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Main Article:

My Life's Journey as Researcher

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Abstract

In this narrative of my life as a researcher, I have presented my understanding of research practice, basing it, of course, on a sample of size one--myself, nonetheless observed carefully for over four decades now. Therefore, readers may take it as a trigger to clarify their own self-understanding as researchers. In my life's journey as a researcher, I have followed my passions and charted new territory, sometimes inadvertently. Research has been for me a life-long journey of discovery--of who I am, of the world around me, and the meaning of life. This has driven me beyond the boundaries of received tradition, often into uncharted territory. Over the years I have put together my own tool kit, sharpening my intellectual skills as needed for the problem at hand.

The focus of my research has been myth and image in their cultural context. My research on the miniature paintings of India, and their organic links with certain texts and cultural modes of being, have transformed me in fundamental ways. I have come to regard my own experience of being a woman as central to my experience of the world. In the more recent years, I have been inquiring into the religion of the Mother Goddess. This has brought me to Orissa for fieldwork in a living tradition--that of the village goddess. I have reached so far in my journey of research by continuously expanding my intellectual boundaries as well as pushing the edges of my discipline into new frontiers.

Keywords: art history; feminism; integral research; self-transformation

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1. Research: Ethical Implications

According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, research is exhaustive investigation, studious inquiry or examination, critical and exhaustive experimentation having for its aim discovery of new facts. I would agree with all of the above but, in addition, suggest that a certain quality of mind and personality mark the researcher *par excellence*. The key characteristics are an insatiable curiosity, a sense of adventure, and commitment to value-laden education. Quality research is not just about publishing for career advancement but for the social good. Researchers are involved in the generation of knowledge and they are personally implicated in the way it will be used. Ethical choices often must be made in determining the use to which their research findings will be put.

One dramatic example of the ethical dilemma choice can pose is that which confronted the atomic scientists at Los Alamos as they planned to test the first atomic bomb. Would it set off a chain reaction that might result in a global fire which could not be contained and cause the destruction of the world? To what end had they discovered how to split the atom and the power this could generate? The success of their research has created yet another epoch, the Nuclear Age with the ever-present threat of the extinction of humankind. Theirs was perhaps what might be called a Faustian bargain, i.e., a bargain in which one is willing to sacrifice anything to satisfy a limitless desire for knowledge or power. In a recent opera by the composer John Adams, *Doctor Atomic*, Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the project, faulted for his decision to test the bomb, has been named after Faust. As Oppenheimer himself remarked in reality, there is something compellingly sweet about the challenge of research being pushed to its ultimate limit.

Social science research is yet another kind of ballgame. Human interaction between the researcher and her subject inevitably changes the field studied. There is a growing sensitivity against the imperialism of the First World ethnographers studying the Third World "natives," generating new knowledge and thereby advancing their own professional careers. In addition, results of participatory research, that involves the subject as an actor, are still suspect. Moral responsibility is involved when entering into another's life-world.

Historians are well aware that facts often bear little or no relationship to what happened on the ground, and that interpretation is constructed through the lens of the interpreter. We cannot help but be reminded of the invidious current debate on the Aryan invasions on which reactionary Hindu nationalists reject all evidence of any cultural influence from outside the subcontinent in the formation of Indic culture.

And then there are cross-cultural issues. To what extent can one ever fully enter into the consciousness of someone from a radically different culture? It is a truism that you always bring yourself with you into your research. Matters of judgment inadvertently arise. For example, who has the right to condemn the widespread practice of female circumcision in Africa, renamed female genital mutilation by those who hold it as child abuse? These are hot topics of debate in the academe. On the other hand, the reality of

violence in the global world in which we all now live demands effective means to understand the experience of this violence.

Having made some sweeping generalizations about the perils of research, let us now consider how research can generate both personal and social good. I shall use my own experience as the primary example of such possibility.

2. Discovering the Researcher Within

I am a citizen of United States who has been coming to India for the past 40 years. My academic specialty has been the art, religion, and culture of India. My training was multi-disciplinary in art history, history of religion, and cultural anthropology in the South Asia Area Studies Program at the University of Chicago, from where I have a PhD from the Committee on the History of Culture. The focus of my research has been myth and image in their cultural context, and in more recent years, the religion of the Mother Goddess. This has brought me to Orissa for fieldwork in a living tradition--that of the village goddess, whose roots are in what is often referred to as "the dim mists of prehistory." I had previously published a study of the recovery of the religion of the goddess in Europe and West Asia; but that was based on library research of a long dead tradition (Gadon, 1989).

Research has been for me a life-long journey of discovery--of who I am, of the world around me, and the meaning of life. Gifted with some intelligence, an insatiable curiosity, and a lively mind, I have always wondered how and why things are the way they are, how we got there, and where we are going.

As a child my passion was reading. On my weekly visits to the town library, I took out as many books as I could carry and, over the years, read from one end of the children's section to the other. A solitary child, I lived in my imagination, identifying with my storied heroines. At 10, after years of gorging on mythology and folklore, I composed a family epic that had little to do with the hard facts. I claimed a far more glamorous origin. I told my younger sister that we were really the English princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose; our fortunes reversed like that of the boys in Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*. She protested and cried because she loved our parents and our family home just as they were. I pleaded with the librarians for access to adult books. Let loose in the main library, my favorites were biographies and travel adventures. At 13, I claimed Marie Curie as my model. I would become a great scientist and marry a fellow researcher. Romantic adolescent that I was, the die was cast, and I went off to the university to major in chemistry.

But life's pathways are not always straight. I married an economics student who, as it turned out, was not looking for an intellectual partner. My career plans were side-tracked by motherhood and it was only years later, when my children were adolescents, that I returned to graduate school. By then I had traveled around the world and lived for a year in Calcutta (now Kolkata, in India) where my husband had been posted to help establish the Indian Institute of Management. We traveled extensively over the whole of the subcontinent. Always keenly visually aware, I feasted on all the wonders before me,

understanding little of what I saw. The experiences of that year were a wake up call reactivating my passion to know and understand the world and my life's journey in it.

3. Research and Transformation

My approach to research is eclectic. I have not done research in any so-called practical field. To a social scientist, my research interests may well seem too extraneous, too esoteric. But I believe that cultural knowledge, knowledge of one's own culture as well as those of others is of critical importance to the researcher if for no other reason than to sensitize oneself to ethnocentric biases.

Over the years I have put together my own tool kit, sharpening my intellectual skills as needed for the problem at hand. I have always been an adventurer and rebel, resisting the heavy hand of authority and the rigidity of conventional ways. I was fortunate that the women's movement came along in my time providing a vibrant community of like-minded sisters with whom I could work for the transformation of culture so as to create a more just world for all--men, women, and children alike.

My standpoint on research practice stems from an instinctive and uncontrollable desire to know the world, and not just to be a mute participant. For me, research has been a way to engage with the world more actively in order to know it better. In this, I have moved towards the notion of research as a search for meaning, rather than restricting myself to the relatively more evident world of observations.

My earliest memory is when at the age of 3, while exploring the wildflowers and buzzing insects in the high grass of the meadow that surrounded our country home, I decided to undress so that I could more fully feel the impact of the gentle warm sunshine on my naked body. I heard a car coming up the driveway and ran excitedly to greet the family guests, expecting to be picked up, hugged, and kissed, but I was spanked for taking off my clothes. Many years later while hiking in the French Alps, I came upon an Alpine meadow ablaze with wildflowers so dense that the scene below looked like a rich many-hued carpet. The memory of that long forgotten childhood experience came back to me vividly, flooding my being once again with the childish wonder at the glory of nature in all her abundance.

I share this personal anecdote because it is suggestive of where our curiosity can lead when we are willing to take the risk of spontaneously following our impulses. Sometimes, it is true, the outcome may be a disaster, large or small, but it can also leave a deep psychic imprint of bodily experience fully lived. That unjust spanking in no way inhibited my adventurous spirit.

A curious child, I always wanted to know "why" and was probably the bane of my mother's existence. She was always lamenting, "You are not like any of the rest of us" and, expressing her frustration through an American idiom, would tell me that I was "driving her crazy." I was famed in family circles for announcing, "I am what I am," in response to being scolded over some mischief of mine. Now that I think of it, it sounds

rather like a Tantric maxim, *saa aham*--I am She, alluding to the idea of woman as goddess.

You might well inquire what made me, a product of Euro-American culture where God the Father reigns supreme and alone in monotheistic Judaism and Christianity, interested in the female godhead. The answer is the spirit of adventure that has guided my life's journey. Way back in 1967 when I first went to India, I knew nothing about her culture or religion. Over the years, I have realized the value of studying culture and religion together, as parts of the same system, especially in India.

As I mentioned earlier, I first came to India in 1967, with my husband. He was part of a team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) that helped establish management education in India. It was his professional opportunity but the choice of India was mine. In those heady days when management science on an international level was still in its early stages of development, the Ford Foundation sponsored American professors who, because it was their baby, had the know-how to help build management institutes all over the world. My husband was given the choice of Barcelona or Calcutta and he deferred to me, his discontented wife, yearning for adventure. While he had been everywhere, traveling in Asia and Europe, in the military and as a management consultant, I had stayed at home looking after our children. Without a moment's hesitation I chose Calcutta. His colleagues were puzzled. Barcelona is one of the most delightful cities in the world with a heavenly Mediterranean climate. And Calcutta! How could I even consider bringing our four young children to live in a city famed for its dirt, disease, poverty, political disorder, and deplorable climate! I replied that I wanted them to experience the world, to open their eyes to the human condition in all its variety while they were still in their formative years. And as it has turned out, their Indian adventure has marked them; all are actively engaged as social activists through their respective professions, working for the betterment of their society.

That first year in India turned out to be the most important one of my life. My experience of India radically transformed me. I had identified myself as an agnostic; but now I saw the world as sacred. The intellectual product of a dualist worldview in which everything was polarized--good or bad, man or woman, light or dark--I discovered a fluid, nuanced world of continuities, ambiguities, and paradoxes. And perhaps most importantly, I discovered *shakti*, the power of the sacred female in the omnipresent image of the Hindu goddesses: beautiful, powerful, sensual, and sexual. Back in those days, before the women's movement had raised public consciousness, there was no awareness of the female divinity in Western culture. All motifs of sacred female had been purged from Europe by proselytizing Christianity. The last goddess temple was closed down in the fifth century by a newly converted Roman emperor.

We traveled widely that year, all over the Indian subcontinent, as my husband gave lectures and seminars to managers in industry and government. Wherever we went, his sponsors would ask me, "Madam, what would you like to see?" and opening the pages of my tour book I would name the local temples, *tirthas*--those sacred places of pilgrimage, museums, festivals, and so on. Everywhere I saw images of beautiful, powerful, sensual, and sexual females. And on the way, I experienced the power of *shakti*--cosmic energy as

a female force. And I could never go back to my old ways of seeing and being in the world. I did not understand what had happened to me then. It was only years later when I was studying Indian culture in Chicago that I became aware of the cultural and political implications of my growing awareness of the sacred female. God was in me. My body and sexuality were sacred. Like the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo, I discovered the power of the integration of body, mind, and spirit.

4. Motivations, Methods, and Meanings

Curiosity is only the first step for doing a successful research project. Quality research also demands patience, commitment, and discipline. You discover all the dead ends and disappointments to which your answers can lead.

Research is said to be about generating new knowledge. But this cannot always be done with old ways. We have a saying in the academic feminist circles that one cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools--to transform society you need new social practices. Therefore, research is also about creating new tools and practices more suited to the task one undertakes. This was indeed the focus of the PhD program in women's studies I designed at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS).

CIIS is a fully accredited non-traditional graduate school with over a 1,000 students. It primarily trains counselors and psychotherapists. When invited by the President to develop Masters and PhD programs in women's studies and given free reign by him, I was able to incorporate my integral approach to research as well as my philosophical stance on the value of a non-hierarchical and relational pedagogy for doctoral students. I was training my women's studies doctoral students to be change agents. This initiative was the product of my life's journey as a researcher. My students developed their own approach to *integral research* they named "organic inquiry," which used ongoing self-reflection as a key practice. I view this program as a model for graduate education in the twenty-first century.

The questions asked are as important as the answers. They are the gate keepers, the direction finders for your navigation in uncharted waters. When the time came to choose a topic for dissertation research, I asked myself: What it is that I most hoped to learn from this project that would engage me for some years and chart the direction of my professional career?

Most of all I wanted a topic that would provide an entry into Indian culture. As an art historian--that was how I identified myself in those days--I looked at the domain of Indian miniature painting, especially Rajput painting, which is my favorite style. I delighted in its bright colors and the bold compositions, their mood, so intense and passionate, much like the India I wanted to understand. Indian miniature painting, a product of Mughal and Rajput court patronage from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, is considered one of the great glories of the Indic civilization. These small paintings around 8x10 inches have two themes: either illustration of scripture or poetry, sacred and profane, or images of royalty--portraits of the rulers, their *darbars*--formal and informal vignettes of court life, and scenes of royal hunts. For me they were also a pathway into

the understanding of Indian religion and culture. Thus, my research interest was triggered by aesthetic pleasure.

For my point of entry into this fascinating world, I choose as my subject the *krishnalila*--stories of the god Krishna's adventures as a child and adolescent lover. According to A. K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), who introduced Indian art to the US, the *krishnalila* was the inspiration for the Renaissance of art and culture in India during sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. So I decided that for my dissertation research I would do a case study of the earliest known illustration of the *krishnalila*, Bilvamangala's *Balagopalastuti*, hymns of praise to the child and cowherd Krishna (Gadon, 2006), an early fifteenth-century manuscript painted in the western Indian style. In this way I would test Coomaraswamy's thesis demonstrating through my research the visual sources of the Rajput painting style. I was familiar with the *Balagopalastuti* because Coomaraswamy had bought 43 folios of an incomplete Sanskrit manuscript for the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where I worked. I knew from published articles that there were others in India.

I would set out on a treasure hunt in the land of their origin and see what I could find and learn. My guide was the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who advocated "dense research"--to pursue all possible avenues of inquiry (Geertz, 1973).

But now as I reflect back on my choice of research agenda, I am aware of how much more than intellectual curiosity motivated my choice. The sacred narrative of Krishna's adventures resonated with my deepest yearnings, those personal experiences that held the meaning of life for me, my family, my love for my children, and my passion for their father, my husband and lover. During that first year in Calcutta, we had become friendly with a Vaisnava family whose children were of the same ages as mine. They would invite us to their home for the celebration of Krishna's festivals where their young daughters enacted in dance and song the stories of mischievous, playful child Krishna. In that family, the relationships between the parents and children were so genuinely loving, affectionate, and respectful--a way of being in nuclear families that we had lost in the US, if we ever had it in our highly individualistic and materialist culture. I yearned for the peace and harmony of family life, but alas in thoroughly modern US, I had raised four impulsive and troublesome children who constantly fought with each other and paid little respect to their parents. This was the 1960s in US when the youth was in rebellion against all rules and restrictions.

Years later, when I had the privilege of befriending Srivatsa Goswami of Vrindaban, who then, like me was a postgraduate student and research fellow at the Harvard Divinity School, I came to know Krishna in a deeper way. In our many long conversations, I came to understand Krishna theologically as the god incarnated in human form because he knew how to love better than anyone. As they say in Vrindaban, wherever there is Krishna, there is love and beauty. And I have come to name *krishnabhakti* as the aesthetic mode of worship. I am not a devotee. Krishna is not my God but I have lost my heart to him. I can understand a god whom you love with the tender feelings a mother has for her small child, and a woman for the man with whom she is utterly passionately involved.

So with Srivatsa's friendship and introduction to Krishna's ways, I began my research journey in India by joining the Krishna pilgrimage, the *banyatra*, led by his father, Purosottam Goswami, the head priest of the Radha Raman temple and linear descendent of Rupa Goswami, one of the 6 *gosains*, followers of Caitanya who codified his revelations and established the Gaudiya Vaisnava tradition. The pilgrimage is a month-long journey through Braj, the sacred land of Krishna, 39 square mile area of villages and towns, fields and river surrounding Vrindaban, Krishna's holy city. It was an arduous, grueling experience as we walked 6 to 8 miles everyday in the heat and rain and mud of the August monsoon. I never completed the scheduled 30 days but stayed long enough to understand what it meant to my fellow pilgrims to travel in their beloved god's footsteps.

We would stop at those places along the way where Krishna had acted out one of his *lilas*--his play in the phenomenal world. As we stood or sat on the ground around Puroshottam, he would read aloud from the scripture, the *dasama-skandha*--the tenth volume of the *Bhagavata Purana*. As they listened to the stories of Krishna's adventures as a small child and adolescent cowherd, the devotees would experience Krishna's presence among them and would envision his play and dance in the beautiful flowering groves of Vrindaban. All I saw was the barren, desiccated, and treeless landscape, but I had learned a priceless lesson: the power of faith.

I left Vrindaban and went on another kind of pilgrimage back and forth across the subcontinent in search of the scattered folios of the *Balagopalastuti*. I relentlessly pursued every lead as my journey took me to private and public collections, to collectors and museums from Mumbai to Hyderabad, from Calcutta to Ahmedabad. I was lucky. In the end, I found 13 series, one copied from the other over a 200-year period, all of Gujarati provenance. If 13 survived the perils of war, fire, flood, and insects, there might have been many more. My analysis of the relation between text and picture demonstrates that this was a direct commentary of the Krishna scripture, the *dasama-skanda* of the *Bhagavata Purana*. The iconographic changes in the illustrations over the 200-year period document changes in the rituals of an evolving faith.

My hypothesis was that the original illustrated manuscripts of the *Balagopalastuti* had been commissioned by a *bhakta*--a devotee, as a mediation-aid so that, like the poet Bilvamangala who pleads this over and over again in his verse, the devotee might always have the vision of Krishna before oneself. The patron *bhakta* would, as it were, go on a pilgrimage, mentally, as Krishna's sacred land in Braj had not yet been recovered. Krishna's holy land existed only in the poet's imagination. Subsequently, I found the missing folios of the original early fifteenth century manuscript, three complete manuscripts and fragmentary folios of 10 others, all copied from the original over a 200-year period. My analysis of the relationship between text and paintings demonstrated that the illustrated manuscripts were a commentary on the scripture. The text was always the same but changes in iconography in the various series represented the changing rituals. This research not only enabled me to recover a major monument of Indian culture but also changed the scholarly understanding of the history of *krishnabhakti* in north India.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to present the following tentative ideas:

(a) The relationship between the researcher and the research topic: I have experienced research as a search for meaning, personal as well as cultural or universal. The process of inquiry and the process of meaning-making can be one and the same.

(b) The relationship between *eros*, creativity, and research practice: *Eros* is the life force. Through creativity we can tap into the life force, thereby activating our curiosity, the passion to know and understand.

(c) It is important to formulate the questions and take a risk, in order to expand one's own intellectual boundaries as well as push the edges of one's discipline into new frontiers.

(d) Quality research demands an enormous commitment of time, energy, and creativity. Good researchers ought to be prepared to recognize, face, and overcome the problems they encounter on the way.

In my own life's journey as a researcher, I have followed my passions and charted new territory, sometimes inadvertently. Perhaps it is indeed as Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "Be intent on action, not on the fruits of action; avoid attraction to the fruits, and attachment to inaction" (Miller, 1986, *The Second Teaching*, Verse 47).

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