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Decolonizing ethnography and Tribes in India: Toward an alternative methodology

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This article unravels the many ways of doing ethnography within the area of Tribal studies in India. Historically (methodologically), studies concerning Tribes in India were dominated by colonial ethnographers and explorers. Subsequently, in post-colonial India, such studies became the field of a dominant male caste. From a similar perspective of dominance, these studies on Tribes in India viewed them as either backward or from the point of view that "civilization" could be achieved only through bringing them into the mainstream. Scholars who followed such frames of reference failed to reflect on their own dominant social positions in engaging in research projects with their Tribal subjects. Moreover, some of them even stated to have been inspired by the studies of Malinowski, whose methodology is considered to be uncritical, non-sensitive, and non-reflexive, especially while relating to Tribal studies. The Tribal people in India, therefore, continued to be framed within such a dominant caste perspective, without the slightest effort to treat them as non-caste societies or as equals within caste societies. Methodologically, by positioning myself against such frames of reference while engaging in research within the context of Tribes in India, I draw my research frameworks from those of indigenous methodologies to explore the possibilities of decolonizing ethnography by recognizing many ways of doing. Empirically, I base my engagement with a specific Tribal group (Tripura Tribe) in Tripura, Northeast India. As an indigenous community within the Indian state of Tripura, Tripura people's epistemology/worldviews differ from that of the majoritarian *Savarna* caste society. With an intent to decolonize ethnography from an indigenous context, in this article, I demonstrate the many ways of doing ethnography by innovatively engaging with three related methods, namely, the conversational method, engaged observation, and sitting around the fire. This article argues that for any researcher, when engaging in research within the context of Tribes, the methods and frame of reference employed must be congruent with indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. Furthermore, it also insists that critical reflexivity, responsibility, and sensitivity are keys to Tribal studies in India.

KEYWORDS

decolonizing ethnography, Tribal studies, indigenous methodologies, conversational method, engaged observation, sitting around the fire, Northeast India

Introduction

In this article, I examine a (my own) research trajectory of 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2019 and 2020, with a specific Tribal[1] group and the context in Tripura, Northeast India, and methodologically relate it to Tribal studies. in India. By drawing on indigenous methodologies as the frame of reference for my research methods, in this article, I attempt to engage with the possibilities of decolonizing the ethnographical practices with regard to Tribal research in India. As a general assumption, this study defines the methods in social science research as technical rules which relate to procedures, and methodology as a framework to fit such procedures and rules (also refer to Creswell, 2002). In this vein, I continually reflected on the methodological framework throughout my research process to ask if the chosen methods are genuinely congruent with the worldviews of my research participants (here, Tripura people) while employing the abovementioned methodologies in order to understand their various lived experiences of contemporary state and development within the specificities of epistemology and the methodologies rooted in their everyday lives (also refer to Smith, 1999). Tripuras are indigenous people of Hill Tipperah (Jena and Tripura, 2009), and when their territory was merged with the Union of India in 1949, the Government of India recognized them as "Scheduled Tribes" as per Article 342 of the Indian constitution. As a Tribal community within the Indian state of Tripura, their epistemology/worldviews are different from that of the majoritarian *Savarna* caste society (refer to Tripura, 1978; Jena and Tripura, 2009). However, state policies and administrators from the dominant caste continue to frame them as backward (Ghurye, 1963; see also Sengupta, 2014), which in some ways resonates with the dominant framework of perceiving Tribes in India (Xaxa, 2008; Bodhi, 2016, 2020).

In contrast to the dominant framework of perceiving the Tribal people in India and Tripura state, in this article, I consider the Tripura people as a non-caste society or as equals among many caste societies. Like the scholars of indigenous methodologies, I too, consider transparency an important part of research ethics. Therefore, after building relationships with my participants, I used deep reflections to employ methods and frameworks that are rooted in their lived experiences and cultural protocols. Engaging in research within the Tribal context can be problematic/dominant if it is not informed by the Tribal communities themselves and, therefore, not based on their epistemologies and local protocols. This article strengthens such arguments by empirically relating them to my current research with

Tripura people and also epistemologically locating myself within the study.

The article consists of seven sections. After the "Introduction" section, the politics of knowledge production within Tribal studies in India is highlighted, and a broad contextual understanding of politico-historical and contemporary debates is provided. The "Methodological framework" section then outlines the methodological approaches undertaken for this particular study and elaborates on emerging literature on decolonizing ethnography and indigenous methodologies. In the "Situating my location" section, I situate myself in order to show my relations with my participants. In the following section, I reflect on how I navigated (Gerharz, 2017) with multiple positionalities/identities while being an "insider-outsider" (Longkumer, 2009; Kwame, 2017; Keikelame, 2018), "somewhere in between" (Kerstetter, 2012), or in "the space between" (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 60) in relation to my research participants. In "The many ways of doing ethnography" section, I outline different ways (methods) of doing ethnography within Tribal studies such as the conversational method (Kovach, 2009, 2010), engaged observation (Dreyer, 1998; Gerharz, 2017; Bodhi, 2020), and sitting around the fire (Connor and Napan, 2021) by empirically relating it to my research. In the "Conclusion: Critical reflexivity as key to indigenous research" section, I make a case for the need for critical reflexivity, responsibility, and sensitivity as necessary requirements while pursuing research with Tribes in India.

The politics of knowledge production: Tribal studies in india

Colonial ethnographers and Tribal studies

Writings about a group of various communities, who were later referred to as Tribes in India, became prevalent with the British colonial expansion into the hills, plains, forests, mountains, rivers, and islands (Bhukya, 2008, 2017, 2021; Xaxa, 2008) of the Indian subcontinent. As the colonial administrators needed information to help expand their colonial regime in these areas, they started to employ the services of colonial ethnographers, missionaries, explorers, and even self-claimed ethnographic hobbyists (refer to Eliot, 1794; Wade, 1800; M'Cosh, 1837; Lewin, 1869; Butler, 1875; Hunter, 1876; Mackenzie, 1884; Aitchison, 1892; Sandys, 2008). Wouters points out that "[c]olonial administrators, travelers, missionaries and early anthropologists attempted to understand, categorize and classify the caste and Tribes in such a way that their information would be useful for the governmental purposes and comprehensively to their Western audiences" (Wouters, 2012, p. 101). The British empire then used this information to further expand its territory in the hill areas.

Studies on the group of communities who were described as Tribes by British colonial ethnographers and administrators subsequently began to be labeled as Tribal studies. Such studies were in a form institutionalized with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. Its publication *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* began in 1832 and aimed to study the people from the hilly, plain, and mountainous regions of British India for the benefit of the colonizer. One such study was conducted by M'Cosh and was compiled in one of their earliest issues as an *Account of the Mountain Tribes on the Extreme N.E. Frontier of*

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1 In post-colonial India, the category "Tribe" sources its meaning from Article 342 of the Indian Constitution where it defines "Scheduled Tribes" (ST). It is in this context that ST is also employed as a politico-administrative term. Furthermore, scholars also use the category "Tribe" to refer to "Indigenous people" or "Adivasi" in India (Xaxa, 1999; see also Burman, 2003) referring to their conditions of marginalization and history of various waves of colonization. In this article, I use the category "Tribe" as an analytical category to unravel their "concrete conditions" (politico-epistemological conditions) in India today. I consider such groups of communities as belonging to non-caste societies. However, while relating the same category with the global debates, I relate it with the category "Indigenous people".

Bengal. The Tribes were referred to in the issue as "*barbarous* and *independent savages*" (M'Cosh, 1836, p. 193, emphasis mine). The colonial administrators cum ethnographers continued to publish with a free hand on the people of India. Among their notable studies were Dalton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Dalton, 1872), Herbert Hope Risley's *Tribes and Caste of Bengal* (1892), Edward Thurnston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (1909), Robert Vane Russell and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal's *The Caste and Tribes of the Central Provinces* (1916), and Watson and Kaye (1868–1875) compilation of eight volumes *The People of India* published between 1868 and 1875.

Risley (1892) used anthropometric methods in collecting data to identify the origins of particular castes and Tribal groups. Using such methods, he even measured the length and width of the noses of the members of different Tribes and caste groups. This methodology was adopted by Paul Topinard, a French physician and anthropologist. The same method was adopted by the Government of British India to conduct an ethnography survey of India to record the details of manners, customs, and physical features of different caste and Tribal groups, and was also supported by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. As part of this survey, Risley wrote another book, *The people of India*, in 1908, in which he categorized different groups of Tribes and castes. Thurston and Rangachari (1909) also used a similar method in their survey of the castes and Tribes of Southern India. Russell and Hira Lal (1916) made use of Vedic literature (refer to Bates, 1995) instead of Risley's theory of racial origin. Bates points out Risley's racial theory as "the apotheosis of 'pseudo-scientific' racism" (Bates, 1995, p. 241). Despite employing what are now considered scientifically racist methods and categorizations, Risley was highly regarded by the British empire and was even appointed as the president of the Royal Anthropological Institute on his return to England in 1910. As the president of such a colonial academic institute, it could be assumed that its members might also abide by a similar pseudo-scientific colonial mentality.

Further writings on Tribes began to be pursued more systematically by colonially-trained anthropologists after 1930, whereas earlier colonial ethnographers were administrators, explorers, and missionaries with no formal training in anthropology. One of the earliest trained colonial ethnographers who arrived in India in 1936 was von Fürer-Haimendorf. Wouters (2012) refers to him as the first "real" anthropologist who came to Northeast India to study the Tribes of the region. He was trained both in Vienna and London and was greatly influenced by Malinowski, whom he met in London. He too undertook similar ethnographic fieldwork like Malinowski in Pangsha Naga village in Nagaland. *The Naked Naga* (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1939) was the outcome of his ethnographical fieldwork in Pangsha. Other notable studies by him on different Tribal regions in India are *The Chenchus: Jungle Folk of the Deccan* (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1943) and *The Raj Gonds of Adilabad: A Peasant Culture of the Deccan* (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1948). His objectives in conducting fieldwork in the Naga village were to observe the practice of head-hunting and to collect ethnographic material to display as museum specimens in Great Britain. Wouters (2012) points out that von Fürer-Haimendorf's ethnographical accounts are richly detailed and clearly grounded within the discipline of anthropology in comparison with earlier colonial administrators' approaches. However, his choice of titles such as *The Naked Naga* demonstrates a clearly racist attitude. He also contributed to the reproduction of particular stereotypes with his use of categories such as "nakedness" and "headhunting" (also refer to Wouters, 2012, p. 116). Kamei (2021) shows that such projects objectify Tribal people, and Ziipao (2013) notes that such writings reflect colonial biases, cultural supremacy, and Eurocentric views that are outrightly racist in many ways.

Unique to colonial ethnographers and trained anthropologists of the British colonial era in India was that they produced writings about Tribal people uninterrupted for more than 150 years, until India's independence on 15 August 1947, without showing even the slightest need to reflect on their own positionalities/epistemological location and the corresponding responsibility to situate themselves. All of them concluded that Tribal people were lazy, wild, savage, naked, primitive, exotic, degraded Tribes, warlike, sexist[2], barbaric, uncivilized, and criminal with habits of drinking, gambling, having dirty clothes, and many more. Vidyarthi (1982) marks this phase of studies on the Tribal people of India as the formative period (1784–1919). He also identifies two subsequent phases as constructive (1920–1949) and analytical (1950 onward). Wouters (2012) further breaks down the period of colonial ethnographers in Northeast India into three sub-phases, namely, the explorative phase, the consolidating phase, and the start of "academic anthropology" with the arrival of Christopher von Fürer-Haimendorf.

Post-colonial ethnographers: From old Tribal studies to new Tribal studies

With the declaration of India's independence in 1947, there were heated debates among anthropologists, administrators, and social workers on the criteria, terms, and status of Tribes in India. One such discussion took place during the Indian Conference of Social Work organized by Tribal Welfare and held in Calcutta in 1951. Even prior to this conference, there were discussions on how to accommodate the Tribes in an independent India, for example, the scholarly debates between Elwin and G. S. Ghurye. Elwin (1939) understanding of Tribal people was first articulated in his book *The Baiga* (1939). His central question was whether (in 1939) Tribes should continue to remain in isolation or whether they should be drawn into the larger society. He argued that Tribes should be kept in isolation by keeping them away from the dominant society, like in "national park[s]". Xaxa (2008, p. 6) points out that Elwin made this suggestion perhaps out of desperation because, during that period, Baiga Tribe had very less of their own when the book was written. In his biography on Elwin, Guha (2013) opines that Elwin was a leading ethnographer of his time and a defender of "his" Adivasis. He recommends that it is worth revisiting Elwin's writings if one wishes to restore faith in "our adivasis", or compatriots who believe in the ideals of the Indian constitution.

However, Elwin was not free from severe criticism by anthropologists of his time (Bose, 1941; Ghurye, 1963; Srinivas, 1976). Ghurye was at loggerheads with Elwin's theory of isolation and he vehemently advocated for a policy of "assimilation" (Ghurye,

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2 For instance, Lewin (1869) insulted the Tipperah/Tripura people by making sexist comments such as "[g]reat freedom of *intercourse* is allowed between the sexes, but a Tipperah girl is never known to go astray out of her own clan. An illegitimate birth, also, is hardly known among them, for the simple reason, that should a girls become enceinte, her lover has to marry her" (emphasis mine, p. 80).

1963). Ghurye himself was, however, often criticized for being a library-based or armchair scholar (Venkatesan, 2002, p. 81). Claiming that Tribals are "backward Hindu[s]", he opined that they should be assimilated into larger Hindu society (Ghurye, 1963). Such perspectives could be derived from his dominant (upper) caste position, therefore, labeling Tribes as inferior to the majoritarian Savarna caste society. His view echoes larger debates on the "Tribe-caste-class continuum" (Xaxa, 2008; Akhup, 2013). Other anthropologists of the era (Majumdar, 1937; Bose, 1941) shared similar opinions. Bose (1941) especially thought that Tribes should be absorbed into Hindu society in a process he terms "the Hindu method of Tribal absorption" (also refer to Xaxa, 2008, p. 17; Akhup, 2013).

The first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, took a different opinion about the Tribal people of India. For him, "while Tribal identity should be preserved, Tribal should develop in their own way without let or hindrance" (Singh, 1989, p. 3). Nehru was a firm believer in the "integration" of the Tribal people of India. In 1954, Elwin became the first foreigner to be accepted and recognized as an Indian citizen. In the same year, he was appointed as an anthropological adviser to the Government of India with a special brief to advise on the hill Tribes of Northeast India. Later, he became a firm follower of the ideas of Nehru and changed his opinion about the treatment of Tribal people. His transition from an isolationist to an integrationist is nicely elaborated in his book *A Philosophy of NEFA* (Elwin, 1957). Nehru wrote the forward to this book, where he outlines five points for a Tribal policy for independent India (refer to Elwin, 1957; Singh, 1989). This policy is commonly referred to as "Panchasheel" or the five moral principles (also refer to Fifield, 1958, p. 505). As part of this policy, Tribals of India began to be categorized as "Scheduled Tribe[s]", which today is a prevalent politico-administrative term, enshrined within the Indian constitution in Article 342 (also refer to Bodhi and Jojo, 2019).

Studies on Tribes became further institutionalized with the establishment of government institutions such as the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) in 1945 and the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) in 1954. In both of these institutes, trained anthropologists and administrators conducted research on different Tribal communities of India in order to provide information to the state. The establishment of these institutes and the activities undertaken by them blurred the line between administrators and anthropologists involved in Tribal studies and policy in India. Jenkins (2003) argues that such a systematic blurring resonates with the colonial practices of Risley's period. For instance, like Risley's ethnographic survey, the ASI initiated a survey project of Indian people, from 1985 to 1994, under the leadership of administrator cum anthropologist K. S. Singh, with the same title: "The people of India". Under this project, it published 11 volumes on different communities of India, including two volumes on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

There are currently 27 TRIs in the Tribal-dominated areas of India. I visited one such TRI in Tripura during my fieldwork at Agartala. It portrayed images of different Tribes (e.g., the Tribe that I identify as being a part of) with a display of museum specimens. When I interacted with scholars and community people in Tripura, many complained to me about the misrepresentation of their own Tribe (that with which they identify) in some of the books published by the TRI. Often, after learning that I am pursuing a doctorate in

Germany and live in Mumbai, they also interrogated me with their concerns as to whether I too would become like those dominant researchers of the TRI and the like. The trust that they eventually bestowed on me came after they found out about my relationship with my native village, my relatives, my social background, and also my past activities with the community with which I identify. Due to such experiences, and by remaining sensitive and reflective to myself and also maintaining a sense of responsibility, I told them that I will never be like those dominant researchers.

Studies related to Tribes in India continued to be perceived differently by Indian sociologists and social anthropologists in post-India's Independence. Prominent among them are M. N. Srinivas, André Beteille, and Virginius Xaxa. Srinivas' (1976) theory of "sanskritization" brought new dimensions to understanding the Tribes/caste discourse in independent India. Sanskritization relates to the process of the lower caste emulating the lives of those in the higher caste. This theory was initially utilized to understand the social mobility of the lower caste within the caste system in India. It was later extended to understand the process of social mobility within the context of Tribal society (refer to Xaxa, 2008, p. 77). André Beteille's understanding of Indian Tribes emerged during the same period. He argued that "[w]here tribe and civilization co-exist as in India and the Islamic world, being a tribe has been more a matter of remaining outside of state and civilization, whether by choice or necessity, than of attaining a definite stage in the evolutionary advance from the simple to the complex" (Beteille, 1986, p. 316). The contribution to Tribal studies in India from Srinivas and Beteille has all the more complicated understandings of Tribal societies in India as non-caste societies. Moreover, Beteille's evolutionary approach to Tribes, categorized from simple to complex, is similar to directing them to replicate the caste structure in order to achieve social advancement or mobility. It can also be taken to mean that the emancipation of Tribal people can only be achieved by evolving into a caste society. Such evolutionary understandings echo the opinions of earlier anthropologists such as Bose (1941) and are rather detrimental in the challenge to change the discourse on Tribal studies in India.

From the mid-1990s until the early 2000s, Tribal studies in India could be said to have experienced an interregnum crisis (Bodhi and Jojo, 2019), where the old ways refused to disappear and new ones were yet to be born. A breath of fresh air was brought by Xaxa (2008) who, unlike earlier scholars, argued that Tribal society needs to be treated like any other society, that is, in a constant process of transformation. He extended his argument by comparing Tribal societies to those of the societies of the Oriya, Bengali, and Telugu, as Tribes also possess all the features that are characteristic of a society. Due to his enormous contribution to Tribal studies in India, Bodhi and Jojo (2019) claimed that Xaxa represents a significant break from the earlier theories on Tribal studies, both methodologically and theoretically (refer to Xaxa, 2008). To this end, he is said to have partially resurrected Tribal studies in India with new relevant discourses.

Taking this break as significant, one can speak of studies pre-Xaxa (refer to Bodhi and Jojo, 2019; Bodhi, 2022b) being premised by a dominant (upper) caste gaze, which failed to recognize Tribal societies (non-caste societies) as being equal with caste societies (also refer to Xaxa, 2008; Bodhi and Jojo, 2019). With a similar line of argument, Kumar (2016), a prominent sociologist in India, questions the current inequalities within Indian sociology itself in

"How egalitarian is Indian Sociology" where he opines that Indian "[s]ociology has been practiced in the milieu of the domination of the so-called upper caste males for the last century" (p. 39). He argues that this domination is visible at the epistemological level, in a selective use of indological sources, fieldwork data, and classroom pedagogy. In conclusion, he remarks that Indian sociology reflects only partially the reality of Indian society and that the challenge should be to make it more representative and inclusionary (Kumar, 2016, p. 39). Kumar (2016)observations inform us that the so-called upper caste male sociologists/anthropologists in India are perhaps in an equally dominant position to that of colonial ethnographers and do not reflect on their own dominant social location.

In a rapidly changing society, to which Tribal societies are not immune, Bodhi and Jojo (2019, p. 14–15) remind scholars of Tribal studies in India today to remain critical and to consider the following five important points when theorizing Tribal-related studies: gender and class stratifications within Tribal societies; no further oppression of Dalit/Mulnivasi societies; to refrain from producing knowledge that silences smaller Tribal societies; affirming the genuine demands of historically non-caste societies; and to take care while theorizing "development" in the light of national economic growth.

In light of the above discussion concerning politico-historical and contemporary debates on Tribal studies in India today, I see the necessity to continuously remain reflective, sensitive, responsible (Gerharz, 2017), and relevant to the research context, both in my approach and in my methodology. Being aware of the myriad of power structures embedded within the production of knowledge on Tribal people in contemporary India is a reminder for me to remain critical when selecting the methodological approaches in order to not further infantilize or inferiorialize the subjects in my engagement in the pursuit of knowledge. By sensitively abiding by such approaches, it also allows me to critically reflect on my own positionality in the relationships with my participants. Therefore, it is critical to think about the possibilities to decolonize knowledge production in Tribal studies in India today when choosing methodological approaches and a process that is congruent with the epistemology of the people and the place. Furthermore, I must also be concerned about whether my methodology is relevant to the context, as I assume that theory is subsumed within a methodology. In the following sections, I extend my arguments with reference to such concerns.

Methodological framework

Decolonizing ethnography

In 1955, Murray Charles Groves, an Australian anthropologist, encountered a young man during his fieldwork in Port Moresby (the present capital city of Papua New Guinea), and the following conversation took place between them:

"Excuse me, sir. Are you an anthropologist?" […] "You have presumably read Malinowski", he added. […] "Then, sir, you may be interested to know that Malinowski was in error", the young man said. "I am a Trobriand Islander myself, and from what I have heard of his writings, it is clear that Malinowski did not understand our system of clans and chiefs". […] "Here is a short account I have written myself", he said. "It outlines the facts as they really are, and I should like you to have it". […] "I should

be much obliged if you would make the facts available to those who have been misinformed", the young man answered. […] I promised to do my best for him, and to fulfill that promise I append the statement which he gave me. It was written in English and it is exactly reproduced hereunder. It should be compared with *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* p. 62–72 (Watson, 1956, p. 164).

The young man who was in conversation with Groves was Mr. Lepani Watson. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was first published in 1922 by a Polish anthropologist named Malinowski, and it became the first celebrated book on ethnography. The method employed by Malinowski during his fieldwork (he referred to it as an "expedition") on Trobriand Island later became the foundation for participatory observation (PO). Malinowski's PO method was further acknowledged as being crucial to the founding of modern social anthropology in Britain and later elsewhere. It is in this context that he is recognized as the father of social anthropology. Yet this recognition by modern anthropologists which is still present in many universities today was only possible through a process of epistemicide on the Trobriand Islanders, as echoed in the specific concerns of Watson. With his feelings of lived experiences dehumanized, the young islander pleaded with Grove, another anthropologist, to correct the misinformation written by Malinowski, by indicating the exact page number in Malinowski's famous book. Watson's concern for his community reveals his innate desire to heal (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009) his community's epistemology from the wound created by Malinowski, the so-called celebrated anthropologist. Even though Malinowski claimed in his book that his methodology was different from those of the colonial administrators, missionaries, or traders, whose approaches he claims were full of bias and pre-judged opinions (Malinowski, 2014, p. 34), he himself was trapped in perceiving his research participants in the same colonial ways. Throughout his book, he describes Trobriand Islanders as savages and uses the same colonial expressions such as "expedition" (p. 50–52) instead of fieldwork.[3]

The dark side of Malinowski's famous book and his uncritical ethnographic fieldwork methods became more visible after his fieldwork diary was published as *"A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term"* (Malinowski, 1967) by his own students. His colonial gaze seems to explode from his daily writings:

At 10 I went to Teyava, where I took pictures of a house, a group of girls, and the *wasi*, and studied construction of a new house. On this occasion I made one or two coarse jokes, and one *bloody nigger* made a disapproving remark, whereupon I cursed them and was highly irritated. I managed to control myself *on*

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3 It is important to note here that Malinowski does not mention the word "fieldwork" in his book, instead calling it an "expedition". According to Oxford English Dictionary, expedition refers to "A journey, voyage, or excursion made for some definite purpose". Fieldwork in modern anthropology can hardly be considered a voyage—with echoes of the British anxiety/desire to discover a *terra nullius*. Malinowski's usage of expedition is, therefore, similar to the language used by the East India Company when they first arrived on the Indian sub-continent (Damodaran et al., 2015), or in America by Columbus (Polk, 2006) as if the natives were people without history.

the spot, but I was terribly vexed by the fact that this *nigger* had "*dared to speak to me in such a manner*" (Malinowski, 1967, p. 272, emphasis mine).

In several further pages of his field diary, he refers to Trobriand Islanders using derogatory English slang such as bloody niggers, insolent niggers, and disgusting niggers. These exceptions show how he maintains a colonial (superior) relationship with the Islanders. With such a colonial attitude supporting Malinowski's framework of practicing ethnography, he of course can hardly be considered to be free from the same colonial prejudices he claims to find so restrictive; nor should his PO method be employed uncritically. In a review of Malinowski's dairy, Geertz argues that although Malinowski did profess ethnographers to "grasp the native's view", his descriptive monographs about the Trobriand Islanders were with less identification with the subjects (Geertz, 1967). Instead, Malinowski's diary reveals what Gough (1968) refers to when he claims that anthropology and ethnography are the "child[ren] of colonialism" and the "handmaid[s] of imperialism" (also refer to Stauder, 1974; Sinha, 2021). Geertz (1973, 1988), therefore, urges the anthropologist to first decolonize their own dominant cultural cosmologies when attempting to offer insights into the cultures of other peoples.

Instead, then, of taking Malinowski's ethnographic method as the universal approach, we are faced with the urgent task of decolonizing ethnography itself. In reaction to Watson's concerns, the desire to decolonize ethnographic approaches took place as early as 1955. Even though Groves himself maintained his promise to Watson by reporting his concerns in the journal "Man" in 1956, after that initial event, the task of decolonizing ethnography was never taken up seriously by that same journal nor by any other. It was only several years later that a collective call to decolonize anthropology and ethnography was raised by anthropologists from the Global North (Fabian, 1983) and the Global South (Das, 1986), as well as feminist and postcolonial scholars (Sinha, 2021, p. 265). However, undertaking such a project with the required seriousness meant that it continued apace only following the 1990s (Fox, 1991; Trouillot, 1991). During the same period, Trouillot (1991) refers to ethnography as the constitution of anthropology and the savage slot. Decolonizing ethnography means challenging a body of anthropological canon based on eurocentrism, androcentrism (Sinha, 2021), casteism (Guru, 2002; Guru and Sarukkai, 2012; Kumar, 2016; Bodhi, 2022a; Darokar and Bodhi, 2022), and the same savage slots (Trouillot, 1991).

Hand in hand with increasing globalization and the resulting fluidity of information flows between the Global South and the Global North, and also within the Global North and Global South, the idea of decolonizing the practice of ethnography within the fields of anthropology and sociology has gained a new impetus. In many areas around the world and in various contexts, the challenge is being taken up of treating the enterprise of knowledge with respect and as a pursuit of diversity and co-existence (Guru, 2002; Uddin, 2011; Kumar, 2016; Bodhi, 2020, 2022a; Gerharz and Rescher, 2021; Kaur and Klinkert, 2021; Sinha, 2021). In a special issue entitled "Decolonizing ethnographies", Kaur and Klinkert (2021) call upon anthropologists across the Global South and Global North to make the effort to decolonize ethnographies in ontologies and epistemologies; how we engage with research participants, how we present ethnographic research, and to what ends (p. 246).

The project of decolonizing ethnographies is an ongoing project. To avoid creating new binaries, however, the same project also demands contextualization (Akhup, 2022), especially in research that involves the historically marginalized communities in the so-called Global South.

Indigenous methodologies

At the same time as debates on decolonizing anthropology were unfolding during the late 1990s, the first efforts to decolonize the dominant research paradigm, especially from an indigenous context, were also taking place. Decolonizing the dominant research paradigm to those involved meant developing indigenous methodologies, best articulated by Smith (1999) in her book "Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples". After the publication of this book, many other scholars from around the globe also began to reflect on indigenous methodologies in various contexts (Wilson, 2001, 2003, 2008; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003; Louis, 2007; Sunseri, 2007; Kovach, 2009, 2010; Chilisa, 2012; Berryman et al., 2013; Bodhi, 2020, 2022a; Akhup, 2022; Darokar and Bodhi, 2022).

Indigenous methodology as a paradigm emphasizes considering the specificities of epistemologies and methodologies which are rooted in survival struggles, specific indigenous contexts, histories, cultural protocols, values, and behaviors as an integral part of any methodology and in a language that is understood by the community, and derived from indigenous ways of knowing and their concerns (Smith, 1999, p. 3–24). The indigenous paradigm also shapes how we consider Tribal people's worldview and involves ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. It is about relationships and seeing everything within the context it represents (Wilson, 2003; Kovach, 2010; Drawson et al., 2017; Bodhi, 2020; Akhup, 2022). The indigenous paradigm, therefore, demands to be culturally congruent (Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Kovach, 2010), and to integrate the indigenous way of knowing (Steinhauer, 2001), or as Martin and Mirraboopa (2003) argue, the indigenous way of knowing (epistemology), being (ontology), and doing (methods). Kovach (2010) also echoes this, saying that "it is not the method, per se, that is the determining characteristic of indigenous methodologies, but rather the interplay (*the relationship*) between the method and paradigm and the extent to which the method, itself, is congruent with an Indigenous world view" (p. 40, emphasis original). Therefore, research within the indigenous context requires building relationships with the indigenous participants that are congruent to their world views. Kovach (2010, p. 41) further demonstrates that indigenous methodologies must incorporate indigenous knowledge using specific contextual knowledge assumptions that emerge from a situated tribal knowledge. As a relational ontology, such a paradigm, unique to indigenous research design, involves flexibility and reflexivity that is more than a matter of matching the proposed methods for data collection with a research question, but which also requires a preparedness of the researcher to show respect for local protocols and cultural safety (Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003, p. 212).

Nowadays, indigenous methodologies are an emerging frame of reference for an alternative when engaging in research within

indigenous contexts. They are related to many names such as decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 1999), indigenist research (Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003), indigenous paradigm (Wilson, 2001, 2003; Kovach, 2009), or decolonial-historical approach (Bodhi, 2020, 2022a). As a progressive paradigm, it differentiates itself from the dominant methodological paradigm by remaining necessarily culturally relevant (Wilson, 2003; Bodhi, 2020, 2022a; Akhup, 2022) and is practiced through research conducted based on Tribal beliefs (Bodhi, 2022a) and by privileging their voices and epistemology (Louis, 2007; Sunseri, 2007; Kovach, 2010, p. 42). With such approaches, Tribal epistemologies can be connected to an indigenous methodology (Wilson, 2001) as a point of many views.

Situating my location

Situating one's "self" has become part of the decolonizing effort in social science research. Feminist scholars (especially women of color) were at the forefront in taking up such methodological challenges (e.g., refer to Hooks, 1990, 1992) to disrupt the dominant framework of doing research. Indigenous scholars also gradually took up similar challenges (Smith, 1999). Therefore, within the indigenous methodologies framework, "situating self" has become an important process of decolonizing the research process while engaging in research in an indigenous context (Wilson, 2001, 2003, 2008; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003; Kovach, 2009, 2010; Bodhi, 2020; Darokar and Bodhi, 2022).

Hence, I find it important for myself to "situate" my location in order to ensure that my relationship with my participants is well-understood and kept transparent. Cosmologically, I have a relational connection with my ancestors (*Donguima Donguipha)* and the Tripura community that I belong to. My father belongs to "gal" *dopha* (clan) of Anok, and my mother belongs to "dabaicha" *dopha* of Khali, and both clans also identify with the same ancestors. My research participants identify with the same ancestors that I belong to but belong to a different clan. In fact, Tripura people believe that our common ancestors "Donguima Donguipha" first originated in Bagirath village, my fieldwork area. To remember our ancestors, a state-level celebration used to be held annually in the month of January in Bagirath village. I participated in one such celebration in January 2020 during my fieldwork.

Furthermore, I speak the same mother tongue "Kokborok" as my participants. Like many of them, I am also a first-generation learner while achieving higher education. For many generations, my family members had practiced *huk* (shifting cultivation) until we adopted settled cultivation. I still remember working in huk during my childhood days along with my family members. However, what makes me different from many of the participants in my research is that I studied in the village Christian missionary school which made it possible for me to access an English education. My father is one of the locally-known Tribal priests and a Tribal healer. Many of my participants also practice Tribal religion and, therefore, I was reflective (conscious) of my Christian background in treating my participants as equals, considering that Christianity has a colonial legacy of perceiving Tribal people as inferior (Xaxa, 2021).

Like my fieldwork area, my native village Prabinpara does not have drinking water facilities, regular electricity, or an all-weather road. In 2010, a motorable road was first constructed for both Bagirath and Prabinpara villages. However, the road did not come to us easily. As one of the educated persons from my native village, I took the responsibility to handle negotiations to get the motorable road for my native village after receiving support from village members. I utilized all my networks and held frequent meetings with local state stakeholders and the state rural development minister. Currently, my native village road is motorable but needs periodical maintenance. I obtained my qualifications in higher education from a western university, and presently I am a teacher at a university in India. Furthermore, I have written about and lectured on subjects related to Tribal studies in India for some years now.

Methodologically, by situating my location and revealing my relationships with my research participants as detailed above, I managed to declare my ancestry and clarified my intentions and position as a researcher to my participants. Simultaneously, I also adequately located my epistemological location as a Tribal person and as a researcher researching my own society. Furthermore, I have disclosed my relationships with my participants and revealed assumptions upon which I formulated my research questions and conducted my research. In addition, this situating allowed my participants to locate me and to identify the type of relationship that existed between them and me (also refer to Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003, p. 204; Kovach, 2009; Darokar and Bodhi, 2022, p. 302–303). Situating self and transparently being able to know each other also created a rapport between us and built trust, respect, and mutual responsibility and accountability. I consider how I transparently situated self and respectfully declared my intentions as a researcher (also refer to Smith, 1999) to be a crucial step in decolonizing any form of dominant research process or framework. In the following sections, I further deliberate on similar arguments by reflecting on how I navigated multiple positionalities in my relationships with my participants.

Navigating with multiple positionalities and identities

On being an insider

I have made the case that my participants belong to the same cultural context as me. This is to say that I am an insider with regard to the study context. However, researching as an insider also has many challenges. As an insider, it is demanded of me to have considerable insider skills, maturity, sensitivity, and experiences and to treat my participants' knowledge (refer to Smith, 1999) in a non-exploitative, non-extractive way, and also respect community ethics and protocols (Kovach, 2010, p. 40; Hart, 2010). Going back to my homeland to pursue research with my community was like a process of unlearning and re-learning about my own community. Therefore, despite being an insider, I could not and did not assume that I knew everything about my community's ethics and protocols. I gave myself time to unlearn and relearn what I already knew about my community, and I used the time and the process to build rapport, trust, and relationships. From the initial period of fieldwork, I clarified my agenda and purpose as a researcher to my participants and pursued it through accountable relationships with them. Wilson (2003) argues that one of the main purposes of indigenous methodologies is to build accountable relationships with our participants. With a similar purpose, I introduced myself to my participants by explaining what I intended to do as a researcher.

However, there were instances where some of my participants would still assume that I was a journalist or a member of a party of some elite politicians. I then told them that I belonged to the same community that they belong to (the Tripura community) and that we share the same cultural roots. I realized that these explanations were not enough to convince them that I was an insider. Subsequently, I shared details about my clan, my village, my parents, grandparents, and also stories about our common ancestors. I learned that many of my participants were aware of my village area, and few of them also knew my parents and grandparents. In this way, I managed to build relationships and trust with my participants as an insider. The above process of building relationships and trust allowed many of my participants to locate and determine what kind of relationship they wished to maintain with me (also refer to Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003, p. 204). To further build relationships, I hung out with the villagers for tea, food, festivals, and sweets, loitering in the market area, playing marbles with the para (village) kids, and occasionally visiting them in their huk (shifting cultivation), river, and forest.

The protocol of making myself familiar to my participants as an insider was to reveal my cultural location and also my political and social background. Declaring everything about me to my participants made them feel comfortable to have conversations with me about any issue and also for me to be able to critically reflect on the power relations between us. As an insider researcher, I was also aware of the need to remain humble before my community because as a researcher, I take on a different set of roles, relationships, statuses, and positions. Therefore, I constantly remind myself to be ethical, respectful, reflexive, and critical, like any other researcher (also refer to Smith, 1999, p. 139). Smith (1999) also points out that "one of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to "test" their own taken-for-granted views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories [...] Research can also lead to discoveries which contradict the image that some idealist younger researchers hold of elders" (p. 139). Reminded of such risks, I overcame such challenges through continuous reflection and by approaching my research and position as a researcher with a sense of responsibility and sensitivity during my fieldwork.

On being an outsider

At the same time, my participants considered me an outsider despite my being from the same cultural context. Even though I am a first-generation student like many of my participants, I have managed to achieve a certain mobility in the area of higher education, which has put me in a better position than many of them, both in terms of economic and cultural capital. In addition, I have been away from my native village for some years in pursuit of higher education and employment opportunities, which has taken me to various Indian cosmopolitan cities and also to Germany for doctorate studies. After teaching for some years now at a university in Mumbai, located within a cosmopolitan part of the city, I have come in contact with academics that belong to the dominant caste society, some of which continue to abide by the dominant framework of researching Tribes in India. In the western university environment, I have been exposed to many academics through conferences, seminars, and workshops, some of whose perceptions of the Tribes of India resonate very well with the dominant framework. Such exposure to the dominant framework of reference (from both a Eurocentric and dominant caste perspective) has the potential to confound my own perception of my participants. These facts, therefore, complicate my belonging to the Tripura community as an insider, and indeed, sometimes the participants distanced themselves from me like an outsider even though I belong to the same cultural group.

While my participants feel proud of me for being one of the first from the community to be appointed as part of the faculty at an Indian university in Mumbai and also for being one of the first to pursue a doctorate in Germany, at the same time, their perception of my superior social capital makes them believe that I could be of support to them when intervening with government or other stakeholders in important issues. One fine morning, I got an unexpected phone call from one of my participants from New Bagirath village, my field site. The person pleaded with me to support them in intervening with local state officials to fix the supply of adequate water facilities for their village as the ring well dried up during the hot summer months. I did my less part by directly contacting the local representatives. As per this example and with many of their other everyday sufferings, they yearn for me to help them tell the correct version of their stories to the world through my engagement as a knowledge producer.

Many of my participants thought that I was more influential than them, telling me, "Oh you live in Mumbai, in a big city where Bollywood actors reside and you are currently in Germany; you must be rich [...] and your house in your village also must have many floors". Some of the youths even asked if they could travel along with me to my native village and see my house, to which I agreed. I, therefore, overcame such dynamic challenges of insider/outsider perceptions by continuously building accountable trust and relationships with my participants and transparently doing everything with them. Moreover, to eliminate the power dynamic between my participants and myself, I relied on constant reflexivity and repeatedly conversing with members of the village such as elders, youths, social leaders, and school teachers.

There were also situations where I was considered an outsider as I could not adapt to the expected cultural context, in the cases when they expected me to be well-acquainted with every norm that existed in my community. For instance, while having lunch during a village ceremony, one of the villagers served me Tripura Tribal cuisine known as "guduk"—a dish mixed with hot chilies. After tasting, I reacted with an unusual sound; "hoha...hoha...hoha", to express that the chili was burning my taste buds. The community members surrounding me laughed at me and said: "Oh, we were not aware that you cannot eat chili like us. Maybe it is because you have been staying in Mumbai away from home for many years now". I continued to interact with them even though I failed at that moment to fulfill their expectations of me as an insider. Smith reminds us that in such situations, it is important to maintain reflexivity, considering oneself as both an insider or an outsider, in order to fulfill the task of "getting the story right and telling the story well" (Smith, 1999, p. 357).

The space between: Insider-outsider

Despite my credentials of being an insider, there were multiple instances where I was simultaneously considered both an insider

and an outsider by different participants in different contexts. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) call such experiences "the space between", and Kerstetter (2012) refers to it as "somewhere in between".

> During my first month of fieldwork in New Bagirath village, before I was introduced to Buwakupur[4] (the oldest person in the village), I was excited, assumed that he would readily consider me an insider, and would comfortably agree to have a conversation with me. However, when I sat down close to him to begin a conversation, he confronted me by saying: "So you are from Mumbai, and now you are pursuing your higher study in Germany. Tell me, how will I know what you will do with the information I will share with you? What if I get into trouble with those local elite politicians after you secretly inform them about me?" I told him: "I don't belong to any political party, and I am only a researcher and everything that you share with me, it will be kept confidential". Eventually he agreed to have a conversation with me, but with some suspicions, he later asked me to write down my contact detail on paper for his future records. He told me again: "When any trouble arises with me, I will call you; if not, I will come and search you in your native village". I wrote my contact details on a piece of paper, and I promised him again that I would continue to remain responsible even after I left their village. Later, when I provided him with more information about my village, parents, relatives, and the stories of our common ancestors, he began to trust me. He even told me at the end: "You are our own people only, so we don't need to worry, and you will, of course, not get us into trouble".

The above conversation shows how I simultaneously navigated "the space between" (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) an insider and an outsider as per my participant's perception of me. In the beginning, even though I considered myself an insider, my participant did not treat me as such. He even treated me as a potential threat both to himself and to the community by comparing me to local elite politicians. His feelings of suspicion and those of other participants come from their everyday experiences with bureaucratic state representatives, such as recent negative experiences with the Block Chairperson (local elite politician). Yet when I began to build a relationship with him and focused the situation more on myself, he began to treat me as an insider including me in the expression "our own people only", and reiterating that I would not get them into trouble. As a Tribal scholar, my conversation with Buwakupur taught me that it is the participants themselves who determine whether a researcher is an insider or an outsider, even within Tribal studies. In such a context, the researcher does not become an insider naturally, even when they might be Tribal themselves. Deep reflexivity is equally required in order to tease out the complex relationships between the researcher and the participants (also refer to Keikelame, 2018).

No doubt, as an insider, I was provided with easier access and entry to the field sites, but there were also situations where my identity perhaps hindered the research process. For instance, in some cases, my participants did not fully explain their stories to me with the assumption that I already knew about them. For example, while having a conversation with the villagers about their experiences of the village road and electricity supply and how they negotiated with the state, there were occasions where they would abruptly end the conversation and say: "You were also born and brought up in the

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4   All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

village, and you already know that bad roads and irregular electricity are common experiences in the rural villages of Tripura". Although my participants treated me as an insider at that moment, I was also reacting to the experience as an outsider at the same time, following the research goal of understanding people's experiences within their own context. I experienced such dilemmas and challenges, in which participants tended to draw strict boundaries and treat me as an insider or an outsider as being "lock[ed] into a notion that emphasizes either/or, one or the other, you are in or you are out" (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 60). During such situations, I used to tell my participants: "I do not know everything about your village, and therefore, I am here". I consider such spontaneous reflection and humility to be significantly important during any fieldwork process (Smith, 1999), because otherwise, I might overshadow my participants by prioritizing my previous knowledge of the place and community, and therefore not be able to separate the unique experiences of the participants. I overcame such difficulties, challenges, and dilemmas by remaining rooted in the lived experiences of my participants and their everyday struggles.

The many ways of doing ethnography

Why the conversational method?

In the initial period of my fieldwork, I struggled with how to locate my methods within the contexts of my participants. I constantly kept asking myself questions in the field: How will I make my participants feel part of my fieldwork study process? and How can I engage them differently from the traditional practice of conducting an interview, as it would require sitting in front of the participant and expecting them to answer the questions that I would pose to them?. I refer here to a style of interview known as the doxastic model— where an interviewer asks questions and the interviewee is then expected to answer all of them "without engaging in *dialogue and deliberation*" (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020, p. 300, emphasis mine). Such a traditional type of interview practice ignores the subjectivity of the participants, in other words, "othering" the subjects (also refer to Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000). Atkinson (2015) argues that such a style of interview

> provide[s] little or no opportunity to investigate the multiple forms of social organization and action that are the stuff of everyday life. They yield information (of sorts) in a vacuum, bereft of the sensory and material means of mundane reality. They furnish no opportunity to study the techniques and skills that social actors deploy in the course of their daily lives, or in accomplishing specialized tasks. (p. 92)

Scholars who are opposed to the doxastic model of interview, therefore, suggest an innovative alternative method known as the "conversational method" (Kovach, 2010) to co-construct (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020, p. 300) or co-produce (Lyons and Chipperfield, 2000) new knowledge by moving away from the conventional mode of interview.

The conversational method is used as part of indigenous methodologies as a means to gather knowledge while engaging in research with indigenous communities. This method is significant within the indigenous paradigm, as oral storytelling is congruent

with indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003). It considers orality as a means of transmitting knowledge (Kovach, 2010, p. 40–42; Hunt, 2014). Culturally, it is an organic means of gathering knowledge within indigenous research (Bishop, 1999; Thomas, 2005). The characteristics of the conversational method also involve considering particular tribal epistemology as relational and purposeful and are informed by local protocols by allowing informality, flexibility, collaborative/dialogic practice, and reflexivity (Kovach, 2010, p. 43; Bodhi, 2022a).

Being guided by similar approaches, I utilized unstructured in-depth interviews in order to prompt conversations between myself and my participants. I engaged with them by immersing myself within the community, hanging out with my participants in mundane areas, and not bothering much with formalities. I kept acknowledging the importance of engaged listening (Forsey, 2010), waiting, learning, and following the same process in different situations and contexts as part of the conversational method (also refer to Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003, p. 213). In this way, I refrained from using conventional types of interviews while engaging in research within a Tribal context (also refer to Kovach, 2009, 2010).

After immersion in the field, I realized that Tripura, as a Tribal community, is not at all familiar with this so-called conventional style of interview. At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I initially told them that I would like to conduct interviews with them, many seemed to be uncomfortable with an interview style of communication. However, later some youths did show some interest, under the understanding that I had come to their village to interview them for government jobs. One of the youths even told me that he waited for me in his house to be interviewed. Such expectations are perhaps to be expected, given that most of the youths in the village are unemployed. It took me some time to make my participants understand that I had not come to their village to interview them for a job. After such contextual experiences, I decided to distance myself from any kind of formal research tools or other formalities such as recording dates, times, and places. After a few months, when I became more familiar with the daily activities of the villagers, I used to walk to their houses and we would spontaneously have conversations together. Of course, my participants were aware of the purpose of my visit, and I made sure to ask their permission to record our conversations. The conversations took place in the village yard, in tea shops, by the roadside, and even inside the truck while traveling to the weekly market at Gonda Twisa. Some detailed conversations with villagers also took place while taking a bath together in the village stream or roaming together in huk (Jhum) areas.

I consider the conversational method similar to storytelling (Drawson et al., 2017), something the Tripura community practice as part of their daily life. I also took care to follow community protocols such as asking permission, respecting elders, and ensuring that the process was reflective of their knowledge and was flexible (Kovach, 2010). Moreover, I constantly connected it to my research focus by repetitively conversing with them about their experiences with the state and development in mundane ways (Gupta, 1995, 2012; Sharma and Gupta, 2006). Having conversations congruent to their daily lives allowed me to understand nuances with respect to the meaning of the state, as experienced by the villagers in contemporary Tripura. Apart from having conversations with elders, youths, school teachers, village clubs, and a women's self-help group, I also had conversations with local elites such as politicians and other state representatives in order to understand views from various standpoints. In this study, however, I have privileged the voices of those members of the marginalized community and did not take the side of elite politicians and other state representatives.

Engaged or detached observation?

Engaged observation is based on the philosophical understanding that social reality is fundamentally diverse and its multiple constituents are in perpetual dialogue. Any attempt to forcefully homogenize social realities or overgeneralize them amounts to epistemic violence (Bodhi, 2020). Therefore, attempting to understand such realities involves engaging with the communities not as a lonely external observer but as an engaged observer (Gerharz, 2017, p. 10). Unlike the detached observer (with a clear distinction subject-object), whose purpose rests on the ideals of objectivity, I approached my research as an engaged participant/observer (Dreyer, 1998; Gerharz, 2017; Bodhi, 2020). In conventional ethnography, the researcher is expected to maintain a strict boundary, recording as a detached observer while engaging as a participant observer (Dreyer, 1998). In this study, however, I positioned myself as an insider (subject-subject) and as an engaged observer, immersing myself closely within the community. I thoroughly reflected on my own positionality (Gerharz, 2017, p. 13) as a researcher, despite being an insider. Being an insider does not mean that I am freed from any possibility for reflection (refer to Kwame, 2017). Using reflexivity, I sought out relevant stories as an engaged observer. I entered the field as an engaged participant observer, continually took upon the role of observer, and remained an observer without specifically stopping, which to me is nothing like dominant approaches to ethnography which normally demand a formal exit. In my case, as a member of the same Tribal community, I have less chance of disassociating from my participants, even after the completion of the research project (refer to Robey and Taylor, 2018). Moreover, the effects caused by the publishing of my studies would most likely also affect me, my family members, my relatives, and my villagers, giving me an added impetus to tell their stories.

It is in this context that I employed engaged participant observation (Dreyer, 1998; Gerharz, 2017; Robey and Taylor, 2018; Bodhi, 2020) to observe the everyday life of Tripura people in Bagirath village and other locations in Tripura. I was part of their everyday engagements with the state to better understand their nuanced relationships with it. I navigated with them wherever they moved locations to understand how the state operates in their everyday life and impacts their sense of hope and frustration. As an engaged observer, I also participated in every village meeting. I observed community uncertainties, survival strategies, new aspirations, power dynamics, and everyday negotiations with the state with regard to basic village infrastructure such as roads, water, electricity, and government development programs. I navigated with them when they visited local state stakeholders, such as the electricity office, the local chairperson, and other village committee (panchayat) members. Not confining myself only to the limits of my chosen village, I traveled with village members to participate in protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) held in Gonda Twisa and Khumulung (near Agartala) in Tripura. During the protest against the CAB, my participants treated me as an insider, as they perceived that the bill would affect me equally due

to my membership in the same community. Immersing myself as an "engaged observer" (Gerharz, 2017, p. 10) has, therefore, blurred the boundaries between academics, an insider, and activism, yet the above framework made it possible for me to understand how members of Tribal communities imagined the state in its various forms and also the complex power relations rooted within their specific contexts.

Sitting around the fire

Focus group discussions were another method through which I generated the situated knowledge of the Tripura Tribe and how they imagine and perceive the modern development state in their everyday lives. In the indigenous methodology framework, a focus group discussion (Becker et al., 2006) is termed a "talking circle" underscoring the indigenous epistemological importance of relationships (Wilson, 2001). Recording the discussions from talking circles allowed me to remain culturally rooted to my participants while having discussions with them about their lived realities. Conducting focus group discussions as a research tool meant being congruent with the belief systems and practices of the Tripura community and their ways of sharing in their everyday life.

The Tripura community follows cultural practices that consider the eldest in the family and community elders to be the most knowledgeable persons in that group or within the community irrespective of their gender, community standing, education, political affiliation, or economic status (Tripura, 1978; Jena and Tripura, 2009; also refer to Braun et al., 2013). The elders are often not addressed directly by name, but rather are respectfully called da/dada/ata (elder brother), boboi (elder sister), or totoi (uncle) relationships that are normally given utmost importance. Unlike in western society, addressing elders directly by name is considered disrespectful or rude within the Tripura community. Due to my Tribal background, I am aware of these contextual practices. Keeping in mind these protocols, I conducted a discussion with community members in order to help me understand the past and present complexities in their society, and their everyday imaginations of the state and experiences with development. In the Tripura society, there is a common saying "*Boddhi thakhalai bokhurok thaitam ni daio thangde*" which means that when one is in search of new knowledge or opinion, one should take advice from the eldest person in the village, regarding them as the most knowledgeable persons in the society. This demonstrates how community knowledge is passed forward from generation to generation.

The sharing of knowledge or associated discussions within the Tripura community also takes place within the kitchen area, when elders sit down around the fire and tell stories of events and experiences with the state from their everyday practices. They also gather together over meals as a means of sharing togetherness (refer to Smith, 1999). In my fieldwork, I gathered situated knowledge from discussions with the elders from the community in accordance with when and where it was most convenient for them and with less formality. Moreover, I conducted several talking circles with women's self-help groups and the village club (Bhattacharyya, 2021) "Chubalainai Committee" (village welfare committee). I refer to

this type of facilitating discussions as the "sitting around the fire" method, as all participants sat around the fire in conversation during the cold winter, comfortably warming ourselves at the same time. Connor and Napan (2021) point out that sitting around an open fire, telling stories, talking, and "yarning" have long been practiced in Tribal societies (p. 80). Similarly, villagers in Tripura often burnt firewood during the winter season and surrounded the fire to tell stories. I witnessed that sitting around a fire during the winter was the most comfortable place for them to share stories and events. Many villagers also sat together around the fire in their respective kitchens. I mostly facilitated discussions with participants by sitting myself around the fire either in kitchens or outside in places where firewood would be burnt. Facilitating discussions in this way allowed me to have spontaneous discussions and minimize potential power imbalances between us. Connor and Napan (2021, p. 86) further argue that sitting around the fire enhances the potential for deeper dialogues, respectful relationships, and mutual learning and generates rich discussions. My similar understanding of sitting around the fire enabled me to privilege the people's voices.

Conclusion: Critical reflexivity as key to indigenous research

After my own engagement in research within a Tribal context, one of the most important lessons I learned is that the researcher should not fall into the trap of defining their research according to the socio-anthropological methodological debates concerning the insider–outsider dilemma. Bodhi (2022a, p. 11) argues that the "insider–outsider" debate is itself a colonial construct and appeals that every serious researcher should engage in Tribal studies in India, no matter what social background they belong to. In other words, defining a strict either/or boundary will only narrow the scope of indigenous methodologies. Neither should a native researcher be considered exclusively an insider nor should a non-native researcher be treated as incapable of conducting indigenous research, if that researcher approaches the task with the intention of decolonizing the dominant methodological framework. The identities of any researcher, as insider or outsider, are continuously negotiated throughout the research process, as shown in the different cases presented in this article. In the same vein, Blix (2015) argues that a researcher's "identities as an insider or an outsider are continuously negotiated, unfinalized, and open-ended" (p. 179). Furthermore, Kwame (2017) points out that since researcher identities are complex and cannot easily be defined, indigenous research cannot and should not be reserved for Tribal scholars only. To widen the scope of indigenous methodologies and frameworks, there is a need for continuing solidarity and engagement between Tribal and non-tribal researchers; as indigenous methodologies cannot remain a paradigmatic monopoly.

While navigating my multiple identities and positionalities, I was confronted with questions and dilemmas: What is it, that is important when engaging in research within the Tribal context in India?; What is my frame of reference?; Is it the same "universal-particular" frame of reference like that of the colonial gaze, that will further subjugate the understanding of Tribal people?; Or does it pursue a diverse co-existence framework (Bodhi, 2022a)

which assumes that social reality is constituted by diverse realities? After reflecting on the above questions, I came to realize that every social reality has its own particular interconnectedness to its own universe within its frame of reference, and it is all about various points of view as opposed to a single, universal point of view.

In this article, I emphasize that for any research project in the Tribal context in India, it is essential to first decolonize the researcher's mind (wa Thiong'o, 1981; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2003; Kovach, 2009; Kwame, 2017; Sinha, 2021) and to de-caste (Ramaiah, 1998; Bodhi, 2016, 2020; Kumar, 2016; Darokar and Bodhi, 2022) the researcher's own frame of reference, at least specific to the Indian context. By "decolonizing the mind", I refer here to the need to reject the old universal-particular frame of reference and instead perceive social realities as "plural" or recognize the potential for "many ways of doing" within a pluriverse of societies. In other words, it means a refusal to perceive Tribal people with the same colonial frame of reference, i.e., the dominant ethnography gaze (also refer to wa Thiong'o, 1981; Smith, 1999). By "de-caste", I refer here to the urgent need of dominant caste researchers to de-caste their very frame of reference and position/perceive Tribal societies as diverse and equal with other societies. When one refuses to "de-caste", but continues to take part in the knowledge enterprise by theorizing on Tribal people, a researcher's perspective is no different from earlier so-called ethnographers or social anthropologists (refer to Kumar, 2016) who perceived Tribes as either primitive or backward. Similar to Xaxa (2008), I also argue that tribal societies are in a constant process of transformation, and they should be treated like any other society, and therefore dominant caste epistemology cannot be a premise in understanding non-caste epistemologies (i.e., those in tribal societies). I also emphasize in this article that research with Tribal people in India can lead to their emancipation or becomes morally ethical only when it attempts to undo the Tribal epistemicide or the historical pain meted out by both the colonial ethnographers and the dominant caste ethnographers (refer to Kumar, 2016), and pursued with the goal of epistemological healing (Darokar and Bodhi, 2022) as an alternative "lived" approach from the periphery.

However, this emancipatory frame of reference is possible only when "reflexivity" is prioritized by the researcher (both Tribal and non-tribal), by considering the indigenous research paradigm. Such a paradigm must pursue research methodologies that are relationally accountable, responsible (Gerharz, 2017), and remain sensitive to other people's ways of knowing, that is, which assume social realities are multiple or plural. Thus, if reflexivity as part of Tribal research is not accompanied by a deeper sense of responsibility and sensitivity, then it can be said to be but another form of the colonial ways of engaging in research—following the same universal-particular frame of reference. In other words, reflexivity without a sense of responsibility equates to a colonially privileged position of the researcher. In order to congruently relate to Tribal ways of being, knowing, and doing, reflexivity within Tribal research must abide by the values of the Tribal research paradigm, irrespective of the researcher's social background or their position as an insider or an outsider. Such an approach would likely bring with it the possibility to fundamentally shift away from the colonial universal-particular gaze and to engage in research from a particular-universal frame of reference. Bodhi (2022a) adds to this thought by arguing that "while cognitive empathy requires a great degree of sensitivity arrived

at through critical reflexivity between self and the other/external reality, the state of emotive empathy has to be cultivated as part of a conscious research practice of 'turning the gaze within' or 'into the self' while operating in the external reality. Looking within to look without is part of this cultivation process" (p. 9). Reflexivity, therefore, demands a continuous process of looking within, to the self and the other; and it can be arrived upon by any serious researcher looking at the Tribal people of India. Critical reflexivity within Tribal research, therefore, demands considering social realities as multiple, with multiple truths, an interconnectedness of all things in the cosmos, reciprocity, research participants as co-constructors of knowledge, and a belief that knowledge production can take place with respect and dialogue.

This article has examined the need for decolonizing the practices of ethnography when engaging in research within the context of the Tribal people of India. Through an empirical study, it has demonstrated many ways of decolonizing ethnography practices employing alternative, related methodologies: conversational, engaged observation, and sitting around the fire. It has shown that the possibility to decolonize fieldwork practices within Tribal communities can only be a reality when research methods/approaches are congruent with indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. A mere reflexivity is not enough to decolonize the dominant research processes, unless it is accompanied by a deeper sense of responsibility, sensitivity, and the transparent situating of the researcher's location in relation to the research context. Moreover, specific to the Indian context, this article has emphasized that any serious researcher involved with Tribes must first decolonize their mind in order to reject the universal-particular frame of reference and to adopt a context-specific frame of reference, and concurrently de-caste themselves within in order to look without, putting themselves on the path to decolonizing ethnography practices.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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