Insider, Outsider or Somewhere in Between: Issues and Challenges in the Sociological Study through Qualitative and Mixed Methods in a Religious Minority Community in India

Sritama Chaudhuri

1Department of Sociology, Samsi College, West Bengal, India; sritamachaudhuri@gmail.com

Abstract. India is a multicultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual, and multi-racial society and a country, which got freedom in the year 1947 after division in the line of religion. In this abstract, I, member of a religious majority group in India, have tried to delineate the challenges and issues faced while doing research on a religious minority community in India using mixed methods.

While conducting a sociological study on double marginality of the queer population of a religious minority group, I had experienced the reality of the dilemma of researcher’s position and could come out with a synthesis to arrive at a proper description.

While doing the research, initial days of entering the field and talking to the desired respondents were easy but not wholly productive. Somehow, the ease of conducting the research was not there. I then realised that while gaining access to their community I was being overly sensitive. In order to be careful about not letting my ethnocentric bias obscure my objective vision, I was purposefully indulging in celebration of their culture and vehemently trying to be an “insider”. This made my research activity tiresome, less interesting, and un-sociological. Somehow, the burden of political correctness was hampering my spontaneous spirit of inquiry. The famous “insider-outsider” debate in qualitative research methodology started feeling real. I paused and tried to investigate the real reasons for my unease.

India has a long history of religious conflicts, complaints on minority appeasement for political goals and governmental initiatives and policies for the protection and uplift of religious minorities. The constitution, school textbooks, mainstream media and in general national narrative and politics have always socialised the people to “take care” of the minorities and respect them. This socialisation has built up an over sensitiveness towards the minority population. Still the most common social relations with minority in terms of “roti-beti”, that is sharing of food and matrimonial alliances, is not acceptable in India in general. So whatever be the economic and educational level, the insider-outsider syndrome is very much common to a researcher and therefore is likely to affect sociological studies unless some methodological cares are taken, whenever the researcher does not belong to the community being studied.

In order to overcome this intrinsic obstacle, I started focusing on the internal processes like emotional reflexivity and auto-ethnography, as well as the external processes of cross verification across official sources. Another ritual proved beneficial which was the spontaneous discussion with the targeted groups in public places and casual interactions with same individuals in private settings. I started maintaining a daily journal and spending more time in the field. In order to eliminate the bias in collecting data, I devised a method of cross validating my notes and findings by taking help of an insider through blind—method (without explaining her/him the reason) which helped me in making judicious.

In this paper, I would like to narrate the entire journey and would suggest for plausible solutions in research methodology to tackle such insider-outsider problem.

Keywords: Insider- Outsider, Hindu-Muslim, challenges in mixed methods, qualitative research in India.