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Studying Within: Reflexivity, Power, and Ethical Conflict in Insider Ethnography

Sachin

Research Scholar, Department of Electronic Media and Mass Communication, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry. 605014, ORCID ID-(Sachin Choruvalappil Subrahmanian) 0009-0005-9227-6358

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines insider ethnography through a reflexive analysis of three interconnected research moments: an outsider study of a Muslim maqam in Kerala, a critical autoethnography of Dalit experience, and ongoing doctoral fieldwork with Dalit youth in emerging towns of Kerala. Challenging the assumption that insider status resolves problems of power and representation, the study argues that ethnographic positionality is relational, unstable, and affectively charged. Drawing on interpretive reflexivity and Bourdieusian insights, the paper demonstrates how ethical unease and shifting researcher locations become analytically productive. The article contributes to methodological debates by foregrounding caste, mobility, and affect in the contemporary ethnographic encounter.

1. Introduction

This article offers a reflexive methodological analysis grounded in three phases of ethnographic engagement: outsider fieldwork, critical autoethnography, and ongoing insider research. Ethnography occupies a distinctive place within sociology and anthropology as a method uniquely suited to capturing the lived textures of social life. Yet the same qualities that give ethnography its depth—immersion, proximity, and interpretive engagement—also generate enduring methodological and ethical tensions. Following anthropology's reckoning with its colonial entanglements and the wider "crisis of representation," scholars note that ethnographic knowledge is not produced from a neutral position but through historically situated relations of power (Archer & Souleles, 2021). As they argue, early

ethnography was enabled by imperial structures that positioned people and cultures as objects—and subjects—of study through practices of documentation and classification.

Within this context, reflexivity has become a near-obligatory component of ethnographic writing. Lichterman (2015) argues that conventional positional reflexivity—often reduced to declarative statements about the researcher's identity—can become analytically thin when it merely correlates social position with research outcomes. Instead, he calls for a deeper interpretive reflexivity that makes visible the process through which ethnographic interpretations are actually produced, including moments of misunderstanding and interpretive repair. Similarly, Reed (2017) underscores that ethnography remains central to sociology as a human science precisely because it forces sustained engagement with questions of interpretation, explanation, and the ethics of knowledge production.

This paper enters these debates from the standpoint of insider ethnography within a caste-stratified social context. While the insider/outsider distinction has been widely discussed, it is often treated as a relatively stable positional category. Yet emerging scholarship shows that power in ethnographic encounters is "fragmented, partial, and situation specific" and fundamentally "relative and relational" (Archer & Souleles, 2021). Building on this insight, the present study argues that insider ethnography—particularly from marginalized caste locations—does not resolve questions of power and representation but instead reconfigures them in more complex and ethically fraught ways.

The argument develops through a reflexive engagement with my evolving ethnographic trajectory across three research moments: first, an outsider ethnography of a Muslim shrine space in Kerala; second, a critical autoethnography of my own experiences as a Dalit from a Scheduled Caste colony; and third, ongoing doctoral research among Scheduled Caste youth navigating urban spaces.

The central questions guiding this paper are: How does ethnographic positionality shift across different field locations? What new ethical tensions emerge when the researcher occupies simultaneous insider and outsider positions? And how might reflexivity be reconceptualized to better capture the interpretive labor through which ethnographic knowledge is produced? While a substantial body of scholarship has established the fluid and relational nature of ethnographic positionality, this paper extends these debates by foregrounding how insider ethnography from marginalized caste locations intensifies rather than resolves ethical and representational tensions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ethnography, Power, and the Crisis of Representation

Contemporary discussions of ethnographic methodology are deeply shaped by the discipline's critical reassessment of its historical foundations. Early anthropological fieldwork was closely intertwined with colonial power, often enabled by imperial infrastructures that positioned researchers as authoritative observers of subordinated populations (Archer & Souleles, 2021). This legacy generated sustained concern about the politics of representation and the epistemic authority claimed by ethnographers.

In response, late twentieth-century scholarship foregrounded the relational and historically situated nature of power. Rather than treating power as a monolithic force acting upon passive subjects, recent ethnographic work demonstrates that power is fragmented, partial, and exercised through specific actors and contexts (Archer & Souleles, 2021). This shift is particularly significant for insider ethnography, where the researcher's own embeddedness within social hierarchies becomes part of the field's power dynamics.

2.2 From Positional to Interpretive Reflexivity

Reflexivity emerged as a key methodological response to these concerns. Earlier formulations—especially those influenced by Bourdieu—emphasized the need for sociologists to uncover the doxa and professional assumptions embedded in their own analytical practices (Lichterman, 2015). More recent approaches have foregrounded the ethnographer's identity positions as sources of partiality, encouraging researchers to situate themselves within structures of race, gender, class, or caste.

However, Lichterman (2015) argues that this positional reflexivity often becomes ritualized. When confined to prefatory declarations about social location, reflexivity risks suppressing the actual interpretive work through which ethnographic knowledge is produced. He therefore proposes an interpretive reflexivity grounded in the hermeneutic process of fieldwork itself. Ethnographers, he suggests, should document how they arrived at their interpretations by tracking misunderstandings, communicative breakdowns, and the incremental adjustments that generate analytic insight (Lichterman, 2015).

Reed (2017) extends this argument by emphasizing that ethnographic explanation is inseparable from interpretation. For him, ethnography's distinctive contribution to sociology lies in its capacity to

produce "interpretive explanations" that fuse empirical immersion with theoretical reasoning. Reflexivity, in this sense, is not merely a moral gesture but integral to the logic of sociological inquiry.

2.3 Ethnographic Explanation and the Role of Theory

Recent methodological discussions have also revisited how ethnography produces explanatory knowledge. Reed (2017) challenges the view that ethnographic validity derives primarily from direct observation. Instead, he argues that strong ethnographic explanations emerge from the researcher's ability to construct contextually grounded contrast spaces and counterfactuals. Deep familiarity with a case enables ethnographers to infer not only what happened but what plausibly could have happened under different conditions.

This emphasis resonates with Burawoy's (2000) extended case method, which conceptualizes ethnography as a continuous dialogue between theory and fieldwork. Through comparative participant observation, ethnographers iteratively reconstruct theoretical frameworks across historical contexts, linking micro-level encounters to broader social processes. Ethnography thus becomes not merely descriptive but theoretically generative.

2.4 Beyond the Agency–Structure Binary

A further strand of recent scholarship questions the enduring dominance of the agency–structure dichotomy. Reed (2017) suggests that the pairing has become analytically obfuscatory, often clouding our ability to grasp the "in-between-ness" of social life—the complex combinations of coercion and choice that shape lived trajectories. When treated as a default explanatory template, the binary risks producing conceptual closure rather than insight.

Alternative formulations, such as Lund's notion of layered agency (discussed in Reed, 2017), emphasize how actors navigate intersecting landscapes of meaning in ways that cannot be reduced to either structural determination or individual voluntarism. Such perspectives are particularly useful for analyzing marginalized subjects whose everyday practices involve strategic negotiation within historically sedimented fields of power. For insider ethnography in caste contexts, moving beyond the agency–structure binary is therefore analytically crucial.

2.5 Locating the Present Study

While these bodies of work have significantly advanced debates on reflexivity, power, and explanation, relatively little scholarship has examined how these methodological tensions unfold when the ethnographer is simultaneously embedded within and institutionally distanced from the community under study. Insider ethnography in caste-stratified settings presents a particularly charged terrain in which emotional proximity, political responsibility, and academic authority intersect in unpredictable ways.

This paper builds on and extends the above conversations by foregrounding the lived methodological dilemmas of a Dalit researcher moving across outsider, autoethnographic, and insider field positions.

3. Methodological Trajectory and Research Context

This article adopts a reflexive methodological approach grounded in a longitudinal ethnographic trajectory spanning three distinct but interconnected research moments. Rather than treating insider or outsider status as a fixed attribute, the study examines how ethnographic positionality is reconfigured across different field contexts and institutional locations.

3.1 Phase I: Outsider Ethnography of the Maqam

As a research scholar, my first sustained engagement with ethnography emerged through a focused study of a single, well-defined topic undertaken for a research paper. The project relied on intensive participant observation complemented by in-depth interviews. Although I was geographically familiar with the field site—located close to my hometown—the community under study did not share my religious background. The research examined lived Islam in Kerala, approaching it as an everyday, practice-oriented religious formation rather than a purely doctrinal system.

The paper focused on the Shaheed Kunji Marakkar maqam (shrine) at Veliyancode as a lived religious space constituted through everyday practice, narrative circulation, and spatial negotiation. Moving beyond doctrinal evaluation, the study approached Islam as an empirical and communicative phenomenon, drawing particularly on Enzo Pace's formulation of religion as communication. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between January and September 2024—including non-participant observation and in-depth interviews—the paper explored how shrine practices intersect with memory, belonging, and authority among Kerala Muslims. It situated the maqam within wider intra-Islamic

tensions between shrine-centered religiosity and reformist critiques without adjudicating theological correctness.

This research engaged with relatively internal dimensions of a religious community to which I remained an outsider. Such positional distance typically raises concerns regarding access, trust, and representational authority. In this case, however, the field encounter complicated any straightforward reading of outsider disadvantage. Entering the field through snowball sampling, I found that participants did not treat me as an alien presence but recognized my institutional identity as a research scholar as a legitimate basis for interaction. Prior background reading and familiarity with the broader discursive terrain of shrine practices further facilitated entry, enabling access to key interlocutors and multiple shrine sites.

This experience underscores an increasingly emphasized point in contemporary ethnographic theory: field access is not determined solely by categorical insider–outsider status but is relationally produced through communicative competence and the ethnographer's ability to maintain a credible presence in the field (Reed, 2017). In my case, academic capital functioned as symbolic capital that helped establish such credibility, mediating trust despite the absence of shared religious belonging. At the same time, I remained attentive to asymmetries embedded in the encounter, particularly the knowledge privilege attached to my academic location.

Notably, the research process did not impose a significant emotional burden on me. My engagement, while careful and reflexive, remained analytically oriented and affectively contained. This relative emotional distance reflected not merely personal disposition but the structured form of the encounter itself. As Lichterman (2015) reminds us, ethnographic understanding emerges through ongoing interpretive and communicative work rather than automatically from social proximity. In this phase, the boundaries between observer and community remained sufficiently intact to sustain a conventional ethnographic posture.

Crucially, my approach avoided the historically entrenched tendency to examine Islamic belief through a civilizational or colonial lens. Rather than treating shrine practices as objects of doctrinal deviation or cultural otherness, I situated the maqam within the syncretic religious landscape of coastal Kerala and its layered socio-historical formations. This orientation aligns with interpretive sociology's call to embed religious practice within communicative and historical contexts. By approaching the shrine

as a lived and negotiated space, the study foregrounded the everyday production of religious meaning while remaining attentive to intra-Islamic debates without adjudicating theological correctness.

3.2 Phase II: Critical Autoethnography

The second phase of my methodological journey marked a profound shift. I undertook a critical autoethnography of my own life as a Dalit individual raised in a Dalit colony settlement in Kerala. Unlike the earlier project, this work was emotionally demanding and personally unsettling. The paper, *The Dark Skinned Father and the Caste Child: Emotional Geographies of Shame and Resistance*, traced the intersections of caste, colorism, and affect through autobiographical reflection.

Beginning with the figure of my dark-skinned father and the learned shame of childhood, the study argued that caste operates not only as a structural formation but also as an affective geography regulating love, visibility, and belonging within intimate spaces such as the home and school. Bringing lived memory into dialogue with critical theory—particularly Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*—the paper examined the pedagogy of humiliation in schooling, the invisibilization of Dalit paternal labor, and the gradual unlearning of internalized inferiority through Marxist-Ambedkarite political consciousness. It ultimately proposed that emancipation from caste must be understood as simultaneously structural and emotional, requiring a decolonization of love, body, and kinship.

Working through this material produced an unexpected sense of detachment alongside emotional intensity. Revisiting lived experience from the position of an analyst required continual oscillation between memory and critique, between the experiencing self and the interpreting subject. Unlike the earlier outsider ethnography, the boundary between researcher and researched became porous, generating a heavier affective and ethical load.

This tension can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity and the embodied nature of social life. What surfaced in this process was not merely recollection but the activation of what Bourdieu conceptualizes as habitus—the sedimented dispositions through which social hierarchies become lived as bodily truth. Moments of shame, hesitation, and hyper-awareness recurring in memory reveal how caste and class operate beneath explicit consciousness, structuring one's sense of place within social space.

Practicing participant objectivation required moving beyond narration to examine how my current academic location shaped the interpretation of these memories. The analysis therefore turned not only toward past events but also toward the present standpoint from which those past experiences were being reconstructed.

This reflexive movement intensified the ethical stakes of the research. As someone who shares the community's social location yet now occupies the relative privilege of academic capital, the analytical distance I attempt to maintain is never neutral; it is shaped by partial mobility within the social field. What felt like emotional weight during writing was, in effect, the friction between embodied memory and newly acquired scholarly habitus.

Seen this way, the collapse of the researcher–researched divide is not a methodological weakness but a theoretically productive site. It reveals how the ethnographic self is already structured by the social forces it seeks to analyze. Reading alongside Bourdieu, autoethnography becomes a method for tracing how large-scale structures—caste, class, institutional power—are internalized as affect, posture, hesitation, and aspiration. The task of writing, then, is not simply to remember but to render visible the social conditions that made these memories feel inevitable.

3.3 Phase III: Insider–Outsider Doctoral Fieldwork

Building on the earlier studies, my current doctoral research represents a third phase of sustained ethnographic engagement. This phase focuses on Dalit youth across different regions of Kerala and their engagements with urban spaces. It examines how Dalit youth from marginalized colonies navigate—and at times resist—caste-capitalist constraints through everyday spatial practices in rapidly urbanizing Kerala towns.

Here my positionality is more complex. I enter the field simultaneously as an insider—by virtue of shared caste location and generational experience—and as an outsider carrying the symbolic and institutional capital of an academic researcher. Moments of rapport are interspersed with subtle hierarchies; familiarity coexists with distance.

Consequently, the project foregrounds new layers of ethical conflict and emotional burden. The research process repeatedly returns me to questions of responsibility, representation, and reflexive accountability. It is from this evolving trajectory—from outsider observation to autoethnographic

immersion and finally to a complex insider–outsider position—that the present reflection on reflexivity, power, and ethical tension in insider ethnography emerges.

3.4 Field Narrative: Negotiating Insider Unease

Field entry revealed the limits of presumed insider ease. It took considerable time to enter the social world of Dalit youth in a nagar in Perinthalmanna town. My first interaction with Kishor (pseudonym), a 29-year-old Scheduled Caste Promoter employed at the municipality, exposed an immediate tension around the research gaze. Despite our shared caste location, I sensed hesitation in the interaction, as if the framing of the study risked reproducing a familiar objectifying question: *Are we some different thing to be studied?*

At that moment, my Dalit identity did not dissolve distance. Instead, the encounter made visible how social positions were shaped not only by caste location but also by differences in educational background and symbolic standing. Recognizing this friction, I attempted to reduce the extractive potential of the encounter by cultivating a slow and sustained presence in the field— tried to attend local events, spend time at informal gathering points, and accompany the youth to activities they regularly attended. Yet even as familiarity increased, ethical unease did not disappear; rather, it became analytically productive.

The interview with Kishor crystallized this tension. His narrative of everyday routine—field visits to multiple nagars, assisting residents with medical and marriage assistance applications, and evening leisure at the Janatha Arts & Sports Club—appeared, at first glance, descriptively straightforward. However, what lingered was not only what was said but the conditions under which it was said. My formal introductory framing of the study, despite attempts at reassurance, risked reinscribing institutional distance. The interaction revealed how the ethnographic encounter is never neutral; it is mediated by histories of surveillance, welfare bureaucracy, and the long experience of marginalized communities being documented, categorized, and governed.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, this moment can be read as an encounter between differently positioned habitus within the same caste location. While we shared certain social histories, my location within the university field endowed me with forms of cultural and symbolic capital that subtly reconfigured the interactional space. What I experienced as ethical discomfort was, in effect, the embodied recognition of this unevenness. The field did not simply welcome me as an insider; it demanded that I continually negotiate the credibility of my presence.

Importantly, insider ethnography here did not reduce power asymmetry—it rendered it more visible and affectively charged. The repeated return to the nagar, the effort to be present beyond the formal interview, and the careful listening to Kishor's articulation of modest aspiration ("I usually buy things within my financial capacity… I just want to live well") compelled me to confront how developmental discourse, aspiration, and self-limitation circulate within structurally constrained lifeworlds. Following Ahmed (2014), these were not merely statements of preference but affective orientations shaped by long histories of caste-class positioning.

Thus, the ethical tension generated in this encounter is not an obstacle to the research but one of its central analytic resources. The three phases outlined earlier do not represent a linear progression from distance to intimacy. Rather, they reveal how ethnographic positionality is continually reconstituted through shifting relations of power, affect, and epistemic responsibility. Across these moments, positionality emerges not as a fixed identity but as an interactional achievement—produced within specific communicative encounters and refracted through broader structures of caste, education, and mobility. This insight complicates the still-common assumption that insider status necessarily resolves problems of access or representation. The task of reflexivity, therefore, is not to claim insider authenticity but to continuously map how one's own mobility, academic capital, and research gaze—along with the gaze of ethnography itself—remain implicated in the production of knowledge about the community one inhabits.

4. Discussion: Reflexivity, Power, and the Uneven Field

The three-phase trajectory outlined in this study foregrounds ethnography not as a neutral technique of data extraction but as a relational practice shaped by historically sedimented inequalities. What emerges across the outsider maqam study, the critical autoethnography, and the ongoing doctoral fieldwork is the instability of positionality itself. Rather than moving neatly from distance to intimacy, the field repeatedly reconfigured the terms under which knowledge could be produced.

In the maqam research, institutional credibility and communicative competence enabled access despite religious difference, demonstrating that outsider status does not automatically foreclose rapport. At the same time, the autoethnographic phase revealed the opposite limit: proximity intensifies rather than resolves ethical and affective burden. Writing from within one's own caste-marked lifeworld required sustained negotiation between embodied memory and analytical distance. The doctoral

fieldwork further complicates this binary by showing how partial social mobility generates a layered positionality in which familiarity and hierarchy coexist.

Taken together, these moments suggest that insider and outsider are best understood not as stable identities but as situational effects produced within specific interactional fields. Access, trust, and interpretive authority emerge through ongoing communicative labour rather than through categorical belonging alone. This insight aligns with contemporary reflexive ethnography, which treats the research encounter as a site where power circulates rather than disappears.

The field encounters with Dalit youth make this especially visible. Shared caste location facilitated certain openings, yet differences in educational capital and institutional affiliation continually resurfaced in subtle ways. Ethical unease, rather than signalling methodological failure, became a diagnostic register of these uneven relations.

Importantly, the analysis also underscores the affective dimension of ethnographic work. Aspirations articulated by participants were not merely individual preferences but were shaped by long histories of caste-class conditioning that orient subjects toward calibrated forms of desire and self-limitation. Attending these affective textures expands ethnography beyond representation toward an examination of how structural inequalities are lived, felt, and normalized in everyday life.

5. Conclusion

This article set out to rethink insider ethnography through a reflexive engagement with three interconnected research moments. Rather than confirming a linear movement toward greater authenticity through insider proximity, the analysis demonstrates that ethnographic positionality is inherently unstable and relationally produced.

Across the trajectory, insider status did not dissolve power asymmetries; in several instances it rendered them more visible and affectively charged. Conversely, outsider positioning did not necessarily obstruct access when mediated through communicative competence and institutional credibility. These findings challenge the persistent methodological assumption that shared identity automatically guarantees epistemic privilege or ethical transparency.

The study therefore argues for treating positionality as an interactional achievement—one continually negotiated within specific fields structured by caste, education, mobility, and institutional

power. Reflexivity, in this sense, is not a confessional add-on but a methodological necessity that allows the researcher to trace how their own social location shapes the conditions of knowledge production.

More broadly, the article contributes to debates on ethnographic method in deeply stratified societies such as India. It shows that research within marginalized communities requires attentiveness not only to structural inequality but also to the subtle affective economies through which hierarchy is reproduced in everyday encounters. Future ethnographic work on caste, youth, and urban transformation would benefit from sustaining this dual focus on relational power and lived affect.

Ultimately, the task of critical ethnography is not to claim insider authenticity but to remain analytically accountable to the uneven worlds in which both researcher and participants are mutually implicated. By foregrounding the frictions, hesitations, and ethical tensions encountered across the field, this study highlights reflexivity itself as a central resource for producing socially grounded and politically attentive knowledge.

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