

Life of 49/1: An Ethnographic Account on Everyday Life in a Boy's Hostel of Kolkata

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the production of everyday life in a boy's hostel within an anthropological perspective. How do everyday life of a hostel is shaped within a particular space? This is the major question that I want to illustrate through this study. In particular I drew my empirical data from my fieldwork in the site of P.G Men Student's Hall, one of the residence halls for male students of Calcutta University. P.G Men student's Hall is located at the heart of Kolkata, capital of the State of West Bengal. The residence hall was established in 1959 with the aim to provide accommodation for students, majority of whom comes from rural areas of all parts of Bengal. The students are comes from different regions with a diverse culture, ideology and mentality. As a boarder of this residence, they are adopted with the environment of hostel life as well as city life. At the same time, they are inbuilt a self consciousness relating with their village life which is a contradiction of city life or hostel life. In this circumstance, this study will explore different dimension of hostel life through an in-depth ethnographic study. Looking at the social practices and the established norms of the boarders through the site of P.G Men Student's Hall, this study aspires to provide a perspective on how everyday hostel life is often constructed within a particular social-political context. In terms of methodology, I have been used case study, narrative, interview and observation as part of this ethnographic research.

Key Words: *Everyday life, Boy's hostel, Ethnographic, P.G Men Student's Hall, Kolkata, Boarders, Calcutta University*

Introduction

Studying everyday life is not a new phenomenon in anthropology (Fishman 2013). From the earlier practice of ethnography, the exploration of everyday life was usually a common theme of every classical ethnographic writings. Although, the beginning of study of everyday life was actually focused on tribal communities, it was after the publication of fascinating book "Writing Culture", by Clifford and Marcus (1984), anthropologist turn their attention towards industrial society for studying everyday life. In this circumstance, this paper empirically analysis everyday life of a hostel through an ethnographic gaze. The field for the study is P.G Men Student's Hall; the official address is 49/1, hazra road, popularly known as 49/1. P.G Men student's Hall is located at the heart of Kolkata, capital of the State of West Bengal. The residence hall was established in 1959 with the aim to provide accommodation for students, majority of

whom comes from rural areas of all parts of Bengal. The students are comes from different regions with a diverse culture, ideology and mentality. They are both mentally and physically belong to two different self as they lived in hostel, but at the same time they have a strong feeling for their village.

Different scholars have studied on different dimension of everyday life. For example, Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) in their paper “examines the proximal environmental factors as well as behaviours and habits that correlate to personal happiness” by analysing experience sampling method data drawn from a national sample of American youth. They actually identified various traits that can be indicator of happiness. Macht and Simons (2000), in their psychological analysis “emotional states experienced in everyday life and examined the subjective motivation to eat associated with these emotional states”. They found that eating habit in everyday life is directly related to emotion. Jenkins (1994) in his fascinating writing argued that fieldwork should be the best possible way to study everyday life. He was actually emphasis on the importance of fieldwork in everyday life. In order to establish his argument, he cited the ethnographic study on cattle market in South-West France.

Rhodes (2005) in a different writings, through his ethnographic research provides an excellent overvie of everyday work culture in British government ministry. Sztompka (2008) in his article describe how the discipline of Sociology turns itself into the study of everyday life “by adopting in-depth, interpretative, and qualitative procedures that focus on the visual surface of society”. The author claimed that this kind of study is “Third Sociology”, which is exclusively focused on social manifestation of everyday life instead of studied social organism. Fishman (2013) also similar to Sztompka talk about sociology and everyday life. Here Fishman discuss about those sociological theories which have potentiality to analyse everyday life.

Objectives

1. An understanding the production everyday life at 49/1.
2. Unravelling of the nature of the everyday especially as it is lived
3. Exploring the dimensions everyday life as experienced everyday and on special occasions

Methodology

The primary method of doing this research has been done by long-term ethnographic method. The fieldwork for this paper has been conducted in one of Post Graduate boarding hostels of Calcutta University, which was situated at 49/1, Hazra road. A purposive sampling technique has been used for

selecting key informants among boarders. In most of the cases I used narrative case study to gain deeper insight of the subject. Occasionally I have participated with the boarders to understand their world view. Observing boarders activities in some event of the hostel is another methodology of this research paper.

Introducing the Field

The field site which is Post Graduate Men Students Hall, situated at 49/1, Hazra Road, is established in 1959 with the aim to provide accommodation for male students of Calcutta University. The building is close to Ballygunj science college campus of Calcutta University. The hall is mainly connected from Ballygunge area in the east and from Hazra crossing in the west direction. A narrow passage from Hazra road is the entrance of the hall. A small tea stall, own by a person from the state of Bihar is situated just beside the entrance gate of the hall. The stall is a gossiping place for the boarders and most of the time it is filled by the students.

The nameplate placed at the entrance wall depicts the name of the hall as P.G. Men Students' Hall and that the building is established in 1959. The whole architecture of the building seems to be different from the rest of south Calcutta buildings. It has unusually large windows, distinct patterns of wall, iron rail supported ceilings, aged and often noisy ceiling fans and balconies with old railings. This is perhaps the indication of the age of this building which is much older than any neighbouring buildings. The four storied building represents an "E" shape, i.e. with three parallel wings. The yellow coloured walls and green coloured wooden doors and windows. Altogether the hall has 48 rooms in addition with staff quarters, hostel super quarter, kitchen, dining hall, store room, news paper room, guest room and hostel office room.

While boarders are living in all the floors, but the ground floor has less number of boarder rooms, as it is used for various utility services. It is seen that boarders are feeling more comfortable if their room partner is from his native region. So, boarders are usually stayed in groupies in whom most members are from their own districts. Even in some cases, I observed that these groupies can also make according to the department in which they studied. The admission to the hostel is controlled by university authority and the seat is reserved only for post graduate students of Calcutta University. All the boarders are expected to maintain the rules, when they legally approved to stay at hostel. They are also governed by superintendent of the hostel about what to do and what does not in order to stay at the hostel. Not every of Post Graduate student of Calcutta University are able to stay at the 49/1, unless they full fill certain prescribed rule.

Tales of Everyday Life

Happiness

The boarder of the P.G Men students' hall enjoyed their happiness through various activities. Happiness is also come through the creation of illusion by the boarder of themselves. Echoing Durkheim's (1973) conception of mechanical solidarity Lefebvre argues that festivals are examples of spontaneous, ecstatic and identity-producing cultural practices, which is a feature of per-modern society. Scholar like Bakhtin (1984) has also contributed on the idea how carnival or 'the carnivalesque' i.e. breaking everyday rules is a means of creating happiness. Bakhtin (1984) note that "As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." (Bakhtin 1984).

The event of **Saraswati Puja** of the hostel is a tremendous example of creating happiness by organizing this festival. According to Hindu mythology, **Saraswati** is the God of Education and culture, so students planned this puja in order to given worship to **Saraswati**. **Saraswati Puja** is indeed a best example of illusion, where all the students have the permission of inviting their girl friends and female friends and make the day is an illusion by forgetting their own space. The superintendent of the hostel approved this. As only in the day of Saraswati Puja, boarders are permit to invite girls, so it was a remarkable for all the boarders. On this day, they properly dress themselves with extra care. Make their room as clean as possible. The experience of that illusion is noticed by boarders own words, which is following. Subhojit, student of Microbiology department told me that,

"I had spent two occasions of Saraswati Puja in this hostel and every time it was a wonderful experience for me. Because only in this day I was allotted to bring my girlfriend into my room and only that day we can enjoy some special privileges which were not possible for rest of the year".

While others like Amit express that he was remember the puja event for full day enjoyment, special lunch and dance in the evening. Thus the puja day offer some spaces for enjoyment to the boarders which are beyond their regular daily routines. Each and every student are emerged them into this festival and have a transitory liberation from hostel rules. This notion is conveyed by Tapas, a Master student of Geography department:

"We know very well that the hostel space will back its traditional state from the very next day. Life goings on according to hostel rules, but all the colours of Saraswati Puja will never back again. All the sharing moments, feelings, collectively lunch, evening dance will turn into an illusion from the next morning of Puja."

Another important event of happiness is the example of fresher's welcome, where every boarder participates and became a part of the event. This event is also happening once in a year and every boarder enjoyed it with full motivation. In this event, new boarders are welcomed by the older boarders with flowers and sweet. The dining room turns into a board place, where this event is organized by the hostel mess committee constituted by boarders. The room was decorated with balloons, flowers, art, etc. New boarders were called and they introduced themselves to the rest of the boarders. At the end all boarders including the older are dance together and at the last they take their special meals which is only for that occasion.

Socio-Political Ideology

In describing everyday life of a hostel, it is certainly argued that hostel is a juxtaposition of different cultures and ideologies. With a closer gaze on the boarder's life of 49/1, I accumulate a lot of evidence suggesting its nature as juxtaposition of different aspects of life. As student were coming from different region, naturally they posses different ideologies pertaining to their own culture and society.

The hostel space is a place, which constitute boarders of every districts of west Bengal. Boarders came from the hilly district of Darjeeling to the most remote place of Sundarban of South 24 Pargana districts. Boarders are also come from indigenous people dominated Khatra block of Bankura districts to Maoist affected areas of Purulia district. Even in some cases, they are coming from other states of India as well. So, the hostel space is the juxtaposition of several peoples coming from different social-cultural background. Sagen Mandi, an *adivasi* boy coming from Bankura district admitted that,

“Though we lived in Kolkata, but we have strong regional mentality. Our districts may be underdeveloped, but at the same time we doing our best to improve it. In hostel, we always try to find a room, where all members are belonging to our community.”

The hostel is composed of student group belong to diverse caste group like schedule Caste; schedule Tribe, General caste, Muslim respectively. Every boarder is conscious about their ethnic identity. In a number of occasions, as an ethnographer I realized that boarders are exclusively want to tag with their caste identity. Hostel boarders came from different geographical location along with their regional culture. Though after living some times in hostel's environment, they are adopted with the urban culture of Kolkata, but their own cultural practices remain in their body. They celebrated their own festivals in hostel room, with inviting others boarders. As for example, the *adivasi* students celebrated Marangburu puja and the Muslim student goes Mosque every Friday for their weekly prayer. Hindu background boarder celebrated Saraswati puja in hostel. So, it is a composition of different cultures, which stayed in a

single place like hostel. Hostel boarders have also developed different political ideology according to their own regional demand.

The case of victor Rai is interesting tin this regard. He was the student of final year and coming from Darjeeling district. He was a strong supporter of ‘Gorkhaland Movement’, a long time demand of creation of new state by the inhabitants of Darjeeling district. So victor is no exception, he was strongly support the movement. In his own voice

“We are strongly belief in the political ideology of Gorkhaland Movement. Unless and until the State Government is agreeing with our demands, we will carry on our agitation”

Nilay Barman, another north Bengal boy coming from Coochbihar, the district has long demand of creation of separate state. I asked Nilay about his thinking on that issue. Nilay painfully uttered with a protest voice that

“We are never been with West Bengal, we have separate ethnic background. In 1953, when State reformation commission constituted, Coochbihar was forcefully integrated into West Bengal in terms of language. It was totally a cheated drama that has been created by Central and State government. From that time our liberty has gone. So, I strongly support the demand of our own land.”

Psychological Stress

The presence of Psychological Stress is another common phenomenon within the boarders. The stress is actually comes through various means i.e. from unknown environment to academic pressure and most of the student have to face this difficulties. After spending so many years in their home, they are now lived in an unfamiliar atmosphere. Naturally a crisis is invented in their life in dealing with their social practice. To map with this type of crisis, my ethnographic study will through light on the inner crisis of the newly arrived boarders of the 49/1. To tracing the psychological stress related problem, it is best to start with the story of Saren Mandi. Saren is a Santali boy, coming from remote area of Bankura district. Being one of the aboriginal populations of the country, he was much more attached with indigenious cultures. Saren’s hostel life began in an entirely unknown environment of Kolkata. In his initial experience of hostel life, he was confronted with many kinds of crisis. Cultural crisis is one of the most important among them. He confessed that at the beginning he was not able to speak Bengali and he usually avoided people in order to face the language problem. Subhradeep, the North Bengal boy also has same kind of experience. He told me that,

“In Kolkata, all are unfamiliar to him, so at the initial days of his hostel, I was faces the crisis of how to talk, how to make friends, how to behave with co-room mates etc.”

Subhradeep acknowledged that all these play an important role to create stress. Although as time passes, they overcome the stress and integrate into hostel life.

Everyday Restriction

Hostel lives always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. I found that hostel space is extremely such a kind of heterotopias that has certain obvious rules and regulation for each and every boarder. All the boarders are expected to maintain the rules, when they legally approved to stay at hostel. They are also ordered by superintendent of the hostel about what to do and what does not in order to stay at the hostel. Not every of Post Graduate student of Calcutta University are able to stay at the 49/1, unless they full fill certain prescribed rule. All this rule and regulations and maintain of certain disciplines make the hostel space as a system of opening and closing. Hostel authority imposed different types of rules for the social control of the boarders. One of such rule is that every resident of the hostel must be reached within 10.30 PM. This prescribed rule has been violated by many boarders several times. Boarders think that, they are adult enough to make their own decision and so they are able to decide their appropriate time of arrival at night. The main gate of the hostel is lock at 10.30 PM. After that, no one is allowed to go outside or inside in hostel.

By talking with boarders, I have found several rules that can impose on residents of hostel. Some of the rules are listed below.

- Without the permission of the Superintendent, which shall be recorded in a book kept for the purpose, no student shall absent himself/herself from the hall between 10 pm and 6 am
- No club or society shall be formed and no meeting shall be held within the compound of the hall.
- Outsiders, whether friend or relatives of the students, are not, as a rule, allowed residing in the hall.
- Visitors may see a boarder in the visitors' room.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study has provided the notion of everyday life as it is practised by an Indian hostel resident. This study explore different dimension of everyday hostel life which is really uncommon in Indian scenario. The paper basically narrates how the lifeworld of hosteller is constituted and how they perceived it. The paper thus highlighted how everyday life of a hostel is structured within a built environment. Anthropological study of everyday life in India is very limited, thus this study makes the

path of new research in this field and different aspects of everyday life could be studied by using ethnographic method.

Note:

Due to keep the privacy of the informants all the names used in this paper are changed names.

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