

Ethnographies in the Post Pandemic
Institute of Development Studies Kolkata
16th-17th January 2024

In an article published as part of a special issue of *Representations*, dedicated to the work of Clifford Geertz, Stephen Greenblatt articulates what he sees as the value of ethnographic work for the world of literary studies, to aid the search for ‘real bodies and living voices’ and to represent the ‘lived life, at once raw and subtle, coarse and complex’. This richness of ethnography comes ultimately from that moment of contact between interviewee and interviewer, between observer and observed, between scholar and informant. Throughout his article, Greenblatt uses the metaphor of ‘touch’ to describe this moment of contact – a metaphor that is also very real. The ethnographic utopia is based on the fantasy of that direct, unmediated touch which allows us ‘to conjure up complex lifeworlds from tiny fragments’.

There is a wonderful unpredictability inherent in this contact – the serendipity through which one can gain insights one did not even know one was looking for. There is unique potential for knowledge production in and through this contact, and the exchanges and conversations that are a result of it. Stretching across academic disciplines, and from academia to activism, policy and more – knowledge produced from ethnographic contact has been indispensable for a better understanding of the world.

The Covid-19 pandemic has of course drastically reduced the possibility of such contact, both during the months of pandemic-enforced lockdown and in its aftermath. The pandemic has generated material risks which circumscribe travel that is needed for contact; it has also encouraged redistribution of resources which in turn makes ethnographic research more difficult. The increased normalisation of technologically mediated remote working brings with it particular challenges for ethnographic research, while also opening up certain possibilities that might not otherwise exist.

This two-day conference will focus on the interstices of the ethnographic connection and the pandemic-related disconnection. Both the connection and the disconnection are of course mediated through classed, gendered, national and other forms of hierarchies, so the interstices of connection/disconnection are necessarily political. These forms of connections and disconnections mark contact between humans, as well as between humans and non-humans. When various non-human species become marked as carriers of contagion, what happens to the ethnographic contact between human and non-human? Many of the changes that mark the post-pandemic world (desirable and undesirable, necessary and artificial) are here to stay, so there needs to be an urgent reflection on what happens to the ethnographic contact – how it has changed, and how that, in turn, affects what kinds of knowledge production remain possible. Across the entire spectrum of theoretical and methodological approaches when it comes to ethnography, we want to interrogate what happens to the ethnographic contact after Covid.

The topics covered at the conference include, but are not limited to:

- Sensory ethnographies
- Technology and the digital divide
- Risk and risk assessment
- Ethics of travel
- Economics of health inequalities
- Ethnography and border control

- Forbidden knowledge production

500 word abstracts/proposals for 20-minute papers on any relevant topic should be sent to ethnographies2024@gmail.com by 30.09.2023. The organisers expect to publish a selection of papers as part of a special issue of a journal.

Convenors

Dr. Supurna Banerjee (Institute of Development Studies Kolkata)

Dr. Anindya Raychaudhuri (St. Andrews University)