

Field/s as sites of encounter

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As we entered the Maritime Container Services Park(MCS), Sydney on 6 July 2012, one could see lines of containers of various shapes lined up in neat columns and huge trucks with containers negotiating their way to find a space for containers. The “empty” containers as the manager of MCS pointed are a major source of income. He said, “We export air”. As he showed us around navigating our bus through the empty pavements amidst thousands of containers stacked up in neat rows there were several trucks with containers who came to unload the containers. What struck me and one of my other Indian colleagues was the absence of work-force.

Miles away in 2011, when we had visited one of the container parks in Khidderpore, the port area of Kolkata, the area bustled with the clattering sound of hammers and sparks coming out of welding machines as workers were repairing containers. In fact our visit to this container park was guided by few workers taking tea break in a tea stall adjacent to this container park who led us to the office of the container park.

Miles away the container parks run under technological surveillance, wireless devices navigating ways to ensure smooth turn-around time. With technological intervention the turnaround time has reduced from 2 hours to 20 min in this container park. The ways in which containers find their way into container parks, ports and become subject of living laboratory spaces also reveal to us the ways in which maritime economy constitute an important part of the transnational economy and the ways in which the labouring subject comes under the surveillance gaze with newer technologies to increase productivity.

These two distinct sites of operation of logistical spaces as part of the Sydney Platform and Kolkata platform was part of the collaborative exercise of using “platform” as a methodological tool to interrogate the formation of transit labour. Methodologically, organising the platform/s has been challenging and as I look back at my experience of Sydney and Kolkata platforms I feel in this project we have taken some of the issues concerning “ethnography” as a method. With a mixed background of political scientists, media practitioners, architects, historians, urban planners, web designers and anthropologists, “Transit Labour” as a “platform” engaged with field as a site and how it transforms and mediates across spaces. While the workings of the platform were steeped in ideas of “multi-sited ethnography” in the way Shanghai, Kolkata and Sydney were studied by individual researchers but the “platform” in my eyes has moved to the idea of field as sites of encounter.

The discussion with the scientists in NICTA, Sydney or activists from *Rajarhat Jami Bacchao* Committee, Kolkata at two field sites initiated through the help of local collaborating organisations open up the field, not as a sacrosanct site to be represented in our texts, reports and short essays but expands the notion of “field” as a site. The “field” in that sense is not limited to spatial locations of Rajarhat, Container Parks of Sydney and our interactions with the labouring subjects but also requires our engagement as labouring subject (as participants of the project) in the transient forms of labouring spaces we inhabit, engage with and participate.

One of the reflections on Sydney platform was the “absence” of the transit labour or the labour forms in the study on Port Botany. While the invisibilisation of the labour force seems to be the significant component in our visit to container parks our interactions with the Union representatives seem to reflect a different picture. The mobility of the labour form and the reasons for their invisibility, well known to us, was represented to us vividly in the Living Laboratory project where the main objective

of the state, citizens and the labouring subjects of these laboratory spaces is to ensure smooth turn-around time of logistics as the key to ensure availability of goods and services. One of the interesting presentations in NICTA was the prediction of future logistical management with the use of informational services. In this interesting slide, there was no representation of human actors; the slide shown to us was mapped with pictorial representations of “signal”- the sign of connectivity, time. The absence of human actor/s in this slide again ponders us to reflect the ways in which we have trained our eyes as ethnographers to locate and identify our subjects. Trained in the art of “observation” and “participant observation”, my experience with these field sites represent an exemplary experiment to re-engage with “ethnography” as a method where we engaged with field/s, performed our roles as actor/s and participants in Kolkata and Sydney.

The living laboratory space for instance turns the ethnographic gaze onto themselves in replicating the field in the laboratory space. The living laboratory project is an initiative to resolve the problems of logistics in food supply and other industries. Taking us around the wine supply network from the vineyards to the shelves, the logistical network of the supply chain is represented in the huge LCD screens; where the scientist is forced to inhabit and cohabit with the living space of logistical network of the wine-supplier. The scientist and laboratory become collaborators of the logistical network through such “encounters”. The field expands into the world of laboratory as a space where the actors i.e., scientists not only act as agents of surveillance but also try to inhabit and create “sites of encounter”. While this may seem a superficial way of imposing onto the labouring space, the ways in which we as actors of the field and products of the field engage with subjects has been remodelled in this particular case where the relationship of the subjects and actors are being performed, inhabited and is a lived reality in the logistical problem resolution of the living laboratory project.

The lived reality of the villages, field sites of production in the logistical city of Rajarhat (Rossetier 2012) on the other hand indicate certain interesting possibilities of the way networks of architects, urban planners, IT farmers, dispossessed farmers, domestic workers participate in the production of the logistical city. The production and (re) production of logistical networks in Rajarhat and Sydney represents not only two distinct forms of accumulation and labouring forms but their interface as production sites encompasses ways in which we need to re-formulate our engagement with production networks of late industrialism. Our engagement with production networks of late industrial sites are transformative and collaborative in nature with transnational networks of production and capital and to understand the nodal points of interface it is important to represent these fields as sites of encounter. The field/s speak to themselves not only as points of comparison but also in the way we as researcher/s, actors represent these fields. For instance, Rajarhat to me now represents an extension of the living laboratory project of logistical management. This is not to add another heuristic tool to understand the field but to broaden the scope and interaction of field sites of Rajarhat and logistical sites of Sydney. The diversity of variables to understand transit labour emerged from the rather fluid ethnographic gaze the individual researcher/s and platform participants which open up the question of where lies the future of ethnographer and ethnography as a method in such collaborative exercise.

Almost 25 years have gone by since the publication of *Writing Culture*- the seminal work in anthropology that called for a linguistic turn in anthropology. George Marcus in an article to celebrate 25 years of *Writing Culture* says that the work “was an ambitious and much needed critique of anthropology by means of literary therapy applied to its primary genre form” (Marcus 2012: 428). In this article George Marcus discusses six conditions that the research studies in Centre for Ethnography, University of California, Irvine have moved towards:- First and foremost, impulse to collaborate. Second, double agency where the anthropologists are indulging in a game of double-ness, double agent cry producing work according to the needs of different register. Thirdly, the public response or what he calls “reception and granular publics within the Frames of fieldwork”; and fourthly, “Incompleteness and scale”. Fifthly, “the temporality of emergence” and sixthly, design projects in association with field projects(Marcus 2012).

Kim Fortun in her article on “ Ethnography in late industrialism” argues that ethnographies “can be designed to bring forth a future anterior that is not calculable from what we now know, a future that surprises. Ethnography thus becomes creative, producing something that didn’t exist before. Something beyond codified expert formulas”(Fortun 2012: 450) indicates the ways in which temporality guides our research designs and the significance of research designs in collaborations and ways in which the field moves back and forth beyond the gaze of the ethnographer. Kim Fortun further identifies two gaps (discursive gaps and risks) that the ethnographers studying late industrial capitalism have to deal with and secondly the problem of design. To understand and grapple with discursive gaps and risks, tendencies that will pervade studies on late industrial capitalism, ethnographies need to “create space for deliberation”.

The creative space/s of deliberation in the transit labour platform was particularly productive in rethinking the ways in which the scope and possibilities of “field” has widened beyond the ethnographer’s purview.

References

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