*Geo-Reflections-6*

# Dismantling Hierarchy and the Epistemological Concerns in Empirical Research

**Gopa Samanta**

The 'field research', crucial to the genuine representation of the real world, preferably called space and place by Geographers, is an essential component of research and writing to advance the knowledge production in Geography. Although critical philosophies have been developed over more than four decades, the processes and methods of fieldwork, especially in Indian geography, are still dominated by objective data collection methods influenced by the spatial science approach and positivist philosophy. Through scientifically collected quantitative data, which can be tested to prove the accurate interpretation of space and place, the epistemology in Geography is also obsessed with bringing scientific rigour to compete with the mainstream sciences and to retain its position within the faculty of sciences in the Indian University system. In attempting to prove its scientific standing, the discipline continues to follow the same path uncritically, even after decades of critical geographical analysis practised in different countries. For this reason, fieldwork still depends heavily on scientific methods hired from scientific disciplines. Geography's epistemological process is biased towards science despite having the human at the centre stage of the discipline.

As part of an academic series written in popular mode, this article highlights certain concerns and challenges in the process of knowledge production or epistemological standpoint in Geography. The article, based on my field experience

over three decades carried out in many different contexts and places, questions the uncritical acceptance and use of certain terminologies and methods in our field research and uncovers the hierarchy hidden in the process of knowledge production. Examining our limitations and problematic perspectives in fieldwork may help us better understand what we do and how we do it. Ultimately, these processes will allow us to develop new epistemologies free from hierarchical baggage.

The process of knowledge production through empirical research vis-à-vis fieldwork has enormous importance in the growth and development of many disciplines of social sciences in general and geography in particular. Therefore, this article's scope is much broader and covers all the disciplines of social sciences which conduct fieldwork with humans as their research participants. The article raises some concerns to improve the epistemological standpoint of all these disciplines. Here, I must clarify that I am using the term epistemology in reference to the specific concerns of fieldwork and, more specifically, the data collection process.

## Deconstruction of Problematic Terminologies

Language and terms are very powerful tools in maintaining hierarchy, which is also applicable in the case of empirical research. We often use certain terms in our day-to-day mundane research and writing without giving much thought to the hierarchy ingrained in those terms. I prefer to say that we accept those terms uncritically without questioning their history and context. The first one I would like to discuss is 'sample'. While presenting my research as a young researcher on different platforms, I often encountered two questions—how many samples have you taken in your research, and how did you choose them? The same question is probably being asked even today without considering *who* those samples are.

I always felt uncomfortable when my research participants were being narrowed down to mere samples by other academics during those conversations. I still hear the term often during discussions on the same kinds of occasions, especially during the presentation of research findings by other scholars. In my empirical research process, the social bond with my research participants played a significant role in data collection, and my research output is often co-produced through interactions with them. Therefore, the contribution of my research participants is enormous in my field research, and that is why defining them as mere samples is beyond my imagination. However, the term is still in use among most researchers within our discipline, which needs rethinking. To do so, we need to understand the roots of the coinage of the term and its strong scientific background.

In the disciplines of Pure Sciences, research rarely deals with the human as a prime research subject, except in Applied Sciences such as medicine. The term 'sample' is appropriate in their disciplinary language as they mostly deal with material objects as the subject of their research, such as soil, minerals, rocks, water, and air, besides some organic substances such as plants and animals. However, in

proving that Geography deserves the status of a science, we have forgotten that we mostly deal with humans as our research subjects, and they are neither inert materials to be tested nor mere plants and animals to be examined. This problem is endemic in our epistemic process as we always try to place Geography as a science. For that, we often copy models and language from Pure Science disciplines. Using such terminology uncritically does not help us; it complicates the knowledge production process and limits the research.

As soon as we define the research participants as samples, we create a hierarchy which limits the participation of people who are the subject of our research and the source of the knowledge as experienced and perceived. Using this term creates a hierarchy by putting the researcher in a higher position and devaluing the contribution of research participants in the entire process of empirical research and knowledge production. Recently, there has been a change in terminology from 'sample' to 'respondent', but it does not remove the hierarchy involved in the epistemological process. The term 'respondents' also treats them as naïve subjects who are only eligible to respond to our questions but are not encouraged to question us or our knowledge production systems. We cannot demolish the hierarchy and co-produce well-balanced knowledge from our field research as long as we continue using these terms. Only research participants can actively participate in our research process and complement our knowledge to make it inclusive and to overcome our epistemological limitations.

Another term we often use in our academic writing, especially in the case of the built environment, is 'unplanned' development. In saying so, we uncritically accept that every built environment should be planned, which finally makes planning a norm. Why do we consider that planning is necessary and obvious? Most research on cities of the Global South ends with a recommendation that they 'need proper planning', although the term 'proper' is not always very clearly defined, even in the minds of those authors. Thus, planning is an epistemological baggage in the urban studies of the Global South, and we often accept and use this term uncritically.

In most cases, planning is a process of exclusion and tends to be biased towards particular demands of certain groups of people. Even if we talk about participatory planning, the existing literature and experience from different countries show that planning is often done by some elite groups, often called urban planners, who work under some corporate companies. They do seek to make the city better-managed and liveable, but not for everyone. The planning process usually recommends the exclusion of poor and marginal communities from the cities and facilitates dispossession. To validate these ideas and implement these policies in our cities, we hire another genre of terms from the Global North, such as redevelopment, gentrification, beautification, etc. Planning makes it easier for either big corporate or local private companies to acquire land and do business for real estate and infrastructure development. Thus, planning is not necessarily a nice or altruistic proposition, and using the term 'unplanned' makes way for such planning.

Redevelopment and gentrification projects are sometimes so exclusionary and brutal in practice that scholars (Burte & Kamath, 2023) define these processes as part of structural violence against some community groups. This process often either evicts the poor and underprivileged or redevelops their habitats, called slums or informal settlements. Such slum redevelopment is targeted to acquire a major share of the land for other kinds of commoditised development activities by pushing slum people into multi-storied buildings occupying a small portion of the same land by allotting a tiny flat for each household. Scholars like Bhide (2023) and Kundu Satija (2023) also interpret these processes as structural violence. Here, I must also dig deeper into the term 'informal settlements'. We often use the term to define settlements that are not legally constructed as per the city government's regulations, and people do not have tenure security. At a time when middle-class people are failing to access housing in cities, how can the poor pay the cost of highly-priced land in a metropolitan city? The informal settlement is also a category created to label poor people's housing in a city, defined as 'constructed/planned illegality' by scholars (Bhan, 2013; Clerc, 2018). Thus, when we use the term 'unplanned', often the nature of informal settlements and lower-middle class or poor neighbourhoods, the underlying meaning advocates that these settlements should not be there. When we demand planning, we naturalise such an exclusionary process of change. Urban Planning is often a corporate business; big multinational companies from Europe and America often plan for the Global South's cities. Even if Indian companies do it, they usually follow the Western planning and design model irrespective of the completely different context, climate, and local environment of Indian cities.

Moreover, the plans are often long-term, and these long-term plans, called 'master plans', often fail because of the mismatch between anticipation of the change in the city over the next 20/30 years and the actual change. Therefore, long-term planning is facing severe criticism worldwide, and the demand for contingent short-term planning is rising. Scholars like Bhan (2019) argue that in understanding and managing the cities of the Global South, we need to move away from the epistemological baggage of 'planning' and look into how cities are built through autoconstruction. To define autoconstruction, Caldeira (2017, pp. 3–20), in her work on peripheral urbanisation, states, 'residents are agents of urbanisation, not simply consumers of spaces developed and regulated by others. They build their houses and cities step-by-step according to the resources they can put together at each moment in a process that I call '*autoconstruction*'. Thus, autoconstruction is the contingent change within cities and their neighbourhoods where people participate and negotiate with the state. In contrast, planning is, in most cases, a one-way change where state machinery has full control and people have no participation. Thus, we must think deeply before using the term 'unplanned' and recommending 'planning' everywhere. Before recommending planning in response to every problem, we must reconsider the hierarchy and power structure involved in the planning process.

## Structured Questionnaire and the Field

A structured questionnaire is a preferred research method among Geographers, especially for those who still believe that Geography is nothing but a spatial science. Structured questionnaires help quantify the information gathered from the field and make it easier to apply higher statistical techniques and, consequently, objective analysis of the real world. However, structured questionnaires are limited by the restricted response options given by the researcher, and there is no scope for research participants to express their views if they go beyond the given structure and options.

When I question the structured questionnaire as a method of fieldwork, I do not only challenge the pre-determined way of collecting data, which can be easily quantified, but also the hierarchy built in that method between the researcher and the research participants, putting the researcher at a superior position and ignoring the perceived knowledge of the persons whose space/place we are going to narrate or explain in the process of knowledge production. In the process of using this method, it is thought that we, the researchers, owing to our formal institutional knowledge background, know the world much better than people who have little or no institutional knowledge. However, during my long field research career spanning over three decades, I observed that the epistemological position of my research participants is no less than ours. Rather, they can challenge our knowledge background and structure.

To explain this context, I would like to take an example and narrate my encounter with one research participant during fieldwork to understand his assets and livelihood portfolio. The man was a small farmer living on a river island. Through the interview, I was trying to understand his farm work's yearly income and profit level, especially from the different crops he cultivates. When I was about to leave his house after the interview, the man suddenly told me, "Madam, you asked about all kinds of livestock resources, but you did not ask about my cats." According to our formal knowledge, we do not count cats as livestock resources as they do not have sale value and cannot be transformed into money. But the man insisted that I should accommodate his cats in the database. I asked him, "Why do you want those cats to be included in your livestock resource database?" His answer was very clear and logically explicit. He gave me a proper description of how, after keeping four cats, he could save a huge amount of paddy and jute bags for storing paddy that mice otherwise destroyed every year. He could calculate the money he saved yearly because of those cats. I was spellbound by his argument and articulation of those animals' contributions. This interaction triggered my understanding of how important it is to accommodate the knowledge of research participants in the process of knowledge production in specific cases. Otherwise, our hierarchical epistemology will never represent the real world narrated and explained through our one-sided empirical research.

Such a hierarchy complicates our understanding and portrayal of the real world and has become one of the central epistemological challenges in Geography. The epistemology practised in this process is, therefore, a problematic one and biased towards the researchers themselves by not giving enough importance to the perceived experience of the research participants, which we claim as our posterior observation and which lies at the core of empiricism as a philosophy of understanding the real world.

The question arises: How can we dismantle this hierarchical position in framing questionnaires? We must use this method in our research to deal with a large number of research participants. However, minor modifications in the questionnaire's structure can help us to accommodate the experienced knowledge of research participants. Semi-structured questions and open-ended questions can help in this direction to dismantle the hierarchy in the research process, and in doing so, it is significantly important to understand how we frame those questions. Openness in the questions and joint involvement of the researcher and the research participants can help in the co-production of knowledge. We can start by accommodating and investigating the 'other' option in the questionnaire.

## Dismantling Hierarchy and Acknowledging the 'Other'

We often use one category in our questionnaire called 'other'. What is this other? It is the amalgamated category of those probable answers which are not there in the knowledge background of a researcher. In this process, our first mistake is to keep 'other' as just one category rather than detailing the answers coming under that category. The 'other' may be a significant clue to where our structured knowledge is limited and what the research participant can contribute to the knowledge production through their experienced knowledge. Therefore, rather than treating the 'other' as a single category, we must be open to documenting all answers coming under that category. Under this particular heading, many crucial answers might emerge, which can improve our epistemological process on any particular subject to a great extent. Moreover, the 'other' allows us to dismantle the hierarchy between the researcher and the research participants, even within a structured or semi-structured questionnaire.

Changing our methodology from structured questionnaires to more open and qualitative methods can solve the hierarchy problem in the research process and fieldwork. A social bond must be developed between the researcher and the research participants to break the differential status and set a level playing field. Otherwise, there is always a chance of error. For instance, during my third interview with a young married woman, she changed her initial statement completely. She cited the reason as not knowing me enough to trust and to share her personal experience with me earlier. Thus, repeated visits also help us to gain trust and inspire confidence to share the truth.

The group discussion method is often used as a powerful qualitative research method. However, it can also elicit non-true observations without a level playing field between the researcher and the research participants. Once, I conducted a group discussion for one women's self-help group in a village in the erstwhile Burdwan district. The group consisted of female members from both the Hindu and the Muslim communities, and the leader was from the Muslim community. The discussion was held in the leader's house. The conversation went very well, and during that process, I asked them whether this group activity had helped to demolish the social division between these communities in the villages, where untouchability was also in practice. They all said the group activity helped them overcome the social barrier between these two communities. At the end of the meeting, while I was walking back to the nearest bus stand, some Hindu women were accompanying me as their neighbourhood was closer to the bus stand. In the villages, there was a clear division of neighbourhood areas between these two communities. While walking with them, one woman suddenly chastised me by saying, "Being a Hindu woman, how could you use the toilet of our Muslim leader?"

I was amazed to hear that statement from her; as a researcher, I started questioning my observations from earlier conversations with these women one hour before. Thus, knowledge, even if it comes from qualitative research, only sometimes leads to the whole, true knowledge. The methods we use in our study have to be carefully checked every time we go to the field. We have to pose the same question, or at least the proxy of that, again and again to our research participants. Personalised questions often lead to false or untrue answers unless we develop a social bond with our research participants, and to develop that bond, we must break the hierarchical status quo and accommodate our research participants by giving enough weightage to their views in the process of knowledge production. It is thus essential to situate or place research participants as co-producers of knowledge rather than treating them just as a respondent or a sample.

## Conclusion

In this popular piece, we need to rethink our epistemological processes and reconsider the problematic terminologies through the lens of the hierarchy hidden within those processes and involved in those terminologies often used in the Social Sciences. Lahiri-Dutt (2020) has explained how new water epistemology is important in the studies of water. Similar attempts are also being observed in different genres of studies, such as urban studies. Trained as a Geographer, my interest is in its epistemological challenges. The challenges are many, and I could not make an exhaustive list and explain them all. I open the platform to the young social sciences researchers in general and Geography in particular for further questions and interrogations in their empirical research. The predominant approach practised in Geography is holistic. Natural Science and Social Science, as well as nature and culture, all blend well in Geography. There is no point in carrying forward the

epistemological baggage of Natural Sciences in our research, thereby unquestioningly continuing with a hierarchical research process. Why don't we accommodate the perceptions and voices of research participants in knowledge production, as the 'human' is at the centre stage of our discipline? The co-production of knowledge is of utmost importance in the epistemologies of space and place, and for this, the dismantling of hierarchy is an absolute necessity. To bring about those changes, we have to start with little things—changing our terminologies, imbibing more open and qualitative research methods, developing social bonds with the research participants to gain trust and their real opinions, and finally, accommodating the experienced knowledge of the research participants on the particular issue or topic of discussion.

## References

Bhan, G. (2013). 'Planned illegalities: Housing and the 'Failure' of Planning in Delhi: 1947-2010', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 48(24), 58–70.

———. (2019). Notes on a Southern urban practice. *Environment and Urbanization,* 31(2), 639–654. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0956247818815792

Bhide, A. (2023). 'Structural violence in much more than neoliberal times: The case of slum redevelopment in Mumbai', *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action,* 27(3–4).

Burte, H., & Kamath, L. (2023). 'The structural violence of spatial transformation: Urban development and the more-than-neoliberal state in the Global South', *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action,* 27(3–4).

Caldeira, T.P.R. (2017). 'Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2017, 35(1), 3–20.

Clerc, V. (2018). 'Rethinking the category of 'slum'. From Damascus to Yangon, precarious settlements through the prism of urban policies', *La Revue Internationale et Stratégique,* 112(4), 139–148.

Kundu, R., & Satija, S. (2023). 'Examining slow and spectacular forms of violence through the politics of redevelopment in Kamathipura', *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action,* 27(3–4).

Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2020). 'Knowledge others, others' knowledge: The need for a new epistemology of water, *Ecology, Economy and Society–the INSEE Journal,* 3(2).

**Author:**

**Gopa Samanta**
Professor of Geography
The University of Burdwan
West Bengal, India, 713104