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Some advantages to having an outsider on the team

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- **Introduction**

In their discussions of the cross-cultural impacts, cultural neutrality, and Insider/outsider effects on RRA research, Weyman Fussell and Ueli Scheuermeier raise some interesting points (in RRA Notes 9 and 10 respectively). While recognising both sides of the issues, the pros and the cons, I wish to take the stand as witness for the defense. Outsiders on RRA teams can have quite positive, sometimes catalytic roles to play. And sometimes Insiders become Outsiders in their own society.

Some years back a discussion was raging in anthropology about the relative ease/difficulty with which Outsiders and Insiders can pursue research in a society. The debate was carried in several journals, and in books (Freilich, 1970; Fahim, 1977; Fahim et al 1980; Messerschmidt, 1981). Even earlier, Berreman (1962) observed, in a classic study, what a great difference the social identity of the researcher makes in gaining rapport and collecting data. The roots of the issues are found, partly, in socio-linguistics made popular by Edward T. Hall (1959; see also Gumperz and Hymes, 1972). Basically, depending on how far in or out of a society a researcher is perceived to be, he/she will have more or less difficulty getting on. Insider villagers sometimes view Insider researchers with suspicion or contempt. Outsider researchers often have advantages - of strangeness, and being able to see things in a new light.

I don't mean to bog down in theory. Rather, with the knowledge that there's nothing new under the sun (the Insider/Outsider debate is

not new), I wish to demonstrate by means of three examples how being Outsider is sometimes helpful to RRA research. My examples come out of recent experience at the Institute of Forestry (IOF) in Pokhara, Nepal, where RRA is used to study community forestry. My role at the IOF is as research adviser, and RRA trainer and collaborator.

- **Case 1. On translation and encapsulation**

On an early reconnaissance of two hill villages, Rhiban and Lahchok, near Pokhara, an RRA team of seven Nepalis and one expatriate set out to learn about local forms of forest management. Focus group discussions were conducted in Nepalese along village lanes and under the ubiquitous banyan tree. After each session, and sometimes during them, my Nepali colleagues wished to debrief a little on the spot, and discussed the findings among themselves, sometimes consciously translating certain terms and concepts to me in English (though I speak Nepali). Our sideline discussions dealt with the significance of the fresh data we were collecting. One effect of this was to encourage team members to paraphrase, summarise and encapsulate the new knowledge.

John Mitchell and Hugo Slim (RRA Notes 10: 'The bias of interviews') are understandably wary of 'summing up' or, as they call it, 'nutshelling'. Yet in my experience that day under the banyan tree, it was a valuable analytical process. For one thing, it allowed the team members to digest a bit of what was happening while still in the field. (It was their first RRA experience). They then returned to the discussions with increased awareness and insight. It was during this process that we discovered a hitherto unreported deviation

from the norm in Nepali community forest management.

On the one hand, the villagers from Rhiban described their single, large community forest as run by a representative elected ban samiti (forest committee); their prevailing attitude towards it was as hamro ban (our [collective] forest). On the other hand, people from Lahchok village described a form of forest management that was quite new to us - but very old in fact. Instead of a single forest the Lahchokis named several, each reserved for the exclusive use of a single caste or clan group from the village. Instead of a village-wide ban samiti they had none, but managed the resource quite as they ordinarily manage other caste affairs, through the dictates of the most powerful families. Of each forest, the corporate caste members said mero ho, bhanne chalan (literally: it is mine, we say is the custom).

The Lahchok villagers had no special name for their system (we probed, and found none), but while digesting and translating these findings to English, largely for the benefit of the team's Outsider (me), my colleagues came up with an important concept: 'Communal Forestry'. The result of one short analysing/translating/encapsulating session sparked tremendous interest, and we re-entered the discussions to probe further and to triangulate on the topic from new perspectives. Despite its drawbacks, this 'summing up' in English (which would not have occurred without the presence of the outsider) provided important impetus for further RRA exploration. Our preliminary findings are written (Subedi et al, in press; Messerschmidt, in press) and a new, more focused RRA on the topic is planned.

• **Case 2. Outsider rapport and repartee**

In 1990, three IOF faculty members were trained in RRA for six weeks at Khon Kaen University, Thailand. Following the training, they returned from home to conduct research leading up to a major publication on the subject of wood energy production in a Nepali district town (Balla et al, in press). On several occasions during the research, the all-Nepali team was accompanied in the field by

expatriate advisers (one of the Thai trainers, an anthropologist; a Dutch sociologist; and an American anthropologist). After observing the difference that having a Nepali-speaking Outsider along made in gaining rapport and collecting data in the villages, one of the trainees remarked (here paraphrased):

"You know, we Nepalis can't ask questions of the villagers like you expatriates do. You can laugh and joke with men and women along the trails, and they answer you. You can probe sensitive subjects, like illegal charcoal-making and wood-cutting, and you get answers and good information. It's because you aren't Nepali, and they assume you know nothing and don't suspect you (of being a government official). If we asked questions and joked about those things like you do, -they'd get angry or wonder if we were stupid or something. You can do it; you're an Outsider. We can't, we're Nepali like they are".

• **Case3. More outsider than in**

During a study of tree and land tenure in the eastern Nepal Terai (Subedi et al, in press), our team of three (two Nepalis, one expatriate) spent some time among the Maithili-speaking Musahars, landless labourers of the lowest Hindu caste. One team member was a higher caste Maithili speaker; the other was a Nepali Brahmin, the highest Hindu caste.

Normally, in traditional society (from which these villagers were not far removed in time), a Brahmin and a Musahar would rarely meet, and certainly would avoid commensal relationships. Normally, Nepali visitors from outside the villages are viewed with suspicion (as we had encountered elsewhere on the same study). We were taken aback, then, by our open reception in one Musahar hamlet, and by the people's perception of all three members of our team as neutral outsiders.

We were in the midst of a rapport-building discussion and map - sketching session in the village square, when our Brahmin colleague and the influential Musahar ward leader disappeared. They'd gone to the ward leaders' house (we found out later) to drink tea and have a frank but private discussion about the

Musahars' dilemma. Being landless and powerless they have no access to trees and pursue, out of necessity, illegal tree-cutting and selling logs from the nearby government reserve.

The ward leader wanted us to know their plight, and invited the team to join a forest harvesting group two weeks later. The data we got through interviews and participant-observation on that trip, including a night smuggling foray across the border into India, was only available because the Nepali members were identified and trusted as a category of Outsider, somewhere between a fellow Nepali and an expatriate, I suppose. The point is, it gave us a level of rapport and trust among Musahars that neighboring Nepalis and government officials are not privileged to enjoy. (Of course, we have a solemn obligation to our friends to maintain their anonymity, given the sensitive nature of the data).

Being the Outsider, even a little, has its advantages. It also has its disadvantages, but that's grist for a future discussion.

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