# 1. In Search of the Never-lost slums: Ethnography of an Ethnographer

*Hear this: clanking of utensils; water filling plastic bottles; tender bottoms being slapped; grown-up cheeks struck; raucous laughter in the corners; coins being sorted; technologies of communication, communicating—phones, televisions and amplifiers, creating, collapsing and distancing words and lives; sellers of wares, necessary, unrequired, and varied, dangling their goods through the prowess of their throats; children otherwise told to ‘shut up’ in the classrooms frolicking about imitating the tongues elders speak—I will fuck your sister, you are a cunt; the elders making claims to the fucking—of mothers, sisters, daughters—with more intent and lost innocence; aazaan on the loudspeaker from the mosque in the corner defining the day for many; the same loudspeaker announcing the find of a young Hindu boy, who if not claimed timely enough will be converted; the precious touch of the hand to the bells in the temples nearby, ting-tong, tong-tong, tinging; the hum of the city passing by; the vehicular conversations, honkingly undertaken; confidences of the most delicate sorts shared across corridors, lanes, and lives; songs of yearning penetrating through; a young girl on the roof remembering the cities she is forbidden to visit; an old man spinning yarn of the lives he has not lived to everyone in general and no one in particular.*

## The Interrogation

It was a Delhi summer afternoon on its deathbed. The evening promised the colours, but not respite from the heat. I was walking along the main road (Baba FatehSingh Marg) which separates Nehru Camp from the legal lanes, 15 in all, of Govindpuri. The distance to Nehru Place, the site of my first unwitting ethnographic research, was only a matter of a couple of kilometers but I could not wait to get there fast enough. The long-delayed, and now much-desired, smoke and a glass of cold beer felt like a deserving indulgence after the hours I had spent in Nehru camp.

Here, I had spent the last few hours interviewing residents of this camp, mostly women, about their everyday. Perhaps interviewing is misleading as it suggests an engaged, informed inquisition on my part. I had in fact spent these hours merely hurdled in a corner, of whomsoever was generous enough to allow me that space, listening to them live their everyday. Even with little or nothing to contribute to these conversations, I felt a day’s work well done.

At a few meters distance from the main road, from where I meant to hail an auto, I was stopped by a doctor with whom I had casual acquaintance and who ran a little clinic from a *jhuggi* in Nehru camp. He invited me to his clinic for a conversation which I found difficult to decline. After all, I reckoned, it was important for me to establish as many contact points in the slums as possible. I had never been inside his clinic. The *jhuggi* coupling as a clinic was only different from the others I spent time in with its lack of an overwhelming bed, a refrigerator in the corner and a precariously perched television set. The presence of a not-so-white coat, a stethoscope and an array of unmarked bottles with little pills extended respectability to his self-proclaimed profession. There was nothing (by the way of framed certificates) or no one (in the form of ailing patients) to corroborate his claims. But he nevertheless proceeded in a precise and clinical manner to inquire about my reasons for spending time in the slums.

‘I am doing my doctoral research, I am interested in understanding how the poor live’, I muttered almost as an apology, slightly taken aback by not knowing the answer myself in its entirety’.

The doctor, unfazed by discomfort, continued with his prognosis:

You do not have to come here everyday to know about that. I can tell you all there is to know about the poor, these slum people, the jhuggi-wallahs. People like you come here every once so often, for a few months, and think you know it all about the poor, how they are suffering, how miserable they are, what small houses they have, no jobs, and wonder what to do about them, right? But you are mistaken, these people – the jhuggi-wallahs – are the scum of the earth. They are all pretending. Of course I am not one of them, I am only here to help them, but are they interested, no, they are not. They have become used to doing nothing, and living off charities, making a fool of people like you. You think you come here, they are nice to you, do not be fooled. Come here in the evening, the same people – these men – saying madam, madam, to you will not think twice about ripping your clothes, mounting you violently, raping you collectively, laughing at you all the while and leaving you to rot on the corner of the road.

When I came to the main-road again, the evening was firmly set but I was bereft of a sense of accomplishment and assuredness of a while back. The doctor’s violent sermonising about my fate at the hands of the jhuggi-wallahs had left me rattled. I abandoned the collected composure, which became of me during my visits to the camps, frantically hailed an auto and hurried towards the intoxicants, no longer as an award but as a refuge.

In short, I was scared were such a fate in fact to befall upon me; after all, what did I know about ‘*these jhuggi-wallahs’*? Doesn’t everyone speak of ‘them’ as being morally and otherwise corrupt, violent and decadent? Why ought I be spared? I found myself overwhelmed, emotionally, but also in the same instance intellectually and politically compromised. After all, in the comfortable confines of one living-room or another, and ensconced within the walls of JawaharLal Nehru University, the bastion of left-leaning politics and teaching, had I not proclaimed about the rights, and denial of dignity, to the poor, marginalised and disenfranchised? Had I not patronisingly chided at those who expressed their reservations about these others?

Now, almost 15 years later, I not only claim an intimate relationship with the people and corners in the slums of Govindpuri, I am also actively invested in its politics, culture and the everyday. However, I would not only be compromising truth but also allowing myself undeserved due if I presented this intimate proximity in and with the spaces of Govindpuri to have come to me naturally. The first encounter with the slums of Govindpuri, nothing less than a ‘touristic’ adventure, was a recce of sorts, to finalise a site of study for a research project.

## A Pervert’s Guide to Slumming

In 2004, I was appointed as researcher assistant to Dr. Jo Tacchi for a project ethnographically exploring the role of information communication technologies in poverty alleviation in two sites in India, one rural and an urban. The slums of Govindpuri were decided upon as the urban site. The decision was not arrived at on account of the existing, or potential, networks in the slums but solely on the promise of the assured, obvious poverty levels in the slums derived from an extensive secondary research about the state of the slums in the city. Having arrived at the decision, I asked my then partner, B., whose office was in the neighbouring middle-class settlement of Kalkaji, to take Dr. Tacchi and I for a recce of the area before we set out for our fieldwork the following day. B., a straight-sorta’-fella, was not much amused by the prospect of I visiting the slums every day, or at least as frequently, for the next 18 months. His knowledge of the slums at that time was as academic as mine, but I only recall his anxiety. He complied with our wishes, driving us around the slums of Govindpuri, all the time recounting incidents amounting to cautionary tales about taking the proposed undertaking. Dr. Tacchi and I were amused, but determined.

As a final, desperate, bid to make us change our minds, B. proposed that if we indeed were so adamant on selecting a slum as our research site, there was one right next to his office. He added, almost as an incentive, that way, him and I could get to work together, everyday. The offer demanded an evaluation, and we agreed to give his slums a chance, which were basically four makeshift shanties for workers in a nearby private construction site. The firm silence that occupied the car informed B. of our decision. Over the years, in lighter moments, I took to recounting this incident with all its sassy details, B.’s anxiety, his feeble attempts to keep me away from the slums and offering one of his own to insist on his apathy, trite middle-class-ness and for being a straight-sorta’-fella. After all, I would always add as a dramatic climax, B.’s slums were a few thatched huts by the side of the road, they were a rather insipid offering compared to the squalid, spectacular poverty on display of the slums of Govindpuri. It never failed to evoke uncomfortable laughter.

With this personal narrative, the intent is no longer to embarrass my then partner B., but to admit to my own anxiety in establishing terms of engagement with slums as a concept and the reality of the slums of Govindpuri, in particular, which has dominated my research, political and intellectual undertakings. By adopting the tactics of deflection, I shifted the onus of the anxiety on to B.’s, indeed a cheap attempt to distract attention from mine. But I was the one who visited the slums of Govindpuri, a few times a week during the period of the research project, and the knot in my stomach, so to say, to make sense of moving across the materialities of the slums back to my middle-class confines left me distressed.

The encounter with the doctor, I started with, not only exaggerated the sense of anxiousness but also compelled a methodological, intellectual and political catharsis. If I were to be so fearful of the other, so much so to dread my safety and violation, how could I ever argue for an equitable, ethical cohabitational space (politically, intellectually and culturally) with and for the others – not only slum-dwellers, but also individuals and communities situated on the praxis on account of their caste, communal, sexuality and gender affiliations? I was left distraught. A paralysis of sorts overwhelmed me, I knew I had to revisit my own prejudices, position and politics. I took a sabbatical from the field to identify the core from where these anxieties were emanating from and in what ways to resolve the same, agreeing that if I could not arrive at an identification or a resolution, I will abandon the project in the slums and instead take the research to more known, comfortable settings.

## From The academic to the Lived: De-coding Slumming

‘*What is it that you really want to know*?’ was a refrain which I had to constantly negotiate during my initial research engagements within the Govindpuri slums. I had approached the slums, hesitantly, in early 2004 as a potential research space for a project I was involved in. Till then, my experience and exposure of the slums in Delhi was through a primarily middle-class, educated, urbane lens which essentially meant that whilst I was aware of the violence and rhetoric of displacement and resettlement vis-à-vis the slums in popular mainstream media and academic discourse, I had never experienced the space first hand. I had no understanding of the dynamics of the space about which I had attended more than a few illustrious talks and conferences.

Over the years, I had helps coming into my house to accomplish the assigned tasks from different slums depending on which part of the city I was residing in at that moment. During my conversations with the helps, I rarely could locate the geographies of the spaces they inhabited. Occasionally, I would try to follow the maps that were being unfolded for my benefit. I would, however, always lose my way somewhere in between hopelessly convincing myself that nothing was lost as ‘*there wasn’t much difference from one such place (slum) to another’*. All slums in Delhi, for me, were a homogenized space living the rhetoric of displacement and resettlement. In my acquired knowledge of the same, there was no scope for a multitude of experiences and dimensions or, narratives beyond those of lacking and longing. My initial engagements, then, were burdened by the guilt of middle-class upbringing which I naively assumed offered choices denied to the others out of this realm.

The constant refrain, *what is that you really want to know,* with shifting emphasis, depending on what I was being interrogated about by whom - my intent, my identity, my personal situation - significantly contributed towards my education of the spaces and lives of and within the slums. In the initial years, my middle-class positionality framed the engagements with the participants. More than the middle-class identity, and what it represented, it was the agenda of my proposed research which was constantly questioned and scrutinized. From whatever little I knew of conducting research in marginal spaces - from personal accounts of researchers, academic, and other texts - I was not prepared for such an interrogation. In these texts and accounts, what was presented was a clean, linear, one-sided engagement with the residents of marginal spaces, wherein the researcher in question rarely, almost never, recounts the questions that were asked of her. And thus over the years, in negotiating the refrain, the roles of the subjects and the ethnographer were constantly challenged and, more often than not, reversed.

## The Politics of Poverty Performance

Years after the relationship with the residents of the slums*,* across the three camps, had moved beyond the strict researcher-researched equation, one afternoon, I was sitting in one of the lanes, a few women and I were catching up with what was happening in our respective lives. I had recently returned after a longish stint in Australia in mid-2014, and there was much to update the friends with, including but not limited to an intense breakup. The women were regaling me with their on-goings: gossip about new and broken relationships; travels; debts; judicious loans and the manner in which they were paid; the gold which was bought, and that against which loans had been secured. All the while tea, snacks and smokes were being shared with a generous amount of teasing, laughs and occasional reprimands.

Our reverie was interrupted by a group of earnest young girls. They were huddled together, and their hesitance was obvious. They introduced themselves as students of the Delhi School of Social Work and informed us that they were conducting a survey about the living conditions in the slums. The gathered women, almost in chorus, spoke about the difficulties of living in the slums; the lack of water; the deplorable sanitation facilities and so on so forth. As they left, after a while we all burst into a cackle of being on in a shared joke. Though nothing was evidently said, it was obvious that the women (and with them, I) were revelling in the performance just brilliantly pulled off. The performance in question is in tune with the mandate informing the agenda and the praxis of engagements, inadvertently, subtly and insidiously, of most researchers, activists, non-governmental and governmental agents visiting spaces as the slums: *the poor can only perform and live in poverty.*

Slums as spaces, witness interventions from agencies, organizations, and individuals assuming the role of interrogators. These interventions are on account of varying agendas: state initiatives to conduct surveys, activities facilitated by social groups operational in the area catering to specific needs (health, sanitation, education, among other), and academic-social research. My interactions with the space and its residents fall in the last category. In the last three-decades of the settlements’ existence, the Govindpuri *slums* have continually experienced encounters with different and diverse researchers, agents and agencies. The residents are acutely aware of the benefits these encounters accrue for them, whether these be in regards to being enrolled in governmental records, which attracts subsidies in different forms, or being beneficiaries of different non-governmental schemes. And at once, as is evidenced from the performance of poverty in the aforementioned incident, the residents are astutely cognizant of the fact that the interrogators only want to hear narratives and experiences of lacks, poverty and *being poor.*

In 2005, during one of my trips in Navjeevan camp, I was walking around with a group of young adults from the local school which is run by a prominent NGO in Delhi. There was no fixed agenda for interviews or group discussions and we were wandering around the camps, recording conversations and discussions, and clicking pictures. In one of the streets, the students initiated a conversation with an old woman who was sewing clothes for an export house. The students were interested in the patterns she was sewing and a discussion about the volume of her assignments per week, how she finishes it, and the remuneration for it, followed. Around this time, two old men joined the discussion. They were not actively participating in the discussion but would occasionally make a comment. Interpreting this as their willingness to join the discussions, I asked one of the men, directly, a question about the penetration of small-scale industrial units in the camps and its benefits to the residents when he suddenly burst out into an angry retort. He accused me of being an agent of the NGO, which supported the school, to perpetuate its agenda:

They [the NGO] are only interested in showcasing poverty so they can get funds from the big companies from abroad. They are not bothered about us. What do you know about us? They want more and more people in the camps to become dependent on them so that they can have us as figures in their files […] What do you know about poverty, anyway?.

Not prepared for such a retort, I conveyed to him that I was not affiliated with the specific NGO in question or any such organization for that matter. On hearing this, he calmed down commenting that, ‘he was tired of people coming and asking the same questions over and over again […] how poor are you? How do you manage, etc.?’ The two men agreed that it was a humiliating experience for them, their space and other residents, to be put through such an interrogation, over and over again, just to avail a few benefits (and sometimes not even that) in return.

Undertaking research in spaces such as the slums is a politically and ethnographically messy affair. In the initial couple of years of my research inroads in the slums of Govindpuri - hesitant, anxious, unsure of the vocabularies and the grammar of the everyday in the slums- I was doing my own kind of performance. Usually adorning only jeans and t-shirts in my everyday and professional spaces, I promptly visited one of those swanky stores catering to expats and bought two pairs of *salwar-kameez* and a few scarves. This is one of the most common attire for young women in the country, and is considered to be a modest wear compared to the more ‘Western and attention-drawing’ jeans and skirts. A heavy smoker I would not light up whilst in the slums*,* and in spite of being a drinker of some merit, a fact which I would otherwise proudly claim, even if not asked, I would maintain a stern silence about it. I also at times found myself blatantly lying, particularly when questions regarding my romantic status or the income levels were asked of me.

The encounter with the doctor, with which I opened the essay, and the subsequent sabbatical from the field I took were pivotal in me sophisticating my own practice and politics of undertaking ethnographic research (not only in the slums of Govindpuri, but also in any other site the assignment took me to) and in my endeavours of ‘working the hyphen’.

## Negotiating the Anxiety of Researching Anxious Spaces

Before undertaking ethnographic research in Govindpuri, I had conducted a yearlong research in Nehru Place, South Asia’s largest second hand electronic hardware market and the hub for software piracy. Owing to the nature of male dominated trade practices in Nehru Place, electronic retail, repair, and piracy, the space has a very masculine character. Whilst conducting research in Nehru Place, I had to negotiate the masculinity of the space. The shops were I usually interviewed people were amidst narrow lanes and the shops themselves congested places populated predominantly by men. My presence would demand that the shopkeepers make unhindered space for me, which more often than not was disruptive to their activities. However, after the initial hesitation, the interactions were devoid of the gender politics as for most part, I was also a potential customer. In addition, the conversations, more often than not, were around trade practices. Once the trust was established, most men freely engaged in detailed discussions even those of illicit nature, particularly since we were discussing the value supply chains of pirated software, which is a criminal offence. During this period, I had also established a relationship of mutual exchange wherein I would bring them CD’s of the latest Open Source software whilst they offered substantial discounts on the purchases I made. The nature of the interviews and interactions in Nehru Place did not by any means challenge or threaten the position of the men, socially and culturally.

The ethnographic engagements in the Govindpuri slums, on the other hand, plunged me into the politics of space and its everyday from the very start. The site of my research had changed from a neutral market place complex domestic space with multiple political, social, and cultural complications and prejudices. Unlike the space and scope of engagement in Nehru Place where the interactions where transactional in nature and did not involve pursuing sensitive discussions about social, cultural, political and emotional opinions and conflicts; in the Govindpuri slumsit was precisely in and around these issues that the research was framed.

In retrospect, I realized that my research engagements in the two spaces, Nehru Place and Govindpuri slums, differed because of the manner in which I approached these spaces through the prism of what my middle-class identity represented. The uncomfortable edginess I could not resolve in the slumswas not because the space was volatile or the residents hostile. In my initial engagement with the Govindpuri slums, I realized, much to my dismay, that I was relying too heavily on the constructions of the slum-dwellers perpetuated by the narratives in academic discourses, popular media, and everyday middle-class dialogues. In doing so, I was unconsciously, romanticizing the slum-dwellers by engaging with them only through the prism of lacking and poverty. In addition, even though subtly, I was convinced that the slum-dweller would not be able to understand my middle-class status, background, identity and its realities.

In short, I realized, I was denying them the capacity to engage and understand any other reality than their own. In my framing, I was approaching them as the other.

## Encountering the Self of the Other

Gulabo is a widow who lives in Nehru camp with her 13-year-old son. I first met her in 2003 whilst conducting research for the Department For International Development, UK Government, on the ‘Role of ICT’s in Poverty Alleviation’. The agenda of the project was such that I had to inquire, at length, about the income, expenditure, and consumption patterns of each household at length. Such inquisitions are very common in the Govindpuri slums*,* undertaken at the beset of either state agencies or other non-governmental organizations and, more often than not, have promise of some direct benefit (loans, subsidies, etc.) associated with them. Whilst conducting the research, my intent of collecting data of this nature was constantly questioned. Not surprisingly, considering the precarious relationship the slum-dwellers have with the state, there is an apprehension vis-à-vis the state interventions. Though I would constantly reiterate that the data I was collecting was for purely academic purposes, there would be persistent requests for extending some kind of help, mostly monetary, to the families.

During the DFID research, Gulabo as a research participant offered significant insights in the gender politics and its direct association with income-expenditure patterns in the Govindpuri camps. She lives in a two room, very meticulously decorated house. Her house is part of what initially was one large slums. The initial settlers, over the years, sold out parts of it to two other families to meet their financial needs. When I initiated my research in Govindpuri, three families, including Gulabo’s, formed this cluster. The entry to all the three houses is common and owing to the lack of space the interactions between the families at an everyday level is very intense and intimate. During the conversations, Gulabo always evoked her widowed status and, more often than not, analyzed situations, income-expenditure patterns, her everyday interactions, through this prism. Her narrative was shrouded with the difficulties she had to endure being married to an alcoholic and the subsequent struggles when he passed away. Though her living conditions appeared to be comfortable and she was getting her son educated in a private English medium school, a rarity on account of the financial burden the family has to bear, she always denied having any regular income and evaded questions about her financial support systems. A few months in the year, she set up a roadside kiosk to sell home cooked eateries in the area. Besides that, she never mentioned having any other source of income. It was a chance encounter which revealed to me the complexity of the gender politics and the networks of financial systems in the slums.

One afternoon at the clinic which I mentioned at the beginning of the essay, and before the encounter with the practitioner, Gulabo came into the clinic. She did not immediately register my presence. The medical practitioner and she were discussing some rent arrangement and subsequently, the medical practitioner handed some money over to her. Interested in this transaction, I inquired about its details. Gulabo, realizing my presence, tried to evade the topic. However, the medical practitioner mentioned that he has to pay Gulabo a monthly rent for using this space. Gulabo had never mentioned that she owned any other property in the slums except the house she lived in. Sensing her discomfort, I did not pursue the matter further. After that day, Gulabo would be very reticent in my company. In another incident of a similar kind, I went to Maya’s (her neighbor and initial owner of the entire cluster) house during a hot Delhi-summer afternoon. During these times, the heat is so oppressive that most people withdraw into their houses, especially when the power situation permits running water coolers. By this time, it had already been a year since I had been visiting these families and I had established a relationship outside of the strict researcher-researched praxis. Maya, her daughter-in-law, and I were sharing lunch when we heard some men call out for Gulabo. The spatial layout of the cluster is such that all conversations, if not carefully contained, can be overheard. We could hear a transaction in negotiation. The men wanted to purchase some liquor bottles and Gulabo was quoting a price for the same. Overhearing this conversation in Maya and her daughter-in-law’s presence was disconcerting. In the last year, Gulabo or any of her neighbours had not even hinted at Gulabo being involved in the illicit liquor trading business. Maya, who usually withheld any comments about Gulabo said:

[…] we know she does it. We don’t approve it. My late husband was strongly against it as such activities invite all kinds of people at different hours. But, well, she is all by herself. She does not have anyone to look after her. Her husband was an alcoholic. He always beat her up. Her in-laws constantly tried to appropriate whatever little she has.

Over the next few years, I maintained my research and personal relationship with Maya’s, Gulabo’s, and Shishir’s (the third family in the cluster); however we never discussed Gulabo’s networks and systems of generating income. By then, once every so often, she would hinted that she has sources of income which she cannot disclose and respecting her desires, I never pursued the inquisitions. Gulabo’s is an extreme case in point. There were many instances in the Govindpuri camps where individuals and families did not offer information about their income-expenditure patterns and I, sometimes, discovered some unrevealed sources or networks, accidentally. This was on many accounts. On some occasions, the individuals being interviewed did not have knowledge, especially women in the households. Besides these, there is a prevalent threat of being brought under scrutiny by state agencies if involvement in the networks other that the legitimate ones was offered. Lastly, these threat perceptions were heightened by my own middle-class identity. My position was constantly under scrutiny vacillating between being a state agent to representing a non-governmental charitable organization with the potential of extending substantial help.

Zameela, an employee at a prominent NGO operating in the Govindpuri camps, was an important cultural translator whilst also getting me introductions to diverse groups of people in the camps. One of her assignments is to facilitate community micro-finance activities. She primarily works with women groups assisting them in setting and running Self Help Groups (SHG’s). Whilst visiting the groups with her, I realized that in spite of my presence, both the men and the women would freely discussed the income-expenditure patterns divulging in detail the nodes, networks, and systems in which they had either invested or in which their savings circulated. After many such meetings, one day I had the following conversation with Zameela to understand the manner in which ‘money’ and poverty levels were articulated:

Tripta [T]: When we go together, the residents do not hesitate to discuss, even in front of me, the details of their investment, etc.? Why is that?

Zameela [Z]: What do you mean? When do they say, when you ask them about it?

T: They do not lie. I am not saying that. I am just saying they do not discuss it as openly. However, when I am with you, they do not hesitate but also ask for your advice.

Z: Have you ever been asked how much money you earn in a month?

T: Yes.

Z: And, do you always tell me the exact amount? Or about the savings you have? Or the gifts you receive from your parents, etc.?

T: No […] I usually avert the question.

Z: It’s the same thing only a bit more difficult for people in the slums. After all these years, they know that the representatives who come (either state agents or NGO’s) want to hear that they are poor. If they do not find enough indications of poverty, the general sentiment is that the victimization will increase and, also, the benefits to be derived in terms of loans and subsidies cut down. When they discuss the finances with me openly even in front of you that is not because they suddenly trust you but because they trust me, I am one of them.

Gulabo, I realized, could not discuss the finances with me at length not because she wanted to hide anything but because there were only that many vocabularies available to her to discuss these matters with the outsiders. She was expected within the constructions through which the slum-dwellers are approached to constantly evoke the narrative of widowhood, lack of income and fragile social support to garner support and help from different agencies. The financial systems in the Govindpuri camps cannot be evaluated through the strict prism of income and expenditure; multiple nodes and networks at formal, informal, illicit and interpersonal levels are involved. The navigation through these networks to optimize them is very significantly dependent on the social, political, cultural, and moral agency the individual, family, or group can exercise within this space. Gulabo’s status as a widow, within the Govindpuri camps, allowed her concessions to engage in illicit liquor trade, an engagement socially denied to women. However, the same status and her involvements made her highly vulnerable when negotiating with the outside agencies, namely, the police.

Once I was visiting a research participant’s house not because an interview was scheduled but because I needed to take a break from the research. During visits as such, the conversations were not strictly research driven and, more often than not, I would be asked to give updates about my own life, marriage, holidays, etc. Shortly after my arrival, a few of the research participant’s relatives from the village paid a visit to her. The research participant introduced me as a friend who was working in the Govindpuri camps. Tea and snacks were organized. The conversations that followed amongst them were pertaining to a family wanting to purchase a newborn baby from someone the research participant knew. The rates were being negotiated. Soon, the relatives left. The research participant had sensed my discomfort whilst the conversation was taking place:

Research Participant [RP]: Did it disturb you? Haven’t you ever heard of babies being sold?

Tripta [T]: I have but I have only read about it. It has never been discussed in front of me. Can’t I do anything about it?

RP: Like what? Stop the sale of the babies? Why?

T: Well, it just does not seem the right thing to be able to sell and buy babies like this.

RP: The women who are selling it, at least most of them, are not doing so by choice. There are women who have made a business practice out of it, mostly, women who are migrants from other states. That is also because they need the money to feed the rest of the family. What can you do? You can inform the authorities, the police, but do not think they already don’t know. They do. They will take some action while you are pursuing it and then? What will happen to the women?

T: But what happens to the children? There should be some way to ensure that they are not sold for child labour or prostitution. Is that not a possibility?

RP: It is, a very strong possibility. However, childless couples or those desiring a son also adopt many of these children. They give them love, affection and care their own parents would have never been able to afford. What about that?

I did not have enough arguments. My middle-class, educated sensibilities were demanding me to undertake an action. However, at the same time, I had mixed feelings. I was aware that I could not ignore the matter whilst at the same time I knew I could not report it. I told the research participant that I would have a conversation about these practices with a social activist working with women in the area. Not with the intent that those involved in this practice, especially the women, are brought under scrutiny but so that they can be informed about proper channels and options if they did not want to go through with the deal. The research participant gave her consent to approach the social activist. When I asked her whether I could use our conversation as part of my thesis, she only relented after I assured that in the narrative, I would not mention any names, locations within the Govindpuri camps, or communities involved.

As an ethnographer, from a space outside of the one being researched, I realized, that certain cultures and practices, however dehumanizing they might appear, need to be situated within the larger matrix of the materiality of the space. Being a widow in a slum settlement allowed Gulabo to sustain her livelihood through illicit liquor trade. These networks would have been very difficult for her to penetrate, if not entirely accessible, if she were living in a legalized colony. Most of her clients are from the neighboring lower-middle class legalized settlement which allows her to bargain the price for the liquor. It is the networks which the slums allow, owing to their illegal nature, to flourish that trade practice around sale of new-born babies can be undertaken.

## Working the Hyphen**[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Unlike many of the ethnographic studies in different anthropological traditions which romanticize the subjects and sites, Jorge Luis Borges, anything but an anthropologist, in The Ethnographer romanticizes, and in the process complicates, the position of the ethnographer. The protagonist who had ‘nothing singular about him’ sets out to learn the ‘esoteric rites of the west’ on the persuasion of his college professor who convinces him that ‘when he came back he would have his dissertation, and the university authority would see that it was published’. The protagonist spends two years on the prairie, learns to unlearn his urban-research ways and is eventually told the tribe’s secret doctrine. However, on his return, he refuses to reveal the secret forgoing the promising career he could chance upon by the revelation. He explains this to his rather indignant professor by stating ‘[…] the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person had to walk those paths himself’. He, Borges informs us to end the tale, is now ‘married, divorced, and is now one of the librarians at Yale’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This brief text, The Ethnographer, played a pivotal role in initiating a self-reflexive exercise in evaluating my own position as an ethnographer in different contexts. At different times in varying context, I have been humbled and equally perplexed by the insights, political, cultural, and personal, which the subjects have offered without malice or agenda. I have in the same vein as the protagonist of Borges’s text had several moments of crisis during my research. The boundaries between what was purely research material and secrets revealed to me for I had ‘walked the paths’ were very fluid and blurred. I have often contemplated over categorizing interactions as interviews, discussions, data, and conversations of personal nature. Moreover, through these different categories of interactions evaluate my own shifting position as an ethnographer or an unwelcome intruder. More often than not, these categories collapse.

After a research sabbatical and evolving my own frameworks of participation in the research space, I made new entries into the space acknowledging that the everyday reality of the slums would never fundamentally constitute part of my every day and vice versa. This, however, did not mean that either the slum-dwellers or I could not evolve dialogic praxis within which we could attempt to understand, respect, and appreciate the realities we represented and lived. However, the important breakthrough in the research praxis was to acknowledge, and critically engage with the subtleties of representations, which I as an ethnographer or the slum-dwellers as subjects, constantly evoked and employed to establish certain inroads (including, but not limited to, research data) for me or derive benefits for the residents of the slums.

As a middle-class ethnographer, my position was uncertain. The production of knowledge of and about the space, given these constraints, could not have achieved at by establishing an economy of trust. The trust, I speak of here is not limited to revealing their lives or the secrets as was the concern for Borges’s protagonist but also involves extending respect for the matter of choice for the lives the residents I was interacting with led. It also meant allowing me to be interrogated without any apprehensions. This trust is established over a period of time, when both the parties involved have tested and tried the limits of the other. Once this trust was established with individuals, families, and communities in the Govindpuri camps, it also meant that I, as an ethnographer, had to not question and be judgmental about certain practices which were prevalent in the Govindpuri camps.

Here, I want to involve and engage the position, articulated and projected, of the ethnographer as an important element of the ethnography itself. The experience of the ethnographer cannot be distanced from the ethnography that emerges for the ethnographer negotiates, questions, imbibes, and treats preferentially, consciously or unconsciously, covertly, overtly, and subtly, certain categories of experiences than others. The ethnographer is not a neutral agency of observation. Or articulation. And in presenting these, the aim is to initiate a dialogue on the creation, sustenance, projection, and the articulation of the other. The importance of contextualizing the position of the ethnographer is accentuated in the context of the present study as it located in the slumswhere the everyday is constantly examined, articulated, and represented through different categories of other.

Ethnography as a methodological tool is not devoid of its politics. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer address the problematic and politics of ethnographic practice within the larger anthropological body of work in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in The Human Science*. Enumerating on the role of an ethnographer in producing cultural texts, they state:

In fact, what gives the ethnographer authority and the text a pervasive sense of concrete reality is the writer’s claim to represent a world as only one who has known it firsthand can, which thus forges an intimate link between ethnographic writing and fieldwork.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is *this* authority, which is vested in an ethnographer, in me, through the methodological tool one employs that one needs to constantly not only be conscious about but also question it constructively. And I was consciously aware of this predicament. The ethnographer, in essence, should acknowledge the implications of the authoritative engagement and representation with a researched space. As an ethnographer working in the slums, I entered into the space as an outsider as I am not a resident of the space. I have not lived the space. That, however, does not mean that I cannot engage with the space. But the manner in which an ethnographer, I, interact characteristically determines the representation of the space in the larger domain. Most of the texts about the slums, academic and otherwise, reflect an edgy nervousness while discussing their subject matter. This uneasiness, first and foremost, comes from the inability to articulate the anxiety of being present in the slums.Even when the researchers are informed by the most radical theoretical and political intent and agendas of the right to the city for the *jhuggi-walahs,* the act of being *present* and to *engage* uninhibitedly in their everyday is an anxious ridden prospect as it challenges (and perhaps also threatens) to reveal their own class, caste, communal informed practices and politics.

Whilst I was negotiating with my own anxieties, I reached out to academic texts to find resonance with other researcher’s negotiating with similar dilemmas. I was seeking out in these texts an assurance that indeed *it was OK to feel unsettled in these living conditions; that I really did not* ***like*** *certain people – both men and women in the slums – for their politics, or their particular personalities and that I was finding myself drawn to a few people, especially women, with whom I was not only breaking the researcher-researched biases but forming emotional relationships.* In the academic texts I had sought refuge in, I was however left wanting for any confidantes articulating similar anxieties.

All the dilemmas and issues which the city faces, ‘crime, dirt, filth, immorality’ in its spread-out territoriality and temporality are consolidated in the confines of the slums. In that sense, the slums are magnified and amplified versions of what that city could be if it was not as controlled and constricted. It is important to consider that the problems concerning the slums are not a classic situation of the slums, per se, but prevalent in the city as well.

Within the schematic of this research, which requires establishing an engaged relationship with the slums, I attempted to deal with the prejudices at the conceptual, practical and personal level. In this intent, I realized that my middle-class-background constantly informed the lens through which I made entries into the space. However, I also realized that differences necessarily are not a negative entry point to build relationships, research and otherwise. Until the time the differences are respected and acknowledged, one cannot aspire for a relationship and interactions on the same plane. In particularly recognizing ethnography as much a political intervention as a methodological tool, the task of constantly negotiating difference, not towards resolutions but sustained dialogue continues to inform my research practices and my engagements with the residents of the slums in Govindpuri.

1. Fine, Michelle Fine, ‘Working the hyphens’ in *Handbook of qualitative research,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions,* trans. Andrew Hurley, New York: Viking, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. George E. Marcus and Michael J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in The Human Science,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)