

# KNOWING THE SOCIAL WORLD

## *Perspectives and Possibilities*

*Edited by*  
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**Orient BlackSwan**

**KNOWING THE SOCIAL WORLD: PERSPECTIVES AND  
POSSIBILITIES**

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## FIELDING ONE'S OWN

### *Prospects and Dilemmas in Researching Women's Collective Organising from Within*

Shaila Desouza

#### THE OPENING

I have always been intrigued by experiments with non-hierarchical organising, though there have only been a few, which are scattered across the country and some which I have encountered through my association with women's studies and the women's movement in the country over the past twenty-five years. This chapter is an introspection on some of the methodological concerns, the prospects and dilemmas faced during my doctoral research titled 'Organising Women for Empowerment: A Study of an Experiment in Goa', which was based on my long association with Bailancho Saad, a women's collective in Goa. The crux of this chapter, therefore, deals with the 'self' and 'location' of the researcher with respect to the subject of the research—as in the words of Srinivas, Shah and Ramaswamy—'the fieldworker and the field' (2002: title).

Bailancho Saad was set up in 1986, and has been opposed to hierarchy since its inception. The organisation views hierarchy as symbolic of patriarchal power and domination and has articulated its commitment to collective organising ever since its very first brochure was printed and circulated soon after it was established. I have been associated with this collective since 1988. In the initial years of my association with the collective, I was an active participant

looking to be involved in social work with women. I had graduated from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai (in 1987) and had just moved to Goa. I was then involved with weekly meetings, discussions and programmes, and contributed articles and sketches that were part of the collectively acknowledged *Saad Newsletter*. I also offered my skills as an artist designing campaign material, programme banners and invitations for the organisation.

About five years later, I undertook a case study of Bailancho Saad in collaboration with the then head of department of management studies at the Goa University. This study had emerged from my discussion with him about the unique, collective organisation style that I was experiencing being associated with Bailancho Saad. This research interest developed into a more detailed collaborative study on 'Tourism Critique and Tourism Movements in Goa' of which Bailancho Saad's critique of tourism formed a part.<sup>2</sup> Formal permission was sought from the group in 1993 to study the organisation. Fortunately, the organisation was very open to the study and, in fact, welcomed an analysis of both its functioning and its ideological positions on issues. My already established relationship with the organisation, no doubt, did impact the collective decision to permit me to study the organisation in this way. Further, being a woman made it easier to have access to the organisation, which may not have been as accessible in the 1990s to any male researcher. I undertook data collection for this first phase of the case study from March 1993 to June 1995.

Researching non-hierarchical organising was my prime interest in studying Bailancho Saad, on which there was very little literature available, so I decided to undertake a more detailed doctoral research on the subject, which was completed in 2009 (see Desouza 2009).

## THE 'WHAT' AND 'HOW' CHALLENGES

During my doctoral research, I did receive mixed reactions from people around me to the subject of my research, namely, non-hierarchical organising. While friends within the women's movement reacted positively, I got many more comments such as: 'Is there such a thing as non-hierarchical organising?'; 'How can you call it an organisation if there is no one in charge, no president or chairperson?'; 'You can only ensure accountability if there is a formal reporting and

monitoring structure'; and other similar comments and expressions of apprehension about the topic. I could not at that point aptly explain the intriguing experience I had had during my association with this novel organising method employed by this women's collective: a group of women ideologically opposed to hierarchy and combining their collective efforts to bring about social change and gender justice. Of course, I found myself groping for words to explain what my research was about and justify why this was a subject that needed to be researched and documented. Mainstream organisation theory talked of bureaucratic structure, reporting and monitoring systems, incentive and rewards. But I was researching empowerment through non-hierarchy and collective organising. Further, I was choosing to research on a subject that I had had a very positive experience with. The non-hierarchical style of functioning; the way information was disseminated *within the group*; and the fact that everyone had a say in decisions taken, which were by consensus and not mere voting; the space created for everyone and the culture of equality despite differences that prevailed within the group; and the sharing of tasks, volunteering responsibilities and negotiating limitations were few of the preliminary observations that intrigued me to study collective organising further (Desouza 2012). This was unique as most organisations followed the bureaucratic style of functioning with shades of hierarchical structures. I did wonder if it was particularly possible with groups that were ideologically opposed to patriarchal power and domination and, therefore, committed to non-hierarchy and equality.

Only later did I manage to lay my hands on literature on feminist research practice which echoed my engagement with this project, such as Brooks who said that 'much of contemporary feminist scholarship and research strive to give voice to women's lives that have been silenced and ignored, uncover hidden knowledge contained within women's experiences, and bring about woman-centred solidarity and social change' (2007: 54). I then connected with the feminist project of *relocating sites of power* and found myself using feminist standpoint epistemology to justify using women's experiences as the starting point of knowledge production.

The work of Srinivas was inspirational and reassuring, particularly the chapter 'Some Thoughts on the Study of One's Own Society', in which he stated that 'all new social experience is referred to a pre-existing base of known and understood framework

of social institutions' (2009: 158). This helped me justify the project of 'fielding one's own' or studying an aspect of an organisation I was already associated with and to research, in particular, the aspect I was most intrigued by, namely, non-hierarchy.

My review of literature on 'Organisations and Organising: Insights from Theories' (Desouza 2009: 31–53) led me to conclude that theories on organisations have been gender blind, and that most assume hierarchical structures and bureaucracy to be a necessity. Organisational psychologists too most often did not ascribe a specific gender to 'the worker'. Organisation theory had its beginnings in the 1800s. Yet a gendered analysis of organisation, whether it is looking at the role women play in organisations or a feminist analysis of organisation theory or how women organise, though initiated four decades ago, still remains largely neglected in mainstream organisation theory (*ibid.*).

There were contentious areas that I needed to tread on in pursuit of my inquiry, not only the 'what' or the very subject of my research but also the 'how' to go about it. The choice of the field or study site, the selection of a 'typical' case for study was a dilemma. Another dilemma was around the acceptance of this method of knowledge production. I feared that the 'objective' lens of scientific research might discredit this 'subjective' experiential approach to knowledge production. There were other experiments with non-hierarchical organising for women's empowerment and organisations that were committed to functioning without a hierarchy scattered around the country, but, in Goa, Bailancho Saad was the only case available. Further, the nature of information required, namely, the organisational strategies and processes, could not be understood merely from interviews or observation over a short period. This could not be achieved through structured interviews or a questionnaire. It was important to understand the dynamics within the organisation over a period to be able to fully grasp the successes, if any, as well as limitations of the unique organisational style. Being located in the state of Goa, I was left with no other option but to choose Bailancho Saad and then use information collected from different sources about other similar experiments across the country to provide comparative insights as well as a deeper insight into the limitations and successes of the organisation style. Theories and explanations emerged as the work progressed.

I was fortunate to lay my hands on the works of feminist thinkers like Harding (1987, 1991), Hartsock (1983), Haraway (1988) and Code (1995), whose writings have made much easier my argument for studying the organisation that I was already a part of.

Feminist research, for over a decade now, has critiqued the methods of androcentric conventional science and knowledge creation. The strongest support for using a case study of one collective with comparative insights from two others from different parts of the country came from Haraway's (1988) work on 'situated knowledge'. In her response to the *science question in feminism*, she highlights the privilege of what she calls the 'partial perspective' or 'situated knowledge'. She argues that individual ideologies and perspectives shape one's understanding of the social world. Haraway is critical of both relativism and totalisation, regarding them 'mirror twins' and "god tricks" promising vision from everywhere and nowhere ... common myths in rhetoric surrounding Science' (ibid.: 584). She argues that it is in partial perspective or situated knowledge that 'the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests' (ibid.). She does not take a postmodernist view that all knowledge is constructed and that there is no 'real world', but talks of 'situated' knowledge'. Situated knowledge argues for the rejection of the objective, value-neutral observer who is distanced from the object of research (Code 1995) and argues for knowledge to originate from positions that are partial, located and, therefore, accountable (Llewelyn 2007: 300).

Standpoint feminism additionally came to my rescue to justify the 'what' and 'how' of this inquiry into women's non-hierarchical experiments. According to Hartsock (1983), a 'feminist standpoint' refers to a position of interest and engagement. This does not imply a bias. Her plea was that 'feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women's material activity ... a step towards the redefining and restructuring of society as a whole on the basis of women's activity' (ibid.: 304). This study originated from the experience with women's experiments with non-hierarchical organising, which was grounded in the collective ideological position that hierarchy symbolised patriarchy and domination. Women's collective organising for social change aimed at empowerment through relocating sites of power. The 'what' and 'how' of this inquiry certainly challenged conventional research and knowledge.

Choosing a topic and case for study depends on the research interests of the researcher, theoretical assumptions, how representative that group is of all such groups and, most importantly, the willingness of the group to permit access to the researcher. My past association with the collective and earlier involvement with a project aimed at studying Bailancho Saad's critique of tourism strengthened the argument for the choice of organisation for it allowed for a deeper investigation into the organisation's activities, processes and outcomes. It may be pertinent to note here that a male researcher in the 1990s may not have been able to have the same rapport with or access to information from the members as I did, as the collective at that time had male supporters for public programmes and workshops, but men were not allowed during the weekly Saturday meetings. According to Bosk (1979), the privilege of being an observer is a gift presented to the researcher by his host and subjects. It was with this background that Bailancho Saad was chosen as the prime study site.

### 'SELF AS INFORMANT'

I have drawn from the work of Mascarenhas-Keyes (1987) the value of using 'self as informant'. At the same time I have also been consciously adopting strategies to overcome the constraints highlighted by the same author: constraints brought on by 'permanent kinship and associational links' (ibid.: 180) as well as those brought on by the expectations of other members when I was often mistakenly perceived by them as part of the group. At various stages during my association with the organisation (as a researcher), the research was discussed; however, with regular attendance at meetings and participation in discussions, I would find myself more involved in the group as a member. Further, I was a member of the Goa State Commission for Women (GSCW) during 2006–09, and Bailancho Saad would refer several cases to GSCW. At some of the Bailancho Saad meetings, women whose cases had been referred to GSCW would be present and the dynamics in the group would be affected. For instance, I would be addressed as 'Madam' by the woman who had been assisted in her case by me as a member of GSCW.

Drawing once again from Mascarenhas-Keyes's (1987) concept of 'multiple-native strategy', as a researcher, I had to adopt a 'multiple-participant strategy'. For example, at GSCW there is a clear hierarchy in the seating arrangement, which is around the large glass-topped table of the chairperson of GSCW. Members sit along the sides flanking the chairperson, while those whose cases are called for hearings are seated across the table from the chairperson. In Bailancho Saad, while there are tables and chairs which are used by the staff during the rest of the week, during the weekly Saturdays meetings the chairs are piled up against the wall and members sit on the floor in a circle. The circular seating on the floor symbolically represented equality and non-hierarchy. There have been occasions during these meetings when my presence on the floor has caused a bit of discomfort to women who had sought assistance from me in my role as a member of GSCW. There have been times when a chair has been offered to me and I have made a very conscious effort to fit in. Unlike the case of Mascarenhas-Keyes (*ibid.*) where 'props' used were language and clothes, in this case I had to consciously use behaviour and mannerisms that would bridge the invisible barriers due to my 'multiple-participant role' and to make sure that the research exercise was not an 'arrogant enterprise' (Agar 1980: 41).

## THE 'HOW' OF EXPLORING WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

The methodology used for the case study of Bailancho Saad was a qualitative one and data was collected over a period of more than fifteen years. The fact that my affiliation with the collective extended over a long span of time enabled a deeper understanding of the finer nuances such as the changes in individuals' confidence and growth within the organisation, which could not have been learnt from interviews alone. While secondary sources such as reports, press releases and newsletters were also used, the prime tools of data collection were observation, discussions, in-depth interviews and personal narratives.

My role as a researcher often varied: I was a participant, an observer and a participant observer. My initial affiliation with the group was as a participant and subsequently I was involved in a study of the anti-tourism movement in Goa of which this collective

was a part. At this time, with the knowledge of the group, I began interviewing members and the study was made clear to the group. The interest in the unique organisational style grew with the affiliation with the collective and thorough observation of the processes.

The prime success of the organisation style that was observed was the confidence it built in individual members. Several women who had been observed to come to the group for assistance as victims of oppression, discrimination or violence of some sort over time became empowered to even assist other victims. The subject of non-hierarchical organising was taken up for study as a result of this experience with Bailancho Saad and the fact that there was very little literature available on the subject. I then ceased being only a participant and was, at times, only an observer or a participant observer. During some of the public meetings and programmes organised by Bailancho Saad, I was only an observer, while at other times I was a participant observer. Support again was drawn from Haraway's (1991) arguments for a self-reflective, politically involved knowledge-making process rooted in the researcher's feminist practice and her critique of the undue emphasis that conventional science lays on the neutral observer.

Regarding the role of the researcher, Gold (1958) explains that the researcher may be a complete participant, concealing his true identity and intentions from the group, and living entirely as they do (as in the case of Charles Booth's study of the poor<sup>3</sup>). However, in my experience, during the period of complete participation, the researcher had no intention to study the group and, therefore, was genuinely a participant during the period of affiliation with the group. Gold also speaks of 'observer-as-participant', which involves only limited participation, and 'participant-as-observer', which implies active involvement in the group, but where the group knows that the researcher is not really one of them and is aware of the purpose of the interaction. In my experience however, although the fact that the group was being researched was known to all in the group, often in the minutes of the meeting, when the list of members attending the meeting was made, my name was included along with the other members. Very often I was requested to undertake specific tasks such as draft letters from the organisation to various government offices, or assist in the organisation of programmes. Mayer talks of this aspect of fieldwork as the 'balanced reciprocity of relationships and information' (1975: 28). I, therefore, undertook

certain responsibilities for the organisation such as designing their invitations and banners, editing some of the letters to the press and other correspondence.

My role as researcher in this case study cuts across all the researcher role classifications (see Gans 1962; Denscombe 1999), as I have been at times a 'real' participant and on other occasions only an observer, that is, I was physically present at the event which was observed but did not really participate in it. Then there were occasions when my participation was determined by the research interest and I was a participant observer. Even during this, for certain programmes, I again was a 'real' participant and, after the programme, I reverted to being an observer or participant observer. In this case, I took on the role of an analyst of my own actions while being a real participant.

There was no situation, however, where my role as a researcher had to be kept secret. Consent was obtained from the group for the research. It was felt that, due to my previous relationship with the collective, revelation of my role as a researcher would not affect the naturalness of the setting in any significant manner. In this case, I obtained consent from the group to be participant observer and my identity as a researcher was openly recognised by those involved. Further, I took the form of 'shadowing' the group through normal processes, witnessing first hand and in intimate detail the organisation culture/events of interest.

The main reason why I have been studying the women's collective for so long is to observe the changes that take place over time and to ascertain the durability of the organisational style as organisation theory spoke only of hierarchy for attaining efficacy, efficiency and long-term dependability. In 2006, Bailancho Saad celebrated twenty years of its existence, which is longer than many hierarchical organisations stay alive today. By merely observing Bailancho Saad for a few meetings it would not have been possible to get a deep insight into the work or working of the group, even less its impact on the individual participants of the society in which it operates.

According to Worsley (1977: 89), quantitative methods are used when large populations are studied and do not require the researcher to be personally involved with the subjects. If personal involvement is important for the study or detailed information is required, then it will be possible to study only a few people. Worsley

argues for the use of qualitative methods as more valid as opposed to quantitative methods which claim reliability and representativeness. In quantitative research, respondents rarely have the opportunity to judge the veracity of the data collected as the researcher rarely gets back to them or presents to them the results of the research. But, in a case study as that of Bailancho Saad, it was important that the researched know what the findings are and are presented with the conclusions of the study. Finally, as Srinivas, Shah and Ramaswamy have said, 'the ultimate test of any method is the quality of the data generated by the methodology' (2002: *viii*). Speaking of research of this nature, they say, 'the outcome is the touchstone of research. The fieldworker can simpl[y] not afford to go wrong on facts' (*ibid.*).

In the case study of Bailancho Saad a variety of qualitative tools as well as secondary sources such as pamphlets, newsletters, press clippings and photographs were used to describe the experience of the organisation with non-hierarchical organising. In elucidating a situation as it is, I attempted to develop a theory of non-hierarchical organising. The hypotheses emerged from the research as it went on rather than being specified from the start and used as a guide to the kind of data that is collected. In this case study it was the experience of the collective's non-hierarchical organising that guided further research into the issue.

## HURDLES ENCOUNTERED IN FIELDING ONE'S OWN

While participant observation enables a researcher, as in this case, a better understanding of the organisation, its members, processes, etc., as also the evaluation of organisation outcomes, this methodology comes with dilemmas related to the reliability and validity of field notes that are based on such observation. Do the researcher's emotions and involvement with the subject of research affect the interpretation of the findings? Will a feminist emotion, as in this case, bring bias or will it allow for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive analysis? Will the researcher include information that may be in conflict with the researcher's own ideology? What does the researcher select to document and what gets ignored? What are the meanings drawn and how are they ascribed to information that is documented? There are issues of reconstruction based on field notes. How close to truth is this reconstruction? Does an alternative

reality get created? Does the researcher fall into a trap of essentialist interpretations?

Then, in participant observation, often the presence of the observer might result in changes in the setting or behaviour of those being observed. Additionally, participant observation often results in lower objectivity and, consequently, there are chances of biases entering the analysis. These challenges have to be consciously overcome by the participant observer. Finally, participant observation is demanding of the researcher's time, making the research process longer and very time-consuming.

A hurdle I faced in this study was related to collection of the necessary data. Like most women's collectives, the one studied too did not systematically document its experiences and even if reports, newsletters and other information were being published periodically, the collective did not preserve these systematically for reference, making the culling out of documentary evidence laborious.

## MAKING AN UMPIRE'S DECISION: SOME ATTEMPTS TO RID BIAS

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, my being a woman and my long association with the organisation even prior to my initiating research on collective organising did put me in an advantageous position in terms of having access to the organisation, the members' acceptance of the research and their openness to critical evaluation. Of course, the question of bias was often raised during academic presentations of this project. The insider-outsider dilemma that is faced by researchers studying their own society (see Bétéille and Madan 1975; Thapan 1998) was echoed in this study as well. Srinivas has warned that 'pedagogically it is very important to ensure that the disadvantages are minimized while the advantages are retained' (2009: 161). I was aware that biases might inadvertently creep in, but the fact that my guide (N. Jayaram) was male and was not associated with Bailancho Saad helped me develop the needed objectivity with his periodic questioning and through the discussions at the various presentations of my work.

Although this chapter does in many ways challenge the realm of conventional scientific objectivity, including the demands for value-neutral observation, it was important to maintain a level of

detachment from the organisation during the period of the research to eliminate bias. Therefore, the shift from active participant to observer and participant observer, as has been explained earlier in this chapter, was a deliberate strategy that was adopted to present a more objective picture of the realities faced in organising without a hierarchy.

## THE FIELDER'S FINAL NOTES

The uniqueness of an organisation or the subject of research justifies the use of case material of a single organisation in theoretical analysis. Feedback from various persons affiliated to the organisation studied is important to overcome the limitations of qualitative methods, namely, those arising out of the personal involvement of the researcher and to avoid any scope for bias. Triangulation using a combination of interviews, observation and secondary data such as press notes and publications of the organisation ensures to some extent the strengths of one tool compensate for the weaknesses, if any, of the other.

While there have been several experiments with collective organising, women's experiences with collective organising, in particular, have not been systematically documented or theorised. There has been some amount of research on women's collective organising in other parts of the world, but in India it remains a largely unexplored area. Besides, theory on organising has primarily focused on hierarchical systems of organising, making that body of knowledge blinded to women's lived experience. Yet narratives of empowerment expressed by women who have had experience with collective organising and participatory decision-making make such a study significant, as women's empowerment is currently a national priority.

To use a more inclusive lens by which we view or strive to know the social world we might have to explore newer sources and methodologies of knowledge production. We will have to go beyond the conventional knowledge production systems and explore alternative sources of knowledge and methodologies in the hope that these will be acknowledged as mainstream sources and methodologies of tomorrow. However, we have to recognise that alternative sources and methodologies may not necessarily mandate a more inclusive understanding of women.

## NOTES

1. This doctoral research was done under the guidance of N. Jayaram and was awarded the PhD in social sciences by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, in 2010. I am grateful for the comments on this chapter received from the discussant and participants at a seminar held in Shimla in March 2013, where an earlier version of this chapter was presented.

2. The full text of the study report is available online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/30334827/The-Tourism-Critique-and-Tourism-Movements-in-Goa> (accessed on 3 May 2017).

3. See <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/learn-more/the-booth-archive-at-lse-library> (accessed on 7 June 2017).

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