. Most of the Bargies died and many flew away. At that time, there were 15 people of Portuguese remained. Later on, three left and 12 persons are still present there. They married local female and settled at Mirpur. But, presently, we can find the following surnames during investigation - 1.Tesra 2.Rozario 3.Rotha 4.Loboo 5.Nunish 6.Suth 7.Dicruz 8.Gomez 9.Perera.Both Catholic and Protestants have maintain their own different styles of rituals. The present researchers also observed the entire life-cycle of Christian Missionaries through interrogation with the villagers. Some information are collected very easily but some are very tough. They hesitate to give some information regarding life-cycles i.e. from birth to death. During interrogation and observation, they have always maintained privacy and confidentiality. They always maintained a smooth and friendly relationship with them.

During investigation, the present researchers find that Christian has seven rituals in their entire life-cycles i.e.

- A) **Dikshasnan:** It is observed after the birth of a new baby, within sixty or ninety days birth.
- B) **Hastarpan :** It is compulsory for every Christian within 14 years of age. In this ritual the children are taught to pronounce Bible correctly. Without '**Hastarpan**' no one can marry.
- C) **Pakshalan:** It is a type of holy event for naming a baby.
- D) **Christ's Prasad:** At the age of fifteen, all the Christian children brought to the Church where they are given "Christa Prasad" or the blessing of God.
- E) **Jatak Baran:** This ritual is performed only among the unmarried Christians. When a person leaves his family and dedicates himself to God and when he sacrifices all happiness in his life, this ritual performs.
- F) **Marriage:** Both male and female Christian adopt the married life in the year between twenty to twenty-five. In the Church, exchange of finger rings of both bride and groom takes place; the marriage is completed with the help of father who read the Bible at that time.

G) Antimlepan: This ritual is performed for dying people or persons who are suffering from disease for a long time. Bible is read and holy water is given to them for their betterment. This is done in order to avoid them from curse.

The Bedkundu village is bigger in size in density. It consists of many hamlets. Among these, Mirpur Christian Pally is the most important one. Both Hindu and Muslim families live side by side with this hamlet for long time period. Due to continuous staying with these Bengali Hindus, the Christian adopt many Bengali rituals and cultures among them. Besides this, they use to participate in Hindu festivals and gladly accept Hindu customs in those festivals without any hesitation. For example, the married Christian women use to wear *Sarees* like Bengali married women instead of their own selected dress. Many of them use *sindur* and few of them prefer to use *Sankha* and *Pola*. Besides these, there is a close similarity prevail between the marriage ceremonies of both of them. Like Bengali Hindus, the ceremonies like "*Gaye Halud*", gift exchange, exchange of garlands, offering of engagement rings, "*Sindur Daan*" etc. are also performed among the Christian families. However, the place of marriage is different in case of Portuguese Christians. It is held at the local church.

During the field investigation, they observed that sometimes the Christian males accept the Bengalese wife gladly. As the numbers of the Hindu families are greater in Bedkundu village than that of families of other religions; most of the religious festivals are mainly based on Hindu customs. But, there is no restriction in case of participation of the people from other religions. During the field investigation, they also observed that, there is a hamlet named "Brahmin Para" among the Hindu families, where "*Narayan Puja*" is held gorgeously for two to three days. Christian actively participates in this *puja* with the Hindu neighbours. Hindus also benevolently participate with the Christians on their Good Friday, 25th December - the Holy Birthday of Jesus Christ in the local Church. In case of food habit, Christian prefers mainly vegetarian diet. But with the contact of Bengalee Hindus, they consumed egg and fish at present. On Tuesday and Saturday, they mainly prefer vegetarian diet.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The concern of anthropologists to produce research that is ethically sound has grown in the past several decades. Originally, when conducting ethnographic fieldwork, anthropologists were not particularly concerned with ethical dilemmas and the impact of their research on the

people that they were studying. Today, anthropologists have a much better understanding of the importance and prominence of ethical dilemmas. All research, particularly fieldwork, has an impact on the people that are being studied. Accordingly, anthropologists must ensure that their work does not negatively impact others and that they do not profit from another cultural group without giving something back to the Community.

From the above study, it is evident that the present researchers conducted the specific fieldwork maintaining the ethical issues of fieldwork. Five major ethical issues are to be maintained here in conducting fieldwork smoothly i.e. respect for anonymity and confidentiality, truthfulness, autonomy, beneficence. The present researchers also obtained informed consent and necessary permissions from the key informants before the data collection and also respect their privacy. They always open-minded and honest regarding their field-survey. Present researchers always respect their local customs, norms of conduct during fieldwork.

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