

# Beyond Methods: Social Research as Experience<sup>1</sup>

DR. SAMIR KUMAR DAS<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to underline the importance of experience in social science research. For, it, as the paper will argue, has the potential of interrogating, destabilizing – if not disturbing – the existing frames of Research Methodology. The paper is divided into four parts. While the first part discusses what qualifies as experience, the second and third parts refer to the impact of experience on the subjects and objects of research. The fourth and concluding part points out why it becomes difficult to incorporate the experience into the methodologically governed knowledge, for experience constantly severs the connection between the subject and object of research. We define knowledge in this context as the one that can provide this connection albeit with a varying degree of success.

## A PRELUDE TO EXPERIENCE

In the *Bhumika* (Introduction) to his famous *Swapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas* (Indian history acquired through dreams) written in an elegant and now almost defunct Bengali, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay writes about his experience of having finished reading a book on the history of India –

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Samir Kumar DAS is Professor of Political Science at the University of Calcutta, Kolkata. Previously the Vice-Chancellor of the University of North Bengal, and a Post-Doctoral Fellow (2005) of the Social Science Research Council (South Asia Program), he is the Coordinator of the University Grants Commission-Departmental Research Support (UGC-DRS) Programme (Phase II) on 'Democratic Governance: Comparative Perspectives'. He served as a Visiting Fellow at the European Academy, Bolzano, Italy (2008), an Adjunct Professor of Government at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University (2014), a Visiting Professor of the North East India Studies Programme at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi in 2015 and at the University of Paris 13 under Université Sorbonne Paris Cité in 2016 among many of his assignments. His latest book *Migrations, Identities and Democratic Practices* has just been published from Routledge.

particularly the chapter on the third battle of Panipat (1761) in which the Peshawas - 'Indian' rulers - were comprehensively defeated making the way to what turned out to be a prolonged rule by the 'foreigners' in India: "Finishing the reading, I started thinking what could have happened had the third battle of Panipat not ended in the way it had"<sup>3</sup>. One may recall that the third battle of Panipat took place on 14 January 1761 at Panipat, - now in Haryana – a little less than 100 km north of Delhi, between a northern expeditionary force of the Maratha Empire and the invading forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali - the monarch of Afghanistan, joining hands with his Indian allies – the Rohilla Najib-ud-daulah Afghans of the Doab, and Shuja-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Awadh. The battle, according to the author, reflected the disunity between the communities insofar as a few Muslim rulers joined hands with the foreign forces and helped them in defeating the Indian rulers.

In the book written about 135 years after the battle, the author slips into what he describes as the state between sleeping and remaining awake after finishing reading this book. One – as he goes on to describe this state in the *Bhumika* - can remain awake while sleeping and can sleep while remaining awake. Having slipped into that state which he describes as 'dream' in his title, he recollects to have watched that Hindu and Muslim rulers sat in an assembly in Indrapat (now Indraprastha near Delhi) convened immediately after the third battle of Panipat was over and they collectively took the pledge that never ever in future they would fight amongst themselves and fall prey to the machinations of the 'outside' rulers. It is this dream-like state that therefore brings into existence a composite Indian nation including the Hindus and Muslims. As he describes the nation: "Hindus are the 'uterine sons'; Muslims are the 'foster children'." The need for dreaming such a composite nation was more deeply felt at a time when the social faultlines dividing the Hindus and Muslims in India seem to have been more sharply drawn than what they were 135 years back when the third battle of Panipat was actually fought in history.

I now turn over to the second experience. I remember having watched the famous Bengali movie 'Jamalaye Jiwanta Manush' (literally a Living Man in the Kingdom of the God of Death) first very early in my life and subsequently countless number of times as I was growing old and – like

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<sup>3</sup> Mukhopadhyay, Bhudev (1303 BS/1896): Swapnalabdha Bharatbarsher Itihas (in Bengali) [Indian History Acquired Through Dreams]. Hooghly: Kashinath Bhattacharya.

many others of my generation was unwittingly sucked into its aura with the effect that I do not forget my first experience of watching it. This was a movie in which Bhanu Bandyopadhyay - the redoubtable comedian encounters the God of Death after having breathed his last and extracts from Him two boons in exchange of a couple of 'good works' that he had done in his lifetime. The Hindu belief in accounting for one's good and bad deeds – one must remember - is settled in the court of the God of Death after one dies and accordingly one goes to hell or heaven depending on the final judgment delivered on the basis of such accounting. On being granted, he immediately took possession of the bull – the mount or *vahana* of the God of Death - and ordered it to charge into the God and throw Him out of his palace - while redeeming the boons. The otherwise fearsome God of Death was seen running for his own life. Finally the entire movie turned out to be a long dream sequence of the maestro comedian – who was also the protagonist in the movie. The movie to my mind represents our secret and albeit impossible desire of not only attaining immortality for ourselves, but unseating the fearsome rulers from their throne. I cannot forget my first experience perhaps because I continue to derive the vicarious satisfaction of unseating the repressive and the fearsome from the throne of power. If the essence of democracy lies in the dream of unseating the fearsome rulers from the seat of power and the endless circulation of elites, does not watching the movie represent experiencing democracy? Does this act of dreaming itself constitute a democratic experience? In a world where democracy increasingly fades into the distant horizon across the globe and turns out to be an impossible aporia, how else can one actualize it without having to experience it through dreams? Democratic Theory seldom takes account of the experiential.

The dream in the above instance is nevertheless a real experience of democracy - 'disguised fulfillment of our repressed desire' as Freud would have put it in his famous *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 1911:83). While Freud and the late Freudians may have discovered the minefield of their research in dreams of this nature, Democratic Theory – for one - would have none of it for this experience of dreaming the unseating of the most fearsome ruler of the Universe having the supreme, sovereign power of meting out death to all living beings. Husserl was constantly warning us against the 'pre-reflective' and evidently untheorizable nature of what he understood as 'experience'. For him, the challenge is to transcend our cognitive tools and theories in a way that they can 'accommodate' experiences that are not immanent in them.

The experience of watching Bhanu dream the unseating of the Universe's most fearsome and mightiest ruler and taking revenge on Him is deeply entangled in the practice of working for it and translating the dream into practice. Does not Lenin in his *What is to be Done?* (1902) call upon us to 'dream' in order that we can move beyond 'the limits of what is "possible" for [us] to do [for we are] restricted by the narrowness of [our] outlook ?'<sup>4</sup> These unconventional spaces and locales of dream are just one of many such experiences perhaps and provide new sites of democracy in today's world. The experiential turn in social science helps us in imagining democracy beyond a regime, a form of government or even a particular kind of Constitutional edifice. Obviously an effort of this nature hits many a hurdle – mostly derived from our old habits of conceptualizing democracy.

Neither of these two experiences can be called ordinary, for it does not happen to all of us – certainly not on everyday basis. Both of them are unexpected, although in the first case, the very act of reading the book on the history of India acted as the immediate trigger. In the second case, it is difficult to ascertain what might have acted as the immediate trigger – although one could suggest that the universal fear from death induces all living beings to achieve the state of deathlessness in dreams. Although the fear is universal, not of all us experience the dream – certainly not in a uniform way. In simple terms, the experiences are extraordinary not so much because they are not very common to all of us – but very much because they are of what Husserl calls 'pre-reflective' nature in the sense that the commonplace modes of cognition we are endowed with do not prepare us for deciphering, understanding and making sense of these experiences. Husserl however proposes to take the point a step further. For him, the challenge of cognition is to reach matters of fact which are not strictly "given to" cognition and are not "immanent to" it. As he argues:

Cognition is a thing apart from the object; cognition is given, but the object of cognition is not given; and yet cognition is supposed to relate to the object, to cognize it. How can I understand this possibility? Naturally the reply is: I could understand it only if the relation itself were given as something to be "seen". As long as the object remains, something

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<sup>4</sup> Lenin, Vladimir (1902): *What Is To Be Done?* Transcription by Tim Delaney. Bonn: Chris Russell Marxist Archive.

transcendent, and cognition and its objects are actually separate, then indeed we can see something here...<sup>5</sup>

Secondly and at the same time, both these experiences are subjunctive. According to Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the word 'subjunctive' is used to refer to 'the form of a verb that is often used to express wishes, uncertainty, possibility or condition'. In other words, the subjunctive makes the present uncertain that Husserl describes as 'the generative indeterminacy of the present' - always fluid, changing and transient, filled with unrealized potentiality and creativity. Democracy, in the above instance, makes it imperative to define it more as a possibility than as a narrative of the present.

Thirdly, Husserl also tells us that each experience is 'a mere experience' rather than 'an experience'. Mere experience is passive endurance or acceptance of the events for one's tools and methods of cognition do not prepare one for the kind of experience that one undergoes. In simple terms, by this kind of experience we actually experience the limit of what or how much we can experience – an experience which we cannot cognize or explain either for us or for others. An experience, by contrast, has the potential of being articulated or accreted into a 'structure of experience' so much so that one can draw parallels, analogies, similarities and differences while narrati(vizi)ng it.

Taking a cue from the two already recorded experiences in two different mediums – one in print and another on celluloid, this paper calls for moving beyond the arsenal of tools and methods of research methodology in order to bring them to bear on social research. In that sense, the paper seeks to retrieve the experiential in social science by way of arguing that it is the experience of conducting social research that also unhooks both the subject and the object of research from the known frames. The experiences destabilizes and makes uncertain the frames (a) that constitute us into what we are – a process known as subject formation; (b) what we work on – a process known as the construction of object and (c) the kind of contact that gets established between the subject and the object thorough the very act of conducting research. Accordingly this paper is divided into the next three parts.

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<sup>5</sup> Husserl, Edmund (1964): *The Idea of Phenomenology*, translated by William Alston & George Nakhnikian. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff

## SUBJECT DE-/FORMATION

I can vividly remember the experience of making a presentation to a seminar in Shillong (Meghalaya) back in 1990. This was my first ever presentation on a subject on India's Northeast in the Northeast. The paper tried to develop the complex argument that unlike what was happening in the rest of India, the peasantry in Assam – maybe in other parts of the same region – is organically linked with the yet fledgling middle class and what is called the middle class hegemony has to be explained in terms of their organic linkage with the bulk of the relatively homogeneous peasantry of Assam. In simple terms, peasant differentiation as a process was yet to be accomplished to its full in the predominantly agrarian society of Assam thanks to the rather skewed and uneven development of the forces and processes of capitalism. As soon as I finished the presentation, I was faced with a battery of questions and comments – not all of which were related to my core argument. The session ended with the announcement of the coffee break. Before I could grab a cup of coffee, I noticed that I was encircled by almost all the participants who attended my presentation. A few of them – older than me – appeared to be condescending and tried to explain why for a non-Assamese like me, it would never be possible to study the society of Assam. The practice of privileging the insider in matters of social research is not new – although the matter was hotly debated on the pages of the famous *Contributions to Indian Sociology* edited in the late 1950s and the 1960s by Louis Dumont and published from Paris. But awkward as it might sound, I experienced the challenge of turning into an Assamese in order to be able to work on Assam and the Assamese. The advice called for my ascension into a different realm of experience.

Does the researcher have to be an 'insider' in order to be able to conduct her research in a field that is not her own? Does the process of becoming of an insider make one cease to be an 'outsider'? How much of an 'insider' can one hope to become in the final analysis? How does becoming an 'insider' offer one with the kind of experience that one looks for and that an 'outsider' can never hope to acquire? Incidentally this was also the time when the social scientists in general and anthropologists in particular were looking for local knowledge frameworks and insider's experience with the effect that the post-Enlightenment categories of universal knowledge were put at stake.

As I grew up and started tracing the academic roots of this advice, I came across the writings of Malinowski who perhaps was the first to have made it imperative on the part of an ethnographer coming from outside to become an out and out insider. What does this act of becoming an insider mean? As he answers:

Th[is]... consist[s] mainly in cutting oneself off from the company of other white men, and remaining in as close contact with the natives as possible, which really can only be achieved by camping right in their village.<sup>6</sup>

As one reads Malinowski's writings between the lines, one can briefly paraphrase them into four steps that he seems to have listed out for an ethnographer to take while trying to conduct her research on an area that she is not part of:

- One does well to shed all 'preconceived ideas'. This would obviously mean, for instance, that one must not be driven by such colonial stereotypes as 'headhunters', 'primitives' or 'savages' as one is poised up for conducting one's research on Naga societies.;
- One must be in constant contact with the society that one wants to work on. Temporary or sporadic contacts will not do;
- As one lives in the field, one gradually ceases to become a stranger or alien to the society one proposes to work on. The transformation from strangeness to naturalness implies, according to Malinowski, 'being in harmony with her field or surroundings';
- Finally, the ethnographer is also called upon to observe their etiquette although minor violations due to unfamiliarity are understandable.

A brief anecdotal note may not be out of context here. Those were the initial days of my fieldwork when I was travelling intensely across the length and breadth of Assam. Starved of money as an Indian doctoral student always is, I depended on public transport. With the benefit of hindsight I now realize that this also gave me the wide opportunity of being in close contact with the field and helped in developing a 'feel' that perhaps no methodological training would provide. My Assamese was halting at this

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<sup>6</sup> Malinowski, Bronislaw (1922/2013): *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 1-26.

time and this was also the time when the high-pitched post Assam movement (1979-1985) euphoria did not let the deep scars and bruises of the society to come into the open – leave alone heal. My ethnic origin as a Bengali was indeed an issue at that time. Most of my informants – kind-hearted as they were – would have a tip or two to offer about my safety. A veteran 'communist' leader suddenly became worried about my safety in my maiden interaction with him at his residence in Guwahati. After hearing that I had miles to go to be able to pick up fluency in Assamese, he advised: “You do apply Assamese as you travel by public bus – even though your Assamese is halting and faltering.” It indeed takes time – if at all it ever becomes completely successful, for the transformation of the outsider into an insider is not a 'switch off/switch on' kind of exercise and I could immediately realize that I would have to hide my 'Bengali' identity as a safety measure during my own research. The hiding was essential for me to become an Assamese.

This very act of transforming into an insider implies, first of all, an objectification of the subject and I could realize it much later. As I desperately tried to become an out and out Assamese, I must confess that the imperative of being nice and decent to others in order to become one of them holds me from candidly expressing my ethical position on many of the ongoing issues and conflicts. The political correctness took a toll on me. Insofar as I strove hard for becoming 'objective' I could realize that I was as it were exercising control over my own self in my attempt at continuously becoming what I am not – at literally turning against my present being. My doctoral research was also an exercise in what Foucault would call 'technology of the self'. At the end of the day I note that I become in the process a product of my doctoral work and the doctoral work is not a product of mine<sup>7</sup>. The act of conducting research induces a split in the researcher into two – the hidden self with its strong moral and ethical underpinnings and predilections endemic in it and the other self that the research foregrounds for itself and that dissolves itself the moment the research comes to an end. If one is seen to carry the legacy of this self beyond one's research, one continues to remain a victim of reification.

Objectification of the subject has its limits too, for it cannot finally wipe out the distinction between 'being an insider' and 'being like an insider'. One can at best aim at becoming like an insider and certainly not an insider.

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<sup>7</sup> Das, Samir Kumar (2002): 'Ei aami nei aami' (in Bengali) [This self is not the self] in Ekak Matra, 3 (2), September-October, 2002, pp. 4-6

Malinowski does not seem to recognize it. Thus to cite an example, transgenders, according to a fairly recent verdict delivered by the Honourable Supreme Court of India (2014), ought to be treated as 'Third Gender' and certainly not as either male or female whereas by all accounts, transgenders – the male-to-female *hijras* of India in particular - want to be identified as 'women'. Sarada Ranjan aka Sarada Sundari a character created after Chapal Bhaduri – a real-life theater personality of Bengal - and played by Chapal himself in the famous movie '*Ushnatar Janya*' (For Warmth) directed by Kaushik Ganguly exasperatingly observes: 'God is very bad! Why am I incomplete as a female?' Sarada has been struggling unsuccessfully throughout his life to become a 'complete' woman who menstruates, procreates and bears children. It may be recollected that till 1991, *hijras* used to be classified as women in electoral rolls of India. In the same year, Khairatilal Bhola – the then President of All-India Hijra Kalyan Samiti (Welfare Association) – demanded that *Hijras* be classified as 'transgenders' in these rolls. He also made it clear that their demand should by no means be read as a perfidious attempt at lending legitimacy to the ghastly practice of castration of male genitals. Incidentally the census conducted in the same year went to the other extreme by classifying them as 'men'. While conceding to the demand, the Election Commission directed all the chief electoral officers of the constituent units to accordingly classify them as transgenders. But the problem was: most of them – if not all – wanted to be identified not as transgenders – but as women. Insofar as the *hijras* are invested with a body that turns out to be perpetually incomplete, inadequate – if not impossible - their identification as woman on one hand sets off an albeit endless process of becoming by constantly calling upon them to become women. While the recent verdict of the Supreme Court of India delivered in 2014 seeks to enumerate them into a legible category by fixing and freezing their identity as 'transgenders', it also in the same vein denies and rules out the other possibilities of becoming - whether men or women. Their classification as 'transgenders', as Alta Hijra in her autobiography puts it, effectively 'mummifies' and 'fossilizes' all these immensely rich possibilities.

Experiences of this nature fall between the well chiselled male/female binary and are required to be brought to bear on social research. Our social science tools and methodologies are perpetually inadequate to take note of, decipher and understand them. It is for this reason they have the effect of interrogating, destabilizing – if not disfiguring - the subjects produced by this vast arsenal of the existing tools and methodologies.

Secondly, when Malinowski calls for this transformation, he does not seem to harbour any doubt about his point of departure as well as the point of destination in this transformation. The point however is complex because the 'culture' that one proposes to switch over to does not exist as an integral and indivisible whole. It too has many layers and folds and a researcher is constantly to figure out what it is that one proposes to transcend into. Thus to continue with the same instance, if one were to understand the *hijras*, one perhaps has to come out of any of the existing binary frames of culture – Hindus/Muslim, majority/minority and so forth. The *hijras* worship Gods and Goddesses that are different from those of the Hindu pantheon. The ethnographies hitherto conducted on them point to the fact that they are difficult to be categorized into any of the existing frames. They live a life that transcends the boundary otherwise separating the Hindus from the Muslims. They are neither male nor female although most of them want to be identified as women. On the other hand, they are very unlike the other sexual minorities – neither gay, nor lesbian. Their ever-elusive nature is what constitutes an experience – an experience that holds them from turning into any of the available subject positions circulating in the society. It is a 'mere experience' that, as Husserl reminds us, cannot be 'structured' into experiences.

In other words, experiences of this nature situated between the available binary subject positions find it difficult – if not impossible – to constitute into separate subjects. Because they do not lead to the production of subjects, they qualify as experiences à la Husserl. These experiences therefore defy any kind of methodological framing.

## **BEYOND THE SELF-OTHER DICHOTOMY**

In the conventional understanding of research methodology, the object of research has to remain stationary, fixed and frozen and is never allowed to be invested with subjectivity and movement. The way we gaze at it therefore entails objectification of the object by reducing the otherwise concrete subjects to mere objects of investigation. The erasure/absence of the living subject and its transformation into an object is held as the prerequisite of social research. The result of this objectification more often than not proves to be disastrous. Let me cite an example.

Chuni Kotal is the first graduate from her community of the Lodhas in West Bengal. Her community used to be classified as a 'Criminal Tribe' in

colonial times and the stigma, by many accounts, seems to continue till today. They have always constituted the delightful 'field' for the anthropologists since the colonial times. The anthropologists would visit their areas almost on a regular basis and write reports on them for things that only benefit them. As Chuni came to join a University for pursuing her postgraduate studies, the field as it were came to the campus. She turned into an object of anthropological gaze. This gaze was so overpowering that she found it impossible to continue her studies. Gaze implies an exercise of power. Shankar Kumar Kotal – Chuni's brother – writes angrily after her reported suicide:

I have one request for the polite (*bhadra*) society of this country, the educated society, the department of anthropology that the higher education department has set up, for the professors and lady professor of this department, although I have no experience about this anthropology department. Yet as an adivasi [literally original inhabitant or aboriginal] I ask, what is your anthropology department? Does it want to collect only this information about how the adivasis defecate, how they become pregnant, how they give birth to babies. How is oil massaged on the baby? How is the baby bathed? How is the *ekusha* [the festival in celebration of the twenty-first day of the birth] observed? How is he married off? What are the funeral rites that are performed by the Lodhas once somebody dies in the family? May I make one humble request to the minister of higher education. I do not hope my request will ever reach the ears of the hon'ble minister. Yet I will request him to stop this child's play. Why have they been maintaining this anthropology department? [To know] whether the adivasis have passed their stool? Today adivasis have no food in their stomach, there is no provision for them for cloths to wear. They have no roof on their head. That is why, adivasis have forgotten to defecate. What kind of research will your anthropology department do? Why do the students of this department go to the adivasis villages and irritate them? So I object to this kind of research on the adivasis and urge you to immediately stop it. I say all this with acute shame. Why cannot the students of this department collect data for their research from their own parents or their professor and lady professors? Besides, this department spreads the word in the adivasi villages that the data and information thus collected will be sent to the central government. Only after that, government assistance will pour in. We have no need of government assistance, please stop the barbaric acts of this anthropology department that hurts the self-esteem of the adivasis.

Readers will be surprised once they hear the kind of torture the anthropology department unleashes [on the adivasis]<sup>8</sup>

Shankar's otherwise sharp comments may have been inspired by a deep sense of anger and grief due to the untimely loss of his own sister, but offer absolutely critical lessons for the students of social science: For one thing, social science in general and anthropology in particular treats the objects of research as the other so much so that the social scientists and anthropologists cannot do to themselves what they can do to the other. Secondly, the so-called social science research is a source of 'irritation' and 'torture'. We will have occasion to return to this point later.

What we call experience does not entail the complete objectification of the object. Nor does it reconstitute the object as an active subject per se. Experience definitely falls between the widely prevalent binary between the subject and the object. But the active subject being turned-into-an-object through social research bears the scars and bruises of this transformation and only a fortunate researcher will be able to experience these scars and bruises. The 'absence' of the object as an active subject marks its 'presence' in the object itself and strikes back in order to turn the table around. The conventionally understood relationship between the subject and the object is suddenly destabilized beyond repair by these apparently 'wicked' experiences.

Let me cite an example from my own ethnographic work. It was an exceptionally humid and sultry afternoon as we hit the tip of Akheriganj on the Indian side of the banks of the Padma separating her from Bangladesh. We saw a barge slowly floating towards us and a middle-aged man with his bicycle stationed on the platform was the first to get down from it as the barge approached the ghat. I came to know subsequently that he was Sohrab Ali (not his real name) and I eventually struck a conversation with him as the crowd on the barge got down without making any noise and thinned out quietly and the lone BSF patrol faded away. The entire area looked deserted and Ali confides that he is returning from the nearby bazaar across the border where he sells egg and earns his livelihood. He is the only earner in a family of six members and price of egg varies on both sides of the border and Ali ekes out a living by taking advantage of differential pricing – thanks to the border that

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<sup>8</sup> Kotal, Shankar Kumar (1992): 'Jonaki Tumi Path Dekhao' (in Bengali) [Fireflies Show me the way] in *Bartika*, 36, July-December. 91-101

separates the two nation-states. How else would Ali live, I wonder, if there were no border? For, border gives him the comparative price advantage and offers livelihood opportunities to him and his family of six souls. On the other hand, he can avail himself of the comparative advantage only when he violates the border by crossing it as he does it daily and of course at grave risk to his life. Sohrab Ali in this instance is required to actively establish his absence by suppressing his presence in order that he lives and his family is not decimated. Sohrab Alis are not merely objects – but locate themselves in that albeit precarious zone that obliterates the distinction between subject and object.

## **THE IMPOSSIBILITIES OF KNOWLEDGE**

Research methodology mostly developed in the West seeks to define the subject-object relation either as public duty or as a contract. Insofar as the subject is engaged in social research, it is seen to be carrying out a public duty for which one does not expect any tangible or immediate return. By contrast, the contractualists tend to view the relationship essentially as a contract, that is to say, an agreement on the terms and conditions that both the subject and the object must agree on in order that the research can take off. Thus to cite an extreme example, ludicrous it may sound the researcher may have to read out a 16-page research protocol before she administers a half-page questionnaire. An average Indian respondent will run away before the questionnaire is run. The experiential in social research points to the sudden discontinuities and ruptures, the breaks and fissures, the silences and eruptions that effectively sever the subject-object contact. The contact is believed to be fundamental in the production of social knowledge. Experience, in simple terms, is a means of understanding the limits of cognition, of getting to know the impossibilities of knowledge, of realizing that knowledge lies not merely in the act of knowing but in knowing what can never be known - the unknowable.

I could realize these impossibilities back in 2007 when some of us became interesting in studying the victims who are displaced by the rapid swings of river (popularly known as riverbank erosion) in northern and north-central West Bengal. I will never forget my experience of 8 December 2007. I was accompanied by some of my old contacts and spent the whole day with the villagers in Khasmahal Char - one of the newly emerged islands in the district of Malda, West Bengal. It was a pleasant winter day and good escape for us. The sun was about to set in the silhouette of over 14-

kilometer meandering belt of the river. As darkness was slowly setting in, we were about to take leave from the villagers – whose hospitality we thoroughly enjoyed for the whole day. The boat fitted with a motor presumably discarded from a bike started roaring and as all of us leaped one by one into the narrow keel, we looked back one last time towards the villagers including the elderly women and little children who flocked in their tens in the ghat. Have they come, we wondered, for seeing us off? None of them – even the child of three years - was wearing any woolen in that punishing cold, but to our utter surprise, we discovered that each of them was armed with whatever they had – lathis (sticks), machetes, spears and sickles etc. The eldest amongst them – a lean, shadowy skeleton of a man with only one hateful eye came forward and slowly became audible. He seemed to speak on behalf of the villagers and bluntly wanted to know the purpose of our visit. We were clutching for words for we had no real answer. Research was like a mumbo-jumbo for them. Thankfully, he himself broke the eerie silence that was becoming unbearable for all of us: “You (aapnera) come and go. But our life remains unchanged. We are yet to figure out why outsiders come to visit us.” It already became dark. The boat started inching forward. We felt relieved. After a while, the faces turned into what they look like from the mainland – ghostly pale shadows. One cannot apparently theorize the experience, as Husserl warns. It is impossible to integrate it into our body of social science knowledge. Yet, its importance lies in pointing to these limits, appreciating that what we know is perpetually fragile and unstable, in understanding the inevitability of the tragedy that social science spells for us.