Caught Between Epistemology and Field-Conditions: Travails of Young Qualitative Policy Researchers in India

Sameer Pendharker
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, sameer.pendharker@gmail.com

Sneha Swami
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

Himali Mhatre
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

Subodh Wagle
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

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Abstract

The qualitative approach is immensely helpful in policy research as it provides a comprehensive, contextually grounded, and nuanced understanding of policy processes and issues. It is characterized by certain epistemological imperatives that demand the collection of rich, diverse data and a thick description of the context. However, conducting fieldwork to collect data required to fulfill these imperatives poses diverse and stiff challenges, especially for young policy researchers in the Indian context. In this background, this paper argues that, while epistemological principles require qualitative researchers to collect rich and diverse data, the researcher's social identity and the socio-political ground reality in the field pose significant challenges for young policy researchers in collecting field data. More specifically, the paper discusses the challenges posed by different elements of the researcher's social identity like economic class, caste, gender, and education. It also discusses the challenges posed by different elements of the socio-political ground reality in the field such as socio-economic inequality, gatekeeping, and by politics played by field-level actors like primary contacts, community leaders, participant groups, and public bureaucrats. It draws from the thematic analysis of fieldwork experiences documented (in the form of fieldnotes and different types of memos) by three Indian researchers (including two females) who were collecting qualitative data for three previous and separate qualitative research projects. This fieldwork was carried out in two different states in India. The discussion in this paper will prove helpful, especially to young qualitative researchers, in planning and executing their fieldwork in developing countries, especially in India.

Keywords

fieldwork challenges, India, researcher identity, field-level politics, socio-economic inequality

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Sameer Pendharker[1], Sneha Swami[2], Himali Mhatre[1], and Subodh Wagle[1]
[1]Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas,
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India
[2]Centre for Policy Studies, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India

The qualitative approach is immensely helpful in policy research as it provides a comprehensive, contextually grounded, and nuanced understanding of policy processes and issues. It is characterized by certain epistemological imperatives that demand the collection of rich, diverse data and a thick description of the context. However, conducting fieldwork to collect data required to fulfill these imperatives poses diverse and stiff challenges, especially for young policy researchers in the Indian context. In this background, this paper argues that, while epistemological principles require qualitative researchers to collect rich and diverse data, the researcher's social identity and the socio-political ground reality in the field pose significant challenges for young policy researchers in collecting field data. More specifically, the paper discusses the challenges posed by different elements of the researcher's social identity like economic class, caste, gender, and education. It also discusses the challenges posed by different elements of the socio-political ground reality in the field such as socio-economic inequality, gatekeeping, and by politics played by field-level actors like primary contacts, community leaders, participant groups, and public bureaucrats. It draws from the thematic analysis of fieldwork experiences documented (in the form of fieldnotes and different types of memos) by three Indian researchers (including two females) who were collecting qualitative data for three previous and separate qualitative research projects. This fieldwork was carried out in two different states in India. The discussion in this paper will prove helpful, especially to young qualitative researchers, in planning and executing their fieldwork in developing countries, especially in India.

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Introduction

The qualitative approach, subscribing to the social constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, is being increasingly used in public policy research (Pader, 2015; Sullivan, 2016; Yanow, 2017). This increased preference is rooted in the realization of the significance of the in-depth and rich understanding of policy issues provided by the qualitative approach (Maxwell, 2020). This also has a background of the increasing questioning of the utility of the reductionist quantitative approach for various reasons. However, the qualitative approach to research has certain epistemological core demands that are considered indispensable if its purported advantages are to materialize (Hammersley, 2007; Lub 2015). These core epistemological demands include the availability of contextually grounded, rich, and diverse data related to the phenomenon under study. This, in turn, requires access to a

diverse group of appropriate participants who would share – in a free, honest, and in-depth manner – their meanings and interpretations of the phenomenon being studied by the researcher.

Because of these tall demands, carrying out qualitative research generally, but more specifically in the Global South and India, poses unique challenges for qualitative policy researchers (Gobo, 2022; Hsiung, 2015). While the literature on barriers to data collection largely focuses on the Global North and experiences of working in the Global South are shared mainly by the researchers from the Global North (Anderson, 2017; Dutta, 2019; Schatz et al., 2015), this paper brings in fresh insights in this regard based on the experiences of three qualitative policy researchers from India of their experiences of fieldwork conducted in India. This paper argues that, while epistemological principles require qualitative researchers to collect rich and diverse data, the researcher's social identity and the socio-political ground reality in the field pose significant challenges for young policy researchers in collecting field data.

The present paper shares the results of the research responding to the research question: what barriers are faced by young researchers in collecting qualitative data during fieldwork in India? This is a conceptual paper where the authors reflect upon their experiences conducting fieldwork in India. It mainly draws from the analysis of documentation of experiences of three Indian researchers, two female, and one male, during the fieldwork for collecting data for three previous qualitative research projects with broader scopes. These three research projects were carried out separately in two different states in India. The primary data collection methods undertaken by all three researchers for their respective initial projects were semi-structured interviews and participant as well as non-participant observations. All three researchers made diligent efforts to document their respective processes of data collection and analysis by writing extensive field-notes and memos of different types such as methodological and reflexive memos. This documentation of data collection processes for the three initial projects was used as the main source of data for this present paper – written jointly by three researchers and their common supervisor. The thematic analysis conducted separately and explicitly for this present paper involved two rounds of coding. The initial, less abstract open codes that were identified from the data, for example, included barriers due to caste, barriers due to gender, and barriers due to politics among the participants. Then researchers clubbed these open codes into a pattern code that was labeled as the "researcher's social identity" to evolve the first argument. Another main argument, around the abstract concept of "socio-political ground reality," was evolved by clubbing together the open codes such as barriers due to politics among participants, barriers due to gatekeeping, and barriers due to socio-economic inequality.

The paper begins with a compact review of the literature on the theme of challenges in qualitative data collection. This is followed by a brief section describing the context of the fieldwork conducted by the three researchers. The next two sections present the evidence and argumentation in support of the above-mentioned argument of this paper. The discussion section sheds light on the cross-case analysis of findings presented in the two previous sections. It also compares the findings of this paper with those in the existing literature on the topic. The last short section presents a summary of the paper and some concluding remarks.

Literature Review

The main tenets of the qualitative-interpretivist epistemology put certain demands on the data collection tasks for qualitative research projects such as the richness of data, diversity in participants, and the thick description especially of the context of the phenomenon (Bryman 2016; Miles et al., 2018). While fulfilling these demands, qualitative researchers face many challenges. The literature presents a multi-stranded discussion on this topic. The first strand in

the discussion on the challenges in the collection of qualitative data pertains to ideas of positionality and reflexivity (Bourke, 2014; Doucet & Mauthner, 2002). The term reflexivity refers to reflections by a researcher on her thinking and emotions and their influence on the data collection process. On the other hand, the positionality of the researcher is determined by her socio-economic identity and how the research participants perceive the researcher concerning themselves (Bourke, 2014; Doucet & Mauthner, 2002). It effectively shapes the relationships between the researcher and the research participants (Bourke, 2014). The literature also discusses how a researcher should become conscious of her positionality and how she should identify the biases arising from it by incorporating reflexivity in the research. The primary arguments of these papers are rooted in ethical concerns and whether the researcher is doing justice to the participants. In addition to the issue of the reflexivity and positionality of the researcher, the literature also discusses practical problems faced by researchers during the data collection process (Bahn & Weatherill, 2013; Orange 2016). These practical challenges in data collection are defined in terms of the problems that researchers encounter in the field (Harris, 2022). These challenges are addressed either under the general banner of fieldwork challenges or as the challenges specific to developing countries (Bahn & Weatherill, 2013; Bamu et al., 2016).

In the literature on practical challenges to data collection, challenges connected with the social identity of the researcher are frequently discussed. For example, the literature points out that the gender identities of researchers act as barriers to access certain groups of participants, especially for securing their candid responses (Qasim, 2021). The gender of researchers also plays a role in shaping another major challenge for researchers in the field – the safety of the researcher, especially in unfamiliar settings – though often it remains underemphasized and underreported (Sampson & Thomas, 2003). During the fieldwork, both male and female researchers may encounter sexual assaults (Warren, 1988) or sexual harassment (Coffey, 2018). Coming to another marker of social identity, that is, race, Brown (2011) reports how her race played a role in all stages of her ethnographic research – from choosing a research question to finding an appropriate field site to navigating in the field, and making sense of generated data. Finlay (2008) draws attention to the power disparity and potential conflict that could arise between the researcher and participants during the research process due to their different gender and racial identities.

Drawing parallels with race, caste – a dominant marker of social identity in India and other parts of South Asia – plays an important role in the fieldwork, especially that which is conducted by qualitative researchers (Patel, 2017). The Hindu society is hierarchically divided by the caste system, particularly in South Asian nations like India and Nepal, where pre-reflexive caste and gender discrimination is a widely reported phenomena (Dahal, 2003). The caste system demonstrates peculiar cultural characteristics including its hierarchical structure with a complex cascade of castes and sub-castes, hereditary basis for caste membership, emphasis on endogamy, and caste-based ideas of purity and impurity (Dahal, 2003). The relevance of caste for the fieldwork conducted in the Indian subcontinent lies in the regulation of people's daily lives by the caste system in this region. Khanal (2021) reported that the Brahminic and patriarchal Nepalese society and its hierarchically segregated caste-based structure influenced his thoughts and actions during the research fieldwork. In another incident, researchers had to drop several questions about caste and religion because, during the pilot study, the research teams noticed discomfort among the participants while answering these questions (Chaudhuri & Morash, 2019).

As a major source of challenges to qualitative data collection, the issue of access to the field is central to discussions on qualitative research. In qualitative research, access to a field means access to two entities: field sites and participants or respondents (Riese, 2019). Johl and Renganathan (2010) define access issues in terms of practical problems that need to be resolved

to gain and maintain access to field sites and field participants. In recent years, this understanding of the problem of access has come under some criticism from authors like Riese (2019). Riese defines access in relational terms wherein the researcher and participant both relate to each other when access is achieved. The author further argues that access is dependent on the researcher's ability to access the field and research participants. As such, access is always negotiated continuously on the field. The author argues against the notion of "gaining and maintaining" access as it may prompt the researcher to see access only in terms of practical or strategic problems. This notion of gaining access may prompt researchers to think of access in terms of a stage in the research process that needs to be dealt with. Rather, it is a process where the researchers' role in positioning themselves with the participants also defines access which is usually neglected in the literature (Riese, 2019). However, the notion of access as a practical problem continues to hold ground in the academic literature to date. Striepe and Cunningham (2022) discuss gaining and maintaining access to the field and present their detailed description of the "intermediaries" between the researcher and the research participants. They define intermediaries as important persons who may act as a barrier and/or a facilitator to the interactions between the researcher and research participants (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). Of the three kinds of intermediaries mentioned by them – gatekeepers, guides, and ghosts – gatekeepers feature prominently in the literature. Borrowing from Clark (2011), Striepe and Cunningham (2022) define gatekeepers as comprising "individuals, groups, and organizations that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants" (p. 277). Johl and Renganathan (2010) emphasize the importance of "gatekeepers" in gaining access to the field, especially in the case of qualitative research that requires continued and "deep" access to the field settings and participants. The authors discuss how gatekeepers influence the access of researchers to participants by providing and/or curbing access to certain participants.

The power dynamics in the field also play a role in determining access to participants, especially in the case of participants who have a power balance in their favor vis-à-vis the researcher. In the literature, such powerful participants, identified as elite, are regarded as the most challenging group to approach, both in developing and advanced industrialized nations. This is attributed to their busy schedules and their use of gatekeepers (like secretaries and assistants) who are paid to keep away outsiders (Mikecz, 2012). The challenges in conducting interviews of such elite include selecting the location and time for an interview, presenting oneself strategically, dealing with the power tactics, designing strategically appropriate questions, getting detailed and honest answers, resisting manipulation, building rapport, and safeguarding the research and the researcher (Beamer, 2002; Mikecz, 2012). The academic background of a researcher may also act as a hindrance, especially while interviewing elites who do not appreciate the academic motivations and obligations of the researcher (Welch et al., 2002).

Regarding the methodological approach of the articles discussing such challenges, it was observed that the studies taking the qualitative research approach tend to be mostly concerned about the issues of reflexivity and positionality, while the articles employing the mixed methods approach emphasize practical challenges in the field (Mathee et al., 2010; Teye, 2012). Since the articles based on a mixed methods approach do not necessarily subscribe to a singular philosophical worldview for the research, the discussion on challenges in data collection in such articles remains a practical concern only.

Thus, among multiple field-level challenges that can affect qualitative data collection, two broad categories of field-level challenges feature prominently in the literature. The first category of challenges relates to the demands of positionality and reflexivity of the researcher. The second category of challenges pertains to gaining and maintaining access to the field sites and research participants. It is important to note here that most of the journal articles discussing field challenges faced by researchers in developing countries rely on the experiences of

researchers coming from developed countries. It is then no surprise that the challenges such as "the lack of capable local research staff" find prominence in discussions in the literature (Harris, 2022; Mathee et al., 2010). Similarly, while there seems to be a sufficient discussion on the barriers induced by race, the challenges posed by the caste system find little mention in this literature. In this background, this paper discusses the practical challenges faced in developing countries by qualitative researchers who are from developing countries. The paper posits that researchers from developing countries carrying out research in their home countries face a unique set of challenges that are embedded in the field settings in these countries.

The main argument discussed in the paper is aimed at investigating the field challenges to the collection of qualitative data posed by two broad sets of factors – the elements of the social identity of the researchers and the elements of the socio-political ground reality in the field. The argument is articulated as follows: while epistemological principles require qualitative researchers to collect rich and diverse data, the researcher's social identity and socio-political ground reality in the field pose significant challenges before young policy researchers while conducting the fieldwork.

Context: Field Work of Three Researchers

This paper is based on experiences gathered by three researchers during their fieldwork for collecting qualitative data. The fieldwork was conducted in two different Indian states for the research projects in three sectors – the electricity distribution sector, the urban water service sector, and the health policy sector. All three researchers came from urban, middle-class backgrounds and had the same interdisciplinary master's degree from a government institute of technology. All three were doctoral candidates from the same institute of technology that carried a national as well as international reputation and was considered an elite institute in the country. The details of the three researchers are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1
Contextual information of three researchers

	Gender	Educational Background	Research Area	Duration and location of the fieldwork
Researcher 1	Female	Ph.D. discipline: Policy studies (Bachelor's in Electrical Engineering)	Electricity distribution sector	Five Months (In three phases) in the state of Maharashtra
Researcher 2	Female	Ph.D. discipline: Development studies (Bachelor's in Electrical Engineering)	Health policy sector	Six months (In two phases) in the state of Maharashtra
Researcher 3	Male	Ph.D. discipline: Development studies (Bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering)	Urban water services sector	Six months (In two phases) in the state of Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh

The topic of the doctoral research of Researcher 1 pertained to the last-mile delivery issues in the electricity distribution sector. The participants for her research included frontline employees of a public electricity distribution utility (PEDU), such as engineers and wiremen (electricians), the majority of whom were males. This PEDU was operating in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. She conducted fieldwork in seven local offices of the PEDU, studying technical tasks carried out by these frontline workers. She also studied interactions of these workers with consumers in local offices as well as at consumer premises, including slum colonies.

The topic of the doctoral research of Researcher 2 focused on the perceptions of lay people of various physical phenomena involved in the spread of the COVID-19 virus. She conducted her fieldwork in the coastal town of Alibag in the western Indian state of Maharashtra in two phases lasting for about six months (October 2020 to February 2021 and August 2021 to September 2021). In all, she interviewed twenty-four participants coming from different categories of people who were operating during the pandemic at three broad categories of public sites – commercial establishments, academic institutions, and the offices and bus stands of a public transport utility.

The topic of the doctoral research of Researcher 3 focused on problems around the delivery of water services slum colonies. The fieldwork for this doctoral research project was carried out in six diverse slum colonies in the city of Raipur in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh (from December 2020 to February 2021) as well as in four diverse slum colonies in the megacity of Mumbai, located in the western Indian state of Maharashtra (January to early March 2020). The participants in the research consisted mainly of slum residents along with local community leaders, heads of NGOs, municipal officials, municipal councilors, and experts in the related domain. The field setting was rife with an acute lack of access to water, resource scarcity, grass-roots level politics, and rivalry among various communities.

Researcher's Identity and Fieldwork Challenges

This section is devoted to the discussion on the field challenges in the collection of qualitative data posed by the elements of the social identity of researchers. The elements of the social identity discussed here include economic class, caste, gender, and education.

Challenges posed by Differences in the Economic Class

The first marker of the social identity of a researcher discussed here is the economic class or stratum to which the researcher belongs. At the beginning of the interview with a wireman of the PEDU in the state of Maharashtra, he inquired about the accommodation of the female researcher. He was surprised to know that the researcher rented an apartment with two bedrooms for her family of two people. He remarked that the researcher instead could stay in a smaller one-bedroom apartment and that she was being extravagant in spending a large sum of money for just two people. From this information, he seemed to have surmised that the researcher came from a higher economic stratum with a lavish lifestyle that he did not approve of. The participant did realize that the researcher was uncomfortable with his criticism. This incident disturbed the prior rapport between the researcher and the participant. Thus, the higher economic class perceived by the participant based on the information on rent paid by the researcher led to the creation of barriers in the form of laconic responses and superficial information shared by the participant, which affected the quality of data.

In another incidence, the female researcher working on the COVID-19 study in the state of Maharashtra also met challenges in data collection due to her economic class. In India, the COVID vaccine was made available by the government through an online registration system

that required online booking of a prior appointment for vaccination. However, despite its phenomenal strides in the information technology sector, India suffers from what is called as "digital divide": a large and already marginalized section of the population still lacks access to the digital world (Ayappan et al., 2022). In its stark and unfortunate manifestation, this digital divide also affected the COVID vaccination program, denying vaccination to a large section of poor and marginalized communities – though they were especially vulnerable to the virus infection – because they did not have access to the online registration system.

One participant was an old driver operating an auto-rickshaw (a small three-wheeler public transport vehicle) even during the period of the surge in the COVID cases in the town, which made him extremely vulnerable to the COVID infection. During the interview, he explained that, despite his old age and high susceptibility to the infection, he could not get the vaccination as he did not have internet access or even a smartphone. At that juncture, the participant asked the young researcher whether she had been vaccinated to which the researcher responded in affirmative. After knowing that the researcher had the vaccination, the participant was so agitated that he simply refused to continue the interview which was going smoothly until then. The participant was visibly distressed by the inequity and injustice involved in the situation wherein the young researcher, with much lower susceptibility to infection, could get vaccination just because she could afford a smartphone and internet connection. Thus, the higher economic class of the researcher as perceived by the participant based on the researcher's ability to avail of vaccination ruined the rapport between the researcher and the participant and, thus, adversely affected data collection.

Another participant in the same study was a mechanic in a public transportation organization. While explaining the financial hardships caused by the long lockdown periods, he asked the young researcher about the professions and jobs of her parents. Knowing that her mother was a teacher and her father was working in a large engineering enterprise as an officer, he surmised that she came from a middle-class family and told her that there was no point in explaining these hardships to her as she, being from a middle-class family, would not be able to understand the suffering of his family. Thus, the economic class of the researcher adversely affected the collection of rich and diverse data required for qualitative research.

Challenges Posed by the Caste Differences

As mentioned before, caste is a major element of the social identity of an individual in Indian society. The historically entrenched caste system has a significant grip on daily life in Indian society even now. In recent times, caste identity has become one of the main planks in electoral politics in India. The history and the present politics have made caste an ideologically intense and emotionally charged issue, often affecting interactions among people in their daily lives (Yengde, 2019). As a result, the caste of the researcher when identified by a participant affects the process of collection of rich and diverse field data. In many parts of India, the caste of an individual is deciphered from the family name (or surname as it is called in India) of the individual as the family names closely correspond to the caste (Patel, 2017).

A participant in the research on water access in the urban informal settlements in the central Indian state belonged to the so-called lower caste. He was describing the connection between caste and water access and arguing that the water access problems were faced acutely by people belonging to the so-called lower caste. The interview went well until the participant asked the family name of the researcher. After hearing the family name of the researcher, who was from a so-called upper caste, the participant immediately said, "How come you are here [in a lower-caste slum]?" Once he deciphered the caste of the researcher from his family name, the participant started avoiding any reference to caste while discussing the water access issue.

It seemed that he could not trust the motivations of the researcher, who belonged to the so-called upper caste, for collecting information related to injustice to people from the so-called lower castes. Thus, the caste difference between the researcher and participant created mistrust in the relationship affecting the collection of data.

The female researcher working on the COVID study met the caste-induced barrier in a different way. The caste system, as mentioned before, is characterized by the ideas about purity and impurity covering the diverse activities and practices in daily life. There is a tendency among people from the so-called higher castes to stigmatize the diet of meat and fish which is associated with the allegedly "dirty" practices of people from the so-called lower castes.

When the researcher asked a participant (a shopkeeper) about the spread of the COVID-19 disease, he started blaming local people from the Koli caste, who were involved in the fishing business, as responsible for the spread of the virus in the town. He claimed that the pandemic was the result of such people eating meat and flesh. He also mentioned that the local people from the fishing community were less educated and stupid. Hence, they did not understand the gravity of the pandemic and did not comply with the rules prescribed by the government for COVID containment. After making such derogatory statements, he became aware of the caste identity of the researcher, again from the family name she had shared with him beforehand. When he realized that the researcher belonged to the caste that ate fish and was closely associated with the fishing community, the participant insisted on ending the interview because he had to attend to customers in the shop. He, however, tried to clarify his remarks by saying "You people (referring to the researcher's caste) also eat fish and meat but you are knowledgeable people." Thus, the embarrassment suffered by the participant over his remarks stigmatizing the diet of the caste to which the researcher belonged led to an abrupt end of the interview, preempting the possibility of getting valuable data on the participants' experience of other aspects of the pandemic.

Thus, the caste of the local researchers in India hindered the data collection process in the case of these two qualitative researchers.

Challenges Posed by the Gender of the Researcher

Like class and caste, gender, another key marker of the social identity of the researcher, also creates significant barriers to data collection by qualitative researchers. The barriers created by gender are rooted in the gendered roles, gendered expectations, and gendered norms mainly about cross-gender interactions in society (Diwan & Menezes, 1992). For example, women in Indian society are expected to get married at a younger age and they are expected to follow certain norms including those related to their attire. In certain parts of the country, a married woman is expected to wear a mangal sutra – a necklace with black beads. Similarly, the norms pertaining to gender roles required that men would be the main breadwinners and would be mainly responsible for financial matters, whereas women will restrict themselves to homemaking duties.

The male researcher had to suffer the loss of valuable data because of the gendered norms governing cross-gender interactions in society. He was conducting household interviews in the informal settlements in the city of Chhattisgarh state, which is known to still practice acute gender discrimination (Mohanty & Biswal, 2007). As his research question pertained to the issue of difficulties in accessing water for household purposes, he planned to carry out detailed interviews with women in households who bore the main responsibility of securing water for their families. The male researcher was told, "Come later, as there is no one in the household to talk to at this moment. . . . My mister (husband) is out currently; come later in the evening." This happened multiple times. Despite significant efforts to convince the members

of these households, the researcher, being male, was denied interviews with womenfolk in the community.

In another serious incident, the female researcher working in the state of Maharashtra was interviewing a female participant who inquired about the marital status of the researcher. The participant could see that the researcher was of the age when she was expected to be married but did not wear a mangal-sutra (i.e., a necklace with black beads). Though the researcher said that she was not married, the participant did not believe her and tried to physically check whether the researcher wore any Mangalsutra. Shocked by this unexpected and unprecedented action of the participant, the researcher went blank for a few moments. It took some time for the researcher to calm herself and continue with the interview. After listening to the audio recording of the interview, the researcher realized that she could not ask follow-up questions to the participant as she was in a state of shock after apparently regaining her composure.

The gendered expectations affected data collection during the interaction with another participant differently. In response to the question about the adequacy and quality of the medical treatment for COVID patients in the local hospital, a female participant continued to narrate in detail the effects of COVID-19 on the menstrual cycle and sexual harassment faced by young women in hospitals during the COVID-19 treatment. Despite several prompts from the researcher to move to other aspects of the treatment, the participant continued to elaborate on these two points, affecting the possibility of obtaining valuable data on other aspects of the treatment and even other aspects of the research question. Thus, the gender of the female researcher prompted the female participant to linger on a limited range of topics, significantly affecting the diversity of the data.

One of the major challenges to data collection that pertain to the gender of the researcher is the safety of the researchers, especially female researchers. This was very relevant in the case of the female researcher working on the issues in the electricity distribution sector, which is highly male-dominated. More so because most of the frontline workers (whose work-life was the topic of the research) were male. This especially became relevant as the duties of these wiremen included working in the night-time shift to urgently attend to the faults in the network which caused interruptions in the electric supply. Aware of the safety issues involved, the wiremen refused to allow the female researcher to accompany them during night duty. As a result, the researcher could not conduct non-participant observation during the night duty of wiremen, which was a crucial part of their work life. The wiremen also refused to take the female researcher to sensitive areas, known to witness violence by consumers defaulting payments.

The norms about gender roles do not expect women to take financial responsibilities for the family. These norms affected the fieldwork of the female researcher working on the COVID pandemic. The participant who was a mechanic in the public transportation agency refused to elaborate on the financial hardships caused by the long lockdown periods by pointing at her gender and saying, "You women won't be able to understand these matters."

Thus, the gender of the researcher raised significant challenges to field data collection by the researchers of both genders.

Challenges Posed by the Educational Qualifications

For a long time in independent India, a formal educational qualification has been considered a key to securing, high-paying jobs, especially in public organizations. A formal educational qualification is an important element of identity or status and carries not just social but economic, political, and even emotional relevance in modern Indian society. As a further complication, academic qualifications in the disciplines of physical sciences, technology, and

engineering are considered of higher status as compared to qualifications in the disciplines of liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences. And within these disciplines of higher status, the qualifications from certain elite institutions – considered as of national and international reputes – are considered as having unassailable value.

This marker of identity did come to both haunt and help these researchers. During the interview, a participant, who was a language teacher in a school, inquired about the educational qualification of the researcher studying the COVID pandemic. When he came to know that the researcher had a qualification from the engineering discipline, he was reluctant to participate in the interview. He expressed that he had a limited understanding of the physical phenomena related to the virus which were studied by students from the "science" discipline while he had pursued graduation from the "liberal arts" discipline. He said, "The virus is too small. We cannot see it. I have my doubts. Me being an art student, I don't understand it that much. You being from a science background, you will know it already."

Thus, the academic discipline of the researcher shaped the participant's perception of his own ability to provide useful information and affected the quantum and quality of data that he provided during the interview.

Another participant, after coming to know that this researcher came from an elite technological institution, was also reluctant to continue with the interview. Explaining this reluctance, he clarified that though he had read and secured significant information about the virus and pandemic, his knowledge would prove superficial for the research conducted by the member of this elite institution of the country.

As against this, in the case of the female researcher working in the male-dominated sector of the electricity distribution sector, despite her gender, she could command respect from the male wiremen and their male supervisors (who were engineers) because, first, she had a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and, second, a master's degree from an elite technology institution that was considered as having national as well as international repute, though her Ph.D. was in the "soft" discipline of public policy. This certainly facilitated her efforts to secure data.

Thus, the educational qualifications did raise barriers for the qualitative researchers, though in one case the qualifications helped the researcher.

Socio-Political Ground Reality in the Field and Fieldwork Challenges

Taking ahead the examination of the argument of this paper, this section is devoted to the discussion on the field challenges in the collection of qualitative data posed by the second set of factors – elements of the socio-political ground reality in the field. Here, the concept of the socio-political ground reality in the field is characterized by the elements like politics played by different key actors like primary contacts, leaders of the local communities, participants from rival communities, and participants from the public bureaucracy. Another characteristic discussed in this section is the socio-economic inequality suffered by participants.

Challenges Posed by Gatekeeping by Primary Contacts

This first factor pertains to the primary contacts who help researchers identify and then reach potential participants from the local communities for interviewing. These primary contacts often are influential members of the community or outsiders who possess good connections with actors inside as well as outside the community of participants. As a result, they play a critical role in the field in helping researchers establish working relationships with participants in the research. The efforts of these primary contacts to control access of

researchers to participants and, thus, dictate the choice of participants are called here as gatekeeping. In the case of the researchers writing this paper, the primary contacts, at times, attempted to restrict access of the researchers to certain categories of participants. These efforts were driven by their urge to retain control over the researchers and their activities in the community so that these activities would not adversely affect the political or economic interests of these primary contacts.

At one of the slum locations, one primary contact for the male researcher was a member of a locally active group of young schoolteachers who were affiliated with a people's movement active in the state. The school was run by this movement. When the researcher sensed the gatekeeping efforts by this primary contact, he explained to the contact the need to capture diversity in data by reaching out to different participants. He also explained that moving around the physical space in the settlement was a part of the research and observations made during these walks were equally crucial to data collection. However, the primary contact remained adamant about restricting the pool of participants to schoolteachers and members of the movement. On asking the reason for this, she said, "If we are seen moving with outside people, suspicions may be raised about our work by some residents. That is why it is much easier and safe to take our teachers and workers as participants." Thus, gatekeeping by the primary contact, driven by the politics to protect the interests of the movement, restricted the choice of participants for the researcher, leading to the loss of valuable data.

Challenges Posed by Gatekeeping by Public Bureaucrats

Like the primary contacts, the higher-level authorities in a public organization resorted to gatekeeping and, thus, creating barriers to the data collection by the researcher studying the COVID pandemic. The researcher was studying the effect of the COVID pandemic on the employees of the public transport utility operating public transport buses in the town. The researcher was especially interested in talking to the drivers and conductors (who were responsible for issuing tickets as well as for the safety of passengers). These frontline workers of the public transport utility, who were plying crowded buses across the town during the pandemic, were exposed to the serious risk of infection. However, the higher authorities of the public transport utility denied permission to interview the drivers and conductors plying the buses. The reason shared by the authorities informally was their apprehension that these frontline workers might "bad-mouth" the utility and higher authorities of the utility. Thus, the gatekeeping by the higher authorities, who were afraid of misinformation by the frontline workers, created barriers to the data collection by the researcher.

Challenges Posed by Politics among Community Leaders

The politics among local community leaders also posed barriers to conducting the fieldwork by the male researcher. The slum colonies consisted of multiple ethnic and religious communities such as Christians, Hindus, Muslims, other backward castes and tribal communities, and scheduled caste communities including the migrant population from the state of Odisha. In the colonies with such socio-cultural diversity, the role of community leaders was crucial in getting access to participants in these communities as well as in developing working relationships with these participants. There was antagonism based on caste and language differences, rooted in historical factors, among these communities. In addition, leaders of some of these communities were engaged in intense rivalry sparked by the need to protect their own interests in the local clientelist and electoral politics. The researcher was denied interviews by the participants from one community at the behest of their leader. This was prompted by her rivalry with the leader of another community whose members had already participated in the

interviews with the researcher. Thus, the politics among the community leaders rooted in their efforts to protect their respective political interests affected the data collection efforts of the researcher.

Challenges Posed by Politics among Participants

The researchers also suffered from the politics among different groups of participants, which posed barriers while conducting the fieldwork. In one of the slum colonies studied by the male researcher, there were plans for the re-development of a local slum colony by a state government agency. This kindles hope among members of the slum community that they would get apartments in the newly constructed building. This was a lifetime opportunity and naturally flared intense politics among the local communities from which the researcher drew the pool of participants. The research was focused on water issues and had nothing to do with housing issues; similarly, the researcher had no connections with people involved in the rehabilitation efforts. Still, the mere presence and activities of the researcher in the community led to suspicion among the participants about his intentions and activities. As a result, a group of participants kept track of the researcher's interactions by following the researcher on a bike when the researcher was visiting different areas in the slum colony for conducting interviews with participants from other groups. These suspecting participants also tried to interfere in the data collection process by accusing the participants from the other groups that they were sharing information about the allocation of the apartments with the researcher with selfish motives. One of the suspecting participants said the following to the participant who was being interviewed. "Why are you telling these things to these people? These are all small issues. Why don't you tell them that there are no street lights on the road? Why are you weeping on selfish issues?".

Thus, the politics among different groups of participants, rooted in the competition to secure apartments in the redeveloped building, acted as a bottleneck in capturing data from participants from other groups at the slum site, therefore affecting the richness of overall data.

Challenges Posed by Politics in the Public Organizations

As mentioned before, one researcher was studying the working conditions of frontline workers of the PEDU, which was a public organization. The internal politics in this public organization led to the creation of a barrier to data collection by the researcher. More specifically, the researcher was interested in collecting information on the impact on frontline workers of the new policy of outsourcing some tasks to private contractors. For the research, she needed to understand the distribution of tasks among the public workers and workers of the private contractors and had no interest in getting information about the financial terms of the contract. However, employees of the PEDU declined to share this information desired by the researchers. For example, the discomfort of the public bureaucrats was visible when they were asked questions about the work distribution between the PEDU employees and contractors' employees and mechanisms to hold the contractors accountable. They tried to fudge the issues by giving evasive answers such as "We do the adjustment" or "This only works due to trust between two parties." This denial was rooted in the complex internal politics within PEDU created by the opposition by the trade unions to the practice of outsourcing as well as the accusation by consumer organizations and trade unions of financial misdeeds against the officials allocating the contracts. Thus, the internal politics in public organizations led to the creation of barriers to data collection by the researcher.

Challenges Posed by Socio-Economic Inequality

The second major factor mentioned in this argument was the socio-economic inequality in the field. More specifically, the socio-economic inequality suffered by individual research participants or by communities to which participants belonged posed barriers to data collection. Acute socio-economic inequality manifests in a diverse and often unexpected manner. The communities residing in the slum colonies were not just denied basic services like water but were also under the constant threat of eviction and demolition of their makeshift dwellings. As a result, the main concern of these communities was to secure some kind of tenure for their dwellings. This threat of homelessness and resultant immense misery was so overwhelming for them that they were least concerned about access to water, which is otherwise considered a need for basic survival. In one of the slum colonies, the inhabitants were given temporary tenure rights to the land on which their dwellings were located. However, after the expiry of the period of tenure, the concerned authorities refused to renew the tenure. As a result, when the researcher started talking about water access, one female participant from the colony responded by saying: "Brother, we don't have any issues [with water access], you just help us to get our lands back". When the researcher explained that it was not within his control to get her the tenure, she said, "Then what are you going to do with this information". The researcher told her that the information would be part of his academic report and might help portray the problems and hardships that she was facing including the problem of lack of land rights. Though she finally seemed to understand what the researcher was doing, her face betrayed the despair and sadness she felt. She cooperated fully during the interview and gave some details regarding water usage and problems related to it but kept bringing the conversation back to tenure. This certainly diverted the discussion from the topic of research and led to a lot of dross in the collected data.

In the case of female researcher working on electricity service issues, her participants assumed she would solve their problems in the future. One of her participants, a PEDU wireman, said while introducing her to other wiremen, "Madam is here to see what problems we face; I am sure that in the future she will join a higher position in the company (PEDU) and solve our problems." Their responses were coloured with the notion that the researcher will be in a position to provide them with direct help later on. Thus, socio-economic inequality led to undue expectations from the researcher. But when the researcher dispelled the misconception, the enthusiasm of participants to share the information that the researcher desired reduced, affecting the quality of the data collected.

Discussion: Further Insights and Nuances

Taking a Comparative View

This section presents nuances and insights emerging from the comparisons among the findings across different categories of causal factors. These comparisons provide further insights into these challenges and their sources.

The findings show that three factors played a major role in restricting access of researchers to a specific group of participants. While the gender of the male researcher led to the denial of access to female participants, the political conflict among different groups of participants led to interference in the interviews of some participants. Third, gatekeeping by the primary contacts restricted access for the researcher to some participants in the slum communities: because of the gatekeeping by public bureaucrats, the researcher could not interview the lower-level employees of the public organization. Further, two major factors did not allow or restricted data collection on a specific dimension of the research topic. The first

such factor was the caste identity of a researcher that prompted a participant not to elaborate on the caste angle of the problem. The second factor was the politics in the public organization that did not allow the collection of data regarding some aspects of the practice of outsourcing.

The findings presented in the previous sections demonstrate some uniformities and expected patterns in working on these factors, however, at times, there were a few surprises and anomalies. When it comes to the gender-induced factors, as expected, both the female researchers were questioned over their marital status, while the male researcher did not encounter such inquiry, although all three researchers were of the same age. Similarly, the academic background had positive implications for the researcher working in the electricity distribution sector but created barriers for the researcher working in the health policy sector. Regarding caste, in the case of the researcher working in the water services sector, the so-called high caste of the researcher led to an adverse reaction from the participant and put a limitation on the data shared by him; whereas, in the case of the researcher working in the health policy sector, the participant belonging to a so-called high caste ended the interview abruptly out of embarrassment caused by his derogatory remarks about the culpability of so-called lower castes.

When it came to the economic class, in the two incidents discussed, the middle-class status of both researchers became a barrier to securing data from participants who apparently came from poorer strata of society. In the first instance, the participant disapproved of what he perceived as an extravagant lifestyle of the researcher, although the lifestyle of the researcher did not have any implication for the research or his relationship with the researcher. In another incident, the participant was agitated by the fact that the researcher could avail the vaccine using resources available to her, while the participant could not because of the lack of required resources, even though he was much more vulnerable to the virus infection and its potentially disastrous aftereffects.

Socio-economic inequality affected data collection in two surprising modes. In the case of the researcher working in the water services sector, the participants expected that the researcher would help secure land tenures, which had nothing to do with the research topic. In the case of the researcher working in the electricity distribution sector, the participants expressed the hope that, after her studies, the researcher would join his organization as a high-level official and help solve problems faced by all the employees.

In the three instances in which the politics of actors in the field affected data collection, the diversity in the actors and the interests they tried to protect are intriguing. In one instance, the researcher working in the water services sector was the victim of the politics played by the community leaders to protect their stakes in the local clientelist-electoral politics, while, in another instance, he was the victim of politics among members of the local community around the allotment of apartments in the redeveloped building. The researcher working in the electricity distribution sector suffered from the complex organizational politics in the electric utility that had financial and career stakes for the actors involved. Thus, the paper presents a complex picture of the challenges – and of factors underlying these challenges – faced by qualitative researchers in data collection in India.

Drawing Parallels with Literature

This sub-section presents some comparisons of the findings and insights from this paper with those presented by other researchers in the literature. The existing literature does mention the academic background of the researcher as a factor causing challenges to data collection but only in the context of elite participants (Welch et al., 2002). However, this paper shows that academic background can influence the collection of data even from non-elite participants. Rashid (2007) described how gang violence and police raids restricted her access to certain

households making rigorous sampling impossible. The experiences of the male author-researcher of this paper show that, even if the politics and contestation in the community were not overtly violent, it hampered the diversity in data by making it impossible to access certain groups.

Riese (2019), while studying organizational dynamics in Norway expressed a caution that "gatekeepers may restrict researchers' access because they fear that potential informants will be harmed by the research" (p. 672). This paper found that, in the context of slum areas in India, the primary contact tried dictating the choice of participants for the research with the motivation to protect the interests of the movement in which her organization was involved.

This paper describes the incidence in which the response of the participants changed after they knew the researcher's family name which was a marker for his caste. Patel (2017) describes a similar experience during fieldwork in the Indian state of Gujarat in which the name of the researcher, which was a code for the researcher's social identity, affected access to participants. Khanal (2021) records the concern about "how a researcher who belongs to a high caste, a high class, or is male may consciously or unconsciously overlook participants in the research field, especially those who are female and/or from Dalit caste" (p. 2). However, in this paper, the author highlights the prejudices of the so-called lower caste participants about so-called higher caste researchers. Due to biases among participants regarding the higher caste, the researcher was not able to get appropriate responses for the caste dynamics of the problem.

The male researcher-author of this paper had to drop the field site considering the manipulation attempted by a primary contact who insisted on choosing participants by herself. Gokah (2006) describes a similar experience of a "novice" researcher when the local contact agency, an NGO in Africa, tried to reorganize her itinerary to suit its own interests, deciding which organizations the researcher could and could not visit, without regard to her budget, while deliberately ignoring some important organizations.

Grant (2017) observed that in certain situations, researchers needed to "demonstrate a shared identity" to gain and maintain access during the fieldwork. However, the experiences of the authors of this paper suggest that the local researchers having shared identities (like gender or same religion) may face peculiar challenges which may pose hurdles to maintaining access to the field.

A female researcher studying seafaring communities had to pay specific attention to risks associated "with being a female researcher in a male-dominated, rigidly hierarchical setting with a strong occupational culture" (Sampson & Thomas, 2003, p. 1). This bears similarity with the experiences of one female researcher-author of this paper working in the male-dominated electricity services sector who had to consider safety issues while conducting the fieldwork. Due to safety issues, she had to arrange her own vehicle and avoid certain dangerous areas from her fieldwork sites. Schenk-Sandbergen, (1995) made some interesting observations about the impact of the gender of the researcher on the data collected during fieldwork in India which echo well with the experiences of the authors of this paper, though their fieldwork was conducted twenty-five years after the publication of the piece by Schenk-Sandbergen. First, according to Schenk-Sandbergen, "western women fieldworkers were allowed greater freedom in crossing local gender boundaries than were male fieldworkers" (p. 3). In parallel, this paper describes the experience of the male researcher who was denied permission to conduct interviews with the female participant in the absence of males in the household. Second, "women fieldworkers were under greater pressure to conform to local gender ascription than did the male fieldworkers" as per Schenk-Sandbergen (p. 3). In the case of this paper, the female researchers were questioned about their marital status. One female researcher working in the electricity sector was judged for her decision not to wear the symbols of marriage even after being married. Finally, Schenk-Sandbergen observed that "women fieldworkers were allowed less mobility and were under pressure to seek chaperones and

'protection'" (p. 3). Similarly, one of the female authors of this paper working in the electricity sector had to lose the opportunity of conducting observation at nighttime due to safety issues.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that various challenges to qualitative data collection faced by researchers in India have a significant bearing on the quantum, richness, and diversity of data, and, as a result, have the potential to adversely affect the knowledge generated. It identifies and discusses the challenges posed to data collection by two broad categories of factors, first, the socio-economic identity of the researcher and, second, the socio-political ground reality in the field. These two broader concepts are further characterized in terms of their respective elements to facilitate nuanced discussions on the roles played by diverse factors in posing these challenges. The paper does not just argue that these factors affect the quantum, richness, and diversity of the data collected but also elaborates on the diverse ways in which these effects unfold.

In the previous section, the paper presents additional insights through cross-comparison of the experiences of the three different researchers. Demonstrating its contribution, this section also compares the findings of this paper with the observations in the existing literature. The insights from the paper mainly add to the limited understanding of challenges to data collection specific to the Indian field settings. The paper also undertakes an in-depth discussion on the challenges faced in their own country by researchers who are native to a developing country. The detailed discussion on the challenges to carrying out data collection, the sources of these challenges, and their impact on the collected data presented in this paper could prove helpful, especially to young qualitative researchers in planning and executing their fieldwork in developing countries, especially in India.

This paper takes ahead the discussion in the literature on the topic of field challenges to the collection of qualitative data in significant ways by adding a few important dimensions and insights. In making its most important contribution to the literature restricted mainly to the experiences of researchers from developed countries (Azungah, 2019; Luong, 2015), the paper discusses the challenges faced by researchers from a developing country in conducting fieldwork in the same country. This contribution could be witnessed in the insights provided by the paper into the challenges posed by caste – a unique characteristic of the social identity in India. As a contribution, the paper also adds a new dimension to the discussion on the role of gender – the role played by the gendered expectations from women, especially married women.

Adding to the discussion in the literature on the gender-related barriers to data collection, this paper demonstrated that, especially in the Indian context, the marital status of female researchers may play a major role in determining their acceptance by participants. In addition to the growing literature on the challenges posed to data collection by the phenomenon of gatekeeping, this paper discusses the specific roles played by other actors like public bureaucrats and community leaders in restricting access of the researchers to participants. It also elaborates on the stakes of these actors that prompted them to interfere in the data collection process. In addition to these usual suspects, this paper brings out the active role played by the members of the local community in adversely affecting the data collection process.

There certainly are limitations to the discussion and insights presented in this paper. All three researchers involved in writing this paper were young. Hence, the study does not show how these challenges and their impacts on data collection will manifest in the case of senior or experienced researchers. Moreover, the specific socio-economic-educational background of all three researchers – urban, middle-class backgrounds with education from elite educational

institutions – did impose certain limitations on the collected data and the final results. Further, the field settings of research conducted by all three researchers and the sectors covered in their projects were diverse. Therefore, a direct comparison was not possible and was not attempted. Also, the insights emerging from the cross-case comparisons need to be seen, as opposed to generalized findings, as specific insights that may be transferable across similar settings. In view of the nuanced diversity in the socio-politico-cultural ground reality in India and South Asia, the discussion and findings of the paper may have limited utility in other parts of India and South Asia.

Coming to the suggestions for future research, while this paper is based on field experiences from two Indian states, similar work coming from different states of India, with significantly different contexts and settings will shed more light on the challenges to data collection in India. Although taking detailed field notes specifically recording the challenges faced during data collection may not be a part of the main research project, more studies based on such notes and field reflections will significantly benefit qualitative researchers.

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Author Note

Sameer Pendharker is a doctoral student at Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas (CTARA), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT Bombay), India. His doctoral research involves understanding water service modalities in slums areas of India using the theoretical lenses of Social Practice Theory and Access Theory. He has a Bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering and Master's in Technology and Development. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sameer Pendharker, Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay. E-mail: sameer.pendharker@gmail.com.

Sneha Swami is a doctoral student at the Centre for Policy Studies, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IIT Bombay), India. Her doctoral research involves investigation into last-mile delivery of services in the electricity distribution sector, using the theoretical lenses of Street-level Bureaucracy and Public Service Outsourcing. She has bachelor's in Electrical Engineering and master's in Technology and Development. E-mail: snehasswami@gmail.com

Himali Mhatre is a doctoral student at the Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas (CTARA), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT Bombay), India. She is working on understanding the Response of lay-people to COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of Mental Models and Compliance Models as a part of her doctoral research. She has a bachelor's in Electrical Engineering and master's in Technology and Development. E-mail: himali.1095@gmail.com

Dr. Subodh Wagle is Professor at Centre for Technology Alternatives for Rural Areas (CTARA) and Associate Faculty at Centre for Policy Studies, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IIT Bombay), India. Prof. Wagle has been working on policy and regulatory analysis especially in the electricity, water, environment, and development sectors for the last thirty years. In the recent years, his research is focused on the last mile issues pertaining to policy delivery in different sectors, including electricity, education, nutrition, Covid-response, and urban services. E-mail: subodh.wagle@iitb.ac.in

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