

Assessing Anti-Poverty Schemes: Sociological Narratives from the Research Field

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Abstract

The narratives constitute a set of social realities we experience in day-to-day situations. The narratives from the research field become part of the biographies and autobiographies of the researchers and respondents. The baggage of these biographies and autobiographies explores the untraced facets of social reality and also shapes the viable 'positions', the perspectives, and the methodologies of the researchers. The author used the narrative collected between 2001 to 2010, from the field, studying The EGS and the SGRY, the two anti-poverty schemes implemented in Nashik district, and grasped the meaningful essence of the qualitative, reflexive data, insights that explored the other part of the social reality.

Keywords: Sociological autobiographies, narratives, sociological imagination, reflexivity, implementation of anti-poverty schemes

Introduction:

This paper attempts to explore the interface between the narratives of life (the personal) and field narratives of 'the social'. The arguments are supported with the autobiographical stories based on my journey of doing sociology. I have gathered many of such narratives/stories being a teacher, researcher, and activist. These stories are studied and analyzed from the research field of Anti-Poverty Schemes implemented in Nashik district. My research focus was to study the implementation and performance of EGS and the SGRY, the two anti-poverty schemes implemented in the Nashik district. The employment Guarantee Scheme in Maharashtra is one the most effective and pioneering poverty reduction programmes through employment

generation, started in 1972. In September 1974 Maharashtra government resolution recognized the "right to work" and EGS was settled as a regular scheme. Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojna (SGRY), the central government-controlled scheme that began on 25th September 2001 was the largest wage employment Scheme of India. Being wage-based anti-poverty schemes, both have many similarities. SGRY had scope for democratic participation of the rural masses through the levels of Panchayat institutions that stand out from the EGS. The EGS, however, was a Maharashtra level scheme having no or little participation but the aspect of guarantee of employment and demand-driven nature of the EGS was its unique feature.

The personal narratives constitute a set of social realities we experience in day-to-day situations. They manifest two realms of life, the 'personal' and the 'social'.ⁱ We keep interested in 'the social' from 'personal'. Becoming a critical sociology practitioner necessitates insight into the construction of selfhood and the social around us.ⁱⁱ Autobiographical and biographical stories in this context become an intensely practical dimension of teaching-learning and research. It makes students, teachers and researchers separate the construction of their selfhood concerning larger social structures around and the one they are going to study. It may empower the sociology practitioners to engage in critical thinking and critical action by relating their own life with the lives of others.ⁱⁱⁱ

This will also help to show various alternatives to a traditional positivist or objectivity-oriented researches where depersonalization could be avoided if required and sociological imagination could be employed at its best.

The narratives based on autobiographies and biographies can be seen as -

- a part of the context of the collective histories
- a piece of individual real-life experience of the social
- indicators showing the time and space context of the experience
- a methodological tools
- a pedagogical tools
- reflexive, spontaneous reactions

- a means of self-critique
- a guide for action (if necessary)
- a model to develop a set of ideas based on the experiences
- ways to explore socio-cultural texts and context

However, biographical narrative-based research does have several problems. Common people like stories but their interest in sociological stories varies from their content. Stories of migration, violence, movements, and disasters do have interesting elements for the commons but the stories of caste, gender, family, poverty, policy, governance-related issues are not so appealing.

One has to understand that the stories based on structural issues are different from the ones based on personal problems or troubles and are more useful for sociological study.^{iv} A sort of representativeness comes in the stories linked with the issues of wider collectivities. We need to relate it with Mills who has given the example of marriage. “Consider marriage. Inside a marriage, a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.” (Mills: 2000:9)

Writing a sociological autobiography needs to put your individual life experience from a wider perspective, in consideration of historical and contextual situations. For example analyze your experience in consideration with the broader structural elements like culture, race, religion, gender, class, caste, and the like that have impacted events in your life and you can also see how they are time-framed. We also need to resonate across the experiences of ourselves or of any other respondents to the larger set of experiences of the others.

The Sociological Imagination, as John Brewer (2004:14), writes, “was not Mills’s first attempt to chart the nature, scope, and aims of the discipline, although it is his best known. The purpose of this section is to explore some of Mills’s earlier programmatic statements for their biographical referent. This involves further attention to Mills’s autobiographical narratives. It is an additional demonstration of Mills’s capacity to render the private into the public and to turn

personal travails into sociological writings, something that made ‘The Sociological Imagination’ so compelling. The shift in the methodology towards qualitative alternatives is visible.^v This led to building experiential sociology. Biographical-narrative methods, with their long and diverse genealogy, provide a sophisticated stock of interpretive procedures for relating the ‘personal’ and the ‘social’.

Narratives from the field

The respondents from the field often tend to tell the narratives, stories exaggeratedly with plenty of demands, expectations, dissatisfaction, and complaints. Many of the storytellers from the field, especially from the villages, believed that the researcher is a government employee and would satisfy their demands.

The issue is how to identify those exaggerations and lies underneath and get the real crux of it. This is difficult but still can be practicable after some verification.

The narratives from the field are full of meaning out of their lives in context with the socio-cultural conditions and time frame to situate the social reality within the complex social situation.

Following are narratives based on the experiences and researches done by me, which molded my sociological imaginations, excitements, frustrations, and hopes. These stories, however, remained untold in academic writings. Unsuitability complex associated with the offbeat methodology, and incapability to use various qualitative methods precisely have been the main reasons behind this. But they have become tools of understanding and explaining the complexities of social reality which I intend to study, which I intend to make understandable to my students.

I wrote these stories to illustrate the political and organizational dynamics of the implementation of EGS and SGRY projects from the Nashik district. I was working under Prof. Sujata Patel, on a joint project of the Department of Sociology, Pune university (now Savitribai Phule Pune University) and IDS, Sussex. In this project, I have studied 29 villages. From 2004, when I began my Ph. D. from Shivaji University, Kolhapur, again I researched 12 villages from Nashik

district. EGS, SGRY male-female workers working on the worksites, Mukadam, implementing officials, local Sarpanch and Assistant Sarpanch, Talathi, local political leaders, higher administrative officials, were among the respondents. Formal, informal debates, talks, comments, were the forms to collect these narratives. They comprise expressions of hope, frustration, hopelessness, anger, rebel, helplessness. I begin with the most shocking of all my stories: an account of how an attempt to intervene to help EGS workers to obtain their rights led to the intimidation and punishment of both the people who intervened and the workers themselves. I was one of the people involved. I told this story every time to my students when I teach research methodology papers.

Story No. 1: Intervention, mobilization, and punishment

In May 2003, I was on my motorcycle searching for the site on an EGS project in Nasik Taluka, about 55 kilometers from Nasik town. The area is prone to drought, but the population of this village is caste Hindus, not the politically more marginalized tribals. This was a drought period.

I had collected information from the Tahsil (sub-district) office. But rural public works projects are not identified on maps, and indeed government offices in India operate almost entirely without maps. Sites are often identified in vague terms. I happened to meet a friend who worked as a local journalist, reporting from that Tahsil for a daily newspaper published in Nasik. He agreed to come with me to show me the site, purely as a friend. He would not use any information that we gathered for journalistic purposes.

The village in question was tiny and fairly close to the native village of the local Member of the state Legislative Assembly (MLA). We found the work site about seven kilometers from the main road. There were no workers actually on the site. Soon after we got off the motorcycle and began to look around, people who had been sitting in scattered groups began to approach us from all sides, and we were soon surrounded by a crowd that I estimated to comprise 225 people.

“Shall we start the work, Saheb?” A few of the workers asked.

“No no! I am not a Saheb. I am just a researcher and want some information from you,” I quickly responded.

Nervousness was showing in their faces. However, they eagerly provided me with answers to all my questions, and more. They were EGS workers, furious because a government official had kept them waiting for three consecutive days. He had told them to come to the site on Monday and await his order to restart the work. It was now Wednesday, but we were the first outsiders to be seen. They had been working on the site previously and did not even know why work had been suspended in the first place. Both men and women had walked to the site on three consecutive days from the surrounding villages, carrying their tools and water pots. Water was not provided on the site.

We thanked them for the information and started to make a move. Some people stopped us and asked us to do something to get the work restarted for them. They said that the behaviour of the officers needed to be exposed. They were ready to fight for this. When asked, they were eager to get the story published in the newspaper. My journalist friend took charge. He gathered the workers and took some photographs. He managed to get the story, along with a photograph, published in the district newspaper on the very next day. I read this in Nashik and thought that the officer concerned would rush to the site and restart the work immediately.

After six days I came to know from the journalist that the work had not restarted. We met, and he told me his story. On the very day that the story was published, the government officials concerned telephoned him and told him that he did not like the news. He said that he faced some problems in getting the work restarted, and appealed to the journalist not to take the story any further. He then came to meet the journalist and, through an assistant, offered him Rs. 10,000. The journalist refused to take the money and continued to show an interest in the project. Both the Tahsildar and the Chairman of the Taluka EGS Committee telephoned him and promised him to take action to restart the work.

I kept an eye on the developments but was involved in researching other cases. After some days, the journalist verified that the work still had not re-started and informed me of this. I asked for separate interviews with the Tahsildar and the Chairman of the Taluka EGS Committee. The Tahsildar said that the journalist had run the story to extract money. The work had been halted for valid technical reasons - the non-availability of the black soil required for wall foundations.

The officer had applied to the Collector (district administrator) for permission to use a tractor to transport the black soil. Without that he could not start the work. Admitting that the EGS Committee had not met at all that year, the Chairman said that the Committee did not recognize there to be a serious problem because no complaint had been made to them. I suggested that, since the news was published in the newspaper, no formal complaint should be necessary. The Chairman immediately got on the phone to the Tahsildar and also asserted that the story had been published to extort money. When I then told him that I had witnessed the whole thing and knew the true story, he admitted that there had been some lapses and assured me he would take action.

About a month after my first visit, I went back to the village. Some men who had been sitting by the temple gathered around. They recognized me but were looking at me strangely. It took them some time to decide what to say. One of them challenged me to say how much money I had earned from the incident. They believed that I was part of some nexus that was profiting from all this. But I was able to convince them that they were wrong, and they then told me the rest of the story from their perspective.

After our first visit had stimulated them to mobilize to fight the case, they decided to take it up in a special Village Council meeting. But a local politician associated with the MLA scolded them for giving information to a reporter. He said he had struggled hard to bring the project to the village, and, by making the government officers nervous, they were going to spoil the whole thing. Some days later the government officials tried to complete the work using the only machinery, and no local labour, as a visible demonstration of his power. It was not easy, and he finally gave up but warned the local people that he was not going to restart the work, to teach them a lesson. They needed the work, and even now wanted me to fight their case. I explained to them that I could do very little, and could only advise them to write to the Tahsildar and the Chairman of the Taluka EGS Committee. I had been drawn into supporting an intervention that had been quashed by the local nexus of officials, politicians, and contractors who manage public works schemes, and could do little to support those who had suffered as a result.

My journalist friend was also punished. A group of Taluka-level politicians and government officers made ten charges against him, verbally, in front of his boss. One charge was that he had

run the EGS story intending to extort money. The newspaper management instituted a lengthy inquiry process. The journalist was eventually obliged to resign from his job.

This experiential narrative predominantly showed the nexus, the administrative lacunas, administrative stakeholder's under-table dealings; weakness, and hopelessness of the workers. It was pretended that the intervention will help the workers and check the administrators. This did not happen.

Story No. 2: Powerlessness of local labour

It was a typical drought-affected village from a non-tribal region of the district. When I arrived there on my motorcycle and started enquiring about the EGS project, I was taken to a farmer. He owned the land on which a percolation tank was being constructed with EGS funds. He was also the (unofficial) site manager. He said he had taken the initiative to request this project and had worked hard to bring it to fruition, using his connections with the political leaders and agency officers. The percolation tank would benefit the remainder of his land. He took me to the worksite, where around 40 people were working. A JCB earthmover was also at work. When I started asking questions about the machine, he begged me not to take a photograph or to mention the machine in my written record. I met separately with the workers. They seemed desperate for employment. They said that they supported the use of the JCB because it made their work easier. Some of them warned me that if I wrote down anything about the JCB machine, they would tear up my interview notes. The Muster Clerk – the official supervisor of the project - was called from another nearby work site. He said that the JCB was being used at the workers' request.

When I next went to the work-site, some of the workers, who were from that village, told me that they had neither requested the JCB nor they could oppose it. They knew it would deprive them of most of the potential employers, but had been forced to accept it, and were in return expecting good daily wages and prompt payment.

Story No. 3: Powerlessness of 'reserved' female leaders

The village population were mainly caste Maratha and two tribal groups: the Kokana, who were relatively affluent and owned some land, and the poor Mahadev Koli. The Sarpanch (Chair of the Village Council) was an illiterate Mahadev Koli woman. She occupied the position only because of the policy of reserving a quota of places for women and members of 'backward' groups. She had little political experience and was completely dependent on the other members of the Council and the Gramsevak (Village Officer). They had completely sidelined her in planning the SGRY work in the village. They did not even call her in the Village Council planning meeting. The SGRY work had been given, on a contract basis, to a group of Kokana men. They were so determined to get maximum wages that they did not allow any women or elderly people to share in the work because they were perceived as slow workers. The Mahadev Koli, the real landless poor, were entirely excluded.

The Sarpanch said that she was very angry when she learned of this arrangement and knew that the Kokana tribal leaders, the Gramsevak, and government officers had conspired. When asked why did not she oppose the move on behalf of her people, she said she had left just two years left to serve as a Sarpanch. After that, she would be an ordinary village woman. She is still working in the fields of Maratha and Kokana farmers and would have to continue to do so. She could not afford to alienate her employers.

Story No. 4: Too much trouble?

The Sarpanch and other members of Village Panchayat (Council) were not interested in SGRY work and decided to let the Rs 114,000 allocated to them revert to the government. They did not want to take the responsibility for using the money. They thought the process of project implementation was too complex. And they were afraid that, if they could not complete the work within the budget and in the specific period, then they would be penalized, as is provided in the SGRY regulations.

It was the Gramsevak, the unelected Village Officer, who convinced the elected councilors to change their minds. He argued that the money could be used to employ the poor of the village

and to create some useful assets. In February 2003, a Village Council meeting discussed the issue and decided to use the money to do some soil conservation works.

Story No. 5: Agitation

This was a tribal village where road construction was going on with EGS funding. The workers were from the 'pada' – a distant hamlet – of the same village. Without any external support, they were able to fight for their rights with some success. They successfully opposed an attempt to use a JCB earthmover to substitute for manual labour. After their wages remained unpaid for more than a month, they went on strike. The Muster Clerk tried to bring in alternative workers from outside, but they successfully resisted that, and eventually received their arrears and completed the work. Why were they so successful? A number of them were young and literate, and they were led by two youths educated to the 12th standard. And that fact that they came from the same hamlet helped produce internal solidarity.

Story No. 6: Awareness, empowerment, and negotiation

This story is from a tribal village where a social activist from Nasik has been working over the past few years. He is attempting to organize and empower the villagers, and their Village Council. Before starting his work, he got the villagers to agree to some conditions. One of the most important was that nobody from the village would either give or take any kind of bribe. In the last two years, in particular, his efforts started to produce results. The villagers have accepted him wholeheartedly.

In the routine meeting between the villagers and the social activist, a woman (active member of the Village Assembly) confessed that she had received a bribe from a government official involved in the implementation of an EGS project. This officer and his assistant had been responsible for several water conservation projects in and around the village. The audience was shocked by her statement that, "I got Rs. 1000/- as a bribe to neglect malpractices in EGS works and not to take action against those officers". She is not just an ordinary woman, but also a member of the Taluka EGS Committee – nominated according to the 'reservation' policy, as a woman. She went on to explain: "I received such bribes twice before. This time the guidance of

the social activist has made me aware that this is doubly wrong. First, I have accepted a bribe. Second, I encouraged malpractices in the EGS construction work. It is the village and the poor who will suffer. I admit my mistake and am ready to pay the money back to the officer”.

The villagers and the social activist elicited the details of the incident and started discussing what to do for the next. The activist decided to meet the officers. They at first denied that they had bribed the women. But later, under the threat of exposure in the newspapers, they confessed. The woman was eager to return Rs. 1000/- to them. The officers refused to take the money, saying that the offer was routine, and many others had also accepted the money. They begged the activist to settle the issue. The activist said that the villagers would have to make the decision.

The activist and the woman again called a village meeting and asked the villagers to decide on their next move. There were two views. One group argued that a formal complaint should be made and the officers should be punished. The other group was ready to forgive the officers on the condition that they would agree not to do this again.

The activist was unclear what to do, and went to consult my father, who is also a social activist. My father’s advice was not to take harsh action, because a single complaint and punishment would not make much difference to the system. He advised the activist to negotiate with the officers on two points; one that they should not do it again and second that they should commit that they would do their best to bring more development works to that cluster of villages in the future. The activist, the woman, and the villagers finally decided on the negotiation strategy. They got assurances from the officers that they would be prompt in their work and bring some water conservation programs to the villages. In 2004, they completed some of the work on the village tank that had been left incomplete from the previous year.

Story No. 7: Some Fruits from Efforts

In the process of doing this research, I established an association with an NGO working in the Igatpuri-Trimbakeshwar tribal belt. My interactions with the NGO taught them about EGS, including the regulations, rights involved, and the mobilization potential. I held few training sessions with about 40 to 50 tribal activists in 2002. As a result of their efforts, the area received more than three times as many EGS projects in 2003 as in 2002. When I re-visited the same

villages in 2003, I found that some familiar faces were smiling. People who had obtained work in the dry season were very happy. One woman said: “I never previously ate rice in the dry season. We use to eat *kanyaa* (congee - a liquid with a little food grain content). Now, the EGS employment gives us the luxury of eating rice in the dry season.”

Conclusion

Between 2001 to 2010, my personal field experiences, stories, and narratives from the field provided me with important data, insights that can never be easy to grasp otherwise from the usual surveys and positivist methodologies. Qualitative methodologies and the use of reflexivity get us further close to the ‘given’ and ‘constructed’ realities. Some positive-negative narratives and personal observations-experiences from the field revealed the dimensions of policy implementation of both EGS and SGRY in Nashik district, paradoxes in project guidelines and standard culture of implementation, and loopholes and discrepancies in the project guidelines and onsite procedures, the voicelessness of the rural poor, big communication gap between the government and the village people, absence or shortage of civil society, and fewer rural-urban dialogues in relation with planning and implementing policies related to villages.

The socio-linguist Polanyi (1985) and the historian White (1987) have emphasized, a successful narrative is more than just a sequence or chronicle of events.^{vi} Neither it is a part of causality-based reality. They reveal the broader social canvas of how the people or respondents from the field are able and unable to be the agencies of change within the given structures. These narratives from the field become part of the biographies and autobiographies of the researchers. The baggage of these biographies and autobiographies also shape the viable ‘positions’, the perspectives, and the methodologies of the researchers.

Notes

ⁱ See C. Wright Mills’ *Sociological Imagination* (1959)

ⁱⁱ Several Sociologists from Maharashtra had a Marathi literature background. Most of their writings especially Novels, Stories, and Character sketches reflected Sociological experiences, imaginations, and practice of Sociology. As visualize- 1) **Shridhar Vyankatesh Ketkar**.1884-1937

although famous for his Marathi Encyclopedia Work wrote several literary works including Gondavanatila priyamvada ani gharkutte gharanyacha itihasa, Ashavadi, athava eka pravahapatiteche charitra, Gaavasasu, Brahmanakanya, Bhatakya, Vichakshana.

2) **Irawati Karve** (1905-1970) had wide-ranging academic interests. Along with Sociology and Anthropology, she had immense interest in literature. She wrote several short story collections like Bhovara, Paripurti, Gangajal, Sanskruti, Marathi Lokanchi Sanskruti. Her book 'Yuganta', a collection of character sketches from Mahabharata won the 1967 Sahitya Academy Award.

3) **Durga Bhagwat** 1910-2002, who was student of G. S. Ghurye, wrote Poorva- a collection of Short Stories, Mahanadichya tiravar-Novel, Loksahityachi ruprekha, Dharma ani loksahitya, Vyas parva, Rupranga, Pais, Prasangika, Doob, Bhavmudra, Khamanga, Satyam Shivam Sundaram, Ketkaki kadambari, Rajaram Shastri Bhagwat yanche charitra, Rutuchakra, Godhadi, Dupani, Nisargotsav). She was President of Marathi Sahitya Sammelan held at Karad in 1975.

4) **Vidyadhar Pundalik** from Dept. of Sociology, Pune University wrote Popati Chaukat, Aawadleli Manase, Devchapha, Maal, Mata Draupadi (Drama), Tekdiwarche Pees, Tirandaji, Pushpanjali.

5) **D. N. Dhanagare** also wrote Hirve Anubandh, Uchha Shikshan: Dhyeyvadakadun Bajarpethekade, Some character sketches published in magazines.

iii Irawati Karve in his Marathi article from *Ganagjal* titled, "Why do people write Autobiographies?", wrote "I was wrong to believe that self or personal is completely a private matter. Selfness separates us from others, and this feeling itself is based on the interaction with others."

iv See Mills (2000:8) saying, "perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure. This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science."

v Usher Robin quotes, Jean Baudrillard from his postmodern text 'America'. Jean Baudrillard writes that 'the point is not to write the sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive...that way you learn more about this society than all academia could tell you' (Baudrillard, 1988; p. 54). For Baudrillard, participating in American driving behaviour is a better way to understand contemporary American society than through 'research' as conventionally understood.

vi See Elliott Jane (2006:9) Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

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