

Ethical Dilemmas in Anthropology: A note on Issues and Concerns

Sarit K. Chaudhuri

Abstract

This paper deals with the notion of ethics and its implications in the context of the discipline of anthropology and how it operates across the existing institutional mechanisms. This paper also deals with the comparative locations of the anthropologist beyond the binaries of 'insider' versus 'outsider' discourse. Taking cues from the Indian North East, this paper finally tries to shed some light on the post-modern ethical concern in the context of the evolving discipline of anthropology.

Key Words: *ethics, morality, philosophy, ethnography, emic, etic, postmodern.*

The concept of ethics and the discipline of anthropology is critically interlinked in multidimensional ways. Of course, this is true not only for anthropology but also for almost all the social science disciplines having linkages with fieldwork tradition. Moreover, most of the higher academic institutions have various forms of ethical committees to deal with the researches which have wider ramifications for living beings irrespective of broader categorization into various faculties or schools of research. However, I like to limit myself with the discipline of anthropology here for the present purpose.

Conventionally, we gave much emphasis on the issues concerning fieldwork where anthropologist got engaged with the "other" for writing ethnography or various other forms of end products though with the growth of the discipline it doesn't remain confined to a one segment of the human population whom we call tribe or Adibasis or Indigenous people as globally the discipline has expanded its areas of study since long for which anthropology is perceived as the science of mankind.

In the present paper, I like to deal with the notion of 'Ethics' in the context of fieldwork tradition which constitutes the soul of the discipline of anthropology in general or even in the context of Indian anthropology in particular. Moreover, I also like to shed light on how this concept has gained space or articulated across the existing institutional mechanisms. In fact, ethical concern also has implications in order to deal with the comparative locations of anthropologists beyond the binaries of 'insider' versus 'outsider' discourse (emic and etic views). Taking cues from Arunachal as well as India's North East, finally, I should try to

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touch on the post-modern ethical concerns within the discipline of anthropology, which may have larger ramifications for other social sciences that have embraced fieldwork as an important methodological tool for analyzing emerging social realities.

The fundamental question remains: what do we mean by the concept of ethics? We know that a scholar of moral philosophy can raise a critical discourse on the notions of 'Ethics' and 'Morality' though sometimes the delineation of boundaries between the two may be difficult as they are used interchangeably. In other ways one can place morality on a higher philosophical ground than the idea of ethics and vis-à-vis. For instance, the philosopher Bernard Williams (2006) proposes that ethics is in any way of answering the question 'How ought one to live?' while morality is a certain kind of answer to that question, namely one involving moral obligations, such as, rules, rights, duties, commands etc. David Pocock (1988) has suggested that ethics and morality are increasingly pulling apart, and that ethics has moved to fill a moral vacuum whereas Caplan raises very pertinent questions (2003),

"Is there then a sense in which we can see morality as more fundamental than ethics? Can morality have claims to truth and universal applicability while ethics is culturally and historically viable? If so, what are those claims of morality and to what extent do ethics change and why?" Such multiple questions can inundate our fundamental premise of social science research.

Ethical concerns in anthropology (specially in social anthropology) is largely relates to the fieldwork tradition as we were taught in college and university days which means that in our course curriculum, it was primarily linked with the methodological domain or learning methodological craft in social anthropology rather than production of knowledge base, framing researchable issues, universe of our study or even modalities of producing anthropological text or 'Ethnography' as an end product. Though, there can't be any denial of the fact that the ethical concerns are actually intertwined with every stages of our disciplinary journey starting from the selecting researchable issues, fixing the universe of study and subsequently prioritizing each and every stage of our methodological endeavors to the writing the end product of various ways or forms.

According to Srivasatava (2004), "Ethical questions start surfacing as the research work begins. Should one inform the people about the true nature of one's study or should one resort to 'covert methods', or what has come to be known, after Douglas (1976) as 'investigative social research'? Is it possible to seek the 'informed consent' of people in all cases, even when they have no knowledge of social sciences or research activity, for example in a pre-literate community? Should one publish one's findings notwithstanding the furor it may cause among the 'subjects' of the study? Or, should one deliberately suppress those pieces of information and practices that people find embarrassing? Should one hide people's identity under a pseudonym or should one be truthful to everything – the name of the community, the name of the respondents, the exact transcriptions of their interviews? Several other questions of

this type can be raised in every study, although there cannot be a set of pre-formulated answers. Each researcher has to address these issues and questions afresh with every research, keeping in view the contextual specifics.”

However, it is a well-known fact that in the context of the USA or UK these ethical questions became a serious concern in the post 1970s since when the allegation was surfaced in clear terms where anthropologists were used to serve the narrow interests of the invading army or the state agencies in different parts of the world. In fact, the ‘charter’ establishing the interest of anthropologists with ethics begins with a letter by Franz Boas, condemning the use of anthropology as a cover for spying, and stating that persons so using it forfeited their right to be classed as scientists and jeopardized the research activities of honest visiting investigators, for which opinions he was censured by the American Anthropological Association. This was reported by many anthropologists while discussing such historical truth linked with the discipline of Anthropology (Stocking 1968: 273-277; Lobban: 2013).

According to Ellen (1984:134), “The ethical problems facing social scientists have changed over time and probably become more difficult to solve as the contexts of social research have changed and as the balance of power has altered between social scientist, sponsor, gatekeeper, citizen and government. Another cause of these changing power relations is the continually altering social, economic, educational, administrative, legal and political contexts and constraints within which social research occurs; a second is the institutionalization and professionalization of social science research. A third contributory factor is the recognition that knowledge is not only a source of enlightenment but also of power and property and therefore, that it entails the power both to harm and to benefit those studied” (cf. Barnes 1979:22; Cassel 1982: 156-157).

In our Indian context, our National bodies/organizations, like Indian Anthropological Society, or INCAA or other similar national or state level organizations, like Anthropological Survey of India, Tribal Research Institute etc., located in different regions of our country, hardly took any initiative to formulate any literature or textual document(s) on these crucial aspects rather we remained much dependent on what diffused to our country from west through textual mode or through the anthropologists or sociologists who either came to work among the Indian communities or Indian scholars who gained anthropological orientation in West or Europe.

Conventional text books usually refer to our prescribed universities or college syllabus; generally, devote little space on the ethical issues in Anthropology. Rather rewarding knowledge and intricacies of ethical dimensions one can trace while critically reading books related to field experience (Sinha 1978, Srinivas, Beteille and Madan) shared by eminent anthropologists/sociologists who worked largely on Indian rural or urban communities. However, within last few decades’ good number of similar publications (Rasalie H Wax:1985, Kristen Hasturp and Peter Hervik:1994, Vered Amit 2000, Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri:2014

etc.) surfaced which overtly or covertly informed us on ethical concerns during fieldwork in various contexts. Some recent publications have gained much momentum while dealing with various critical issues by taking diverse fieldwork issues by Indian anthropologists (Biswas: 2014 & 2017). It may be mentioned here that recently University Grant Commission, New Delhi, has introduced a mandatory paper on 'Research Ethics and Publication' for all doctoral students as an integral part of their course work in all universities of India which reflects the recognition of the ethical issues in research at higher educational institutions.

During my seven years of tenure in Anthropological Survey of India, both in Kolkata and Shillong, where I had to work for various national projects, including much hyped project called People of India, never provided me any instructional materials or even orientation in relation to any ethical concern related to place, people, content of the project or even in the context of the methodological strategies which were adopted for various projects. However, in contrast to such a state of anthropological inaptness with which Indian anthropology has suffered to groom new generation of knowledge bearers, whereas the American or British Anthropological association developed meticulously distinct guidelines that have shown their concern over the ethical dimensions densely interlinked with the growing discipline. If one goes through the manuals or the text, then one can clearly identify the nature of their ethical concern and in fact, there are obvious common grounds, which such texts emanate and which have wider anthropological validity beyond the political boundaries of a particular nation-state.

However, these documents were published much before the discipline has faced new challenges with the publication of the book "Writing Culture" (1986) along with two other major successive books (Anthropology as Cultural Critique:1996 and The Predicament of Culture:1988), which have given a new twist to the concept of "ethnography" which remain as the lifeline of the social or cultural anthropological enterprise. In fact, these publications surfaced a new movement which popularly known as postmodernism(s) in anthropology, a movement that actually gained ground in the discipline of archaeology but gradually inundated almost all social sciences and even the various other disciplines of arts and humanities.

This new wave never remained uncritical as there are counter arguments about the plight of postmodern ethnographies or the kind of text postmodernism is supposed to indulge. What remains covertly or overtly important is its impact on the ethical consideration which perhaps may be considered as one of the major turns in terms of construction of anthropological end products or its growing epistemological praxis as it talks about a new orientation from our conventional ethnographic writings where the question of polyphony or multi-vocality hardly found any space. This shift in textualization of empirical facts may bring ethnography much closure to people or in other words may make it more people centric, as imagined by its protagonists but at the same time it also became a challenging task to

anthropologists, the practitioners of the discipline, to accommodate contested voices within the existing social strata which is inextricably linked with location of power as well as the notion of marginality within the multilayered social reality, which Clifford Geertz (1973) proposed to capture through his concept of “thick description”. Postmodern ethical concern also relegates the notion of ethnographic authority and gives a new lease of life in researching a community/community beyond the established tradition of ‘restudies in anthropology’. One of the most crucial issue is to understand or rethink the very concept of community or the ethnic group where we can locate more sharper ethnic divides based on the nature of transformative experience and understanding along with incorporation of wider ideas of social/culture change linked with not only the political economy but also with the political ecology of a nation-state.

Sometimes, the emergence of new coinage such as ‘Elite Society’ used by the tribal communities themselves and not imposed by the outsiders and the ongoing process of marginalization of some segments of tribal population, even among the various tribal states of Northeast India, raised multiple ethical concerns not only for the so called researchers came from other states but also for the insiders (native or indigenous anthropologists) who chose to work among their own community or state, taking multiple issues into their consideration which they think crucial from their own perspectives. Of course, there are a good number of literatures published within the last few decades which has led to rethink over the stereotyped authoritative notions of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ (Narayana:1993) perspectives. Perhaps, this was inevitable with the shifting of locations within the subjects or objects of study in anthropology across the nation states where globalization and liberalizations emerged as passwords to understand and analyze every day’s nuances of life across the ethnic divide. What is evident in the context of the North east and even for many other regions of our country, is the growing factionalism and rise of corresponding interest groups who try to carry forward their hidden agenda by appropriating the so-called notion of “community perspective”. These became possible by their proximity to state craft or the existing power structure.

Based on contemporary field experience and available literature, I would rather like to ask whether anything really exists as a community’s own or collective perspective which is homogeneous in nature? May be on the issues of finding the markers of group identity, whether expansive or episodic, a given community may like to project certain socio-cultural elements to retain or to consolidate community or clan identity which itself is a very complex process and this may go beyond the question of boundary maintenance process which Fredrik Barth (1998) proposed in his classic work titled ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’. In fact, location of power within the community, which may even change with the passage of time, may work as a deciding force to delineate how community need to be represented and, in the process, they may not bother about the historicity rather may like to superimpose new

realities and may prefer even to decline their cultural past for projection of a new identity. Now how an ethnographer or social scientists look at such overt or covert multilayered emerging realities from ethical standpoints?

To illustrate this point further here I like to fall back on the case study based on my own experience of dealing with an Apatani student of anthropology who decided to write a master's dissertation on Apatani social structure. Being an Apatani (insider) he has mentioned regarding the two-broad division in Apatani society about which not only Haimendorf also wrote (1962) in his seminal volume "The Apatani and Their Neighbours" but even some Apatani scholars (popularly call 'indigenous scholars') also mentioned long back in clear terms in their apparent ethnographic writings (Takhe Kani:1993). Our student wrote on the Apatani social structure where he mentioned about these two strata and added how these divisions were perceived by earlier writers and finally urged upon the need for further rethinking on those narratives from the contemporary perspectives where Apatanis are passing through the phase of transition. He was basically focusing on how with the passage of time such older notions became redundant and how community members started looking at such issues which has lost its functional implications as Apatanis in general became one of the progressive tribes of the state of Arunachal Pradesh. This piece of work was seen by a friend of that student who passed over that dissertation to some of the older members of the society. Then immediately he was summoned by those elder Apatani people belonging to one segment of older divisions and then subsequently they came to meet to the Head of our dept as well as university authority, and expressed their terrible agony for such information written in the form of text which they felt highly derogatory for the tribe and specifically from their perspectives. Most of them were state government officials holding responsible posts in various departments. In fact, they came with a typed document and tried to pursue the university authority to remove those pages from the dissertation so that no negative image of their segment or society as such is carried over to the readers of the dissertation and more importantly, they came with their version of the issue which negate such hierarchical divisions in the evolving social structure which they wanted to incorporate in the dissertation. Being the supervisor, I had to take part in the discourse and finally, after their repeated visits and representation, University authority decided to keep that dissertation in a sealed envelope so that the readers do not access it and in the process university authority also wanted to show mutual respect to the voices of the people.

Now what should be taken as the community's own perspective here, which needs to be respected or deserves ethical consideration? What a native anthropologist learn from the actions of some sections of his own community? As a non-native anthropologist what ethical stand do we need to take to deal with such crucial issues which have a meaning in the changing circumstances? Or should such issues be left out of our contemporary ethical discourse? How do we like to assess the stand, which university authority had taken? Should we move

towards academic activism or promote the idea of social engineering to bridge the gap that emerged out of rigid social norms and values located within the social system itself? These are some of the fundamental questions on which we need to ponder over.

I would like to provide another example, which is related to the issues of ethical discourse along with an anthropologist's relative position in a state where he or she is located. At the end of the year 2011, Arunachal Pradesh had experienced an unprecedented ethnic tension since the achievement of statehood as a result of huge political instability in the state, which didn't gain much required attention of the so-called mainstream media of India. This has resulted in huge loss of property, clashes between ethnic groups in the capital complex leading to virtual collapse of the state craft. As an anthropologist having some understanding over the issues which has its roots in the evolving of inter-ethnic relations of the state, I had to remain silent as we learned from the past experience that even today any publication on such violent acts, which may place some groups or civil societies or even certain individuals etc., to an uncomfortable situation, may have a counter effect on the individual analyst, who may be a social scientists or journalists or any other conscious citizen of India.

Through our silence are we really taking any ethical stand by not hurting the sentiment of a community, civil society or any factions? Are we making our discipline irrelevant in addressing the emergent issues which also need urgent attention? Alternatively, should we maintain a silence and wait for the time when things will lead to a point of saturation with the interventions of state or other agencies and then only, we will formulate a project and look for funding agencies and finally after a few years we will come out with grand narratives as a product of our research project(s). Or should we accept equivocally that such issues need to be dealt with by the journalists and in the process we, the anthropologists will enter into a deep academic slumber in the pretext of maintaining a comfortable ethical norm. We can even take the ongoing crisis in the state of Manipur leading to the worst form of ethnic conflicts in the history of the state or North East region. Unfortunately, we didn't hear any meaningful voices of the anthropologists irrespective of their ethnic affiliation on such a grave crisis which still continues to bleed this bordering state and became a huge concern for our nation-state and even beyond.

Another context which anthropologist in other parts of the world, have started addressing effectively is the plight of the anthropologists working in the conflict zones, may be war or battle affected areas or within the states which are infested with extremist groups and factions, or states where violation of human rights are the essence of every day's existence of common people.

Jeffrey A. Sluka(1996) rightly observes that, 'about one third of the world countries are currently involved in warfare and two third of the countries routinely resort to human rights abuses as normal aspects of their political process to control their population, it is clear that few anthropologists will be able to avoid conflicting situations and instances of socio-political

violence in the course of their professional lives' (Sluka 1996: 276 c.f. Das 2014). Das (ibid) also added, "Therefore, doing fieldwork in politically disturbed fields means negotiating and surviving from dangers that often come without warning. The Anthropological ethics committee in the U.K. as elsewhere is unenthusiastic on setting practical guidelines that could defend the interest of anthropologists doing fieldwork. The conventional ethical requirements in anthropology do not speak of the researcher's safety, security and well-being in violent environments. Anthropologists well-being are often taken for granted as 'common sense knowledge' in violent field site".

Primarily, being social analyst, perhaps anthropologists cannot escape such conflict zones with which even our nation-state is trying to negotiate. Beyond the red corridor, and other disturbed bordering state, India's North east region is also known for such violent conflicts which created an elusive imagery of the region which has otherwise contained so much diversity in terms of biological, physical and human resources.

Concluding remarks

Many anthropologists from the region and beyond are dealing with various issues related to ongoing ethnicity or ethnic movements or other issues related to development, change or transformation etc. Unfortunately, most of them are actually left to their own plight or the predicament they face in risking their lives in the absence of any ethical guidelines to negotiate their academic pursuits in the context of huge disbelief prevailed between the states and armed extremist groups or other agencies. Working in such a precarious field largely depends on the individual's own ability to negotiate with the crisis situation and gaining confidence of both the contending parties and sometimes on their good fortune.

Here, I am in agreement with Das who has done commendable work on the Nagas for his doctoral research from SOAS, U.K., who wrote, (2014), "the possibility of surviving such fieldwork is determined by factors that are beyond human control and comprehension. But we can always take steps that do not stop at the 'common sensual' 'rhetoric', nonetheless, transcend the idiosyncratic standpoints of anthropological research determined solely by professional ethics. I will argue that 'professionalism' should match 'humanism' and our study among the 'poor, marginalized and powerless' contribute to their empowerment". Das further added, "It would be dangerous and utter falsehood to think that there are definite answers to any of these ethical questions". As a practitioner of Social Science, irrespective of our disciplinary boundaries, we need to think and rethink about them in both practical and theoretical terms. Let me quote Caplan (2003:27) from his valuable book to conclude the paper, "In looking at the debates on ethics and anthropology over the last four decades, the issues that recur continually are concerns about, on the one hand, the relations between anthropologists and the subjects of their study and, on the other, the responsibilities of anthropologists towards informants and others. Yet these are never purely internal matters:

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debates around them are products of the wider contexts – both historical and geographical – in which anthropology is practised”.

Sometimes, there may be a need for academic activism in order to surpass various barriers to resolve such ethical dilemmas in Anthropology or in a larger domain of social science research for the benefit of communities who constitute the universe of our academic journey.

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Bio Profile of the Author:

Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh.
Founder Head of the Department of Anthropology, RGU
Former Director of IGRMS, Bhopal.
Vice President, Kolkata Society for Asian Studies.
E-mail: saritkchai@gmail.com