

In Search of a Methodology of Forced Migration Studies

(Abstract)

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Our methodologies have been methodologies of truth – whether by serving as a means of verifying or refuting our conjectures with truth claims or by seeking to understand the intricacies of truth production. The multi-volume work of Walter Fernandes and his associates may be illustrative of the first. The work subjects all ‘official truths’ about forced migration – particularly the one induced by the commissioning of development projects - into scrutiny and verification. A new and unknown truth with much greater ‘truthfulness’ and perhaps hugely disastrous consequences for our social life is discovered through such scrutiny and verification. While the ‘Truth’, according to the Positivist framework, is assumed to be *one* with capital ‘T’ and researchers are urged to discover it tirelessly till it is discovered, a new awareness that truths are produced at multiple sites has developed particularly in recent decades. Since there is a plurality of truths, there is no way we can privilege one over the other. While the former is geared to the understanding of the possibilities of knowledge, the latter flags its limits. Yet for both of them, truth – whether single or plural – is potentially knowable. A series of Partition Studies brought out by ‘Kali for Women’ particularly since the 1990s and other feminist publishing houses seek to retrieve truths from the hitherto silenced voices. But both these methodologies institute a ‘metaphysic of presence’ of one who is displaced. Conventional methodologies of truth hardly help us understand the displaced who being displaced finds it impossible to register her ‘presence’ in both social life and our knowledge and whose presence is always marked by a ‘presence of absence’ or ‘absence of presence’. The problem with the displaced is that she not only is displaced but ‘disappears’ from the truth discourse. Displacement as it were turns against the discourse - eventually threatening to destroy it.

Critical forced migration studies (CFMS) makes it imperative to move beyond these methodologies of truth. It calls for not just a shift in our methodology of truth, but a shift in our *understanding* of methodology which posits the displaced not as presence but as absence, not as truth but as ‘exteriority’ of truth – an exteriority that is also constitutive of ‘truth’ by way of being ruled out by the truth regime and constantly interrupting it.

The new understanding of methodology – if one ever likes to describe it as one – therefore calls for a certain reorientation of such concepts as space, state and sovereignty. At a time when large masses of population move and there are mixed and massive flows of population without any home to return, the earth ‘deterritorializes’ itself in a way that provides the migrants with a space for such movement. The state is unhinged from the ‘sedentary metaphysic’ endowing it with a centre – an apparatus of capture spreading out towards the

border and finally setting up the borders. Forced migration in today's world implies movement without possession of territory. Sovereign power is least comfortable with this type of power that escapes it and keeps it perpetually fluid.

The researcher is caught as it were between two worlds: While more often than not she develops empathy with the displaced and becomes one with her at one level by way of discovering other 'truths', at another she is also required by the Positivist framework to be 'objective'. In case of conflict-induced displacement, for example, the researcher turns into a party to the conflict as much as the researcher's gaze constitutes the object of her research. In case of displacement induced by ethnic conflicts by contrast, ethical obligation runs the risk of becoming synonymous with ethnic obligation. Either of them does not help.

Ethics of social research obliges the researcher to focus on the 'absence' of the displaced beyond the truth regime, to see how she 'endures' with her resilience and thereby constantly destabilizes the 'sedentary metaphysic'. Ethics is about resilience not victimhood, about life not death, - a life that lives although dangerously.

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(Draft)

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The sedentary life is the very sin against the Holy Spirit. Only thoughts reached by walking have value.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

While search for methodology is as old as the history of Social Science, in this paper we argue that emergence of Forced Migration Studies (FMS) as a field calls for a new *understanding* of methodology. The new understanding of methodology, as we will see, also makes it imperative on us to re-define such concepts as ‘space’, ‘state’ and ‘sovereignty’ etc that are otherwise very commonplace to diverse Social Science disciplines. The first two parts of the paper revolve around these two critical themes of methodological understanding and redefinition respectively, while the third seeks to address the question of research ethics that one is required to follow as one engages in forced migration research. Elsewhere we argued (2000:48-57) that FMS as a field is vast and is as complex as the variety of factors (such as conflict, development, disaster and so forth) inducing forced migration. Methodology or even methodological understanding and ethics suitable for researches on one kind of forced migration may not be as suitable – if at all – for other kinds. For obvious limitations of space, this paper does not propose to bring in such issues as vastness and complexities involved in FMS. Instead, it highlights some issues in broad terms in the light of some of the current researches in the field and develops albeit an extremely tentative and preliminary argument, which of course leaves scope for further discussion.

Sedentary Methodologies

Most of the hitherto existing methodologies seem to be biased in favour of the settled and the sedentary. While Social Science methodologies have a preference for studying objects in their stationery or frozen state, the mobile is always held as chaotic. In the words of Creswell, “Mobility seems a chaotic thing - chaotic in the sense that moving things are often chaotic in the

way we experience them. Stationary, sedentary life, on the other hand, is hard to see as chaos” (Creswell 2006:6).

As a corollary to it, the settled and the sedentary are always regarded as true as much as the moving and the mobile are regarded as too contingent and chaotic to be true. In simple terms, our methodologies have also been methodologies of truth – whether by serving as a means of verifying or refuting our conjectures with truth claims till the truth is established or by seeking to understand the intricacies of truth production. Indeed, the quest for truth is arduous and one cannot afford to rest till it is discovered.

In the Positivist trajectory of truth-seeking, the emphasis has been laid on exploring the infinite possibilities of truth through the processes of verification. Partition (1947) is regarded as not only the foundational moment in the evolution of States in the subcontinent, but the beginning of forced displacement of population. One can always say that forced displacement thanks to Partition also marked the beginning of the States in the region (Das 2004:151-172). The debate on whether the Indian National Congress was responsible for Partition or the Muslim League is yet to come to an end. Tara Chand’s official history of freedom movement accuses the Muslim League of having been instrumental in creating Pakistan much against the will of the Muslim masses and even some of its provincial factions and of being responsible for the human tragedy that accompanied it. By contrast, a section of Pakistani scholars holds the Indian National Congress responsible for the human tragedy.

The multi-volume work of Walter Fernandes and his associates on the state of population displacement in different Indian states between 1947 and 1997 may be illustrative of the first. Their work subjects all ‘official truths’ about forced migration – particularly the one induced by the commissioning of development projects - into meticulous scrutiny and verification. A new and unknown truth with much greater claim to ‘truthfulness’ albeit with hugely disastrous consequences for social life is discovered in the process of such scrutiny and verification. They have recently conducted a study on *Progress for What?* The book is about contesting the ‘truth’ of the State according to which development is essential for us and displacement that it triggers is regarded as its necessary cost to be borne by the society. He and his team have been engaged in the search for truth for long – presumably since the late 1980s till they hope to establish it beyond any doubt. They make a fervent plea for establishing certain parity between what one loses in terms of land and livelihood and what one gains by paying the price of development calculated in terms of such loss. It is important that unless parity is achieved, the losers are fairly compensated for and made the equal stakeholders development may be said to have been achieved - but only at the cost of justice.

While the ‘Truth’, according to the Positivist framework, is assumed to be *one* with capital ‘T’ and researchers are urged to discover it tirelessly till it is discovered, a new awareness that truths are produced at multiple sites has developed particularly in recent decades. Since there is a

plurality of truths, there is no way we can privilege one over the other. While the Positivist framework is geared to the understanding of the possibilities of knowledge, the latter flags its limits. Yet for both of them, truth – whether single or plural – is potentially knowable. A series of Partition Studies brought out by ‘Kali for Women’ particularly since the 1990s and other feminist publishing houses seek to retrieve truths from the hitherto silenced voices. Menon and Bhasin (1998) and Butalia’s (1998) work on thousands of women who were abducted and then ‘recovered’ by the respective state authorities during the post-partition era illustrates the paternalism of the Indian state. It took the role of protector and provider and insisted on determining where women and their children belong. For women who were dislocated, destitute, widowed, and collectively described in policy terms as ‘unattached’, the state stepped in as the surrogate pater familias, and once again inherited the mantle of the protector. Urvashi Butalia (1998) retrieved the stories of ‘smaller, often invisible players: ordinary people, women, children, scheduled castes’ and underlined the need to look at how people remember partition (Butalia 1998). The violence created ‘new subjects and subject positions’ and it were felt that the moment of violence required greater attention than had been forthcoming from Indian social scientists (Pandey 2001, 2001a). These authors have contextualized the individual narratives and while Menon and Bhasin (1998) give a gendered reading of partition through memories of women, Butalia (1998) focuses on the marginalized, that is, on partition memories of women, children, and lower castes.

Mallick (1999) points out that back in East Pakistan the near total departure of the Hindu upper-caste landed elite and urban middle classes meant that communal agitation had to be directed against the Hindu untouchables who remained. Later refugees therefore came from the lower classes, who lacked the means to survive on their own and became dependent on government relief. Lacking the family and caste connections of the previous middle class refugees, they had to accept the government policy of dispersing them to other states, on the claim that there was insufficient vacant land in West Bengal. By doing so the Congress government effectively broke up the Namasudra movement and scattered the caste in refugee colonies outside Bengal, thereby enhancing the dominance of the traditional Bengali tricast elite. However, the land the untouchable refugees were settled on in other states was forests in the traditional territory of tribal people, who resented this occupation. The conditions in many resettlement camps were deplorable, and grievances led to resentment and movement, which began at Mana group of camps in Dandakaranya and the refugees decided to launch a national movement for resettlement at Sunderbans area of West Bengal. Refugees began to settle at Marichjhapi Island in Sunderbans, after the Left Front government came to power in West Bengal, but the left government at state was not disposed to tolerate such settlement, saying it violated the Forests Acts. It is debatable whether the CPI (M) placed primacy on ecology or merely feared this might be a precedent for an unmanageable refugee influx with the consequent loss of political support.

These studies conducted in recent years point to other sites of truth production beyond the great power game played by such forces as the colonial rulers, Indian National Congress and the Muslim League etc. These - albeit partial truths - continue to leave their heterotopic traces in social life, which remain dormant but not dead and the settled and the sedentary are forced to bear these traces lying hidden in them. As Foucault observes:

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form to its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that give birth to these things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents (Foucault 1977 ...).

What happens ‘subjugates’ what does not and perhaps what cannot be and the current events imply ‘a series of subjugations’ that constantly seek to shape these events through their interruptions. According to Samaddar, for instance, Partition is not really a reconstruction of the past, it is a recording of a continuous present. In that sense partition is an enduring fact, living in the present as much as in the past. The importance of partition for modern times has been called to attention by many scholars. It is argued that even if the event goes back to the forties, it has remained a reality, a deep metaphor for violence, fear, domination, separation, ‘a metaphor, in one word, for the past, one that goes on making the present inadequate’ (Samaddar 2001:22). Samaddar considers partition an event of the past and a sign of the present time; he writes: ‘Partition lives on in post-colonial time to such an extent that we should truly prefer the phrase “partitioned times” to the more common “post-colonial times”’ (Samaddar 2003:21).

The Positivist methodology being the methodology of truth institute what in Political Philosophy is called metaphysics of presence - whether of the state or capital or any other agency that initiates development as in the case of development-induced displacement or the forced migrant who bears its brunt and becomes the victim of injustice or even both. In the second, the forced migrant – maybe a woman or a *dalit* or otherwise – who stands resolutely as a *supplement* - always refusing to dissolve into the official Truth of the nation-state that came into being as a result of Partition - and constantly destabilizes her presence from within. The violence that the presence does to the absence for its own institution and establishment is always inadequate, always negotiating with itself and perpetually seeking to come to terms with its ever-fragile and perennially unstable foundation. As Sweetman puts it, the presences are touched and produced by these absences and inadequacies, but are “not themselves it” (Sweetman n. d. 238). While it focuses more on *what* she and her absence do to the ‘Truths’ circulating in the society, much less is said about *how* she establishes her agency by marking her absence. The absence is active. Nietzsche’s principle that as one ‘walks’, one hits ‘thoughts’ of ‘value’ (see the epigram) turns our attention away from what to how, to very act of walking, walking as a methodology of Social

Science and the art of how one walks into thoughts that are of ‘value’. The art of walking is important, for, not all walks enable us to be informed by valuable thoughts.

Walking into Thoughts of Value

How does one walk, if one were to walk into thoughts of value? Not so much by making her arrival at any given point, by fixing and freezing her at any given point, and thus announcing another presence as Positivist methodology would have us believe. Positivist methodology, as we argued, strives for establishing the Truth of the forced migrant in place of the official Truth of the endless path of development. Walking, as Nietzsche seems to remind us, is hardly linear departing as it were from a point of origin to one of destination, but resembles itineration that makes one stand perpetually at a node from where a multiplicity of paths opens - not to any one destination - but to a variety of nodes. In the famous nonsense rhyme ‘Thikana’ or address in Sukumar Ray’s *Abol Tabol*, Jagamohan, on being asked what the address of Adyanath’s uncle (in fact the husband of Adyanath’s mother’s sister), replies exasperatingly:

If you need address, listen patiently, in the intersection of the Amratala Mor,

Three paths move towards three directions and you follow one of them,

You head on following your nose keeping your eye on the right –

As you go you will see that the path takes a bend.

You will see, many roads have opened there on your right and left,

You better move about following them for a while like in a maze.

Then you bend rightwards and turn abruptly,

Again you return leaving three lanes on your left.

Then only you can come back again to the intersection of the Amratala Mor,

Then you go wherever you want, get lost and do not disturb me!

- *Thikana* (address) from *Abol Tabol* by Sukumar Ray

The process of finding one’s destination is endlessly circular in our age of globalism.¹

¹ I have discussed it in my valedictory address to the Tenth Winter Course on Forced Migration organized by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group on 1-15 December 2012. The forces and processes of globalization have led to an acceleration of this kind of migration.

We argue that absence of the forced migrant is always pitted against the presence of the settled and the sedentary. The absence that is thus subjected to the presence has first of all to register itself as if in a war. The presence of absence is registered by hiding and suppressing it, by avoiding the process of refugee detection and registration, even by faking and misidentifying herself in order to evade torture and violence.

Let me cite an example from my own ethnographic work. It was an exceptionally humid and sultry afternoon as we hit the tip of Akheriganj on the Indian side of the banks of the Padma separating her from Bangladesh. We saw a barge slowly floating towards us and a middle-aged man with his bicycle stationed on the platform was the first to get down from it as the barge approached the ghat. I came to know subsequently that he was Sohrab Ali and I eventually struck a conversation with him as the crowd on the barge got down without making any noise and thinned out quietly and the lone BSF patrol faded away. The entire area looked deserted and Ali confides that he is returning from the nearby bazaar across the border where he sells egg and earns his livelihood. He is the only earner in a family of six members and price of egg varies on both sides of the border and Ali ekes out a living by taking advantage of differential pricing – thanks to the border that separates the two nation-states. How else would Ali live, I wonder, if there were no border? For, border gives him the comparative price advantage and offers livelihood opportunities to him and his family of six souls. On the other hand, he can avail himself of the comparative advantage only when he crosses the border as he does it daily and of course at grave risk to his life.

I remember Sohrab Ali telling me that people like him who live on the border are like husk isolated from the paddy. Like husk, they are of no use to the nation. The paddy have for long deserted the husk in their journey for greener pasture - to Nashipur, Bhagabangola, Lalgola, Kolkata and even Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Pune – the new face of globalized India - where they work as zari-workers, goldsmiths and construction labourers etc. Those who are left here do not have even the means of migrating to these areas. We spoke for far too long and I became thirsty. He said that he could offer me water of the Padma that he and his family were forced to drink as the entire groundwater in the area was contaminated by arsenic – caused perhaps by the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides – thanks to the Green Revolution in West Bengal initiated in a large way by the former Left Front Government. Sohrab has not hesitation in admitting that people like him prefer to go to the Government hospital in Rajshahi than to the one in Murshidabad when they fall they are need of medical attention. The hospital in Bangladesh offers better medical facilities at a cheaper price. Earlier he used to own land large enough to feed his family. But as the river swings and shifts its course, his land has by then become part of the Bangladeshi territory. Even then he continued to cultivate the land, but could not reap the harvest as one day he discovered that ‘the goons of Bangladesh’ had looted his harvest at night. Sohrab Alis live their life only by suppressing their presence.

If Sohrab Ali is required to establish his absence by suppressing his presence in order that he lives and his family is not decimated, there are also examples of forced migrants who register their presence of absence by highlighting absence, the sense of loss that it accompanies and that one needs to fill up and make good through a variety of means. To cite an example, empirical studies on the forced migrants – particularly the Partition refugees – drive home the point that as

they settle themselves in the new country they name their ‘colonies’ and newly settled villages, the names of markets and sweetmeat shops etc after the names of the villages they left. In the presence of absence, there is always the conflation between home and destination and she is called upon to make constant back-and-forth movement between them, between the past and the present in order to make the past come alive in the present. The past is *relieved* not in the way it used to be, but in the new locale at a different space and time. Insofar as the forced migrant exercises an agency by registering the presence of her absence, she weaves a history – contra-history as one may call it – by telling us what the history could have been but never had been in reality – a contra-history that she also desperately seeks to imagine into existence.

Redefining Space, State, Sovereignty

Foucault in his Preface to *Anti-Oedipus* by Deleuze and Guattari points out how ‘waking’ as a methodology calls for a re-definition of such concepts as ‘space’, ‘state’ and ‘sovereignty’ that are central to our understanding of migration in general and forced migration in particular.

Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems (Foucault 1983:Xiil)

In a world where there is endlessly circular churning of population, it becomes difficult to keep track with people and their identities. Anonymity is the rule. Earlier, population displacement used to take place on a fixed space in a linear fashion from a point of origin to a point of destination. Now it is the space that moves, not the people. As Deleuze and Guattari observe: “It is the earth that deterritorializes itself, in a way that provides the nomad with a territory. The land ceases to be land, tending to become simply ground (**sol**) or support” (Deleuze & Guattari 2010:45). The space that has hitherto remained striated thanks to the establishment of territorial States preventing thereby the free entry and exit of migrants across their borders has become flat and smooth so much so that it is possible for one to migrate from one country to another, from countries of the South to the North – to countries of Europe, New Zealand, Australia and the USA invariably at grave personal risk. At a time when large masses of people move and there are mixed and massive flows of population without any home to return, it is the earth - and not a section of people - that ‘deterritorializes’ itself in a way that provides the migrants with a space for such movement. The study on women’s trafficking in North Bengal conducted by the University of North Bengal, for instance, points out how swiftly the women from some of the backward districts of the region are trafficked away from the villages to the nearby towns, to the neighbouring countries, to Kathmandu, Bangkok and Copenhagen and such places through a network in which the victims are constantly on the move not knowing what their next destination would be and the middlemen and the agents work without having any idea

of the details of the routes and paths of these trafficked women. When the space moves, there is churning of population and people hardly know each other as they move and settle albeit momentarily in course of their endless journey. I described Siliguri – the largest town of North Bengal – not a city of migrants although it has been the largest recipient of the migrant population since its birth in the early twentieth century, but as a town in transit. I wrote the following:

Siliguri's slow insertion into the ever-expanding global network hardly leaves room for any transcendence. For, it simultaneously takes away from us our ability to comprehend and make sense of not so much the city per se as it happens in Los Angeles, but its connectedness and nodes – the deep mechanics of the network of which it is only a part - in its totality. You never know whether one who jumps into death and commits suicide from the terrace of a highrise is your next-door neighbour or the lower middle-class girl next door is the one who suffered bullet injury while entertaining her guests inside a hotel at night. The network has taken away from us our known identities and constantly pushes our sensory perception to its limits. Familiar faces now become unfamiliar while ever-unfamiliar faces keep adding on to the city (Das 2013).

The State is predicated on an equally sedentary metaphysic with a stable Centre from where it spreads out towards the border and turns into an apparatus of capture of its subjects and citizens by setting up the borders as the container of its power. The resistance put up by the migrants to the codification of life by the State often reflects expression of positive desire not to become sedentary, coded, classified or fixed in space and time. These are the people who follow a form of movement without possession of territory. Similarly, the concept of sovereignty is also reconceptualised. Sovereignty today is a type of power that the apparatus of capture is least comfortable with, as the forced migrant constantly escapes, creates, morphs and moves, and therefore keeps herself in a perpetually fluid state.

The Ethics of Research

Does research on forced migration make it imperative on our part to be guided by any kind of ethical obligation? One may argue that forced migration being a source of destabilization turns against any ethical discourse and threatens to eject the researcher out of the ethical loop. While such an extreme eventuality is not uncommon particularly in cases of displacement induced by war and ethnic conflicts, empirical studies cited above underline the importance of closely understanding the processes through which the forced migrant exercises the agency by constituting her absence. For the purpose of convenience, we will confine ourselves at this point to an analysis of the phenomenon of displacement induced by ethnic conflicts.

The researcher is caught as it were between two mutually opposite worlds: While at one level it is only natural on her part to develop complete empathy and identify with the displaced, she is also required by the Positivist framework to be as 'objective' as possible in her research. In

case of conflict-induced displacement, for example, the researcher often turns into a party to the conflict so much so her ethical obligation runs the risk of becoming synonymous with ethnic obligation. Either of the two does not seem to help us.

The Eth[n]ics

Ethnic conflict at its most heightened phase polarizes the society in a way that the researcher is obliged to take a position and become a party to the ongoing conflict. Being ethnic gives one as if it were a licence to kill the *other* with impunity and without any remorse. Examples of researchers being dragged into or getting entangled in ethnic conflicts that they decide to work on and losing their life in effect are by no means rare. More often than not the researcher is dragged into the conflict against her will. Mahanta in his recently published book (2013) regrets that the middle ground has been lost in the otherwise conflict-ridden society of Assam. He is reportedly advised to stay away from making such statements in public after the book was released. Herder, the great romantic thinker, for instance, argues that cosmopolitan ethics that a researcher is urged to follow particularly in situations of heightened ethnic conflicts is nothing but a sham. As he maintains:

Neither our head nor our heart is formed for an infinitely increasing store of thoughts and feelings, our hand is not made, our life is not calculated for it. Do not our finest mental powers decay, as well as flourish? Do they not even fluctuate with years and circumstances, and relieve one another in friendly context, or rather in a circular dance? And who has not found, that an unlimited extension of his feelings enfeebles and annihilates them, while it gives to the air in loose flocks what should have found the cord of love, or clouds the eyes of others with its ashes? As it is impossible, that we can love others more than ourselves, or in a different way, for we love them as part of ourselves, or rather ourselves in them, that mind is happy, which, like a superior spirit,, embraces much within the sphere of its activity, and in restless activity deems it a part of itself: but miserable is that, the feelings of which, drowned in itself, are useful neither to itself nor others. The savage, who loves himself, his wife and child, with quiet joy, and glows with limited activity for his tribe, as for his own life, is, in my opinion, a more real thing, than that cultivated shadow, who is enraptured with the love of the shades of his whole species, that of a name. The savage has room in his poor hut for every stranger, whom he receives as his brother with calm benevolence, and asks not once whence he comes. The deluged heart of the idle cosmopolite is a hut for no one (Herder 1968:75-76).

He exhorts the researcher to live up to the commitment to her community – in his case her nation. The problem with this formulation is that it erases the middle ground in a society where there is ‘war of all against all’ and the researcher by taking a position plays a role in its perpetuation. Ethical concern, as we see it, is to deterritorialize the ethic in a way that it ‘escapes

or departs from a given territory' (Patten ...:4) or ethnicity. This is what Deleuze calls the 'counteractualization' of phenomena: such philosophical redescription enables us to see things differently or to see them as they might become rather than as they currently are. The protagonists of *eth(n)ics* who think that 'ethics' and 'ethnics' are essentially the same do not however mind if a justification for ethnic warfare is made through their research and such warfare continues unabated resulting in grave human tragedy.

The Challenge of being 'Objective'

By contrast, there is the argument that more distant the researcher keeps vis-à-vis the conflict, the more she is likely to succeed as a researcher without adding to its intensity. The distance is a function of objectivity in Social Science. The classical statement in favour of objectivity comes from Max Weber. Being 'objective' in Social Science research is understood to mean assessing instrumentality or what he calls appropriateness of the means to the ends. As he writes:

All serious reflection about the ultimate elements of meaningful human conduct is oriented primarily in terms of categories "end" and "means". We desire something concretely either "for its own sake" or as a means of achieving something else which is more highly desired. The question of the appropriateness of the means for achieving a given end is undoubtedly accessible to scientific analysis (Weber 1949: 52).

Weber however subjects his instrumentality principle to a couple of conditionalities: First, if the means that are considered as appropriate are not available then one becomes 'indirectly critical' of the end and asks for bending and compromising it. (b) If the deployment of means considered 'appropriate' in the pursuit of one end implicitly introduces compromises – if not dislocations of other ends considered as equally or even more important - then the society is to determine the relative 'predictable consequences' of such compromise.

Objectivity understood as instrumentality principle a la Max Weber poses two sets of problems: (a) observance of objectivity is likely to amount to 'objectification' of the researcher and (b) the principle has a tendency of turning live social actors turn into mere 'objects' of research. My experience as a researcher in the otherwise highly conflict-prone area of India's Northeast testifies that all others and not just my respondents have always been very nice and decent to me across the board as much as I have been nice and decent to all of them. Being an outsider my respondents and interlocutors often became overtly concerned about my safety and security. At a time when I was yet to pick up Assamese, many of them advised me not to take public bus where I would be required to communicate in the same and it would be possible for others to make out my identity as I would fumble over my Assamese. Now I must make the anecdotal confession that the imperative of being nice and decent to others holds me from

expressing my ethical position on any of the ongoing conflicts. As I strove hard for becoming 'objective' I could realize that I was as it were exercising control over my own self in my attempt at becoming what I am not – at turning against my very being. At the end of the day I note that I become in the process a product of my doctoral work and the doctoral work is not a product of mine (Das 2002:4-6).

What social scientists delineate, as social reality is the product of the tools, instruments and categories that they employ in order to make sense of and/or change it. They define social reality as a 'field' that they consider worthy of their investigation and research. Thus, social reality is made synonymous with the field. There is no social reality outside the field. Social science tools, instruments and categories in other words, contribute to the construction of the field. The gaze of social science could be excruciatingly painful as it might take a toll on human life. Chuni Kotal – the first lady graduate amongst the Lodhas of West Midnapore (West Bengal) – classified by the colonial authority as a 'criminal tribe' – who took admission into the postgraduate Department of Anthropology in a state-run University in West Bengal committed suicide reportedly because of the dense research gaze that was cast on her. Chuni's brother observed in disgust: "why do they (the researchers) visit us? To see how we walk, eat, drink, dress and defecate?" Unable to take it any longer, as his brother writes, she perhaps took her life.

The Ethics of Life

Ethics of social research on forced migration obliges the researcher to bring home the 'absence' of the displaced by way of observing how it gets registered, to see how she 'endures' with her resilience and lives. By registering her absence, whether through the presence of absence or through the absence of presence, the forced migrant opens up 'new possibilities of being' – different from what 'takes place' - and unless what takes place is implicated with the possibilities of 'taking place differently' the reality cannot release these possibilities. The researcher is called upon to remain committed to bring out the implications and be 'attuned to' these new possibilities. As Dillon argues:

... [T]aking place necessarily ... allows and requires ... revisionary practices of the (political) self. These are concerned with responding to the continuous insurrectionary call of Justice that arises within the self, as well as between selves, to the self. Such practices, while depending upon the possibility of imagining and knowing ourselves differently, recall the very reality of having imagined and known ourselves differently. They do so in order to keep open the possibility that we may continue to imagine and know ourselves differently. It is how this responsibility is assumed — not the *essentia* of a what—which ultimately decides the question of identity. Hence, the more unity,

uniformity and immutability demanded of the self, the more ethical dissolution and irresolution is produced; and the more the self is fragmented into competing egotistical solipsisms, incarcerated within equally fragmented and dessicated worlds (Dillon 1996:203).

Ethics of research in FMS therefore is about resilience – not victimhood, about life – not death, about living life dangerously. The living body refuses to make itself available for the forms and technologies of governance as it fears death and develops a stake in the practice of life. The potential of body as a living organism never completely exhausts itself by surrendering to the call of death, but constantly interrupts the forms and technologies of governance. As Rosi Braidotti aptly sums up: “What is ethics, then? A thin barrier against the possibility of extinction. Ethics consists in re-working the pain into threshold of sustainability, when and if possible: cracking, but holding it, still. It is a mode of actualising sustainable forms of transformation” (Braidotti 2006:141).

Let us cite an example from our own ethnographic work. We conducted a series of such studies and interviews in Gerukamukh area in Upper Assam – the hub of anti-dam protest in the Northeast - organized by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) and a few other organizations. While recent violence in Lower Assam is predicated primarily on the demand for homeland - whether for driving out the ‘outsiders’ or against being driven out by them - the movement in Gerukamukh marks the arrival of a new subject in the wake of a series of developmental policies initiated since the early 1990s. The interviews were conducted across various age groups and communities like the Mishings, Dewris, Ahoms, Assamese, Nepalis, Hajongs, Bodos and other Tea tribes like the Kurmis etc.

Most of our respondents extend unflinching support to the anti-dam protests – although not all of them actively take part in them. When asked why they support it all of them have been unequivocal in pointing out that the issue is integral to ‘security of their life’ (*jiwanar suraksha*). They argue that unless their life is not secure, development becomes ‘unthinkable’. What will they do with development if they are not alive? Economic development or for that matter any other kind of development has no meaning unless there is security of life, which according to one respondent, cuts across the ethnic boundaries and is ‘greater’ (*brihattar swartha*) than economic development for any ‘particular’ community. When collective survival is under threat, it is imperative that all people irrespective of their ethnicity, creed and community identity come together and put up a joint (*ekeloge*) resistance and collective (*umaihotiya*) struggle. It is important that ‘the public’ (*raij*) across ethnicities and nationalities work together as a collective (*ekgot*). Haren Saikia – a medical practitioner based in Narayanpur – observes: “This is a movement with which the interests of all classes and the public are tied up.” Construction of dams will make them vulnerable to natural disaster which – if it ever happens in a seismically fragile region – will not discriminate between classes and ethnicities. The collective survival of the people in common will be under threat (*bhabuki*). Ensuring the security of life is therefore the topmost priority for them.

Life for them is understood in broad and collective terms. Another reason cited by them while explaining their support to the anti-dam movement is ensuring the ‘security of Assam’.

Construction of dam in an otherwise ecologically fragile region will pose threat to the territorial integrity of Assam so much so that the 'map of Assam' will be 'decimated' (*salani*) and a part of it might be permanently wiped out. In the words of a local journalist who was also one of our respondents: "If we cannot make our immediate living space (*thai*) and our future generation survive, then what will we do with autonomy?" The movement, according to Sarat Dewri – a student leader of Bhimbar Nagar, again a respondent - is a desperate attempt at upholding 'the geographical existence of upper Assam' (*ujani Asomar bhogalik astitwa*). While autonomy pertains to any particular community in exclusion of another, the protest against construction of dams is inseparably connected with 'the interest of the larger nation' (*brihat jati*). Nation here is understood as 'the people of Assam'.

While a whole diversity of groups and communities constitutes 'the people of Assam', the coming into being of 'the people of Assam' as a collective is a complex task as envisaged by our respondents. *Thai* in Assamese is a word used popularly to refer to one's immediate dwelling place and neighbourhood as distinguishable from homeland. It is interesting to note that a distinction is made between one's identity as a dweller in a particular *thai* (like Gogamukh) on one hand and one's identity as a member of a particular ethnic community. An ethnic community within an area is spread across many such *thais* – each *thai* in effect has its own importance for those who inhabit it. Thus, Leeladhar Doley – a commoner from Gogamukh, one of our respondents – argues that his identity as a dweller of *thai* prompts him to unite with others and fight against the dam that threatens to wipe out the *thai*, while his identity as a member of the Dewri community makes him ask for Sixth Schedule status for the Dewris. His proposed disjunction between ethnic and immediate spatial identities should not escape our attention. It is true that security of life, according to our respondents, is again closely interconnected with the question of territorial integrity of Assam, but Assam as a territory consists of many groups and ethnic communities each with its own congeries of *thais* etched in its map, important for the survival of those who inhabit it. Security of life is connected with the issue of territorial integrity. While autonomy disunites people and privileges one community over another, the anti-dam protest unites all of them.

Insofar as threat is perceived as 'real' by all of them, dam and development strike at the *physical body* that exists as 'the tabernacle of *dynamis*, its potential' and is 'not yet objectified' (Virno 2004:82). The body refuses to make itself available for the forms and technologies of developmental governance as it fears death and develops a stake in the practice of life. The potential of body as a living organism never completely exhausts itself by surrendering to the call of death, but constantly interrupts the forms and technologies of developmental governance. Never before in the history of the Northeast has physical body become so much of a security concern for the people as it is now. This is not to say that physical body has never been under threat in region's history. The recent violence in Lower Assam (July-November 2012) points to how physical existence particularly of the common people was under threat. But the important point is that for every life lost, an epitaph is written by the particular community that loses its member and therefore there is mourning and pledge to revenge for her death. Processions were taken out with the dead bodies of those who lost their lives as a result of the ethnic violence. The dead is remembered as a martyr. But when a dam bursts and washes out communities and groups, there is life that is lost 'without being sacrificed'. As dams are perceived to threaten the physical survival, developmental governance does not 'realize the potential, but contradicts it' (Neilson 2004:75).

The living life of the forced migrant does not register its presence; it registers its absence through a variety of means and opens up new possibilities of 'taking place' and keeps alive the counteractual only in hiding. The challenge of any methodological exercise is to introduce the figure of the forced migrant – a living and enduring body - to bear on what her absence means for FMS and does to the presence of the already settled and the sedentary by without ever coming home, by constantly walking into valuable thoughts.

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[Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from non-English sources are mine.]

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