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# Research on the move: revealing power dynamics in the field

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*The article follows my research journeys in Tamil Nadu, India between 2012 and 2016 and presents the power dynamics I encountered while working with a nomadic community, the Narrikurovars, also pejoratively referred to as "Gypsies". This article starts by introducing the Narikuravar community, explaining its nomadic patterns and reflects on the importance of telling the stories of people whose lives are often buried in silence. Then, the article further exposes the dynamics of power that structured my research by describing the interactions that took place through translators/ interpreters (Fujii, 2013). Here, I describe what it means not to speak the language of the community I worked with, the process of working through translators, and I analyze how these processes revealed who gets to speak in a community and who does not have a voice. The article concludes by analyzing the epistemic implications of co-generation of data (Yanow, 2006) when working with marginal and vulnerable communities. It argues that researchers should both reflect upon their position of power and adopt positions that mirror the power dynamics of the communities they are researching by placing themselves in powerless situations. Even if this power reversal is temporary, it will help researchers understand what it means for their participants to make claims of justice, and could further articulate, reveal and minimize power networks.*

Keywords: *Translators, Narikuravar, "Gypsies", nomadism, power, field research*

## 1. Introduction

While reflecting on my work with a mobile community in South India, I expose the categorizations/hierarchizations encountered in the field and in my own research. The following article will: a) give insight into the local power dynamics between majority and minority populations, b) reveal the multiple power dynamics at work within a nomadic community, and c) reflect on ethnographic knowledge production. It aims to show how complex dynamics of power are, pertaining not only to the communities researched, but also reinforced by researchers. I propose that researchers adopt positions that reflect the power dynamics of the communities they

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are researching by placing themselves in powerless situations. Doing so will reverse the balance of power. Even if the reversal is only temporary, it will help researchers understand what it means for their participants to make claims of justice. Researchers could then better articulate, reveal and minimize power networks. In traditional scientific experiments scientists/researchers are in control. They organize and replicate the research parameters. I propose something different, a "losing" of the researcher within the field, to empower communities to take control of their narrative.

Overall, my work is concerned with marginal and vulnerable communities, and reveals the processes they employ in accessing social justice. For my recent project I have been working with communities that are labeled as "Gypsies".[2] The term "Gypsy" is often employed both to refer to diverse ethnic communities across the world, and to pejoratively define nomadic marginal communities. The term was used in Europe to define nomadic communities that presumably came from Egypt.[3] In the 17th century, British colonialist brought the term to India, where it took informal roots within the system, defining nomadic, marginal groups who, in the eyes of the colonial power, resembled the groups known of as "Gypsy" back home.[4] Thus, the term "Gypsy" gained currency in India. It was widely used to refer to tribal and nomadic communities (Jonathan, 2017). One such group was the Narikuravar, a traditionally nomadic community found in Tamil Nadu, south India [5].

The Narikuravar community describes itself as nomadic. Over the four years I worked with them (during summer and winter school breaks), I was exposed to different power dynamics, such as the ones between the community and the larger Tamilian population. The Narikuravars reveled in my inherent powers as a white, female researcher from a North American University. However, because the community was mobile, the limits of my power were also exposed. Nomadism placed me in situations that were difficult to navigate and produce knowledge. I was forced to conduct research on their terms. I had to adjust my expectations, my

[2] While this project includes communities in both Romania and India, in this article I refer only to the participants in India.

[3] The etymology of the term is sometimes considered to be the Greek term "Atiganoi" – meaning untouchable. This use of the term is use in connection with the term "Tigan"-in Romanian, or the Eastern European Version of "Gypsy." The same term is in French "Gitane", "Gitano" in Spanish, "Tzigan" in Hungarian, and "Ciganski" in Serbian (Dragomir, forthcoming, 2018).

[4] The parallel between communities labeled "Gypsy" in Europe and India is often supported by the idea that "Gypsy"- labeled communities come originally from India, where they left approximately one thousand year ago, crossing Asia and Middle East, fin at time settling on the way, at times continuing their journey all the way to the new World. More recently, there are several genetic studies that assign a connection between groups found in India and those named "Gypsy" in Europe (Dragomir, forthcoming 2018).

[5] There are several traditionally nomadic communities in India that fall under the "Gypsy" label; the most well-known are the Banjaras, Jogis- who are "Located" in north Western India in Rajasthan, where presumably the European communities of nomads came from.

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schedule, and my behavior. This further revealed that nomadism is a form of power – a displacing power. The nomads were the ones in control. As for those seeking contact (in this case the researcher, though one can easily imagine that this would be the case for representatives of the state), they are in a powerless position, trailing after them, of hoping to meet them.

Even though I knew that the Narikuravars are nomadic, it took time for me to adjust my expectations, which were still confined to settled populations. I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated when my research progressed slower than I had estimated, because we could not find the people we were hoping to interview. But these frustrating setbacks helped me see how power works, and revealed that power is not only omnipresent, in a Foucauldian fashion, but that the same situation can place one in duplicitary positions of both subaltern (Chaturvedi, 2012) and dominator. These instances, of which I will detail some examples below, corroded my notions of power, and while they placed me in precarious positions, they also allowed me to further my understanding of the everyday politics in which the Narikuravars participated.

## 2. The Narikuravars within Indian power hierarchy

In the winter of 2012, I arrived in Tamil Nadu, which is "home" to Narikuravars (as much as it could be a home for nomads), and started my project. The Narikuravars are a small community; they do not have enough political power to be courted for votes by political officials, and government institutions and scholars often ignore them. I embarked on regular journeys and conducted ethnographic work. My goal was to observe the group and interpret their struggle for justice.

The Narikuravars are part of a historically marginalized community within India. They tell the story of their tribe being associated with the upper castes, which about five hundred years ago provided security for the kings. But once invaders took rule over the territories, Narikuravars, like many other tribes, became nomadic. They retreated into forests, and in doing so preserved their traditions and freedom. When hunting became illegal in 1972 (The Wilde Life Protection Act, 1972), so did their forefathers' tradition. Since, the Narikuravars live at the margins of the society, in dire poverty, making and selling beads and other small ornaments. The community struggles with high levels of illiteracy, multiple health issues, and unemployment (Jayachthra, 2016). In Tamil Nadu there are currently about 8,500 Narikuravar families, or 30,000 people, less that 1% of Indian population. Because they are such a small community, research and available data to compare them to the larger population is scarce at best. The Narikuravars refer to themselves as *Adivasi*, and hope to be legally referred to as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and hope that this recognition would bring them better access to resource (Dragomir, 2016).

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### 3. Doing research: Isolation, Mobility and Translation

One of the main obstacles of the Narikuravars in accessing social justice is the dim visibility of their community in research, in government policies, and in the eyes of Tamilian and Indian populations. The Narikuravars are a close community. They often intermarry, which keeps their traditional ties strong. The community enters mostly economic relationships with other populations in Tamil Nadu or neighboring states, but otherwise remains isolated.

Their isolation is also reinforced by their nomadism, as they are strangers in many places, moving from place-to-place, sleeping at the margins of the road, or selling small plastic knick-knacks near markets. Even when they are located in a place for a period of time, or inhabit a public space (like garbage-dumping site) most people prefer to turn a blind eye to them.

British colonialists attempted to sedentarize nomadic communities like the Narikuravar, an endeavor also tried by the Indian government for the past decades. While the British created legislation like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which criminalized mobile communities by birth, in contemporary India one of the main forms of controlling and accounting for mobile communities was instituting the national Aadhaar (Citizens' Charter, 2012) card, which is a form of identification that allows people to access government sponsored programs. To obtain the card, one has to provide a stable address. As a result, the Narikuravars register their residence in sedentary places, typically assigned by the government, but they seldom use them. Their relationship with settled habitation is complex, flexible and varies greatly the Narikuravar always tell me. When asked, they describe themselves as nomadic, even though they have a place of residence. When challenged, they explain that they simply use their addresses to obtain benefits, but they are not settled; they prefer "roaming around". They give examples of children being forced to sleep in houses at school, but running away in the night and finding their way to their families simply by walking, being content only when escaping the limited space of settled habitations.

Their movements defy traditional definitions of 'nomadic' and 'sedentary', which both assume absolute mobility or absolute 'settlement'. The Narikuravars are different from this dogmatic understanding. They negotiate their nomadism and empower themselves by standing in the 'peripheral vision' (Wedeen, 2008) of the state, where they can engage in acts they deem as necessary for their survival. For example, despite the fact that hunting jackals (their traditional occupation) is currently illegal, because the Narikuravar travel at will and often go into forests, they are able to hunt for food, as well as for selling. This ambivalent relationship with the law keeps them secluded, and closed off from random strangers. Moreover, their isolation is reinforced by the majoritarian population's preconceived biases towards the Narikuravar community.

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As many other *Adivasi* communities, they are often seen as pariahs. They often do not belong to the Hindu system, thus they are outside of the "inexistent" caste system. They are often regarded as "polluted," and able "to pollute" anyone who comes in contact with them. Different from the "untouchables" or the Dalits, who are the "lowest" caste of the Hindu system, *Adivasis* are communities not intergraded in the caste system. As a result, they are kept as far as possible. The Narikuravars often confessed that even institutional employees, nurses, teachers, doctors, etc., avoid or limit their interactions with them. As a result of their nomadism, of their community oriented social and cultural practices, and their "casteless" identity, the Narikuravars are often isolated and ostracized.

Conducting research with the Narikuravars poses several logistical issues: first their nomadism makes it difficult to connect with them. Whenever I went to their 'settlement' places I encountered several people, but not always the same people. When I asked where some of the people I knew were, I was told that they are "out for business" with an indeterminate return date or time. My experience is not dissimilar from government officials, such as nurses, who need to get into touch with members of the community; they have a hard time encountering them. Second, even after finding them, it is difficult to gain their trust and to be accepted within the community. Third, amongst themselves, the Narikuravar speak their community language, Vagriboli, an oral language that is not spoken outside of the community. Most of them speak informal Tamil, hence my work needs to be intermediated by translators, and (as all researchers in the field know) good translators are hard to come by.

## 4. Entry and Translators

When I started my work with the Narikuravar community, I shared my interest with my Tamilian friends. Most of the time they smiled, as if they were saying, "These foreigners and their bizarre, nonsensical interests," but they also politely humored me. They were eager to share their views of the Narikuravar community: "They are 'Gypsy,' you know," I was told. My local interlocutors would tell me that they are "uncivilized," "unkempt," and "roam around."

Many shared stories from their childhood: "My parents used to tell me to bring all the animals inside the house when the Narikuravars were coming in the village" Padman said. Upon meeting my confused gaze he continued. "They eat dogs and cats, so they would catch your animals and eat them".

Aparna shared her mother's worries with me: "She told me to bring the pots and pans inside, out of fear of them being stolen". But then she added that her mother would give the Narikuravar old clothes, because she knew they were very poor.

"They do not take bath"! was the thing I heard the most about the Narikuravars. Considering that the community is mobile, with scarce access to

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water, “taking a bath” would understandably be a challenging endeavor for the Narikuravars. They were described as “unkempt”, and as a result, unpleasant to be around. I was often cautioned about the danger of getting lice from them.

I found most of these descriptions inaccurate. The Narikuravars’ hygiene is not dramatically different from other communities. It became obvious that these widely shared opinions said more about the image of the Narikuravars in the eyes of Tamilians than the community itself. These statements made it apparent that the social hierarchy in Tamil Nadu existed, and clarified the place that the Narikuravars occupy. The self-assurance that my interlocutors displayed, when speaking about the Narikuravar, revealed their sense of entitlement to make claims about a group of people, showing that, in the Tamilian social hierarchy, the Narikuravars occupy a subordinate position.

The Narikuravars’ marginal and subaltern position became more obvious when I was searching for translators. Whenever I asked about someone who could help me in the field, most Tamilians listened carefully, but then shook their heads in understanding. Most of my acquaintances said they did not know where I could find a translator, or how they could help me I had always been impressed by the degree of politeness and formality that the people of Tamil Nadu extended me. My Tamilian friends, with their gentle, respectful manners, always agreed, in their kind manner of speaking, to help me navigate the country, and its invisible (to me) social mores. So, it was difficult for me to understand why we could not find translators to go with me into Narikuravar ‘settlements’. It took me a while to understand that it was not necessarily a lack of language skills on the part of my friends that kept them from helping me, or a lack of time or resources, but their unwillingness to be in contact with the community. This became clear when one swami (i.e. monk), visibly amused by my lack of social understanding, told me with a smile that it was difficult for “people to go there [i.e. in the ‘settlements’], as the Narikuravars do not take baths”. The refusal to come in contact with Narikuravars, even in a research setting, and for a short amount of time was surprising, especially since most of the people I was asking were part of a spiritual community whose core principle was the belief in the equality of human life. Thus, my visits to the community were postponed several times due to the lack of translators.

One of the swamis recommended a volunteer of his spiritual center, a man who knew the community and who could take me to the Narikuravars. I arrived by bus in the ‘settlement’s’ neighboring town on a sunny January day. My new translator, Sasi, happily greeted me, and then drove me to meet the Narikuravars. He introduced me to one of his friends, whose father-in-law was doing business with the Narikuravars. This link facilitated my first encounter with the community. My first visit was long and cheerful; I got to know several people in the ‘settlement’, and they invited me back. But as Sasi had a new business, and a young daughter and wife, he was not always available to accompany me. Hence, I needed to find a

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translator, preferably one who could also support my transportation needs. Upon my assiduous requests to find someone who could help me in my work, one Ma (i.e. a female monk) recommended me to another volunteer, whose English was very good.

On an early Sunday morning in 2013, I met Padman, who became one of my translators and guide in Tamil Nadu. Padman was a handsome Tamil man in his late thirties, with sharp, large brown eyes and an elegant demure. He shared with me that he was of high caste. He was not a Brahmin, he said, but a business people caste, well-known in South India. He came by car and took me to the 'settlement'. I was happy to have him along. Because he spent countless hours on-line, devouring documentaries, his English was strong and his knowledge vast.

As we entered the Narikuravars' 'settlement', Padman took a strong footing and made his presence known. The Narikuravar children surrounded us, smiling and pushing one another towards me. They spoke respectfully to Padman. Padman took his role seriously. He asked for my contact in the village, an elderly man I met during the previous visit. Padman proceeded in talking to the man. He continued to be reserved and polite, careful in his words and gestures. The Narikuravars were happy to see us. Padman did his best to translate the avalanche of words and social mores bombarding us. I was rather overwhelmed by the attention I was suddenly receiving; it took me a while to find my bearings.

Because I was depended on Padman even for basic interactions, I watched him with acute interest. A dynamic immediately formed. Padman was talking to the elderly men in the community, but he was not addressing the women. He was asking questions, listening carefully, and often nodded in response. But he was even more reserved than usual. I noticed his attitude, but after asking for permission, I preoccupied myself with taking pictures. When I came home that evening, I studied my pictures. There were photos focused mainly on the Narikuravars in the 'settlement', with happy faces, bright eyes, hands risen in the air. Next to them stood Padman, obviously unwilling to engage. Moreover, in all of the pictures he made sure that he separated himself physically from the group by literally taking a step out, and crossing his hands to his chest. He had a faint smile, but one that smacked of superiority and indulgence towards the activities taking place around him. Even though Padman was willing to help me, it was clear that he wanted to be seen as different from the others; he did not want to be mistaken as a Narikuravar.

Other Tamilian friends and acquaintances had even stricter attitudes. For example, in 2016, three years into my research, I was volunteering at the school connected with the spiritual center that was hosting me, working with highly educated Tamilians. As Padman was out of state, I was in dire need of another translator who would help me with my work in the field. The school recommended a young Tamilian teacher. They placed us in contact, and the young woman politely met me. I explained what I was doing, and what I thought would be helpful for her

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to know if she were to accompany me. She listened, nodded, and then asked: “Is it safe to go”? I was slightly puzzled. I did not know what was she referring to. I told her that I would reserve a car with a driver so we would go as such; hence it would be easy and safe. She seemed unsatisfied with my answer, but did not persist. I asked about her schedule, and we decided to do the trip in a week, when we were both available. A few days before the scheduled event, I ran into her. I greeted her, and politely reminded her about our appointment. She nodded, and then asked again if I was sure it was safe. I re-confirmed. On the day of our departure the car and the driver arrived at school, ready to pick us up. I was in the building getting ready, when I heard someone speaking loudly over the phone in Tamil, right in front of my window. I looked outside and saw my new translator speaking with agitation on the phone. I pulled back and continued to get ready. A few minutes later I left the building and waited for her at the convened place. Time passed. She did not appear. I nervously looked at my watch. She was late fifteen minutes. I called her phone to see if everything was OK. The phone rang for a long time. When she finally answered she had a faint voice. I asked her if all was okay, as the driver was waiting for us. She told me that she was not feeling well, that she was “feverish”. As I had just seen her speaking energetically on the phone earlier, I was concerned. She told me she couldn’t accompany me to the Narikuravar ‘settlement’. I said that I understood, wished her a speedy recovery, and then hung up.

Luckily, I found another translator at the last minute, and we went into the field that day. But I reflected a great deal on the interactions that my Tamilian friends were avoiding at every (social) cost. The young teacher’s reticence to interact with the community, and her obvious fear for her safety, was at odds with her willingness to help, and with the established social order of the school, which had recommended her to assist me. In spite of endangering her social relationship with me, and implicitly with the staff at school, she had obviously decided against establishing contact with the Narikuravars.

These stories are examples of the many situations I encountered when conducting fieldwork with the Narikuravars: translators often stood apart while in the field or refused to contact the Narikuravars all together, as if even a simple encounter with them might lead to losing one’s privileges. Thus, these events implicitly exposed the hierarchy within the Tamilian society, revealing the marginal and ‘low’ place assigned to the Narikuravars.

## 5. Gender and Power within the community

Working with translators posed further moments of reflection. It is assumed that knowing the language of the participants furthers research and allows the participants to speak comfortably in their own tongue (Fujii, 2013). Fujii argues that:

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> Good interpreters do much more than simply render spoken words from one language to another; they also can play a vital role 'interpreting' in the methodological sense – in helping the researcher make sense of what people say by calling attention to background knowledge that gives meaning and context to people's words. In this way, interpreters can serve as valuable collaborators in their own right. (Fujii 2013, 149-150)

Moreover, as the field provides simultaneously diverse information, interpreters

> Can provide a second set of eyes and ears. They can pick up on different cues, both verbal and nonverbal. They can provide insight into people's responses, behaviors, attitudes, and body language during interviews. They may notice details that the researcher misses. (Fujii 2013, 150)

Great translators, or 'interpreters,' as Fujii calls them, are crucial to the work, and can aid it by furthering knowledge. However, different translators can play different roles. For example, Padman was able to inadvertently reveal dynamics of power within the community. While Padman was eager to distinguish himself from the Narikuravar community and always stood aside, he took his role seriously and followed my instructions. He asked the questions that I discussed with him earlier. When we entered the community, everyone there, in the 'settlement', came around us and invited us to sit down in small courtyard next to the temple. We sat and the Narikuravars sat concentrically around us: elder men closer to us, followed by younger men. Women were at the periphery, most of them standing. Padman was conducting the conversation, and even though I kept asking him questions to be translated, the men answering them were looking only at Padman; they did not make eye contact with me (Dragomir, forthcoming, 2018).

As we were speaking, women walked around and came next to me, touching my hands and making eye contact. Suddenly, one woman came to me and started talking in a precipitated voice. Other women moved next to her, trying to make her stop. I interrupted Padman and asked him what was she saying. He listened to her for few seconds, and then dismissed her with a roll of his eyes. He turned his attention back to the men he had been speaking to moments before. The Narikuravar woman was restless; she still wanted to talk to me. She came closer and showed me her bruised arms. I knew it was important for her, and also for my understanding of the gender dynamics within the community, so I insisted that Padman tells me what she was saying. He listened to her in an annoyed manner, and then switched his gaze again. The men in the community started gesticulating towards her to stop her lament. I looked at Padman and asked for an explanation for this escalation. Padman said reluctantly, "You see, this woman is telling you that her husband is beating her." When he saw my increased curiosity he rapidly added, "But you see she is drunk and talks too much"! He ended by refuting the authenticity of her words. "I still need to know", I told him in protest.

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He did not respond. We all stood, guided by the men Padman was speaking with. We started walking in the 'settlement', accompanied by the Narikuravars. The woman captured my eyes again. She started talking to me, raising and showing me her bruised arms. I made a quick decision. Knowing that Padman was not willing to engage with her, and to translate for me, I asked Padman to ensure that he records her. He nodded in agreement. He stood near her for a matter of seconds, then swiftly changed his hands, pointing the phone towards the men who were examining something inside of a home.

When we left the 'settlement', and he was driving me home, Padman felt the need to educate me. "You see", he started in his usual tone, which was the prelude to an explanation for the Indian and Tamil culture, "these women", he continued referring to Narikuravar women, "are different. They take alcohol"! He switched his gaze from the busy road to me, and seeing that I did not have a reaction (or the assumed reaction), he said, "They go in liquor shops and drink with the men". I found out later that Tamil Nadu has a history of controlling and banning alcohol, with the state having monopoly on liquor shops (Deepalakshmi K. 2016), which are public places for men to gather around. These gendered places were structured around alcohol intake, but also surrounding male interactions.

"When men drink", Aparna, my other interpreter, explained a few weeks later, when I asked her why Tamil women were not going to the liquor shop, "it is better not to have women around. It is not safe for them".

The image of women as a deterrence to male spaces is not endemic only in Tamil Nadu or in India – but it is pervasive across the world, and used as an argument to exclude women from participating in the public sphere, from socializing, from military training, and from political engagement. It is also not new. While used today, it also appeared in the work of Plato, in the discussion of the perfect republic, where men argued that women could not be guardians (or leaders) in their communities because their presence would make men lose focus and deter them from taking care of the wellbeing of the republic (Plato, trans. Bloom, 1991).

In the context of Tamilian gender relations, women's presence in gendered spaces is not acceptable. But Narikuravar women break these taboos; they are found in the midst of male spaces. When I asked Padman about the Narikuravar women crossing gendered social lines, he said, "It does not matter for them. They are already polluted. They can even smoke". From their marginal place, as out-casts, Narikuravar women could transgress the gendered lines and bend social norms in their direction. Narikuravar women being outside of the traditional Tamilian Hindu system have the freedom to enact what other Tamilian women cannot: they have the freedom to drink, smoke, and enter male dominated spaces. But this freedom comes with a price: because they break the society's mores, their voice is not taken into consideration. Their alcohol intake silences their voice of resistance against violence and domestic abuse. They simply do not count.

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After Padman finished his lecture on Narikuravar women's cross of social mores, he added in a low voice, "They are beautiful, these women. They look so different, no"? He looked at me for approval, and then exclaimed, "They are known for that"! I looked at him as he dreamily stated the exoticization of members of minority communities, encountered in many places across the world, like the exoticization of the Roma, Native Americans, or Black women in different cultures.

Padman's translation of the field was important for my understanding, but not in the commonly accepted and expected sense. It pointed out the importance of gender with respect to the Narikuravar community, revealing how outsiders see Narikuravar women: both as beauties and beasts. Moreover, as his attitude of dismissal of the Narikuravar woman went unchallenged, and he was able to proceed at will, he revealed as well as reinforced the gendered hierarchy's existence within the Narikuravar community. Women's marginal position, even within their own community, also became visible in this instance when they allowed men to sit in front while they took a place in the back. The gender hierarchy within the Narikuravar community became further visible in the silencing of the woman's voice by others in the community, as well as by my interpreter.

It could be argued that if I knew the local language, I would have understood the woman and prevented this need for interpretation. Knowing the local language, in other words, may "help the researcher to establish trust with people, since it demonstrates both her seriousness about the project (Fujii 2013, 146, citing John Donaldson, personal communication, March 16, 2010) and respect for the people in her research site" (Fujii 2013, citing Devereux 1993, 44). Hence "not speaking the local language would call into question the researcher's professional competency" (Fujii 2013), and working with interpreters is suspect of "produc[ing] low- quality data" (Fujii 2013, 152). However, working with Padman exposed gendered dynamics with and within Narikuravar community, not only through what was spoken, but also through the unspoken, through gestures and body language. In this case, interpreters proved to be constitutive to the researcher project, engaging in a continuous process of co-generation of data (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2015), reenacting dynamics of power, rendering visible 'naturalized' hierarchies.

Without him knowing, my interpreter Padman helped me see power at work. He broke many of the standards of good interpreters, as set by Fujii (2013). For example, she suggests that "a study focused on women, for example, might proceed better with a female rather than male interpreter" (Fujii 2013, 155). Padman was male, and he was eager to exhibit his masculinity, and to reinforce gendered hierarchies of power. However, in doing so he enabled these hierarchies to quickly surface, in a way that captured my eye. Another desired quality, Fujii says, is "the interpreter's ability to give and take directions" (Fujii 2013, 154). Padman was helpful for my understanding of the Narikuravar community, but his effectiveness was not established through his willingness to take instructions, but by his reticence to take instructions from me, a woman. As his attitude to dismiss my request to

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record the Narikuravar woman who was complaining about violence was accepted by the community, it also revealed the "normality" of his behavior, and exposed the position of power he was inhabiting as a male. Moreover, Fujii states that an "equally important quality is the interpreter's ability to put other people at ease" (Fujii 2013, 153). Padman, while elegant and patient, did not put people at ease. He enacted his high caste and his privileged class status. But in doing so, he made clear the inherent hierarchies within Tamil Nadu, and the position that the Narikuravars occupy in the social order. Padman's presence – while often frustrating – immersed me in a new field and focused my attention on details that might otherwise have escaped me.

Granted, Padman was not my only interpreter. He was one of the six people I worked with throughout my years in Tamil Nadu. But his rebellious behavior made my work with him the most difficult one. It also turned out to be the most productive, and creative work I have done, as through his trial of fire I have learnt in a short time more about power, dominance, abuse and silence that I would have learnt if I spoke the language and if I were a Tamilian.

## 6. Conclusion: Epistemology of Power

Throughout my time in India I was always aware of not being Tamilian, of not being a Narikuravar. Because I came by car, had a new phone, and was recording on expensive equipment. I was also made aware by my participants that I was researcher, and that I had a different class position from them. On very many accounts, I was a stranger, a so-called outsider, and this status was constitutive to my work.

Social science scholarship has been deeply concerned with the insider-outsider dichotomy (Kersen, 2016; Gopnik, 2015; Naaeke et al. 2011; Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Mullings 1999; Headland, Pike and Harris, 1990; Becker, 1973; Merton, 1972). Being close, to or even better, belonging to the community is often considered beneficially important in the ethnographic work, and mainly seen as an advantage. Especially in working with marginal populations, scholars have argued that it is better (and that it is also time) that people speak for themselves, and stop being spoken about'. Being an insider is thought to give an in-depth knowledge of the community and its dynamics, but also to break away from the inherent vertical, one-sided power trajectory, which intrinsically leads to producing and reinforcing hierarchies. Belonging to the community would lead to a more equalitarian field of analysis, where participants would not simply occupy the 'object' place in knowledge production. This is hoped to translate into empowering communities and in overcoming marginality.

However, more recent work has argued that being an outsider might have desired benefits in furthering knowledge of communities. Scholars have argued that

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because "two people could interpret the situation differently" (Fuji, 2015), "one of the benefits of doing fieldwork is the chance to see in from the outside (Bucerius 2013, 702). Being new to a place can enable the researcher to observe sense-making in action" (Fujii 2015, 528). In my work with the Narikuravars, being an outsider enabled me to enter in contact with the Narikuravar woman who felt she could come and speak with me directly, given my sudden appearance. My limited time with the community precipitated the events, and she was able to come forward and address the abuse that she was subjected to. This encounter was new to me, and forced me to look into this issue and learn that acts of domestic violence, while frowned upon in Tamil Nadu, were difficult to prosecute by the police. Moreover, Padman's dismissal of the woman' complaint exposed how "homogenic status can lead people to forget that other interpretations are possible" (Fujii 2015, 529). My strangeness to both Tamilian social dynamics and to the Narikuravar community allowed me to explore the gendered power dynamics and understand the limited agency the women in the community have over their bodies, and how their voices were silenced and their discourses dismissed.

Furthermore, the fact that Narikuravar women came to me directly and engaged in gendered manner, defined me as a woman. Their implicit categorization based on gender revealed the importance of gender within the community. The Narikuravar women solidarity based on my gender allowed me to observe "how others type us", and how this "can reveal a great deal about various clues and criteria that people use to categorize others in general" (Fujii 2015, 29).

This example of relationship based on gender challenges the dichotomy of insider/ outsider when conducting fieldwork. Solidarities are based on one's official acceptance in an ethnic community, of knowing the language of the group. But solidarities are also enforced on a shared gender or class. Similarly, solidarities could be based on membership in two different classes, in spite of ethnic, linguistic or geospatial commonalities.

Wiederhold (2015), argues in her work that one could live close by but still be far away:

> I grew up in a rural Ohio town with one stoplight, one school, and only a handful of people who were not working-class white Christians. However, I share a home state with residents of Cleveland, which is a large metropolis 3.5 hours northeast of the one-stoplight town where I grew up. Studying Cleveland, though, is not 'studying home' for me. I would have to look at maps to navigate the city, I am unfamiliar with the localized history and culture and the residents should neither recognized me not my family name. What benefit do I have studying Cleveland over Toledo, Detroit or Pittsburg? There are equally familiar and alien to me. I am an 'insider' insofar as I claim membership to the same region of the same country and share a common

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> language, but with such broad definitions of insider status, the notion of insider or outsider become 'inadequate in an absolute sense'. (Mannay 2010, 92; Wiederhold 2015, 601)

Thus, there is a difference between researchers "who connect with their participants due to general commonalities and those researchers experiencing the specific mutual familiarity of sharing a personal history, a social network, and an assumed placed-based investment in the future of their participants" (Wiederhold 2015, 601). Insider status is not simply granted based on superficial, general commonalties. This became apparent my fieldwork. In my work, I always actively engage my participants, giving them powerful roles. In one instance, I worked with Narikuravar activists in conducting fieldwork within the community on health issues. Three Narikuravars, two men and one woman, were a part of our team of researchers. Following classical theories of insider/outsider dichotomy, it was expected for the Narikuravar activists to produce better, more insightful interviews. But two weeks into their fieldwork they confessed frustration that because they were highly educated (all had master degrees, when working with a mostly illiterate community), and because they now belong to the Indian middle class, they were seen as outsiders and met with disdain by the Narikuravars who otherwise were happy to talk to me and my research assistant, both Europeans. This brought to view that simply belonging to the community, being an insider in this traditional sense, did not obliterate differences, as participants were still able to see through and understand the power hierarchies at work. Furthermore, they did not obliterate power dynamics that empowered the Narikuravar researchers (whom now were gaining money based on their fieldwork) and (re)placed participants in a subaltern position.

If these attempts are doomed to fail, what is for the researcher to do in the face power? I argue that our approach needs to be double-folded: on one hand it needs to be both transparent and reflective (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013), but on the other, it needs to challenge the researcher and place her in powerless positions. In their groundbreaking work, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2013) argue that we need to "make methodological concerns more explicit in a way that is both reflective and illustrative of what interpretative philosophies ad methods have to offer" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013, xiv). This process is not limited in time or space; it could not take place in the research design or at the end of an analysis, but it needs to be continuous, as we need "to study not only what it means, but also how it does" (Yanow 2013, 6); understanding that meaning "is not universal" (Yanow 2013, 9). Thus, we need to continuously reflect on the "situated context of the 'knower' producing it", "because sense making is an historically and socially contextualized process and that the subject of the study is itself historically and socially situated" (Yanow 2013, 10).

Caught within the avalanche of new information that hits us once we enter a new place, it might be difficult to engage in a reflexive practice that would reveal

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the networks of power at work. But this practice has been my safe ground while working in a completely new environment, where I did not know the language, where I was unfamiliar with the basic social mores. We need to understand, as Soni-Sihna argues, "how the intersectional subjective identities are constituted and their interrelationship to the investments in and constitution of collectivities" (Soni-Sihna 2012, 775). And this reflective practice revealed how power worked, and also my role in reinforcing power structures. Without a continuous reflection on my role in the field, on my translator/interpreter's impact on the community, on power as manifested in this context, the data that was generated through this, encounters would have occulted hierarchies and power at work in Tamil Nadu, and within Narikuravar community. I could not avoid the situations I was placed in, and I do not wish I could. While unpleasant at times, they also created a more detailed image of the Narikuravar people whom I met in Tamil Nadu.

Even more discomforting, another step needs to be acknowledged as a part of the learning process. Researchers are in privileged position of power, socially, economically, and at times politically. While there is a dire price to pay for badly conducted research, overall their position is rather secure. It is not the same for participants. In certain situations what they share during interviews could be detrimental to their careers, at times even their freedom or life. Acknowledging this is a part of fieldwork. But to understand marginalized and vulnerable groups, researchers need to make an effort and the step out of their privileged positions, even if for a short period of time. And because any distortions of power balance are short lasted and superficial, with the researcher being able to turn the tables back, she needs to place on the social table something that is precious, in this case the research itself.

The researcher needs to allow the field to emerge and take her along, without control over the conversation, without control over the people interviewed or locations. She needs to dislocate herself and inhabit these powerless positions that participants often encounter. This would not only lead to an increase in empathy towards the field, but could generate more equalitarian data, with participants having control over the narrative, beyond the outsider/ insider dichotomy. Ultimately, reflection and powerlessness would place the researcher on the move, creating different narratives of power.

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