CONTESTED MORALITIES, DISPUTED ETHICS:
THE DILEMMAS OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN POST-CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS

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I.   Introduction

As we turn to the twenty-first century, the number of countries and regions either witnessing different types of conflict or undergoing "post-conflict" transition has been on the rise. This has inevitably led to an increased interest amongst social scientists to try to intimately understand the experiences of war, or engage in what is generally referred to as the "anthropology of war." Because of this burgeoning interest, empirical work in what is often referred to as "dangerous fields"[1] is also bound to increase (Kovats-Bernat 2002). Conducting research in such situations demands a reconsideration of traditional notions of fieldwork ethics and development of new tactics and strategies that would be more responsive to the unique methodological and ethical concerns encountered during situations of violence and conflict. Thus far, there has been very little in the existing literature that speaks directly about methodological strategies, including the process of data collection, ways of ensuring the veracity and reliability of data, coping with crisis

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[1] Kovats-Bernat (2002: 208) defines dangerous fields as "those sites where social relationships and cultural realities are critically modified by the pervasion of fear, threat of force, or (ir)regular application of violence."

and terror, as well as the broader ethical issues that require careful consideration and preparation prior to entering the field.[2]

What I present in this paper are reflections on my personal experiences while conducting fieldwork in the post-conflict situation in Nepal. Rather than creating a narrative based on my professional work in Nepal, especially since 2001, I will instead limit my discussion to the crisis that I was caught up in while conducting research in Kapilvastu, a district in the western Tarai, the southern belt of Nepal, in September 2007. More specifically, I will focus on unanticipated events and encounters that made it difficult for me to decipher the crisis and to negotiate through these events, using the language of fieldwork ethics common to social science disciplines. In essence, these were experiences where the customary approaches, methods, and ethics that I have been acquainted with as a social science researcher felt far removed from the realities in the field during situations of conflict, violence, and terror.

I choose a narrative strategy to present my encounters primarily because, as Clarke (1975: 96) has observed, personal anecdotes which are "systematically suppressed as 'non-scientific' by the limitations of prevailing research methodologies" can actually serve as an important body of knowledge. While providing a narrative of experiences in the specific fieldwork context of Nepal, it will be my attempt to demonstrate some of the problematic encounters, which require traditional notions of research ethics to be revisited, and perhaps even radically transformed, to address the unique circumstances of fieldwork in conflict situations. I hope that the experiences and the strategies I adopted to overcome the ethical dilemmas will be helpful to other researchers as they prepare for the challenges inherent in conducting research in "dangerous fields."

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[2] Notable exceptions include: Kovats-Bernat (2002), Peritore (1990), Scheper-Hughes (1995), Nordstorm and Robben (1995), Skula (2000), Wood (2006), Smyth and Robinson (2001).

II.   Understanding Conflict and Post-Conflict

The major theme of the paper – conducting fieldwork in post-conflict situation – necessitates first a discussion about what conflict and post-conflict situations generally mean. Scholars working on issues of conflict have time and again argued that rather than being discrete stages in a linear continuum, conflict and post-conflict environments are instead marked by complex and interdependent relationships, with remnants of conflict continuing to disturb the post-conflict environment or new conflicts beginning to emerge during the transition (Santiso 2002; Collier 2007).[3]

Such was the situation when I was conducting my own research in Nepal. The decade-long Maoist insurgency[4] in Nepal had ended, following the People's Movement of April 2006, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and the Agreement on Monitoring the Management of Arms and Armies between the government of Nepal and the rebel Maoists. The transition period in Nepal, however, was and continues to be marred by instability, uncertainty, violence, and malgovernance. These tensions have been further exacerbated by the rise of identity-based politics, particularly the proliferation of armed groups clamoring for the rights and autonomy of various social groups.

In particular, in the case of Kapilvastu where the fieldwork was conducted, tensions in the post-conflict environment were particularly acute. Following the 2007 Madhes Andolan,[5] armed

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[3] Collier (2007) observes that around half of all civil wars have resulted from a relapse in a post-conflict environment.

[4] The Maoist insurgency had affected almost all the 75 districts of Nepal to varying degrees, and had claimed the lives of more than 13,000 people, injured and displaced thousands more, while affecting millions psychologically, economically and politically. See Thapa with Sijapati (2005) and Lawoti (2007) for a fuller treatment of the insurgengy.

[5] Arguing that the political parties who came to power after the April 2006 People's Movement had failed to address the greivances of marginalzied groups, including Madhesis [people of plains/Tarai origin], the Nepal Sadbhavana Party, a Madhesi political outfit, staged a demonstration on 26 December 2006 in Nepalgunj, Banke (a mid-western Tarai district to the west of Kapilvastu and also with a strong Muslim presence), which progressed into communal riots between pahadis [people of hills origin] and madheshis, followed by a prolonged agitation against the government. This movement, which became popularly known as the Madhes Andolan, lasted for 21 days, claimed the lives of 30 people, wounded 800 more and resulted in the vandalization of hundreds of government offices and private property. While the Madhes Andolan effectively ended on 30 August 2007 when the government and the MJF signed a 22-point agreement, problems in the Tarai continue, especially with proliferation of armed groups that have radicalized the madheshi agenda. (ICG 2007).

groups[6] in the Tarai had begun threatening Pahadis [people of hill-origin] into vacating the Tarai at the pain of "action." As a result, in Kapilvastu as well throughout the Tarai, many industries owned by the Pahadis had been forcibly closed and the owners had fled the Tarai; large farms owned by Pahadis had been confiscated; and civil servants, including security personnel, had effectively vacated their posts. Similarly, exploiting the weak law-and-order situation, armed groups were also involved in abductions, extortion, physical attacks, and murder (ICG 2007; OHCHR 2007).

The tensions between Madhesis [people of plains/Tarai origin] and the Pahadi settlers need to be understood in the context of state-sanctioned migration of the northern hill residents into the Tarai over time, but particularly beginning in the late 1950s as part of the "pahadization" of the Tarai in order to check the growing population of Madhesis in the Tarai. The inflow of Pahadi migrants posed a challenge to the established landholding pattern and extant feudalistic practices in Kapilvastu, a district where large tracts of agricultural land, including whole villages, are under the control of a few families, including of a prominent landowner called Mohit Khan. As a result, according to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), starting in 1983 and long before the Maoist conflict, there had been various episodes of conflict between the landed class, primarily the Khans (Madhesi Muslims), and the landless Pahadis (mostly Hindus) on the grounds that the landowners had not been consulted before settling the hill migrants in public land that the Muslim landlords had been using as pastures, but which others claimed were also used as smuggling routes into India. Inevitably, during the time of the Maoist conflict, the landless people who had long viewed the landlords as oppressors served as a ready group that the Maoists could tap into for support (OHCHR 2007).

Another notable source of tension was the issue of vigilante groups; the 'Village Defense Forces' (*Pratikar Samiti*, in Nepali) set up most visibly in the districts of Nawalparasi and

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[6] Called *sashastra samuha* in Nepali, these are groups with ostensible political objectives, but many of which had taken up criminal activities as well. More specifically, most of these armed groups claim that the problems in the Tarai have

Kapilvastu, both in the same part of the Tarai, to retaliate against the Maoists during the period of the conflict (Rai and Bhusal 2008; OHCHR 2007; AI 2005; Bhattachan 2008). The support to these vigilante groups was such that human rights groups, including Amnesty International (AI) and OHCHR, have documented evidence suggesting government support in the form of money siphoned from local development funds meant for village governments, training to members of vigilante groups, and possibly even the supply of weapons (AI 2005; OHCHR 2007). As can be expected, official endorsement of the activities of the vigilante groups had an inflammatory effect and led to a serious escalation of violence in Kapilvastu.[7] With the end of the conflict, in September 2006, the *Pratikar Samiti* in Kapilvastu disbanded to form a new organization, the Loktantrik Madhesi Morcha (LMM), and thus continued to exercise significant authority. Responding to criticisms from human rights organizations and civil society representatives of the continued powers enjoyed by the former members of the *Pratikar Samiti*, in January 2007 the government discussed the issue of disarming them and commencing legal action for their alleged crimes, but in Kapilvastu this initiative failed to produce anything substantive (OHCHR 2007). This, and the continued existence of an army garrison of 200 men stationed next to Mohit Khan's house, led to significant tensions, including an announcement of an indefinite strike in Kapilvastu called by the Maoist-affiliated Young Communist League (YCL) in June 2007.[8] The attacks and counter-attacks, exacerbated by the deep-rooted ethnic, communal, and religious fault-lines in Kapilvastu, made it a likely area for the eruption of violence.

From this discussion, it can be surmised that researchers conducting fieldwork in post-conflict environments first need to be aware, as well as mindful, that a post-conflict situation does not necessitate the end of violence nor a return to normalcy. Instead, post-conflict environments

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emanated from colonization of the Tarai by the Nepali state, and they endorse violence to achieve an independent Tarai (ICG 2007).

[7] In February and March 2005, violent clashes between Pratikar Samiti members and the CPN(M) resulted in the death of 60 individuals from both sides, large-scale burning of more than 700 houses belonging to people who allegedly had provided support to the Maoists, and the displacement of thousands of civilians, mostly pahadis (AI 2005; Gyawali 2005).

are often marked by political instability and poorly enforced rule of law, making the resurgence of conflict in some form almost imminent. In this regard, the threats of violence and terror can be as pervasive in post-conflict environments as they would in situations of conflict.

III.   Field Relations and Personal Responsibilities

For researchers working in situations of conflict, there is an impending risk of "most, if not all… suffering recriminations, even to the extent of becoming targets" ourselves (Sluka 2000:23; see also, Sluka 1995). This leads to an examination of the fundamental issue of why researchers seek to work under such perilous conditions. After all, what is it about the field, especially one prone to violence, which attracts people to risk their lives in search of information or greater knowledge?

It was a late afternoon on Sunday, 16 September 2007, when I switched on the television to hear the news about violence in Kapilvastu following the killing of Mohit Khan,[9] the former chairman of the *Pratikar Samiti*. The news report at that hour indicated that at least a dozen vehicles had been torched, over two dozen houses in Kapilvastu and the surrounding districts of Rupandehi burnt, and at least two individuals, including a member of the Armed Police Force, killed. The report also indicated that the demonstrators were targeting Maoist sympathizers and Pahadis, thus turning the conflict into a "communal riot."

During that time, I was employed by an international organization that, among other things, was working to assist Nepal's peace process. Upon hearing the news, I immediately called my supervisor, a customary practice at the organization. As I had expected, he had already heard about the riots and informed me of a team being sent to the incident site the next morning to follow up on the violence that had by then spread into the neighboring districts of Rupandehi and Dang with retaliatory measures taken by Pahadis against Madhesis. During our conversation, I did

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[8] During the course of the strikes, members of the YCL also torched and vandalized dozens of vehicles in Kapilvastu. "Maoists torch seven vehicles in Kapilvastu", eKantipur.com, 10 June 2007.

not realize that my supervisor had not taken my name as he listed the individuals leaving for Kapilvastu the next day. I went back to the television to continue watch the spectacle unfolding in Kapilvastu with more scenes of houses and trucks burning. "Mohit Khan is not an individual, he is an institution…If something were to happen to him, this whole place will be in fire." These were the words spoken by an individual, I could not remember who at that time, when I had gone to Kapilvastu in June that same year. How true, I thought to myself – Mohit Khan's murder was in fact turning Kapilvastu into flames.

My visit to Kapilvastu in June 2007 was the first time that I had been to the district. There was something very peculiar about Kapilvastu that had intrigued my imagination. The district headquarters of Kapilvastu, Taulihawa, was like any other Tarai town – unbearably hot and humid, with dirty and congested roads, houses sprouting everywhere, clearly without any plan or scheme, glaring music from dilapidated tape recorders, *paan* (betel leaf) stains on the walls – in a sense, an epitome of unplanned urban development that was made all the more unattractive by the absence of the mountain scenery of the hill districts of Nepal. But the socio-political dimension of Kapilvastu was irresistibly fascinating. Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha is in Kapilvastu; in fact, the district presents itself as the "playground of Lord Buddha." Census figures indicate that in a population of about half a million, approximately 80 percent are Madhesis (including 20 percent Muslims), the remaining 20 percent is equally divided between hill Brahmins, Chhetris, and Tharus, and a meager 0.7 percent are Buddhists (CBS 2007). These distinct population groups in Kapilvastu, however, had never integrated as one society, but instead were always divided by parochialism, languages, customs, and localities within the district (Rai and Bhusal 2008).

Politically speaking, the district was fraught with deep-rooted class, religious, and ethnic tensions, which have been exploited by different vested interests. The social structure was marked by feudal relations with uneven land distribution patterns. A few families, including Mohit Khan's, owned hundreds of acres of land and served as landlords, commonly referred to as 'babus', to

[9] The assailant has not yet been identified and brought to justice.

tenant farmers who clustered around or near the property of the landlords. As aptly pointed out in a report published by an international NGO, political parties and government institutions in Kapilvastu, especially in the Madhesi-dominated southern parts of the district, had left it to the feudals to "determine the fate of politics and of the common people there… Hardly anyone votes for principles here; they vote for a party or candidate as per babu's diktat" (Rai and Bhusal 2008).

Evidently, Kapilvastu was a mess and since my visit in June, I could not resist the temptation to spend much of my time seeking to understand the district and to follow closely the events there. That Sunday afternoon, as I watched the violence unfold with retaliatory measures taken by Pahadis against the Madhesis, it suddenly struck me that I needed to go to Kapilvastu – there was a deep sense of commitment I felt to the area and its inhabitants which I could not simply abandon during the time of crisis.[10] With some semblance of moral responsibility, I immediately called my supervisor and asked him if I, too, could join the team leaving the next day. Understandably, there was reluctance in his tone; after all, I was a Pahadi and sending somebody of my ethnic background at a time when ethnic tensions were at its height obviously was not advisable. "But I am a Nepali, and the others whether they identify themselves as Madhesi, Pahadi or Tharu, are Nepali too," I insisted. After much discussion, my supervisor finally told me that I could seek advice from one of my colleagues who is a Madhesi Muslim and was based in Nepalgunj in the western Tarai, and hence closer to Kapilvastu than those of us in the capital, Kathmandu. Upon explaining the reluctance on the part of our organization because of my ethnicity, my colleague said, "During these times, what is required is somebody who can understand the situation, will know how to talk with the people, will be empathetic to their grievances as well as anger, and besides, the Madhesis' anger stems from the fact that the Pahadis have always mistreated them, so seeing a Pahadi during these painful times will perhaps help assuage the situation as well."

Another round of negotiations with my boss followed and I was part of the team that left for Kapilvastu from Kathmandu. In retrospect, my desire to go to Kapilvastu and my readiness to compromise my own personal safety brings into question deeper issues about the relative value of information or knowledge that can be developed from fieldwork during conflict, and concerns about impending danger to researchers' and the informants' lives and security during such situations. While those like Peritore (1990: 362) have suggested that during conflict, a calculus needs to be made between whether the "research has enough scientific seriousness that potential risks are repaid with significant scientific knowledge," my motivations were driven mostly by a moral imperative. Witnessing the carnage on television from afar and in the comfort of my home, I simply felt that I could not betray or abandon those who had shared with me so much and whose lives were now imperiled by violence and terror.

Admittedly, I was going to Kapilvastu under the protection of a powerful international organization whose intervention the people in the area clearly expected, but our objectives and approach were more humbly a desire to understand the situation, and in this regard, the objectives of the mission were similar to those who might be involved in a 'scientific inquiry.' More importantly, driven by moral concerns, as is the case of many other investigators who choose to participate in research amid violence; I, too, was willing to accept a certain degree of danger to participate in such an endeavor.

IV.   Mediating through my Pahadi and Other Identities

Recently, much attention has been given, though admittedly inconclusively, to the tensions between researchers' identity and the research process, in particular on the questions about how ascribed identities or ethno-cultural differences between the researchers and the researched impact the research process (Chilungu 1976, LeCompte 1987, Fontes 1998, Arif 2006). Some

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[10] Here, I am under no pretense that my return to the field would have somehow helped those whom I had previously met. Rather, my reference is simply to the deep and long commitment that I felt towards my research subjects based

scholars have argued that sharing the same cultural characteristics with participants allows researchers to easily establish rapport and also provides them with better insights on which questions to ask and how to ask them, while investigators from different cultural groups are often viewed with suspicion, face greater hostility, and even "overt compliance" in the form of covertly withholding or distorting information (Fontes 1998). This is not to say, however, that researchers from the same culture as those researched always have an advantage. In fact, Daly (1992: 109) argues that "when researchers and the participants operate from shared realities, there may be a tendency to take too much for granted", causing researchers to miss out on certain aspects of the participants' realities because of presumed familiarity with them; or it could also lead the respondents to withhold information since they feel that it would be obvious to a researcher from the same background (See also, Chilungu 1976).

These issues of identities of the researcher and researched become particularly salient in polarized settings. As for myself, I was initially of the conviction that my ethnicity as a Pahadi was only a demographic factor and being a Nepali would suffice in making me, in many regards, an "insider," as opposed to some of my non-Nepali colleagues. However, during the course of the fieldwork, I began to realize that the sense of being an "insider", and claims to being privy to authoritative knowledge, was not only naïve, but also misplaced. In particular, as I spoke with individuals from the Madhesi community, I began to realize that in divisive situations like that in Kapilvastu, my ascribed identity as a Pahadi in many ways had meant that in the perception of the Madhesi community, I was the "other" or the "outsider." As a result, building a connection took time, and I often sensed a feeling of suspicion and discomfort when talking to individuals from the Madhesi community.

But being from a Pahadi community also had its own set of advantages and disadvantages when talking with other Pahadis. In one instance, as we approached Gorusinge (a small town on the highway to Kapilvastu) on 18 September 2007, our vehicle, clearly marked with the insignia of

on the relationships that I had developed with those individuals.

our organization, was surrounded by an angry mob of about 30-40 individuals. Anyone caught in that situation would have just turned back, but we could not do so since we were completely surrounded on all sides. Gradually, a few of us got out of the vehicle and began to negotiate. "Why are you here now when the damage has already been done? What needed to happen has already happened!" the mob shouted. Others joined in saying, "Burn their vehicle", and "Stone them." Some of the younger men came forward and said in Nepali, "Our women have been raped by Madhesi men, their bodies have been mutilated, our homes have been burnt, and our children have been orphaned, do you know what that means?" The moment of breakthrough happened when I instinctively replied, "Yes, I can understand, I am one of your women as well," and added, "We understand what you must be going through and that is why we are here, precisely to find out what happened and how it happened."

I have never felt comfortable about what I had said then about being able to "understand" on the pretext that I was one of their women. But shortly after I uttered those words, the crowd dispersed to let us through. My identity as a female Nepali and also from a Pahadi community perhaps helped assuage the situation, and though I do not know what else would have had the same effect, I have always felt guilty about what I said then. I am from a Pahadi community, but I am not "one of them" as I had framed it. My experiences are nowhere close to what people were experiencing then: I have not experienced direct violence as those individuals had at that time, and as far as I can recall, I have not suffered from direct discrimination in Nepal because of my ethnicity, particularly because most of the power holders are pahadis. While there have been experiences of sexism as a woman, I must admit that my class and caste background has spared me from some of the worse forms of discrimination that most women in Nepal would have experienced. Besides, the situation at that time was such that I did not even want to be a Pahadi – after Mohit Khan's murder, the Madhesis had allegedly instigated the violence, but the Pahadis had retaliated, perhaps even more harshly and indiscriminately. That was definitely not one of the moments when I wanted to identify myself as being from any one group.

That day in Kapilvastu, we strategically chose to talk mostly with individuals from the Pahadi community rather than entering the areas that were tense following the rioting. After all, conducting fieldwork in violence does require one to be sensitive to potentially hazardous situations and to weigh the costs and benefits of acquiring information given the impending issue of personal safety (Peritore 1990). My multiple identities as a Pahadi, a woman, admittedly upper-middle class, and affiliated with an international organization, worked in many ways: sometimes posing a challenge and sometimes facilitating the interviews. There were in fact instances when I felt that I was being readily trusted by the participants in ways that I do not think would have been possible for someone from a Madhesi or a Muslim community or even a non-Nepali. A few Pahadis we spoke to even conceded that they had directly participated in the violence against Madhesis. As a result, some of my colleagues mentioned that they were really relieved that I was part of the team since it helped people, especially women, connect with me easily. But one of the telling moments was when a Bangladeshi colleague mentioned that he had never been so concerned in his life about "being a Muslim" and feared that the others would learn he was one.

Our being part of an international organization helped us in many ways: we had a legitimate reason to be at the site and interact with people, and in general, we were not suspected of espionage (at least I am not aware of it). However, there was also a lot of resentment about our having "arrived late," or "not done anything actively." Some local civil society members even termed our field efforts as that of "disaster tourists."[11] In many instances, we were able to negotiate our way through by telling people that we had left for Kapilvastu the day after the violence broke out and even though we might have arrived late, we were there because "we were concerned and we cared."

During the course of the research, I also came to realize the importance of language while conducting research in tense environments. Inability to understand or fully express one's sentiments can lead to much frustration. Some of my team members could understand and speak

Nepali as well as Hindi, but because their fluency was limited, there was much frustration on the part of the community members who evidently felt that they were not being understood properly. At one point, when one of my colleagues who was not a native speaker was talking, some in the group turned to me and said, "Why don't you speak instead?" My point is not in any way to suggest that only native speakers can conduct research in such an environment, but there are clear benefits to having native fluency while communicating. Of course, one could employ an interpreter, but there are cultural undertones to the spoken and unspoken word that are not easily translated but that are nevertheless important, especially during times when people's emotions are intense and frenzied.

Given these varied experiences, there are obvious tradeoffs to research being conducted by "insiders" and "outsiders" that need special attention in tense environments. In such cases, scholars like Fontes (1998) have argued for diverse teams that can "harness the richness of differences and similarities between researchers and participants, rather than an either/or approach." However, a diverse team of researchers themselves need to appreciate the power dynamics, both among themselves as well as those between themselves and the researched.

V.   Entering the Field

While conducting research on human subjects, researchers often face the difficulty of seeking and thereafter gaining entry into the field. After all, investigators using qualitative research are essentially seeking to uncover the private, and at times intimate, details of others who until then are mostly strangers to them. In normal circumstances, these issues raise considerable ethical concerns as well as constraints for investigators because, as researchers, we are essentially engaging in a process of publicly exposing, scrutinizing, and objectifying the lives of others, even when we practice the highest levels of ethical standards. These issues are much sharper and distinctive in post-conflict situations. Having recovered recently from conflict,

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[11] Torsten Henningsen. "No More White Cars." 12 August 2008. Downloaded from www.ms.dk/sw102812.asp

individuals tend to be more suspicious of each other and more so of outsiders. Similarly, they also tend to be guarded about revealing their personal details and equally, if not more concerned, about the political ramifications of their responses (Shahidian 2001). Furthermore, research in such post-conflict and conflict situations are almost exclusively related to issues that require the participants to either relive their past experiences of conflict or the difficulties they are likely to be experiencing in the transition period.

Such was the environment when I went to Kapilvastu. As a "practitioner" instead of a "pure academic," I was part of an organization that allowed me easier access than perhaps would have been possible had I been an independent researcher. But even then, the situation did require us to negotiate in ways in which we had not anticipated nor for which we were prepared.

When we left for our mission, on 17 September 2007, it was already the day after the riots had broken out in Kapilvastu and spread to the neighboring districts of Rupandehi and Dang. Since we had set out late in the day, we decided that it would be best if we conducted some preliminary investigations in Rupandehi and moved towards Kapilvastu the next day. Butwal, one of the two major towns in Rupandehi district, had experienced a significant degree of retaliation from the Pahadis after Madhesis in Kapilvastu had allegedly tortured, vandalized, and killed Pahadis, and burnt their houses, following Mohit Khan's murder. I was part of a smaller team that was tasked to drive around the highway area to document the visible damage and also to talk with individuals. As we moved around, we noticed a three-storied house that was obviously a shop-cum-residence, which had been badly damaged and vandalized. As we parked the car and looked up at the broken widows and burnt doorways, I could see people who had previously been peeking through the windows, disappear. As we stood outside the main gate, nobody came to talk to us and the neighbors just stared without saying a word. When we approached some bystanders, introduced ourselves and our affiliation, the only words they uttered were, "*Hamilai kehi thaha chaina*" (We don't know anything), even before we asked them anything. It was obvious that people were not

ready to talk; we did not think it proper to insist either. After all, fear of persecution needed to be understood and respected.

After a brief discussion among ourselves, we decided that it would be opportune for us to meet directly with the owner of the house. As we walked through, we saw the patio was filled with broken glass, and only the head of the household came and briefed us about what had happened.[12] Gradually, however, other members of the family, including the women, shared with us the events of the day, their sense of insecurity, and also the impact that the incident had had on them and their children.

The two instances described here (i.e., experience with members of the household, and with the neighbors) speak to the need for investigators to be very reflexive, proactive, and at times flexible while conducting research in post-conflict environments. In essence, there is a need to practice what Shahidian (2001) calls "flexible investigative methods" instead of seeking to adhere to certain conventional techniques. In this regard, our research was not guided by methodological imperatives of drawing representative samples of informants. Instead, we focused on interviewing individuals from a wide variety of groups and affiliations such as government organizations, security forces, community groups, and individuals – Pahadis, Madhesis, and Muslims.

What we learnt from the experience of conducting interviews in such a setting is that one needs to be on the constant lookout for cues while approaching research participants and seeking to build rapport. We also need to be mindful about when people want to talk and when they do not want to, and in fact respect their hesitation. Perhaps, investigators even need to start with the assumption that one might not always be successful in gaining entry into the lives of participants and instead prepare ourselves to encounter suspicion and even hostility. As is evident, gaining

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[12] He informed us that around 5 pm on 16 September, a mob of pahadis came to his house and started throwing stones and burning the front porch. "They did not care to mention anything to us and just started destroying things and we did not even know why we were being targeted," he said. Later, he added that his shop probably became an easy target for the mob because the sign outside his shop was marked as being a wholesale store for bangles. "Since Muslims have traditionally been in this occupation [of selling bangles], the mob probably attacked us. They did not even care to find out if we were madheshi muslims or pahadi muslims… We are just stunned by the fact that our fellow pahadis would attack us and make this of us," he added.

access to the family members was a lot easier than one could have expected. In hindsight, I think the family needed to express their grief and we had presented ourselves as "listeners." This experience also brings into question the issue of receiving consent from the participants. At no point did we seek to gain consent from the people who had been targeted at that time, because broaching the topic of "informed consent" when individuals were terrified and distressed not only seemed difficult but also quite inappropriate.

VI.   Dealing with Exaggerated Truths

In addition to practical concerns about personal safety, another challenge that often emanates during conflict situations is that of methods, and securing the validity and reliability of the data gathered. Traditional research strategies are generally based on "ideal field circumstances" where the researcher is in control, making it possible to interact with informants on the basis of trust, security, freedom from fear, etc. In conflict environments, "the usual imperatives of empirical research (to gather and analyze accurate data to address a relevant theoretical question) are intensified by the absence of unbiased data..." (Wood 2006: 373).

So, how can we deal with the question of collecting unbiased data? In answering this, it is important to first recognize that during conflict or post-conflict environments, self-exposure understandably can be very difficult, and in this regard the desire to withhold/exaggerate information needs to be understood. As Shahidian (2001: 57) has argued, "remembering the past is not merely recollecting the past; it is also reconstructing it", and in the process of reconstructing, individuals often tend to exaggerate or falsify information, especially when group identity and honor are at stake.

In addition to methodological compromises, i.e., not being able to carefully follow the dictates of research design in terms of sampling methods, number of research participants, characteristics of the participants, etc., one of the biggest difficulties I was confronted with during my fieldwork was testing the veracity of some of the statements made by the participants without

undermining their claims. Qualitative researchers are often reminded of the concept of "triangulation," at the heart of which lies the idea that different research approaches, methods, data sources, etc., need to be utilized in order to gain a more comprehensive and reliable data source (Ulrich 2003). However, how does one access various data sources to test the validity of claims when the information provided itself is sullied by violence and fear? Or, put more simply, how does one work with available information when within groups, the information is almost uniform and between groups, it is completely the reverse?

During the course of our research in Kapilvastu, we often heard stories about gross violations of human rights being carried out by both sides, Pahadis as well as Madhesis. Individuals from both groups gave us accounts of women being raped, women mutilated, dead bodies floating in the river, mass burials being carried out, or hundreds of people being hacked to death, etc. There was evidence that some of these had in fact happened, because the riots in Kapilvastu between 16 and 21 September did lead to the deaths of fourteen people and they damaged or destroyed more than 300 buildings, including five mosques and 200 houses (OHCHR 2007). But before we were able to verify these facts by going to the areas where most of the violence had taken place, we had to assume that the claims being made were possibly true. As a result, we spent most of our time trying to document those atrocities from secondary sources (as opposed to the victims themselves).

However, as we talked with individuals, everyone could recount the same story, but very few were able to give names of individuals who had been victims of the violations. In one instance, a female journalist even approached me and said, "There is a group of people who would like to talk to you in confidence. They have family members who were killed, including children. And among them is also a male whose wife was raped, mutilated, and had a stick inserted into her genitals." After listening to her, I was in a way relieved that we could finally document the alleged violations that had taken place and not discard them as hearsay for lack of proof.

After a brief discussion among the team members, we then decided that given the sensitivity of the information, it would be best if two females were to go and interview the "victims." I thought it was awkward that the "victims' group" asked that we meet at the office of the local chamber of commerce and industry – a public, bureaucratic, and male-dominated institution – but I did not broach the issue. Upon reaching the office, we were greeted by a group of eight men who were sufficiently calm considering the stories that we had heard about them. As we talked, we came to realize that they too were not the victims of the violations we had come to document. The journalist's account about this group was, again, reconstructions of what these individuals had heard from others about what had happened in some of the affected areas.

Our experience here suggests that while conducting research in post-conflict situations, investigators need to remember that testing the veracity of the claims is challenging, yet very important. As Kovats-Bernat (2002: 212) has also poignantly suggested, in situations of conflict, "rumor may be substituted for knowledge, and suspicion, for certainty." Thus, individuals often tend to falsify information or even reconstruct incidents in ways that suit their stories. This is likely to be more prevalent in situations of conflict because stories about women being raped and mutilated, children killed, or innocent civilians gruesomely murdered, become a rallying point to induce people to develop a deep sense of humiliation and hatred against the "other," thus provoking them to take direct action.

But having said that, we should not simply discount people's self-constructed and even falsified narratives because, socio-politically speaking, they help us understand violence and the escalation of conflict which, as outsiders, we may consider as being irrational. Thus, fieldwork in post-conflict situations requires one to realize the close nexus between violence and data and the difficulties in separating the former from the latter.

VII.   Moral Obligations and Humanism

Conducting research in post-conflict environments also invites critical, ethical dilemmas for the investigators. In general, investigators conducting research under normal circumstances are required to work under stringent ethical standards, but these standards become extraordinary and at times even contradictory in situations of conflict or post-conflict. In this section, I will use Reynolds' (1979) distinction between "moral concerns" versus "ethnical concerns" to discuss ethical issues related to doing research in a post-conflict environment. As he argues, moral concerns in research focus on "acting in accordance with accepted notions of right and wrong", while ethical concerns relate to conforming to a code or set of principles established by professional organizations (Reynolds 1979: ix). In post-conflict situations, the ethical concerns which are generally enshrined in the handbooks on qualitative research do not adequately address the moral concerns that often emerge while conducting inquiry into sensitive topics.

As somebody fresh out of graduate school and having gained fairly rigorous training in qualitative research, I had considered myself well-prepared to conduct various kinds of fieldwork and to engage in and deal with numerous ethical issues arising during research. However, as Fontes (1998) has argued, "even with the best of guidelines and human subjects review boards and consultants, researchers ultimately face ethical issues alone with their consciences."

To begin with, in Nepal, and I am sure in many other parts of the world, there are no professional institutions like the Institutional Review Board to ensure that research on human subjects are in conformity with certain ethical codes or set of principles. Those conducting research are generally left to their own self-defined principles, if any at all. When I heard one of my colleagues accuse Madhesi community members for having incited violence, or even make benign comments like, "Madhesis and Pahadis should learn how to live in harmony," I was appalled because these were value judgments that I was taught researchers should not express. Having said that, witnessing the plight of humans caught in conflict is never easy. In a way, I do

understand the impulses of some of my colleagues when there was the impending threat of further escalation of violence.

Another ethical dilemma relates to the issue of passive acceptance of violations versus actively engaging with information received from participants. For example, when one encounters somebody who has obviously engaged directly in violence, what does one do? Is it one's moral obligation to report his/her transgressions to the authorities, or does one continue with the inquiry pretending that the person in question is just another research subject? As I mentioned earlier, I did meet a group of Pahadi individuals who candidly acknowledged that they had torched the houses and vehicles of Madhesis, and even added that "there might have been individuals inside the houses when we burnt them." Another frequent occurrence was Pahadis using derogatory language when talking about Madhesis, reminiscent of the way in which Madhesis have always been treated as "second-class citizens" and viewed with distrust and suspicion. Should I have said something about how wrong it is to talk of Madhesis in that way?

Following the ethical principles I was accustomed to, I did what I had been taught to do, i.e., present myself as a "neutral observer" and do nothing else besides take down their words in my notebook. I also took great efforts to encrypt the identities of my informants, scribble one interview in different pages of my notebook, and hide my notes, all to ensure that my fieldnotes, even if confiscated, would not lead to the identification of my participants. But while I painstakingly sought to protect the identity of my interviewees, I had made the decision not to intervene. Admittedly, reporting the names of individuals responsible for the carnage in Kapilvastu to the authorities would have been in the extreme, but was there something else I could have said or done to assuage the human suffering as houses were being burnt and people killed or displaced, etc.? To this day, I continue to ruminate on where my loyalties rested and what, if anything, I could have done.

There were many other instances in Kapilvastu where the situation at hand made it morally reprehensible for us to remain silent and detached observers, and we instead sought to

help those in need. One such moment came when we drove away from Gorusinge (after being surrounded by an angry mob) and parked our vehicle near a gas station when we saw a large number of people coming along the highway and heading towards Gorusinge. At first, we did not talk to them, but later, when it became fairly apparent that they were internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had fled their homes, we approached them. These IDPs told us that they did not know where to go; the only thing they knew was that it was no longer safe for them to remain at home. As "external observers," we probably should have just left them at that or followed them to see what they would do or where they ended up going. But we knew that there were *ad hoc* IDP camps set up in nearby schools, so we suggested that they go there.

Similarly, at the IDP camps we visited, we met people who had lost contact with their family members as they fled from their homes. We obviously could not go on search missions to find their families, but we felt that it was our moral obligation to at least inform them of the possible ways they could go about locating their lost ones, including filing a report with the police (who at that time was quite defunct, having themselves been attacked) or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). We even took down the names of people with whom they had lost contact and told them that we would pass on the list to the ICRC or OHCHR ourselves. When we returned to Kathmandu, we did, in fact, share the information with ICRC and OHCHR. Because of this, even when we were back in Kathmandu, I continued to receive calls from family members, including an individual working as a migrant laborer in South Korea who had been unable to get in touch with his wife, children, and siblings. While we were "assisting" people, we had to be careful about not raising people's expectations. As a result, we assured individuals who gave us information that even though we would continue to follow up on the missing individuals, it would not mean that we would go on search missions or be able to locate them ourselves.

Evidently, in these situations of conflict, investigators, whether practitioners or academics, are bound to come across instances that are unjust or unacceptable. Researchers can either remain neutral and objective, accepting the situation passively and not challenging it behaviorally,

or they can seek ways in which they can act in accordance with their moral concerns and commitments. But choosing one option over the other requires us to reflect on what Scheper-Huges (1995: 411) asks of researchers, "what makes [researchers] exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?"

In my opinion, given the turmoil that conflict brings into people's lives, there is little virtue in seeking to hide ourselves behind the veil of neutrality and objectivity. Instead, it is essential that researchers be driven by not only "ethical concerns," but perhaps more importantly, "moral concerns." Individuals who participate in our research often provide us with intimate details about their lives and sensitive information, which could even jeopardize their own security that we then scrutinize and objectify in our reports and publications. One needs to reconsider what our obligations to our participants are as we write about and theorize on human misery and suffering during times of conflict. The idea that even when we gain so much from our participants, we still insist on objectivity, neutrality, and even indifference, and hence are reluctant to intervene or seek ways of reciprocating even in the face of extreme human misery, seems quite unfair and reprehensible.

VIII.   Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I had previously thought of ending my paper with a set of suggestions on conducting research in post-conflict environment. But, as Punch (1994: 85) has observed, "fieldwork is definitely not a soft option, but, rather, represents a *demanding* craft that involves both coping with multiple negotiations and continually dealing with ethical dilemmas." Developing such a craft can be all the more challenging in conflict and post-conflict situations that are bound to be too unpredictable, too diverse, and too complex (Wood 2006). In such situations, any attempts to formulate a set of rules or guiding principles that a researcher should adopt are naïve at best. Instead, researchers, depending on their own subjective set of values, morals, and

principles, will have to determine their own paths. It is my hope that this paper will at least serve as a reference for others to reflect on the methodological and ethical dimensions of what they might experience before they actually enter the field.

Having said that, there are, however, two issues that I believe need to be taken into consideration while we develop or conceive of our own set of ethics and guiding principles in situations of conflict. First, if we are to work in dangerous fields, we must begin with a fundamental shift in how methodological strategies and ethical concerns are defined; they cannot be regarded as a rigid framework, but rather need to be conceived as flexible practices constitutive of a continuous process of negotiations and improvisations both in terms of actual methodology and measures to deal with ethical dilemmas. Second, if one has chosen to study conflict or post-conflict-related issues, one too must be prepared to do whatever is in one's own capacity to assuage the fears and dangers that befall our participants. Understandably, we as researchers are not, and perhaps cannot, be direct agents of social or political change, but there is at least a need to acknowledge that in a sensitive setting, especially one mired by violence and fear, one cannot simply be content with "observing" and "documenting" the realities. There is a moral obligation to act, and the failure to do so is not only inappropriate but also morally reprehensible.

Here, I am reminded once again about my desire, or rather insistence, that I go to Kapilvastu, knowing full well that I was in essence jeopardizing my life, risking being caught in the cross-fire, and even being victimized for my ascribed identity. It would be unreasonable on my part if I were to say that researchers, once having developed a relationship with a community that they are studying, have a moral obligation to return to the field even in case of impending danger. To go to the field was my personal choice. I cannot say that I was able to return with information that is of significant scientific value, as suggested by Peritore and others cited above, but what I have been able to document are the experiences of people living in these dangerous situations and thus contribute to the broader literature on the "anthropology of war." But, more importantly, my

return to Kapilvastu marked what Scheper-Huges (1995: 418) calls, a "pursuit of those small spaces of convergence, recognition and empathy" that I shared with people in that area. And this, I think is one of the most important concerns driving empirical researchers studying conflict.

Methodologically speaking, the research strategies that I adopted would not pass rigorous scientific tests because I did not enter the field with a well-defined methodology that I then closely followed. But there are no pretentions about it either. On the contrary, I would agree with those who in situations of conflict, the improvisations and negotiations that follow the process of data collection are datum in and of itself. So what was the value added? I think it was simply an instance where I sought to privilege the relationships I had developed with my participants, and, expectedly, the hope to also be able to contribute to the larger body of knowledge on the experiences of people during times of conflict. Thus, fieldwork, howsoever defined and undertaken during times of conflict, requires first and foremost not a retreat but rather a commitment to personal engagement and moral responsibility.

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