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Being a positivist researcher in the field: Reflections on conducting a field experiment in Mangolpuri and Sultanpuri districts, India

*Few quantitative researchers share their field experiences (for one of those rare moments, see the contribution by Ping Lin). Perhaps this is because they are invested in large teams of enumerators, who collect data across large sample sizes. However, the process is far more complicated than just getting a team together to collect the data. There are several subtle challenges at every stage of fieldwork, much of which is often unexpected. This is often because these challenges are not freely and frequently shared or discussed. My identity as a positivist, quantitative researcher was put to test every single day of my fieldwork given the dynamic, unpredictable and often haphazard settings across the districts of Mangolpuri and Sultanpuri situated in West Delhi, India, write **Aditi Bhutoria**.*

In association with a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO), which acted as the implementing agency, I conducted a randomized control trial with women-only savings groups (involving a sample of 1281 women). The study aimed to measure the impact of a financial education program on savings and other financial behaviors. The program was relatively light (a day of training), offered in non-formal community settings and was a significant departure from more costly traditional classroom style adult education interventions. This is because it was based on simple rules of thumb involving a goal-oriented, action-focused learning, which targeted behavioural change. Limited time, limited funds (doctoral fieldwork grant), substantial sample size and most importantly 'me being a girl', were enough reasons to make me concerned about going into the field, one of the largest resettlement colonies of Delhi. Hearing the participants' stories of violence, hardship or strength and personally staying detached, resisting help even when most needed to avoid bias or innovating new techniques to optimize resources – taught me much about life and perhaps my own self as an individual and a female researcher.

On the Geographical Context

Mangolpuri and Sultanpuri are among the oldest and the largest resettlement colonies in India, established way back in 1977. These are also amongst the most highly populated areas of western sub-urban Delhi. The majority of the population in this area comprises old migrants from the poorest states of India. This is largely non seasonal migration, flowing in from under developed states or areas with limited economic opportunities to fast developing areas, which provide higher wages and prospects for an improved socio-economic status. Today this area is a combination of an industrial hub and residential colonies, and falls within the city with well-connected roads, local transport, basic water supply and sanitation facility, electricity and other basic facilities for a modest living.

Like most other urban resettlement colonies in Delhi, Mangolpuri and Sultanpuri also lie at the geographical periphery of the capital city. There has been a disparity in economic growth between the city center and the peripheries, with the latter converting to an agglomeration of slums and government built resettlement housings. The changes in spatial structure of the city over the years along with growth of manufacturing industries in these peripheral areas, has led to severe environmental concerns for the population residing in the resettlement colonies (Kundu, 2012). A rising demand for labor to work in the adjoining industrial areas has also led to intense population pressures. This has been coupled with unorganised development and little policy attention from the local government. As a result there has been a gradual degeneration in the living conditions and economic status of the resettlement colonies.

Interestingly, both Mangolpuri and Sultanpuri areas constitute of multiple parallel lanes, which are crowded with a motley collection of kutcha and pukka houses. Women from each lane usually come together to form their own savings groups and the research was conducted with these groups.
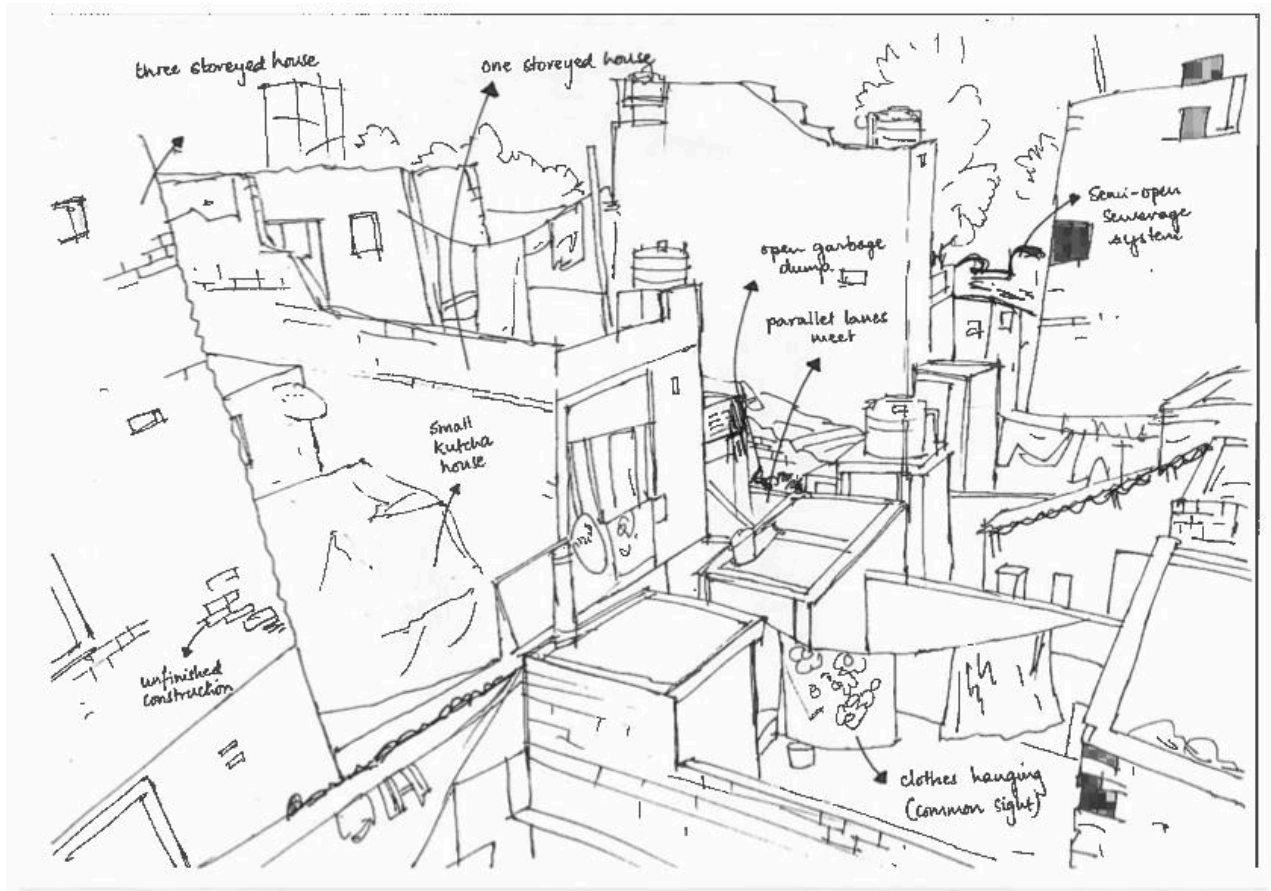
Figure 1: Bird-eye view of a resettlement colony in Mangolpuri (author's own sketch)

On Research Collaboration & Management for Conducting the Fieldwork

The research alliance with the NGO offered several advantages. The organisation's extensive national level experiences in the area of development with strong local networks were useful for me to understand the project area and its population. This research relationship has been mutually beneficial, with me gaining access to primary research participants for my study and with the NGO gaining from an independent evaluation of their financial education program. In retrospect, this arrangement entailed certain critical success factors related to overall program management that were necessary for a fruitful research study at both ends. These include:

1. *Setting out the research responsibilities upfront.* — Implicit in the research collaboration were key fundamental questions that were acknowledged and addressed at the onset of the research. These include: What is the research collaboration? What motivates the research collaboration? Who are the collaborators? What constitutes the collaborative activity? What are the expected outcomes from the association? (Katz & Martin, 1997). Within this study, a Memorandum of Understanding covering all these aspects was signed upfront between the organisation and myself. With hindsight, doing so presented various advantages. It safeguarded interests of both the parties involved by providing research autonomy with the assurance that the data and ethics would be preserved throughout the study.

2. *Scheduled Management & Reporting.* – Clear understanding of the work to be performed and resources assigned is imperative. For this a detailed work plan for this study was prepared and discussed for setting implementation targets, where required. Setting timelines at the onset brought discipline to the fieldwork and regular communications acted as constant nudges to complete the work in a timely fashion.

3. *Resource & Risk Management.* – Given a reasonably large sample size, this study entailed setting up a research team of five members, apart from myself. Project cost management becomes an important task in this respect. Liaising on the NGO's existing infrastructure and networks minimized the cost, wherever possible. Further design elements like maintaining a common project database using project management tools/websites (like Mavenlink and Dropbox), using strictly defined data collection guidelines for field enumerators, simultaneous data cleaning, coding, follow-up with data collection (the quantitative researchers would perhaps appreciate how tough it can get to do these tasks simultaneously) helped to induce better resource management during fieldwork.

On Working in the Field

Setting up a field team in the urban resettlement colony of Mangolpuri in Delhi, training them and collecting data was a massively educative experience, not because I was doing this for the first time but because I was doing it all single handedly. This was my first experience of living in Delhi and the city taught me several lessons on people and life. Though the NGO's field team was extremely helpful, I had to restrict their involvement in the data collection related hiring and field procedures, to keep the study results free from bias. Further, there were many small innovations that helped to complete the fieldwork in a timely and robust manner – one of them was to use tablets to collect data instead of paper questionnaires. This not only helped to clean and code data simultaneously with collection but also acted as a significant time saver.

When one is working from a small field office, when issues are raised every few hours (whether it is because a participant is not found at the expected address; or a participant refuses to answer the survey; or an enumerator does not come to work; the area where the enumerator has to go for data collection is not safe; the participant's husband does not like her to participate, given the sample comprised only of women members; and so on) the researcher needs to resolve issues immediately and continuously. I have learnt that there is just no possibility for delaying issue management, as a small lag can lead to big pile-ups.

Moreover, there were many small improvisations, which contributed to a high participation and response rate in my study. Hiring enumerators who belonged to the study areas as they would already know how to approach the participants and how to find their way through the complex field geography; Meeting participants at their homes (usually when they are cleaning up and chatting with their neighbours) after their husbands left for work and before children returned from schools to get their time and attention; enforcing a daily messaging habit on the other enumerators for keeping constant track; reviewing collected data every two days to find and correct any

misunderstandings and reduce item nonresponses, were some of them. Finally, regular written updates to all concerned stakeholders helped me to keep track with writing and documentation alongside fieldwork.

Figure 2: Data collection at SHG participant's home (author's own sketch)

On Expecting the Unexpected

There were several unanticipated experiences, encountered while conducting the fieldwork. For instance, I remember a woman participant sharing her plight, as some local boys were teasing her and her daughter every time they would cross a lane which led to their residence. Some of the participants shared their personal issues, on how they could not leave their homes without permission or how their economic hardships were so strenuous that they could not make basic ends meet. A quantitative researcher goes in to the field to complete a survey (usually long) and is perpetually time constrained. What does she do, when the respondents make such strong personal revelations about their lives and challenges? These can be looked upon as 'out of context' but from a 'human' and truly 'developmental' perspective they are the actual experiences, which define the perception of the context itself. In my experience, keeping a balanced approach, factoring for some extra time for each survey and definitely keeping some helpline phone numbers (there were some useful numbers available for Delhi) handy is useful, especially for research across poor habitats. Conducting a long, extensive fieldwork is a lesson on life, struggles and also 'hope'. Remember to keep your eyes and ears open at all times. You'll be surprised how many new issues you will identify,

how many inspiring people you will meet in the most unexpected settings, and who knows – you may find the idea for your next research endeavor, while on the journey. Well, I did.

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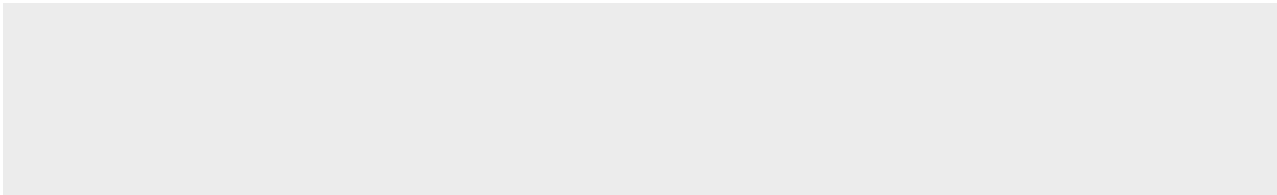
Related Publications

"Do Financial Education Interventions for Women from Poor Communities Impact their Financial Literacy and subsequent Financial Behaviours?" (with Anna Vignoles). Accepted with minor changes in the *Journal of Research for Educational Effectiveness* (JREE)

About the Author

Aditi Bhutoria is currently working as a post-doctoral fellow with the Evidence for Policy Design group at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She was working as a researcher with the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK as well as a consultant for the Government Office for Science, UK, prior to this. She has received her Ph.D. in Education from the University of Cambridge (UK) and M.Sc. in Economics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Aditi has also worked with Swiss Re Services Ltd. (London, Zurich) with their Financial Audit team; and PricewaterhouseCoppers Ltd. (India) with their Social Sector Advisory, mainly engaging with state governments across the country.

Aditi's research focuses primarily on the design, delivery and impact of educational policy and interventions in developing countries. Her recent projects have analyzed how unconditional cash transfers impact educational spending within households; how the design and delivery of financial literacy interventions can enhance savings and uptake of income generating activities; and the importance of social groups in conjunction with financial training in helping women grow their micro-enterprises. She has also tested behavioral models to increase the effectiveness of training for adult learners.

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