[1]*Doing Prison Ethnography: Explorations and Impediments*.

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Abstract:

Prison Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, is invaluable for its deep immersion into communities, enabling researchers to capture the nuanced behaviours and cultures of a controlled group. Through participant observation, it grants an insider's perspective, offering rich, detailed insights into lived experiences. This paper critically examines the use of ethnography in prisons, particularly in the study of women's confinement, arguing that its immersive approach reveals complex social dynamics that other methods overlook. Prison ethnography, while laden with significant methodological and ethical challenges, continues to serve as a crucial lens for uncovering the inner dynamics of closed institutions and the marginalization within them. This study, centred on female inmates in Kerala, interrogates the intersections of gender, power, and institutional control, revealing the deeply layered ways in which women experience incarceration. By confronting and complicating dominant narratives around crime and punishment, particularly in relation to women, this research offers a pointed critique of traditional penal discourses. The findings emphasize the need to foreground the voices of those most marginalized in the carceral system, urging a revaluation of how these perspectives are integrated into broader discussions of social justice and reform. While prisons, as Goffman's "total institutions," pose significant challenges to full ethnographic immersion due to their hyper-surveillance and restricted access, the richness of data gathered even from partial ethnography is undeniable. This study contends that, despite these constraints, ethnography offers unparalleled insights into the institutionalized lives of women inmates, highlighting the interplay of control, resistance, and identity within the carceral setting. The paper further interrogates the methodological limitations and ethical concerns of prison ethnography, while advocating for its unique ability to unearth the hidden narratives of institutional confinement.

Key Words: Ethnography, Prison Ethnography, Total Institutions, Women in Prison

[1] This paper shares the experiences of the researchers during the field work in Women's Prison, and the real-life confrontations and engagements while doing research in Women's Prisons in Kerala, India.

Evolution of Ethnography and its Methodological Scope

Ethnographic research has been effective in its pursuit to comprehend social reality for over sixty years across diverse fields in Britain, North America, primarily as an anthropological approach. Topics range from the mundane to the exotic, providing insights into both everyday life and extraordinary social phenomena (Dorothy, 2005). As a genre, ethnography is dynamic and constantly evolving, reflecting shifts in theoretical perspectives and methodological innovations. While traditions and continuities persist, ethnographers continually seek to refine their approaches to better capture the complexities of human action and meaning. Ethnography's evolution is inherently tied to the slow immersion of the researcher in the lives of those they study. This immersion occurs across various social contexts and through different forms of engagement. Researchers might conduct unstructured interviews, participate in the daily activities of their participants, or simply observe interactions for a long period of time.

The interpretative approach is central to ethnography, as it is deeply rooted in constructivism, which holds that knowledge is subjective, multiple, and context-bound (Cresswell, 1994). The research process, which involves the co-creation of knowledge between researcher and participants, is often more important than the final product, as it reflects the complex and ongoing nature of meaning-making. The process of ethnographic research typically begins with the researcher's participation in the daily lives of their participants, talking, observing, and listening. Ethnography is a distinctive research methodology that offers unparalleled depth in understanding human behaviour, as well as the meanings individuals attach to their actions. By embedding themselves into the daily lives of participants, ethnographers gain insights that would otherwise be difficult to achieve through more distant forms of inquiry. This immersive approach allows researchers to observe not just behaviour but the cultural, social, and psychological contexts that shape it (Daynes, 2018). Ethnography comes with its own set of qualities and limitations, but its strength lies in the researcher's active involvement with participants, often over extended periods of time.

Ethnographic research involves sustained engagement with individuals, often through repeated encounters in their everyday environments. This method, originating in cultural anthropology, has its roots in early exploration and colonization, where anthropologists sought to understand the cultures, they encountered. The essence of ethnography is directly tied to the researcher's engagement with the "field"—a conceptual space representing a distinct cultural environment (ibid). Ethnographers approach their work with an orientation toward understanding how the 'other' feels and interprets the world. This focus on the subjective reality of the participants shapes the researcher's perspective and drives the inquiry into how individuals construct their own understanding of the world.

A critical aspect of ethnographic practice, according to Bourdieu (1977), is reflexivity. The researcher's social and cultural capital influences both their relationships within the field and the interpretation of the data collected. Positionality—the recognition of both the researcher's and the participants' social positions—plays a crucial role in the ethnographic process. As the researcher moves toward the intimate knowledge of an insider, the distinction between observer and participant becomes fluid, requiring constant self-reflection on the impact of the researcher's presence and biases. Ethnographic studies typically employ a combination of qualitative methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and casual conversations, over an extended period. This prolonged engagement allows for a deeper level

of verification and helps establish trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants. Ethnographers focus on descriptions and narratives rather than quantifiable variables, providing a more nuanced understanding of the human experience (Daynes, 2018). It is a dialectical relationship between the participant's subjectivity and researcher's positionality.

The process of decontextualization—analysing and reducing data—is a crucial part of ethnographic research. The goal is to identify larger patterns and themes from the vast amounts of narrative data collected. As Tech notes, there is no single correct way to analyse ethnographic data; the process is eclectic and context-dependent (Cresswell, 1994). Issues of validity and reliability are central concerns in ethnographic research. The challenge of gaining an accurate understanding of the phenomenon under study is compounded by the researcher's potential biases, the reactivity of participants to the researcher's presence, and the limitations of observing all relevant aspects of the social context (McCall & Simmons, 1969). Despite these challenges, ethnography's flexibility and adaptability allow researchers to continually test and refine their conclusions through the dynamic process of fieldwork.

Ensuring the validity of ethnographic research involves two key concepts: internal and external validity. Internal validity can be strengthened through triangulation, feedback from participants, and involving participants in all stages of the research process. External validity, while less emphasized in ethnography, involves recognizing the limits of generalizing findings and instead focusing on developing a unique interpretation of events. Despite its strength in generating "thick descriptions," ethnography is often criticized for its lack of reproducibility and generalizability, as its findings are bound to specific contexts. Yet, this very specificity is its greatest asset, particularly when studying highly regulated environments like prisons.

Ethnography in Institutional Settings: Exploring Prison Environments

This paper explores the application of ethnographic research within the institutional setting of a prison—a "total institution," as defined by Erwin Goffman. Prison ethnography presents unique opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it offers rich data on the lived experiences of inmates, particularly women, whose voices are often marginalized. On the other hand, the hyper-surveillance and restricted access in prisons can pose significant hurdles to conducting primary research.

Ethnography was chosen as the methodological approach for this study to delve into the complex social structures and experiences of confinement in women's prisons. The prolonged engagement and flexibility of the ethnographic process allowed the study to adapt to the unique challenges of understanding a closed institution, while also maintaining a critical focus on the lived experiences of the participants. The initial stage of "hanging around" is crucial for building rapport and learning the social norms of the group under study. As the research progresses, the researcher's role within the group may shift, and these changes are critical for learning the ropes and gaining deeper insights into the subjects' experiences (Miller, 1952). While the researcher strives to gain an insider's perspective, there is always a risk of "going native"—becoming so immersed in the group that it becomes difficult to maintain a critical distance. There have been several debates regarding the insider and outsider perspectives. The insider position posits that only those from within the ascribed status group access to understanding their cultural practices, which in this context, when explained, only a prisoner would be able to understand the experiences and meaning system of the inmates of the prison. This has been counter argued by theorists like Merton (1972) who recognised considerable

heterogeneity within social groups which give and exchange ideas and meaning systems with each other. Merton also acknowledged shifts in status as Insiders become Outsiders and vice (see also Alexander 2004). In essence, Merton (1972) recognized that 'the sheet for Outsider observers resembles that for Insider observers, both having distinctive assets and liabilities'.

While prison ethnography provides valuable insights, it is often considered "partial" due to the limitations on complete immersion and access to respondents (Bandyopadhyay, 2015). Nonetheless, it remains a powerful tool for exploring the intricacies of institutional life and the human experiences within such environments. Ethnographic research in prisons not only helps uncover hidden aspects of confinement but also highlights the subjective feelings and perceptions of staff, inmates, and researchers alike, thus offering a more holistic understanding of life within these institutions.

Prison Ethnography: Understanding the method

Ethnography, as a qualitative research method, thrives in open and accessible settings, such as schools, villages, or communities, where researchers can freely interact with participants. However, applying ethnographic methods within a closed, controlled environment like a prison presents significant challenges. These challenges are worth confronting, as prison ethnography can uncover nuanced issues and micro-dynamics that contribute to the broader structure of incarceration. As sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2002) has pointed out, prison ethnography has been "curiously eclipsed" at a time when social justice, incarceration, and penal reform are central topics in public discourse. Yet few anthropologists are willing to explore the "belly of the beast." There are three main reasons for this hesitancy such as prison inmates are not typically viewed as ideal research participants in anthropology, a discipline that often focuses on marginalized but "innocent" groups, inmates are perceived as uncooperative or difficult to engage with, further complicating the research process and finally, prisons are tightly controlled environments where access is regulated, and data collection can be constrained or even manipulated by institutional authorities. Conducting research in such an environment is inherently difficult. Many members of the public, including academics, harbour negative views toward prison inmates, viewing them as irredeemable or deceitful. This perspective not only affects how research is conducted but also the reception of the research findings. In academic settings, questions of the credibility of inmates' narratives or the ethical concerns surrounding "giving voice" to convicted individuals further complicate the process. For example, one academic remarked, "they're all liars," in reference to prison ethnography, while a criminologist claimed, "They'll never talk to you." Such dismissals reinforce stereotypes and undermine efforts to study incarceration from an insider's perspective.

Despite these challenges, the exploration of inmate subjectivities, particularly those of women in prison, who are doubly marginalized by both the penal system and a patriarchal society, offers valuable insights into power, agency, and resistance. This paper will expand on two key themes emerged from fieldwork conducted in women's prisons in Kerala, India, utilizing prison ethnography. These themes not only illuminate the experiences of women prison inmates but also underscore the methodological hurdles researchers face when navigating prison systems. The disclosures prompted by prison ethnography go beyond the site and reveal the blind fields in the representations of marginality. Prison ethnography highlights the processes of sense-making and meaning-making in states of chaos (Bandyopadhyay, 2020). Andrew Jefferson (2010) and Mahuya Bandyopadhyay (2010) have all argued for the necessity of taking long-

term trajectories and traversals into account when considering how prison affects people's lives. In fact, prisons are often just one site of confinement in people's lives, as Boe, Bandyopadhyay, Weegels and Jefferson (2014) has argued, it is not only sites that confine; confinement can also be a feature of everyday practices and states of mind, here created out of the process of imprisonment.

Methods in prison ethnography:

One essential tool for ethnographers is the research diary, which captures the minutiae of the field, including observations, overheard conversations, and descriptions of the physical and social environment. This diary serves as a record of the researcher's experiences and as a point of reference for identifying patterns and themes in the data. Over time, the diary helps the ethnographer make sense of the raw data and facilitates the process of decontextualization, where narratives are reduced to categories, patterns, or themes during data analysis. Ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction, and always self as well as of the other. (Stacey, 1988). There are not any prescribed set of methods that are exclusively to be used while doing prison ethnography. The researcher may use any methods that befits capturing the thick narratives of the participants, is primarily the greatest asset of prison ethnography. Prison, as a total institution, under its strict monitoring and continual surveillance does not enable free flow of data, just like urban ethnographies or village studies. However, flexible data collection methods like case studies, observation, Participatory Learning Appraisal (PLA) methods can all come in handy to collect data in such controlled environments. Hanging around, transect walks, daily routine analysis are some of the PLA methods that can ease out relationships, that are otherwise hierarchical and innately oppressive in nature.

Prison as a Site for Research

Prisons are fundamentally gendered spaces, historically designed to address male criminality and deviance. The limited presence of women within the criminal justice system, particularly in the Kerala context, has led to a lack of scholarly attention on female deviance. Crime is often regarded as a male domain, and when women enter this space as offenders, they are seen as outliers rather than as subjects of serious study. Consequently, the experiences of female prisoners, their struggles with institutional life, and their interactions with male-dominated prison systems remain under-researched.

Choosing prisons as sites of ethnographic research, particularly when studying women, presents unique challenges. Women inmates often face a double burden: they are ostracized by society not only for breaking the law but also for violating gender norms. In Kerala, as elsewhere, their relatively small numbers lead to their issues being overlooked, with their experiences considered unrepresentative of broader patterns of criminality. This deliberate neglect creates a knowledge gap that further marginalizes women within both the prison system and society at large. Women prison personnel, who are also scarce, reflect this gender imbalance within the institution itself, reinforcing the prison's patriarchal structure.

Field Work in 'Restricted Spaces'

Fieldwork in a prison environment is a uniquely controlled and constrained experience. One of the most critical lessons a researcher learns in this setting is how to navigate the restricted space and institutional protocols. There are different forms of control that are decisive in determining

the nature of data collection in prison research. Prison as a strictly monitored and supervised institution offers spatial control over the researcher's pursuit to understand the lived experiences of women in confinement. Permission to conduct research inside a prison comes with numerous mandatory provisions, which must be adhered to without deviation. Any breach of these rules can result in the immediate cancellation of access to the institution, which would abruptly end the study.

The researcher is required to follow a conservative dress code, with minimal display of jewellery and other cosmetics. This facilitated the researcher to be easily acceptable, and not felt intimidating by the participants. This also contributes to the sober appearance and avoids drawing unnecessary attention. Moreover, carrying electronic gadgets is strictly prohibited, and prison authorities reserve the right to ban even basic data-recording tools such as pen and paper at any moment, without prior notice. The presence of an external researcher can disrupt the established work routines in the prison for a brief period. However, over time, the routine is usually restored, and the prison environment returns to its typical rhythm.

Prisons are highly controlled environments, both physically and socially. The scope for research is often limited, and the need to balance research demands within the space and time constraints of the prison is crucial. Documenting the unofficial or "hidden" aspects of criminality, inmate treatment, and the overall prison culture is highly restricted, as noted in multiple studies conducted in prison settings. Access to prison documents, such as case files, is generally discouraged unless the researcher has specific permission. Researcher is confined to official spaces, and the practice of "hanging out," a key observation technique in ethnographic research, is subject to heavy sanctions in prisons. Researcher is prohibited from moving beyond officially designated areas or speaking with individuals of their own choosing. This aspect of the research is tightly controlled by prison welfare officers, whose role is pivotal in determining who will be interviewed or observed. Gaining their trust and securing their cooperation becomes a necessary step for the researcher, as these officers act as gatekeepers to the institution and its people, serving both as facilitators and as monitors of the research process. Experiences of the researcher in navigating the spatial controls in the prison is noteworthy. Meeting the participants, negotiating with the prison staff, knowing the prison premises, accessing the physical and social spaces in prison, getting photographs clicked of the participants (with anonymity maintained) and the premises of the institutions, scrutiny of the cases and interviews, scanning the photographs taken although granted with formal permission, was part of the everydayness of the researcher.

Social accessibility within the prison also plays a key role in determining how researchers engage with inmates and staff, fostering the development of open dialogues. Researcher must often employ subversive techniques to navigate these restrictions and build rapport with the prison community. For instance, offering to "make oneself useful" by conducting sessions on hygiene and health, helping inmates who are studying for exams, or writing proposals for rehabilitative programs, allows researchers to become embedded in the institutional setting. Over time, these small acts of service make both the staff and inmates more comfortable with the researcher's presence. As the researcher becomes a helpful figure, rather than a detached observer, they are able to form stronger connections with the inmates. Building these relationships is essential, as they help the researcher gain insights into the prison's social networks and power dynamics, including the relationships between inmates and staff, as well as the hierarchical structures within the inmate population itself.

One particularly useful relationship for researchers is with the "writers"—convicted prisoners who work as helpers in the prison office. These individuals are a vital link between the prison authorities and the inmate population, often serving as intermediaries. Their position gives them access to both sides of the power structure within the prison, making them crucial informants for the researcher. By creatively navigating within the permitted space and switching between different research methods, researchers can gather the data they need while developing "thick descriptions" of prison life, which form the foundation for critical narrative analysis.

However, conducting fieldwork in a prison presents distinct challenges compared to research in other settings, such as villages or open communities. In institutional environments like prisons, researchers face physical and social barriers that limit their ability to immerse themselves in the field. Unlike in a community setting, where a researcher might live with the group being studied and participate in their daily life, such opportunities are rare in prisons. Immersion, in the traditional ethnographic sense of being fully absorbed into the daily lives of research subjects, is nearly impossible in a prison context. Any sign that a researcher is becoming too involved with the inmates or is spending more time in the prison than the authorities deem necessary can lead to their immediate removal from the premises. Prison authorities maintain constant surveillance over the researchers, keeping close tabs on their movements and interactions to ensure they do not stray beyond their assigned duties or become too familiar with the inmates.

Maintaining relationships with prisoners is also a constant struggle. Participant observation requires building rapport and trust, but in a prison setting, this can be complicated by the "panoptican" culture of surveillance, where every action is monitored. Waldram (2009) highlights the pervasive atmosphere of suspicion in prisons, where researchers are constantly watched as outsiders. This aligns with Whyte's (1943) observation that if a researcher is accepted by the community, they can "just hang around," and the answers they seek will eventually come to them, often without the need for direct questioning. However, this process of rapport-building is fraught with challenges in the highly regulated prison environment.

Prison research is marked by the constant tension between the institution's control mechanisms and the researcher's need for access and trust. Prisons are not passive spaces to be studied from a distance. Instead, they are dynamic environments shaped by the friction between the controlled (the inmates) and the controllers (the staff and administration). Researcher must navigate and negotiate within these tensions carefully, balancing their need for access with the institutional controls that seek to limit their influence and interaction with the inmate population. Fieldwork in a prison requires not just an understanding of ethnographic techniques but also a deep awareness of the legal and institutional boundaries that shape the researcher's experience, ensuring that the two life worlds within the prison—the controlled and the controller—remain in a state of both engagement and tension. This led to the informed decision to focus on female inmates in Kerala as a site of ethnographic inquiry. It provided a rare opportunity to explore how women navigate and challenge the dual oppressions of imprisonment and patriarchy. Through sustained fieldwork, the researcher was able to document how female inmates develop subjectivities within this highly regulated space, and how they make sense of their identities within the framework of both societal condemnation and the institutional rules of the prison. There are two major themes that's has to be discussed while deliberating on prison ethnography.

Gaining Access to the Field: Navigating Bureaucratic and Social Barriers

Access is a frequently cited issue in prison research, particularly in ethnographic studies. The logistical challenges of gaining physical access to prisons—such as securing permission from multiple layers of authorities, meeting the requirements of prison ethics panels, and enduring the continual surveillance that accompanies any research within these institutions—are well-documented. In Kerala, gaining access to the women's prison involved lengthy negotiations with government agencies, police officials, and prison administrators. The process of securing entry required the researcher to navigate not only bureaucratic hurdles but also the gendered assumptions of the prison system itself, where women researchers studying women inmates were met with suspicion and confusion.

Once inside the prison, access to data remained controlled. In a prison setting, institutional authorities regulate not only the researcher's movements but also the types of interactions allowed with inmates. The tools of conventional research—such as surveys, structured interviews, and standardized questionnaires—are often subject to intense scrutiny, and the prison staff's expectations of these methods may differ significantly from the researcher's goals. In this study, for example, prison personnel were perplexed by the use of unstructured interviews, participant observation, and the "hanging out" method, which allowed for deeper, more active engagement with the inmates. The staff's preference for rigid, formulaic data collection highlighted their unfamiliarity with more flexible, ethnographic techniques, which prioritize rapport and trust-building over standardized data.

Over time, the researcher's presence became normalized within the prison, and access to both physical spaces and the personal lives of inmates expanded. However, the study was continually influenced by the presence of "gatekeepers"—prison personnel who monitored and controlled the flow of information, thereby shaping the data that could be collected. These gatekeepers were not only concerned with maintaining security but also with controlling the narrative that emerged from the research. Photographs, interview transcripts, and observational notes were all subject to official review, limiting the researcher's autonomy in documenting the reality of prison life.

The most significant challenge, however, was gaining access to the personal spaces and inner lives of the inmates. While physical access to the prison allows for an exploration of the institutional environment, it takes time and patience for inmates to open up about their lived experiences of incarceration. Through sustained interaction, the researcher was eventually able to gain insight into how these women navigate their imprisonment and reconstruct their identities in the face of societal exclusion.

Prison ethnography is fraught with challenges—both methodological and ethical—but it remains a valuable tool for understanding the inner workings of closed institutions and the experiences of those marginalized within them. By focusing on female inmates in Kerala, this study highlights the complex intersections of gender, power, and institutional control, offering new perspectives on the ways in which women experience imprisonment. The insights gleaned from this research challenge dominant discourses about crime and punishment, especially as they relate to women, and underscore the importance of including marginalized voices in discussions of social justice and reform.

Despite the barriers to access and the constraints imposed by the prison system, ethnographic research within these settings can reveal the hidden structures and dynamics that shape inmates' lives. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of prisons not merely as spaces of punishment but as sites of contested identity formation, resistance, and, potentially, transformation.

Hyper-surveillance is the norm

Prison, as a total institution, operates under a regime of hyper-surveillance where every movement and interaction are closely monitored. For researchers conducting fieldwork within these walls, this means that not only are the inmates under constant watch, but the researchers themselves are scrutinized for their interactions, behaviour, and the interviews they conduct. The panoptic culture, as described by Michel Foucault (1977, 2009), permeates every facet of life within the prison, extending beyond the physical walls to a broader "carceral archipelago"—a complex system of institutions, punishment, and logic that extends into society. For the researcher, this creates an additional layer of responsibility. Not only must they gain access to the prison, but they must also earn the trust of inmates who view them with suspicion, all while adhering to visible symbols of distrust and control that are embedded in the prison environment.

One of the most significant challenges for a researcher in prison is to navigate the rigid boundaries of interaction. Activities that might seem innocuous, like “hanging out” with inmates while watching TV or observing other daily routines, are not necessarily seen as part of the research process by either the prison officials or the inmates themselves. Furthermore, maintaining confidentiality while protecting the information shared by inmates from officials and other prisoners requires constant negotiation and, at times, subterfuge. The balance between being an "outsider" to the criminal justice system and building rapport with inmates is delicate. While being an outsider can be an asset, as Mahuya Bandyopadhyay (2010) notes, proving that one is not connected to the prison authority or system is difficult. Inmates often regard all newcomers, including researchers, with suspicion. Trust must be earned through engagement, often by through the use of the unconventional research methods in order to gain access to the reality that reflects the prison culture itself.

Prison life is dominated by rules, and the act of breaking these rules is often seen by inmates as a form of resistance. Researchers can find themselves caught in this dynamic, as inmates may attempt to involve them in subtle acts of defiance, presenting both ethical and practical challenges. This delicate balance becomes a constant reminder of the researcher’s position in the prison—to observe and gather data without becoming too deeply involved in inmate resistance, which could result in legal consequences or jeopardize the research. Researchers are often advised to maintain distance from the inmates, as officials fear that too much involvement could lead to hostility or complications that would undermine the research.

Prisons are not merely spaces of punishment and deprivation; they are complex social environments where power dynamics, identity formation, and institutional controls play out daily. Ethnographic research in prisons is invaluable for uncovering these dynamics and giving voice to the inmates’ experiences, which are often silenced by the institution. By focusing on the everyday experiences of incarceration, prison ethnography can reveal how inmates navigate the structural limitations imposed on them and how their identities are shaped by these experiences. Unlike survey-based research, which can flatten the complexity of prison life,

ethnography captures the nuances of power, resistance, and agency that define life inside these total institutions. It is particularly useful in engaging with legal and penal institutions because it does not shy away from addressing the complex and often contradictory nature of these systems. In doing so, ethnography allows researchers to explore the site of contestation—the prison—as both a place of control and a space of lived experience.

In the context of women's prisons in Kerala, India, fieldwork is particularly constrained by the strict surveillance imposed by prison authorities. From the moment a researcher obtains permission from the state, surveillance begins. Authorities monitor the researcher's intent, methods, and interactions, controlling who they can meet, for how long, and under what conditions. The female ward is a microcosm of the larger prison architecture, replicating the institutional controls on a smaller scale. Mahuya Bandyopadhyay (2010) refers to this as the "Interactional Space," where human and non-human actors construct agency through lived experiences and institutional frameworks. The first instruction given to researchers is to maintain the anonymity of inmates, a rule that not only aligns with research ethics but also reflects the prison's rigid control over information.

Establishing rapport with inmates is a crucial step for gathering reliable data. Prolonged fieldwork, which allows for familiarity between the researcher, the inmates, and the prison staff, can yield deeper insights into the prison's social dynamics. However, the researcher must walk a tightrope, ensuring they do not become too closely aligned with the prison staff, as this could alienate the inmates. Conversely, appearing too friendly with the inmates can raise suspicion among the staff. Striking a balance between these two domains of prison life is essential for understanding how they interact and shape the lived experiences of those within the institution.

The physical structure of the prison, with its towering walls, serves more than just the purpose of security and surveillance. It also represents the institution's isolation from broader society and limits community engagement with the prison and its inhabitants. For inmates, these walls not only confine them physically but also cut them off from the social systems that once defined their identities before incarceration. Women's prisons are no different in this regard. These institutions are designed to be impermeable, isolating a supposedly pathological group of people for the "common good." The panoptic structure of the prison reinforces the surveillance not only of the inmates but also of the knowledge created about them.

Long-duration fieldwork is often met with suspicion from both prison officials and inmates. Research is generally understood by these stakeholders as a brief exercise in distributing questionnaires and collecting responses. The idea of an extended ethnographic study, where the researcher immerses themselves in the environment for an extended period, is foreign to both groups. This sometimes requires the researcher to make considerable efforts to convince prison authorities of the legitimacy and necessity of their prolonged presence. Officials and inmates alike may become curious or doubtful about why the researcher is spending so much time in the prison. Unlike more conventional research methods, ethnography requires the researcher to be visibly present, sometimes dining with staff or inmates, or spending time "hanging around" in permitted spaces. These activities, while critical to ethnographic research, are often misunderstood or viewed with suspicion by those unfamiliar with the method.

Conducting fieldwork in prisons requires a deep understanding of the institutional controls and the social dynamics that shape life inside the walls. Researcher must navigate a complex system

of surveillance, suspicion, and resistance, while also working to build trust with inmates and staff. Ethnographic research is particularly well-suited for studying prisons, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of incarceration and the structural forces that shape those experiences. However, it also presents significant challenges, as the researcher must constantly balance their role as an observer with the demands of the institution and the expectations of those being studied.

Women researcher in a 'restricted space'.

Studying women criminality is not a much sought after area of research due to the structural issues that are involved with the process of conducting research in a field site which is "not meant to be researched" nor it is "meant for a woman researcher". However, the more significant excuses could be that of the insignificant number of the women convicts in prisons and the stigmatisation of women prisoners as "mad and not bad" (Llyod, 1995) which need not to be studied or researched upon. Finding academic approval for conducting fieldwork in prison and government sanction for the same was equally gruesome. The constant reminder of no- cooperation and the danger of "getting lies" was received from various sources, that involves the personal and public spaces of the researcher. There was indeed an advantage for the researcher being a woman for conducting fieldwork in Women's prisons, however the approval order from the government comes with the dos and don'ts for the researcher, irrespective of the gender of the researcher. A prison ethnographer is driven with curiosity and apprehensions that are filled from by the popular images of prison made by media in their first rodeo. The researcher challenges the officiality of the prison structures through ethnography, as it explores the structural dimensions of prison as experienced by its inmates through mundane behaviours. There would be discouraging efforts while seeking permission for data collection and access into the 'total institution', particularly for ethnographers, as the method is not accepted as "real research". The methodology would be questioned, the objectivity and usefulness of such researches would be raised at every point of research, not only by the prison administration but the academics too. The researcher was thrown to questions such as "Why study women prisoners? They are all bad women and they would lie", "Are you not from good family? Are you not raised well?". There are comments and questions labelled against the researcher, for being a prison ethnographer and for being a woman in the wrong place/ a not permitted for women. Women researcher in the premises of a restricted space is severely condemned and looked down upon. This is a clear reflection of the deep lining of the patriarchal fabric that any woman faces in her everyday life. Prison is thus a representative structure of the dominant hegemonic ideologies which perceives any woman (researcher/ prisoner/ personnel) as deviants of their gender roles and expectations.

The researcher is often subjected into scrutiny and the demand for the same need not be always at the entry point only. It could be scrutiny of the researcher's movements, activities, interviews with the prison inmates or the thorough examination (physical) at the prison gates or even the research tools used for data collection. Very often the researcher would be confronted with the quality of ethnographic methods as "they are very unconventional for scientific studies". The gendered experiences of the researcher as a woman have facilitated in understanding the patriarchal question in defining prison experiences of women offenders and how they are constructing their identities that was once shattered as part of their deviant behaviour. The subjectivities of the researcher and the participants (both women here) construct meanings and experiences that define their identities in a patriarchal social structure.

Conclusion

Bandopadhyay (2010) offers a detailed narrative on the nuances of conducting ethnographic research, insights that resonate deeply with the present study of prison ethnography. A recurring theme in this context is the intricate management of time, both for the researcher and the inmates. While the subjects of the study—prisoners—may appear to have "all the time in the world," the institutional constraints imposed on their daily routines often leave them with little control over how they can allocate that time to participate in the research. This paradox, where the urgency of gathering data clashes with the slow, methodical process of gaining trust, is a critical factor that shapes the quality and depth of prison fieldwork (Schatz, 2009).

Another significant issue in prison fieldwork pertains to the researcher's status, which can directly affect their access to crucial events or information. Gender, in particular, can serve as a significant barrier. For example, male researchers may find it challenging to observe female activities directly, which can limit their understanding of certain aspects of prison life. Additionally, ethical issues that are already prevalent in social science research become even more pressing in the prison context. One such ethical dilemma is the question of concealment—whether researchers should always be transparent about their professional role or if, in some cases, a level of secrecy is necessary to gather authentic data. The line between covert and overt research can blur, raising questions about how much information should be disclosed to the subjects being studied.

This ambiguity about the researcher's identity becomes even more pronounced in prison settings, especially for female researchers. In largely male-dominated environments, such as prisons, the presence of women—whether as inmates or researchers—can be met with suspicion, strange glances, and unsolicited comments. These responses reflect an underlying belief that prisons are fundamentally male spaces, where women, including female researchers, are perceived as outsiders or interlopers. This perception highlights not only the gendered dynamics within the prison system but also the challenges female researchers face in these environments.

The primary goal of ethnographic research is to obtain a holistic understanding of the subject by immersing oneself in the everyday experiences of individuals. Through observation and interaction with both the primary subjects and the "significant others" in their lives, the researcher aims to build a comprehensive picture of how people describe, navigate, and structure their world. As Cresswell (1994) notes, this method emphasizes the lived realities of individuals, uncovering the patterns and practices that shape their day-to-day existence.

However, research ethics in the realm of qualitative studies remains a subject of considerable debate. A close examination of various ethical codes in social sciences reveals that many are designed as models of compromise, recognizing the compulsory nature of specific regulations but allowing for exceptions when necessary. The American Sociological Association (ASA) Code of Ethics (1997) provides a case in point. While it emphasizes the importance of informed consent, it acknowledges that in certain circumstances—where obtaining consent is impractical—exceptions may be made. This utilitarian approach, while controversial, recognizes the complexities inherent in studying human populations, particularly in closed or controlled environments like prisons.

In this context, ethnographic research often requires innovative, subversive practices to adhere to ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. As Roth (1960) pointed out, the debate between "secret" and "non-secret" research is largely misguided, as all research involves some level of secrecy. The more relevant question is how much secrecy is appropriate and under what circumstances. Field researchers are generally expected to balance their ethical obligations to the subjects with their research objectives, though the degree to which they prioritize these responsibilities can vary.

In prison ethnography, researchers bear a unique burden of responsibility. As Richard Quinney argues (Drake, 2013), criminologists and other social scientists studying prisons are privy to experiences and practices that few outsiders ever witness. This privileged access comes with a moral obligation to communicate these findings and educate others and make research useful for the society. In the case of the present study, the researcher adopted an overt identity, presenting oneself as an academic conducting a study on prison life. While formal permission from the Kerala government facilitated their entry into the prison, convincing the inmates of their intentions proved to be far more challenging. Despite being introduced to the inmates by the prison staff and welfare officers, the researchers faced initial scepticism and distrust.

Breaking the ice with the inmates was a slow and arduous process, but over time, as the researcher demonstrated the commitment to protecting the anonymity of their respondents, trust began to build. This rapport was crucial in encouraging the inmates to open up and share their experiences, providing the researchers with rich, detailed narratives about life inside the women's prison in Kerala. The gradual easing of tensions allowed the researchers to collect data that went beyond superficial observations, offering "thick descriptions" that revealed the complex social dynamics, power structures, and lived experiences of the inmates.

This essay understands the broader discourse on prison ethnography, highlighting the ways in which ethnographic methods can be adapted to suit closed, highly regulated environments like prisons. Unlike ethnographies conducted in more open, community-based settings, prison ethnography requires researchers to navigate a tightly controlled space where access to information is often limited, and their movements are constantly monitored. Yet, as this study demonstrates, the flexibility and depth of ethnographic methods make them particularly well-suited to exploring the hidden aspects of institutional life.

Ethnography, with its emphasis on the lived experiences of individuals, offers a unique lens through which to understand the complex world of prisons. The researchers in this study not only documented the formal structures of the prison system but also uncovered the informal networks, relationships, and survival strategies that define life behind bars. By adapting their methods to the constraints of the prison environment, the researchers were able to produce a nuanced, multi-faceted account of the women's prison in Kerala. This study thus underscores the importance of ethnographic research in revealing the often-overlooked human dimensions of incarceration and contributes to the ongoing development of prison ethnography as a sophisticated and innovative research method. In ethnographic research, methods often become diverse and adaptable, as strict adherence to a single technique—such as participant observation—can limit the depth and scope of the investigation (Nader 2002, 192). Furthermore, conducting ethnography in legal and penal environments demands meticulous attention to ethical concerns. These include navigating the often-complex dynamics between the researcher and the participants, as well as acknowledging how the research itself is

intertwined with broader issues of knowledge production and power relations (Coutin 2002; Marcus & Fisher 19). It is from a comprehensive engagement with life inside prison that recent prisons research has become more attentive to the prison's embedding in wider social structures.

Writing Ethnography

The effectiveness of ethnographic research lies with its documentation and its publication. The richness of data is often missed with bad writing. Ethnographic writing, consisting of fieldnotes, participant narratives, and the researcher's field diary, is an essential component of ethnographic research. These written accounts not only capture data but also create a bridge between the researcher and the field as it ventures into the politics of writing in the knowledge building process. Ethnography has historically shifted its attention towards the narrative dimension, focusing on storytelling as a central part of meaning-making. According to Clifford (1986), ethnographic writing is shaped in six ways: contextual, rhetorical, institutional, generic, political, and historical. These dimensions suggest that ethnography is not merely about documenting observed reality but constructing a reality framed within specific cultural, social, and political contexts. This essay also explores the challenges, ethical dilemmas, and political implications of ethnographic writing while also acknowledging its transformative potential, especially through feminist approaches.

Ethnographic writing, as Clifford argues, is inherently political and institutional, revealing and reflecting the power structures in which it is embedded. It interrogates meaning systems, contested traditions, and cultural artifacts while giving voice to marginalized populations. This dimension is perhaps most visible in feminist ethnographies, which challenge the conventional anthropological categories by focusing on women's lived experiences and subjectivities. Through this lens, ethnography becomes a site of resistance, where the act of writing itself can disrupt hegemonic structures of knowledge.

Feminist ethnographic writing is particularly noteworthy for its engagement with exclusion and inclusion. It enables researchers to reimagine established traditions, urging a focus on the subjectivities of the oppressed, their hidden knowledge, and their resistance. However, while feminist ethnographies seek to bring marginalized voices to the forefront, the inherent power relations between researcher and participant remain. Who gets to tell the story? Whose narrative is amplified, and whose is silenced? The process of selecting, interpreting, and representing these voices involves ethical concerns about how well researchers can represent their subjects without reinscribing hierarchies.

Moreover, the institutional constraints imposed by academic conventions shape what is considered "valid" ethnographic knowledge. The pressure to adhere to certain formats and structures can compromise the complexity and ambiguity of lived experiences. Ethnographers may be tempted to present their research findings in a way that fits neatly into academic standards, even if this means flattening the contradictions and tensions inherent in the data. This raises questions about how to balance the demands of academic rigor with the need to faithfully represent the complexity of the field. The complexities of the field and construction of the social realities are constructed out of the "thick descriptions".

Thick descriptions, introduced by Clifford Geertz (1973), are central to ethnographic writing as they capture not only what happens but also the underlying cultural meanings that give those

actions significance. However, thick descriptions are also limited by their reliance on language and the researcher's subjective interpretation. No matter how thorough the descriptions, something is always lost in translation. The ethnographer's positionality—their background, assumptions, and biases—inevitably colours their interpretations. This partiality can make thick descriptions both powerful tools for understanding cultural practices and problematic sources of potential misrepresentation.

Additionally, thick descriptions are performative in the sense that they do not just document the field; they actively construct the field. The act of writing shapes the field by organizing data into narratives that may gloss over the messiness and contradictions of real life. The challenge lies in producing coherent, compelling narratives from the often chaotic and contradictory realities encountered in fieldwork. The ethnographer's role in selecting which narratives to foreground and which to omit demonstrates the active role of writing in knowledge production, that comes out of a theoretical underpinning of the study. A key aspect of contemporary ethnographic writing is the researcher's reflexivity, or self-awareness, regarding their own role in the research process.

Reflexivity requires that researchers critically examine how their own social, cultural, and institutional positions shape their interactions with participants and influence their interpretation of data. This ongoing process of reflection complicates the act of writing, as the researcher must constantly grapple with their biases, assumptions, and influence on the narratives they construct. Positionality, which opens up a dialogue between the researcher and the participants, also presents a challenge for writing. The interaction between researcher and participant is inherently dialectical, meaning that the fieldwork influences the writing, and the writing itself becomes a form of engagement with the field. While reflexivity enhances the criticality of ethnographic writing, it also raises questions about representation and power. How does the researcher's positionality shape the stories they tell? Can the researcher ever truly give voice to the marginalized without imposing their own interpretations onto those narratives? These questions highlight the ethical and methodological complexities of ethnographic writing.

The ethnographer cannot fully control the narrative; the field exerts its influence on the direction of the research, sometimes in unpredictable ways. For instance, long-term fieldwork in settings such as prisons can overwhelm the researcher with a flood of narratives, making it difficult to organize and interpret the data coherently. Ethnographic writing is not a discrete task completed at the end of the research process; rather, it is a continuous, evolving practice that extends from the initial fieldnotes through to the final drafts. This process involves constant revision and reinterpretation, as the researcher's understanding of the field deepens and new insights emerge. This dynamic, ongoing nature of ethnography aligns with the view that the field is never fully "captured" or "closed." The narratives generated through ethnographic writing are always subject to further inquiry and reinterpretation. As new themes arise from the fieldwork, the ethnographer must engage in a continuous dialogue between writing, analysis, and reflection. This process underscores the importance of acknowledging the open-ended and unfinished nature of ethnographic research.

In conclusion, ethnographic writing is not merely a tool for documenting reality; it is a performative act that shapes the production of knowledge. The challenges of writing thick descriptions, navigating institutional constraints, and balancing reflexivity and positionality make ethnographic writing a complex and contested practice. Feminist ethnographic

approaches highlight the potential for writing to be counter-hegemonic, giving voice to marginalized groups and challenging established power structures. However, the act of writing remains entangled in the very power relations it seeks to critique, raising ethical questions about representation and voice.

As ethnographic writing continues to evolve, it is important for researchers to remain critically engaged with their own positionality and the ways in which their writing constructs the field. The future of ethnographic writing lies in its ability to remain reflexive, adaptable, and open to the complexities and contradictions of the field. By embracing the inherent tensions and ethical dilemmas of the writing process, ethnographers can contribute to a more nuanced and critical understanding of the social worlds they study.

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