



Confronting Ethnocentrism and Community Expectations in Contemporary Academic Enquiry

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Abstract: This article is a personalised reflection on the complex paradox of academic rigour and social espousal, exploring the interconnected dual roles of a researcher as agents of change and as an impartial participant in a polarised heterogeneous social-political environment. While the academia encourages to locate systemic inequalities, the integrity of such works is founded on scientific neutrality. The central premise of the article is that that ethnocentrism remains primary barrier to objectivity, often leading to lopsided methodologies and biased findings (and presentations) that reflect the cultural lens rather than empirical reality. The article specifically navigates the tension between maintaining academic objectivity and meeting the expectations of the community who demand scholarly validation for their specific grievances and narratives. By comprehending on reflexive methodologies with ethical practices, the article argues for a framework for "engaged neutrality", forwarding the contention that a researcher's role is not to adopt a partisan stance, but to provide a transparent, evidence-based foundation that resists the reproduction of biased academic narrations, thereby facilitating a more informed and equitable discourse.

Keywords: *Facts Versus Emotions; Selective Presentation; Polarised Social Environment; Peacebuilding; Inclusive Research*

1. Introduction

To generalise, much has been researched and written on frontier ethnicities in academics. Re-coursing from what Smith (1999) writes, '...they came, they saw, they claimed... (80), the academics have, with the objective lens, claimed to bring forth the

objective social facts, putting on the academic table for the young scholars (and perhaps the public as well) to digest or emulate or celebrate the findings. Indeed, the general academic research in social sciences advocates and practices the standardised methods so as to maintain neutrality and reduce bias throughout the research process. Indeed, this is true and reflective across the globe; yet, however, there are always subtle anomalies (perhaps, it is not anomaly in those anomaly areas) in the frontiers where, in a crude fashion, the standardised methodology is constructed as '*too mainstream*'. One such anomaly is the Northeast of India, more precisely the hill areas or also somehow viewed as the domains of the indigenous tribes and communities, which is academically characterised by first and second generation scholars and first and second generation research works. Leaving behind the comprehensive documented works left by the colonisers and colonial era anthropologists (or basically colonial administrators), the post-colonial research field in the Northeast region is featured with each community exploring ways and means to assert their identity, narratives and claims: in this exploratory endeavour lies the hidden dynamics wherein the claims and counter-claims as produced by scholars of the region, through their researched ends in the form of articles and books, often clash with the claims and counter-claims of the other community. Indeed, in the decolonising contemporary, even narratives and methodology ought to be decolonised, as a reflexive approach, to bring forth the *insiders* narratives and worldviews that were often missed or neglected when adopting the standard (or what the local researchers term- mainstream or western) methodologies.

To initiate the argument, for this article, the decolonising path taken by the indigenous scholars in Northeast India as a reflexive approach and feministic attempt to bring forth the social facts of the region (or their region, as most scholars in the region by default concentrate their works within their territorial or ethnic conveniences) suffers from ethnocentrism, as much as the colonial anthropologists and *mainstream* researchers suffer from their standardised objective methodologies constructed by them. For example, if the colonial anthropologist, say Hutton (1921), account on the Nagas is riddled with subtle ethnocentrism directed against the *uncivilised* Nagas and describing it from the British point of view to serve the interest of the British (administrators, researchers and audiences), then the contemporary *insiders* research works can be put as their *point of view* to serve the romanticised interest of their community or territory. Concurrent with the process of decolonisation, the local communities in the frontiers of Northeast India also aspires for a decolonised platform where their narratives can be presented and academically approved as the social fact- and for that, the responsibly ethno-conscious scholars of the region engage in

the narrative making adopting selected *mainstream* methodologies to forward their hypothesis and objectives. In this web of academic ethnocentrism in the region, especially in the state of Manipur which is also characterised by polarised communities and narratives, it is the need of the hour in the contemporary to synthesise both objectivity and reflexivity in research if any amicable pathways are envisioned by the academic community towards social harmony and acknowledgement. To further the article's discourse on ethnocentrism, two main themes are discussed: the community expectation and the personal reflexivity.

2. Community Expectations: Dilemma and Challenge

It is natural for every community to aspire for its narratives are documented for visibility and to be heard. In the past, the academic was not much paid attention by the tribal community, mainly due to the colonial legacy. During the colonial period, it was the colonial administrators and related persons who usually make socio-ethnographic accounts of the people; as such, their writings were, as the administrators, revered and interpreted as absolute truth by the people as it gave them visibility and made their narratives and claims penned down by someone in authority.

As the colonial period writings were revered and gave legitimacy to the claims and counter-claims, and also cited widely in the post-colonial period, it was assumed by default by the community that the political administrators and bureaucrats were the right fit for narrative making; rendering the community to not seriously consider the scope of scholars engaging in research. In addition, modern education was in nascent stage; not many had ventured beyond undergraduate degree, although they were exceptions. Accordingly, there was less community expectations with the scholars and academic community.

However, in the last two decades, the academic scenario had evolved, along with the community's attentions. As more individuals from the Northeast India, especially from Manipur state, enter into higher education and research, the communities also began to shift their focus of importance. Individuals entering into research and academic field are suddenly recognised by their respective communities as vital assets and as medium to represent their collective voices. Also, hailing from communities that were often neglected in research and academic writings, scholars are also inclined to shoulder community responsibilities utilising their research skills and knowledge to research, document and write of their communities, as a form of communitarian contributions for social development. There are two dynamics in this matter of community's expectations and researcher/scholars responsibility.

Firstly, every community in Northeast India wants their story to be legitimately heard. The academic scholars and researchers are identified as the right fit, as academic narratives, findings and data are constructed by the local people to be the absolute truth due to their methodological rigour. Accordingly, there is also expectation from the community members that scholars and researchers belonging to their community would not shy away from bringing out the story of their version. There is little understanding among the community members that social science scholars and researchers are not writing stories or the absolute fact; but the zeal for their voices to be heard translates into the expectation that researchers would genuinely hear their stories and document them. This is founded from the colonial research scenario wherein a researcher (during that time the colonial researcher) was believed to be someone with power and authority and the person who can legitimise their claim. Thus, for the community, telling their story has the motive different from the researcher's objectives. Nevertheless, the community expectation also means that a researcher cannot simply ignore their motives, but to incorporate it into by emotive default- *this is for the best of my community*. At the same time, the community expectation also means that researchers often chose a topic or subject that they can research within their community out of convenience with the belief that fieldwork and data collection are easy if it they done within their own community. This puts a question- if the research is conducted on the basis of convenience by default or to explore the social issues through research questions and objectives. Often, it is noticed that the field (the community) dictates the research questions and objectives, making the research process questionable from an objective academic point of view. However, for the community and community loving researcher, this is a minor issue because few research had been done on the community and thus they would be encouraged nevertheless to engage with the research in the hope that the findings would contribute to the academic library and a document on the community would exists. As such, for the community, it is the perfect opportunity to make use of researchers from their community and put their voices into writings and thus, make their presence in academics. After all, academic audiences to their voices could amplify their causes and grievances, which otherwise might not be possible through other means like media.

Secondly, the polarised socio-political scenario in Northeast India and Manipur in particular, means that every voices and writings of the voices matter and they need maximum and legitimate audience. Every community has their own version of the story, their own grievances, their own point of view and their own objectives. These elements could be addressed by the media, but for the people, the channel of media is not enough. They believe

that researchers can do much more than media. If a researcher produces the voices of the people through research, that product has more value than the same via the channel of media. Moreover, in a society which is defined by kinship bonds and social responsibility and strict social hierarchies based on tradition, it becomes impossible for an individual researcher to go against the community wish. One is expected to uphold the image, legitimacy and honour of the community or face dire consequences in the form of social boycotts and disciplinary actions. No researcher wants to offend his or her community. Thus, writing for the community becomes the default exercise, which could further polarise the already polarised communities. Besides, being ethnocentric, despite the expectation to remain academically neutral on ethical grounds, a researcher also produces a work that is characterised by ethnocentrism. These multitudes of ethnocentric academic writings serves only the purpose of the community, but not the academic integrity, and it only culminates into a library of misunderstandings, hypostatised documents representing the image of the community and, most importantly, lag in critical thinking and analysis among the researchers, with the potential to only sustained the polarised environment rather than fostering understanding and mutual-cooperation.

In a way, community expectations contributes to the erosion of academic confidence in Northeast India, resulting in the production of ethnocentric (either harmless or motive based) writings and documents. Of course, these documents are essential window to understand the particular community's narratives; but, where does one draw the line between objectivity and subjectively laden literature? The crucial question dilemma is that, the Northeast India is not a homogenous social space, but rather a heterogeneous social environment. This multiculturalism is both a boon and a blessing for researchers: to put short, the boon of multiculturalism is also the bane, as communities often contest over narratives and legitimacies. These contestations are brought or forced into the academics, which indeed add to the debate environment in academics, but at the same time the community expectations also translates into scholars and researchers taking the ethnocentric side wherein- *my version of story is the truth and the other is false*.

The community expectations also further shapes how an individual searches and analyses the data. Often data are manipulated or analysed selectively to fit the objectives and questions (that were already defined by the ethnocentric aspirations), which further bring down to the question of authenticity in the reported data. Data that may legitimise one community's claims could be offensive to the other community: for this scenario, community tug of wars do not only remain within the social world and it enters into the academic where

researchers defend their communities they belong to and criticise the others instead of researchers contemplating on engaging in constructive debate if they could be missing. Thus, unless the community expectation is scrutinised rigorously, the contemporary research works are questionably dangerous and academically useless for not upholding objectivity and neutrality.

To reflect and connect to the larger academic realities of – not encouraging to study one's own community- it is crucial for researchers and scholars from Northeast India to evaluate the ethnocentrism in them and as well as question the philosophy and methodology they are to adopt. When the academic reality is discouraging one to research their own community, adopting ethnocentric methodologies serves only the purpose of their community and the mainstream academic's stands against '*self study*', much against the expense of the researcher. For the matter, scrutinising community expectations would pave the way for a holistic approach and presentation as well as foster collaboration to strengthen the pathways towards the study of the self or own culture/people. Since the researchers and scholars of the region, and the people included, are not satisfied with an outsider *researcher* researching, then the research they engage on should not be characterised by ethnocentrism if holistic ends has to be produced. Since the writings of the outsiders are often biased and lagging due to lack of comprehensive knowledge of the region or people they are studying, the insider researcher has the academic responsibility to produce a comprehensive research based literature capturing the actual social realities: not the ethnocentric hypostasised literature that serves none but the community.

3. Navigating Research with Reflexive Approach

Circumventing the path towards an inclusive research is essentially one of the most important elements in building a rigorously critical academic document and objectively significant findings. Starting a reflexive journey in the environment of intense community expectation and pressure is something a researcher from Manipur needs to reflect upon. Of course, it does not mean that every researcher encounters the same pressure; while a good many may engage in researching their community, others might opt to engage in research within the psychological imprinted default shaped by the community's sense of responsibility. Anyways, the task of employing reflexivity is of utmost importance, as Gouldner (1970) argued for it in the light of contemporary crisis of Sociology being ultra methodical and of no practical usage for the society. Building upon Gouldner's arguments for reflexivity and putting into context, it can be stated that social research in Northeast India and

Manipur need to evolve from the existing communitarian's utilitarian methodology to critical enquiry. The challenges have been identified in the previous section, which can be treated as the present crisis in the field of research.

To be reflexive in this context means for the researcher to recognise the existing default psychological environment and subtle ethnocentrism. Indeed, it is through this acknowledgement of the existing subtle-ism ethnocentrism that one may be able to question and question the answers in the form of field data. Perhaps, the reflexive path may not be conveniently easy, especially because of the strong community norms, traditions and customs that usually entertains research works for its utilitarian purposes. In this backdrop, an insider researcher may reflect upon its positionality of dilemma - if the purpose of the research for the benefit of the society or to contribute towards academic knowledge building or both. It is not to say that working for the community, when in the community, results in biased data, but neutrality is default compromised.

Some elements to consideration in this reflexive research navigation are,

- i. Data are rarely neutral when researching one's own community. Data is either exaggerated to compose the best narrative at the utilitarian interest of the community or is mis-constructed through selective reporting ignoring what is not in the best interest of the community.
- ii. Each narrative from the field cannot be interpreted as absolute facts; close analysis from Freeman,s (1983) arguments against Margaret Mead reveals that narratives from the field participants can be exaggerated statements or casual statement of jokes. Freeman and Mead may not be unrelated in the context of Northeast, but the debate reveals that data from field need to be handled cautiously to avoid the risk of treating non-fact as fact in the haste to produce a narrative welcomed by the readers and communities or the risk of ignoring subtle signs of exaggeration due to ethnocentric defaulting.
- iii. There are always multiple versions of narratives; each narrative has to be considered for commutative data and then critically analysed to find out patterns and themes for further synthesis and deliberation. For inclusive data, one ought to step beyond the subtle ethnocentric boundaries and methodology by making the means and ends of data open for inclusion and further question. Concentrating oneself within a defined field limits the data to be holistic and restricts critical data to be disseminated in the future for reference and for reflections.

- iv. Incorporating epistemic humility is another vital element to navigate the ethnocentrism. This would require the researcher to deconstruct the default assumption that their point of views provides superior vantage. The field should be constructed as co-producers of knowledge rather than the data for preconceived theories, thereby allowing creation of intellectual space necessary to listen to the authentic voices instead of bias echoes. This humility fosters shifting from hegemonic data extraction to a respectful dialogue and thus ensuring that the findings reflect the field and the subject in inclusive manner (Persaud 2019).

4. Concluding Discussion: Engaged Neutrality

In the volatile social environment of Northeast India, especially Manipur state, where ethnic polarity is the everyday reality, engaged neutrality serves as a vital methodological pathway to navigate against the currents of ethnocentrism. Traditional methodology often ignores the historical grievances and power imbalances that characterise local identities (Smith 1999). Here, engaged neutrality demands that the researcher is immersed holistically in the field while maintaining a reflexive distance that prevents the researcher from being burdened by ethno-expectations favouring a narrative over another. Thus, in a region where data can be *weaponised* to strengthen territorial claims, ethnic superiority or stereotypes, engaged neutrality ensures that field narratives are not at the expense over each other; through the employment of methodologically disciplined and neutrally critical engagement can the researcher be able to explore and bring out the nuances of the community without imposing the framework of hypostatised ethno-romanticism.

In addition, with the potentials of research data to fuel or sustain ethnic tensions, engaged neutrality should be accompanied by a sense of non-ethnocentric ethical responsibility. Ethnocentrism in this context usually manifest as an attempt to categorise fluid narratives into rigid declarations that could further exacerbate tensions. Engaging neutrally ensures that the researcher, especially the *emic* or insider, treat every narratives with equal epistemic *cruciality* and resist the urge to arbitrate historically shaped disputes. This transparency prevents research data from becoming tools of propaganda. In the end, adopting engaged neutrality to navigate the ethnocentric social environment ensures that findings, and what is presented, reflect the intricate mosaic of the region over skewed projections that could fuel communal discord.

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