

## ENCOUNTERING THE FIELD

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[...] the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself.

Jorge Luis Borges (The Ethnographer)

The centrality of ethnography in anthropology cannot be underplayed - the contours along which the entry into the field is made, the way that the field is chosen by both institutional and personal factors, and the dynamics of time spent in the field have been debated for some time now (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Harding 1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Crapenzano 1985, Montuschi 2003). Even so, there has been little talk of ethnography being conducted from contours not defined in line with the way that the hegemonic discourses project it in (Escobar and Restrepo 2005). In lieu of this, finding myself as an Indian student from Delhi University, with an opportunity to conduct a short stint (45 days) of fieldwork in Europe (Denmark), seemed both exciting and daunting all at once. There are several reasons to this state of mind which emanate from my particular 'anthropological position' and my relation to the field thereof. Taking account of the brief amount of fieldwork time, my engagement was more about what it meant to be in the field rather than in strict terms of the substance of my research. In order to exculpate on this I will take up how the ethnographic experience emerges through multiple encounters with and in the field.

If the crux of the discipline is defined in the specific encounters that the anthropologist makes in the field, the specificities of how these encounters take place cannot be undermined. Not attempting to disavow the encounter in itself, I place emphasis on what allows the encounter to exist at all. I seek to stress the institutional and inter-subjective positions of agents/entities

who, through their mutual engagement come to form the anthropological encounter. More importantly, I try to trace how the exchanges that transpire in such encounters re-orient viewpoints to then lead to future encounters, invariably defining the way in which the research progresses.

In a nutshell then, the focus of the paper is on how the paths to and from the encounter get constructed. I argue that it is in these paths that the essential nature of the encounter is made. Further, I look at how previous encounters inform future ones in the field which ultimately defines how the ethnographic product is generated. In attempting to address this question I view the encounter essentially as a means to grasp the 'ethnographic secret' of the ethnographic object being investigated of which the anthropologist attempts to become privy to. In my case, this becomes an attempt to understand the way that my respondents viewed and experienced the ethnographic object I was attempting to study. Before fieldwork this knowledge is essentially a secret for the ethnographer as the very basis of fieldwork is the premise that only through detailed and prolonged interactions with respondents in their everyday life situations can information about the ethnographic object under investigation be attained. The final product from these associations is embodied in the ethnographic text. This text is a result of encounters, re-contextualisation of viewpoints that occur therein alongside texts that are read, which guide the manner in which the ethnographer chooses to comprehend the 'ethnographic secret' and hence orient her argument in the construction of her ethnographic text. In adopting this stance I ask not so much of the content of this secret, but the mechanisms by which it is constructed and through which it gets disseminated.

### **The possibility of the path**

My 'position' finds itself placed as an attempt at conducting what Escobar and Restrepo term as 'world anthropologies'. For them 'world anthropologies',

[...] does not claim an epistemological and ontological privilege on some other criteria (e.g. the identity of the speaker, geographical location, or type of contestation). Rather, we see the project of 'world anthropologies' as an intervention aimed at loosening the disciplinary constraints that subalternized modalities of anthropological practice and imagination have to face in the name of unmarked,

normalized and normalizing models of anthropology (Escobar and Restrepo 2005: 3).

In lieu of this, I use the notion of 'world anthropologies' as a mode that seeks to address questions such as - What does it mean for an Indian Student to get an opportunity to conduct ethnography in Europe? More significantly, what does such a possibility or such an opportunity imply and why has there been a lack of such instances in the past? I place these questions within the larger framework of classificatory schemes that emanate from the hegemonic discourses of who studies who - which are largely labelled as 'dominant anthropologies'. The bleakness of such opportunities and how such a possibility truly represents something other than the norm can be located in two particular instances. Firstly, there exists little literature on the specificities of a brown anthropologist conducting studies in the white world. Most texts on methodology engage with the question of the encounter in regard to the white man's experience in worlds other than his own and more recently, critiques stemming from this approach which address the politics of a native conducting ethnography in her own land (Guha 1983; Srinivas and Ramaswamy 1979; Madan 1982). The position I found myself in not only had little relevant literature, but also such instances were hardly common. Secondly, this opportunity only became a possibility through funding from the European Union. Within the program that allowed me to take benefits of this opportunity, the time I spent in the field or even the ethnographic site I chose in an European country was limited to one that had a partner university with the program in question. These instances point to the institutional restrictions that allow for the proliferation of such a trend (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Having studied a law (Right to Information 2005, hereafter RTI)<sup>1</sup> that operates in India, I chose to go to Denmark to get a taste of how the same law (the Danish version- Access to Public

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1 On 12th October 2005, the Right to Information (RTI) came into effect in India after much debate. It signified an attempt to revitalize the notion of 'democracy' for the state and its citizens through propagating a more transparent system of governance, as it allowed Indian citizens to seek written material on the way that the state functions. Since its inception it has led to vigorous public debate and media attention on a host of issues which are chiefly a result of the manner in which corrupt activities of state officials have come into the public domain and which state officials fall in the ambit of the law.

Administrations Act 1985, hereafter APA)<sup>2</sup> operates in the Danish case. Both laws in their specific contexts give citizens the right to access written information from the state on its functions. Thus, in both cases it was seen as a tool encoded in state law to deface corrupt activities of state actors and widen the ambit of transparency. My central research question was – what did such a law do to the idea of the ‘state’ in the everyday world of the citizens by allowing for the circulation of stories to do with state corruption? India and Denmark represented counter-opposites for me. In India the citizen operates with the pre-conceived notion that the state is rampant in corrupt activities, whereas the average Dane prides herself in the transparent system of governance in Denmark. The research question then sought to investigate how the ‘state’ as reified object gets instated in the everyday through that which both laws in their respective contexts allow to come into the public domain. In essence, I was trying to grapple with the ‘ethnographic secret’, which in my case was the understanding of people’s experiences that had used the law in question. For me, the true hallmark of anthropology and its valid claim lay in the study of an anthropological object through the route of another. Thus I hoped to exculpate on the Indian case through my understanding of the Danish example and vice-versa. In attempting to do this, I viewed both cases as specific to their own ethnographic sites, without ascribing any pre-defined binary to the two (such as developed/underdeveloped, east/west, centre/periphery etc). The dominant template I used for this became Arif’s notion of ‘difference’ as a means to carry out ‘world anthropologies’ (Arif 2007). This notion of ‘difference’ is treated not as a resolved analytic and thus not reversed ethnocentrism, but as a proposition to be addressed. In order to avoid the pitfall of creating a reverse-ethnocentrism by advocating a discourse counter to ethnocentrism the need is for the anthropologist to place herself beyond the dichotomy of self and other in order to constantly question the discourses that make up these binaries and her own position (Lee 1997). The position is one which is simultaneously external and internal - recognizing the binaries but not allowing them to drive the mandate of the research. This can be made a possibility for Arif by viewing particular instances not in the substitutable terms (of opposition thus

2 In 1970, the Danish Parliament adopted the Act on Access of the Public to Documents in Administrative Files, which was replaced in 1985 by the Access to Public Administration Act. In a general sense it meant the legislation of a law that allowed the citizen to ask the state for information regarding its functioning. Unlike India the law is chiefly used by investigative journalists in Denmark.

avoiding the threat of creating a reverse ethnocentricism), but in the mode of a Deleuzian repetition. This stance advocates that each encounter is treated as an anthropological ‘concept’ so that in ‘its internal profound vibration is an instance of repetition and not substitution’ (Arif 2007). The attempt is to formulate a disciplinary template that without denying history and getting trapped in traditional binaries, allows a movement forward. The moment forward into this sort of a formulation will be made possible when dominant anthropologies are no longer viewed as the defining myth of how relationships are structured in the loci of anthropology.

I viewed the opportunity presented to me, of being an Indian going to Denmark to conduct anthropological work and present my findings to the department in Delhi as a step in that direction. By viewing the world of anthropology through the trope of difference and not the binaries enunciated in ‘dominant anthropologies’ (self/other, centre/periphery, colonial/postcolonial), I aimed to view each encounter as sculpted through the trajectory of mutual discovery. That being said, I found myself being constantly reminded of the classificatory schemata that emanates from the dominant anthropologies while in the field (Foucault 1972)<sup>3</sup>. This difficulty was made most explicit to me by the way that I was perceived while in the field. Broadly speaking I found my presence to be understood along three broad ‘frontiers’, each of which was pronounced by a distinct form of consciousness in which a particular sense of the self and stemming from it – difference, emerged.

The first is, of course, the manner in which I was perceived within and outside academic circles. Further, within the academic world my presence was understood differently by those intellectuals that studied ‘India’ and those that took up ‘Europe’

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3 In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault puts forth that power in any episteme is embodied in the classificatory mechanisms that are set into motion and define the way that discourse is formulated. As discourse, ‘anthropology is a rule-governed system of utterances (a discursive formation, in Foucault’s sense of the term) that systematically constructs “facts” in ways that have at least as much to do with the goals of the discipline and the organizations it sustains as with the world “out there”’ (Escobar 1993: 379) I use this analytic to understand how in my time in the field even though I attempted to view the ethnographic object through the trope of difference, several ‘encounters’ constantly informed my position as lodged in the traditional binaries of developed/underdeveloped, east/west, centre/periphery etc.

as an object of study. In all of my discussions, not just what I had come to study, but more importantly the manner (paths) in which this had been made a possibility for me was inquired into with great interest. For instance, over a long discussion with one of the professors who studies India, he remarked with gravity, 'It is about time the gaze was returned!' A similar reaction was elicited by those who engaged with the question of India. This could possibly stem from the fact that I was taken to be a native, and hence could speak with some certainty on issues, that they themselves were concerned with. However, on another level, I felt there was an attempt to take my presence as a serious one and my study as important, maybe because they were aware of the kind of anthropology being practiced in India. Further the Danish law<sup>4</sup> I wanted to look at had not been studied from an anthropological point of view, to their and my knowledge. The fact that I had taken an interest in the same was treated as stemming from my prior work on the Indian law, but more importantly my study allowed an aspect of Danish culture (the mere possibility of and acknowledgement of corruption in their state system) to come to the forefront which had not been considered in the past. This became especially explicit through my discussions with Europeans that were not Danish, as one professor at the University explained 'There is a form of corruption here, but it's different. I see it, but it is garbed you see, it goes unacknowledged every day and one way of doing so is through the large amount of state funded research on studying why Danes are the happiest people in the world'. My research interests then allowed for their viewing of Denmark in an explicitly different way.

From my interactions with the specialists on India, those positioned outside India, for the first time I became conscious of how one's membership to a community is taken to refer to an almost automatic knowledge about one's own culture (Buchowski 2004). Through questions posed to me not just on my research topic but on India in general I wondered having received all my anthropological training in India what was the specific 'stuff' that attributed me my Indian-ness? This question became even more pronounced through my interactions with Danish students studying India. For them my Indian-ness was taken as some sort of a guarantee of my knowledge on India. However, as I was

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4 The Access to Public Administrations Act 1985 had not been studied in my knowledge by any scholar I met or attempted to contact. In texts that I could lay my hands on (I was limited by language, as I did not know Danish) I could not find any work on the aforementioned law.

to learn, their way of approaching India projected my home to me in a very different light from what I had ever viewed it in the past. For instance, the Hindi I spoke was quickly connoted as 'market everyday Hindi'. My Hindi had been a result of habit while their Hindi was a result of intensive grammar classes. In time, the way that I related to India became easy to chalk along the lines of how they related to Denmark, a site that was home and object of study at once. This occupied a diametric position to how I viewed Denmark and they viewed India, a site that remained an object of study (Abu - Lughod 2000).<sup>5</sup> Both sites were however viewed through the lens of the other so that in these encounters I found myself simultaneously distanced and brought close to both sites of Denmark and India through the discovery of sameness and difference. What became particularly interesting was how previous notions of sameness and difference were re-contextualised. For instance, a young Danish student of India said, 'Look at my name, the first part is my name, the second part denotes my village name and the third the fact that I am part of a lineage that stems from a common ancestor. So understanding the caste system in class was never difficult for me. Why should anyone presuppose that it would be an inconceivable idea to me?' These differences brought me closer, through the route of another, to my inside social conditions from which I was personally and spatially removed. Thus the way in which I viewed both sites was exposed to me in different lights through these engagements and became the first type of 'encounters' in the field that informed my notion of the field (Cheah 1999).

It could be convincingly argued that if I had gone to southern or north-east India (parts of the country I have little knowledge of), I would approach them in the same way as I had approached Denmark. The question of proximity to the field is thus placed above geographical and cultural differences; at the level of boundaries created by 'dominant anthropologies'. It is by giving

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5 Abu-Lughod argues that whatever objectification takes place in case of socio-scientific representation is countered by what she calls 'discourses of familiarity', the way we talk about ourselves with our friends. The way that I viewed India (*vis-à-vis* Denmark) and the Danish students of India viewed Denmark (*vis-à-vis* India) finds resonance in how Abu-Lughod puts forth, 'We know that everyone is different, that people are different, that life is complicated, emotional and uncertain. This counter discourse does not usually exist for us with regard to distant communities where all we might have is the social-scientific analysis, the ethnographic description, the timeless ethnographic photograph, not to mention popular racism and political domination' (Abu-Lughod 2000: 4).

eminence to binaries as opposed to differences that these boundaries get constructed. I am not trying to deny that there are no boundaries between the researcher, the field and the researched; only that the contours of these boundaries should not operate on the template laid out by the binaries of dominant anthropology (colonial/post-colonial, centre/periphery etc). Boundaries exist and it is essentially an exploration along and within these boundaries that form the crux of what the discipline is. Freezing these boundaries along pre-determined outlines decreases the depth of the anthropological enterprise. For instance hierarchy in India has become a gate keeping concept which limits anthropological theorization about the place in question (Appadurai 1987). What such concepts have done is not allowed for using the lens of viewing certain objects in India (or Europe) beyond the Indian (or European) field and hence leaving them under studied. This is exemplified in my case in that I found there was little academic concern in the Danish law I was interested in as a mode to curb/change/conceive of state corruption. More specifically, the possibility of such a gaze stems from my prior location in India and became possible by attempting to understand the Danish situation through the Indian lens. Since in India the RTI was used as a means by the common citizenry to deface corrupt state officials in the public domain, I attempted to grasp what such a law allowed/did not allow for in a society that prided itself for being transparent in its states functioning. This position was essentially a result of the fact that I had perceived the functionality of the RTI in India in a particular way before coming to Denmark. It could be argued that the dearth of such instances is primarily a result of practical and technical factors such as funding, resources etc., but also the degree of interest in the same is strongly lacking due to the dominant tropes for understanding particular types of societies (Buchowski 2004).

As I was to learn, attempting to place myself in such a formulation wasn't always easy. While explaining my project to those theorists who engaged with 'Europe', the first question that was asked of me was, 'So, this isn't like a Ph.D., right? You are just doing this for yourself?' On replying in the affirmative and also stressing the fact that opportunities like this are rare and I couldn't let it go, perceiving it as an important site to learn in practice. I was often told, 'Well it sounds like a Ph.D. topic to me, have you applied anywhere?' I wondered to myself if such statements did not point towards the fact that serious ethnography, must emanate from a structured program that is linked to an institution in some sense. Somehow my saying that I was still affiliated to



the Department in India, made little sense as my research did not fall into a demarcated study program. In fact, on putting forth that I did contemplate future studies but hadn't decided where and how yet, I was told by one professor, 'You guys only apply to the U.S., I mean all the Indian scholars that have some name are from there, or have studied there' (Buchowski, 2004). Was this an attempt to lodge me within the classificatory scheme of 'Dominant Anthropologies', by deriding the status of my research and my affiliation? I treat these engagements as 'encounters' in their own regard, in that they tell of my own 'position' in the field.

My reception, outside academic circles as it turned out, aided in the possibility of my research. People were more than willing to talk to me, as to them I represented a 'true outsider'. I was often told, 'you have come all the way from India, to talk to us about this. It must be difficult'. They too were interested in the logistics that allowed me to come to Denmark, but for them, my marked difference was reason enough to suggest that I was indeed undertaking some sort of a serious undertaking; whose importance though not easily comprehensible to them could not be derided. While my Indian-ness was not forgotten here, my agency was the ability to communicate through a problem that was both local and universal at the same time (perceptions of state corruption). I was taken as someone who had finally risen up to talk about something that not only formed an intrinsic part of the lives of Danes, but had not been spoken about 'enough' in the past. This communication set me up as a student of social science beyond anything else.

### **Grappling with the secret**

The encounters one becomes a part of in the field are always in a state of 'becoming', that is the act of doing ethnography is contingent on several factors that occur before, after and during the course of events that transpire in the field. Each previous encounter informs the next. The emphasis ultimately becomes about the complexity of individual contact points made in the field. Thus, my journey to Denmark was much more than just a journey to the west. What is retained by the researcher through these engagements consolidate to form the 'ethnographic secret', that she hopes to disseminate through what is written. The manner, in which these encounters unfold, is intrinsically tied to the position of the ethnographer before and after her entry into the field and the multiple encounters in the field. This unravelling of relationships is between unequal partners i.e. the researchers,

the researched and the field. Grappling with the 'ethnographic secret' then becomes an attempt to mould and be moulded by the discovery of these relationships and what they come to mean. It is in this sense that ethnography emerges from the site of the field.

In order to amplify how this works I view the field as constructed like a 'meshwork' wherein I use the Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a means to work through this 'meshwork'. By posing the field as a 'meshwork', I take on Arif's (2007) notion of structuring encounters in the field not through the binaries of centre/periphery, the colonial/post-colonial but through the trope of difference or a world of differences. By the 'meshwork' she implies,

-meshworks are self-organizing; grow unplanned and unpredicted; they are constituted by diverse elements; uniformity and homogeneity are not the criteria for inclusion and lastly; they survive on a degree of connectivity that enables self-sustenance....i.e. circumstances at which ethnographic encounters come to be placed outside of west vs. the rest, centre vs. periphery, colonial vs. post-colonial by highlighting their heterogeneity' (Arif 2007:3).

By viewing the world of anthropology through the trope of difference and not the binaries enunciated in dominant anthropologies, I aim to view each encounter as sculpted through the trajectory of mutual discovery, using ANT as a guiding principle. In so far, as ANT can be understood as a way of navigating through research, the word 'network' in ANT implies a way of registering the 'surprise' we have when we do research, to see the number of entities that become visible through description (Latour 2005). This 'surprise' is registered by what is made visible in the course of research, which is made explicit through the specific dynamics of the 'encounter'. This is structured by the positionality of those that make the encounter and also by how previous encounters inform future ones. This act of making visible is precisely that which informs the possibility of future encounters and that which structures the network, which finally forms the 'meshwork'. The directions that my meetings took were constructed by previous encounters. This process began while I was still in India, in my trying to contact individuals in Denmark who had heard/knew about the law I wanted to study. These contacts later fed into the people I was to meet during my time in the field, but also

how I approached the field. For instance, feeling like I had hit a dead end, when I got no concrete replies to e-mails explaining my purpose in Denmark, I was delighted to one day receive not only a detailed reply, on the current status of the law, but also some references of people who would be willing to talk to me. In all the exchanges that took place henceforth, my having come from India was treated with great importance, and meetings were quickly fixed. In exchange for people's time, I had to share my knowledge of the case of the Indian law. It cannot be denied that the easy facilitation of these meetings was also a result of the fact that during my time in Denmark, a committee had come out with the draft of a new bill for the law in question after eight years of deliberations.<sup>6</sup> While the draft was undergoing reviews in the parliament, a strong movement<sup>7</sup> had been set into motion, by a group of journalists that found the new bill as problematic. As, I was to learn, my chief respondents became these journalists that had used the law in the past and were now the torchbearers for the movement against the new bill. Thus, in exchange for them giving me their time to speak to them, I was asked to do

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6 On 16th May 2002 the Danish government created a twenty-one member Public Disclosure Commission composed of senior level journalists, state authorities and specialists of law to review the APA. The commission was appointed with the task of considering how new information technologies could be employed for improvement of access to public information, as well as assess the necessity for review of other laws related to freedom of information. After eight years of deliberation on 8th December, 2010, the Ministry of Justice presented a new bill to replace the APA of 1985 to the Danish parliament.

7 Members of the public disclosure commission framed the release of the bill, as a long laborious battle that would ultimately lead to greater degree of transparency in the state system. This view was challenged by a group of dissenting journalists that claimed that the new bill in fact closed up the possibility to access information. Two sections of the new bill were seen as especially problematic on account of the fact that they barred the possibility of the Danish media in getting recently acquired information (through the APA) of a state scandal popularly dubbed as the 'email case' which involved senior officials hiding information of corrupt activities through the deletion of particular emails. While the new bill was being debated investigative journalists were still in the process of getting their hands on the contentious emails or concrete proof of their deletion. Due to the call of state elections on September 15th, 2011, the new bill did not see the light of day as it did not go through three parliamentary hearings. The process must now be started anew.

an interview on the state radio channel, documenting my views on the operation of both laws in India and Denmark respectively. After getting over the first shock of being introduced as 'a specialist on law from India', I found myself feeling even more uncomfortable on being asked to give my views not just on the Indian law, but what Denmark could learn from India. Repeated efforts to explain that the laws, their use and thereof the events that were elicited were particular to the specific social-political contexts of both countries, registered little. Choosing my words carefully, I attempted to enunciate what I knew without giving any sort of advice.

Not ascribing any sort of hierarchical order to the two cases, I viewed the Danish case through the lens of the already familiar Indian case. What did this do for the way in which I approached Europe as an object of study? Cheah uses the 'inverted telescope' metaphor to describe Anderson's (European) surprise at the way Sukarno (Indonesian) described Hitler as a nationalist leader. Cheah takes on the surprise that a young Benedict Anderson pens down in the introduction of his book 'The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World' (1998), on hearing a young Indonesian, Sukarno characterize Anderson's Hitler as a 'great nationalist leader'. Hearing Sukarno frame Hitler thus, Anderson was forced to see a 'distanced' Europe mapped through a series that began in Indonesia. Not only did such a description have a 'dizzying effect' on Anderson but more importantly, it was an invitation to Anderson to see 'his Europe' through an 'inverted telescope'. Such a viewing of Europe places it as 'distanced and miniaturized' for Anderson. Cheah problematizes such a conception by asking whether Europe through such a viewing is in fact distanced, or brought closer as an objective reality? Further, he questions whether the placing of the comparative point for Europe in a context outside Europe, is not a reverse ethnocentrism (Cheah 1999)?

Without trying to displace the importance of the two points raised by Cheah I contend that with regard to the inverted telescope metaphor, what becomes important is not so much what is distanced and what made close, but what magnification through the telescope does to the two objects being observed. This is precisely what allows the viewing to take on a notion of difference rather than a binary that represents a hierarchical order. It is not whether the telescope is inverted or not, rather the fact that there is a mutual directionality of viewing. A viewing that is simultaneously moving in and out, which re-interprets the object/s being viewed. Thus, with regard to Anderson, not

only is 'his Europe' seen in a different light, which 'distances' Europe for him, but this re-looking at Europe, makes him re-look at Indonesia too. This re-looking at Europe in fact makes 'his Europe' closer to him after an initial distancing. It is this mutual directionality that aids in understanding through difference. This is most pronounced in the encounter. In my case my viewing of the Danish case through the Indian lens, not only presented Denmark as a particular type of object, but this could only be made possible by a re-viewing of the Indian case. For instance my encounters with respondents often led to discussions around the fact that citizens of India and Denmark both perceived the state system as problematic (in their own ways), yet whereas the average Indian citizen sought deliverance through the usage of the RTI most Danes had not even heard of the APA. It was only investigative journalists in Denmark that were really using the APA. In India on the other hand not only were most citizens aware of the RTI and also learnt of it through regular reportage of stories in the public media about what the RTI had uncovered, but there were different private bodies and NGOs that pushed for the heightened usage of the RTI by citizens. As a result of such encounters I often found myself reassessing why the Indian citizen placed such faith in the RTI, thus I viewed India differently from the European lens. My respondents often asked me (since I was allegedly the social scientist) why I thought Danes did not use the APA more often. This bi-directionality is that which made possible the provisioning of a space to do 'world anthropologies'. In this context the notion of difference allows for a re-evaluation of the way that the idea of the 'state' as reified object is actualised in the everyday in India – an understanding that occurred to me after my affinity with the APA in the Danish field.

What did it mean to understand the Danish case in this sort of a framing? How did it influence the way in which I saw and grappled with the 'ethnographic secret'? Most certainly, my take on the Danish case, inadvertently led me to being directed to other respondents in the field. For instance one respondent put forth, 'I get why you are here. The Indian law is a hot topic back in India. No one in Denmark even knows about our law. You want to know why, right?' In a sense this encapsulated my presence. But this assessment of my situation could only be reached through a mutual directionality that we both understood in our respective positions that together came to form our encounter. The way that I was understood was a key element in the way and the type of people I was directed to for further meetings. For Latour, ANT can only be used as a mode to register the trajectory that the

research has taken. It registers the 'surprise' of heterogeneous actors connected together which defines the many unexpected paths that the research has to pass through (Latour 2005). I locate this 'surprise' at the site of the encounter, which re-structures the way in which the anthropological object is perceived through a constant re-contextualisation of sameness and difference. That is the 'surprise' that both the interviewer and interviewed register through the mutual directionality of the gaze which gets constructed in the 'encounter'. In my case, this 'surprise' was registered in the way that those I interviewed reassessed themselves through the specificity of my position and vice-versa. For instance, a journalist who had used the law extensively to uncover a state scandal said, 'I don't know why more Danes don't use the law? I know we are very different as a country from India, but it's not like everything is perfect here. People do care about the way things are going on, but their interest is manifested in different ways'. Such statements aided in my assessment of not only the Danish case, but from it I was allowed a new lens through which to view the Indian case. It is at this level that my 'surprise' was registered. For the interviewed this 'surprise' is registered by giving them the Indian lens to think through the Danish case.

This 'surprise' is registered by approaching the field through the trope of 'difference and not the classificatory schemes emanating from 'dominant anthropologies'. In doing so, the temptation to quickly categorise observations into binaries ceases. It is precisely this act of not going to the field with a prepared list of world binaries that allows the 'surprise' to exist. The temporality of such encounters is thus emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. It is this 'surprise' that then draws out the paths through which the research transgresses. This mutual 'surprise' defined the way in which I navigated through the field, the type of people I was led to, formulated the questions to ask and to whom. My grappling with the 'ethnographic secret' essentially became a means to register the 'surprise' that pronounced the mutual directionality of my encounters. The notion of difference then does not operate as one that pre-supposes and hence leads to a case of heterogeneity but it is an emergent bi-directionality which re-aligns contact points in the encounter through mutual 'surprise'. This 'emergent bi-directionality' then does not allow for a simple alignment of the ethnographic secret in the dominant binaries of centre/periphery, east/west etc., but is always in a constant process of re-contextualisation of contact points within and beyond the encounter defining paths towards the ethnographic secret.

### **Disseminating the secret**

After engaging with the field, the task that remains at hand is to pen down what has been learnt and also to disseminate the knowledge so gained. This act of 'writing' and the final output that is generated is dependent on the way in which the ethnographic object is comprehended and approached. While in the field, this is determined by not only the position of the ethnographer but also the ethnographic texts she has read/continues to read which then, informs her position and her gaze. Overall, my research work in Denmark seems to have been handicapped in two ways – first, I found no texts that aided me in approaching the specificity of my engagement with my field (a brown ethnographer in the west) and secondly, the Danish law that I had gone to study had not been academically addressed in the past to my knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Being given the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in Denmark is not merely a question of being able to combine empirical data with theoretical sophistication. The point is about the theoretical framework through which one frames, interprets and analyses ones empirical data? My specific research agenda was best informed by contemporary theoretical reflections that emerged from theorization conducted by anthropologists seated at western institutes who had studied the indigenous world, or Indian anthropologists who had studied their own worlds. What did this mean for the way in which I looked at Europe as an object of study? What role did this play in the way that I not only approached the 'ethnographic secret', but the way in which I understood it and then disseminated its message?

My aim was to understand state corruption and the way in which it structured the idea of the 'state' in the everyday that is state creation. But how was I to comprehend this in the short time I was in Denmark, a country which was famous for its transparent state system? It took me little time to realize that I could not approach the matter as I had done in India. Even such assessments came from the position of realizing the difference that operated in the Danish field vis-à-vis India. Further, I found myself constantly referring to texts that dealt with the same problematic but which were ethnographically located in India, Africa or Latin America. Using such texts most definitely defined

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8 The Access to Public Administrations Act 1985 had not been studied in my knowledge by any scholar I met or attempted to contact. In texts that I could lay my hands on (I was limited by language, as I did not know Danish) I could not find any work on the aforementioned law.

the contours of my ethnographic product. In this line of argument I ask, is it possible for the anthropologist to become fully aware of the 'ethnographic secret' without distorting it in so far as the aim of the ethnographer becomes an attempt to appropriate the energy of the ethnographic secret without distorting its inner core, in other words - undertaking a revelation that does justice to the secret? (Taussig 1999) The fact being that becoming privy to the knowledge encoded in any secret distorts the very knowledge encoded in the secret by making it more public and shared. Does such an attempt to grasp the knowledge (which is the underpinning of ethnography) not lead to the re-creation of the very content of that secret? I contend that any sort of encounter essentially leads to becoming privy to the 'ethnographic secret' through its distortion. Any engagement necessarily instils change, nothing can remain untouched. Any distortion then leads to a simultaneous creation. However, through an orientation that treats of the 'other' through the trope of 'difference' and thus goes to the field without pre-conceived notions of traditional binaries embedded in 'dominant anthropologies', leads to a minimal distortion of the 'ethnographic secret'. This is made possible by allowing for the element of 'surprise' to remain in the encounters by not pre-determining which and how entities will present themselves as intrinsic to the assessment of the 'ethnographic object'. The implication being that the distortion from any kind of ethnographic engagement is interlaced with a simultaneous creation, which is minimised through 'emergent bi-directionality'. In my case this does not mean that I attempted to find in Denmark what I had seen and studied in India, but there was a way in which my gaze was defined along the tangents of similarity and difference along the Indian example. In so doing, there is most certainly a moment of coming together before a moment of breaking away through differences in both contexts of India and Denmark. In fact this is a constant process during and after the field engagement. This constant process of re-contextualisation informs the way in which the 'writing' component of research is conducted and the 'ethnographic secret' disseminated. In my case I saw the operation of state formation through the vantage point of garbed state corruption, something Denmark prided itself in not possessing. Such a comprehension could not have emerged without my prior engagement with the Indian case. Herein lay the construction of a path in itself. This path is intimately connected to and constructed by prior paths that finally led to the engagement with the 'ethnographic secret'.



## Conclusion

Does the shortness of my stint and hence the degree of affinity to the APA in the field disavow the status of my research? It could be convincingly argued that I had not engaged in serious ethnography, but that is too simplistic a rendering. Institutional factors more than anything else defined the shortness of my time, but even this meagre affinity with the European field aided in my perception of the Indian field, a site that I was much closely acquainted to. Retrospectively, this was the greatest learning I got from the Danish field, a chance to re-look at India through what the Danish lens allowed me. Further, it is with some certainty that I can state that such learning was intrinsically different and perceptively more rewarding from what ethnographic texts that dealt with notions of state corruption in India, Latin America and Africa allowed me to gauge.

My attempt has been to show that ethnography is a process, defined through the craft of grappling with, becoming a part of and then disseminating what has been learned of the 'ethnographic secret', which is gained/constructed through the encounter. Approaching the 'ethnographic secret' is tied to perceiving the field in particular ways. In order to avoid the trap of codifying the field and its entities in binaries embedded in 'dominant anthropologies', taking up Arif's trope of 'difference' aids in a more meaningful and well rounded ethnography. Even so, the tools for ethnography as I discovered emerged from the specificity of the field. The specific emergence of these tools is tied to the manoeuvrings through the 'meshwork'. The 'meshwork' then becomes a way of manoeuvring through the field central to which is the positionality of the ethnographer. The question then becomes - how does the ethnographer become an extension of what she studies? Is this extension defined by the 'meshwork' that the ethnographer becomes a part of when in the field? Most definitely yes! As I experienced in my case the differences in the field brought me closer, through the route of another, to my inside social conditions from which I was personally removed. These differences aided in my reception in understanding the object of Europe through my location. This realization was structured through heterogeneous differences rather than hierarchies that slotted the observer in relation to the observed. Since I had looked at the Indian law in detail, I was constantly struck by the way in which both India and Denmark approached the idea of the state, even if they were differently oriented to what their specific laws may entail. This possibility was also intrinsically linked to the issue of readability that I could comprehend from having been

in both fields. For me the two situations not only spoke to each other, but more importantly informed my perception of either and both. This not only meant the ability to look at 'Europe' through the Indian lens which was scarce in itself, but more importantly it meant an ability to re-look at India through the recently experienced European lens. My notion of both India and Europe were distanced and merged simultaneously which meant that, for me, there was a metamorphosis on not just a theoretical level, but allowed me to see analytics that I previously had not perceived.

My stint in the field in a nutshell can be described as a story of realizing and attempting to review relations of power and understand how discourses ossify. By giving eminence to difference in the field through the practice of a different type of ethnography (the very fact of my being in an European field), there is a possibility that boundaries and insularities do not get reified, but rather that anthropological knowledge achieves meaningful fructification. The hope is that such a trend becomes a commonality rather than a one off "lucky" chance I was privileged to have received.

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