

# **Fieldwork Amidst Extreme Poverty and Deprivation: Ethical Dilemmas and Policy Impact**

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## **Abstract**

*Fieldwork is an essential research tool in the anthropology. However, ethical principles that often provide guidelines for fieldwork may prove inadequate or conflicting when fieldwork is conducted in situations of extreme poverty. Experiencing field reality with these ethical dilemmas is a 'social fact' that a researcher carries while attempting to influence public policies through research. This paper attempts to chart out lessons learned while handling ethical dilemmas that emerged while carrying out the fieldwork by the author, as part of the study that aimed at explaining the failure of public policy and public action to reduce starvation. It discusses a set of ethical dilemmas related to assisting study respondents who live in extreme poverty, including payment for information, provision of loans and access to the researcher's facilities. Thereafter, the paper examines how researcher can influence public policies based on experiences and empirical evidence available from the field, including the extent to which researchers working in development studies can become involved in potentially improving the livelihoods of people living in poverty.*

Key words: Fieldwork, Extreme Poverty, Ethical Dilemmas, Eastern India

## **Introduction**

While preparing for the first of several visits to drought-prone and starvation-hit districts in Eastern India towards the latter half of the 1990s, I was concerned about how I would react to such extreme forms of suffering and tried to prepare myself for the difficulties I expected to encounter in the field. Some of these areas had become notorious for high rates of under nutrition, and there was considerable national and regional media coverage on the fact that in spite of a long history of drought and starvation deaths, not much had improved in these areas. One particular district – Kalahandi (in Orissa) – has even been dubbed by the print media as the “starvation capital of India”, while several other districts in Orissa and in neighbouring West Bengal (e.g. Purulia) had

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surprisingly not witnessed the ignominy of starvation deaths despite being widely considered as equally poor, drought-prone and underdeveloped.

I wanted to examine and further build on Amartya Sen's famous claim that no famine has ever occurred in a democratic country, but my study also examined the ability of democratic institutions in tackling starvation, which lacks the sensational characteristics of a famine. The aim was to understand why some issues are effectively death with and not others, and link India's success in famine prevention with its failure to reduce high levels of under-nutrition and subsequent starvation deaths, which ironically persist amidst large food surpluses.

While I was born in India, I had lived in Europe for over a decade at the time of the study. And some of the issues that worried me before I arrived in the field included how I would legitimise my study to my informants, and whether (and the extent to which) I was morally obligated to help promote their welfare. I also had numerous doubts on whether I should re-package my study from a pure academically oriented exercise to one that was explicitly policy-oriented.

I am not an anthropologist, and my background in political science and economics had not prepared me sufficiently for some of the challenges I was to subsequently encounter during fieldwork in some of the poorest districts of India. However, I was not necessarily worried about the challenges associated with the application of qualitative methods per se, but rather the challenging sets of dilemmas that crop up when researchers are directly confronted with people living in extreme poverty.

Some of the issues I discuss here may also be equally applicable to affluent members of local society, street-level bureaucrats, local leaders, journalists, aid workers, and representatives of civil society organisations. However, the ensuing sections of the essay take a starting point in a set of ethical challenges viewed primarily from a researcher's perspective. It draws on fieldwork spread over many years in two Eastern states of India – Orissa and West Bengal – related to a couple of research projects on the politics of malnutrition among both adults and children.

Ethical dilemmas in fieldwork are often unavoidable and difficult to plan for before the onset of a study (Punch 1986). Moreover, the dilemmas of qualitative research, where the researcher is in direct contact with people, vary considerably from the more impersonal approach of quantitative approaches (de Laine 2000). Qualitative research often involves multiple roles (researcher/friend/therapist) and dual relationships (friend/researcher), and these can potentially create conflicts of interest, exploitation and betrayal (England 1994). Moreover, there are concerns that academics are generally not

adequately trained or prepared to explore local power relations, inequalities and injustices, especially when they belong to societies and cultures that are very different from those they study (Madge 1993; Scheyvens and Leslie 2000). Others have gone even further and alleged that some researchers employ exploitative methods in the field, aimed exclusively at promoting their own careers (Lather 1988, cited in Scheyvens and Leslie 2000).

There is considerable scholarly work on the issue of ethical dilemmas in the field, particularly in the ethno-based social sciences such as ethnobiology and ethnopharmacology, and numerous ethical codes and guidelines have been proposed.<sup>1</sup> However, I argue here that extreme poverty provides a particularly challenging set of dilemmas for the researcher, who may be frequently confronted with situations where s/he is unsure of what constitutes the right or ethically correct course of action. This can happen, for instance, if we encounter extreme forms of poverty for the first time (e.g. even though I was born in India, I had neither visited such remote areas of the country nor witnessed starving individuals dying in front of me) and do not have the required ethical codes or previous experience in tackling the problem.

In other cases, we may possess certain moral principles, but may have difficulty in applying them either because the principles are inadequate and/or because they clash with other important and competing sets of principles (e.g. moral principles versus research ethics). In still other cases, we may actually think we have arrived at a moral decision only to discover that carrying it out may be unpleasant and/or problematic (e.g. how many can we help, and the repercussions of such acts).

While some of our informants may harbour the hope of receiving some form of immediate assistance from us, others may expect concrete improvements in their livelihoods to occur in the longer run as a result of our research. Even if we are able to provide some form of temporary assistance, the question is whether we are morally required to do so. And if we are indeed obligated, how much, to how many and for how long must we extend such assistance? Methodological considerations of validity and reliability of data do not always make much sense when the researcher faces pressing dilemmas and challenges in the field.

A separate, though not entirely unrelated, issue concerns how public policies can be influenced and further improved through ethnographic fieldwork that focuses on processes and relations among individuals and state and non-state actors at various levels involved in policy formulation and implementation. As Wedel et al. (2005: 34) note, an anthropology of policy has a broad aim to examine how the state relates to local populations as well as a narrower aim of “understanding how state policies and government processes are experienced

and interpreted by people at the local level, keeping in mind that anthropologists are recasting the 'local' or the 'community' to capture changing realities". They suggest that a key question to further explore is "What do people do in the name of policy?" (Ibid.).

In the ensuing sections of the essay I will briefly discuss both of the above-mentioned issues, albeit with the caveat that I do so from a non-anthropologist, but interdisciplinary and social science/philosophy perspective. The aim is not to revisit the voluminous anthropological literature on fieldwork methods, but to highlight the sets of ethical dilemmas that a researcher may find particularly challenging when confronted with extreme deprivation in the field.

I begin with a discussion of a set of ethical dilemmas related to assisting study respondents who live in extreme poverty, including payment for information, provision of loans and access to the researcher's facilities. Thereafter, I examine how researchers can influence public policies based on experiences and empirical evidence from the field, including the extent to which researchers working in the field of development studies can become involved in potentially improving the livelihoods of people living in poverty.

### **Working amidst extreme deprivation**

In the past six and a half decades since independence, the threat of famine in India has been dramatically reduced, as has the incidence of nutritional-deficiency diseases. Many attribute the general improvements in nutritional status to rapid growth in foodgrain productivity and improvements in dietary intake and health care. Successive governments at central and state levels have intervened in private food markets in order to control and stabilize prices and supplies, and to prevent food shortages. And India runs some of the world's largest and most expensive social welfare programmes (e.g. Integrated Child Development Services, ICDS and the Public Distribution System, PDS) aimed at promoting food security. India's success at improving nutritional status varies across regions, states, and gender, age, and social groups (Banik 2011).

With better access to health care and greater equality in the distribution of food among various income groups and within families, the infant-mortality rate and the percentage of the population facing severe under-nutrition in Kerala is far lower than in other states. Despite taking great strides in promoting human development, 37.2 per cent of India's population (more than 400 million people) is officially estimated to be living in poverty. India also has the unenviable record of being home to a third of the world's poor and with the largest number of hungry people in the world (FAO 2012).<sup>ii</sup> Given such a context, although the cases I discuss below are largely derived from fieldwork between 1998 and 2006, they nonetheless remain highly relevant today as a

reminder of how policies targeting the poorest of the poor can fail to achieve their intended impact despite an abundance of resources and political attention.

More than a quarter of the population in Orissa, and two other states – Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh – faced severe undernutrition in early 2000, despite having a higher average dietary intake than the people of Kerala. And within Orissa, one particularly district in the southwest – Kalahandi – symbolized drought, starvation, and deprivation like no other part of the country. Much of Kalahandi's notoriety can be traced back to the mid-1980s, when a string of press reports on starvation deaths and child selling (and Parliament's subsequent criticism of the local government), spurred a visit to the district by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1985. The rest of India soon began hearing of Kalahandi on a daily basis as national media interest increased manifold. With severe droughts in 1986–87, 1993–94, and 1996–2000, the situation in the district was grim, and forced migration and hundreds of starvation deaths were reported.

The recurrence of starvation deaths there has figured regularly and prominently not only in the media but also in parliamentary debates, with political leaders and civil society organizations criticizing both the state and national governments for failing to provide adequate and timely relief to the drought-affected population. I was intrigued by the fact that almost every Indian prime minister since Rajiv Gandhi had visited Kalahandi, and the nation's courts had passed several verdicts criticizing the government's failure to provide adequate assistance to the poor. Yet starvation deaths reportedly occurred every year. My studies (and related field visits) over the years were thus concerned with explaining this failure of public policy and public action, with a particular focus on understanding the role of political parties, bureaucracy, media and civil society organisations (Banik 2007; Banik 2010; Banik 2011).

### **Compensating respondents**

One of the main challenges I faced was interviewing individuals and families who were visibly ill – suffering from a combination of prolonged undernutrition and various forms of illness in remote (and often inaccessible) parts of Orissa such as Kalahandi and the neighbouring districts of Koraput and Bolangir. A smaller number of my respondents were even worse off, severely emaciated and close to death. Despite very visible suffering, a large majority appeared eager and willing to share their problems with me, and my Indian identity certainly appeared to help in putting people at ease. I often wondered, however, whether my respondents harboured the hope of receiving some form of assistance from me – the researcher from a rich country (or a high-ranking Indian official on tour, as some initially thought me to be).

At other times, I wondered whether some of my respondents exaggerated their problems in order to attract more sympathy or to simply please me in their belief that I was looking for sensational bits of information. For instance, when I enquired what members of a household had eaten earlier during the day, a common reply was, “Sir, we have not eaten for the past one week”. When confronted with such information, it is difficult for the researcher not to feel guilty of his own good fortune. Irrespective of whether the information I received was valid and/or exaggerated, it nonetheless was distressing to interact with starving individuals without being able to offer them a direct benefit for the time they spent with me. It was particularly uncomfortable when people fell flat at my feet in a gesture of total submission and helplessness.

There is a considerable amount of anthropological debate on payments or “fair returns” to respondents (what is fair is often decided by the researcher) and the potential problems of validity and reliability of data, including the danger that people may be more inclined to tell us things they believe we would like to hear (Srivastava 1992). Let us assume, however, that we require a specific bit of information in order to fulfil our research goals and that the only way we could acquire this information was to pay for it.

Should we pay? The answer, it seems, will depend on a number of details. Is this information something we would normally expect without charge? If so, are we establishing an expectation for the future? Would a refusal to pay harm our effectiveness in the field? If those being interviewed expect to be compensated for their time and cooperation, what should we do? Will our data be distorted if we did not compensate them? The issue becomes even more challenging when we are confronted with very visible forms of human suffering.

In Kalahandi district of Orissa and Purulia district of West Bengal, the study respondents spent a considerable amount of time answering my queries – some stopped doing their daily chores; others gave up their place in a long queue for subsidised food rations; still others accompanied me on foot to remote and inaccessible areas. In certain study villages of Kalahandi, which had reported starvation deaths, relatives of the victim and fellow villagers often claimed that the victim died due to lack of food.

The standard local statement I often heard was *‘kichhi khaiba kuna pahi mori gole’* (having nothing to eat, he died). And a frequently heard statement in the poorest areas of the district was: *Ghar nein, Dih nein, Bada nein, Kam nein, Dhana nein, Po nein, Jhi nein, Khai bake nein, Gulgula hauchhe, Mariju cheagyan* [No house, no home-stead land, no agricultural land, no work, no vocation, no son, no daughter. No food to eat, in a miserable state. I am dying, Sir]. I thus often felt compelled to do something that could, even if temporarily, reduce the vulnerability of my informants to acute forms of hunger.

It was not particularly difficult to offer a small amount of money, which I occasionally did, to a young mother with severely undernourished children, with a specific request to purchase food for her children. Other locals would later inform me that when the husband found out that his wife had come into some money, he would demand that he decide over how the money should be spent, which invariably did not include prioritising child nutrition. In other instances, such money could be forcibly take from her and used for gambling or purchasing country liquor. But I did not see any reliable evidence to substantiate such allegations.

I also reached the general conclusion that a small sum of money as a token of thanks to people I would probably never meet again (and who were not aware they would receive such payment before the interview), could not possibly affect the validity of my data. We often tip the local taxi driver or the waiter in a restaurant, but not someone who is in desperate need and one who has also contributed actively to our research. None of the respondents explicitly asked for money, although it was relatively clear that most hoped that I would offer a gift of some kind, since very few outsiders visit such remote villages.

#### **Local hospitality, loans and use of the researcher's facilities**

Another issue that poses a challenge is giving or exchanging gifts, which is not altogether the same thing as paying for information. This is particularly relevant when one lives with a family for an extended period or is helped in numerous ways in the field. I felt the burden of expectation, discretely alluded to by mainly urban respondents and local elites, of receiving a souvenir from "your country" when I re-visited the study areas after a prolonged absence. Such expectations were never explicitly articulated although it was easy to observe the disappointment among some individuals when they realised I had not brought any "European" gifts. Rural respondents, on the other hand, appeared pleased whenever I brought along local sweets, baby food and sugar, or bought a week's supply of groceries for the household.

The major dilemma, however, arises when individuals and their families sacrifice something for the researcher they should not be sacrificing. In many cases, my hosts (even those I only met once) offered me hospitality that went far beyond what they could afford. Such acts of generosity included offering fruits, preparing a meal involving meat (a luxury for most), where I was the only one to eat and giving me a piece of local artefact. Although I would have felt a lot better had I been allowed to pay for a gift or a meal, rarely was this possible. In most situations, an attempt to compensate such acts of generosity with a monetary gift would tantamount to an insult. When such acts involved people I met again at a later date, I found a way of returning the favour by

either bringing small gifts such as sacks of rice, cooking oil, milk powder, fresh vegetables, fish, and toys. Even small gestures such as paying for a cup of tea or a light snack at a roadside eatery was often much appreciated.

The difficulty with generosity from local hosts, however, is that we may be entangled into a web of reciprocity and may not know what the appropriate response on our part ought to be. For example, we may be asked to provide a loan to someone in the field whom we know relatively well. In such situations, one is confronted with a financial trade-off. What would be the best way of maximising the limited resources we have at our disposal? Would direct assistance to *X* be better than a loan to *Y*?

Once again, it appears that many of these issues need to be determined locally. A good understanding of local cultural practices associated with giving loans is of the essence, as we ought to avoid potentially damaging and unanticipated consequences. For example, if loans are not repaid then the traditional practice is, in some cultures (e.g. rural Mali), to humiliate the borrower in public. And if our generosity of providing small loans becomes known to a wider audience, the number of requests will increase. In addition to the rise in costs to the researcher, an added challenge in such a scenario is not playing favourites, i.e., providing assistance to some and not to others.

### **Diagnosis, prescription and policy influence**

Researchers working on extreme poverty often perceive a greater need to legitimise their presence in a local context and justify the relevance and possible outcomes of the project. The belief that remains strongly entrenched in academia – that basic research does *not* require us to conclude our findings with concrete policy advice – appears neither persuasive nor helpful in the field. And in areas with high levels of extreme poverty and deprivation, it is natural to question the pursuit of a purely academic enquiry, unconcerned with influencing the everyday policies that directly impinge on the lives of people we are studying.

On the rare occasion that I have been questioned by my respondents on potential policy implications of my study, I have responded as follows: “I am interested in understanding your problems and making it known to an audience interested in your plight. However, there is no guarantee that my research article/book will in any way improve your daily lives”. Reactions to such statements have not always been welcoming, and some individuals very quickly decided not to collaborate. This was illustrated very well by a landless farmer in Kalahandi, who noted: “I have seen many like you who have come and gone

over the years – we are still poor and hungry and will continue to exist in this way ... it is our fate”.

But many others were more forthcoming. I learned subsequently that the researcher has various ways of responding to need. One is, of course, by way of direct forms of assistance either in cash or kind. However, it is difficult to imagine a universal research ethic that applies to all researchers and in all contexts. Rather, we can respond to need in various alternative ways – caring, listening, disseminating and understanding. Recounting stories and experiences (e.g. six months of darkness in Norway during winters) from distant shores or playing a recording of their own voice, showing a video clip taken in their village, and sending printed photographs were all small ways of giving something back and sharing a common experience. Moreover, researchers can play an enabling role in generating awareness of legal and political rights among study participants, and facilitating contact with relevant administrative authorities, political leaders and civil society organisations.

### **Forging closer links between research and policy**

The challenge of linking research and policy in the field of development continues to be debated in the literature on the topic (e.g. Stone and Denham 2004, Stone and Maxwell 2005). However, the link from research to policy does not, in practice, proceed according to a linear, rational model, based simply on reliable “evidence”. Researchers can make a valuable contribution to policy, but primarily as independent, critical analysts: sources of authoritative empirical information and instructive insights. It is in the nature of bureaucracy that policy-makers tend to be averse to explicit reference to power, and to be attracted by widely applicable generalisations, preferably backed up by ‘hard’ (measurable) data and indicators (McNeill and Banik 2011).<sup>iii</sup>

In contrast, an anthropology of policy through ethnographic fieldwork not only examines the content of policies, but also how the policy process should be conceptualized in creating specific “policy communities”, i.e. the mix of the activities and influence of various actors and their multiple roles that shape policy (Wedel et al. 2005). New public management and the audit society have exerted their influence also in development policies, withgrowing emphasis on performance-based interventions, making huge demands on measurement – such as numbers of schools built, or kilometres of roads constructed.

But the shift in development policies in recent years has been to support much less technical interventions, in the field of governance or conflict resolution for example. Alternative methods of assessment, including anthropological and interdisciplinary approaches discussed above can, in such cases, usefully

complement or substitute quantitative models and approaches (McNeill and Banik 2011).

The distinction between diagnosis and prescription is crucial, and yet challenging, in development research. As Tostensen (1999: 140) argues, “the academic analyst would be better placed to offer a sound diagnosis of the problem at hand, but not particularly well equipped to handle policy prescription ... Conversely, a practitioner can be ill prepared to provide an in-depth diagnostic analysis, but may be better at prescribing a course of action”. Particularly problematic in research on extreme poverty is that we risk being told by our informants that we are studying other people’s misfortune rather than doing something to alleviate pervasive suffering.

There have been numerous occasions when I wished I could argue with confidence that radical and/or rapid improvements in local welfare would be one of the key contributions of my research. And I wondered how other groups (e.g. bureaucrats, NGO staff) cope with such dilemmas, envious of journalists who visited my case study areas for very short periods and published their pieces in a hurry and then went on to newer areas and problems. The journalists I interacted with appeared to at least derive some form of satisfaction from having completed their assignments, disseminated a message and then leaving it to others to resolve problems and provide appropriate remedies.

The publication and dissemination of academic outputs, on the other hand, take considerable time, and are often excessively lengthy and not easily accessed by policy-makers and development practitioners. Even consultancy reports are not necessarily acted upon by those who order them in the first place. While one can write op-ed pieces in local, regional and national dailies (or maintain blogs), these can pose newer challenges for the researcher in the field once officials get wind of such activity. For example, most newspaper articles on so-called “starvation deaths” in India are treated with disdain by the ruling party, and the administrative apparatus is under pressure from their political masters to deny the presence of starvation-related suffering (and resulting outcome – death) (Banik 2007).

An adverse article in the media is routinely considered to be an attempt by opposition political groups to distort the truth and unfairly criticise the government, and hence all such claims of starvation are summarily dismissed as being false. In such charged and sensitive scenarios, the worry is that a critical news report based on research findings may result in numerous difficulties, including the researcher being prevented from working in a region, threats of violence, uncooperative officials and scared informants.

Hence, there may be good reasons for us to withhold the results of our study until we have collected all the relevant material and when we are no longer dependent on having continued access to a particular area or a particular group of people. The dilemma, nonetheless, lies in how – and whether we are required – to do something constructive (and relatively quickly) with our empirical material, i.e. exerting policy influence without compromising our ethical standards and jeopardising continued access to research sites.

### **Researchers and policy influence**

A related dilemma is the researcher's access to information that can radically improve the situation of some while running the risk of it being potentially damaging for others. It may be difficult for us to accept inaction, incompetence, theft, negligence and outright discrimination in development programmes despite claims by officials that adequate funds are provided and everything is running smoothly and according to plan. Allegations of corruption and mismanagement are frequently heard in the field, and yet doing something concrete on these issues is challenging for the researcher. For government policies to be effective, bureaucrats need to implement them properly. Regulations and administrative procedures for resource allocation may impede smooth and effective implementation, and sometimes even breed corruption.

Local officials in Orissa and West Bengal often did not agree with policies imposed on them by higher-ups from the comforts of their offices in Bhubaneswar or Calcutta. Moreover excessive political interference at the district level on matters related to targeted beneficiaries of welfare programmes (e.g. political leaders demanded greater resource allocation to their constituencies and chosen groups) resulted in growing dissatisfaction and demotivation within the civil service, many of whom feared being side-lined or harassed.

The researcher, in such contexts, may be well-equipped and willing to play the role of a facilitator by interacting with a wide range of actors (e.g. civil society organisations, aid agencies, politicians, civil servants, and media) and communicating the need for action on a set of issues on which there is consensus. However, the ethical dilemma (e.g. with regard to information of corrupt practices) is to know when to raise such issues with the higher authorities, and whether by doing so, we compromise the safety of (and the flow of future government benefits to) our informants and their families. And there is always the possibility of influential informants objecting to the researcher's ethnographic accounts (Mosse 2006).

I frequently chanced upon persuasive evidence of government benefits being purposely diverted to individuals and households that were not the intended

beneficiaries, while the owners of the ration shops (in charge to distributing subsidised food and other essential items procured by the government) overcharged their customers. Similarly, I was made aware of some so-called “open secrets” – officials, who took bribes and owners of “fair price shops” routinely diverting food and other essential commodities, earmarked for the poor, to the private market where they could earn a greater profit.

And I personally witnessed how certain *adivasi* households were routinely exploited by visiting urban traders who paid well below market prices for forest produce or cattle. In still other cases, there were indications of gross negligence by petty government officers responsible for the operation and maintenance of water pumps (crucial for agriculture in drought-prone areas), who seldom reported for work with the consequence that the pumps did not run according to the planned schedule.

At other times, my informants requested me to communicate directly with high-level officials in order to make them aware of the misdeeds of junior officers posted at district and block levels. There are several ways I tried to influence policy processes and some of these were not overtly risky. On one occasion, a high-ranking cabinet minister in West Bengal expressed great interest in my study and invited me to share my findings with him upon completion of my first phase of fieldwork in Purulia. I felt excited at this prospect of having the minister’s ear, and upon completion of fieldwork had, at least in my view, a productive discussion with him based on my preliminary findings.

This also gave me an opportunity to hear his views on how the government planned to address some of the problems. He was aware of many of the issues I raised but appeared relieved to be told of minor changes that could be made to make the district administration function better in preparing for drought. There was no way of knowing whether this discussion had a concrete impact in changing existing administrative procedures, but on a personal level I felt I had at least made a credible attempt at disseminating key research findings to someone who was capable of initiating change.

I had similar discussions with successive chief ministers, cabinet ministers and leaders of opposition parties in Orissa and West Bengal as well as senior administrative officials in Bhubaneswar and Calcutta. I also interacted frequently with officials of various ranks (e.g. District Collector/Magistrate, police chief, doctors, college lecturers, block development officers) posted in Kalahandi and Purulia, many of whom were keen to make a difference in a region plagued by underdevelopment and extreme poverty.

A majority of these individuals also welcomed a discussion with an academic on developmental theories and practices, and provided me with an opportunity

to discuss my findings in considerable detail. Such events also provided opportunities to engage in conceptual discussions on the state of the art in theorising and measuring under-nutrition, starvation and famine, including the possible revision of specific provisions in the Scarcity Manuals (a set of instructions which form the backbone of administrative response to drought and starvation at state levels). I thus felt that I was providing something in return for all the help and information I received.

Although I was on occasion able to pass on information to district officers (and in certain cases, even journalists and NGOs working in the area) about specific problems affecting specific individuals, households and villages (e.g. delays in pension payments or inadequate stocks at ration shops providing subsidised food), these were inevitably non-controversial matters. In all of the above cases, however, I was unable to establish with certainty whether the issues we discussed at these interactions were acted upon, and whether the minister or concerned officials simply used the opportunity to give a favourable impression of the willingness of their administration to listen to the voices of researchers and the masses.

The results of my interaction with local journalists were, however, different (and perhaps more productive) in that they were sometimes able to use generalised findings from my research to file news reports that subsequently received considerable political and administrative attention. Verifying the credibility of sensational information I received from so-called “informed locals” (e.g. local leaders, officials, NGOs), however, remained a major challenge as some willingly provided false information on alleged “starvation deaths” and attempted to misguide me. Others (e.g. ruling party leaders) flatly denied the existence of extreme deprivation in the district, despite the availability of credible evidence, and rather than taking responsibility, very quickly shifted the blame onto others (e.g. opposition leaders and the previous government).

### **Concluding remarks**

I began this essay with a discussion on a set of pressing ethical dilemmas related to fieldwork in areas with high levels of poverty and deprivation. Some of the challenges discussed included paying for information and the researcher providing other forms of assistance. Our first instinct as researchers may well be that we ought to do what we can – within the limitations of our research project and available resources – to help those we can help. A small token of thanks, either in cash or kind, does not appear to be very problematic in relation to the validity and reliability of fieldwork data.

With regard to humanitarian assistance (e.g. hospitalisation, costs of medicines, etc.), it seems that the dilemmas that apply are not the same as the ones governing paying for information. By rendering such assistance and the ensuing expressions of gratitude, we may not necessarily receive biased information from our respondents. In situations of genuine need, the ethical imperative seems to be quite clear: one should help. But how much one should give or the exact nature of assistance offered will depend on a complex combination of factors – resources available, urgency of need, number of individuals to support, the absence of assistance from alternative sources, etc. An important aspect to bear in mind is whether an act of assistance to a particular individual or group can ruin our efforts to provide assistance to others. Simultaneously, it is important not to be seen as playing favourites.

The second set of issues I addressed included how researchers can influence public policies based on evidence acquired in the field, and the extent to which researchers working on poverty should actually get involved in improving the livelihoods of people they study. When confronted with information and evidence of political and administrative bungling, negligence, discrimination and corruption, it is ethically difficult for a researcher to look the other way. Thus, making relevant authorities, activist groups and the media aware of corrupt and/or exploitative and discriminatory practices can be an important set of tasks we may wish to undertake.

However, such acts carry potential risks (e.g. threat of violence, uncooperative officials), and we may not necessarily be able to provide credible evidence in support of our allegations. Even in the presence of credible proof, we risk moving away from an impersonal/observer role to one of an activist, thereby potentially compromising our neutrality. The challenge for the researcher is not only the task of validating and documenting allegations of corruption, exploitation and negligence (which may not necessarily be a part of the original research design), but also articulating such concerns to some agency or individual with the power to make quick and decisive changes.

Moreover, while we may not feel it is part of our role to carry out such functions, the magnitude and severity of human suffering and our own moral codes may compel us to do whatever we can. One approach I have adopted is interacting with a select group of individuals – including political leaders in power and opposition, journalists and senior civil servants – and discussing (rather than providing advice) a set of conceptual issues as well concrete empirical findings with them. While I do not have evidence to claim that this has been a successful strategy to pursue, my goal has been to understand how state and non-state actors understand and relate to local populations.

At the same time, I have confronted these very same actors with available empirical evidence in order for them to be aware of how government policies and processes are experienced and understood by the local population. The most satisfying strategy, nonetheless, has been to convey to study respondents and informants that I am genuinely interested in their problems and that I am willing to listen and learn and share my own experiences and knowledge. We are seldom in a position to promise dramatic changes in the lives of people living in poverty, but that does it mean we should stop trying.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> See, for example, the International Society of Ethnobiology's Code of Ethics (<http://ethnobiology.net/what-we-do/core-programs/ise-ethics-program/code-of-ethics/>), which places strong emphasis on "mindful research" and the Swiss Academy of Science's ABS Guidelines for non-commercial research (<http://www.cbd.int/abs/doc/protocol/icnp-1/swiss-academy-science-en.pdf>), which highlights the importance of "prior informed consent" and compensations for local stakeholders in research on biodiversity. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for the above references.
- <sup>ii</sup> Moreover, India ranked 63<sup>rd</sup> among 78 countries in a recent Global Hunger Index; with an estimated 40 per cent of children under five years of age that are underweight (IFPRI 2013), the country is far from targets meeting its Millennium Development Goal targets scheduled for 2015.
- <sup>iii</sup> This tends to favour research of a quantitative nature, often based on secondary sources, which only provide one of many aspects of reality.

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