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Research Note:
Moving from 'Giving Back' to Engagement

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I went home to the "field," to Delhi, India and to issues, movements, and sites that I had inhabited before I began my doctoral education at the University of California, Berkeley, United States. My research looked at changing politics of poverty in Delhi through looking at the eviction of *bastis*—settlements of income-poor urban residents that are often reductively and narrowly referred to as "slums." Delhi is a city scarred by the repeated demolitions of the homes of the poor with even official data recognizing 217 different instances of eviction between 1990 and 2007. My research asked how these evictions occurred as well as how democratic processes justified them and even presented them as legitimate acts of good governance and planning. I sought to understand what such framings told us about poverty, inequality, and citizenship in contemporary Indian cities.

Before beginning my doctoral work, I was an activist in anti-eviction social movements. I speak about it here in some detail because I consider this work inseparable from what is administratively understood as my dissertation "fieldwork." This is partly particular to those of us who do research not with the "other" but our "own," and where research is part of a continuum of our own lives and practices. My "research" began neither with my PhD nor ended when I filed my dissertation. Such a model, if one can call it that,

provokes a certain reaction to the idea of a defined moment, practice, or form of something called "giving back." I want to suggest in this reflection a different formulation, one both particular to my own choices, methods, and academic and research practice. This formulation thinks of continuous and multiple engagements with communities and sites of research rather than a frame of giving back.

Before heading to Berkeley, I spent several years working in *bastis* in Delhi with movements and associations attempting to resist and prevent evictions. After one particular eviction of a series of settlements on the banks of the River Yamuna in Delhi that were collectively called Pushta, I became involved in trying to follow the post-eviction paths of many households. After evictions in Pushta, about 15% of households were given alternative housing plots in what were called "resettlement colonies" located in the far peripheries of the city. One particular resettlement colony called Bawana was where almost all Pushta evictees were sent. On the invitation of a colleague, Kalyani Menon-Sen, I became involved in an attempt to understand the impact of eviction—how did households fare in new resettlement colonies? The government claimed that these families now had secure, legal title yet Bawana was so far from the city that it took a back-breaking 4 hour, multiple bus rides journey to get to work. Was it possible to re-create life for citizens thrown from the heart of the city and its employment geographies? Data were urgently needed to both assess the government's claims and provide evidence—one way or the other—for on-going judicial challenges to the legitimacy of evictions.

In Bawana, Kalyani and I formed and were part of a team that designed and undertook a large systematic survey of nearly 3,000 households to quantify the multiple impacts of eviction. For several days a week, she and I would travel nearly 50km from our homes to the colony, traversing both the physical and social barriers that lay between the two worlds within our city. Bawana, at the time we did our research, was, quite frankly, a nearly impossible place in which to live with dignity. Households had simply been left on empty plots of land without even a water tap. Services were non-existent; the site was dark, isolated, and under the threat of violence from nearby settlement residents who were angry that "poor people" had been dumped in their district in large numbers. Opportunities for employment were absent, the shock of eviction had depleted savings and children had been pulled out of schools.

Kalyani and I were committed to feminist research. We understood it as research that actively addressed and accounted for the power imbalances not just between men and women, but between researcher and research subject. For us, feminist methodologies were strategies to challenge social inequalities built into mainstream research methods as well as to question the very ownership of research and knowledge. We knew, for example, that the survey team must not only include us as "field workers" but also be composed of local residents so that we all could share a sense of ownership over the survey, the data, and the research itself. Each of us undertook the work, in a sense and as far as possible, as investigators in our own right and with our own stake in data gathering.

As time passed, this realization went from a theoretical and political ideal to a deeply felt conviction in both of us and, I believe though I cannot speak for them, the other members of the research team. I want to cite at length a description of what went into coming together as a team of [outside] researchers and local *basti* residents in undertaking this research. Here I borrow from the description of our final published study (Bhan & Menon-Sen, 2006):

> Training this young team was an intense, rewarding, and exhausting effort. We were clear that we were not just teaching them to mechanically fill survey forms, but building their capacities to understand and contribute to the project in substantive ways. We started by making our own perspectives and positions clear, and discussing the impact of imagined biases—of class, caste, gender, and religion—had on the way we saw our own realities and the world around us. They shared the same. Over a period of three months, we organized weekly discussion sessions on a range of issues from gender, patriarchy, power, class and caste, the Delhi Master Plan, and the evictions. We spent hours talking about and arguing about men's and women's work, bodies and sexuality, marriage and relationships, violence and identity, development and urban planning. (pp. 26-27).

The experience of these meetings transformed me. I had long battled with ethical questions of how one lives a life of privilege in contexts of extreme inequality. I had also grappled with ethical reflections particular to research practice in spaces of impoverishment within this inequality. I had the idea that I must "give back," using my own power and privilege to some end that was not yet clear to me. Yet, as our team discussed what to do together in meeting after meeting, this anxiety faded. As issues emerged that went far beyond our research and took on the pressing concerns of life in the *basti*, a new set of conversations began that I would like to think of as "engagement." Kalyani and I had not intended to have these conversations. As these began to emerge, however, we realized that these were critical to our relationship with the place where we had come to do "research." In these conversations, our research became one of the multiple ways of transforming and intervening in the *basti*. A complex, heterogeneous engagement began to form. Within it, each of us in the team had a particular role to play. The team together began to develop a kind of power and competence. We were able to acknowledge the different identities, locations, and power we each held but did not allow this to overwhelm us. Discussing our own multiple identities began to unpack and pull apart the different axes on which we came together and drifted apart: gender, class, caste, religion, and even taste, personality, and temperament. As power structures were laid out in the open, they were not defeated but blunted. What this made possible was to use power strategically rather than be caught in false dialectics of the powerful researcher and the powerless field subject.

The research stood transformed. As the team pilot-tested a draft survey instrument that Kalyani and I had initially designed, we together added questions and modified others. Kalyani and I had to explain why each question was there in the draft and, in doing so, we set many aside and the team added new ones that reflected their particular collective

and individual concerns. Our survey instrument was, in my mind, clearly co-produced. The team devised uses for the data, for example in public hearings where they invited local political leaders. They began using the data to build and organize beyond Kalyani's and my own imaginations. Kalyani and I went along to these meetings, as team members, just as they had come to join us, offering any kind of support they needed. The terms of our engagement had changed. We were not "giving back"; we were engaged—at multiple levels, times, and spaces. The research had changed and was collectively owned.

I cannot think of giving back to the communities I worked in—it is a frame that denies the relationships that we built with each other and my ability to walk into Bawana even today with a sense of ownership and involvement after several years of physical absence. I continue to engage with and shape Bawana even when not physically in it. I do so through my own practices elsewhere: teaching, advocacy, and research. Let me take one example: in my teaching at the University of California or at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements where I now teach, I refuse to use the word "slum." Instead, I make my students write *basti* instead of slum. Each time I do so, I remember a discussion in Bawana about how we must refuse the power of others to call our settlements by names that we do not ourselves use. If I were in one of our meetings in Bawana, this is what I would offer as my contribution, my practice. I believe my team would think it just as important as fighting for a new water tap.

Engagement affords multiple ways of giving that are not just limited to giving back. It allows us to transform ourselves through our engagement with the communities in which we work. Instead of a finite moment, it enables on-going attempts at transformation within these communities. Engagement can also help us bridge seemingly unbridgeable gaps of inequality and privilege if those are constantly laid bare and made open to manipulation. It is to create collective imaginations where different individuals each have their own capacities and locations. It is to fight the hierarchies between these locations as far as possible, even as these hierarchies constantly try to assert and reproduce themselves.

References

Bhan, G., & Menon-Sen, K. (2006). *Swept off the map: Surviving eviction and resettlement in Delhi*. New Delhi, India: Yoda.