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‘DS View’, an academic activity in which students, researchers and faculty are encouraged to write short academic essays on the Development discourse, aims to generate discussion on issues concurrent to the times we are living in. The topical range may include academic debates on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender, conflict and human security. The essay for DS View can be expository, argumentative, persuasive or analytical.

The topic of second DS View (based on student’s field experience) is **‘Anthropological Research in Urban Slums: Some Notes from the Field’** written by Aziz Khan.

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Anthropological Research in Urban Slums: Some Notes from the Field

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It is a general view that anthropology deals with the studies of so-called primitive peoples, remote tribal groups, people with simple technology but exotic practices. Yet another common opinion, which though wrongly held; is that anthropology only concerns itself with the old things and artifacts and reconstructs history by studying them. Hence the urban or slum studies do not come in its realm. Lately in the 20th century the need for research on urban poverty and human relations in urban areas has been greatly realised and a growing number of researchers are studying urban poverty and especially slums in urban areas under the realm of anthropology. The main area of concern for researching slums has been that whether slum is a product of urbanisation or not, what kind of relationship exists between it and the bigger society? It is worth inquiring to study what makes a slum the breeding place of criminality, immorality, and other forms of social problems? And, is it possible to deconstruct, isolate, and examine some of these variables associated with slum life? No matter how much these questions elicit researcher's interest, still the first question in relation to urban slums that arises is: If one wants to conduct research in a slum neighbourhood, what are the key challenges faced by the ethnographers?

I discuss below some challenges that anthropologists face in the field.

One big challenge faced by many ethnographers is that one may be suspected as a police agent attempting to infiltrate the street-corner gang. And if it is a well off neighbourhood, you might be viewed as an agent of the government spying on those who are delinquent in taxes or have hidden wealth. These perplexities are not present in many rural communities, because once you are there most of the people are likely to know you sooner than you think. In the urban area, you encounter new faces, you make new acquaintances, and you cope with new situations almost every day. First thing the researchers in this regard, have to consider is that one should not walk around immediately, announcing to everyone that one is an anthropologist, or that one is there to study the people's lifestyle so that one can make recommendations regarding what assistance government agencies might give. In fact, one must completely shed the idea of studying poverty or the culture of poverty in slums and should also avoid asking too many questions. Too many questions create suspicions.

Another key concern that an ethnographer has to face is the challenge as to where does one start? First, if one has chosen a slum's neighbourhood, the locality is never defined in terms of identifiable boundaries because the boundaries of such settlements are spatially spread-out. Another problem that one faces is that there are no identified headmen, elders, or definite leaders in the slums to whom one can approach and introduce oneself and by using his/her knowledge and influence one can be introduced to the people. Third, there are many roles, behaviours and patterns of social life that demand equal attention.

Fourth, the peoples' views of one another are impersonal. It is difficult to get a resident to introduce ethnographer to the community because each one seems not to

bother with the affairs of his/her neighbour — nor even bother to know who his/her neighbours are? Fifth, urban community is generally segmented into different small subgroups, each group having different lifestyles depending upon such variables as length of stay in the city, provincial or regional origin, occupational specialisation, and levels of income. It is also considered that studying urban communities which are composed of subcultures is more complex in open society; in fact more difficult to undertake than doing work among rural people or tribes where closed community welcomes the ethnographer. Unlike rural village or mountain settlement, the urban neighborhood or community confronts the anthropologist with multicultural situations.

It is proven by experience that written or structured interviews in slum settings prove to be next to impossible. One cannot possibly hold a paper and pencil and ask questions without provoking suspicion on the part of the respondents, particularly members of the street-corer gangs. Suspicion can lead to physical harm, and many incidents had occurred in the neighbourhood because of this kind of interaction. Thus a prudent research advice and technique has been delineated by a famous urban anthropologist F. Landa Jocano (1973). According to him a method that did prove successful is a two-step process that requires refraining from revealing information about one's own identity as an anthropologist, and living in the area for long. By employing the methodology of participant observation one can understand and gather data by living in the community and observing what people do, then checking actual behaviour against what they say and they do. Secondly, being a participant observer one can know the difference between the slum dweller's view and that of the outsider and one comes to know that such intricate social processes are researchable.

Urban anthropologists have learnt that the theories developed in experimental laboratories and then translated into human strategy for research or data collection proves inadequate in the field. There is also a difference in theory and what one practically experiences on the ground. Thus the academic ideals of many students working in fields alter when one comes in direct contact with the slum dwellers, and as a result one becomes a pragmatist just like other slum dwellers. The students come to the realisation and understanding of the limit and range of opportunities available to slum dwellers and the options open in seeking for expiation of violations of individual rights in slums.

Despite all odds anthropological research on urban slums has been contributory in producing context-specific knowledge. This knowledge is differentiated along the axis of spatial, experiential and temporal narratives. These narratives have helped highlight issues such as ecological imbalances, structural inequality, social poverty, inter- and intra-household hierarchies, ethnic conflict and lack of state intervention, changing societal order and aggrandising criminalities. These areas of thematic focus could not have been explored had anthropologists not faced the difficulties of field research in urban slum settings. Variant theoretical, methodological and analytical frameworks have been employed as well as devised by anthropologists along the way, which has helped in producing alternative knowledge on slum life. Anthropological contribution to this knowledge production is revelatory yet marked with field related issues which if dealt with care and sensitivity can produce context bound research on urban slums.

Reference

Jocano, F. L., 1973. Experience and perspectives in a slum neighborhood: An anthropological view. *Philippine Sociological Review*, pp.223-228.

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