

NOTES ON FIELDWORK

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The role and methodologies of fieldwork in the literary sphere are far less clearly defined than in other disciplines, such as anthropology or history. Yet with the gradual expansion of literary studies in Europe and North America towards the literatures of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, together with the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary perspectives, this aspect of our research would surely benefit from collective discussion. This article therefore aims to introduce a forum for research students to record individual observations and experiences, so that the broader questions and issues surrounding literary fieldwork — its strategies, ethics and uses — might be addressed in the process.

In the most obvious terms, fieldwork leads us to place the objectified area of our study, the ‘field’ as we have conceptualised it in distilled, academic terms, within the more concrete framework and activity of the field itself. Through this encounter, theoretical structures and empirical observations are brought into an often unsettling, sometimes reassuring union, which frequently throws into relief the cultural assumptions and implications of our academic agendas. My own fieldwork for my thesis on the post-Partition Indian Muslim narrative, conducted in India from April to July this year,¹ threw up as many questions as it answered and ultimately provided me with insights that can only be gained by experience within the ‘social context’ that we have become so conscious of in present-day literary criticism.

By Indian Muslim literature, which in itself refers to a broad and varied canvas, I am specifically referring to the cultural narrative primarily effected through Urdu, which, now largely displaced and fragmented, has its roots in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century courtly culture of

north India and the Deccan. In tracing the effects of 1947 and the ensuing 50 years on this partitioned and increasingly marginalised narrative, my research has had to extend beyond the critical reassessment of texts that have already been accessed by criticism in English, to bring into focus the writings of a more recent literary scene that has not yet been recognised outside its immediate milieu. One particular aim of my trip was therefore to collect primary texts — Urdu short stories and novels — that would be used to bring my study up to the present day and give my thesis its principal substance. Very few, if any, examples of contemporary Indian Urdu fiction have made it to library shelves in England, which, of course, is related to demand, but also points to the marginality of that scene, no doubt increased by the general perception of Urdu as now the language of Pakistan. The only texts I had been able to access were scattered short stories in translated anthologies of Urdu literature and some ‘all-India’ anthologies of short stories translated from various Indian languages.

As I had not set out not to unearth obscure manuscripts, but to collect the work of published writers, this task seemed straightforward enough. However, it proved to be the most time-consuming, frustrating and, at times, exciting aspect of my research. With the rapid growth of media technology and the growing domination of the Indian book market by English publications, the consumer demand for Indian-language books has generally fallen. The extent of this of course varies according to language and region. In the case of Urdu, which no longer has an official regional base in India, and has a steadily declining readership, the commercial impotence of its book trade is evident. Urdu bookshops are invariably located in the old cities – Old Delhi, Aminabad in Lucknow and Charminar in Hyderabad. These were all once important centres, but are now largely Muslim-populated areas, removed from the main urban centres. Despite the indubitable power of these places to stir the

imagination, one learns a great deal about the cultural location and status and accessibility of this literature when, in the most basic terms, one sets out to buy a book.

To cite an example, Delhi's Educational Publishing House is perhaps one of the best outlets I found for modern Urdu fiction, with an extensive and up-to-date list. It is located in a hidden alley in Old Delhi, which one can reach only by cycle rickshaw and foot, making one's arrival in itself feel like a big achievement. The next challenge is to actually find the books one wants. Browsing through the shelves of the Educational Publishing House, I was delighted to find several titles I had been looking for. However, with regard to many books I had on my list of 'must haves', particularly those important works from the '70s and '80s that almost everyone I had spoken to had mentioned, I met with the same helpless shrug that I was by now becoming accustomed to.

Talking to publishers and writers, I learned that the average print-run for most of these books is, at the most, around 500 copies, many of which do not sell but are distributed by the authors themselves. Although one finds the more canonical texts going into further editions, a second print-run for most contemporary writers is extremely rare. This frustrating fact is something that even the most determined book hunter has to resign themselves to and accommodate as an element of the literary culture in question. It made me think of how much we as literature students, particularly those of us trained in an orthodox English Literature environment, take the accessibility of modern sources for granted.

Some of the gaps in the market-place are however made up for by libraries, such as the Sahitya Akademi Library in Delhi, which has a substantial and up-to-date Urdu collection, as well as the libraries of the Urdu Academies in various states, also funded by the government. The Maulana Azad library at Aligarh University has the most useful and

extensive collection. As my time here was limited, I had to resort to a great deal of xeroxing, particularly from journals, which is where the short story culture really exists and reaches the widest audience.

Essential to our research, libraries are nevertheless home from home, and like American tourists seeking out a McDonalds in every city, we are reassured by the ease and comfort of their familiar surroundings — I certainly felt this after my various book-buying expeditions. There is therefore no need to dwell on the library experience here. Instead I will turn to a more difficult occasion in Aligarh — this time largely influenced by physical environment — which crowns my recollections of gathering material.

I was fortunate enough to meet a writer with an extensive personal library, built up over the years with obvious devotion. His collection contained many titles that, due to my frustrated searches, were rapidly approaching gold-dust status. Very generously, he lent me around twenty-five books, which he proudly told me I would not find anywhere, so that I could xerox the stories I needed. A couple of days later, having selected, xeroxed and bound my own personal anthology, I went to return the books. In the street outside the house, amid the crush of evening activity, I dismounted the cycle rickshaw — the only form of public transport in Aligarh — conscious of my valuable load. I negotiated the narrow space between the rickshaw and the wall surrounding the house, keeping my eyes fixed warily on the wide *nala* (open gutter) which ran alongside it. My train of thought in the seconds that followed went something like this: *nala*, busy road, bags in each hand full of books. Busy road, bags in each hand, *nala*...with books in it. One bag split — books in *nala*.

The dozen or so books floated in the filthy water as disbelief and panic crawled over me. I spotted a young boy, eight or nine years old, staring at me with curious suspicion. I begged him to help me, which he

decided to do, slowly. He accompanied me to the door of the house and left me with the dripping books and a puzzled inquiry, best translated as ‘you’re not from round here are you?’, lingering in the air. My host calmly dismissed my torrent of apologies, and we sat down to wipe the soiled pages, one by one. The incident was sealed by the tragic humour of my host’s final pronouncement on the subject: ‘What better example of the value of modern Urdu literature in India could you have than these books floating in the gutter.’

In addition to collecting material, I had gone to India to meet writers. Ideally one should do the first and then the second, but in my particular experience this was not always possible. (In fact, I realised that the best, sometimes only, way to collect texts was to go directly to the writers themselves.) The usefulness of meeting writers when one is engaged in the business of criticism is open to debate, particularly since biography has become so outmoded in textual analysis. However, in the present context, and indeed in similar cases, I would argue that there is much to be learned from the encounter. Meeting writers gave me a clearer idea of who the main literary voices in this cultural group are, what kind of social environment they work in, how they themselves perceive their position as an Urdu writer in India and what concerns they have with regard to their national and cultural identity.

Furthermore, in dealing with the literatures of India, we cannot make the same assumptions about authorship as an occupation — excepting perhaps the successful Indian writers of English — that we may do regarding established authors in England or America and their acquired social positions. With the exception of a few canonised living figures like Qurratulain Hyder, who is widely regarded as the ‘Grande Dame’ of Urdu letters, nobody in the context of my research could be described as a full-time writer, despite having gained recognition in the Urdu literary world.

However, the fact that many were themselves academics located in Urdu departments, or journalists and broadcasters also working in the Urdu field, reflects how the increasingly insular world of Urdu literature in India is dominated by an intellectual elite, while at the same time representing a cultural identity which has been greatly affected by material and political decline. The elitist consciousness of this writing, which I have addressed in my thesis can be partly attributed to such an infrastructure.

One particular tension between the conceptualised ‘field’ of study and the field itself, points to a perennial difference in agendas between academics and creative writers. Part of our work as academics is to create categories, make connections and often impose identities on certain groups and individuals which may not be agreeable to them, but provides us with an interpretive tool. How often have we heard female or Black writers, for example, state that they don’t want to be put in a box labelled ‘women’ or ‘black’. In setting out to find ‘Indian Muslim’ writers, my intention was to identify a particular minority which, having a heritage of cultural elitism and literary prestige, now occupied a marginal position. However, certain reactions to my stated project forced me to reassess the ethics of creating categories that appear viable in the academic context. By concentrating on Muslim writers alone, I wondered at my own complicity in the ‘Muslimisation’ of Urdu culture in India that has come about this century, resulting both from its transfer to Pakistan and the projection of Hindi as the language of Indian national identity. I was particularly conscious of this when I met non-Muslim writers writing in Urdu — probably the last generation to do so — who understandably misinterpreted my agenda as somehow separatist; my definition of a minority involved the exclusion of an even smaller one. Furthermore, with communalism ever ready to disrupt Indian society, the ‘Muslim’ label acquires religious and political ramifications which become more

pronounced in particular surroundings. I thus noticed that the fluid boundary between the terms Muslim and Urdu, which has resulted from the communalization of language, was something I resisted at the start of my trip, but soon came to cross with ease. The problematics of academic categorization, highlighted through the transfer of concepts from page to place, is an important lesson of fieldwork. In this case, it emphasized the ambiguous location of these writers who are Indian but also belong to a community of Urdu writers situated in Pakistan and India, thus having to negotiate the often politically charged issues of identity this confronts them with. One writer, whose writing has addressed the Indian Muslim's alienation from this politically projected identity (the perceived alliance with Pakistan) responded to the question as follows:

“I suppose I would, first and foremost, describe myself as an Urdu writer. I often write about the issues which concern the Muslim community, but would not like to be labelled a ‘Muslim’ writer. Finally, if I were to be described as an Indian writer, which is not often the case, that would please me very much”.²

What fieldwork seeks to acquire in any discipline, is, amongst other things, evidence. However, in the study of literature and, more particularly, the tracing of a literary history, the question of evidence has become increasingly elastic and complex: ‘Hence bits of evidence must be magnified to reconstruct the essence of a psyche or a civilisation’.³ With my dictaphone on constant stand-by, I had hoped to capture some choice quotes about the marginalization of Urdu by Hindi and the peripheral status of Muslim writers. I was instead forced to address the general reluctance to make any unequivocal pronouncements on this issue, to reconsider the question and interpret the more often procured ‘evidence’ of silence.

The last of my book and xerox parcels arrived last week, and the dictaphoned interviews have all been transcribed. Working through this material, which I have literally travelled to find, I am led to reflect on how I began my research armed with theoretical and fashionable notions about fractured identity and minority alienation and how, in the encounter between the abstract and concrete fields, such notions have had to be modified and reassessed. The perception of ‘social context’, which has become so vital to our understanding of literatures today, can of course be drawn from books and deployed in our writing in a clinical fashion, but a sense of how it really operates is something that, in my view at least, can only be acquired by placing oneself, albeit temporarily, within it. As one ventures further into ‘other’ literary landscapes, the inadequacy of a purely theoretical approach — though theory may have led us there in the first place — becomes all the more apparent. Digging with one’s pen, to borrow Seamus Heaney’s terms, may often involve, and benefit from, some hands-on spadework too.

¹ I would like to thank the SOAS Scholarships Committee and the University of London Central Research Fund for their help in funding this trip.

² Interview with Syed Muhammad Ashraf, Mumbai, June 19, 1999.

³ Lawrence Lipking, ‘A Trout in the Milk’, in Marshall Brown (ed.), *The Uses of Literary History*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995, p.8.