

**Ethnographic Research in Prison:  
Descriptions, observations and suggestions from the field**

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***Abstract***

This article portrays an account of my experiences in doing research in one of the oldest jails of Jammu and Kashmir. Prison as an institution holds a mixture of people. One group among this mixture are those of under-trial prisoners. These under-trial prisoners constitute a majority of the prison population and the focus of my study lies primarily on them. In this article, I run through the challenges that I came across in the field. My firsthand account of how I gained access to the prison setting and the process of collection of data are vital since these provide an insight for other scholars preparing to conduct research on prisons. Interviewing a category of people who have been kept away from the mainstream society is a difficult task. The paper describes how the participants were selected and the process of interviewing. Subsequently, I will draw suggestions from my experience of researching in prison, which will act as a guide for future researchers to conduct study on prisons.

**Keywords:** Prison, prisoner, under-trial, ethnography, imprisonment, jail, jail-staff.

**Introduction:**

Indian media has appeared more powerful in nearly all areas of the global world (Mason, 2006) from the past so many decades. It has contributed a lot towards human perceptions in a setting that has transformed the world into an 'age of information'. However much, or may be most of what a wide range of population knows about the prison, is provided to them through an image that time and again misrepresents what is accurate and lays emphasis on what is more 'entertaining to the masses' and 'beneficial to politicians' (Simons, 2007). The study of imprisonment as it is represented and practiced in this twenty-first century in the Indian sub-continent gained an impetus in me when a particular case of Machung Lalung,

who was released after having spent fifty-four years in jail without any trial (*See: Parwini, 2005*), appeared in the print media and also on the internet. Such an incident clearly illustrates how the imagination of prisons overwrites their actuality.

The present research was carried out as part of the researcher's doctorate course. Three factors are to be taken into consideration while one chooses to conduct a study and these are: formulation of the research topic, aim of the research and nature of the information to be gathered (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). All these factors were carefully taken into consideration during the process of data collection to ensure the fair outcome of the study. The motive behind this research study was to unfold the procedures that cause delay in the disposal of the cases of under-trial prisoners and therefore delay in delivering justice to its seekers. This delay in the delivery of justice was assessed at both the institutional level and the procedural level. To carry the research study further, the researcher started his journey towards the field site in February 2012. It is pertinent to mention here that the study was conducted in one of the oldest jails in Jammu and Kashmir – the Central Jail, Srinagar. The field work was conducted in two phases. Phase – I of the field work pertains to the collection of data from prisoners inside the prison setting. Phase – II of the field work pertains to the collection of data from the families of under-trial prisoners who are imprisoned in the Central Jail, Srinagar. From March 2012 to July 2012, I spent an average of three to four days a week in the prison interviewing under-trial prisoners. This category of prisoners constitutes around 75 – 85 percent of the prison population at the time data was collected and included both male and female prisoners who were undergoing their trials in the courts of law. Interview schedule was used to collect information from the prisoners which included questions relating to their personal and criminal profiles. Prisoners' personal profile was later used for Phase-II of the field work, which pertains to conducting interviews of the families of under-trial prisoners interviewed in Phase-I. Phase – II of the field work started soon after the researcher finished Phase – I of the field work. Phase – II of the field-work started from August 2012 and ended in February 2013. Besides using interview schedule, observation of the participants and informal interviews were also employed in this study for the collection of data.

As a beginner in the area of research especially while preparing to survey prisoners, I might have benefitted from reading about the experiences of researchers who conducted surveys on prisons or prisoners in the past. However, I hardly found any published work on prisons or prisoners that would depict the actual process of doing survey research in prison especially in

a conflict-ridden state of Jammu and Kashmir. Only a few authors have till time accumulated a detailed guide to make way towards the prison structure to collect and analyze data (Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings, 2004) and that too does say nothing about prisons in Jammu and Kashmir however they provide an in-depth insight into how to get inside the prison settings. Yet again only a few earlier researchers have detailed on the method of doing research on prisons once access is gained.

I will now share an ethnographic account of the research work on prisons in the following section. I ignore reporting the empirical findings here instead my emphasis will be more on the process of research and this will supposedly be descriptive. To begin with, I will trace the history of ethnographic research conducted so far on prisons. I will present an account of everyday dynamics that I bumped into in the field which will be followed by personal reflections. These sections will expose a concrete method of conducting survey research in prisons. In the concluding section I will present a list of suggestions that illuminates some of the arguments for the research students who chose to conduct research on prison. The suggestions that I provide would generally be applicable to both qualitative and quantitative researchers who wish to work in a prisoners' world.

### **Prison Ethnographies:**

As mentioned earlier, much literature is available documenting the problems of prisons, in general, and the problems of under-trial prisoners, in particular. But there is hardly any literature available on the jails or its allied aspects in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Ethnographic studies on prisons have been conducted only since 1940s. These studies offered a conflicting picture of the prison life and the structure of prisons. Also, the outcome of these studies is often short-lived because the nature of prisons is always in flux.

Stretching back to 1940's, Donald Clemmer's (1940) work "The Prison Community" is considered by many to be the first comprehensive sociological study of prison. The study was conducted in one of the America's large prisons in the State of Illinois, which Clemmer (1940) considered as a place where 'men do time'. The study is considered as one of the model prison ethnographies, being cited in works even by the contemporary scholars. In his work, Clemmer (1940) highlighted the concept of 'patronization' and emphasized that prisons transform prisoners into habitual criminals relating it to their period of stay in prison. Clemmer showed that within the walls of the prison, there exists a culture among the prisoners which is shaped through an interaction with the fellow prisoners and also through

other informal relationships with the institution for which Clemmer (1940) used the concept of “prisonization” by which he meant ‘the socialization of inmates into the prison culture’.

Another classic ethnographic work “The Society of Captives” of Gresham Sykes (1958) was conducted in New Jersey men’s prison for three long years. Sykes developed his work carefully so as to exactly frame the life in a prison. Sykes work is devoted to justifying the pains of imprisonment, muddling through the oppressive power relations within the institutional set-up. The principle theme of Sykes’ work is reflected in its conclusion that the existing characteristics of prison culture stems from the restrictive kind of environment within the prison.

Cressy (1961) and Goffman (1961) amended Clemmer’s (1940) analysis of institutional relationships. They argued for a more concrete role of prison organizational structure so as to create a culture within the prison walls for the prisoners to inhabit. Goffman’s concept of ‘total institution’ is a solid association to the debate of prisons and deals largely with the formation of two distinct worlds – the world of inmates and the world of staff within the small world which he calls ‘total institutions’. For Goffman, ‘total institution’ refers largely to the residential and work places, confining people who are cut-off from the mainstream society for some amount of time. In the latter part of his work, Goffman suggests that for future researchers, attention has to be paid on the internal structure of the two worlds and to the functional aspects of the institution and the role performed by both the staff and the prisoners.

Galligan’s (1999) study on ‘Due process and fair procedures’ is an attention grabbing and conceptually one of the difficult areas of the legal system. On his general analysis of due process and fair trial rights, Galligan (1999) stressed on the theoretical features. His work is an all-inclusive study presenting a wide range of subjects and the author has not limited his study to one specific dimension of due process and fair trial rights but has moved beyond these terminologies.

Rhode (2004) conducted her study ‘Access to justice’ in a maximum security prison in Washington State. Rhode’s study takes an extensive picture of the ideal ‘equal justice under law’ and marked it as its starting point in the study. Rhode’s (2004) study is grounded in the realities of law and other legal practices. Her work on ‘access to justice’ focuses heavily on examining the nature and extent of procedural justice available to people with little or no income. Her work is intended to develop our legal procedures realistically in order to bring us closer to our goals. Rhode (2004) concludes her study by outlining two fascinating services: one by

creating radical disparities in access to justice predominantly for those having a limit on the means; and secondly in doing this, she creates an extensive list of special recommendations.

In the recent past, other prison ethnographies have highlighted a series of procedures and practices that were employed in prison research. Examples of these ethnographic studies include the studies conducted by Barbara Owen (1998), Megan Comfort (2008), Ben Crewe (2009) and John Irwin (2009). Barbara Owen (1998) enlarged her previous research studies on female prisoner subcultures in her ethnography of a women's prison in California, while as Megan Comfort (2008) after conducting interviews of prisoners in San Quentin prison found that the female partners of the prisoners were to a great extent affected by the prison rules imposed on the prisoners due to imprisonment. Ben Crewe (2009) conducted a study in a prison in England. Crew (2009) examined the power-relations between the prison administrators and the prisoners. John Irwin (2009) in a study on male prisoners serving life sentences for murder examined how prisoners transformed into compassionate individuals over the course of their imprisonment.

Such foundational studies accentuated the practice of ethnography in prison research. These studies mentioned above highlight the relationships between the researcher conducting study, the field of research (i.e. the prison setting) and the participants (the inmates). As a researcher, I primarily gathered data for the study by using interview schedules and engaged myself in the observation of participants besides conducting informal interviews as mentioned earlier. I obtained ethnographic understanding and engaged in the introspective examination in the process of conducting the study. I now turn to how I gained access to the prison setting and my initial visits to prison.

#### **Gaining access and getting inside:**

Conducting survey research in prisons poses certain challenges for researchers (Byrne, 2005). Most of the prisons do not consider it a primary concern to accommodate researchers (Hart, 1995). Researching in a setting which is quite a closed institution consisting of two basic categories such as inmates and jail staff requires a researcher to confront a number of challenges (Patenaude, 2004). Also, conducting research on prisons is a difficult task especially when the study is undertaken in a conflict-ridden area like Kashmir as mentioned earlier. Data collection took place at the start of the spring season and continued till mid-summer and this period corresponds between March and July of 2012. But before I could plan to start my field work, I sought permission from the higher authorities of prison department for conducting research in Central Jail, Srinagar. Yet again, it was next to

impossible to approach the higher authorities of Prison Department in this regard since most of the times, permission is denied to the researchers especially during inspections and sometimes for other security reasons. Therefore, the only way-out to approach to the higher authorities of Prison Department was to find some reliable source who could assist me in how the permission could be obtained. Apart from finding reliable sources for assistance, having correct documentation plays a significant role in obtaining permission from the higher authorities. For example having a recommendation letter issued by the university to which researcher is affiliated with is essential while trying to get into the prison. I was granted permission just after around ten days of my applying for the same.

During the month prior to actually starting my field work, I paid a few visits to the field site to get familiarized with the environment and the people living inside. Speaking in general, it is important to achieve an insider's vision not because it is the only one achievable but because without it, a complete picture of the life inside the prison cannot be comprehended. This also requires the researcher to communicate sympathetically with the subjects. Predominantly, this is true when the study is being conducted in an area such as prison. One often bumps into resistance, both from the respondents as well as from the authorities conceding permission. Uncertainties often exist about the intentions of the researcher to understand the ins and outs of the state of affairs. Given such odds, the relationship between the respondents and the researcher presupposes a primary importance in this study. Crucial at this point of time was the way I introduced myself to the prison staff and thus I was never taken for granted by the staff of the prison.

### **Selecting the participants:**

A strategy was adopted in this study for the selection of participants. Among the two male blocks of the jail, first participant was purposively selected taking into consideration the judicial status of the participant and thereafter selecting every second location in two male blocks. Within the female block, all the locations of under-trial prisoners were selected owing to its little population. Purposively selecting the respondents is one of the chief techniques often used by researchers in qualitative researches for the fact that in purposive sampling technique, it is the characteristics of the individuals which qualifies them to be selected as respondents (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In this approach, the sample units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central problem and other themes which the researcher wishes to study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

During the process of data collection, the focus on the places of accommodation rather than

on prisoners was necessitated by the fact that while the course of data collection would take an upwards of five or more months and any location of the participants derived from a list of locations before interviewing would quickly become obsolete due to the rapid turnover of prisoners. I worked along every nook and corner of the prison thus taking the prison structure into consideration which included three blocks each comprising multiple numbers of barracks where prisoners spent their time thus accommodating more than three hundred fifty prisoners altogether. Since there is always the accommodation problem inside the prison due to overcrowding, it was not surprising that all the selected accommodation places were occupied at the time of data collection. For most part of the field work, this method of selecting participants worked well. Most of the selected prisoners were interviewed. But in a number of cases, the selected prisoners were not available due to one or the other reasons. Some of these prisoners were interviewed at a later date while others were released and hence not interviewed. Those released prisoners were not replaced in the sample owing to the fact that the new comers occupying those vacant locations were likely to be a different category of prisoners such as convicts.

Altogether, a total of 148 locations were selected for interview among which only 127 interviews were conducted. Rest of the prisoners were not interviewed even at any other time for different reasons. For example, there were some prisoners who resisted appearing for the interview, some were granted bail and thus released from prison, some locations changed and occupied by a different category of prisoner due to internal shifting and so on.

#### **Prison visiting and rapport building:**

My visits to central jail marked an encompassing feeling of not having so much of time whenever I visited it. During my first visit, as mentioned in the above section, there was an introductory session between the researcher and one of the staff members which led to a series of interactions with other staff members and this was formal. During the visit, under-trial prisoners were asked to come forward for an introductory session. During this introductory session, not all the inmates spoke much about prisons or about themselves however a few who chose to speak made critical comments about the police but not about the prison. In the latter sessions, much began to change. With each visit, I could sense the inmates' resistance to appear for the interview. And therefore, I actually began to move towards them but this was possible for two male blocks of the central jail only and male entrance into the women's block was completely prohibited on the grounds of maintaining privacy. In order to build a trustworthy environment with the prisoners, I tried to become part

of the scene without being obtrusive, responding to inmate's suggestions, participating in discussions, accepting their invitations for meals and so on. Both the prisoners and the staff most often assumed that those conducting studies on prisons are those either affiliated with different wings of criminal justice system or with some non-governmental organizations or they may be some social activists. But having introduced myself as a 'university student' undertaking research work, seemed sensible and I was least likely to be misunderstood by prisoners or by jail staff. This was the time when I realised how important it is to be connected to a well-known university since I was at all times taken seriously by jail staff and the inmates alike (King, 2000; Martin, 2000).

Prior interaction with the prisoners or merely gaining access to prison does not come with a guarantee that the under-trial prisoners would participate in the research. Therefore, it became a prerequisite to establish relationships and build rapport with the prisoners. To achieve this, I regularly interacted with the inmates and participated in their daily living activities. But inmates tend to be very careful about the people they do not know. Thus, it was sometimes important to stand still if they do not want to unveil certain things during the interviews. At the same time, I have to be open enough about what the interview covers so that they do not feel sort of trapped in such a situation which would cause harm to them as prisoners. I actually ensured them that I have come through a trustworthy source rather than the ones they are in opposition to such as police. Thus the need of the hour was to protect the confidentiality of the participants. These considerations were particularly acute, because the survey, besides other aspects, also inquired about their crimes for which they are lodged in the jail. The matter was further complicated by the fact that all the participants were housed in a jail and such institutions are always subject to the control and supervision of jail staff whose powers included the right to search even the documents while leaving the premises. Therefore, they were guaranteed that their information will be kept confidential and that a pseudonym will be used in place of their actual names. Besides, I ensured prisoners that the information obtained from them would be beyond the reach of the jail staff. In other words, only the researcher would know the identities of those participating in the process and be in a position to match responses with named prisoners. The reported and published data would be anonymous and the identity of the prisoners would in no way be traceable. This level of confidentiality was an important assurance for some of the respondents who might otherwise have been reluctant to participate in the survey.

One significant argument during this point of time was that the distrust of the prisoners could result in refusal to go along, at least for some time till they got to know me well. For example,

some prisoners during the process of interviewing tried to stay away in order to avoid an interview owing to the fact that they had found me having friendly chats with the jail staff. Yet in spite of this, I was able to go through all these barriers as the frequency of my visits to jail increased and I became more familiar with some prisoners who previously started with some resistance. The level of relationship between the researcher and the participants reached to such a stage that some of the prisoners expected a favour from my side in the sense that I could carry their message outside of the jail premises either to their family or to some other person. In fulfilling their expectations, I would have actually invited trouble for them and for me as well but somehow I managed to come out of such hurdles.

### **Impact of researcher's presence on the setting:**

The process of interviewing was always "long and exhausting" (Liebling, 1999). Interviewing respondents within the barracks of different blocks where prisoners actually stay was significant in the sense that my presence impacted the environment. Though the interviews were conducted at a place invisible to the staff but I could most often see some staff members making rounds inside the barracks keeping an eye on what is happening. According to some prisoners, the jail guard would not so often visit the barracks except in the morning to call those prisoners who had a hearing in the courts. This indicated that my presence within the prison walls was not at all times pleasant for the jail staff. Though some of the staff members were too open in showing their obnoxious feelings towards my presence yet these reactions were not symbolic to how most of the jail staff reacted. For example, most of the jail staff got actively involved in the study and most willingly tried to assist when asked for.

Also, how prisoners reacted to my presence offered insights into how my presence impacted the prison settings. Most of the prisoners were curious to interact with a person who was not another prisoner or a member of the jail staff (Rhodes, 2004). For them, participating in the process of interviewing was perceived as an opportunity to narrate their experiences. A few of the respondents were delighted to have someone from a highly reputed university to interact with them. By and large, my presence appeared to be looked upon positively. However, inmates showed negative signs towards being interviewed only when they were distracted or disturbed from the activities they were doing at that point of time.

Yet another significant aspect within the prison was the division of jail staff and prisoners into dichotomies like 'we' and 'them'. Such splitting up of the jail staff and prisoners is strengthened by certain rules, which prohibits prisoners from establishing friendly relations

with the jail staff (Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Granack, 2000). In such a division then, researcher stands at the third category thus placing the researcher outside of the staff-prisoner array (King, 2000). As a researcher having been placed outside of the staff-prisoner dichotomy allowed me to obtain much of the information from those living inside which might otherwise was impossible to obtain if either of the categories would pre-suppose I was allied with “we” or “them” categories. This indicates that a researcher conducting study inside any prison has to be neutral. But maintaining neutrality cannot be possible all the times which would otherwise impact their rapport building process. Therefore, the researcher thought about embracing “multiple loyalties” to the jail staff and the prisoners according to situations (Nielsen, 2010). For example, according to Nielsen (2010: 318), “While a person may, in one situation, be taken as an outsider approached with caution, the same person may, in another situation, be taken as an insider who must be treated trust fully - as was the case with my own shifting engagements and positioning as an ethnographic researcher” (Also see: Clarke, 1975).

Conducting study within the prison entails support from both the jail staff and the prisoners respectively (Newman, 1958). During my field work, I presented myself as being devoted towards collecting information from the prisoners rather than assisting them for their release or bail (King, 2000). Such facts about my intentions of being in the jail stands as a foundation for the jail staff to get satisfied. In his study, King (2000) advocated that researchers conducting studies in prisons must stay with their outside status at all times. A common example of this kind entails being visible to the ‘insiders’ while standing in queue for check-up by the jail staff when entering or leaving the prison (Waldram, 2009).

#### **Suggestions for future researchers:**

Up to now, I have presented an account of daily processes of doing research in prison. The reflections and observations presented are intended to generate thoughts about researching in prisons. These will set the foundation for the beginners to start their research on prisons. I will now present a list of suggestions which recapitulates my advice for future researchers and other academicians who plan to study prisons or prisoners:

1. Prior to actually arriving in the field for the collection of data, one must possess vast knowledge about the field site, the participants, the research methods and tools and techniques of data collection. This is possible through the process of learning. Researchers must look for the existing literature available pertaining to their area of research and go through it thoroughly in order to avoid difficulties in the field.

2. Present yourself as an outsider and not the one from amongst the insiders. Prisons are always considered as high security places responsible for upholding its security. As a researcher, you may though consider your research study fundamental to your life but it may never be priority for the jail staff. The jail staff may assist you inside the prison but this adds to their existing role and they are likely to feel overburdened by this additional task. Therefore, it is necessary to establish warm relationships with the jail staff also as much as with prisoners.
3. As a researcher, presume that your appearance inside the prison may be irritating for the jail staff. Therefore, you must step in courteously. You have to be patient and steer clear of such actions which could be identified as offensive by the jail staff.
4. You must always keep in mind to introduce yourself as a 'researcher' having an affiliation with a university rather than any other status signifying connection with some criminal justice wings.
5. Most of the times, insiders will show too much of interest in what you are up to and may be eagerly waiting for a chance to pose certain questions to you. Find ways so that you can avert their attention.
6. Once, as a researcher, trust develops between you and the prisoners, their level of expectations may arise. You are most likely to be asked to do favours such as carrying information out of the jail premises or asking for some paper. I suggest avoid doing any such activity since this may bring pause to your research survey inside the prison or you may completely lose access to the prison.
7. Lastly, maintaining confidentiality is one big issue especially when the respondents are the prisoners. I suggest that researchers must assure the respondents that their information will be kept confidential. The researcher must use a suitable pseudonym in place of the name of participants to ensure that their identity can in no way be recognized. The researcher must also ensure that all the information provided by respondents will be destroyed after use and will not be used for any other purpose except for the research.

### **Conclusion:**

In the above sections, I have argued that research which is intended to extract information from the respondents especially when the respondents are prisoners, the researcher requires establishing a relationship with the respondents. Also, I have invited both qualitative and quantitative researchers to overtly provide an insight on the field setting and on how they

carried the process of data collection. Researchers in any field setting do not come up with their writings on the field setting and the process of their data collection in their works. Their focus remains primarily on data analysis. This may often leave the readers into thinking about how this work was accomplished. Those who conduct research on prisons or prisoners often enquire about two viewpoints: One, that they often seem speculating about how doing research on prisons sounds like? In the previous sections, I have elaborated my understanding of the field and shared some reflections; Second viewpoint is concerned with the process of data collection. Researchers are often worried about the fact that prison is a difficult place to conduct a study on. They are always curious to find ways so that the process of data collection will go easy without any unevenness. In this regard, I have offered a list of suggestions in the above section, which originates from my own understandings of the process of data collection. My experiences presented in the above sections may or may not be representative of what others will go through inside the prison because prison cultures can differ extensively from one setting to another. Furthermore, I propose that future researchers must consider this piece of writing as a beginning point for them rather than an authoritative collection of guidelines.

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