

accept me was when I brought out my identity as a trade unionist or my identity as a woman (and particularly my involvement with a battered women's refuge at home in the UK). It was only then that they began to ask me questions – and several of them.

Thus in my 'objective' role as a researcher I was just an outside observer, and quite frankly (as I was reminded a few times) a nuisance. In fact people did not understand what I was doing. However, in my 'subjective' role as a woman, a mother, a daughter and a wife, I could make friends and have proper conversations with *khannawallis*. Information thus obtained was information given in trust, and I learnt all kinds of 'secrets' about savings, affairs and quarrels to which I would have been denied access otherwise. Feminist critique thus gave me the confidence to admit subjectivity and to reflect on its advantages.

### 9.3 Conducting the fieldwork • • •

This section outlines how information was gathered mainly from the *khannawallis* and their clients. In doing so, it discusses various difficulties encountered in gathering information in 'informal' settings, and the ways in which some of these were resolved.

Like all research, this study also required information from those who were not the main actors, but nevertheless helped to complete the picture. Amongst others, I interviewed bank managers to understand credit arrangements for the poor, textile trade unionists to enable a clearer understanding of the textile history and how changes here have affected the *khannawallis*, and visited relevant women's organisations located in Mumbai and elsewhere. In addition, I talked to several academics and activists.

In comparison to *khannawallis* and their clients, there were no real problems encountered in gathering information from these actors as they were in one way or another associated in 'formal' institutional structures in some way. Below, therefore, I show the difficulties that arise when research is set within less formal set-ups.

#### 9.3.1 Information-gathering from the *khannawallis*

##### *Who and how many?*

As discussed above, I did not aim for any statistically significant sample with the *khannawallis*, but to broadly cover as wide a range of differing situations as possible. In that, I was hoping to talk to at least fifty women initially and choose some for more extensive study.

It was, however, necessary for the sample to draw out social differentiation between the *khannawallis* (because that was a primary objective in the study). I felt that two sets of criteria might enable a comparison between women from various groups: (a) differences in their caste/religion/marital status; and (b) differences in their association with the AMM, i.e. AMM membership, non-membership, and 'potential' membership. (Potential members were those waiting to join the AMM, usually for six months. For further discussion see Abbott, 1993, ch. 8; also Abbott, 1992.)

I was confident that I could gain access to these women through the AMM because initially the AMM assured me of their full co-operation, and I knew that the *khannawallis* would not talk to me without the approval of the AMM. Although, for reasons unknown to me, certain influential individuals in the leadership later withdrew co-operation, I was able to continue with help from a number of AMM 'area leaders', who were responsible for looking after the *khannawallis* living in their localities or areas. Altogether, I managed to interview 33 AMM members, 12 potential members, and 17 non-members (these figures include two group interviews, which occurred when a number of *khannawallis* lived very close to each other – for example, in a 'police building' I visited, where the *khannawallis* had sons or husbands in the police force and were eligible as a family for rented accommodation from the police).

Once the initial visits were made, people were chosen for second and repeated visits depending on which categories they fitted into, and how interesting their case study was. As far as the categorical choice was concerned, there was no hope of selecting on the basis of ratios or proportionality. There were, for instance, proportionately far higher numbers of upper-caste and married *khannawallis* simply because (a) until the founding of the AMM it was the upper-castes who dominated the *khannawalli* activity and (b) in general, most of the women are married, very often at a young age. Thus, it was decided to choose from the predominant categories based on the variety each case offered, while all those in secondary categories (such as single women and scheduled castes) were automatically put down for at least one repeat visit. Who was visited for the third or fourth time thereafter often depended on how forthcoming the women had been on the previous visits.

A similar format was followed for non-members, although it was far more difficult to trace these. However, despite AMM's warning that I would not be able to find any *khannawallis* who were not associated with them, initial introductions 'snowballed' and I managed to interview at least seventeen. These women were introduced to me by union representatives as well as by clients who worked in textile mills. All seventeen lived in the better-off localities and appeared to be in a stronger financial position than the AMM members interviewed. There was also a higher level of male employment in this group. Perhaps because non-AMM *khannawallis* lack an organisational structure, they were more suspicious than AMM members. Therefore, the initial interviews were problematic, and on one occasion had to be abandoned because of a distinctly hostile atmosphere. However, return visits were made to those who responded well. Here, there were two particular cases that were considered exceptional and interesting. Therefore much time was spent with (a) a household that consisted of three generations of *khannawallis*, and (b) a household which catered for at least 70 clients.

### *Carrying out the interview*

As suggested earlier, during the first three or four interviews I carried a very small tape recorder with a built-in microphone, thinking that it could be used without causing much distraction. It was my intention to record and then transcribe the majority of interviews in this way.

However, taping simply did not work because (certainly during the first visits) in every location I attracted a small audience. Friends and neighbours crowded into small hutments and tenements to see what was going on, and took great delight in chorusing answers to anything that was asked. It thus became impossible to make sense of the tapes or to distinguish the remarks that were being made by the *khannawalli* herself.

My problem, therefore, was twofold: how could I control the interview so that I captured the *khannawallis'* responses only; and how could I record them because (for reasons described in Section 9.2.1 above) I was loath to carry a notebook. Also, of course there was the additional problem of language, when, initially at least, even those fully conversant in Hindi insisted on using Marathi, which needed to be translated. (As I was later to discover, this was for social and political reasons. Firstly, the *khannawallis* associated Hindi with class and power, which they felt they lacked. Secondly, they saw the use of Marathi and a rejection of Hindi as a part of their fight to gain state recognition of Marathi as the regional language of Mumbai. The use (or non-use) of language, then, is a complex issue!)

I was aware of studies that had experienced similar problems in the Indian setting (Patel, 1986) and, like these, the only answer seemed to lie in memorising both the questions and the answers. But, in actuality, this proved to be a highly difficult task, particularly when translating is also taken into account. I discovered that I had often forgotten to ask questions or forgotten the replies given.

In order to help me memorise the questions, give some structure to the conversations, and control the constant interference, I therefore devised a 'questionnaire' (a semi-structured interview schedule in terms of Woodhouse, Chapter 7) that was divided into subsections. The headings and the gist of each subsection were memorised, and thus, during conversations, I was able to concentrate on a particular subsection and generally recall the questions that went with it. In this way, the conversations became more structured and if I had forgotten anything, a friend and translator (Anita), who accompanied me to most places, usually reminded me.

When I devised the questionnaire, I left many spaces in order to record the answers – spaces that were never filled out in front of the respondent. The answers were recalled as quickly as possible and, at the end of each interview, Anita and I would head for the nearest cafe where we would sit down to fill the blank questionnaire. Between us, we recalled statements and checked details. In this way, I was also able to query translation as well as work out what was missing and what remarks needed to be explored in the following session.

The question of interference from onlookers was never entirely solved, but, as my visits increased, the curiosity dwindled. With each repeat visit, therefore, the chance of the *khannawalli* responding openly and singly became stronger. What is also important to note is that, as the visits increased, the nature of our relationship (and therefore methods of information-gathering) changed. I was invited to participate in activities within the *khannawalli's* house (such as meals, celebrations), and outside it (such as accompanying *khannawallis* to hospitals, lawyers, their children's school – in fact anywhere

where I could be of use to them in filling out forms or meeting officialdom). This meant that, although information-gathering became less formalised, it nevertheless opened up areas which otherwise would have been closed.

In addition to interviewing, I accompanied a *khannawalli* to her native village, which gave me a concentrated case study in exploring the link between rural migrants and urban suppliers as well as networking in greater depth.

### 9.3.2 Information-gathering from the clients

In Section 2.2 I indicated one area of difficulty in obtaining information from this group, particularly from the scheduled caste clients. There were at least two other major problems: (a) the *khannawallis'* resistance to interviews with any of their clients; and (b) entry to a male domain by a female researcher.

With the first problem, whereas I did manage to interview at least 16 clients of the *khannawallis* in the study, the other 34 ate with *khannawallis* who did not take any part in the study. The disadvantage of this was that the 'mismatch' perhaps misses out on some of the detail about the *khannawalli*-client relationship that may have otherwise been highlighted. For instance, from the 16 'matched' clients (some of whom were boarders) I learnt the *khannawalli*-client relationship could be far more complex than that of a customer and a supplier. On the other hand, the advantage of interviewing the clients away from the *khannawallis'* presence was that they gave more honest answers (even more relevant when the *khannawallis* came from the same village or were relatives). Thus, I found that clients talked more easily about food tastes, quantity, and their general opinions about the service.

Locating other clients at their rooms (*kholis*) was not a problem, but gaining access to rooms which are never visited by women was. However, this was overcome when I met Vilas, a young man whose mother is one of the *khannawallis*. Vilas took a keen interest in my work and negotiated my entry to the *kholis* as well as acting as my 'escort'. Additionally, I received help from members of the Communist Party, which continues to retain a high profile in Mumbai's slum localities to this day.

The *kholi* interviews were slightly problematic in that the timing was always wrong. There were always some men heavily asleep and others too tired out from work to respond well. However, these interviews were important to me because, prior to seeing the full extent of the stressful conditions that these men lived in, I do not think that I fully appreciated the overwhelming demand for the *khannawalli* service. And, although the clients who lived here did not 'match' with my *khannawalli* sample, this group gave me invaluable insight into networking and how their relationship with the *khannawallis* began – not in the urban setting, but in its rural origin. The format was to interview groups of men numbering between 10 and 15 and this was done in four different locations. A third place where interviews were carried out was the clients' place of work,

with a focus on textile mills because the study was located in the textile mill areas of Mumbai. These interviews were fairly easy to conduct in comparison with others because, in both a private and a government-owned mill, management provided full access to those workers who received *tiffins* from the *khannawallis*.

Therefore, while I am aware that my client sample was not neat, and that it was based on an opportunistic approach, I would argue that the mix that resulted proved very valuable. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only study that has even attempted to analyse the client–*khannawalli* relationship and explore its differentiation, rather than obtain survey data on specific variables such as those relating to credit facilitation.

## 9.4 Lessons • • •

The chapter closes by looking briefly at the results and asks some ethical questions related to poverty research, particularly in developing countries.

### 9.4.1 Alternate ways of conceptualising women's survival strategies

The study contrasted significantly with the tendency to regard women's home-based activities as micro-enterprises which was current at the time. I used my results to argue that poor women's income generating could be conceptualised in an alternate way. It appeared to me that the *khannawalli* activity made better sense if it was conceived as a part of an urban livelihood system or survival strategy rather than as a micro-enterprise. My study showed me that, for each individual, the *khannawalli* activity is just one part of a continuous struggle to mobilise resources for survival on a day-to-day basis. Equally, the relationships with clients are part and parcel of general relations of obligation and reciprocity in which caste, kinship and urban–rural relations mould how people interact. The idea that the *khannawalli* activity forms a separate 'business' part of a woman's life and her relations with clients are mediated mainly through 'the market' is less helpful for understanding what appears to go on.

Examples 9.1 and 9.2 below that draw on the lives of two of the *khannawallis* demonstrate this more complex picture. The first exemplifies some common patterns that affect the activity: strong caste and kinship ties with clients; payment for services overlapping with other aspects of reciprocal relations; changes over time relating to changes in other parts of a household's livelihood system (e.g. male employment or unemployment). The second example is an unusual case but reinforces some of the points about the mechanisms of the activity and its interrelationship with other parts of a survival strategy.