

Pre-Dissertation field research report

The Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant award has enabled me to undertake predissertation research in India. I left for India two weeks earlier than the time line I submitted for the grant. I landed in India in the middle of scorching summer and also in the midst of growing tension between the Naxalites (who I intend to study) and the State of Andhra Pradesh. The objectives that I set out for the predissertation research were:

- 1) Realistically assess the possibilities of continuing with the proposed research
- 2) Meet with representatives of the Naxalite movement and social movement representatives to get a sense of the social and political climate and what kind of strategies I could employ to continue with the present research?
- 3) Collecting secondary materials i.e. booklets, pamphlets, journal articles, newspaper reports on the Naxalite movement from libraries and archives
- 4) Meet with the Anveshi team (who were involved in the Stree Shakti Sanghatan project *We Were Making History*) and other feminist groups.

My stay in Hyderabad and travel to different regions of Andhra Pradesh for 6 weeks has provided me with an opportunity to meet with spokes persons, activists, sympathizers and ex-activists of the Communist Party of India (CPI-Maoist) and CPI (Janasakthi)¹. I also meet with feminist groups, media personal and academicians in Hyderabad to get a broader understanding of the movement and the present socio-political climate. Given the nature of my research and the amount of trust required for my interviewees to tell their stories to me, I did not intend to use this round of research to record or conduct any structured interviews. The purpose was mostly to get connected and soaked in the context which will enable me to have a better grounding when I go back to do my actual research. As soon as I reached there, I realized that I should not stick to a strict time line and

¹ CPI-Maoist and CPI (Janasakthi) are the two visible and prominent Naxalite groups operating in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

schedule about doing things. Rather I should be open to the opportunities and constraints and use my time as best I can.

My first meeting was with a former president of the Radical Student Union (RSU) of the CPI-Maoist on May 7, 2005. This unstructured interview with the ex-activist gave me a better sense of history, internal structure & organization, and every day practices of the movement. Subsequently, I got the chance to meet with several former activists. While all these meetings helped me in getting a better historical and political understanding of the movement, the most crucial part of the field research was when I got the chance to meet with an underground woman activist. This woman activist not only provided me with an account of what is happening currently inside the guerilla movement but also provided me with some journals and booklets which are circulated as educational/political materials in the armed squads.

While it was not impossible to get in touch with the members of the Naxalite movement the failed peace talks, and the growing repression by the state made it a little difficult to have a time bound interview schedule. An experience of mine will better illustrate this point better: I was making an effort to meet with the president of the Revolutionary Writers Association, who also happens to have extensive documentation of the movement. While I was trying to get in touch with him, he was arrested along with four other fellow activists. This arrest created a big uproar among the mass organizations of the Naxalite movement and their sympathizers. In this climate I could not simply go ahead with my interviews. I had to wait for a week to start reviving my contacts, in the mean time I used my time to visit public and private libraries for secondary literature and make connections with local intellectuals and academicians.

During the last week of my visit I spent most of my time visiting Anveshi research center for Women's studies, and talking to the activists and research fellows in the institute and collecting secondary data. These visits put me in close touch with some of the member of Stree Shakti Sanghatana who were earlier involved in writing a book *We Were Making History: Women in Telangana Armed Struggle*. The discussions were mostly focused on

issues such as: How do we write gendered history of the movement? What are the methodological challenges we as feminist scholars face while researching armed struggles? What kind of theoretical grid do we use to filter the accounts of the men and women activists of the movement? Etc.

On the whole, the trip was very useful and helped me reflect/think about the methodological and theoretical challenges that I have to grapple with in the course of my research and come up with ways to engaging with these issues. It also gave me an opportunity to have a dialogue with local intellectuals, activists and academicians; and helped strengthen my contacts and networks.

I thank the Global Studies Program for providing me with this great opportunity to conduct pre-dissertation research.