# Reflections on the field work of a dancer-political sociologist

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I never thought I would use my skills as a dancer performer after embarking on an academic career. Little did I know that these very skills would see me through some of my biggest academic challenges. The intrinsic value of academia for producing new knowledge and transmitting it through institutionalized settings was never as real to me as after a year's field work and two terms of teaching.  And it was my performance skills that helped me navigate the challenges of a beginner in these fields. So much so that I don't know when and whether doing ethnography and teaching was making me a better performer, or a better researcher-teacher, so inextricably tied these seemingly unrelated fields are and so seamlessly the two blurred into one another over the last two years.

Simply put, ethnography and teaching require mastery over performing a range of characters repeatedly with passion and precision.

During the course of my field work in four sites in India, which included villages and small towns, I donned a variety of characters, some very different from the real me. For much of the time when I was interacting with villagers in my first field work site, which has members of the same caste (social identity among Hindus in India) group I belong to and is in the same province where I grew up, I played the character of a naive college girl.  This character shared with the villagers her geographic and social location, but having lived a sheltered life in the city with no exposure to the rough and politically charged life of the village, was unaware of the social and political ramification of her social position and practices and the behaviour unique of it. She was baffled and disoriented. She had come to the village in all sincerity for a project on elections given to her by a university based in a foreign land, which was insensitive to the challenges such a project involved for a young, unmarried girl travelling alone in rural India. She needed the guidance and support of the village men to identify respondents, conduct the interviews, decode their responses, but most importantly, 'explain' politics to her. She had little interest in politics *per se* but was committed to learning and working for the sake of her project. She was just like any other village girl going to a local college, ensconced in her private feminine world, conservative and traditional in her value system even after being a part of institutionalized higher education.

The character was not completely alien to me. I am a city girl and was experiencing the messy electoral politics of India up close and personal for the first time, and was quite overawed by it all. But naive and ignorant of political intricacies and my own social position, I certainly wasn't. I wasn't apolitical in my objectives, visiting the village to simply record the electoral activities, voting turn-out and outcomes. Rather, my aim precisely was to understand the *why's* and *how's* of political participation and behaviour. My prime interest *was* local politics and everything that could help me gain access into the political world of my respondents. So even if I attended the afternoon knitting sessions I did so to gain an insight into the social world of my respondents through the village gossip

the women shared with me, for that could help me understand the political behaviour of my respondents. I often participated in such banal village activities just to embed myself in the everyday of the village and establish trust with the residents. At any rate, none of my activities were done unselfconsciously and with the careless abandon of the character I played.

I lived my character every minute of my life in the village, for without her presence me-the-ethnographer would never gain access to the sites and stories of village politics. If my respondents sensed an overt political interest in me, my neutrality would be compromised and the purpose of my visit doubted and questioned. In fact, for the first few weeks, there were many rumours about me, from being a CIA agent to an undercover spy doing scoping work for the re-election campaign of the sitting village council president. By assuming the character of an apolitical, naive college girl I was able to allay the fears of the villagers and gain their trust about the authenticity of my purpose. I got to capture their narratives about the nation and democracy in India and also the political undercurrents in the village and its relation with national politics.

My performance of this character was like doing a frame story – it was a performance within a performance.  Nested within the informal every day performance were the formal stage productions called *interviews* that I did throughout my stay. These productions required me to travel to the performance arena, the homes of my interviewees, in my student-researcher costume with props and perform the interview act in front of an audience. Unlike the everyday, I would dress in a particularly conservative *salwar kameez* (a traditional Indian dress made of flared loose trousers, a loose tunic), shapeless, with full sleeve, high neck line, and *duppatta* (a long stole used to cover the torso) fastened on my shoulders and hair neatly tied in a bun, in conformity with the local image of a studious college girl. Armed with a large note-book and pencil box to enhance my recognizability as a student, I would march with my local contact to the performance arena, my respondent's home. Here the stage was set with a table and chair right under a light bulb and my audience, consisting of family members and neighbours gathered to one side and the respondent right in front of me. After introductory remarks by my contact, in which time the audience would settle down, my performance would begin. I had a set script, my interview questionnaire, which had my dialogues, i.e. the questions that would match the character of a naive, politically illiterate female. *Why do you go and vote? Why are elections important?* The questions were deceptively simple and when posed by an ignorant college girl asking such basic information, it immediately relaxed my respondent. He would go out of his way to answer my question in great detail, often sharing stories of internal politics of parties and leaders, as doing so also boosted his ego. But I wasn't the only actor in this production. My respondents were actors too, as they switched to the characters of teachers-informers when answering my questions. They were eager to be seen as politically knowledgeable, a sign of power and accomplishment in the village, and they performed this character deploying stylistic text bookish phrases related to voter and civic duties, nation and national identity and dropped numerical figures to back up their assertions about political corruption.

Quite a bit of the performances in this production were *extempore*. My respondents understood their character in the performance only after I was introduced and posed the first question. In these brief moments, they witnessed my character of naive, politically illiterate college student. This was their cue to automatically assume their character of informer-teacher in the performance. But parts of my own performance were *extempore* too, for my role was not just that of posing set questions,

but also of emoting and expressing in ways corresponding with my own character and that of my interviewee's responses.

The challenges of this production resembled those of ballroom dancing with a new partner for the first time. Both the interviewee and I only knew our own parts, but the ultimate performance hinged on our ability to read each other's moves and respond in effortless harmony in tune with the music, which here was the larger interview objective. I was the dance lead. I posed questions and performed relevant expressions of affirmation, surprise, shock, approval and mystery that would ease the interviewee and nudge him into following me with his teacher-informer moves. The success of the production depended on how well I performed as a lead and the balance and harmony I created with the interviewee. Bad interviews were the ones where I could not put my partner at ease into assuming his performing his part as an informer-teacher or couldn't understand his moves to lead him accordingly by phrasing relevant questions.

While every interview production was unique because no two respondents are ever the same, certain questions, *certain moves*, always elicited the same response, *same moves*. In posing these questions I had to play up my character of the apolitical college girl. I had to pose the question to my respondents with complete naiveté and political ignorance even though I already knew the response. Likewise, expressions of surprise, awe, anger and disbelief had to be emoted with total sincerity even at answers I heard repeatedly. By the end of the performance, if the interview went well, i.e. my performance eased the responded to elicit his performance of teacher-informer and I got clear and willing responses to my questions, the audience would be enthralled and would display their appreciation by contributing their own stories and narratives to my questions. This was their way of paying for a good production.

There were situations that demanded I play other characters. In the dingy, dusty offices of district level bureaucracy, my foreign credentials were my passport for unrestricted access to the office of the district collector (a very powerful position in Indian bureaucracy) and official electoral data. Here my character was of a confident woman from London, who probably had undisclosed political connections and was on serious research work. But it was a tougher character to play because I still had to project political naiveté and disinterest, so as not offend the male bureaucratic egos of the officials. My character had to repeatedly play up the importance of their knowledge and experience against mine, despite my foreign degree and exposure.

This schizophrenic living did take its toll on me and I would experience powerful emotions of self-accusations for being deceptive and manipulative. I was often contemptuous of 'performing' these characters, for that's what the word 'performance' signifies when done in an everyday context outside of formal performing arts. It denotes the lack of integrity, honesty and courage in a person. But drawing on my experience as a dancer, where I often performed characters I couldn't relate to, a prostitute, or a ruthless demon slayer Hindu goddess or a bashful bride, and would still draw applause and adulation when I danced well, for being 'genuine and heartfelt' in performing the character, I realised that the word 'performance' is burdened with a misleading and negative baggage.

We all perform everyday to get by. Performances are as much a part of everyday social living as small talk and manners are. We continuously dole out performances almost unconsciously. For example, when we meet people with radically different value systems we perform an act of

acceptance and tolerance; when we want to turn down an invite from an obnoxious relative we perform an act of respectful refusal; when we want to stay out of an argument between loved ones, even when we have clear preferences, we perform neutrality. These responses are 'performances' because the individual is not being herself. She is not squarely telling the other person that she doesn't agree with the opposite views, or refusing the invite plainly for her dislike for the person, or openly taking sides in the argument. In the social world we often call these performances manners, though they really are performances similar to the ones I did during fieldwork.

What differentiates genuine from fake and manipulative individual is not that they never 'perform', but that the reasons for their performances are not deceptive and manipulative. These everyday performances are meant to ease interaction and enable respectful communication.

Playing certain characters during fieldwork was not meant to manipulate my respondents into providing me false information or insights, but only to create a context of uninhibited conversation. Through the performance of my various characters, I presented myself in a form that corresponded to their notion of a neutral and apolitical person and allowed me a peep into their real world.

Discovering the power of giving genuine guilt-free performances has been liberating and has helped me immensely in my role as an undergrad tutor. I 'perform' my lecture with each of my tutorial groups through acting out a range of emotions, surprise, shock, disinterest, irritation, joy, punctuating the material I'm teaching to make it come alive, even though it is far to basic for me to react in that manner.

Looking back at my days as a dancer, I couldn't be more thankful to my teacher for sternly instructing me that a great performance is not one that has the perfect technique but one with the most passionate, genuine and effortless expression of the character. I survived field work and teaching, not because I mastered the technique of framing the right interview questions and perfect recording, or by giving the informational dense lectures, but by identifying the relevant characters for the context and performing them with integrity.