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Ethnography of (In)visible Bodies

Indian Wrestlers during the Coronavirus pandemic



Life Before the Lockdown, "Scene of a local Dangal just before the lockdown" in village Barona, Sonipat, Haryana; 15 March 2020. Dangal is an essential part of Indian wrestling. Around 150 wrestlers took part in this Dangal where winning prize was INR 300000 (3500 Euros approx.). Photo by: Santram Antil

It certainly has been a turbulent year. The spread of the Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has potentially affected every human being on the planet. In India, the first case of SARS-CoV-2 was reported on 30 January 2020 and first death was reported on 13 March 2020 in Karnataka (South India). In response, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a 14 hours long 'Janata Curfew' (Janata means People) followed by a national lockdown for twenty-one days starting from 25 March 2020 to 14 April 2020. Following this declaration, 1.3 billion people and their everyday life came to a halt. All research and educational institutes, places of worship, public and private travel,

sports activities were suspended. As the number of cases grew rapidly, the lockdown was extended further until 31 May 2020 in four phases.

Since the start of the year, the city of Delhi was constantly in the news. The courageous women of Shaheen Bagh (South Delhi) were at the forefront of the protest against the notorious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which provided citizenship to all migrants from neighbouring countries except Muslim migrants. This was the first time that religion was made a criteria for the determination of Indian citizenship. The country was divided into pro – and anti – CAA supporters. The growing communal tension in the city eventually culminated in an anti-Muslim pogrom (23 February – 29 February 2020) in which more than fifty-five people lost their lives. My phone was constantly bombarded with Facebook and WhatsApp notifications consisting of posts, videos, memes, audios of the protest and the attack. Though I was in Berlin (Germany), I felt connected to my field through this 'virtual archive'. The virtual archive created a 'sensorium' (visual, oral, written) that remains crucial to understand how old and new media combine to form virtual resources for a 'leaderless' social movement that spread across India (See Das 2020). The virtual resources and platforms remain significant site during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Ethnography of (in)visible bodies

I arrived in Delhi from Berlin on 22 February 2020. At the time, India had only 3 cases of SARS-CoV-2. As I was preparing to begin my short fieldwork in early March, there certainly was a sense of sadness as well as hope. Despite the upheaval caused by pogrom, I was hopeful because as an anthropologist I was on the field, and it gave me an opportunity to examine and capture the experiences and voices on the field.

The envisaged objective of my short fieldwork was to identify a wrestling *Akhara* (academy or gymnasium) where I could stay and conduct a yearlong fieldwork during

my second year of PhD. (2021). I wanted to collect the experiences of Muslim and Dalit wrestlers concerning the changes brought about by rapid urbanization and the new 'idea of modernity' in the region of NCR (National Capital Region) and its impact on the wrestler's body. Within this new idea of modernity, the middle class from which most of the wrestlers come from aspire to achieve the new muscular ideals inspired from the western lifestyle. These aspirations are manifested in the bodies through distinct bodily regime. Indian wrestling famously known as *Kushti*, is practiced by people from various religious and caste groups in *Akhara*. Wrestlers live a distinctive 'way of life' unique to the sport. The wrestlers form a distinct identity which cut across religious, regional and caste ties (Alter 1992). They live in *Akhara* in close proximity and practice wrestling in soft mud pit. *Dangal* (local tournaments) are a mean of economic sustenance for wrestlers. They are organised throughout the year by local village councils, politicians, religious institutions and *Dera* (local cult camps) under various religious and non-religious settings. *Dangal* are the lifeline for a huge number of wrestlers as they move from one place to another to earn money. Thus, wrestling in North India is not only a leisure sport but a livelihood.

The coronavirus has been causing an unprecedented impact on people's lives. For an anthropologist, it has posed a great challenge as ethnographic fieldwork has become '(im)possible' (Miller 2020). On one hand, the imposing urgency of the phenomena invites anthropologists to study it at the global as well as the local level, but on the other hand, it raises crucial methodological and practical challenges. Public health officials have stressed on the practice of 'social distancing' to tackle the spread of coronavirus. But for 'contact sport' such as *Kushti* wrestling, social distancing is not a feasible option. It not only restricted wrestling bouts but also interrupted the source of income for the wrestling community.

After the lockdown and social distancing had been established, I quickly acquainted myself with the existing field site via social media platforms. I became part of the already existing wrestling community on Facebook and WhatsApp groups by using

methods from Netnography, which is an adaptation of ethnography (participatory observation) but applies to online connections, and communications that people form with one another (Kozinets 2010). I did online 'participatory observation' for a month on the social media platforms (three WhatsApp groups and One Facebook Page) and tried to capture the interaction of (in)visible bodies. I 'observed' the WhatsApp groups and their interactions and content shared on them and 'participated' by offering my helping hand if I could. I attended live sessions on the Facebook page titled, *Kushti Hech Jiwan* (Wrestling is life) and also interviewed the page admin to understand his perspective on wrestling and the impact of SARS-CoV-2 on wrestler's lives and bodies. In this context, I worked with four individuals with whom I developed a close relationship over a period of time. They were associated with wrestling and understood wrestling from different perspectives: Vikas Dahiya, a male wrestler, from Haryana (North India); Madhuri, a lower caste female wrestler from Haryana; Arun Dubey, a *Kushti* reporter and journalist; Coach Virender Dalal, a national level coach for wrestling from Haryana. I regularly conducted online interviews on WhatsApp and live sessions on Instagram with them.

SARS-CoV-2 brought major setbacks to the whole community. Many wrestlers lost their livelihood and their loved ones. Vikas Dahiya, a 24-year-old male wrestler, from Haryana, was unable go to *Dangal* because of SARS-CoV-2; hence, he had to find income from other sources. He was forced to go back to his village in Sonipat District, Haryana, where he helped his father on the family farm. Now, he patiently waits for *Dangal* to restart and get back to wrestling. His experience is identical with that of many other young wrestlers of his age. Madhuri, a 19-year-old lower caste female wrestler, awaits her *Akhara* to open. She does not have access to equipment and diet because of her financial incapability. She was concerned about the period of inactivity which would lead to health conditions and lack of performance once *Dangal* restarts. I helped the female wrestler by sharing the online sessions and tips offered by Coach Dalal, as I attended his coaching sessions regularly.

Limitations and Inconsistencies

Over a period of time, the stories of the pandemic in weekly conversations were replaced by familial issues, conflicts, and nostalgic memories of *Dangal* and pre-Corona times. As a whole, the virtual archive opened up opportunities to continue ethnographic research. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the online social media platforms (WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook) have also played a major role in creating the existing religious and communal tension in the field.

The 'systematic stigmatization' of the Muslim population during the CAA protest and the Coronavirus pandemic lead to marginalization of Muslim bodies (Syal 2020). Muslims were constantly targeted on social media with hashtags '#CoronaJihad'. It was systematic because the Muslim groups such as Tablighi Jama't was far from the only group to ignore the social distancing instructions; but they were the only one singled out as a scapegoat for the spread and existence of Coronavirus 2 in India (Syal 2020).

The existing religious and communal tension in the field exposed to me the limitations of virtual ethnography. I was unable to connect with many wrestlers through virtual media. The use of media creates ambiguity regarding the identity of the person on the other side of the call. This was evident from many interlocutor's responses, as my calls and texts were left unattended and I was informed to visit in person once the situation gets better.

Experiencing Netnography

The experience of conducting online ethnographic research has been full of inconsistencies and uncertainties that are due to the difficult circumstances. Though

online participatory observation provides access to the lives of interlocutors in the field, many participants in due time consider responding via online medium an additional burden on them.

It is worth mentioning that the power relationship between the researcher and those researched by him/her exists even when you adopt online and virtual participatory observation. Of course, being a 'native anthropologist' was an important factor in facilitating the conversation with my research partners (Narayan 1993). Yet, a certain power asymmetry also persisted since my position as a foreign PhD. scholar gave me an 'elevated' status. Nevertheless, during the last six months, I shared with my interlocutors familial losses, deteriorating health conditions, and uncertainties of the future. Perhaps, realizing this it could be an important contribution to bring their stories and experiences to larger audiences. Such experiences can inspire sensitivity and create an environment of solidarity amidst the pandemic.

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