

LIKE THE STRANGER described by Georg Simmel (1908) who “comes today and stays tomorrow,” anthropologists are a perpetual synthesis of wandering and attachment, simultaneous nearness and remoteness. Anthropologists embody a particular social relation distinguished by membership in a group to which they do not belong. Simmel writes that the stranger “is near and far at the same time, as in any relationship based on merely universal human similarities. Between these two factors of nearness and distance, however, a peculiar tension arises, since the consciousness of having only the absolutely general in common has exactly the effect of putting a special emphasis on that which is not common” (1971 [1908]: 148). The position of the anthropologist and the stranger can be one of *confidante*—the stranger “often receives the most surprising revelations and confidences, at times reminiscent of a confessional, about matters which are kept carefully hidden from everybody with whom one is close” (145). As anthropologists enter and leave communities, they span boundaries of difference to understand specific “others” and write about their experiences in terms of more general human questions. In the field, anthropologists engage in meaningful relationships that may overflow the boundaries of their research. Those who welcome anthropologists into their worlds—whether informants, friends, or families—do it deeply, personally, emotionally, and temporarily.

Anthropologists dwell in the field, with families of their own and with host families who have embraced them.¹ Unlike children adopted cross-culturally who are fully and permanently integrated into their new families, anthropologists adopted by their host families are adults who leave their field site and at

times return. Membership in communities (and families) formed by anthropological relations is partial and may be temporary. Yet relationships created by anthropologists with their hosts are also forms of membership, and membership in the field remains an anthropological ideal.

When I began my ethnographic research in India, much had changed in my life since my previous ethnographic experiences to alter my perspective on fieldwork (Bornstein 2005, 2007). With my research in Zimbabwe complete, I embarked upon the project that constitutes this book on charitable giving in New Delhi with the aim of examining Hindu teachings of charity and the lived practices of humanitarianism in religious and secular contexts. Research in India had emerged out of an interest, developed in Zimbabwe, on how global, humanitarian practices of child sponsorship both transformed and were transformed by local contexts. Building on insights from my work in Zimbabwe, but aware of the radically different cultural and religious context of India, I chose New Delhi as a field site partly because my husband, a sociologist, conducts research in India. He also happens to be Indian. Furthermore, during the years between my research in Zimbabwe (1996–97) and my research in India (2004–05), we had a child, and the political climate of Zimbabwe made it a less likely choice for fieldwork with a family.

In India, I was suddenly thrust into an affinal family setting of which I was a new member. The people through whom I learned about north Indian kinship were my affinal relations, and the anthropological fantasy of “fitting in” became immensely real. Despite this built-in membership, culture shock was painfully apparent, and my Hindi was rudimentary. My husband was returning home, and everything was conducted in Hindi. The cleaning lady, the cook, the maid, my mother-in-law (who came to visit and stayed), and some of the wives of my husband’s friends spoke only Hindi. My son, who was three years old at the time, spoke Hindi. I had not expected the transition to the field to be such a rupture. I was emotionally and culturally at sea. For instance, most middle-class Indians either have extended families or nannies (*ayyas*) to care for young children, but since my husband is the youngest in his family, his elderly parents required care of their own, and other relatives were unable to help. It took us one month to find a preschool that would provide full daycare. The school we selected was in the center of New Delhi, a half hour’s drive from the southern part of the city where we lived. At first, I considered family a distraction from my ethnographic work at temples and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), but I soon found that the people I met through my son and

his school shaped my understanding of giving, charity, and humanitarianism. At the school I was introduced to donors and became involved in charitable efforts. I quickly learned to notice opportunities as they presented themselves, often at unexpected moments.

Despite the built-in relationships of my Indian family, or perhaps because of them, my field experience unfolded in Delhi with a great deal of confusion. In the spirit of anthropological mistakes that shed light on the practice of fieldwork itself, I offer an example of an encounter that was particularly awkward though instructive in which I became confused as to whether I was an anthropologist or kin.

My husband, his brother, and I went to the train station in New Delhi to meet my eighty-four-year-old father-in-law, Babuji, who had come from Kanpur to stay with us and have surgery. He was traveling with his servant, Rajol. The platform overflowed with people, and a sea of greetings, welcomes, and reunions surrounded us, along with luggage, shoving, and the smells of multitudes. Our party decided to split up and search for Babuji and Rajol, as we didn't know in which train car they had traveled. I scanned the crowd, looking for the two familiar faces. Yet I was searching with an anxiety beyond that of a daughter-in-law preparing to meet her father-in-law, to obey customs of hierarchy, age, and gender in India, as I had learned to do—to behave properly. I was also searching with the anxiety and excitement of an anthropologist. I, the ethnographer, watched Indian families as they greeted each other. I watched out of ethnographic curiosity—what do *they* do?—and out of a kind of personal desperation—what do *I* do? I knew that younger family members were supposed to genuflect and touch the feet (*charan-sparsh*) of a respected elder and then . . . what had I seen in Hindi films? Some specific gesture of touching the feet with your right hand, and then, touching your own forehead . . . or chest? I scanned the crowd for a model pair to help me recollect the movements of my kinship choreography. I watched to learn, urgently trying to decipher the code—the winks, blinks, embraces. Where was Clifford Geertz when I needed him? Multiple greetings later, eyes dry from absorbing visual cues and looking for Babuji and Rajol in the crowd, I spied Rajol. We greeted each other with a joyous “Namaste!” No genuflection necessary, as he was Babuji's helper. I bowed my head, and he pointed in the direction of Babuji, who was sitting on his suitcase, a few rail cars away on the train platform, waiting for us in his white khadi. I moved quickly to him and touched his feet. Hands to chest, forehead, and then the greeting, “Namaste.” I had recollected the movement,

absorbed it, embodied it, and performed it. I was proud of myself. Babuji stood and greeted me with a reciprocal “Namaste.” He did not mention my greeting; he had not noticed it. Although I was a foreigner, I was kin, and I had done what was expected of me. I blended into the surroundings. I was taken for granted, foreign no longer. Yet I was confused; the glitch between performing daughter-in-law and ethnographer was a skip in a recording, a trip in a song that apparently only I had heard. I was related; I was not foreign. Although I was as culturally lost as I have ever been in any field setting, I was no longer just an ethnographer; I was kin. More importantly, I was mortified by this private dissonance. That I had considered myself an ethnographer and *not* kin even for a moment exposed a distance, an instrumental formality that only I could perceive but that was inappropriate in the context of my Indian family.

As the year progressed in New Delhi, I made efforts to consciously evaluate my fieldwork, and I found that my desire for intimacy with local informants and new affinal family created a particular problem. There were limits to how far I could go to observe local practices. For example, we hired a woman to assist in the kitchen and watch our son in the evening after his school had ended. We agreed to give her a meal each night, and I announced that she would eat the meal at the table with us, the family. My Indian relatives were at first shocked and perhaps even horrified by this pronouncement, but they were willing to go along with my social experiment. “Why not?” said my brother-in-law after some discussion; it seemed like the correct, progressive thing to do. I was put in the position of being the American with new ideas, and my Indian family was curious and accommodating. However, after a month of joining our dinner table, the maid stopped listening to me. Perhaps my progressive ideas confused her. Maybe she really thought she was part of the family, rather than a wage-earning employee, and thus an equal. She refused to do things I asked her to do and preferred instead to look at pictures in the newspaper. Eventually, I became so frustrated with the situation that I wanted to fire her. My Indian relatives protested: one does not hire and fire people so easily. Even domestic help is not a loose social connection; they become part of the family. Relationships such as these were not simply transactional—as easily dissolved as they might be in the United States, which was my point of reference for both kin and staff (and my Indian family, including my husband, used to laugh when I called the help “the staff”). Not only did I get it all wrong, I was breaking all the rules in what turned out to be a costly mistake. Amidst great protest and in a dramatic scene in front of the entire extended family, I fired the maid.

The closeness of my family, and the codes of conduct that it dictated, altered my daily decisions; it impinged on the quiet, private time that I found necessary and productive for writing up field notes. With little time to write down the events of the day, I found myself waking up in the middle of the night to slip away to my computer and reflect on events. Field experiences and interviews began to stack up in piles of notes and digital computer files. Unreflected, the experiences built to the point of conceptual overload. Moreover, the family that I had become a part of put emotional and moral constraints on the content of my writing. Ethnographic writing always risks alienating informants, but in India such alienation would mean social death, with long-lasting repercussions extending beyond field experience to my relationships with my husband, our son, and our extended family. My anthropological “host family” was my affinal kin. True, I did learn a great deal about kinship in New Delhi through family, but the calculated distance that structured my earlier experience of field research in Zimbabwe was no longer present or possible. A number of informants whom I interviewed were in some way or another connected to family, further embedding me in a web of social relationships.

One could argue that family is important in India and that I was learning this social fact firsthand.² I met Indian anthropologists, and we discussed how, in interviews, we found ourselves discussing our families as a point of reference, a calling card, before people would begin to talk to us. On a few occasions, I used the name of my father-in-law to gain access to informants through lineage and belonging. I learned that once I was located in relation to kin, my credibility was enhanced. My membership in an Indian family, even if by marriage across cultures, became essential, and I soon had the feeling that no one would talk to me unless I could first prove I was connected to someone recognizable. More than once, family connections facilitated finding informants. I did some letter writing and self-introductions, and I benefited from introductions by obliging colleagues who knew Delhi well; but in most cases, once an initial contact was made, discussions of family almost always ensued. It mattered to whom one belonged.

In addition, the types of field sites I began to work in presented new ethnographic challenges. In Delhi, unlike my earlier work (Bornstein 2005), I studied some NGOs, but they were not my primary focus. I sought to widen my purview to include philanthropists, priests, temple devotees, individual donors, volunteers, and any other social instance of charitable giving. Much activity was going on that did not fit into an institutional frame, and once my vision

adjusted, I took note. I started looking and listening for instances of philanthropic practice wherever I found myself—often places to which my family took me instead of active research locations I sought on my own. I witnessed philanthropy at home where families supported their maids and other domestic helpers, who clearly did not have the systemic support of either a formal economy or institutions such as NGOs. For example, we paid an extra month's salary to help our cook, whose nephew fell from a roof at home (he miraculously recovered). Informal forms of charity happened frequently in everyday life—an important contrast to more formal, institutional, and distanced forms of humanitarian assistance. Another example was my son's school, which was involved with philanthropic activity. After the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, the school linked itself to NGOs that were coordinating relief programs, and soon my commute to my son's school became research. It was fieldwork that found me. Perhaps this happened during previous ethnographic experiences, but earlier I had felt as if I had to seek it out.³ At first I had difficulty maintaining research momentum in Delhi at sites I selected on purely intellectual grounds: temples, NGOs, charitable organizations. Soon, I let life lead my fieldwork.

In New Delhi, I was drowning in anthropological riches, especially on weekends. Many informants invited me to events—rituals, weddings, and celebrations—but because of my own family obligations and responsibilities, I could not attend most of them. It was impossible to be part of the families of “others” in quite the same way. So I started developing alternative research strategies. My research had shifted toward a focus on orphans and orphanages, which were significant sites of giving, charity, and philanthropy. However, I found it painful to go to these orphanages. My emotional resistance mounted, and I dragged myself around Delhi, trying to conduct research. It was not until I recognized the problem as one of emotional isolation that I figured out how to address it. I met women from the United States and Britain living in Delhi who had been in the city for some time, or had just arrived there, but were also looking for meaning in the bustle of the metropolis where their husbands worked. We met at a hotel where a membership organization for expatriates gathered weekly. I originally joined, as an anthropologist, to meet wealthy foreign philanthropists. I was hoping to contrast foreign charity with Indian practices of *seva* (service) and *dān* (which I will explain shortly, but roughly, donation). Instead, I found friends who wanted to get involved with charitable organizations but did not know where to start. The sharp economic contrast

between the expatriates and pockets of poverty in Delhi was something they wanted to do something about. When they heard I was studying orphans and charity organizations, they became interested and I invited them to join me. My research started humming. I took my friends along to visit and tour charitable organizations. Some of them wanted to volunteer, and I matched them with organizations. I felt productive, if not in field notes, then in a social world. The topic of my research was swirling around me. It was only when I could incorporate into my research multiple aspects of my own identity—anthropologist, ethnographer, humanitarian, Jewish foreigner living in India, and affinal member of an Indian family—that ethnographic practice seemed in harmony with living. Only then could I dwell in the field, and only then could I really do fieldwork.

In India I did not have the option to maintain distance between my anthropological and affinal roles. Yet, while my father-in-law praised me for being so much like a native daughter-in-law, for doing *seva*, I was at first troubled by the tension between my ethnographic desire to belong to my family and their sudden embrace that canceled ethnographic distance. To live in or inhabit a culture or place, one must abandon the objective distance required to systematically, instrumentally, and diligently record daily behavior; yet without this documentation, this data, there is no ethnography. In India I had multiple roles. I was an anthropologist, daughter-in-law, wife, and mother—all roles that I interpreted and reinterpreted according to ideas of “correct” behavior by my “host family,” which was also my affinal family. But what does this mean when you cannot stop inhabiting the field, when your socially adopted relatives become your real (in my case, affinal) relatives, and when you can no longer defamiliarize yourself from the ethnographic site in order to write an ethnographic account? Although the category of “native anthropologist” has been well interrogated (Narayan 1993), even this did not correspond to my situation. Previous scholarship on research subjectivity did not offer a ready answer.⁴ It became apparent that my idea of ethnographic distance was at odds with my integration into family life in Delhi where, even though I was obviously not a “native ethnographer,” I did, through affinal relations, become part of the field and embraced.

How ethnographers live in the field has much to say about fieldwork itself. In India, because I was an affinal member of an Indian family, “fieldwork” was integrated with life almost by necessity. Ethnographic immersion no longer became a choice or a task that I could avoid. As a result, I was connected to the

field in ways I had not anticipated, and I sometimes found myself longing to escape, as many people may wish to do from their own families. Families can be claustrophobic, like the field. But one can leave the field; there is a built-in escape: anthropologists can come and go from the social obligations of field relations in ways they may not be able to at home. Yet in India I was not only conducting research, I was living. Surrounded by and conscious of my webs of affiliation, my relationships in Delhi were rich and I was not disappointed. I did not expect to befriend or to be included in the lives of many of my informants. I did not expect to have lasting relationships with all but a few. Yet, in Delhi, I was in relation; I was part of the field in a way that I wish I had known earlier how to be.

Relationships in the field involve loyalties that tempt a complete immersion, represented ultimately by the imagined possibility of “going native” (which is obviously problematic and extensively critiqued). Whereas now no one assumes one will go native, there remains an anthropological ideal of membership—that one will be accepted by and integrated into, or even initiated into, the groups and sites where one works. Relations of friendship, love, parenthood, and affiliation fill fieldwork. Our field families are often “families we choose” (Weston 1991), sometimes in relation to our own families that we have chosen to cross the globe in order to flee. My intent is to stress that in anthropological fieldwork, models of membership are useful, and here I include honorary or symbolic membership. These relationships affirm the moral grammar of ethnographic engagement: “I was there”; “I am responsibly socially connected and maintain obligations toward my host family and informants”; “I am still part of the community despite cultural and/or physical distance”; and “I lived with them.” Speaking to the complex experience of fieldwork, membership is a useful notion in anthropology. That we can even attempt to create a “bridge to humanity” through our ethnographic fieldwork (Grindal and Salamone 2006), by forming meaningful and at times temporary relationships with those radically different from ourselves, is an ethically challenging and compelling endeavor.

This ethnographic meditation sets the ground for the relational grammars of rights, giving, and humanitarianism that are the subject of this book. Humanitarianism—giving to strangers—is distinguished from the care of kin, and in order to make this distinction, one must know to whom one is related. One overarching theme of this book is the tension between giving to strangers and giving to kin. Although boundaries of affiliation may orient moral directives

to give, it is difficult to classify giving to kin as a humanitarian act, although it is no less valid. Relations of affiliation, such as families, define to whom one belongs, within which group one has rights, and to whom one is socially responsible. One could say, more broadly, that such affiliative relations structure obligation and responsibility in urban India. With fluidity that surpasses distinctions of kin and caste, affiliative relations in Delhi may also be articulated through where one lives (in north, south, east, or west Delhi), the language one speaks (Hindi, Urdu, or English), the city of one's birth (Allahabad, Lucknow, or Delhi), or one's religious identity (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, or Jew), among other associations. Each of these identities asserts group membership and provides referents for giving, helping, and other forms of humanitarianism.⁵