

Negotiating Rapport and Shades of Participant Observation: Notes from Fieldwork in Jaunsar-Bawar

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Abstract: The paper tries to examine fieldwork based research strategy, especially focusing upon intricacies involved in establishment of rapport which involves highly complex negotiative interactions carefully calibrated by the anthropologist. Based on doctoral fieldwork of the author, it examines rapport establishment as systematic exploitation of the opportunities and breakthroughs that keep cropping up before the anthropologist during proactive interactions in the field. It is surmised that there can never be any codified prescription for the rapport establishment which can be seen largely as friendly interactions carefully maneuvered and steered by anthropologists for enhancing the quantity and quality of the data.

Key words : Participant observation, fieldwork, rapport, Jaunsar Bawar

Anthropological Fieldwork

According to Powdermaker, “Anthropological fieldwork has been characterized by the prolonged residence of the investigator, his participation in and observation of the society, and his attempt to understand the inside view of the native people and to achieve the holistic view of a social scientist..” (Powdermaker, 1969:418). While this definition broadly outlines the context of anthropological fieldwork, for any neophyte anthropologist fieldwork entails walking through the labyrinthic pathways negotiating unique situations which will emerge in the field from time to time. The dilemma of a typical anthropologist seeking advice for a good fieldwork was aptly summarized by Evans-Pritchard as follows:

I first sought advice from Westermarck. All I got from him was “don’t converse with an informant for more than twenty minutes because if you are not bored by that time he will be”. Very good advice, even if somewhat inadequate. I sought instructions from Haddon, a man fore-most in field-research. He told me that it was really all quite simple; one should always behave as a gentleman. Also very good advice. My teacher Seligman told me to take “ten grains of quinine every night and to keep off women”. The famous Egyptologist, Sir Flinders Petrie just told me not to bother about drinking dirty water as one soon become immune to it. Finally I asked Malinowski and was told just to remember not to be a bloody fool. (Evans-Pritchard, 1973:1)

The dilemma of Evans-Pritchard is every anthropologist’s dilemma. You can never predict what situation an anthropologist will be in and what should be the best way to deal with a typical adverse field situation? Besides broad advice such as being given by Haddon that one should be a gentleman there is not much that can go as good advice. Even being a gentleman, at times may

not prove to be the right advice as was true with Napoleon Chagnon who would have become a pauper had he remained a gentleman among the Yanomamos. Therefore, anthropological fieldwork as a data collection strategy is inimitable and context driven. As against the linear informant-information-researcher mechanism of data gathering, the experience based anthropological fieldwork involves complex maneuvering by the researcher where data gathering becomes cumulative endeavor something akin to absorption action of a sponge. While maintaining the focus in research, the anthropologist is never oblivious to what is happening around. The holistic framework in field research implies that episodes and events are always integrated and therefore anything happening in the field is important. The ever presence of anthropologist in the field exposes an anthropologist to the 'imponderabilia of actual life'. Fieldwork thus implies driving amidst the forest of information from outskirts to the deeper and dense areas of ones topic of study. It further involves investment of emotional capital which is necessary in maintaining friendly relations.

An anthropologist in the field is like an omnipresent entity. Active fieldwork entails active presence of anthropologist in the field. Fieldwork thus involves intimate, personalized and emotional interaction with the people and at the same time it is a rigorous scientific endeavor. An anthropologist in the fieldwork is constantly struggling to make concerted efforts so that the flow of required information is not hindered. In fact, the major difference between a good and a not so good anthropological fieldwork lies in how the anthropologist was able to handle opportunities and challenges that keep cropping up constantly in the journey of fieldwork based research.

The 'field' in fieldwork is not merely a place; for an anthropologist, it is no less than a battleground where, the anthropologist is required to steer the flow of information as a master strategist and consciously manage impression in order to conduct a successful fieldwork. The expression 'immersing in the field' implies deliberate attempt by the anthropologist in making efforts in 'going native'. It means the change in attire, etiquettes, habits, mannerism, speech, food habits and sundry other behaviors helping an anthropologist in camouflaging in the local culture. Here the expression camouflaging is not used in the sense of being deceitful and secretive but as an act of mingling and dissolving in the culture. To an outsider, a typical anthropologist, in the context of the 'other culture' may look like a specially privileged guest who is friendly to many and enemy of none. The over indulgence on part of anthropologist in meeting and greeting people, in showing extra concern about the well being of the people are deliberate attempts in good rapport building. As a good listener, the anthropologist knows much more than any single individual; becoming storehouse of confidential and the other information of the community.

Establishment of good rapport is the most essential part of any anthropological fieldwork. However, rapport is a very complex state of existence

and it is affected by myriad factors such as the gender, age, social status, purpose of research, reference person, attire, accent and sundry other traits that people identify with the researcher. The rapport is also a function of how the researcher is talked about in the field setting. In a typical 'other culture' setting, an anthropologist is not only an outsider living alongside but also a wanted intruder constantly asking for access to the social and cultural milieu with a purpose of making recording of the social interactions. However, the fieldwork based information gathering is not a one-way affair. People are equally interested in knowing intimate details of the anthropologist as well. Thus anthropologist in the field situation is someone who is subjected to critical assessment by the people, who try to understand the purpose and intention of anthropologist out of the activities that an anthropologist is indulging in. For the lay people, it is not so easy to bracket anthropologist into an occupational category as what anthropologist does will not generally fit into a known category, especially if the field has not been visited by an anthropologist before.

The Khos Fieldwork

My doctoral fieldwork (Joshi, 1985) among the Khos of Jaunsar-Bawar was no less a challenge to me in management of impression and continuous building of the rapport. My choice of Khos as a field site for the doctorate arose because of my prior exposure during undergraduate and M.Phil. fieldwork. However, the earlier fieldworks were for smaller duration and not very intensive. I was reminded of D.N. Majumdar's expression that a good fieldwork involved being in the field for a longer duration. Majumdar (1962) had stated, "A stay of one or two weeks in Chakrata is not enough to enable any one to understand the intricate social structure of an ancient people, living a quaint life, and practicing a curious mixture of monogamy, polyandry and polygyny" (p. ix). Majumdar had conducted a legendary fieldwork in this area as is clear from many books and articles that came out of his pen. However, Majumdar's fieldwork was not concentrated in any one area and his ideas and writings were based on fieldwork done in various places across the length and breadth of Jaunsar-Bawar. In fact, Majumdar would pay annual visits to Jaunsar-Bawar during summer vacations exploring different aspects of these polyandrous people. He did it for more than two decades.

D.N. Majumdar's ethnography of the Khasa is therefore a summation of socio-cultural features collected not only at different places but also at different times. For example, in his well known book 'Himalayan Polyandry' the data had been collected from three villages from Jaunsar and Bawar. Thus D. N. Majumdar's ethnography was extensive but not intensive. For example, D. N. Majumdar has not mentioned at any place that he was well versed in the local dialect. Perhaps, he did not know Jaunsari language. This extensive study of Majumdar had almost covered all the villages of Jaunsar-Bawar for twenty two long years and had the total span of four years and eleven months; still if

he was not able to converse fluently in the local dialect which keeps on changing from one area to another; his field insight would rather be truncated.

Choosing the Field Site

Although I had some idea of the field area as I had been to different places in Jaunsar-Bawar, I decided to explore the most appropriate village for my doctoral work as I had to stay there for a longer duration and for intensive fieldwork. Furthermore, I needed to select a village which should have been moderately large, multi caste in composition and had medical pluralistic character. There were five such villages where I tentatively planned to pursue my research. I was very careful in searching for a village where I get full cooperation from the people. For selecting the village, I spent nearly five days in the town talking to different kinds of people. This time was also utilized in collecting official records pertaining to medical facilities and utilization besides information on development related activities. Many persons suggested that I work in Silgaon, which had a state Allopathic dispensary, multi caste population and different kinds of healers. Another attractive feature of this village was that it was on the road side, just 30 kilometers away from the Chakrata town. Finally, it was almost in the midway between Jaunsar and Bawar which represented two subcultures.

Luckily, the Pradhan elected head of this village also paid a visit to the town and the Primary Health Centre In-charge was kind enough to introduce me to him. In this brief meeting, though, I was able to give only a very rough idea regarding my research purpose, I was greatly impressed by the readiness of the Pradhan in welcoming me to his village. With his status as Pradhan and due to his frequent encounters with the outside world, he could understand the purpose of my research and so invited me to come to his village. While choosing the village for the study was not much of a problem, getting entry into the village was not as easy as the Pradhan headman of the village was mostly out of the village visiting offices and cities for various political and business purposes. I had to start from the periphery. I initially camped in the saw mill which was located way outside the village. One relative of the Pradhan was working in the saw mill. He became my initial contact and it was through him that I was slowly introduced to the villagers. Thus my actual entry to the village took nearly a fortnight and the rapport building was not a sudden one shot affair but it was carefully guided and slow process.

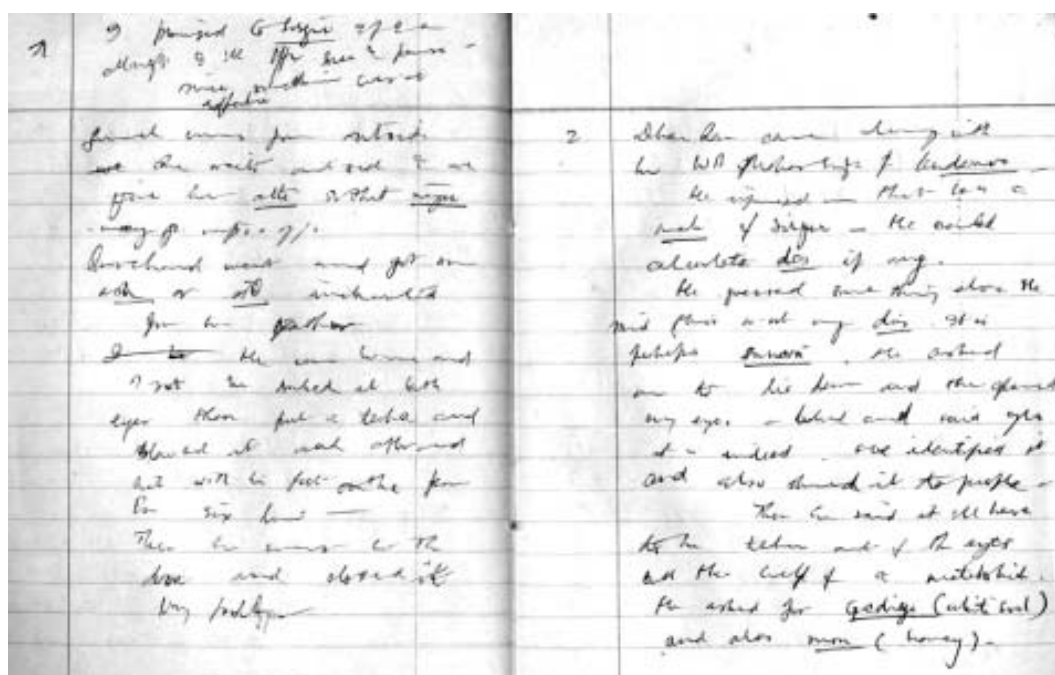
The present fieldwork was conducted in the early nineteen eighties. It was a time when Morris Frielich's 'Marginal Natives' was available and anthropologists were grappling with the question of the 'extent of participation'. The ideas such as reflexivity, author's position, informed consent, ethical concerns and sundry other contemporary necessities were not present at that time. Even Malinowski's diaries had not yet reached Indian libraries. In the beginning of the fieldwork, I was confining myself to the peripheral or marginal section of the village. The people working in the saw mill (all except one of

them had come from outside, mainly Himachal Pradesh). The younger brother of the village Pradhan headman was managing the mill for all purposes and he was also the branch post master of the village. Besides him, I was also interacting with the In-charge of the health sub-centre of the village. He was a pharmacist hailing from neighboring Garhwal region. There was one school teacher who hailed from Dehradun but had married locally. All of these were the gate keepers providing me initial information. The villagers were extremely busy people whom I would see going and coming from the fields at different times. My interviews were mainly confined to the people who were either frequently going outside or had links outside. As I was working on the topic of indigenous health seeking, I was quite depressed on learning that people mostly consult doctors trained in biomedicine and have almost abandoned traditional system of medicines. Some would go to the extent of saying that the indigenous medicines have now become ineffective due to pollution and contamination. I then chanced upon a *baman* priest-cum-healer who was the brother-in-law of the teacher hailing from Dehradun.

In the initial period of my fieldwork, I was perceived as someone interested in learning about the local culture but generally I was given information as they deem it fit for an outsider. Perhaps people were afraid that if they give details on their peculiar beliefs and practices, I may laugh at it and make fun among 'my people'. They were particularly sensitive to the practice of polyandry which they thought is being made fun of in the outside world. In the similar vain, they thought of shamanistic and magico-religious practices as being weird not to be disclosed to the outsiders. They were not wrong in thinking in this manner and have some idea regarding how the people in the cities talk about them. I had quite often heard people in Dehradun district headquarter warning me that I should be careful in Jaunsar-Bawar as they were expert in magical practices and particularly their women folks were expert in magically changing outsiders into he-goat and ram.

Against the backdrop of villagers being suspicious of outsiders, especially if they want to know about intricacies of local culture, establishment of rapport and gaining of trust were very strenuous tasks. My approach, in such a scenario, was to flow along with the available opportunities. If someone visited the village health centre, I would ask what had happened and what actions were undertaken. I was more interested in noting down the information given to me voluntarily rather than proactively. It was during my initial days that I was invited to a play being enacted in the neighboring village. This play called "Roop Basant" was being enacted on a story being taken in from the plains. The props, dialogues, attires, music and all other properties used in the play were hired from the city. The direction to the play was being given by a teacher hailing from Dehradun plains. In all, it was a play organized by the outsiders for the villagers. I was asked to be the chief guest in this play. My choice as a chief guest was perhaps a befitting choice as I was identified as an 'outsider'.

Accompanied by few youths from Silgaon, I went to see the play. It was after returning from this play that I got the first opportunity to indulge in participant observation and intimate rapport building. I am describing the whole incidence from my field jotting diary. Given below is the transcription of the two pages of my jotting diary (see Figure 1):



I promised to Silgur if I am alright I'll offer rice & paisa – since medicine was not effective female comes from outside she waits and stands and we give her *atta* (flour) so that *najar* (evil-eye) may wipe off.

Name went and got some ash or oil enchanted from his father. He come back and I got it rubbed at both eyes then put a teeka and blowed it and other with his foot on the floor. For six times —. Then he went to the door and closed it very forcefully.

Name came along with his WB *name* of *name*. he informed me that he is a *mali* (diviner) of Silgur – He would calculate *dos* (supernatural cause) if any.

He guessed something else. He said that this is not any *dos*. It is perhaps *sunnava*. He asked me to lie down and then opened my eyes – looked and said yes it is indeed. He identified it and also showed it to people –.

Then he said it 'll have to be taken out of the eyes with the help of a matchstick. He asked for *Godiya* (white soil) and also *mon* (honey).

The Incident

It was fourth of August, a pleasant summer morning of the majestic and splendid Chakrata hills. I did not sleep the previous night. The reason being – I had witnessed a play organized in the neighboring village. I, along with my village mates had arrived early in the morning. My village friends had straight away attended to their domestic and agricultural chores while I decided to get a good night sleep, though it was morning.

I had hardly dosed off that I heard a knock at my door. A Bajgi musician woman was asking for my permission to take away their rages stacked in my room. A *dhiyanti* village daughter, she had come to her natal village for attending a festival. I allowed her to do so but felt intense itching in my eyes. Thinking it to be due to dust particles, I used the commonsense childhood technique of rolling upper eyelids gently over the lower ones. Contrary to any relief, it made my eyes completely locked. It was a terrible experience, of temporary blindness – the world was dark around me. I could only hear mothers calling their children, greeting calls and ululations. I got up from my bed and realized that the more I try to fiddle with the eyes the more intense the pain becomes. I therefore left all efforts and for the first time in my life realized the agony of being in a village away from amenities. I was baffled since I had not known of such a state ever in my life. For a moment I thought that I was going to be blind. The mere thought of it made me shiver.

I had two options left to me. Either I wait for few hours and catch the first vehicle going towards the town. In this case, I needed to take somebody with me as an escort. The other option was to gear the traditional knowledge into action and see what it does. It took me quite a while to decide and I finally chose the second option as I wanted to learn and first hand experience the journey of therapy.

Although I was participating in the day to day life of the village, it was the first opportunity for me to get the glimpses of participant observation where the participation was centered on me, the anthropologist. I think such opportunities appear quite rarely in the field. Of course, there was great risk, in choosing to be a guinea pig but the insightful returns were immense. Since I had not studied any case of in-depth health seeking behaviour so far, enacting a sick role would have definitely enriched my knowledge on this subject. I became eager to adopt a sick role which was not difficult to adopt as I was in a dramatically pathetic condition. Furthermore, it was a festive day and most of the people had remained stationed at home and some of them had even invited their relative to celebrate the festival, so gathering of a therapy management group would be very convenient.

Knocking against few things on my way to the door, I managed to reach it and called out loudly for help. Fortunately, a kid heard me. I asked him to go to my landlord and call someone immediately. A boy from their house came to see me a few moments later. I told him that I had severe pain in my eyes and

was unable to see anything. He, at once, said that his brother's spouse has an expertise in taking out dust from the eyes, which he logically thought had troubled me.

He went back and came along with his elder brother, a little later. The cause of something entering the eyes was dropped altogether. My hunch is that as I was an outsider, the woman being a *ronti* village daughter-in-law, her coming to help me was not a dignified thing and therefore it as a cause was abandoned. His brother came up with a new diagnosis and suggested that I had 'hot' trouble. He had accompanied me to the play last night. He said that he had himself felt itching after remaining awake all night. His etiology was that the 'hot' had entered eyes because of excessive strain caused to them. He suggested a humoral remedial action involving of treating 'hot' with its opposite humor – the 'cold'. A glass of sugar water ('cold' in quality) was prepared and was given to me to drink. A few drops were also applied over my eyelids. It indeed resulted in cold sensation and lessened the intensity of the pain. My eyes also released some water. The relief however was momentary. This remedial action was again repeated and I was informed that it will take nearly half an hour to completely neutralize the effect of 'hot'. But nothing happened in spite of repeating this remedy many times and I was back to where it had all began.

Apart from self medication efforts of mine and abortive second cause, the first remedial action was already taken resulting in a failure. I had taken a position to surrender myself to the actions and explanations of the village people without giving any of my own opinion. The sick role actually allowed me to act like that. I was confining myself only to express my pain and agony in a realistic manner and tell people if they had any question regarding my symptoms or behaviour prior to getting the pain in the eye. The first diagnosis 'hot' got dismissed.

News spread around and the local Community Health Worker, a close friend of mine, came to my room with Sulfonamide drops. He poured few drops in my eyes and I was asked by him to calmly lie down. A small crowd had gathered by now but as it was a festival day and my friends had to complete their routine works, they left promising to come back soon.

After an hour or so, the Allopathic Sub-Centre pharmacist came to see me. By that time, my eyes had swollen very badly. On examining me, he announced a new cause – 'hot-cold'. He regretted that he could not provide me the Boric (Boric Acid) powder as it was out of stock. He, however, suggested that I constantly wash my eyes with lukewarm water. He was also kind enough to boil some water for me with which he washed my eyes very delicately. When nothing happened, he also nodded his head in bewilderment and left. On my own, I took some sugar in cold water that again gave me a momentary relief.

So far, we were confining ourselves to the causative domain of *bimari* considered to be caused due to natural agencies like the humour. As a person

hailing from urban area, I was considered as unlikely person to have fallen to a *dos* supernatural cause. However, I was not immune to the supernatural cause, as I learnt a little later.

The Community Health Worker came again with two youngsters. On learning that earlier interventions had failed, they discussed afresh. The entire incidence was re-heard and re-analyzed. While I was reporting about my return from the neighboring village, I was stopped in the middle of my narration. It was inferred that I had crossed the abode of *succi matri* – the ‘pure and high’ invisible fairies on my way which perhaps was the cause of my present trouble. The cause of my trouble has clearly shifted to supernatural cause *dos* now. Taking this as the new cause of my trouble, an instant remedial action was proposed. The remedial action consisted of ameliorating *succi matri* effect through supplication consisting of symbolic offerings and a vow. I was required to propitiate *succi matri* upon getting relief from the present ailment only. Such a vow becomes invalid, I was told, if there is no immediate relief, saving on the burden of elaborate ritual.

When this vow could not alter my trouble, the *succi matri* interference as a cause was automatically dropped. My illness episode was again probed. It gave them another clue. This time, the entrance of Bajgi musician female was reckoned as a cause. It was explained to me that when people come from outside, there is a chance that they may carry with them the ‘evil-eye’ which can be easily transferred to an innocent person. Since, the Bajgi woman had come from outside, she was now held as the potential carrier of the ‘evil-eye’. I was further informed that women in particular are easy containers of such evil-effects, though; it is also inherent in some of them. It was therefore customary for the guests to stay outside the entrance and enter only after wheat flour called *bhunda* is thrown in all directions – an action which is supposed to ward off the adverse effects of the ‘evil-eye’ in particular. Although in general cases, the ‘evil-eye’ effect is manifested through itching all over the body (allergic reaction), my specific case could also be enveloped into it as I was having itching in my eyes, it was explained.

For ‘evil-eye’ treatment I was advised to take help of the Silgur deity which was considered to be most appropriate in warding-off the ‘evil-eye’. I was simply asked to request Silgur and promise proper supplication if I feel relieved. Had I felt better, I was required to offer rice grains and a coin to the Silgur the next day empty stomach. I did accordingly but the itching in the eyes remained. It was paining but frankly speaking, I was now enjoying the decision making of the therapy management group.

‘Evil-eye’ was not abandoned so easily. I was told that an old man of the village had expertise in enchanting ash for ‘evil-eye’. It was quickly sought and the treatment action was made. In this intervention, ash was gently rubbed on my right eye first followed by the left and of making a tick mark at the forehead and finally of going at the entrance of the house and blowing the ash

out with a loud sound – ‘ho’. It was a ‘brush and blow’ act to ‘drive out’ the ‘evil-eye’. The action was repeated six times and at the end, the door was also closed with a bang. Nothing happened.

The news that the person who has come from Delhi is having problem was fast spreading around in the village. While two of my companions (who had accompanied me to the play last night) were constantly there, others were coming and going. Perhaps they were also spreading the news of my trouble. My sickness was becoming topic of general discussion in the village as owing to festival day many guests had arrived in the village. However, my landlord showed primary responsibility in my treatment. It was his family members who were taking one after another action in providing me the relief from my itching.

Everyone was perplexed. A little while later, one senior adult from my landlord’s family entered my room accompanied by his relative who had come from outside. This relative of him was a practicing diviner of Silgur. I was assured that a *dos* will be easily revealed to him. The incidence was probed again. On learning of the circumstances related to my eye itching, he at once announced that there seems to be no *dos* to me. If there was no *dos* then my trouble must fall in the broad category of *bimari* (natural cause of illness). He took charge of me.

He asked me to lie down. Gently pushing my eyelids up and down, he carefully looked inside. He came out with a new diagnosis – *sunnay ro bossi*, which laterally meant – ‘sitting of the gossamer’ in the eyes. According to him, the gossamer must have entered my eyes while I was sleeping as my bed was near the window. Confidently sure of it, he showed it to others for approval.

The taking out of gossamer was a very delicate operation. White clay and wild honey were the main ingredients in my treatment. They were so confident of the treatment that inspite of unhygienic preparations, I agreed to go for it. First, a few drops of white clay solution were poured inside the eyes. The solution was used as writing medium by school children as also for painting the ceiling. I was informed that the solution would collect gossamer at one place. My eyelids were then forced open and I was asked to look in different directions. Then my head was tilted to the sides. Sometimes later, the eyes were examined. Everyone saw that the gossamer had clotted together. It was taken out with the help of a cotton tipped matchstick.

The treatment action was repeated several times. My itchiness had subdued considerably but the pain was still there. A few drops of wild honey were poured into eyes. I was told that the honey would heal the bruise caused by the poisonous gossamer. I closed my eyes and lied down. After nearly fifteen minutes some more dirt was taken out and I was told that my eyes had become free of the gossamer.

There was perceptible change in the way people were behaving with me after this incident. I was able to feel that the people, who had spent time with

me during my sickness, had come closer to me. This brings me to the point whether rapport establishment is a matter of time or if more the time we spent in the field better will be the rapport? I think rapport establishment is not dependent upon quantity but quality of interaction. The incident had done two important things. One was my suffering which brought natural sympathy towards me making people more receptive to my enquiries. Secondly, my commitment and adherence to local natural and supernatural agencies during my illness made them realize that I may not be the one of those outsiders who would make fun of their beliefs and practices. Thirdly, I was becoming much more knowledgeable about the health seeking behaviour. My case made it amply clear why people abandon one cause and switch over to another? I learnt that traditional medicinal practices are not blindly followed. People stick to a cause only if it is empirically valid. Of the myriad causes attributed to my sickness, those causes were easily abandoned which were not proven on empirical ground. Finally, it was the diviner of Silgur, a supernatural healer, who identified my cause to be *bimari* which falls in the domain of natural causation (Joshi, 1988). It clearly indicates that people are rational in their decisions and give due cognizance to empirically verifiable actions

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