



My Fieldwork Memoir: Experience of Working Among the Hanji Fishers of Kashmir Valley

HASHMAT HABIB*

Setting the Scene

For each anthropological endeavour, the experience of intensive fieldwork is a book waiting to be written, and if it is published, the work will be explained. This article aims to provide an opportunity for me to reflect on my experience conducting PhD research on the *Hanji* fishing community residing around Wular Lake between 2019 and 2021.

In reality, literature is incapable of expressing the actual experience of conducting intensive fieldwork. Though, the past never dies or, in a sense, even exists. This essay, on the other hand, is a narrative monologue based on my experiences and observations made while conducting fieldwork in the *Hanji* community.

The *Hanji* Fishers: Place and People

The *Hanji* people, with whom I conducted intensive fieldwork, are the main traditional fishing population in Kashmir, but no comprehensive ethnographic research on this group could be found.



Picture 1: Society in permanence

* Hashmat Habib, Assistant Professor (Ad-hoc), Government Degree College, Handwara, Jammu and Kashmir. E-mail: Hashmat51@gmail.com

The primary objective of my Ph-D research was to fill this void by providing new insights into one group of *hanji* inland fishers. Other aims of the project included collecting comprehensive ethnographic data on sustainable lifestyle patterns, rituals, fisheries resource management, fishing organization and indigenous fishing practices, and policy implementation scenarios.

My account of extensive research among the Hanji people of the Kashmir valley is preceded by a rich heritage of my native place. It was a dream come true to do research in my neighbourhood, and I could not wait to join my neighbouring village's people in the field. In my opinion, it seemed obvious that they would welcome me without my having to develop rapport with them, and that it would also be enjoyable for me. As it turns out, I was mistaken.



Picture 2: Lake, life, livelihood and emotions

Everyone in the town immediately began speaking to me, exactly like they did throughout my previous routine years. I was unable to initiate a conversation about my studies because I entered the situation with the optimistic belief that obtaining information about them would be easy. For me, the adjustment from being a native to an anthropologist was quite difficult. During the preliminary phase of my study, I assumed I was familiar with the majority of cultural complexity and would just adjust to the tradition, but after wearing the anthropological glasses, I was able to acquire an entirely new narrative and my prior knowledge was rendered useless. I squandered many days of my time aimlessly meandering about before finally giving up after an intensive search produced no leads since people were entertaining me as a native.

My inability to engage in activities connected to my research lingered on for around eight days to acclimate to, which contributed to the level of discontent I felt. After a few days of becoming familiarised to my continuous presence, the villagers started to mistrust me as their new normal. As a direct result, residents began to inquire about the purpose of my regular visits to their neighbourhood. I then utilised these conversations to communicate to them my study intentions.



Picture 3: First day into the lake. Nervous and frightened.

(Photo Credit: Mr. Bilal Ahmad Dar)

Observing the neighbourhood, I saw that inhabitants reacted in both positive and negative ways. Despite having spent my whole childhood in that place, they gave me the impression that I was still an outsider. This presented me with issues at the outset of my fieldwork, when I was obliged to maintain a range of interactions with diverse individuals. With the support of Mr. Bilal Ahmad, a classmate who gave both advice and participation, I was able to create a great relationship with the aforementioned individuals.

Mr. Nayeem Ahmad was the gatekeeper for my field, and he always spoke and interacted with me as though I was his younger brother. He assisted me in keeping up with my fieldwork schedule. I was being treated like a part of his family at all times. They showed an exceptional amount of care, affection, and consideration for me, which was unprecedented. Initially, he helped in arranging lodging for me in a community-owned guestroom. In course of time

as the fieldwork progressed I stayed at their house, thus, becoming a member of his household- an insider.



Picture 4: A selfie of commemoration, I am learning to row the boat.

Fortunately, I overcame the first obstacle, and the community had grown more accepting and cooperative towards me. The more I stayed in the neighbourhood, the more acquainted I became with the surroundings and the individuals I met. I was acknowledged as a member of the group and took part in the great majority of its rites, rituals and practices. I began my field interactions with casual conversations about my goals, before embarking on formal interviews with my fellow fisher mates.



Picture 5: Learning the first principles of casting a net from XXXX (name the person).

(Photo Credit: Mr. Dawood Bhat)



Picture 6: Gaining some knowledge via open-ended Interviews.

(Photo Credit: Mr. Zahoor)

Mr. Nayeem, Mr. Bilal, and Mr. Maqsood Reshi are thanked for their aid in discovering key persons for my research interviews. I frequently fished with them so I could see and learn from their strategies and techniques on the lake. On one occasion, we were fishing in two boats on the enormous Wular Lake when a storm overtook us. I was afraid and convinced that we would not reach the lakefront. While these three rowed with all their strength, I was given an umbrella to shield my camera and field notebook from the rain. We pushed the boats through approximately 3-foot-high tides for over a half-hour until two motorised boats reached us for aid. It was a remarkable day not because we were caught in the whirlwind, but because, when the motorised boat brought us to shore, I was astonished to see that the entire town was concerned about me, caught in the whirlwind. I was surprised by everyone's compassion and apprehension for me. I distinctly recall an old woman saying, *"We were not scared for them, because they are fishermen and know how to survive this, but we were concerned for you since you do not know how to swim in these white waves, ..."*.



Picture 7: Casting the net, my first successful stint after weeks of training.

(Photo Credit: Mr. Dawood Bhat)

As my fieldwork progressed, I had mastered rowing the boat on my own and casting a net, and the entire village celebrated my accomplishments. One day, Bilal and I set off in two different watercrafts with harpoons in hand towards the greatest harpoon fishing spots on the eastern side of the lake. When the time came to release the harpoon, I was both captivated and unable to control my feelings. Bilal showed me how to identify the vibrations made by fish below the water's surface and how to follow them without generating any audible or visual noise or vibration. The entire day passed without a single fish being caught in my boat despite my efforts.

After the COVID-19 outbreak, when I returned to the field for the third stretch of my research, I was once again welcomed with the community's enthusiasm and commitment. Several acquaintances invited me to lunch and supper at their houses as a sign of affection. Throughout my approximately 13 months in this culture, I was treated with courtesy and cooperation at all times. This community became my second home not because they assisted me with my research, but because they 'raised me as their own'. I consider myself fortunate to be a member of this fishing community, since the knowledge I learned there will be with me forever.



Picture 8: My second home.

Bibliography

- Banks, M., & Morphy, H. (2012). *Rethinking visual anthropology*. Yale University Press.
- Fraser, T. M. (1984). *Fishermen of South Thailand: The Malay villagers*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Guindi, F. E. (2004). *Visual anthropology: Essential method and theory*. AltaMira P.
- Habib, H., (2020). The Pattern of Livelihood: A Study of Fishing Community Living Along Wular Lake, Jammu & Kashmir. *Antrocom J. of Anthropology* 16-(2), 183-191. <<http://www.antrocom.net/upload/sub/antrocom/160220/016-Antrocom.pdf>>. Accessed 12 July 2022.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

H, Habib. (2022). "My Fieldwork Memoir: Experience of Working among the Hanji Fishers of Kashmir Valley" in *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*. Special Edition on Visual Anthropology. Guest Editor: Alison Kahn 1(2), pp. 1-7, ISSN : 2583-2417