



# On Spies, Conspiracies and Intruders: Ethnographic Encounters with “America” in Rural India

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*Rasanblaj: n. assembly, compilation, enlisting, regrouping (of ideas, things, people, spirits; for example, fê yon rasanblaj, do a gathering, a ceremony, a protest).*

## On Spies, Conspiracies and Intruders

Ethnographic Encounters with  
“America” in Rural India

*Aradhana Sharma*

**W**hen I began my ethnographic research stint in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, or U.P., nearly two decades ago, I wasn't expecting to be called “an American spy.” But that is exactly what happened. This mis/identification was not innocent — how could it be! — and it pestered me. It still does.

Indeed, “America” kept cropping up in strange ways as my fieldwork unfolded, drawing me into an identity and relationship that I had disavowed and histories that were and remain deeply troubling. Yet these encounters with America in rural India helped me understand, to an extent, why I was seen as a spy who came from the United States — with all the power, conspiracy, knowledge gathering and surveillance that spies connote. Ethnographers are also entangled with these connotations, whether we like or intend it, or not.

I went to India in 1998–99 to conduct research on the *Mahila Samakhya* program — a rural women's empowerment initiative structured as a state-cum-feminist collaboration. The program intrigued me for a number of reasons: I wondered why some Indian feminists, who had heretofore had a very contentious relationship with the state, were partnering with the government. I wanted to know how women's empowerment was being defined and whether it could be nurtured through a bureaucratic program. I was suspicious that the state's involvement in this program might limit a liberatory feminist vision but also curious about some unexpectedly hopeful fallout from this program.<sup>1</sup> With these questions — in some cases, suspicions — in my head, I flew from New York to New Delhi and took an overnight train from New Delhi to a city I will call Begumpur.<sup>2</sup> I completed the last leg of my journey on a rickety bus that dropped me off near Nimani village, where I was to conduct an important part of my ethnographic fieldwork.

At the time I did not write about my confrontations with America in rural U.P. because I did not think these stories “fit” the arguments I needed to make, nor have I written about them since. But they remain revelatory, not so much about gender relations or empowerment processes in rural U.P., which have not stood still since I conducted research, but about the practice of ethnography itself. They illuminate the muddiness, epiphanies, ironies and even absurdities of ethnographic research. They also reveal the particular intricacies and tangles of native ethnography carried out by “halfies,”<sup>3</sup> diasporic subjects who are caught somewhere between being

a native and a foreigner whether they are in their “homeland” or adopted land, who occupy an unresolved space of un/belonging, who are haunted by other peripatetic beings and histories that have preceded them.

I was in my native country, though quite far from one of my homes — New Delhi, where the first 18 years of my life had unfolded. I looked Indian and spoke fluent Hindi, the most commonly spoken language where I was conducting research. I even picked up the local dialect. My nativeness only afforded me so much leeway, though. I was *in* a place that appeared familiar, but not *of* it. Rural eastern U.P. — fondly known as the “cowbelt” and not-so-fondly known as the “backwaters” of India where gender and caste inequalities are concerned — was where I had come to observe, intrude and learn. I knew I wouldn’t, indeed couldn’t, blend in. I was a halfie from Delhi and the United States. A friend joked that my neon green backpack would make me stick out like a sore thumb, easily spotted even from an airplane cruising high in the sky. It wasn’t just the striking color of this bag, but also what it symbolized: books, written words, pens, literacy, power. The largely nonliterate, nonlandowning peasant *Dalit*<sup>4</sup> women I worked with told me so. *Didi* [sister], *you are powerful because you wield a pen!*

And then there was the matter of my caste, which I was constantly asked to furnish. “But I do not believe in caste,” I would protest when asked to identify it. So my interlocutors would use a different tactic: *Tell us your last name*. I knew that was a trap; my last name clearly conveyed my caste. *Sharma*, I would reply, reluctantly and a little shamefully. *Ah, you are a bhaman* [Brahmin]. My father

was, but not my mother, I would clarify, as though my halfie, impure caste status somehow made a dent in my privilege. Clearly, my last name, my neon green backpack, my perpetual note-taking, my status as a single, young woman marked me as “empowered” and different in the eastern U.P. landscape.

So did my glasses and my outfits. The women I worked with could not afford spectacles and, unlike me, only wore *sarees*. Afraid that my poor saree-tying skills could cause embarrassment — what if it came undone in public or what if I tripped over it? — I chose to wear the *salwar-kameez* (loose pants and long tunic) outfits worn by young girls in the area, complete with a long scarf, or *dupatta*, thrown over my head. This had everything to do with comfort and familiarity. And with the security of covering my otherness, to the extent that I could.

Even though I knew I wouldn’t blend in, I was stunned to find out soon after I had started my research that some people in the area thought I was an American spy! A resident of Nimani told me that people had asked him in the local market about the American *jasoos* (spy) who had come to study his village. My stomach contorted into several knots, and I must have looked aghast. The man laughed, as did his wife, Rani. “Don’t worry, didi.” They had informed the people in the bazaar that I was not a spy, but studying and working with women. And that I lived in America, but I was from Delhi; my mother lived there.

I let out a long, slow breath, still stunned. And embarrassed. And worried. Okay, so hopefully I wouldn’t be seen as someone dangerous. But who started this rumor about me and why?<sup>5</sup> I was indignant and hurt

about getting marked as an American, and a spy to boot. My leftism was as bruised as my belonging to India. I was Indian, dammit, and I had a government-issued passport to prove it (not that it made an iota of difference, since no one was interested in seeing my passport). I had a Stanford University student ID to authenticate my “pure” research credentials (no one was interested in that either). Ah, the irony of my situation. Here I was, a self-avowed critic of the state and the knowledge/power nexus, yet seriously contemplating using state-issued and institutional truths to validate my authenticity as an Indian and a researcher. Records, for the record. *What would Foucault say?* I have wondered since.

The spy rumor faded, or so I hoped; at least it didn't hit me in the face again. But I unexpectedly encountered “America” on two other occasions, which helped me make sense — I *had* to make sense — of my spy label.

\* \* \*

Nimani is roughly 27 kilometers from Begumpur. The single road that connects the two locations is plied by state-contracted buses. Profusely decorated with religious- and Bollywood-inspired kitsch art, these buses carry humans, small animals, agricultural produce, luggage and other paraphernalia. The ride to Nimani takes an hour and a half if all goes well — road conditions, weather, the age and upkeep of the bus, the state of mind of the driver, for example. I made this trip several times in the course of my research. The fare I paid varied. Initially, the conductors asked me to pay seven ru-

pees each way because I was an unrecognized “outsider.” Regular commuters, like teachers, paid two rupees, handing the money over to the conductor without being asked. And the occasional local bigwigs traveling on the bus paid nothing at all; the conductors would never dare to ask them for fare. About a month into my fieldwork, having figured out these rules, I decided to integrate myself into the bus economy as a local, handing over two rupees to the conductors when they approached my seat. I simply ignored the strange *Are you a regular? Do I know you?* looks I sometimes got from them. That was my little rebellion against my outsider status.

During one of these long but generally pleasant bus rides in September 1998, I overheard two men converse about the recent outbreak of “dropsy” in India — an illness associated in this case with adulterated mustard oil. Mustard is a multipurpose oil used for cooking, massages and medicinal purposes. (I recall a childhood ritual: my mother, acting on her mother's instructions, rubbing mustard oil on my arms and legs after my Sunday morning baths in the winters and adding a drop each in my belly button and ears.) But the Indian government had banned the sale of mustard oil because more than 2,000 people had exhibited symptoms that included nausea, diarrhea, liver and kidney damage and fluid in the lungs; some had died.<sup>6</sup> The ban caused a huge stir where I was and in other parts of eastern India, where mustard is a staple edible oil. So I wasn't surprised to hear the two men in the bus wax eloquent about the inimitable pungent taste that mustard oil lends to dishes and complain about not being able to cook with it. I also

smirked—it's not like they ever cooked their own food!

What I heard next astounded me. One man stated that the mustard oil adulteration was an “American conspiracy.” I was all ears. *America wants to dump palm oil on India. It spiked the mustard oil with diesel and other pollutants so that Indians would be forced to switch to palm oil. It was a plot to choke the local production of oil and increase India's reliance on American imports.* I took a deep breath, hopelessly trying to connect the dots in my head. I wondered if this was a lie or another errant rumor. It was not entirely believable, but not impossible either. Rumors reference particular histories and truths, I had read. The conductor called my stop. I was loath to check out of this overheard conversation, but I had to, my head still abuzz with all sorts of questions. The United States had a long history of conspiracies, dirty wars, underhand trade and military deals, and counterinsurgencies. I really shouldn't be shocked. But palm oil? Surely there had to be another explanation.

My curiosity led me to a slightly different truth. Like the two men I had eavesdropped on, the prominent Indian environmental activist, Vandana Shiva, also told the story of the mustard oil scandal as an American conspiracy.<sup>7</sup> The main protagonist in her story, however, was not American palm oil (in fact, Indonesia has controlled the global market for this product)<sup>8</sup> but genetically modified soybeans produced in the United States. In July 1998 there had been protests in India against a government proposal to import genetically modified U.S. soybeans as oilseeds. At issue was not only genetic modification but also how this import might kill the lo-

cal edible oil industry. The dropsy outbreak linked to polluted mustard oil had unfolded in August 1998 and by early September the Indian government had banned the sale of this oil. At the same time, however, it approved the import of foreign soybeans, sans protective trade tariffs. “The mustard oil tragedy,” as Shiva put it, “served as a perfect ‘market opening’ for U.S. agribusiness corporations. Now they can make us completely dependent on their soybeans for our edible oil requirements.”

A plot hatched by the Americans to taint Indian mustard oil, choke local oilseed production and increase India's need for U.S. imports — this I could believe. And an “American” female spy in an area where mustard oil was routinely used for cooking and all sorts of other things, who was collecting data and hanging out with women who grew mustard, among other crops — this too, I could believe. It was not so far-fetched to be called an American spy. *Bad timing*, I thought. *If only I had scheduled my research differently ...* But I soon realized that my timing had nothing to do with the suspicion I faced. I was treading on a longer local history of intruding, suspicious “Americans.”

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As a student of anthropology, I had learned to hone my observational skills, directing them primarily at the “anthropos,” or humans — their cultural practices and social interactions. But when it came to nonhuman beings and specifically plant life and trees, I was clueless. I grew up in metropolises — New Delhi and New York — where the built environment and the riveting pace of human life

overwhelmed and edged out pretty much everything else, including the foliage. Beyond knowing about a few of the potted plants my father tended — the rubber, the ferns, the Canna — and even those just barely, I never really learned about what grew around me. I didn't need to. That was a problem when I first arrived in Nimani; its rural agroscape was completely unfamiliar and I became a laughing stock of sorts. When walking with local women, I would often point to a plot and ask what was growing there. *Potatoes, carrots, lentils, garlic, paddy, wheat, peas, onions, mustard.* They laughed. I was chastised. *You are so educated, you wield the pen, and you don't even know this!* "We know more than you do." I had clearly missed out on basic, essential education, and they took it upon themselves to teach me.

During one of these walks, Rani, my companion, pointed to a mango orchard in the distance, where the trees bore fruit every two years. She talked about preparing the land on which she worked as a sharecropper for the winter season. The main *Kharif* (monsoon) crop in the area — rice — had been cut and processed. Women did all of the processing and could only meet me in the late afternoons, after the day's work was done and they had a chance to wash off the sawdust-like fine powder that clung to their skins from thrashing dry paddy on the ground to separate the seed from the chaff. And now they were preparing the land for wheat, one of the main *Rabi* (winter) crops, which was harvested in the spring. Wheat brought with it unwanted guests, however.

Rani pointed to white flowers growing in abundance on the side of the path where we

were walking. *These nasty little things.* She scowled.

"Oh, I know them," I responded, excited that there was finally a plant I could identify. "In America *they* [not we] call it baby's breath." I had seen these twigs with little white flowers fill up nearly every bouquet sold in New York City delis. I always wondered why they were called baby's breath; they are nearly odorless and have nothing of the milky and at times acrid smell of babies. It felt almost "homey" to see them growing in Nimani.

Until I realized that I had misidentified them. The plant wasn't baby's breath, but a look-alike. And it was not a useful or coveted flower either. Rani informed me that it was a weed, an invader that came from America. "*Gajar ghaas* (carrot grass) grows everywhere and makes our life difficult."

"Huh," I responded half-heartedly, deflated that I was, yet again, wrong about a plant.

"The weed came along with PL480 wheat," Rani continued.

What? I recognized PL480! This mix of letters and numbers conjured memories of my time spent in an underground, windowless room of Lehman Library at Columbia University, where a large chunk of my 20-hour-per-week student job was spent in the early 1990s. I had to sort through boxes of books mailed from India. The only thing welcoming about that office, besides my genial Malaysian coworker, was the smell and feel of Indian books. The shiny pages with sometimes faded printing and the crackly spines brought back memories of hardbound school textbooks that I read, cared for and passed on to my younger brother. The sweet, musty

smell of the pages was a whiff of the known, of home.

My job included inserting magnetic strips in the books that make them beep when taken out without proper permission, and stamping them with “Columbia University Libraries.” The books were then assigned call numbers beginning with PL480. I learned that PL480 stood for Public Law 480, which allowed books from India to arrive in the United States. I was curious about the background of this legislation, but I never bothered to inquire. This was a \$5 per hour job; I did not need to know the details and I did need to minimize my time in the steel-furnished, fluorescent-light-flooded back office. I later discovered that U.S. wheat, Indian books and Indian currency constituted a key triangle of exchange set up in the mid-1950s. The United States supplied wheat to India during a time of serious food crisis as part of its “Food for Peace” program.<sup>9</sup> India paid for the wheat in rupees, not dollars. The United States used Indian currency to pay for its local investments and expenses in India and to buy Indian books acquired for U.S. libraries.

“Food for peace,” however, turned out to be anything but peaceful. U.S. wheat brought with it a pest that grew wildly and threatened local Indian species. The invader I mistook for baby’s breath is *Parthenium hysterophorus*, also known as “famine weed” or the “Congress weed.” The Global Invasive Species Database calls it “an extremely serious agricultural and rangeland weed” that “aggressively colonises disturbed sites.”<sup>10</sup> This invasive species harmed crop production in various parts of India and was blamed for respiratory and other illnesses in humans

and livestock. Where I did my research, this deceptively harmless flowering plant was weeded by hand; weeding and hoeing were women’s work. Women knew this foreign intruder intimately — it had overrun their area. Famine weed was their daily brush with “America,” one they could not ignore. I could not imagine a better metaphor for U.S. imperialism, coded as generosity, than this enveloping, colonizing, toxic yet seemingly innocuous, even pretty plant.

I had unwittingly crossed paths with a weed that conjured bad memories of America. The famine weed and I were two itinerant beings whose trajectories connected India and the United States. Like the famine weed, I was a foreign element in the local social scape — a Delhite, but more important, an “American.” I had, without knowing, joined forces with another being that symbolized the dark side of U.S. help. Western-sponsored research, as I well knew, came with its own checkered histories of power. Quite like the weed, I was not an invited guest in the lives of locals. I tried to refigure my belonging and otherness to the place where I conducted research. Yet I stood out and intruded, taking up people’s time — just like the American weed — but in the name of knowledge rather than help. Both food aid and academic research, laced as they often are with good intentions, are quite convoluted in terms of their power dynamics and after-effects. They are tainted, not unlike the mustard oil I had encountered.

The very “suspicion” between the state and women’s groups in India that I wanted to interrogate in my research took on a life of its own, but it was now directed at me. I was marked as someone who lived and studied in a country — the United States — that could

not be trusted. America was a deceptive, invasive, polluting and unethical power. My ethnography was intertwined with this history and perception of imperial America, flourishing and alive in the shape of the PL480 weed, not to mention the colonial entanglements of anthropology itself.

Field research never happens in a political or spatial bubble, even when it unfolds in a particular location. I had been taught that. But how fieldwork can jump scales — from the personal to the regional, national and transnational — and collapse the past and the present, this was something I learned only through my embodied experience in rural India. It was an experience that impli-

cated me but went way beyond me, connecting the *here* of Nimani with the *there* of Delhi and the *there* of the United States. It was also an experience that taught me how complicated claims about belonging and nativeness can be. *Parthenium hysterophorus* and I were both interlopers: native, but not quite. But perhaps, just perhaps, the famine weed had an edge over me. Weeded but refusing to be rooted out, it had claimed, more or less permanently, the soil in India. I, on the other hand, had uprooted myself and was no longer of the soil. As a transient halfie, a “soiled” Indian, I could not simply belong. “America” would haunt me. It still does.



Figure 1. *Parthenium hysterophorus*, known as “famine weed.” Photographed in Howrah, India, 9 Jan 2011. Biswarup Ganguly. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parthenium\\_-\\_Howrah\\_2011-01-09\\_9940.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parthenium_-_Howrah_2011-01-09_9940.JPG)



## Notes

1. For answers to these questions, see Aradhana Sharma, *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

2. I follow the common anthropological practice of changing the names of people and places for the sake of anonymity. The only exception is Uttar Pradesh, the name of the large Indian state in which I conducted my research.

3. For this term see Lila Abu-Lughod. "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Richard G. Fox, ed. (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 1991), 137–62.

4. *Dalit*, which means broken or crushed, is a term of self-identification used by those at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy (otherwise called outcastes or untouchables).

5. The "who" remained a mystery. Rumors are errant and itinerant, after all, and their source can be virtually impossible to pinpoint. See, for example, Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Rosemary Coombe, "The Demonic Place of the 'Not There': Trademark Rumors in the Postindustrial Imaginary," in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropol-*

*ogy*, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 249–74.

6. See Vandana Shiva. "Monsanto and the Mustard Seed," *Earth Island Journal* Winter (2002), [http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/monsanto\\_and\\_the\\_mustard\\_seed/](http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/monsanto_and_the_mustard_seed/).

7. Shiva, "Monsanto and the Mustard Seed."

8. See Colin Todhunter, "Palm Oil and GM Mustard: A Marriage Made in Hell," *Counterpunch*, March 11, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/03/11/palm-oil-and-gm-mustard-a-marriage-made-in-hell/>.

9. Food for Peace is still in operation: <https://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization/bureaus/bureau-democracy-conflict-and-humanitarian-assistance/office-food>.

10. Global Invasive Species Database, *Parthenium hysterophorus*, <http://www.iucngisd.org/gisd/species.php?sc=153>.

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