

‘I spy...’: The (Im)possibilities of Ethical Participant Observation with Antagonists, Religious Extremists, and Other Tough Nuts

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Many of the games played at the Hindu extremist summer camp were fairly violent, as they were designed to discipline ostensibly “soft” Hindu American kids.ⁱ Even the yoga exercises had been accelerated into militant drilling — the transitions marked with terse counting in staccato Hindi. However, as we stood in the dewy grass one particular June morning in 2002, the teenaged campers and I all looked at each other with alarm, as the new game being described to us involved throwing *lathis* (poles) at running members of the opposite team.ⁱⁱ As discipline was a key aspect of the camp culture, we all did as we were told. I played the game as I had with all the others, but as the volunteer anchor of the relay race, a pole was thrown javelin style straight into my back during the first round. Much to the dismay of the *Hindutva karsevak* (Hindu nationalist “volunteer”) in charge, the teenagers stage a quiet revolt; they stopped throwing the *lathis* altogether,

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and henceforth let the race winners be determined without further injuries.

As the substantial swelling on my lower back went down over the next 36 hours, I discerned to my chagrin that at the very base of my spine where the *latbi* had hit, there was a brilliant purple crescent-shaped bruise. I panicked. At a camp where a cadre of the Hindu army against the Islamic threat was ostensibly being trained, it simply would not do to get caught physically manifesting a classic (if somewhat contested) Islamic symbol! I told a doctor at the camp that I was just fine – “no need to look at it”! I put bandages over the bruise, and I became fastidious about dressing in private (although I was staying in a shared girls cabin) until the crescent moon evaporated with time.

I tell this story to elucidate the fact that I greatly feared discovery of what remained hidden; that is, not that I was a Muslim in hiding or anything so dramatic, but rather that I was strongly against the explicitly hateful ideology expounded by my informants at the camp. My informants all knew that I was an anthropologist researching their temples and camps. They had given their consent to let me be a participant observer, but they knew nothing of my personal antagonism towards the core political beliefs of *Hindutva*, and that fact remains as painful that swollen lower-back of 2002, and as tender as the hidden bruise that followed. This ache, however, has not faded as neatly over time.

This paper explores the ethics of partial concealment, as well as other aspects of research with religious nationalists (or whomever we may be at ethical loggerheads with at any given time), such as representation, rapport and collusion. While the American Anthropological Association is currently wrestling with the ethics of explicitly covert research, this paper instead

foregrounds the covert inherent in our overt research. The Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) will serve as a baseline to examine the extent to which the institutionalized normative ethical standards for research fail to account for the complexities of our encounters with informants with whom we heartily and emphatically disagree. In this paper, my subject of study is more about the ethical guidelines themselves and my personal desire for ethical practice, than the ethics of my fundamentalist informants themselves, because insofar as I have failed the Code of Ethics of the AAA, it has also failed me.

Ethical Research(?)

From 2001–2002, after having received the requisite permissions and consent from my informants to proceed, I conducted full-time research with six Sikh and Hindu religious communities in the Washington D.C. area.ⁱⁱⁱ Both Sikh and Hindu communities ran the political gamut, some generally liberal, while others tended towards conservative; conservatism, in this context, refers explicitly to militant stances adopted by diaspora Indians in terms of homeland political identities, while liberal tended to indicate inclusive discourse with regard to homeland politics.^{iv} My ethical dilemma manifested itself quickly, as I was immediately uncomfortable by the fierce antagonism evinced by the extremists within the Hindu and Sikh communities for their respective Others. Yet I did not dare to voice my own enmity to their animosity lest I be shut out of my field-site altogether. Since I generally kept my opposition to fundamentalist ideology to myself while in the field, I felt emotionally stressed and ethically unsure by virtue of this opacity, and concerned about how I

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would eventually represent my informants in my ethnographic writing. While writing up as a graduate student, I turned to several anthropology professors and mentors from my own department and others, almost all of whom pointed me towards the professional code of conduct, the Code of Ethics that had been adopted in 1998.

The profession of anthropology has a long history of dealing with ethics, but I will argue that such engagement is sometimes superficial, and that as anthropologists we would be misguided to place too much faith in the Code of Ethics as they stand. Ethical engagement can be traced at least back to Franz Boas, as he raised ethical questions in 1919 about anthropologists involved in espionage (and was censured by the AAA as a result) (Gusterson and Price 2005). As the culmination of debates about the effects of Cold War funding on anthropological research, the Principles of Professional Responsibility were adopted by the AAA in 1971. It mandated that anthropologists must not engage in clandestine or secret research, that is, research in which the results of study are not made public, nor should the work “jeopardize” the people who were studied (Fleuhr-Lobban 2003:12). In 1984, in response to the fact that more and more anthropologists were finding work outside the academy, a AAA committee tried to revise the PPR into a proposed Code of Ethics, in which the mandate to work in the best interests of the people one studied was replaced by the guideline that anthropologists should consider themselves morally responsible for their actions. However, the 1984 Code of Ethics was not adopted, and instead the PPR was revised (the new version of the PPR was adopted in 1990); the new PPR maintained the language that an anthropologist is primarily responsible to the people they study, but it erased all mention of clandestine research.

In 1998, a new Code of Ethics for the AAA was adopted, which emphasizes that anthropologists “have primary ethical obligations to the people and animals with whom they work and to the materials and people whose lives and cultures the study” (AAA COE 1998: III.A). The new Code of Ethics of the AAA includes the first handling of the issue of informed consent. Anthropologists are now responsible for receiving consent through a “dynamic and continuous” (18) process that does not necessarily imply written consent, but requires qualitative consent. “The spirit of informed consent is one of dialogue and negotiation with the person(s) studied using openness and full disclosure to discuss the research intent, methods and likely outcome(s)” (Fluehr Lobban 2003:19).

A decade later, there is movement within the AAA to try to edit the Code of Ethics again, as anthropologists face new challenges with military and government trainees in the classroom, as well as the Human Terrain System (HTS) that has recruited anthropologists and other social scientists to work alongside the American military in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Executive body of the AAA has explicitly written against HTS, pointing to violations in the Code of Ethics, as well as other potential ethical imbroglios.

As of Fall 2008 there are proposals on hand that would re-insert language into the Code of Ethics that forbids clandestine research, as well as strengthen language from asking anthropologists to do try to avoid doing harm to informants’ to requiring that they “ensure” they do no harm. Also, an attempt to strike language from the Code of Ethics of the AAA that allows anthropologists to follow alternative Codes of Ethics was defeated at on the floor of a Business Meeting at the AAA

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Annual Meeting in 2008 (Redden 2008), but this issue, as well as others may re-emerge as the Code is revised through 2010.

Vincent Crapanzano notes that while anthropological ethics committees have been preoccupied with the admittedly very important task of policing the tenor and consequences of fieldwork in terms of the informants best interests, they have failed to secure a lasting commitment to moral practice in terms of ourselves and our communities (2004:4). I would like to approach the assessment of professional codes of conduct as a means to re-engage with our own moral practices.

In examining professional codes of conduct, Peter Pels (2000) and Anand Giri (2000) have both evoked Foucaultian (1977) critiques in which the codes can only be seen as entrenched in modern notions of discipline and accountability that hide the real nodes of power. Pels describes a professional code of ethics as “set of quasi-legal rules, as part of a specific technology of the (professional) self” (2000:136). Pels argues that the professional codes of conduct hide true moral and political engagement, even while protecting the greatest secret of all— that the rhetoric of full disclosure is a publicly perpetrated ruse to assert our professionalism and expertise: “maybe anthropologists have always been forced to maintain the secret that, in the end, they can never be completely trusted by anyone, because there are no overarching values to which any of their projected audiences can definitively hold them. Contrary to what is usually maintained by liberal political theory, the guarding of secrets can be supremely moral practice” (164). What place *do* secrets have in the discipline of anthropology?

Partial Disclosure

Allow me to put (all? some? more of?) my cards on the table: I deplore religious extremism in all its forms. I hate the politics of hate. Yet, during my fieldwork I played those cards close to the chest. Only now can I reveal what was once hidden, for if I had revealed it before, then the field-sites of my fundamentalist informants would have been forever concealed from me. I concealed in order to prevent concealment. I never lied, but I never told the whole truth either (see Crapanzano 1986). And now, I reveal in order to best demonstrate the hopelessness of full revelation.

The Code of Ethics of the AAA clearly emphasizes a commitment to full disclosure: “In both proposing and carrying out research, anthropological researchers must be open about the purpose(s), potential impacts, and sources of support for research projects with funders, colleagues, persons studied or providing information, and with relevant parties affected by the research” (Fleuhr-Lobban 2003:248). This emphasis on transparent practice strikes me as well-intentioned, but ultimately ambiguous. What is openness? One can never disclose “everything” about one’s self, one’s thoughts and one’s opinions to anyone; it would be impossible to be fully transparent. So then “full” disclosure is necessarily still only ever partial, and “transparency” can never aspire past translucence.

What must one disclose about a research project at hand then? I would argue that the culture of anthropological practice does not support transparent behavior. Pels has confirmed that anthropologists are faced with “the trickster’s dilemma,” the unenviable position of being forced to be strategically duplicitous: “owing public allegiance to both research sponsors

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and research subjects, anthropologists can no longer desire to show either of them a ‘true’ face” (2000:137). Anthropologists may even be fooling themselves; Vincent Crapanzano has also written that ethnographers are necessarily “tricksters,” since they weave a presumably “true” narrative without ever telling the whole truth, yet they rarely see themselves as such (1986).

First, we scholars must spin and rewrite our proposals from the outset to speak to the specific desires of varying granting institutions in order to receive funding, so our project begins with a series of strategic concealments and fore-groundings. We anthropologists tend to explain our project in many different ways depending on which colleague we are addressing, which discipline we are speaking to, which body of literature we are drawing upon, which conference we are writing for, etc.

Our challenge and responsibility to be open would seem greatest with our informants, but it is therein that the injunction to transparency seems especially meaningless. It is generally easy enough to be honest about our sources of funding, but to have to tell all informants of intents, methods and possible outcomes, seems a guideline doomed to fail. Even if researchers compiled a massive master proposal of every theoretical take, possible hypothesis or outcome we could think of, and attempted to give it to every informant who crossed our path over the year(s) in the field (!), it would still fall short of the mandated transparency, since few informants would care to read such a massive document (not all are even capable of doing so). Also, such a document would be itself misleading, because anthropologists rarely really know how a project will actually manifest until we are either well underway or finishing up. How then do we practice the full disclosure that the Code of Ethics of the AAA mandates?

All told, transparency itself is far more opaque than we like to believe.

I would argue that when a spotlight was thrown onto the political narratives of my informants, my own politics were eclipsed, that is partially concealed. The bright light of ethnographic scrutiny foregrounds the beliefs of the informants, and backgrounds the beliefs of the ethnographer. At the same time, when the mandate to transparency itself goes opaque, gazing at it casts a long shadow over the ethical standards of the AAA and other professional organizations. Ethical standards are not obliterated through “gentle deconstruction” (Strathern 1988), but a shadow of doubt is suddenly cast over its face, which both obscures and complicates it. One of the goals of this article is to eclipse the AAA’s code of professional conduct, by casting light and throwing translucent shadows, in order to urge the re-thinking of genuine ethical practice in the discipline.

The Ambiguity of Rapport

One could argue that even if full disclosure is impossible, anthropologists should make an effort to disclose as much as possible, and therefore avoid the active concealment of ideological divergences within research relationships. But to suggest that anthropologists only work with communities with whom we are ideologically compatible is inconceivably limiting. Since many communities will not suffer outright dissent from an interloper, unsympathetic anthropologists may not just be barred from studying extremist communities they found politically alienating, e.g. a militant *madrasah* in Karachi, a neo-nazi Christian study group in Alabama, or an RSS summer camp in the Indian diaspora, but such minimal ethical leeway would force

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certain anthropologists to abort their work if they came across cultures inclusive of any number of “controversial” practices often objected to: female infanticide, violent initiation rites, abuse of the disabled, female circumcision, missionary activity, patriarchy, caste hierarchy, class exploitation, etc. Has there ever been a dynamic between researcher and field-site that was in perfect ideological/political/cultural synchronicity? Do researchers have the responsibility to tell their informants what they personally think of the latter’s ontologies and practices, right to their faces, in the midst of fieldwork?

The norm in contemporary anthropological practice has been to avoid tactlessly judging one’s informants’ practices and beliefs, especially as we are often in the process of attempting to understand what at first may seem unintelligible. I am not an absolute cultural relativist;^v I have already expressed my personal moral distaste for the ideologies of religious extremism—a feeling that was already well-developed when I chose to work with extremist informants. However, I would suggest that in a field context a researcher should try to temporarily collapse, cordon off, and background one’s own values and ways of being, in order to best attempt to understand the subjects’ sometimes very different values and ways of being. Is hiding one’s political views from one’s informants so different from covering one’s head out of courtesy for gurdwara tradition, eating food that one dislikes out of politeness for the host, refraining from telling an informant’s wife that she is the victim of patriarchal gender dynamics, or concealing from a conservative elder the fact that one might have an active sex life out of wedlock?

I would argue that the dynamic between researcher and informant is always distinguished by half revelations, by partial concealments, by feints, and by conscious and unconscious

illusions. Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the agency of subjects can be discerned through attention to the complexity of their actual strategies practices: the sometimes agonistic “shadow-boxing” that informants do with each other, varying the tempo of their interactions in order to position themselves advantageously (1977). Of course, they dance with us too. My informants knew that I was watching them, and I knew that they were watching me do it.

It would be difficult, if truly hard pressed, to delineate the difference between observing and spying. To spy something is just to see it, and we are proficient observers. Spying for a government against another government is just one interpretation of the terminology, though I would not want to equate our normative spying with the covert research relationships that would further entwine anthropology with militarism, nationalism and warfare.^{vi} My purpose here is to complicate the normative, consensual, academic relationships we have with our informants by arguing that our gaze can be more piercing and agonistic than we sometimes care to admit. Anthropologists are always a little bit the spy.

Once, at a Hindu summer camp with deep connections to the Hindu fundamentalist movement, I was playing a popular American game with a little girl, a Hindu American camper, to pass the time in between sessions. Just as a parent was walking by, I said to the little girl, “I spy...” and the parent stopped short and looked at me in horror, so I quickly finished the sentence, “with my little eye, something... and its color is... green!” The parent walked on, perhaps embarrassed by the look that he had shot me, but I remember the event, because I had seen the mistrust that lies beneath the surface of many research relationships rise visibly to the surface. For a moment, I had

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seemed to shockingly reveal my “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990), and instead I had accidentally revealed someone else’s. I had spied something very interesting indeed: the Hegelian discomfort of the self being defined in part by the gaze of the other.

Initially, I believed that my ethical battle with transparent practice was a virtue of the violent nature of my informants’ narratives, but I have come to believe that there is fiction and instability beneath the surface of most research relationships, not just those in which the researcher is hiding abject antagonism to the ideology of her informants. Clifford Geertz has written about the, “ethically ambiguous situation,” of fieldwork in general, arguing that “In a way which is in no sense adventitious, the relationship between an anthropologist and an informant rests on a set of partial fictions half seen–through... So long as they remain only partial fictions (thus partial truths) and but half seen–through (thus half-obscured), the relationship progresses well enough” (1968:151). Anthropologists are sustained by the notion that the fieldwork is professionally, politically or scientifically valuable, while informants are often sustained by the expectation of increased prestige, socioeconomic gain or social gain, but these hopes are often unstated, non-contractual and inherently unstable.

Geertz notes that field relationships are often too delicate to be maintained indefinitely:

It either gradually expires in an atmosphere of futility, boredom, and generalized disappointment or, much less often, collapses suddenly into a mutual sense of having been deceived, used, and rejected. When this happens the anthropologist sees a loss of rapport: one has been jilted. The informant sees a revelation of bad faith: one has been

humiliated. And they are shut up once more in their separate, internally coherent, uncommunicating worlds. [1968:152]

My rapport with one community of Hindu militants collapsed when some of the leaders sought to get me to substantially change a draft of a paper I had written in part about their community. One informant had requested that I remove the phrases “Hindu fundamentalism,” “Hindu extremism,” and “right-wing Hindu,” altogether, as he explained to me that such things did not exist, for Hindus are inherently tolerant, flexible and peaceful. I respectfully disagreed, by citing numerous historical and contemporary examples and discourses to the contrary. Then, via email, several of my informants showered me with a barrage of articles written by others of their opinion, and most of these were about the “Muslim menace” and the need for Hindus to protect themselves from the scourge of Islam in their “Bharat Ma” (Mother India). Not only did they want me to change specific wording, but they wanted to “change” my mind. I was inundated with Hindutva propaganda and felt as overwhelmed and unmoved by this effort as if a neo-Nazi group was working equally hard to compel me to hate just as they did.

Before this exchange, I had intended to return to the Hindu summer camp for a second stint, but since substantial partial fictions had come crashing down, I was compelled by two professors to abort my fieldwork immediately. While it is true that the partial fictions, once lost could not be re-forged without difficulty, and had I returned my informants may have been merciless in trying to get me to see things their way, I regret that my decision not to continue was guided by certain professors’ and mentors’ absolute recourse to the Code of Ethics of the AAA: I was told that if I was working at cross-purposes with the

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people I was researching, then I had no business doing research with them in the first place. As I read the Code of Ethics again myself, I felt dirty, confused, and frustrated. It was right there in black and white—my primary ethical obligation was to my informants—I must “do no harm.” Since writing against their narratives may harm their interests... I clearly needed to find warmer, fuzzier informants.

Usually there are not such explosive ends to research relationships, and Geertz writes that anthropological fieldwork depends utterly on the ability to maintain the partial fictions at hand: “It is this fiction, not falsehood—that lies at the heart of successful anthropological field research; and, because it is never completely convincing for any of the participants, it renders such research, considered as a form of conduct, continuously ironic” (1968:154). Barbara Harrell-Bond has written that in order to gain rapport she had to “deceive” informants by establishing close bonds that they thought were more permanent, while she knew them to be temporary: “I carried out a piece of deception that I am not able to fully justify” (1976:120). The difficulty of wiggling out these relationships once the fieldwork ended plagued Harrell-Bond for years, which only serves to highlight Geertz’s assertion that the “moral tension” and “ethical ambiguity” (1968), in the relationship between informant and researcher, are normative. Geertz would have us believe that there is a sharp line between these “fictions,” and actual “falsehoods.” I wonder.

James C. Scott’s notion of “hidden transcripts” (1990) is a useful concept through which to explore the complex relationship between the researcher and researched. Scott’s “hidden transcripts” are those narratives that have been banished from the public arena through the workings of power. While working with religious extremist communities in the Washington

D.C. area, I was cognizant of the complexity of the power dynamic between me and my informants. In general, both my informants and I were educated and middle-class, but the workings of American racism are impossible to ignore: Indian immigrants covet acceptance by the white majority, for despite being a “model minority,” they are still considered less-than-white (Prashad 2000; Maira 2002). I believe that my university credentials and privileged whiteness helped me to gain access to my fieldsites, but while I was actually inside the community domain of my informants I felt quite powerless. I was at the mercy of my informants to aid me, tolerate me, and talk with me. I had to tread softly or risk being barred. In this complex maze of power dynamics, I believe that Scott’s “hidden transcripts” were enacted by both me and my informants. “Hidden transcripts” may not point just to domination and resistance, but to the narratives which go unsaid in public spaces out of anxiety and fear based on shifting nodes of power.

And to what extent are these partial fictions or half-truths on both sides hurting our ability as anthropologists to represent and write? This is well-plied territory as well, but not surprisingly, this line of inquiry has not yielded many firm, unyielding answers. For example, drawing on his work with Afghans, David B. Edwards gives us a series of vignettes that privilege “experience over certainty and ambiguity over certainty,” and jettisons the concept of “truth” altogether (1994:359). His representation of diverse Afghani experiences based on partial truths is an attempt to honor the complexity of their relations with him and with one another.

The Swedenburg-Shokeid debate, which played out in the pages of *Cultural Anthropology* from the late eighties through the early nineties, touched on the nerve of partial fictions (among

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other issues), and also served as a fine case study for how anthropology is dealing with reflexivity and the effects of internalizing Foucaultian anxieties about “truth.” Swedenburg initially chooses to respect and represent his Palestinian informants’ partial truths, (although even as he does so, he exposes them as such), since they tell us a great deal about memory, forgetting and re-narrating the past towards the present political moment (1989). Shokeid attacks Swedenburg for forwarding these partial truths, for re-framing the debate to suit his own theoretical desires, and for forwarding his own political agenda (1992). Swedenburg shoots right back by arguing that he was honest and forthright about his politics, agenda, and both the partial and fuller truths that he presented in his work, so given that he had self-consciously situated himself he had not violated any ethical norms (1992). This debate uncovers some of the ethical messiness that anthropology is still working through—their feints, our feints, their politics, our politics, his politics, my politics—and how we manage to try to find something honest in the midst of the uncertainty.

But, again, what about those antagonist informants? What happens to representation when we do not agree to try to represent our informants as they would want us to? Edwards narrates his time with rebel mujahidin in 1984, but he does not give his readers an inkling how he felt about their militancy (1994). Swedenburg was firmly on his informants’ side politically, although sometimes they did not realize it (for a time his car was routinely the target of hurled stones), and he was interested in representing them in a way that would advance the integrity of their political ideology. But what if he had been doing ethnographic work with the Israeli army at the time instead—

how would that have changed his ethical positioning according to him, and/or according to the AAA Code of Ethics?

Our antagonists and tough nuts are not ubiquitous — anthropologists are not of one mind about anything at all. While extremists really get my goat, perhaps there is a conservative Republican anthropologist out there whose personal politics deeply conflict with those of her hippie, environmentalist, commune informants—so is she ethically required to represent them as they would want to be represented? To what extent are we ethically bound to represent our informants in their own terms, or at least in ways that do not harm their interests and integrity?

Of Reifications and Representations

In the end, my Hindutva informants felt betrayed, because I would not promise to represent them on their own terms, or champion their cause. One fiction they had ascribed to me was that I could potentially help them to defend their views post-Gujarat massacre, when the American media were reporting on the human rights violations of Hindu extremist karsevaks and leaders. One informant told me that I “could be the next Konrad Elst,” referring to a Hindutva sympathetic researcher. Several times my Hindu fundamentalist informants lent me their books by David Frawley, a white American who had converted to both Hinduism and extreme Hindutva politics. They vocalized their hopes that I would represent them to the American mainstream on their terms. I promised only that I would dutifully read the sources they had proffered, and I did. In directing me towards the “right” representations of them by outsiders, they

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acknowledged their anxiety that I would represent them in the “wrong” way.^{vii}

Richard Handler has argued that anthropologists have no responsibility to faithfully represent informants and their politics in their own terms (1985). He has noted that simple acceptance of the narratives and ethnic appellations of our informants without recourse to the demystification of certain assertions and assumptions will invariably land the anthropology of nationalism and ethnicity into the unenviable position of reproducing and reifying fictions. Handler advocates instead for a deconstructive process, which is the simultaneous “destructive analysis of the familiar and the exotic,” in which narratives of cultural distinctiveness are carefully examined instead of reproduced or romanticized. This does not involve the anthropologist narrating the “facts” of the situation in ethnography, but rather: “the promiscuous juxtaposition of texts from various sources, familiar and exotic, suggests that disagreements, dissonance, and competing viewpoints must be explored rather than suppressed” (18). It is the anthropologist’s challenge then to complicate narratives, not necessarily to deny them or forward them.

When a member of the Sikh nationalist (or Khalistani) community forwards a narrative about the history of India, which I find patently false, I can address this in my ethnographic writing by noting the breadth of contrary opinions. When a member of the VHP/HSS (Vishva Hindu Parishad/Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh) community tells me that in “fact,” there is no such thing as Hindu extremism, but that it is only because Muslims are “inherently violent” that they ought to be excluded from the glorious “Hindu state” of India, then it is my responsibility in the writing of ethnography to contrast the “facts” of my informant with a *mélange* of counter narratives and contrary expositions. In

the end, the truth and fictions of ethnography remain somewhat blurred, perhaps a symptom of the partial truths and fictions of fieldwork. James Clifford asserts that ethnography is incapable of real honesty, or full disclosure: “Even the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control. Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (1986:7).

The anthropologist is under no obligation to collaborate with ones informants if it would reify fictions, but informants are under no obligation to approve of what is produced by the anthropologist either. But the collapse of rapport is especially frightening if your informants believe they are fighting a righteous war defending their religious, ethnic and/or national integrity. The militancy of some of my informants has meant that I have been anxious about placing my work in the public domain.^{viii}

Since the Hindutva movement is vitriolic and often violent, I was intimidated when certain informants began a vigorous campaign to “change” my mind. The Black List: Enemies of Hindu Exposed is a webpage, topped by a graphic of a rope dripping with animated blood, and listing the antagonists of Hinduism worldwide (The Black List 2008). Although the list includes a handful of famous and infamous Christians and Muslims, like the Pope and Pervez Musharraf, it is largely populated by journalists and scholars who have written contrary to Hindu extremist ideology. The New York Times has even made the list, as did the BBC, which earned the brief epithet: “Blatantly Anti-Hindu.” The Black List is also listed as the “Criminals Hit List,” and the addresses and contact information of the alleged perpetrators are public posted so that the “guilty”

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can be harassed by the righteous Hindus doing their “duty” to their “religion and nation.” Therefore, doing written or rhetorical “violence” to the violent is not just ethically perilous.

Nowadays, many anthropological subjects are talking back, and some are very angry. They are not just reading what is written, but some are writing rebuttals and even issuing threats. Pels (2000) has compellingly argued that the anthropology of modernity can fruitfully engage the study of the angry subject and the collapse of rapport as aspects of the new realities to be faced in doing research today.

Collusion

In the final analysis, the prickliest aspect of participant observation with extremists is the actual “participation” itself. Drawing on Geertz, George Marcus explored the problematics of “rapport” in the participant observation methodology by discussing the “intellectual/cognitive affinity” between researcher and subject despite a possible lack of “ethical affinity” (1999). His notion of “complicity” underscores the fact that our field relationships are inherently ambiguous, dynamic and mutually forged, in manner which belies the conventional notions of “rapport” and “collaboration.”

Sara Shneiderman evoked Marcus’ notion of complicity in her discussion of her own varying and shifting negotiations with Maoist ideology and informants inside and outside of her field village in Nepal (Pettigrew et al. 2004). In order to maintain “well-being and access,” Shneiderman was forced to vocalize her accommodation to certain aspects the Maoist project, despite her unease at its often violent manifestations—a revelation that has created a tangle of “competing complicities.”

Douglas Holmes' research on "illicit discourses" required that he interview and work closely with far-right neo-fascist European politicians (Holmes 2000). Marcus notes that there is ethical shaky ground being traversed in the process, yet Holmes' work is important, despite his necessary concealments and complicities: "This calculated and imposed naïveté, necessary for fieldwork to be conducted at all, is potentially the source of greatest strength and special insight of ethnographic analysis, leading to both the 'complex or involved' sense of complicity as well as exposure to complicity's other sense, 'of being an accomplice, partnership in an evil action' " (1999:124). Like Holmes, my rapport with my extremist informants must be complicated with reference to its resonance with complicity in both senses of the word.

Marcus' notion of "complicity" was not inherently fraught with the notion that one is abetting wickedness, but the potential for such distasteful circumstances to arise remains implicit (1999). Complicit relationships with extremists, while still arguably based on set of partial fictions, can have very concrete consequences. Since the method of participant observation mandates that the anthropologist be there, do it, and live it, then to some extent at least, anthropologists working with militants could be put in positions in which they would be seen as giving legitimacy to the group they are studying, by actively participating or even just by being there.

Participant observation itself rarely pushed me into the realm of moral crisis, but it did happen occasionally. Once I was asked by an informant to read a passage from Swami Vivekananda on stage during a Hindutva event, ostensibly because my English would be most understandable to the assembly of Indian immigrants who hailed from various linguistic corners of the sub-continent. The Gujarat riots of 2002 were underway at the time,

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and the meeting was intended to both celebrate a Hindu holiday, and simultaneously support a *Hindutva* group, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) of Gujarat, in their “righteous defense” of Hinduism. My skin prickled as I sat before the event and read the document, entitled, “A Clarion Call to Hindus”:

Mark me, Then and then alone are you a Hindu when the very name sends through you a galvanic shock of strength. Then and then alone are you a Hindu when every man who bears the name, from any country, speaking any language, becomes at once the nearest and dearest to you. Then and then alone are you a Hindu when the distress of any one bearing that name comes to your heart and makes you feel as if your own sons were in distress. Then and then alone are you a Hindu who you will be ready to bear everything for them, like, the great Guru Govind Singh. After having shed his own blood for the defense of the Hindu Dharma, after having seen his children killed in the battlefield, the great Guru, the wounded lion, retired from the field calmly to die in the South but not a word of curse escaped his lips against those who had ungratefully forsaken him!

Given the context, the speech was not just *Hindutva* propaganda advocating militancy, but it was treading on factually contested ground.^{ix} Although I was worried about the consequences of refusing, I could not in good conscience read the speech in public. I felt like an undercover police officer being asked to commit a crime: what equation determines whether s/he ought to commit a smaller crime in order to eventually be in a position to prosecute far bigger crimes? Luckily, I was not forced to tip my hand, because while refusing to read the speech I successfully

reasoned to my informant, “As a non-Hindu, who am I to tell Hindus what they should be and what they should do?” By concealing my primary reason, and revealing a secondary one, I managed to remain in the audience, and avoid the unpardonable sin of publicly reciting Hindutva ideology with a great saffron VHP flag in the background while Muslims were being slaughtered in the thousands on the far side of the world.

Despite the fact that I never publicly uttered the ideology of Hindutva, my research demanded that I assist its machinery from behind the scenes: serving food, setting up chairs, volunteering at the camp, etc. Even attending a Hindu extremist event means that one is at least a little complicit in what goes on there, for my very presence may have been read as support by onlookers. Residing in the belly of the beast means that one is part and parcel of the problem, and yet perhaps simultaneously in the most strategic position to undermine it.

Doing Harm

My work with Hindu and Sikh extremists means that I am in a position to publish articles which question their narratives and may, if anyone reads them, even damage their public credibility in Washington DC and elsewhere, as many people (both insiders and otherwise) are blind to the extent of the ignorance. Does the ethical dictate of the AAA to “do no harm” extend to communities which, arguably, *do harm*? Even if it somehow did not, I take particular issue with the mandate, since our ethnographic output has never been politically neutral or objective: We are almost always harming someone’s agenda, someone’s dignity, someone’s faith.

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The text of the Code of Ethics of the AAA reads:

Anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work. These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a research project when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities, such as those owed to sponsors or clients. These ethical obligations include: To avoid harm or wrong, understanding that the development of knowledge can lead to change which may be positive or negative for the people or animals worked with or studied. [1998:2]

If that were not straight-forward enough, it continues, “Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research or perform other professional activities” (2). Sounds good, but what if an anthropologist knows that their ethnography may harm the integrity of their informants by questioning their mores and exposing how the group is doing harm to others? Should one walk away?

Pels has argued that it is a potentially slippery slope to suggest that the anthropologist must take the interests of one’s subjects as paramount priority: “in the semi-contractual sense of guaranteeing obligation towards the people studied, the code (1991 PPR) may function to prohibit the publication of research findings unpleasant to the latter” (2000:145). In a climate in which anthropologists are working more often with subjects who have a stake and an opinion in how they are represented, it is

imperative to interrogate the possible consequences of putting informants' interests (as if informants' interests were singular!) ahead of the subjective truth of ethnographic conclusions or even the dictates of good conscience. Pels narrated a cautionary tale in which a group of elite informants used professional codes to try to force a Dutch anthropologist not to publish, since exposing their exploitative practices in print would potentially "harm their interests" (144).

My initial goal in undertaking my research was to try to understand how religious nationalisms and the politics of hate are constructed, maintained and reproduced. My primary goal was not to harm my informants interests, but to understand them. However when I publish my material on my Hindutva informants, I sincerely hope that in the process of exposing their hate as such, and by complicating their simple narratives of good and evil, I do manage to harm the narratives of Hindutva. I would willingly do rhetorical harm to those who do violent harm. Rhetorical violence against violent ideology itself is the lesser of two evils, as the alternative is silence too deeply complicit to be endured. Even if completely ethical research with fundamentalists is impossible, the moral cost of eschewing such research altogether seems far more unethical.

Cynthia Keppley Mahmood engages in a thoughtful and well-articulated discussion of the complexity of working with violent informants in her book, "Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants," which addresses an earlier iteration of the very same Sikh militancy that so perplexed and repelled me years later. Although Mahmood is careful to note that she disagreed openly with many of her informants, she does write that her work with Sikh militants came after her work with Sikh victims of the Indian state, and that she was very compelled

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by the narratives of the latter.^x I wonder if her initial forays into the suffering and victimization of the community helped her to create a context in which political violence and religious nationalism could be understood with more sympathy.

At the beginning of her book, Mahmood tells her readers that she expects her informants to generally respect and appreciate her work. My empathy with regards to the suppression of the community under various past regimes in South Asia (not to mention the structural racism in America that had led to so much backlash against them post-9/11) was, and remains, considerable; yet, I do not believe that my Khalistani informants will so wholly approve and respect my ethnographic writing about their community. Mahmood took refuge in a level of empathy that I was never able to muster, and that fact seemed to free her to tell a narrative that was not wholly anathema to either her or them.

So while Mahmood may have been working with militants, she was not working with antagonists whom she was afraid of, or whose interests she hoped to actively harm. Mahmood talks about how she was able to avoid agreeing with her informants on many facets of their ideology, yet she was still able to speak on behalf of their interests and political goals in other ways. While not a “Khalistan supporter” herself, she could speak out vocally, on stage with microphone in hand, against the repression and torture that some of her informants and their families had endured in Punjab during the height of the insurgency.

While her excellent discussion of these issues was primarily concerned with many of the ethical issues at hand in this article, Mahmood did not address any of the AAA’s ethical instruments to note whether they helped or hindered her progress, or whether she even consulted them. If she were held to the standards of the current Code of Ethics of the AAA, then Mahmood would

probably find herself comfortably within the guidelines of ethical behavior outlined therein. She seemed to take her “primary responsibility” to her informants seriously, as she worked to advance some of their narratives to the extent that she believes that they would largely approve of her work. This has not been the case for me, so while empathy may be the key to avoiding harm, what if one’s discomfort wins out over one’s empathy? While I can be compassionate and understanding about the causes and conditions that set the scene for the particular brands of hate and Othering peddled by both my Sikh and Hindu extremist informants, my empathy was usually subsumed by my desire to undermine the false certainties that so often give way to ever more violence.

Undermining the beast can be accomplished from without, as I have discussed, but it can also be attempted from within. I did manage to push the boundaries of discussion and debate, so I at least mitigated some aspect of ideological reproduction while I did research. I was a softly dissenting voice throughout my involvement with the VHP/HSS summer camp. Even while I was aiding one of the *karsevaks* in leading a discussion group, I tried to mitigate some of the intolerant lessons by reinforcing some more pluralistic ones. For example, one afternoon the oldest batch of VHP/HSS campers and their counselors tried to convince me that Mohandas K. Gandhi had been a traitor to the Hindu people. An Indian-American teenage girl explained to me that Gandhi should have been killed long before he actually was, because his deference to Muslims meant that India was not created as an officially Hindu state. In this argument, as in several others, I argued at length, but I eventually felt the partial fictions wear thin and threaten to snap. Once rapport had been severely endangered, I usually deferred by saying that I would read more

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literature on the subject. I may not have won any arguments, but my questions certainly went against the “taken-for-grantedness” of the place, and I strategically uttered dissent in corners where it would have been otherwise absent. This is in and of itself a hopeful space in which collusion may provide its own very thin silver-lining. Perhaps some of the kids who danced *garba*, and ran relays races with me at the Hindutva summer camp in 2002 will read anthropology articles about the social construction of hate in Hindutva discourses and choose to re-think some of the lessons they learned there. One can only hope.

Conclusion

Anthropologists must be fully cognizant of the danger, and advance carefully with eyes wide open, for ethical gray areas and uncertain footing must be approached with real concern, care and accommodation, especially by those of us who are just setting forth on the journey for the first time. When our own storms come, and they will, we should not have to dive under the tattered Code of Ethics and get soaked through to the bone in the process. We have to learn how to build our own shelters—complex, strong and supple—that will actually survive tumultuous times. It is our responsibility as the next generation to know our past, but question our inheritance.

A brief sketch of the ethical complexities tackled thus far reveals that little is certain, so uncertainty itself must become a point of departure for ever deeper moral inquiry: transparency in practice is partially opaque, our field relationships are a tangled web of partial fictions, universally satisfactory representation is often (if not always) impossible, dialectical engagement means

negotiating both collusion and resistance, and it remains our choice to do rhetorical violence to the violent.

While I have cited several ethnographers who have also puzzled and toiled through these concerns, there are many others who have managed to study about, work with and/or publish on militants, some who are sympathetic to their subjects and others who are not, without ever addressing ethical issues of collusion, research complicity, or rhetorical violence to the violent (e.g., Edwards 1994, Hansen 1999, Kurien 2004, Seneviratne 1999, Tambiah 1992 and 1996). Does an anthropologist who has done work with extremists have to address the question of collusion, rapport, or representation head on, explicitly, and in gruesome detail? While reflexivity of this kind does not need to be poured onto into every book and article (though as a reader I personally appreciate when it is), I do hope that behind the scenes these ethical dilemmas are being worked through, discussed and taken seriously from start to finish.

On a personal note of conclusion, the complexities, fictions and ethical intractability that I have discussed at length in regards to my Hindutva and Khalistani interlocutors, is by no means only a symptom of extreme fieldwork situation with those informants who spout vitrol and carry (and throw!) *lathis*. In a fruitless effort to side-step the double duplicities and the ethical tribulations of my work with Hindu and Sikh religious nationalists, I choose my dissertation research project more carefully. My initial logic: I am a Buddhist convert myself, and since Buddhist convert communities tend away from religious nationalisms and the discourses of hate, what could be more ethically straightforward than research with a Dalai Lama-loving community that makes meditations on compassion, peace, and enlightenment their *raison d'être*? Ah, yes. Well, lesson learned. In a nutshell, it turns

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out that my Buddhist informant community, the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, wants to build a 500-foot statue of Maitreya, the Buddha of Loving-Kindness, in the heart of rural India; however, the two thousand plus subsistence farming families who own the 750-acre tract of land that the state government plans on taking by force to give to my Buddhist informants for their giant statue are understandably quite angry. Enter (from stage left)...me. My research turned into a painful exercise in failed communication and mediation, and it tossed me headlong into yet another series of ethical dilemmas.

During my dissertation fieldwork, the Code of Ethics of the AAA was worse than useless—again. It was like a dull noise in the distance that keeps one tossing and turning through the night: a relentless car alarm two blocks away, or a neighbor’s dog that will not stop barking. “Avoid harm or wrong...” Avoid harm to whom? Make a public fuss on behalf of the farmers, and I harm the reputation and agenda (the literal “heart project”) of the Buddhist group. Stay silent, and be complicit in the disenfranchisement of thousands of small farmers. Avoid? Harm? I will spare you the nitty-gritty details of how I proceeded, or why I believe I acted as ethically as possible in the situation. My point here is that the Code of Ethics was an unbearable distant hum, a pretentious easy answer where there was none, a retreat backwards with every flank still exposed; it was a trap. The only way forward involved unambiguously turning my back on it altogether. Instead, it took soul-searching, eggshell-treading, back-breaking work, and painstaking tacks back and forth and back again to find ethical ground upon which to stand, albeit it precariously. It has always been precarious and it always will be, and that is what lies hidden beneath the Code’s smudge of a shadow.

If the Code was supposed to serve as a lifeboat for those of us trapped in shark infested waters, then why does it keep sinking just when it is needed the most? Poor construction, brittle material, shoddy craftsmanship... The truth is that it was never meant to help us. The Code of Ethics is a stage piece; it is a door that leads to nowhere. It symbolizes and signals our vaunted professionalism to outsiders, but it is a white lie and we of all people should know better. The stand-off in Kushinagar continues, by the way, and so does my careful skate across ethical thin ice.^{xi}

Professional codes of ethics themselves do violence to our ability to contextualize and particularize our methods and moral grounding on a site to site basis. Marilyn Strathern writes that human subjects approval boards and ethical codes themselves are dangerously close to shaping and limiting the terms of our fieldwork: “However much talk there is of collaboration or conserving the autonomy of subjects or recognizing their input into the research or taking power into account, this aspect of ethics in advance, of anticipated negotiations, belittles the creative power of social relations” (Strathern 2000:295). Insofar as they take limitless potential methods and ethical bearings and forward one interpretation as gospel, there is something very extreme and *fundamentalist* about the professional codes of conduct themselves. Even though the AAA chooses not to discipline members for possible infringements of the Code of Ethics, and notes that it is meant to educate and promote discussion, the very existence of the Code in black and white, as it were, serves to simultaneously diminish those goals. If they are to exist at all, codes of ethics should be flexible, constantly in process, and evolving and shifting as a result of continuing debate and discussion. Institutionalized, “approved,” professional codes smack of a

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certainty and closure that hampers ethical debate as opposed to stimulating it.

I have argued that the very opacity of transparency is cause for the eclipse and complication of the professional codes of ethics, but my ambivalence for the professional technology of codes of ethics should not be mistaken for disinterest in ethics themselves. I am committed to the revitalization of ethical engagement within anthropology, and indeed I would argue that this paper has been written in that spirit. I would join Pels (2000) and Giri (2000) in condemning the codes of conduct while simultaneously calling for a rejuvenation of moral inquiry. Pels writes that the conventional *modus operandi* of anthropology distances self from moral practice and political engagement except through quasi-legal ethics code. He bemoans the loss of the third element, that is, the moral ideal to which everyone should strive. On the other hand, Giri suggests that Immanuel Kant's notion of autonomy and Gandhi's notion of *swaraj*, or self-rule, may offer anthropologists more hallowed moral ground than our current professional code of ethics. Giri's work evokes Cassell's discussion (1980) of the problem with university human subject review boards, since the latter also gestures towards Kant's exaltation of human autonomy as a starting point for anthropological ethics. Similarly, Deborah Battaglia's "ethics of the open subject" foregrounds the need to engage ethics without essentializing or disciplining, while remaining open to the ambiguities and multiple valences of the subject(s) of anthropology (1999). Moral engagement and ethical fieldwork are lofty ideals worth pursuing—they represent horizons we ought to continue striving towards, and yet we must never delude ourselves into believing that we have finally arrived.

Anthropologists often tread in complex cultural chasms thickly mined with real and phantasmic dangers: ideologies, research methods, representations and even the physical realities of a field-site can all be imbued with violence from time to time. As anthropologists we work to complicate and bridge the deep gap between self and other, so we cannot be shocked when the bright light of moral inquiry reveals just how far one might fall with a single misstep. Absolute, unquestioning reliance on the Code of Ethics of the AAA is akin to putting one's faith in a dusty old parachute hastily packed many years ago by unknown hands, and then jumping headfirst into the abyss.

Endnotes

i. The camp was run by members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (the diaspora version of the infamous Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which was temporarily banned after members planned and executed Mohandas Gandhi's murder), which are part of the Hindutva (Hindu-ness) family. As part of the Hindutva movement, the VHP and HSS discourse hinges on a strictly Hindu nationalism that stands in opposition to "foreign" minority religious groups in India, notably Christians and Muslims. For more on Hindutva, see Kurien 2004, Hansen 1999, McKean 1996, Prashad 2000, and Tambiah 1996.

2. The *lathis* at the camp were long skinny poles. *Lathis* are often a sign of violence and disciplining, as they are carried by police, and also mobs.

3. The Pew Charitable Trust's Religion and the New Immigrants Project, and the Harvard University's Pluralism Project each contributed funding towards a full twelve months of research.

iv. Sikh fundamentalist ideology revolved around the maintenance of militant fervor in the pursuit of a Sikh homeland, Khalistan, and

these Sikhs defined themselves against the Hindu majority in India, while carefully maintaining a historical mistrust for Muslims as well. For more on Sikh nationalism see Juergensmeyer 2000 and Mahmood 1996. On the other hand, Hindu fundamentalist narratives paint the picture of embattled Hindus striving to protect their religious integrity from inherently dangerous and alien Muslim and Christian Indian minorities. For more on Hindu nationalism, see the first footnote. As well as hinging on very contested historical constructions and narratives of religious interpretation and practice, both extremisms advocate violent means if necessary to achieve states solely dominated by their own religion and no other.

v. Battaglia advocates for an ethics of the open subject which is neither relativist nor universalist, since moral scrutiny would tack back and forth with accommodation to complexities of cultural and historical particulars (1999).

vi. Anthropologists have long grappled with the issue of “covert research” for government or military establishments, but I would argue that that particular element of the debate is beyond the purview of this article. Here I am questioning the brittleness of the Code of Ethics as they stand based on the “covert” aspects of our normative research, and although I particularly look at work done with ideological antagonists, the question of actual spying is an ethical morass for another time and place. The issue of anthropology and intelligence has been handled admirably by others; for more see Gusterson and Price 2005, Moos 2005, Price 2007, Turner 2008, and Wolf and Jorgensen 1971.

vii. My informants were well read in literatures that affirmed and contradicted their position, as there were pamphlets and thought pieces circulated amongst the Hindu fundamentalist community that directly replied to the arguments of scholarly and journalistic entities writing against Hindutva. One thought piece even cited parts of *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Marty and Appleby 1991), in which it was reported that Judeo-Christian fundamentalisms are more missionizing

than a movement like Hindu fundamentalism. The VHP pamphlet used the scholarly work to eke out an argument that Hindu fundamentalism was “better” than Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms.

viii. One of my funding agencies likewise demonstrated some anxiety about the antagonism of my informants. The Pluralism Project opted to give inquirers about my research directions on how to request my paper directly from me, although all other funded student research was published on their website.

ix. Sikhs would invariably argue emphatically that Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) did not shed blood in defense of Hindu dharma, but rather in defense of Sikhi and against political repression (Singh 1999). In fact, few histories deny that Guru Gobind Singh fought in battles against Hindu rajahs, as well as with them when against Muslim rulers. Many Sikhs argue that Hindu fundamentalist discourse problematically appropriates Sikh martyrs in an effort to encompass Sikhism as part of Hinduism.

x. By the time I entered the field the Khalistan movement had receded so far in to the political background in Punjab that the separatist movement in the Washington DC area was only maintaining itself through very heavy-handed, ahistorical discourses of Othering and hatred. Perhaps my timing, in addition to the fact that I did not explicitly do interviews with torture victims, made my experience with Sikh militants less complex and multivalent than Mahmood’s. I could find nothing tolerable about the intolerance being taught to children at the most religiously and politically conservative of the Sikh gurdwaras where I did research.

11. The Buddhist group (the Maitreya Project of FPMT - the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition) still won’t talk to the farmers, and the farmers won’t budge unless moved by the police or the army, but I do believe that my interventions at least brought the confrontation to light, and now the Buddhist administrators are being pressured by their donors to look for

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compromises. If you're really curious, check out my contributions on the issue in the Wild River Review - www.wildriverreview.org.

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