Re-reading the Field in Conflict Zones: Experiences from Kashmir Valley

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This article explores how a conflict zone complicates research. Safety and security of the researchers are major concerns, whereas respondents tend to provide incorrect information based on their perceptions of and suspicions about the researcher. The resultant research often provides little insight into the chosen area; instead, it ends up providing broad generalisations and even, baseless theories. The author who conducted fieldwork on "Muslim Endowments and Society" in the valley, also interviewed 20 fellow researchers who worked in the valley between 2009 and 2013.

Social Science research has encountered several crises throughout its history; more often than not, such crises have been methodological in character (Hammersly 1993). Ideally, a researcher must read/observe the field/context and represent the situation "as it is". In reality, however, this activity is replete with subjective factors: how much time one spends in the field; how much prior knowhow one has; follow-ups with respondents, and crosschecking of facts among others. These are questions that animate the researcher's world, alongside concerns about rapport building, methodological lapses, financial constraints, and time management. When the field happens to be a conflict zone, the data collected by the researcher is often coloured by the researcher's own threat perception, as well as respondents' perception of and suspicions about the researcher.

Challenges in Doing Research

The Kashmir valley has been mired in conflict for over two and a half decades. Most research projects on the conflict, conducted during this period, have had to deal with issues around the duration and quality of field work, sample design, data collection techniques, and how best to word these reports. In a setting like the conflict-torn Kashmir valley, '*being in the field*' is a frustrating experience for the field investigator today, owing to a plethora of security-related issues and other vulnerabilities. The long history of the conflict in Kashmir has produced public fatigue. There is immense frustration around unmet demands, poor delivery systems, and rising mass dissent. People in Kashmir also have a high threat perception against outsiders. They are fatigued by years of answering journalists' and researchers' questions.

In such a state of affairs, researchers often contend with a surplus of irrelevant, false and ineffective inputs from the field, thereby adding to his/her burden, and resulting in misleading interpretations/conclusions/findings. This leads researchers to constantly question their own identity, and the validity of their samples. Even secondary data analysis in such situations is of little use, as the data produced by earlier researchers offers little insight and reliability. For instance, a lot of literature has been produced on the Kashmir valley during the decades of the conflict. The major themes have been gender, education, religion, conflict studies, community or ethnicity studies, and political or administrative studies. Despite this range of studies, we hardly see any use of varied models and approaches of data collection. There is a need to deconstruct research in conflict zones and think through research themes, discourses, field work patterns, findings, and conclusions.

Rationale, Methodology and Analysis

This article deliberates upon the sociology of the field; ethical and political issues in the field; the researcher's struggle with the self and subjects in the field; dealing with unclear, clever and scared respondents; suspicions, misleading facts and figures; and manipulated data, are some of the issues and challenges faced by the fieldworker in a conflict zone. The Kashmir valley has been chosen primarily because the author himself has carried out extensive field work on *auqaf* (Muslim Endowments) in the valley for two and a half years.

The basic methodological tools used in this study are personal fieldwork experiences, observations of, and casual interactions and interviews with other researchers who have carried out fieldwork in the same context between 2009 and 2013. Secondary sources and inputs from relevant sources have been taken into account as well.

The basic findings are: People in the valley (respondents of research studies) have developed a high degree of fatigue with regards the conflict. Researchers must not only contend with this fatigue, but also engage with respondents patiently, and respond to their queries about the "actual" intentions of the study. Researchers must also deal with people's preconceived notions and stereotypes, and reflect on their own subjectivity constantly to survive the conflict. This study also provides a validation of the white man's burden and Hawthorne effect[1] in research on conflict zones. Very often, what is presented as fact can also be assumptions of the researcher, itself based on unreliable studies from the past[2].

Several of the researchers this author interviewed and who were insiders were unable to detach themselves from their biases. The outsiders among them, on the other hand, spent lesser time than scheduled for their studies. Researchers' access to information in conflict zones is curtailed in several ways. People in such zones are highly politicised. Since they witness the repressive state apparatus at first hand, they tend to be suspicious and apprehensive in general, and particularly towards strangers. They also create their own theories about research projects being undertaken in their areas. In most cases, they think that research is a garb adopted by intelligence agencies to gather information on what is

happening in their areas. This is in keeping with Goodhand's findings (2000) where he says that research in conflict zones is unlikely to be viewed by local actors as neutral and altruistic.

The author's personal experience also suggests that respondents often mislead investigators especially when talking about sensitive issues. The tenuous and uncertain political and security situation leaves subjects with little time for "non-productive" academic research; since they are engaged in contending with worries regarding their survival, safety and livelihood. To explore these questions and the problems that field workers face in conflict zones, 20 researchers from various disciplines (see **table 1**) were asked to respond to an opinionnaire. The five-point Likert Scale was used to gauge the opinions and experiences of field workers.

Table 1: Respondents and their Areas of Research

Sr. No.	Area Of Research	Number of Field Workers Interviewed
1	Sociology	4
2	Comparative Religion & Civilisation Studies/Islamic Studies	3
3	Mass Communication	2
4	Political Science	2
5	Peace and Conflict Studies	3
6	Psychology	1
7	Kashmir Studies	2
8	Economics	1
9	Education	2

Perils of Research in a Conflict Zone

The onset of armed conflict in the Kashmir valley in the early 1990s also brought about a collapse of law and order, and the spread of a culture of uncertainty and insecurity. Like other conflict areas, research work in the valley received a major setback as the situation restricted free movement and speech, and opportunities in general. The prevalence of the Hawthorne effect in a conflict zone makes this job all the more difficult.

While entering the field, the researcher has to be careful; s/he may need to act covertly or overtly depending on the situation. There may also be times when the researcher, instead of conducting an interview, ends up being an interviewee, or a speaker. I remember the time I

was visiting a big Islamic seminary in Kashmir valley two years ago for a focused group discussion with students on the quality of education at the Waqf Board-funded institution. I was showered with a range of questions on general education even by teachers of the seminary who were excited that a researcher from Delhi had come to study them. However, they were also suspicious of my motives in being there. On that occasion, I ended up speaking about education in general, my experience at the university, life outside Kashmir, the need for modernisation of *madrassas*, etc. by which I could build a rapport with the respondents and gain insights into my research questions.

There are also times when a researcher asks about one issue, but ends up receiving a flood of irrelevant information in response. Sometimes, s/he tweaks the pre-decided schedule or questionnaire to adjust to and survive through perceived sensitivities and threats in the field. At times, researchers start interviews with questions, but often observe and notice what is left unsaid to understand the situation better. Researchers often use empathy as a rapport building tool, but also get drawn into participating in activities they may not want to be part of as a result. Sometimes, s/he informs subjects/respondents about her/his full identity; at other times, the researcher resorts to anonymity. Sometimes, s/he mentions something "safe" as the subject of study so as to not draw unwarranted attention. I remember this instance when one of my senior colleagues was researching child labour in the cotton industry of Uzbekistan. He was sure he would not be allowed entry into Uzbekistan for research on such a provocative topic. He, therefore, described his topic in vague terms which were not alarming to the authorities and having received the required permission came back with an interesting study on child labour in the central Asian republic.

The way a researcher represents himself is also extremely important. When I was visiting endowment schools in the Kashmir valley, I initially received a very cold response and was barely able to gather any information. I realised I should change my style of functioning if I was to gain any real insight. I then started behaving less as a researcher and more as an endowment expert. This way, I received a lot of inputs and was able to gain access to essential documents, as well as interact with teachers and discuss their issues and concerns. There were ethical concerns, but there was also the realisation that I was not working in a normal situation.

E J Wood (2006), who conducted field work for 26 months in El Salvador during the civil war and confronted a plethora of ethical dilemmas, had this to say on the matter:

> *"Field research in conflict zones is challenging for both methodological and ethical reasons. In conflict zones, the usual imperatives of empirical research (to gather and analyse accurate data to address a relevant theoretical question) are intensified by the absence of unbiased data from sources such as newspapers, the partisan nature of much data compiled by organizations*

> *operating in the conflict zone, the difficulty of establishing what a
> representative sample would be and carrying out a study of that sample, and
> the obvious logistical challenges."*

Ethics and the Researcher

It cannot be argued that insecure regions need not be studied at all or should be studied
only when the conflict stops (Goodhand 2000). However, the complicated position of the
researcher must be taken into account when designing studies. Take my own awkward
position (Pandey 2008) as regards research in Kashmir. I am a native of the valley and being
an insider, engaged in research, created certain difficulties in rapport building. For
instance, it was awkward to talk to people about religion and religious organisations, given
my awareness of the nature of their suspicions about me. I had traveled outside the valley,
studied in Delhi, and knew of the perception created among Kashmiris during the conflict,
that those who went outside Kashmir for studies sometimes converted to Christianity for
money or joined spy agencies and came back to inquire about sensitive issues on the sly. I
was, therefore, dealing with the psychological stress of being an outsider while also
carrying the burden of "being an insider" (emic). As Sarsby (1984) aptly puts it, it was a
feeling of "isolation in the crowd".

This feeling persisted through the two and a half years of my fieldwork. I was aware of the
reality of my identity and location throughout my fieldwork, as pointed out by Naz (2012),
"who the researcher is and where the research is conducted are the two key dimensions of
fieldwork" (p 97). I took advantage of my position as an insider and began casual
discussions with people associated with the management of mosques, shrines while
conducting the study, employing participant observation and attending several religious
congregations to observe the role played by shrine managers, while also simultaneously
assessing the extent of religiosity and religion in Kashmir. Initially, I couldn't openly state

that the subject of study was waqf[3] or endowments. Instead, I started taking an interest in
auqaf affairs, and started speaking to family and close acquaintances. I got the feeling that I
was a stranger unto the respondents, but a friend too (Powdermaker 1967).

I spoke to some political leaders as well. Initially, I sensed their suspicion regarding my
interest in auqaf affairs, as the chief minister was the chairman of the Waqf Board. Here, my

caste identity came to rescue: being an *Ashraf*[4] Muslim (Syed)[5], many subjects took it as my
family orientation and subject of interest to talk about Islam, endowments, auqaf and
administration. While I was able to gather some information from each category of
informants, the bigger challenge was to access actual administrators—the top brass of

shrine managers. These comprised two groups, the waqf board members and the *Khudams*[6].
Besides caste, there was one more factor that helped me as far as the ulema community,

khudams and *sajjadanishins*[7] were concerned. This was my gender identity as male. Had it

been otherwise, the twin factors of the conflict and the local practice of women not visiting

mazars, *dargahs*, *khanqahs*[8], offices, political institutions, etc would have hampered my work. Pandey (2008) maintains that such a cultural perception produces some additional problems of adjustment to female investigators in the field, compared to those faced by their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, I was aware of my lack of connections in the valley, and the problems that posed in access to information and senior waqf officials. It was a senior academic at Kashmir University who came to my rescue and arranged a meeting with a Waqf chief, who had been a former Vice Chancellor of the said university. The said academic introduced me, thus, to the waqf boss,

> *"This person is of our own group, a very like-minded student who is studying auqaf for his thesis in Jamia in Delhi. He can push your agenda forward some day and is a good writer. Can he meet you tomorrow in your office?"*

The smile on the professor's face implied that the boss had agreed. I went to the Waqf office the next afternoon and was surprised—although this was a sacred religious organisation that collected *Nazr-o-Niyaz* (donations/alms) from the religious and distributed it to the poor, its office resembled that of a political entity complete with flags of the ruling party, portraits, and other symbols.

Field work in conflict zones usually comes with a range of both overt and covert challenges. My study on waqf too encountered its share of problems. Planned study trips had to be postponed on several occassions due to strikes, curfews, and routine incidents of protest and violence. People too had become apprehensive about everything, including researchers/fieldworkers/ investigators; this made interviews and appointments difficult.

Cross-checking Facts

In order to substantiate my arguments borne out of my own firsthand experience in the field and analysis of secondary sources, I interacted with 20 researchers. They were my respondents for this study; each one had conducted research in Kashmir between 2009 and 2013. I chose the respondents on the basis of familiarity, either direct or indirect. Most of the researchers I interviewed had a background in social sciences; there were a few from the humanities as well. 18 of the 20 respondents were concerned about safety issues while conducting their respective research, and most were concerned about the credibility of data and perception of respondents (see **table 2)**.

Table 2: Problems Faced in the Field

S.no	Issues	No. of Respondents (out of twenty)
1	Safety issues	18
2	Maintenance of Research Ethics and Values	15
3	Lack of Credible Data	17
4	Denial of subjects to talk	16
5	Unwillingness of respondents	17
6	Communication/rapport building issues	16
7	Researcher Taken as a journalist	13
8	Researcher taken as a spy/Indian agent	11

Each respondent who was interviewed had to answer 20 focused questions based on the conflict torn field. These questions in the form of Likert's scale were sent to respondents over e-mail. Interactions and interviews were mostly conducted over telephone and social media. The responses (see **Table 3**) show how the conflict plays a detrimental role on the quality of research or field work.

Table 3: Respondents' Experience of Research in Conflict-ridden Kashmir

S. No.	Statement	*SA	A	PA	D	SD
1	Conflict situation had a negative impact on the quality of field work	9	6	3	1	1
2	Data /information could not be easily accessed rather was denied	2	12	4	1	1
3	Entry was easy to offices/institutions for information and data collection.	2	13	3	1	1
4	Movement was restricted due to conflict ridden field	3	11	3	2	1
5	Not able to build a quick rapport in the field	2	15	1	1	1
6	Respondents treated the researcher as a spy or an agent of government	3	11	5	1	1
7	Treated as a newspaper reporter in the field	1	13	4	1	1
8	The field work took more time in field than expected	3	14	2	1	0
9	Some portions of data were manipulated	0	2	1	15	2
10	Interviews were held with and questionnaires were received back only from selected known people.	0	5	3	11	1
11	Useful and objective conclusions of study could not be reached	1	5	2	11	1
12	Not satisfied with the kind of field work done	2	12	3	2	1

13	Resorted more to secondary data and secondary data analysis	1	13	3	2	1
14	Results are true and in line with the ground reality	1	15	2	2	1
15	Field situation and violence led to drastic changes in the research design/plan and procedures.	2	11	4	2	1
16	Respondents were confusing and dual, so managed/incorrect answers.	0	2	3	12	3
17	Able to finish field work on time.	0	2	1	14	3
18	Were scared of working in the field	3	13	2	1	1
19	Material consulted as secondary source was reliable and correct	1	13	4	2	0
20	Rebuked/Faced direct violence in the field	0	1	1	15	3

*SA- strongly agree, A- agree, PA- partially agree, D- disagree, and SD- strongly disagree.

The results and findings of such a research often involve fabrication/manipulation and methodological compromises. For instance, a researcher who had been studying the "plight of half widows and orphans in Kashmir," narrated how he was initially rubbished, criticised and even abused by female respondents. It took him almost double the assigned time to complete the fieldwork. He recounts,

> "We have to finish it (field work) somehow and play our part. We have to complete our thesis. Though it is our mandate as researchers to represent truth, where was the truth and who was willing to tell it to me?"

Another (non-local) researcher working on social development was not satisfied with the quality of fieldwork. He says that he was ridiculed by respondents in the field for choosing to work on development, when there was so much uncertainty about life itself. During one of the interactions, a respondent told him

> "Working on development and empowerment in the valley... what does it really mean, when you don't know whether you will be alive tomorrow or dead? Wind it up and escape from here."

He also says his being an outsider pushed him to wrap up his field work in almost half the assigned time. A female researcher, despite being from the valley, was not content with the quality of her field work. She says her relatives were particularly critical of her.

> "I was asking them about the position of women in the job market but, often, I'd receive unheeded advice or warning. Even my way of dressing was questioned. It took a lot of time to collect authentic data as I kept reviewing my

sample constantly to keep out crazy respondents… I was even advised to get married rather than waste time in research"!

My batch mate and colleague Riyaz (name changed) was studying "primary education in a Kashmir village." He narrated how he was initially perceived as a spy who was providing information about the religiosity of teachers and their affiliations with various groups to government agencies. It took him more than a year to collect data as he was thrown out of many schools and denied data simply because he was perceived as a threat. He did not manage to get government figures on education either, forget data on other sensitive topics. Riyaz states,

"I was denied information despite my continued efforts and was doubted even by my own acquaintances who were teachers in schools. They did not permit me to take any photographs and took me more as a journalist than a researcher. Although I was conducting research in my own village, I had a really a tough time."

Concluding Remarks

There is a need to seriously rethink the very design of field studies in conflict zones. Researchers working in conflict areas must be provided ample training to ensure their safety and management of unforeseen situations. Researchers must also be given enough time and support to complete their studies with proper guidance and help from their supervisors, rather than being pursued with deadlines. Major surveys must hire trained and professional field investigators and keep a constant vigil on them so that unethical practices are checked. Research institutes must issue proper documents and travel permissions, so that affiliated researchers do not face any issues in the field.

Lastly, all research findings coming out of a conflict area must undergo constant rechecks, revisions and improvements, so that theories are not built on manipulated or fake research. One needs to be careful as it has been found that researchers often commit ethical errors at crucial points (Ford 2009). Regular (academic and friendly) contact with locals in the conflict zones, alongside awareness of the ground situation is key to good fieldwork. Researchers must, therefore, acquaint themselves with the local culture and follow local codes to facilitate public acceptance.

End Notes

1.Hawthorne effect refers to the alteration of behaviour by subjects of a study due to their awareness of being observed.

2.Based on personal accounts of researchers revealed during interviews with the

researchers themselves.

3.Waqf is an Islamic, charitable organisation. Waqf is an Islamic endowment, and the term *Auqaf* is the plural of Waqf.

4.Imtiyaz Ahmed (1967) defines the "ashraf", or the upper caste Muslim, as including all undoubted descendants of foreign Muslims (Arabs, Persians, Afghans, etc), and converts from upper caste Hindus.

5.Syed is an honorific title that denotes males accepted as descendants of the prophet Muhammad.

6.Khudams are those who serve worshippers at shrines.

7.Sajjadanishins claim to be descendants of shrines and operate at shrines as managers.

8.Mazars are Muslim graveyards. Dargahs and Khanqahs are shrines of Sufi saints and pilgrimage sites in Kashmir.

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