

Continuing Engagement of Fieldwork and the Writing Machine

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Fieldwork transforms our identities in the field, in our discipline (sociology/social anthropology), and the discipline itself. My fieldwork has not ceased with my physical exit from Sikkim, as by including archival data, worldwide web representations, audio-visual material, personal papers, and legal case files, my ethnographic engagement is a continuing one. Adopting the idea of 'writing machine' from George Marcus, I argue that ethnographic writing is a decision while fieldwork is not a trope of entry and exit but assumes an ever presence in us.

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The act of "writing culture" is not merely writing but is the active process that moves the researcher from fieldwork to text...

Marcus, 1999: 20

These words that I key in on my computer and those that I edit out will take a life of their own in the wider world. Derived from our fieldwork experiences, ethnographies are impressionist and impressionable while the field and our locations and positions in this field remain continually in flux.¹ We take positions in the field, off the field, in writing and by not writing ethnographically. The idea of writing machines given by Marcus highlights 'the inter subjective and [the] material modes of the production of both representations and the limits of representation' (1999: 21). Any ethnographic writing is a decision while fieldwork is not a trope of entry and exit but assumes an ever presence in us.²

The *rite de passage* that transformed me into a sociologist/social anthropologist took place in the former Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim situated in the Eastern Himalayas.³ Fieldwork transforms our identities in the field, in our discipline (sociology/social anthropology), and the discipline itself.⁴ I conducted multi-sited fieldwork in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal between August 2001 and September 2002, primarily among the Lepchas and the Bhutias, but also among the Nepalis and the Tibetan refugees. Traditionally, ethnographic practice privileges dwelling over travel: 'the field as a spatial practice is thus a specific style, quality, and duration of dwelling' (Clifford, 1997: 22). As places, locales sustain meanings in

communicative acts.⁵ My fieldwork was a combination of localised dwelling in Kabi village of North Sikkim and a series of ethnographic encounters in different sites to which I travelled to attend rituals and document the history of sacred landscape.

A single-sited study could neither adequately represent the contested discourses about Sikkim's landscape nor document the polyvocality within an ethnic group and between different ethnic groups.⁶ Excluding archival research and fieldwork at two sites, this fieldwork was guided by the logic of association given by some Lepcha and Bhutia ideologues. Serendipity played a critical role in this fieldwork, though many of us do not seize the moment as we are instructed to be non-participant observers (see Pieke, 2000). Sociologists and anthropologists acknowledge the importance of circumstantial activism in multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1998 and 1999). Activism does not undermine knowledge production, as engagement provides vital insights and reinforces our long-term commitment to the field and the dissemination of its knowledge.

The article begins by discussing the ethnographic terrain and the fieldwork dynamics that transformed a hostile field into a collaborative ethnographic field for this fieldworker. The next section discusses the extension of fieldwork into archives, courts and the domain of visual culture. The final section extends the meaning of traditional conceptions of fieldwork by including fieldwork in the courts, the archives, the museums, the bazaar, and on the Internet. I conclude this article by acknowledging the limits of ethnographic authority by admitting the impressionistic nature of writing cultures.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TERRAIN

The incorporation of the former kingdom of Sikkim into India was a front-page story in 1975 and, in the 1980s, it re-entered news with the death of the Karmapa and the Sikkim's last king, *Chos-rgyal* (a Tibetan term for a righteous king) Palden Thondup Namgyal. The rise of the Gorkha national movement in the neighbouring Darjeeling Hills in the late 1980s with their separatist regional demands underscored the ethnically eruptible tendencies simmering in this part of the Himalayan region. In the 1990s and until recently, Sikkim's presence in the Indian and international mass media was limited to news-items about its three famous sons (Bhaichung Bhutia's football exploits, Danny Denzongpa's acting talents, and Ugen Chopel's Nepali films), frequent landslides, orchids, masked dances and occasional reports about the Karmapa controversy and the Indian army guarding this borderland.

During the period of my fieldwork in Sikkim in 2001–2002, the Maoist insurgency in neighbouring Nepal and the Lhotsampa exodus from Bhutan had made the entire region politically unstable. In contrast to these neighbouring kingdoms, Sikkim was (re)presented to

be an idyllic serene scenic Himalayan Shangri-la of this region. Nevertheless, security was a prime concern, and I had to renew my research permit every 90 days in order to conduct fieldwork in the restricted access areas of North Sikkim and for some areas secure 10—15 day special permits. Despite the overt cooperation, these periodic visits to renew my research permit to the Home Department of the Government of Sikkim, the Sub-divisional Magistrate's Office in North Sikkim, the police, and the Indian Army Headquarters at Gangtok, reinforced the feeling of fieldwork being a privilege that could be withdrawn if I transgressed any boundaries. Many of those apprehensions were justified as China had not formally recognised Sikkim to be an integral part of India and this issue continually surfaced in local, national and international politics.

I was writing my doctoral thesis at Oxford University when, in mid-2003, some Lepcha and Bhutia politicians challenged Article 371F during a protest rally at Delhi against the recognition of Limbus and Tamangs as Scheduled Tribes. The leaders and their supporters challenged the democratic incorporation of Sikkim into India and were immediately branded as anti-Indian by other Sikkimese politicians and the press. I was placed in a difficult position as I had interacted with many of them during my stay in Sikkim. Those leaders altered their positions subsequently, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It is relatively easier to conduct fieldwork and write about Sikkim today after China's formal acknowledgement of Sikkim as an integral part of India in 2005. The reopening of the Nathula trade route after its closure for 44 years signals a normalcy in this border region and the opening of a strategic commercial chapter in Sino-Indian relations. Nevertheless, dilemmas are inevitable and writing and publishing about cultural politics of Sikkim has involved decisions on what to write and not to write.

THE FIELDWORKER AND THE FIELD

The field has its own logic, and I submitted to it. Everyone distrusted a social anthropologist who was studying in England while the Sikkimese nationalists were hostile towards my 'Indian' identity. I entered the field with letters of introduction from some Sikkimese friends living in Delhi whose kinspeople welcomed me by giving a place to stay in Gangtok and introducing me into their community. From this initial location in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim located in East Sikkim, I tried to find a place to stay at Kabi village located at the border of East and North Sikkim.

Kabi is the historic site of the blood-brotherhood treaty that was entered into between the representatives of the Lepcha and the Bhutia tribes in the fourteenth century by keeping the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga as the divine witness. The treaty legitimised the migration and settlement of Bhutias into Sikkim. This event is materially represented by a shrine of stones in a sacred grove that

becomes the locus of an annual ritual commemorating the Lepcha-Bhutia alliance. It was this sacred grove that I had chosen as the base for my multi-sited study. Additionally, Kabi is an extremely historic site close to Tumlong, the third capital of Sikkim and the place where the Lepcha rebellion of 1826 occurred.

We approached the office bearers of the panchayat of Kabi and the family members of an administrative official who was related to my hosts at Gangtok. However, suspicion and a general atmosphere of local anger at the strict enforcement of a recent Supreme Court directive on use of forest resources and ongoing enquires by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) upturned all my fieldwork plans. Traumatized by a recent CBI 'enquiry/inquisition' of forest thefts in North Sikkim, a villager of Kabi had committed suicide in August 2001. My research project on people's attitudes and relations with the forest, sacred groves and the environment, requiring me to be stationed in this village, was definitely not received well in this scenario. Those initial weeks in Sikkim were spent in absolute frustration when someone circulated a malicious rumour that I was an intelligence officer: 'which other Indian woman will come and decide to stay in the backward forested villages of North Sikkim! She is definitely an intelligence officer sent to spy on us and report on forest thefts and Maoist infiltration in this region' (a local resident of Kabi village who works in a government office at Gangtok). No one was ready to give me a room to stay at Kabi, as I was a single unaccompanied woman with no affiliation to a recognisable entity such as a school or a hospital that could situate me.

The villagers argued that their houses were small, and they could not be sure that their men folk who got drunk regularly would not misbehave with me. I did not know then that Kabi is notorious for its black-magic practitioners who poisoned their adversaries to augment their family wealth. Some concerned villagers reminded the people interceding on my behalf of this: 'an outsider dying of poisoning here and one who was rumoured to be an intelligence officer would be catastrophic' (a local resident of Kabi village). My friends in Gangtok impressed on me the wisdom of shifting to another region; two recent cases of death by poisoning added weight to their argument. The veracity of whether these deaths by black magic and poisoning were true could never be verified during my fieldwork. Given Kabi's historic importance and the location of its sacred grove on a national highway amidst rice and cardamom fields, I did not want to shift to another location.

However, I had started surveying other sacred groves of Sikkim as an alternative sites, when a chance meeting with a bureaucrat (an Income Tax Officer stationed at Siliguri), who had studied at Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, expressed his interest in my research project secured me the necessary foothold. He turned out to be the younger brother of the late Kalzang Gyatso, the

former Rajya Sabha Member. After his intervention, his relatives at Kabi village were persuaded to give me a small room to stay. I was given this room on the condition that I would cook for myself and that I would not accept food and drink (excepting water) from anyone at Kabi or its neighbouring villages excepting the four households who were entrusted the responsibility for my well-being during this stay. Given my vegetarian inclinations, the villagers accepted my declining all meal invitations and acceptance of only hot-water drinks (*tato-pani* in the Nepali language). I became an 'untouchable Brahmin' of the village, accepting food and drink only in the village monastery and public religious ceremonies in the village.

I moved into the village in midst of the monsoons, and my initial horrified reactions to the blood-sucking leeches became a source of amusement and much mirth for the villagers. Some unlucky falls into ditches while I got used to walking on the narrow hilly tracks convinced the villagers that I was definitely not physically strong enough to be an intelligence personnel. To assuage villagers' suspicions that I was not a spy and to explain how I knew about the historic importance of Kabi, a sympathetic villager floated a rumour that perhaps I was originally a Sikkimese resident of Kabi who had been reborn in Delhi. My repeated reference to historical texts or a research design to justify my selection of Kabi and the interventions of my Gangtok friends were floundering when this rumour succeeded in begetting my acceptance.

I am an upper-caste-Hindu-vegetarian-single-Punjabi woman. The general upper-caste Hindu denigration of the beef-eating Mongoloid tribals (including the Lepchas and the Bhutias) and their kinship customs (such as bride-price, polyandry and polygyny) directed much criticism in my direction, but I stoically lived through all their anger and remarks at Kabi and in other parts of Sikkim. The conversion of some Buddhist sacred places into Sikh shrines by the Indian army in the 1980s unfortunately placed me at the hostile receiving end of their simmering anger against Punjabis; I explained continually that I was not a Sikh.

Some relief came when some lamas and nuns commented that I was perhaps a reincarnate of a Buddhist nun (*mo-btsun* in the Tibetan language): 'only a Buddhist nun will have such patience and forgo the pleasures of life. She spends so much time learning about rituals and with the lamas...when our own don't care to learn about our culture...'.⁷ I compromised with this reincarnated (re)definition of myself, and even started wearing the traditional Sikkimese costume on ritual and festive occasions. My regular presence at the monasteries of Sikkim and attendance at rituals and journeys to sacred sites were now being interpreted as pilgrimage.

This persona received a respectful reception everywhere and fictive kinship networks ensured that I travelled safely and securely without any harassment.⁸ Instead of the forest, I was seen spending all my time

with nuns and lamas in sacred sites, and people started sheepishly laughing about the initial rumours of my being an intelligence officer. My extended stay at Kabi village legitimised my fieldwork in other parts of Sikkim and specifically its historic sites, with the kinship and friendship links of these villagers also facilitating fieldwork in other sites.

Fieldwork cannot be conceived off as an external encounter, as it involves an internal dialogue within the self. Fieldwork was humbling, and involved both an unlearning of the self and the learning to think, live, and feel like them. In the beginning, I had no status because I had no role in the order of things. I sensed their dwelling in the landscape and the contested discourses in the differing ways in which they engaged with the land, the landscape and the sacred site. The villagers could not spare any time for idle chat on various things with me. I assisted them in their fields, walked with them as they grazed their cattle, helped the children with their school homework, helped them in their cooking and joined them when they had time for leisure.

My positioning in the village was crucial and my later relocation to a house near the forest check-post that functioned as a centre of gossip, the handicrafts school, and the residence of the village matriarch of the village emplaced me in the landscape. I picked up lot of news and gossip from the village shops, the post office, and the children who attended the handicrafts training centre located in the room adjacent to mine. I would sit for hours sunning out in the winter, appearing to doodle sketches while keeping an observant eye on the activities around the grove and the monastery, which was just below the house I stayed in. Initially, my notebook was perceived to be invasive but the Sikkimese villagers embraced my camera as they were used to the tourist gaze. As I attended social occasions in Sikkim, gradually I was transformed into an ethnographer-photographer documenting their stories and life histories.

I moulded my enquiry to events and encounters in the field. Abandoning all attempts to document people's ethnobotanical knowledge and relationship with the forest, I was sucked into documenting cultural politics. Many of my fieldwork experiences were not of my own choosing. 'Being there' is not sufficient, but 'being there to witness certain events' can become critical. If I had not witnessed a local dispute at Kabi then I would not have become the official ethnographer of the Lepcha pilgrimage to worship Mt. Tendong in August 2002. On October 16, 2001, the villagers of Kabi refused to let the members of the Lepcha association perform rituals at the Kabi grove, and this led to a Lepcha boycott of the annual ritual at Kabi. In protest, the Lepcha association decided to found another sacred shrine at Mt. Tendong in August 2002. My witnessing of their humiliation at Kabi village and subsequent interactions with them transformed my fieldwork into a collaborative enterprise. The gut feeling I had about

Kabi village proved right in the end as moving to another locale would not have yielded the insights I gained here, though I had to reframe my research questions.

Another breakthrough came with my serendipitous location on December 3, 2001 at the Tholung temple in North Sikkim, the epicentre of an earthquake measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale. Etymologically, the word Tholung derives from the union of two Lepcha words *atho* and *lung*, meaning 'a high rocky place'.⁹ Tholung temple is located at the altitude of 2592 metres and is considered to be the second highest Buddhist temple of Sikkim after Lachen temple (at 2653 metres). On December 3, 4.00 am, we were rocked awake by big tremors, shrieks of scared animals, utensils and other things falling off the walls and racks of our wooden hut. When these tremors subsided, huge boulders started sliding down the slope hitting our wooden house: we were trapped inside. The noises emanating outside were eerie and deafening for the next few hours and we cowered in the hut. The lamas started chanting prayers to placate the place-deities and after a few hours the landslides ceased. We gathered the courage to venture outside, and the scene was horrifying. Boulders had broken trees, huge landslides had broken away large areas of the slope, an entire yak-herd had disappeared, but miraculously our wooden hut, the monastery, and some other houses nearby had escaped these landslides: there were no human casualties in this massive earthquake. There were approximately 200 people, including a large number of lamas and novitiates at Tholung, and none of us suffered any physical injuries.

My continued field-presence after this tumultuous earthquake was interpreted positively and subjected to a religious interpretation: 'the spirits of Tholung sacred grove and the place deities of Tholung have accepted her and we have to cooperate with her research as she can disseminate our cosmologies to the wider world in a language that they will understand' (Lamas of the Tholung temple and monastery). The Teesta project was being implemented in this region and the activists welcomed me in their midst. I did not abandon fieldwork, but nativised myself into Sikkim:

[...] This Tholung experience transformed people's [Lepcha-Bhutia] perception of my research project, as one lama succinctly impressed on me: "you have to tell our story to the outside world".... I had undertaken two pilgrimages to Tholung and the acceptance of my presence in this most sacred grove and its temple opened hitherto closed doors in Sikkim, prompted recalcitrant people to share critical information, and to naturalize my presence in Sikkim's landscape. My research on the sacred landscapes of the Lepcha and the Bhutias gained an acceptance that was unforeseen and unanticipated.... Five consecrated *rlung-ta* (Tib.: Buddhist prayer flags) earning spiritual merit for my family, listing three of my wishes, and the title of my doctoral thesis *Just a Pile of Stones*, are flying near the Tholung temple adjacent to the *rlung-ta* planted by the Tholung family, and

the other lamas of Tholung. These prayer flags were consecrated a day after the greatest earthquake that rocked Sikkim occurred at 4 AM on 3 December 2001. These flags materially symbolize *the* turning point of my fieldwork on sacred landscapes among the Lepcha and the Bhutia tribes of Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills. After this earthquake, Agya Jetha the head of the Tholung family decided to narrate the history of this sacred landscape and his family's association to me... (Personal field notes, December 2001).

I was transformed into an ethnographer invited to and given the responsibility of documenting and disseminating Lepcha and Bhutia cosmologies to the wider world. My notebook and camera became instruments of dissemination of their ethnic revival and promotion of an understanding of their culture. It was my absence at two rituals that alerted me of this role-transformation. I found myself witnessing ethnic encounters, documenting controversies around the Rathongchu and the Teesta hydroelectric project, and participating in rituals that were a result of complicity and serendipity than any scientifically prepared research design. During the course of this fieldwork, I started analysing ethnic self-presentation and representations of the diverse ethnic groups. The influence of these representations in cultural politics of Sikkim became a central issue of my research encouraging me to diversify into archival research on Sikkim.

Looking back, that period of fieldwork in Sikkim is a tangled web of negotiations and complicities with diverse sections, including the villagers (Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis), the ethnic associations of the Lepcha and the Bhutia tribes, the Buddhist monastic association, the Lepcha ideologues including their shamans, the bureaucracy of Sikkim, the Indian judiciary (in Gangtok and Delhi), the army, and other Indians. My constant movement between sites and different levels of Sikkim's society gave it an activist character. Personal conflicts and contradictions were 'resolved not by refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar but in being an ethnographer-activist renegotiating identities in different sites' (Marcus, 1998: 8). The ideologues and the leadership of the cultural associations of some ethnic groups, more specifically the Lepchas and the Bhutias, perceived me to be a useful instrument who would disseminate information about them to the wider world.

I will not say that I conducted fieldwork under fire or in flaming fields, but the field was politicised with different ethnic groups either reviving or ceremonialising their cultural identity to assert their indigeneity and rights to Sikkim's landscape while expecting myself as an ethnographer to document them for the wider world. In the last leg of my fieldwork, both the Indian army and the Government of Sikkim complemented me by giving me the rare permission to conduct short-term supervised fieldwork among a dwindling Tibetan yak-herders community living in the land-mined areas of the

Indo-Tibetan border.¹⁰ In July 2002, I was formally invited to sensitise the army personnel about Sikkimese culture, while the locals were delighted that now I could bridge gaps on their behalf. I could not give these lectures, as I was winding my fieldwork and preparing to leave for England. On my return from England in 2005, my teaching commitments have not permitted me to undertake extended fieldwork in Sikkim, although I conducted short-term fieldwork in October 2006.

FROM ARCHIVED PASTS AND LEGAL BATTLES IN COURTS TO PICTURING SIKKIM

The ethnography I am writing is shaped not merely by encounters in the forests, villages and the fields of Sikkim, but also discoveries in the archives in Sikkim, Delhi and England, the analysis of legal case files in the High Court of Sikkim and Supreme Court of India, and circulation of images in postcards and posters.

As discussed earlier, I conducted fieldwork in historically significant locales, and history was part of this living present. The field encounters and oral history that I collected had to be related to the history available on Sikkim. There has never been any conscious attempt at archiving history within Sikkim, though history is lived and part of their present: a past that is embodied, materially affirmed and reworked in ritual performances, but not formally archived as history. In 1947, the British Raj took the Sikkim archives with them to England. Until 1975, Sikkim was an independent kingdom; hence, very few documents relating to Sikkim are available at the National Archives in Delhi or in Bengal. Sikkim's history had to be collaged from the texts, documents, papers, photographs, personal papers available at the Sikkim State Archives, the Asiatic Society Library in Kolkata, the National Archives in Delhi, the British Library, the Royal Geographical Society in London, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge, and some personal collections in Sikkim and England.

In 2002, my archival research at the National Archives in Delhi on Sikkim's trade routes had to be abandoned (or suspended) as consulting these documents required time-consuming clearances from the Ministries of Home and External Affairs.¹¹ I had a time limitation, as I was writing my thesis at Oxford. In striking contrast, research in the British and the Sikkim state archives posed no such problems. The reports on the trade on the Sikkim frontier narrated the significance of Sikkim to the imperial interests, the administrative reports on Sikkim revealed the development of the region, and the official papers on land disputes and other administrative matters showed the contours of administrative intervention and bureaucratisation of Sikkim. It was the papers I discovered in the Sikkim State Archives that helped in tracing the crystallisation of indigeneity and migrant identities of ethnic groups in the region. The discovery of a law prohibiting racial

miscegenation between the Lepchas-Bhutias and the Nepalis, and historical maps contouring ethnic settlement of groups guided the subsequent analysis of Sikkim's ethnoscape. Petitions of common villagers against their landlord's ill-treatment gave insight into Sikkim's feudal past and excesses, while the intervention of religious functionaries in administrative matters indicated the extent of Sikkim's theocratic inclinations.

Given the dearth of textual documentation of Sikkim's history, I have turned to other sources such as the photographic collections and films produced by the Political Officers of the Tibet cadre, the papers and pictures of the Kanchenjunga expeditions, visual illustrations in ethnographic texts such as Hooker's *Himalayan Travels*, and the two monographs on the Lepchas to supplement my archival research (Gorer, 1984; Morris, 1938). The chance to browse through the former King's personal albums at the filmmaker Ugen Chopel's residence during my fieldwork had ignited my interest in looking at other visual records of Sikkim and to trace the continuities and discontinuities in the visual imagination of Sikkim.

The 60 rolls of photographs and slides that I took during this fieldwork period constitute a comprehensive visual document independently of the ethnographic text that I am writing. I constantly refer to these pictures in order to compare them with the photographic archives available on Sikkim and the visuals circulated in postcards, posters, and brochures on contemporary Sikkim. I have started a collection of postcards to document the commercial production and dissemination of Sikkim's self-reflexive representation to the world. The images published and circulated on websites and agencies promoting tourism in Sikkim constantly feed into this discourse. In the near future, I intend taking some of these archival images to Sikkim in order to elicit comments from the community and analyse changes in specific locations in Sikkim's landscape. The pictures that people take in Sikkim have themselves become a subject of my enquiry: visual representations and imagining of Sikkim. My physical entry into Sikkim and exit from it no longer define my fieldwork engagement.

The analysis of the constitutional provisions relating to Sikkim and the special privileges enjoyed by the Lepchas and the Bhutias channelled me into the realm of constitutional law and a deconstruction of identity politics and the state-construction of tribes. What was the self-presentation of the Lepchas-Bhutias and the Buddhist activists to the wider world? What was the response of others to this self-presentation and arguments against the implementation of the hydel project? Why did not the activists network with other resource-related struggles against hydel projects in Northeast India and India at large?

After informally accessing some legal documents in 2002, I finally secured special permission from the Chief Justice of India in January

2003 to cite the Rathongchu hydroelectric project case file in my thesis. As I juxtaposed the documentary account of my field experiences with those legal case files of the Rathongchu hydroelectric project and the archival documents and pictures of Sikkim, I realised how the field and legal narratives structured the representations of the Buddhists and Lepchas-Bhutias as primordial environmentalists. Large sections of my thesis were read and commented upon by an eminent lawyer and constitutional expert; in fact, the entire chapter dealing with the Rathongchu hydroelectric project controversies was minutely screened as the case could have been reactivated in the Supreme Court of India after some controversies arose in the project location.

The legal perception and representation of the Sikkimese people in the courts (such as the Supreme Court of India) under construction has become another arena of my fieldwork. The Limbus and Tamangs of Sikkim were recognised as Scheduled Tribes in 2002; they are challenging the constitutional provisions buttressing the Lepcha and Bhutia privileges, while the activists protesting against the implementation of the Teesta hydroelectric project in Sikkim have approached the Appellate Court in Delhi for redress in 2005. I am following all these proceedings with interest. The appropriation of some of my research articles by the activists has ensured a dialogic exchange between the field and the fieldworker and validated its status as knowledge.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING CONTOURS OF FIELDWORK

Fieldwork experiences essentially produce ethnographic knowledge, though theory informs the writing of these experiences. Some fieldwork experiences become templates, while our writing filters these representations of cultures that are own and strange at the same time (Parkin, 2000). Ethnographic writing is neither subjectively objectified writing nor a disguised autobiography (see Okeley and Callaway, 1992). Since the mid-1980s, the conception of the field has undergone radical transformation. Fieldwork cannot be conceptualised as a trope of entry and exit. In an extended sense, fieldwork becomes a central ever-presence in us with pictures, news-reports, conversations, emails and web-chats with interlocutors, our archival discoveries and engagements with material culture in museums, while the circulation of representations in the mass media, production of audio-visual material, and conscious acquisition of personal papers and photographs, continually redefine our sociological sensibilities and the production of knowledge.

By including archival data, worldwide web representations, audio-visual material, personal papers, and legal case files, my fieldwork engagement is a continuing one. Events occurring during the writing-up process structure these arguments and the selection of data and its presentation as knowledge in text. Any writing of cultures is provisional and impressionistic, not only because the field is

continually changing, but also because our arguments with collaborators in formal and informal settings of conferences, coffee houses, courts, and in university corridors impress our writing and the production of texts — visual or ethnographic.

My ethnographic knowledge of Sikkim is the complex outcome of field notes and pictures, continuing communications from my collaborators in the field and my future visits to the field locales condition any narrative. The doctoral thesis contains *in situ* discussion of how my ethnic identity and some research questions became occasions for Sikkimese people to reflect about ethnicity and Sikkimese nationalism and the anthropological (mis)representation of the Lepchas and the Bhutias in earlier ethnographies (Arora, 2004: 121-24, 131-34).

I am acutely aware that my writing can be challenged as other ethnographies are being debated within the field. Can I ever forget the hostility directed towards anthropologists by the Lepchas angry at the misrepresentation of their sexuality and marriage practices! In the middle of the Lepcha reserve, during my fieldwork in December 2001, a Lepcha ideologue placed a copy of Gorer's *Himalayan Village* (1984) and demanded to know my position on it. His concerns centred on the politics of ethnographic representation and how the community is striving to vanquish those earlier representations of themselves as sex-obsessed promiscuous primitives that have been held to international ridicule. Ironically, the monographs by Geoffrey Gorer (1984) and Major John Morris (1938) are the only texts that the Lepchas have as a record of their culture, yet they feel defiled in those pages. My discussions with the Lepchas would often include a sarcastic reference to these texts, and they would cite an extract to me and advise me to refer to it than wasting my time doing fieldwork in a physically inhospitable terrain.

In 2002, during my fieldwork in Kalimpong, Lyangsong Tamsang, the Lepcha ideologue expressed his extreme anger at a recent web-representation by a Leiden-based Dutch anthropologist Helen Plaisier about the Lepchas of Kalimpong as 'inhabiting a jungle'. This description was totally unacceptable to the Lepchas of Kalimpong, and Lyangsong expressed his disgust with anthropologists and distrust of any ethnographic representations: 'the Lepchas are now educated and we should write about ourselves and set the record right'. Any research among the Lepchas was possible only after I pacified the ideologues and assured them that they would have access to my writings and right to disagree with anything objectionable. Such fieldwork encounters add weight to the impressionist nature of ethnographic writing, and show the erosion of ethnographic authority and the blurring of boundaries between the home and the field.

I will conclude this paper by arguing that the inner struggles within us, the kind of fieldwork we chose to do and serendipitously experience,

the theoretical prisms we select in our arguments, the archival documents we include and silence in our writing, the pictures we take, include in our narratives and frame out, are intentional decisions of conscious representation that outline the contours of this representation. My computer screen is continually transformed into a field-site, where I engage with different kinds of narratives, textual and visual, authored both by the self and the others. The metaphor of 'writing machine' deployed by Marcus encapsulates my continued fieldwork engagement while setting the limits of my representations and ethnographic authority as a knower.

NOTES

1. My supervisor, David Parkin would often remark that my writing resembled an impressionistic painting giving space to the polyvocality of the field and reveal the battles within myself as I related my field notes with other material.
2. The distinction between *fieldwork* (collection of data) and *ethnography* (physical and mental acts making up the fieldwork, including the writing up) collapses in this paper.
3. Fieldwork is often cited as the rite of initiation into a mature professional identity and the authoritative basis of ethnographic knowledge. My fieldwork was conducted in what constituted the area of the undivided kingdom of Sikkim including the Darjeeling Hills that were annexed by British India and incorporated into Bengal in 1835. My doctoral research and fieldwork were funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (UK), and the Beit Fund for Commonwealth History, the Radhakrishnan Trust, and Linacre College at the University of Oxford. I am indebted to my thesis co-supervisors Marcus Banks and David Parkin and examiners Caroline Humphrey, Wendy James, and Robert Parkin for their constructive criticism. I thank Keith Sprigg, Subhash Jain, Narmala Halstead, Amalendu Misra, Anand Chakravarti, P.K.B. Nayar, M.N. Panini, and N. Jayaram for encouraging me to write on fieldwork. The usual disclaimers apply.
4. Social science disciplines such as economics, law, social work, and history do involve fieldwork, but here I am restricting myself to discussing the impact of fieldwork on sociology and social anthropology.
5. Giddens defines them as 'a physical region involved as part of the setting of interaction, having definite boundaries, which help to concentrate interaction in one way or another' (1984: 375).
6. A multi-sited study is designed around 'paths, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations' in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with a posited logic of association between them shaping the argument of the ethnography.
7. This comment was made by the treasurer of Kabi temple. The villagers related to my vegetarianism as conforming to the austere diet of a Buddhist nun.
8. On the whole, Sikkim is safe for single women to travel alone, and the Sikkimese women enjoy greater mobility than Indian women. I avoided places when I found men drinking in groups and did not respond to any sexual innuendos that were directed towards me.

9. This site is located in a landslide prone area. These landslides are often inferred to signifying the anger of the Tholung deities and Sikkim's other protective deities.
10. The watchful presence of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate in the area, a Research and Analysis (RAW) agent, and army personnel ensured supervised access.
11. Such archival research on border zones should become easier in the future with the restoration of peace on the Sino-Indian frontier.

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