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Journal: Global Ethnographic

Publication Date | April 2018 | No. 4 |

Published by: Emic Press

Global Ethnographic is an open access journal.

Place of Publication: Kyoto, Japan

ISSN 2186-0750

Global Ethnographic and Emic Press are initiatives of the Organization for Identity and Cultural Development (OICD).

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Reflections on the Imagining Sanskrit Land Project

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It has been a bit over two years since I was in the small hamlet of Jhiri. So, these ‘Notes from the Field’ are a little dusty. However, they are a reflection on my time before, during and after conducting this fieldwork, which I conducted while I waited for my PhD dissertation to be proofread by my supervisors. I stayed in a ‘Sanskrit-speaking’ village in Madhya Pradesh, India, during the summer months of 2015. These notes do not focus on the sociolinguistic reality of spoken Sanskrit in this village, which was the focus of the fieldwork. Rather, they focus on the personal challenges I faced preparing, entering and being in the field.



Photo 1: Old door

I have previously published a few articles on Jhiri. A public interest article is available [here](#) (McCartney, 2017a), while a linguistically-oriented article (McCartney, 2017b) and anthropologically-focused article (McCartney, 2017c) followed. I am also slowly making a low-budget documentary series. [Here](#) is the first episode, which documents the task of looking for the village.

I still remember the trepidation prior to going to the middle of Madhya Pradesh in late April. Before I ventured off into the unknown, I had spent most of February, March and April 2015 in the air-conditioned comfort of a friend’s apartment in the embassy district of Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, where I had been writing the final draft of my PhD thesis. As the temperature increased each day, my interest in leaving these comforts declined considerably. The comforts served as a retardant to literally getting off the couch and venture forth to do fieldwork.



Photo 2: Acharya Tiwari (right)

Initially, my biggest problem related to the ‘Sanskrit-speaking’ village of Jhiri was that the village was impossible to locate, which was basically due to limited and imprecise information. I decided, finally, just to go to Rajgarh district and see what might happen. I had been thinking about this village for a few years, since I came across it on my search for information about ‘Sanskrit-speaking’ villages. Initially, like many people, I wanted it to be true. I noticed that most of the websites, news articles and blog posts all seemed to be copying and pasting from each other. This made me even more curious about the veracity of the truth claims that ‘everyone speaks fluent Sanskrit’. Either people uncritically consume these stories as simply ‘true’, or, instead, they are dismissed. These wide-ranging opinions are fascinating. Why do people feel the need to believe these stories are true, or not?

There is an interdisciplinary blind spot related to spoken Sanskrit. Currently, I know of no other academic research into the ‘Sanskrit-speaking’ village phenomenon. Since Srinivas (1952, 1955, 1956, 1989), several works have been written on the topic of spoken Sanskrit. This includes: Nakamura (1973); Aralikatti (1989, 1991); Hock & Pandharipande (1976); Hock (1983, 1991, 1992); Pandharipande, (1991, 1992, 1995, 1996, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013); and Hastings (2004, 2008). Probably, however, the most cogent overview of the success and failure of spoken Sanskrit is Deshpande (2011).

I find it interesting to explore, not only the politics involved in the reclamation of this variant of the classical language, but also its acquisition as a second language. This is directly involved in the [political theology in which Sanskrit is embedded](#), which demands a lexical and grammatical purity for the [moral, cultural and political reformation](#) it is said, by ethno-nationalist Hindu

supremacists, to foster. I tried to specifically collect linguistic data related to Sanskrit’s vitality in relation to how it survives within a complicated linguistic ecology.

Jhiri has only two Brahmins, out of a population of approximately 600, most of whom are from the Sondhiya caste. Therefore, how might the Brahminical Sanskrit language, in a rural village in India, evolve as a natural, as opposed to an artificial, language? What stages of imperfect learning, if left unchecked, might result in a creole-type hybrid between the first language(s) of the inhabitants and the revived Sanskrit?

I just turned up, unannounced at dusk, in Jhiri one day, and hoped that people would at least let me stay the night. Instead of staying only a few days, I ended up staying just over one month. My intention was to spend this month visiting as many ‘Sanskrit-speaking’ villages as possible in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Haryana. But, I felt compelled to stay. The more I learnt about the community, the more fascinated I became. We became friends, almost instantly. It was hard to leave, in the end.

From Delhi, I took a train to Gwalior where I stayed with a Couchsurfing friend and his family. A few days later I took a bus to Guna, where I spent the night. The manager of the motel was convinced he knew where Jhiri was located. He organised a driver to escort me to Jhiri, which was apparently ‘only three hours away’. We literally drove around in circles that day, backwards and forwards, stopping at countless dusty intersections to ask for directions. It seemed many people had heard of this village (*‘jo Sanskrit walleh gaon; that Sanskrit village’*), but no one seemed to know exactly where it was. My experience with asking for directions in India is that no one generally wants to admit they don’t

know. They would rather just tell you something.

My driver started to get annoyed. A few times he told me we should just turn around and return to Guna. At one point, quite late in the day, he explained that the bus in front of me was *definitely* going to Jhiri. So, as he implied, I could just get on that bus and he could go home. I asked him, 'How do you know that bus goes to Jhiri when you don't even know where Jhiri is?' He kept driving in silence. Eventually we arrived. There was no sign that said, 'Welcome to the Sanskrit-speaking village of Jhiri: An ancient world, [India's own Jurassic Park](#)'.



Photo 3: Gheesha Lal (left) and two friends

Gheesha Lal, a tall, lanky, young man, approached. His beaming smile disarmed me, as he briskly walked over to the car and stuck his head inside the window. I spoke to him in Sanskrit. He, in turn, smiling, resplendent in his *paan*-stained singlet, responded in Sanskrit, which included an emphatic wiggle of his head. We became instant friends. Gheesha Lal would often take me on trips around the district on his motorbike. Having unloaded my bags from the car, Gheesha Lal led me up the main street to the home of the two Sanskrit teachers. Exhausted and relieved, I waited there and spoke Sanskrit with the husband and wife team.

In my third week in the village, during the evening celebrations of a wedding, I was asked by a couple of the villagers to speak with the

Sanskrit teachers and convince them to start teaching Sanskrit again. I really wanted to stay out of this situation. It seemed not my place to intercede. But, following repeated requests, when the time felt right, I asked Acharya Tiwari why he and his wife no longer taught Sanskrit, and if they had any plans to restart the project. He replied, smiling as always, 'Right now, we are just too busy with caring for our children, and I have my other teaching work outside the village. I don't know if the Sanskrit will restart here, or not'.



Photo 4: Rooftop

During my stay, I slept on the roof of a three-storey building. Below, on the ground floor, the stable was full of buffalo. During the summer months, the coolest place to sleep was on the roof. It was even too hot for the mosquitoes this time of year. One did not need a blanket. To freshen up each morning, I would go down to the 44-gallon drum next to the toilet and buffalo, and, in the darkened corner on the ground floor, pour cool water over me to wash away the dust-encrusted sweat from my itchy body. The buffalo slowly warmed to me. There was not much light down on the ground floor, apart from what came through a skylight. The sound of buffalo chewing cud, and their primal grunts and huffs they made in that hot, dark room, haunt me a little bit.



Photo 5: Buffalo roam

My first evening involved being taken around to meet the important people in the village. After dinner, we talked over a cup of sweetened tea. I asked the leaders of the village council for the opportunity to stay. We talked mostly in Sanskrit, yet sometimes we switched into Hindi. As I'm reasonably conversational in both languages, there was no problem in explaining my intentions, or being understood. I explained how I had heard about Jhiri in Australia through YouTube, and that I had come to India to see it for myself. I told them how I was a PhD student interested in documenting the revival of Sanskrit, and that it would be great to be able to collect data to make films and write papers. Essentially, there were no objections by the council to my project, as most were excited and interested. I was free to stay, as long as I wanted, and film-interview anyone who was interested in being involved.



Photo 6: Elders in the village

However, the problems I faced would reveal themselves soon enough. While some

people were certainly not interested in being interviewed or filmed, and stayed inside their homes when I was present, I generally had more of an issue with keeping people out of the frame while recording, or not using up all my battery power and memory on taking a seemingly infinite number of selfies with everyone who requested them. Initially, some people were quite hesitant; however, the majority were not, and, over the weeks that I was there, the people (and the buffalo) became more familiar with me. This enabled at least some of the problems with trying to observe things in a natural state to dissipate, but not all of them. For instance, people would be speaking Malvi (the first language of the village and district) and Hindi with each other, but when I encountered a group of people, they would start speaking Sanskrit with me.

Jhiri does not have electricity or running water. The lack of lighting and generators made the soundscape of the village exceptionally tranquil. However, because there is only one working well in the main street, this sound created a rhythm throughout the day, as it was used non-stop, mostly by the young women and girls to collect water. This was an endless task, it seemed, which I have documented in this [short film](#).



Photo 7: Water supply

The electricity story is more complex. The village council had refused, on principle, to pay their electricity bill. They refused

because there were other villages close by that either did not pay a bill, or had a significantly reduced bill. This was due to nepotism and corruption, as family members worked for the electricity company. I did not become fully aware of this until it was time to recharge my laptop, video camera, phone, and voice recorder on about the third day.

This led to repeated trips to the next town where family members of people in Jhiri lived or worked. I started charging my equipment at a medical doctor's surgery. It was down some steps off the main street. This basement location meant it was perceptibly cooler than up on the street, even without air-conditioning. However, on many occasions, I arrived to find the power already out, or, having just plugged my surge-protected power board in, the 'electricity *calī gayī* (left)'. It was pointless asking the question, 'When will the electricity come back on?' as not even God knew the answer to that.

On several occasions, I was whisked into the back seat of a car, or onto the back of a motorbike, without any idea where I might be going. Generally, it involved visiting relatives in another district. Sometimes, this involved actual farm work, like in [this film](#), where we went to a village about one hour away to collect grain.

These trips to related villages also helped me think about the viability of the Sanskrit reclamation project. Annually, young women leave their ancestral village to live with their in-laws. This constant exodus of Sanskrit speakers means that, unless these other villages also participate in the Sanskrit-speaking project, its future seems dim. The leaders in Jhiri are aware of this situation, but feel helpless to rectify the situation. [This film](#) shows some aspects of this festive wedding season in Jhiri.



Photo 8: Women and children travelling back from a wedding

Jhiri has 92 dwellings, of which only a handful have plumbing. Most of the villagers openly defecate at one of four spots on the edge of the village. I was oblivious to this situation, because the home I was staying in had a toilet. I wondered where, and why, people were walking to at different times of the day, with a little tub filled with water that returned empty. I thought, initially, that because of the heat, it was an attempt to stay hydrated. As I wandered around the village, I eventually came to the points on the edges of the village where most people went to answer *nature's call*. Through my privileged perspective, I found it hard to understand why this village did not see this as a priority, as the World Health Organisation and the Indian government agree that open defecation is a serious health issue that not only costs billions of dollars, but also lives. While the village is self-reliant, when I asked about the lack of plumbing or better infrastructure for public health, the village council told me that they were waiting for Prime Minister Modi to come and build them toilets.

In Jhiri, except for one day of quintessential 'loose motions' caused by heat stress, I did not have any problems with my health. The water coming out of the aquifer was exceptionally clean and sweet. One day, however, the village was having a wedding party. I recall sitting there in line talking to a

couple of the male visitors who had come with the groom from a village about 50 kilometers away. It was then that I noticed the plates we were eating from were full of graphic pictures of mouth cancer. It still strikes me as odd, that a festive occasion, such as a wedding, was in some way, potentially sullied by these confronting images. However, none of the people sitting nearby seemed to think it was odd.



Photo 9: Cancer plate

But, my bowels were not good. I ate the food offered, all of which was fried and either salty or sweet. I politely excused myself to rush back to the privacy of the toilet amongst the buffalo. At least it was cool, dark, and quiet there. As I scuttled across the dry and dusty, windswept field, stopping repeatedly to remove clumps of hardened dirt from my sandals, I heard some of the wedding guests ask where I was going. The guy I had been sitting next to, without any thought for my privacy or dignity, simply declared to the 100 or so guests that: 'He must go take a shit, he's got loose motions'. The raucous laughter still haunts me a little. I am sure they still laugh while reminiscing about the foreigner scurrying across the field like a penguin.



Photo 10: Village portrait



Photo 11: Women sorting food

I often think it would be great to spend a year in Jhiri and write a more extensive ethnography of the village. But, it would require many sacrifices, particularly on a personal level. Personally, I do not think that it is feasible, even if part of me would like to do it. The main reason, however, is that there were hardly any people who spoke Sanskrit. Even though the media continue to produce stories that [the entire village speaks Sanskrit](#). It is my impression that, of the 600 residents of the village, only about ten spoke Sanskrit at a comfortably conversational level, which was closer to the perceived purity of the Classical register, was mostly free of grammatical errors, and had minimal substrate interference from Malvi and Hindi. We were able to converse, indefinitely, with relative ease, on a variety of topics, using different tenses, cases and moods, without having to switch to Hindi. Beyond this, perhaps another 20 people tried to speak a disjointed variant that occurred through the prompting of elders to perform some standard sentences, which, often only got as far as, for example, 'Hello, my name is Akhilesh. How are you?' Beyond this, the rest of the villagers were limited to 'Namo namah', which means 'Hello'.



Photo 12: Two boys by a door

Also, even with this lack of speakers, I was repeatedly told that people were speaking more Sanskrit because I was there, which made me wonder, How little Sanskrit is spoken without an outsider's influence? It seems that, based on the small amount of Sanskrit spoken in my presence, then, the answer might be that there would be not much, if any, spoken on a regular basis. The Sanskrit adoption project in Jhiri seems to have reached its endpoint, even if the villagers want to revive their own 'revival' project. I am still in semi-regular contact with some of the villagers through Facebook and Whatsapp. This has been an interesting way to continue to collect data in informal registers of Sanskrit as we continue, for the most part, to converse in Sanskrit.



Photo 13: Preparing lunch



Photo 14: Lunch prepared

Now that I am engaged in a different research project, my attention has turned towards learning Japanese, and trying to learn more about the spiritual marketplace in Japan. I do hope, though, to continue to journey into Sanskrit Land, as the Sanskrit language and its imaginative consumption are indelibly linked to the global consumption of yoga-inflected lifestyles. It still fascinates me when I hear a consumer of global yoga assert, 'Have you heard about that village in India where everyone speaks Sanskrit?' I can only respond, with a glint of a smile, 'Go on, please tell me'.



Photo 15: Ornate door



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