Addressing Contextual Challenges in Underserved Indigenous Spaces of the Global South: In Search of an Approach Based on Unlearning, Co-Learning, and Relearning

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Abstract
Qualitative scholars are increasingly arguing in favor of bridging the gap between emic and etic knowledge as well as to become critically reflexive while conducting research, especially in the underserved contexts. Conducting qualitative research in marginalized spaces of the global South often poses unique challenges. In this case, my research took place in rural eastern India where some of the challenges faced were my ethnocentrism and preconceived baggage, trust building challenges, and situated communicative and structural barriers. My field research experiences taught me the importance of unlearning, co-learning, and relearning to meaningfully engage with the underserved populations and their realities. Unlearning involves critically examining our previously acquired knowledge/assumptions toward exploring purviews and avenues for new learning. Co-learning is a process of collaborative learning with and in grassroots communities toward cocreating culturally meaningful knowledge and opening up avenues for social equality. Intertwined with unlearning and co-learning, the relearning efforts are focused on gaining and embodying new knowledge or ways of seeing. Grounded in the examples from my field research experiences, this article discusses the roles and significance of unlearning, co-learning, and relearning in conducting qualitative research in the underserved context of the global South.

Keywords
indigenous, India, unlearning, co-learning, relearning

Introduction
Scholars have noted that it is almost impossible for us—non-Indigenous qualitative researchers—to deny or abandon our past experiences and values while conducting a study and/or writing about the same to represent cultural groups or spaces (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Ermine, 2000; Mantzoukas, 2004). Therefore, scholars have argued in favor of developing critical consciousness within ourselves, so that we can potentially (i) reduce our ethnocentrism and cultural baggage in order to better understand contextual realities and situated power dynamics, (ii) become cognizant about problems or possibilities of misrepresentation, and (iii) thereby, create avenues for social equality and emancipation (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012; Hooks, 2000). By reflexively recognizing nuances of contextual dynamics and reflecting on our unearned privileges, De la Garza (2014) argued that it is crucial to include research participants to guide as well as to contribute in designing and conducting qualitative studies. Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, Visitacion, and Caricativo (2017) noted that such an embrace of reflexivity is a journey of both learning and unlearning. Loppie (2007) opined that we (non-Indigenous researchers) need to be prepared for (re)learning from local and Indigenous realities and principles by going above and beyond West-centric approaches toward ensuring plurality of epistemologies and ways of knowing. Denzin, Lincoln, and Giardina (2006)
called for deconstructing existing ways of doing scholarships and exploring approaches to privilege local and Indigenous voices, practices, and knowledge.

Such unlearning and relearning attempts do not deny or dismiss the importance of systematic and/or institutional learning and practices of qualitative research (Kwame, 2017; Tracy, 2010), but they seek to add values to ever-emerging qualitative scholarship to better understand the nuanced and hidden aspects of participants’ knowledge, articulations (or silences), and activities. For more than a decade, I regularly visited underserved Indigenous spaces of eastern India to conduct qualitative studies. As many of the studies had action components, in most of the studies my role was of a participant observer. For instance, with active participation and inputs of Indigenous communities in three locations of rural eastern India, we (the villagers and I) co-constructed a mini hospital and a library, organized a grassroots innovation initiative, and codesigned culturally/communicatively appropriate computer interfaces to bridge situated digital divide. In other words, all the research projects were community-driven, where the villagers made collective decisions to own, lead, and implement their initiatives. This article documents examples and reflections from my aforementioned field research experiences and discusses the roles and relevance of unlearning, co-learning, and relearning in conducting qualitative studies in marginalized contexts of the global South².

Literature Review

Smith (2013) argued that the marginalized populations have been historically denied the opportunity to be the owner and the creator of their cultural practices and knowledge productions, as evident by the fact that the West had rejected Indigenous people and their alternate ways of knowing. Challenging such dominant intentions, she opined that rewriting history, reclaiming knowledge, and refighting rights are necessary to decentralize the West and their hegemonic desires and acts of claiming ownership of singular (or dominant) ways of knowing (Smith, 2013). It is the need of the hour to reflexively engage with other knowledge production avenues, especially with underrepresented voices and epistemologies, which have systematically experienced delegitimization and erasures (Kwame, 2017). However, according to these scholars, resisting the global North’s ethnocentric intents does not mean absolute rejection of Western theories and knowledge; rather, it refers to the production of knowledge by centering Indigenous values, worldviews, and concerns (Smith, 2013). Scholars have also emphasized that local and Indigenous people have adequate contextual knowledge and deep insights about their lived realities and their own communities (Palaganas, Sanchez, Molintas, Visitacion, & Caricativo, 2017). Critical scholars therefore remind us that we (non-Indigenous qualitative researchers) need to privilege and foreground subjectivities and knowledge produced by the marginalized communities of the global South (Denzin, 2017).

Philosophies of the global South fundamentally argue in favor of epistemological diversity and a plural form of emancipation (Santos, 2015). Epistemologies and praxis of the world, according to Santos (2012), is greater than Western understandings; therefore, he argued that to advance global knowledge, it is important to transform the knowledge production processes as well as foreground alternate ways of knowing (Santos, 2015). In other words, it is crucial to ensure ecology of knowledge, where ignorance will not be celebrated, and more than one form of knowledge will be recognized and respected. In order to reestablish and reclaim epistemological diversity at the margins, it is necessary to recognize and represent distinct modes of being, alternate viewpoints, values, and interaction opportunities (Smith, 2013). Thus, exploring ways for overcoming and minimizing epistemological violence and delegitimization of Indigenous knowledge is foundational to unearth newer theoretical avenues as well as to build possibilities of social change. Moreover, reflexive engagement at the margins is potentially instrumental in transforming the life, lens, and epistemological foundation of many of us, the non-Indigenous qualitative researchers (Denzin, 2017).

Unlearning

Unlearning can be defined as critical examination of knowledge or concepts learnt in the past toward exploring scopes and avenues for new learning (Pighin & Marzona, 2011). Scholars have opined that past practice, knowledge, or beliefs oftentimes constitute formidable barriers to learning new behaviors, ideas, or actions (Baxter, 2000; Becker, 2010; Duffy, 2003). The practice of questioning West-centric assumptions and unlearning dominant approaches is relevant in marginalized contexts of the global South where underserved populations experience great oppressions and uncertainties, unfavorable sociopolitical realities, and oftentimes follow informal/unconventional lifestyles (La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, & Vishny, 1999; Zahra, Abdelgawad, & Tsang, 2011).

Co-Learning

Co-learning³ is a process of collaborative learning with and in grassroots communities toward co-constructing culturally meaningful knowledge and opening up avenues for social equality (Barr, Freeth, Hamrick, Koppel, & Reeves, 2005; Rutherford, 2011). Such mutual cocreation fundamentally opposes acts and/or attempts of appropriating culture and knowledge of underserved communities (Curry & Cunningham, 2000). Conceptualizing the participants as “knowledge makers, not simply as knowledge consumers” (Curry & Cunningham, 2000, p. 76), co-learning process calls for an active and inclusive involvement from the margins in addressing issues of importance to underserved stakeholders (Rutherford, 2011). Critically examining our own ethnocentrism is one of the precursors of the co-learning process, particularly when such cogeneration meant to address conditions of marginalization and foster collective and synergic efforts from the below
amid limited material and symbolic resources (Curry & Cunningham, 2000).

Relearning

Intertwined with unlearning and co-learning process, the relearning efforts are grounded in gaining and embodying new knowledge or ways of seeing (Pighin & Marzona, 2011; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Conceptualizing it as a “transformative” process, scholars have noted that relearning opens up possibilities of coevolution as well as sociopolitical and cultural change (Leal-Rodriguez, Eldridge, Roldán, Leal-Millán, & Ortega-Gutiérrez, 2015; Yang, Chou, & Chiu, 2014).

Attending to critical scholars’ call for sociopolitical and cultural consciousness raising, an integrated effort espousing the principles of unlearning, co-learning, and relearning potentially enhances our contextual understanding, broadens horizons, and fosters enriched awareness (Abegg et al., 2017). Such a “learning to learn” approach, according to Spivak (2002), is a precursor to being cognizant about situated social–political realities and suspending one’s belief that “one is indispensable, better, or culturally superior . . . it is resisting the temptation of projecting oneself or one’s world onto the Other” (p. 6). Contextual (re)learnings from below not only make us aware about our unearned privileges and vulnerabilities in our acts of representations of marginalities (Kapoor, 2004) but also help problematize our conceptualizations about processes such as “participation” and “dialogue” in the context of ethnographic research (Andreotti, 2007).

Context

Many underserved spaces of the global South are still under-researched, including the rural Indigenous spaces of eastern India. A limited knowledge (including sparse information from published articles and public records) about underrepresented communities and spaces due to geographical isolation and lack of connectivity oftentimes leads us (non-Indigenous researchers and mainstream populations) to stereotype and generalize, which further marginalizes the underserved populations. Apart from physical remoteness, cultural and communicative barriers also play important roles in meaningfully interacting and researching in those spaces. Some of the barriers I experienced were my ethnocentrism and preconceived baggage, trust building mentality are often responsible for portraying Indigenous peoples as mere receivers of Western knowledge, lacking consciousness, exotic, pseudoscientific, and uncritical marginalized monolith. Indigenous voices and practices as well as sharing among various research stakeholders (including me).

Unlearning, Co-Learning, and Relearning

Grounded in my experiences, this section includes the framework, as well as my ethnographic journey, and experiential realizations in three remote geographical locations (forest, mountainous, and coastal region) where I conducted several qualitative inquiries for nearly a decade. The examples presented below explored the intersections of three knowledge sources, that is, knowledge of the outsiders/non-Indigenous researcher(s), knowledge of local and Indigenous communities, and knowledge situated in wider sociopolitical contexts (both local and non-local; Figure 1). Interactions of aforementioned knowledge systems yielded opportunities for reflections as well as sharing among various research stakeholders (including me).

Unlearning

Our unexamined and unearned privileges, superiority, know-all mentality are often responsible for portraying Indigenous peoples as mere receivers of Western knowledge, lacking consciousness, exotic, pseudoscientific, and uncritical marginalized monolith. Indigenous voices and practices as well as their agentic abilities, leadership, and alternate knowledge productions (including alternate education system) taught me and opened up avenues for learning through unlearning. Grounded in my field research experiences, the journey of unlearning taught me to question my privileges, assumptions, and perceptions about underserved populations and their cultural practices, knowledge, and agencies (Figure 2).

Indigenous consciousness and nature. Researchers show, traditionally, that most Indigenous populations of eastern India
practice animism, that is, they conceptualize inanimate objects such as stones, water, and trees, as well as natural phenomena, and attribute a soul to the entities (Mathur, 2001). Scholars further opine, urban and mainstream viewpoints consider such conceptualizations and practices as primitive, exotic, and pseudoscientific (Harding, 1998). While working with Santhal (one of the Indigenous tribes of India), I gradually learnt that the Santhal community was divided into 12 clans. Each of the clans has their designated plants/trees and animals, which they consider as their totems. As a part of their everyday socioreligious as well as ritualistic duty, the members of those clans protect their totems as a community (Baske, 2006). In addition, the Santhal tribe, as a collective, routinely engage themselves in protecting their sacred environmental objects and spaces, for example, sal trees (Shorea Robusta) of their sacred groves (Deb, 2007). A combination of spiritual as well as environmental consciousness unites the community to conserve natural resources, which they consider inseparable from their lives (unlike many non-Indigenous cultures). Previously (i.e., before conducting research in Indigenous spaces), influenced by mainstream viewpoints (such as Indigenous culture is often superstitious), I never fully realized the deep Indigenous commitment and active engagement for protecting their environment. In other words, unlearning Indigenous practices/rituals as exotic and/or irrational helped me (as a non-Indigenous researcher) to become culturally cognizant; such awareness guided me to discover/realize the richness of contextual knowledge as well as to observe sociocultural practices and nuances in a more informed way.

**Traditional knowledge and practices.** Hegemonic depictions often portray Indigenous populations as “devoid of agency” (Spivak, 1988) and as mere recipients of dominant knowledge and interventions. Without unlearning such deficit framing, that is, underserved people are inferior and incapable, and therefore, are subjects of dominant control, it was difficult for me to appreciate the fact that in colonial era many of the Indigenous sciences (including medicinal knowledge), technologies, and craft practices were co-opted in the dominant knowledge production processes. Colonial knowledge and power structures fundamentally rejected Indigenous people and their contributions in creating and developing knowledge from below. However, in reality, Indigenous populations of eastern India constantly iterate and innovate culturally meaningful solutions to survive, as an integral part of their day-to-day struggle against situated resource scarcity and contextual odds. For instance, after cyclone Aila in the year 2009, when I was visiting the coastal villages of Sundarbans, I noticed that the presence of excessive salt in the soil prevented most of the villagers from doing agricultural activities. In contrast, local Indigenous people, unlike other non-Indigenous villagers, were able to carry out agricultural activities using seeds invented and preserved by their ancestors which apparently performed well in a salty environment.

Similarly, Indigenous villagers of the forest region demonstrated their deep involvement with local medicinal plants, which were actively being used for treatment of family and community members. However, they preferred to keep such practices to themselves as (i) such medicinal knowledge and practices were not approved (often not legal) in the mainstream society and/or (ii) they were co-opted by non-Indigenous knowledge systems. Such interactions guided me to (un)learn preconceived notions embedded in mainstream understanding of viewing Indigenous knowledge as inferior and pseudoscientific and helped me to become aware of my taken-for-granted presumptions to see the strengths and uniqueness of situated Indigenous knowledge and practices. An introspective attempt to dismantle dominant depictions prepared me to be respectful to local cultural norms and dynamics of Indigenous populations as well as to the communities and their rights for preserving their traditional and sacred wisdom and heritage.
**Indigenous knowledge in everyday contexts.** It has been noted that in the discursive spaces of knowledge production, Indigenous knowledge is often deemed inferior, obsolete, folk knowledge, or pseudoscientific by the mainstream (Harding, 1998). This is primarily due to geographical isolation, narrow access to information produced and consumed by the mainstream, and limited awareness of Indigenous practices. Reflective appreciation and awareness of situated Indigenous knowledge was important for me to understand the realities and negotiations of underserved populations. For example, many of the Indigenous populations of eastern India are primarily dependent on agricultural practices, and I observed their use of traditional knowledge to predict weather and in crop production matters—practices/skills which are passed on from their elders and greatly influence their everyday praxis and attempts of survival.

Other than the agricultural practices, they depicted how they protect themselves by using traditional sign systems and sounds while communicating and walking in remote and isolated (forest and mountainous) terrains. These signs, in the form of line drawings on tree trunks, serve as their travel guidelines in dense and remote forests. Moreover, they produce characteristic sounds using traditional musical instruments including drums to communicate threats, information, and messages to fellow community members. This meaningful usage of situated knowledge by the Indigenous communities aided me to experientially unlearn the hegemonic stereotypes that delegitimize Indigenous wisdom and agentic capabilities.

**Local agentic capabilities.** Guided by West-centric pedagogies and ideologies, we, ethnographers/practitioners (including me), are often intellectually more inclined toward and invested in dominant approaches than local-centric practices. Such ethnocentrism often hinders our visions to appreciate and recognize community-led bottom-up initiatives that address conditions of marginalization. For instance, members of an Indigenous tribe, Mahali, led, organized, and mobilized other villagers, including their non-Indigenous neighbors, to construct a gravel road to solve local transportation related issues in an Indigenous village of the forest region. While sharing the experience with me, the community members said,

> We constructed the road in a participatory way. It was about 20 years ago. We still have the written records of expenditures. We contacted local businesspersons who owned those trucks, and employed drivers. In addition, we did not have to pay much as many of us worked under those businesspersons. Within our community, we started organizing our villagers. One person per family volunteered for that work. None took a single penny for it.

Such agentic engagements and commitments demonstrate the existence of alternate ways of knowing, taking actions, and organizing capabilities at the margins, which were potentially instrumental in inverting the historic misrepresentation of and systematic injustices to this Indigenous culture. Being respectful and receptive to situated knowledge, long-term relationships and dialogic engagements with Indigenous communities opened up (un)learning opportunities for me, where they taught me to understand and listen to their agentic journeys and capabilities. To me, such learning aided to empirically dismantle dominant and or the so-called unproblematic assumptions about the cultural participants’ practices and challenged my uncritical takes on hegemonic/top-down approaches.

**Intergenerational communication.** Illiteracy among the Indigenous populations of rural eastern India is high (World Bank, 2017); moreover, high dropout rate and lack of access to education prevent tribal students from getting higher education (World Bank, 2017). Through the lens of the mainstream, Indigenous people are therefore depicted as “uneducated.” In my ethnographic engagement, I noticed that apart from intergenerational communication of everyday skills and knowledge, many Indigenous communities take collective initiatives, often, informal pedagogy to educate their children and youths. In one such study, I attended an annual festival in southwestern Bengal where tribal people from West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Orissa participated. Initially, the Indigenous youths demonstrated their skills and abilities to protect themselves as well as their community members from the wild animals. As a preparation for such demonstrations, they received at least a month of rigorous training from the seniors in their respective villages. Later, elderly and senior members, through songs and interactive performances, taught youths the nuances of family and married life, including sex education. To me, such intimate and engaged interactions within Indigenous communities were instrumental in teaching the community members about their basic duties, responsibilities, and commitments. In other words, observing such intergenerational communications of situated knowledge and praxis helped me to unlearn the primacy of formal/institutional education.

**Undeciphered logics.** In the spaces of decision-making, mainstream conceptualizations often value and legitimize rational thinking, especially in the development sectors. Consequently, oftentimes our mainstream viewpoints, which are deeply influenced by colonial praxis, undermine situated Indigenous viewpoints and thought processes by portraying them as irrational, whimsical, and absurd. In one tribal village project, community members were to select a construction site for an Indigenous library for which several meetings were conducted. During the final meeting, the village head and senior members had a discussion about a white ghost, which was harmless and beneficial for the community. They added that the ghost needed an open and safe space for its daily commutation. As one of the proposed sites was restricting its walking space, the villagers selected an alternate site for constructing the library. To my “educated” ethnographer self, it did not sound like a rational decision. However, as the narrative of white ghost was culturally meaningful and appropriate for the community, it was instrumental to challenge and dismantle my preconceived notions, which eventually aided me to unlearn the supremacy
of rationality in the context of community led decision-making processes.

Unlearning unearned privilege. Unlearning our own unearned privileges is an important and often difficult aspect of ethno-graphic engagements in underserved spaces. Being the members of lower most socioeconomic strata and caste system, Indigenous and dalit populations experience untouchability. Abused and humiliated by such practices, Indigenous populations oftentimes maintain caution before giving access to outsiders, like me. For instance, some communities offered me water to drink or invited me for lunch at the initial stages of research interactions to check and/or make sure that I was respectful to their culture, and more importantly, test/observe my hesitation in sharing space or food with them (particularly when I was going to study and write about their communities later). Publicly sharing and eating food in their community spaces with non-Indigenous/non-dalit people is often considered as an act of potentially opposing the social norms of untouchability. Moreover, I stayed in their homes and helped them in the everyday domestic activities, which were instrumental in breaking the barriers of caste-based malpractices and also helpful in unlearning my unearned privileges. Even if I had some experiences of sharing food and spending time with dalit families since childhood, it was still not very easy for me to decenter my unearned privileges completely. Constant reflections and sincere engagements were instrumental for me to reduce the sense of privilege embedded within. The unlearning experiences and realizations are intimately intertwined with the co-learning processes, described below.

Co-Learning

In marginalized context of rural eastern India, knowledge and information is not always readily available to one or more of the stakeholders or groups to negotiate situated adversities, which potentially open up avenues for sharing and mutual learning. Engaged interactions and explorations oftentimes helped local communities and myself to potentially codesign or cocreate solutions and develop alternatives through co-learning processes. For instance, Indigenous communities addressed contextual and emergent issues through locally led deliberations, iterations, collective reflections, and through learning from local examples and instances. Co-learning opportunities helped me to learn from local iterations, community deliberations, and from cocreative activities (Figures 3 and 4).

Codesigning interface. We (community members and I) codesigned a culturally appropriate computer interface; the interface design project focused on bridging the digital divide to foster access to information in a culturally meaningful way for illiterate and tribal language–speaking (i.e., nonmainstream language) populations. During the process, we faced two types of illiteracy—while many of the community members were educationally illiterate or semiliterate, I was culturally illiterate in that Indigenous context. To bridge the cultural illiteracy (within me) and situated communicative barriers, we embraced a visual/sensory approach, where we used visual imageries instead of English texts, which are conventionally used in interface design. To do so, the villagers initially participated in several participatory drawing sessions to draw culturally meaningful imageries (e.g., pictures of culture, education, health) and then collectively chose the appropriate visual representations for the interface, which were then graphically refined using a software for interface usage. Unlike many top-down information and communication technologies for development initiatives that often design interface for communities which underserved/illiterate people have to adapt to, this interface was codeveloped, grounded in the inputs from the community members, which was instrumental in making the graphic user interface culturally meaningful and appropriate. This process of mutual learning using the community inputs marked the moments of co-learning as well as codeveloping culturally meaningful solutions.

Codeveloping booklist for an indigenous library. As a part of my research program, another initiative, the Indigenous library project also came up where the Indigenous villagers collectively decided and built a library to promote education, create awareness about Indigenous literatures, and spread knowledge among local tribal populations. When it was time to decide the list of the books to be kept in the library, multiple groups, such as jobseekers, literature enthusiasts, and so on, in the village separately came up with a list of books according to their needs, tastes, and choices. In this process of developing the list, each group separately met with local experts such as teachers, poets, government officers, and practitioners. As a part of the process, I also shared my views and web-searched to suggest books to the groups. Next, all the groups shared their lists and then participated in a full-house discussion to deliberate and collectively decide the final selection of books. In other words, the critical voices from various internal stakeholders played a crucial role in coming up with a final decision that was led and shaped by the community members. The process yielded moments of co-learning from me, particularly about diversity of choices, thought processes, and deliberations at the locale. Even if the villagers were working on accomplishing the same goal of preparing the booklist, the stakeholders based on their demographics and/or identity markers (e.g., age, gender, educational qualifications), interests, and preferences brought forth a diverse set of options/verdicts, which also taught me not to subscribe to dominant depictions that portray underserved communities and their preferences as timeless monoliths.

Iterations and co-learning. In another community-driven cultural intervention project, villagers collectively participated to design public performances to address locally situated social and cultural problems. In those theater-like performances, situated issues that affected the lives of the local Indigenous communities, such as alcoholism, broken families, large-scale financial cheating, and so on, were addressed. After coming
up with the initial script, Indigenous artists performed the piece several times in front of enthusiastic villagers who (including me) attended the rehearsal sessions. Members of the enthusiastic audience participated in the process by interacting with the actors as well as scriptwriters to share their thoughts, suggestions, and opinions. The dialogue and communication eventually helped the community members to come up with culturally impactful performances. Such iterations and interactions also helped me to co-learn processes of culturally appropriate creation of socially relevant messages. In the process of cocreation, co-learning often enhances the quality of locally meaningful outcomes.

**Co-learning from examples.** Oftentimes, Indigenous villagers, being residents of remote villages, sought to learn from local examples to address situated needs and local problems and came up with contextually appropriate solutions. In an academic community collaborative project where the local villagers led a health initiative to construct a mini hospital, the Indigenous people did not have the experience to construct or run a rural health facility. Therefore, to learn about hospitals and their functions, we (the villagers and I) visited several rural hospitals and health clinics (both private and government-run). As a part of the visit, villagers observed those facilities in detail as well as posed questions to doctors and administrators—to be meaningfully informed. After learning from several examples, we shared our learning with the rest of the village during discussion sessions held in the village. In the meetings, the villagers made collective decisions about hospital accessories and resource planning. As a participant observer, I also co-learned from local examples as well as from community-led decision-making processes about local realities on how community members through collective organization and their leadership brought about meaningful change. Overall, co-learning from local examples opened up new opportunities to develop solutions as well as helped me better understand the local dynamics and discursive processes. In the next subsection, various aspects of relearning are presented.

**Relearning**

Ethnographic interactions and experiential learnings from the communities, local contexts, and realities provided me the opportunity to study Indigenous people and their praxis in a new light. Situated epistemologies and practices grounded in Indigenous values, needs and worldviews, layered communication practices, situated cultural expressions (and its gradual erosion), local priorities, perspectives, and alternative approaches were some of the key relearning aspects for me. Relearning process was instrumental for me to understand nuanced perspectives about local/Indigenous epistemologies, communication, and sensitivities as well as about their cultural heritage (Figure 5).
Indigenous practices. Dominant perspectives and lenses portray Indigenous perspectives as deviant, inferior and therefore as something that needs to be fixed; consequently, hegemonic viewpoints oftentimes remain incapable of seeing alternate perspectives and possibilities emerging from the margins. On the contrary, Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews were eye-opening for me and experientially taught me new perspectives to understand and learn from contextual realities. In one community-led project, Indigenous people were constructing a brick wall to protect their sacred environmental resources such as trees and stones. Before initiating the construction work, more specifically before digging the soil of that sacred space, the community members made collective apologies to their sacred trees. Such demonstrations retaught me about the environmental consciousness and respectful care of the Indigenous community.

In another instance, I relearned from their intracommunity legal approaches; they follow a community-based and community-led decision-making process and collectively determine legal provisions and punishments (if required). As a punishment, in most of the cases, the accused have to arrange a community lunch and/or have to pay compensations. After observation of the necessary formalities, the entire community forgives the accused person and helps the person lead a new life without ever talking about her or his past behavior. Such traditional legal and cultural practices of an Indigenous community of the forest region gave me new insights about social consciousness.

Indigenous priorities. West-centric lens oftentimes fails to comprehend the meanings and the relevance of many local/Indigenous practices and commitments that operate in the global South, including Indigenous priorities and decision-making dynamics. While working in various projects in Indigenous spaces, I noticed an urgency inside me to complete the research projects within a previously determined time limit (as my air/train return tickets were prebooked). Although Indigenous people were sincere in contributing to the community-based participatory projects, their priorities were different from mine. While maintaining the schedule was one of my priorities, the community members prioritized their relationships with community members and cultural and ritualistic events of the community over deadlines. For instance, in case of marriage or death, as well as community gatherings or fairs in nearby villages, villagers as a whole community took 1–5 days off from the research project to participate in those events. Even if it was difficult for me to cope with the situated practice initially, over the years, I gradually learnt to acknowledge and appreciate the local cultural dynamics. Diversity of priorities and commitments dismantled the taken-for-granted mainstream understandings within me about Indigenous priorities, worldview, and practices and thereby marked a new learning experience for me.

Indigenous communication. Communication is an important aspect of Indigenous existence to convey their preferences, thoughts, values, and ideologies. In the last phase of the aforementioned library project, villagers collectively came up with an Indigenous name (in the local Indigenous language) for their library. Then, while writing the name in public (i.e., on the wall of the library), villagers used two languages—English and Santali (Al-Chiki script). They never used any dominant mainstream Indic languages (e.g., Hindi or Bengali) for that purpose. When I asked them about the rationale of such decisions, they never replied verbally but just smiled. To me, this conveyed a polite and/or silent protest against the acts of dominance and abuse by the contemporary power structures. In other words, here Indigenous communication (both overt and covert) emerges as the site of voicing Indigenous questions and resistance from the margins. Scholarly understanding about covert and silent communication in Indigenous contexts, particularly in underserved spaces of rural South Asia, is not yet well developed. We need to relearn more from the Indigenous people to enrich our knowledge as well as to communicate effectively with tribal communities.

Aesthetic sensitivity. Indigenous knowledge, sensitivities, and aesthetics are often exoticized and oversimplified in the mainstream discourses. Such West-centric knowledge structure portrays situated Indigenous knowledge as an uncritical homogeneous entity. In my case, by reading secondary materials such as books and mediated texts, I had the preconception that Indigenous people follow or like circular patterns. Accordingly, while designing the computer interface (mentioned previously), I initially used circular elements to make the design culturally appropriate. When the design was shared with the villagers and I sought their feedback, the villagers advised me to modify the circular elements (because, to them the graphic elements were oversimplified). In addition, senior women organized a hands-on training session and taught me the alternative visualizations that were contextually meaningful for their community. Guided by their teachings, I became aware about the necessities of using more culturally defined graphics by going above and beyond the stereotyped circular design option. Such relearning experience guided me to codesigning culturally appropriate graphics to develop computer interfaces to meet their expectations and aspirations.

Cultural heritage. It is critical to preserve and conserve alternate knowledge, voices, and perspectives of Indigenous communities that are constantly and consistently eroding owing to structural ignorance and oppressions in the neoliberal era. Owing to contextual complexities and structural conditions, many Indigenous cultural artifacts and heritage are facing threats of extinction in rural South Asia. For example, Indigenous communities expressed concerns about the decay of several cultural expressions such as songs, paintings, and crafts that have been practiced in local communities for generations. In one interview, Indigenous community members of southwestern Bengal expressed concerns about their songs, which were annually performed during their traditional festivals; according to them, some of their songs were up to 24 hr long. According
to the villagers, a few seniors fully knew such songs, and they anticipated that the songs could potentially be lost in next 10–15 years. Such information not only taught me the unique nuances of Indigenous cultural heritage but also taught me the necessity and urgency of developing new approaches and processes to document such invaluable resources.

Discussion

In hegemonic depictions, local and Indigenous knowledge largely remain invisible, nonexistent, and/or illegitimate; consequently, alternative knowledge and epistemologies from the global South consistently disappears through the process of deliberate destruction of culture (Santos, 2016; Shiva, 1993). Scholars have noted that reflexively listening to, engaging with, recognizing, and seeking to legitimize new knowledge could open up avenues for social transformation (Kwame, 2017). To represent local perspectives, contexts, and realities better, developing our reflexive understandings of limitations of etic knowledge productions as well as reducing the gaps between emic and etic perspectives is crucial (Markee, 2012). Instead of portraying and/or stereotyping underserved Indigenous populations, their voices and agencies from a deficit perspective (i.e., marginalized population are lacking agency or are subjects needing control and refinement), reflexive engagement at the margins potentially makes our qualitative research journeys less judgmental and a matter of responsibility and duty.

While conducting field research, embracing previously acquired formal knowledge or learning, I oftentimes felt that my approaches (learnt in class) were inadequate to understand the nuances of contextual complexities; such inadequacies also created learning barriers and conceptual conflicts that affected the quality of research (more specifically data collection) process. I also noticed that the two knowledge systems or worldviews (e.g., academic/institutionalized and traditional/Indigenous) often seemed incompatible; for instance, scholars have noted that many a time, the villagers became skeptical, kept mum, or exhibited deference effects as a consequence of epistemic barriers (Bernard, 2006; Dutta, 2018). Therefore, unlearning was the first step for me in reorienting myself, whereas co-learning and relearning marked the process of rediscovering the marginalized contexts. Such a journey, to me, was potentially inclusive and allowed us to cocreate mutually agreeable/understandable avenues to communicate with and/or represent underserved realities.

In my research journey, I also realized that even a tiny residue of preconceived notions and unexamined assumptions could affect the process of reflexive understandings and research interactions. More specifically, being cognizant about the slightest sense of superiority, examining critically the societal sense of normativity (and so-called deviations thereof), and dismantling the very idea of perceiving hegemonic/West-centric interventions as panacea to local problems marked the beginning of unlearning journey for me.

Conducting qualitative research by embracing elements of action research, particularly in the underserved contexts (i.e., with limited availability of, and seeking to create access to resources), the process of co-learning (along with unlearning) is both edifying and challenging for me as a participant observer. In the co-learning engagements, (i) learning from external (as well as mediated) examples (especially when community members and researchers have limited or no knowledge/experience about things/processes/phenomena), (ii) learning by iterating and by doing (especially when at least a few community members or researchers have some ideas/experiences trying new things), and (iii) learning through dialogue/deliberation and brainstorming (particularly when the community members and researchers are debating or deliberating to improve/build something) open up new possibilities of mutual learning as well as meaningfully addressing situated needs and issues.

While unlearning calls for interrogating our presumptions and privileges, the process of relearning provides me a renewed vision, which helps me to discover new cultural alphabets and new depths or dimensions in situated practices, sensibilities, and epistemologies (Klein, 2008). In addition, an informed understanding about (i) rationale for Indigenous decision-making practices and priorities, (ii) local cultural heritage and aesthetics, and (iii) nuances of Indigenous communication and silences, and so on (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006) open up newer avenues for me to potentially enrich and thicken ethnographic descriptions. In a way, such engagements potentially resurface knowledge/perspectives that usually remain invisible/hidden (Pighin & Marzona, 2011) and help me build solidarity with underserved populations as well as rediscover my blind spots/vulnerabilities regarding power and representational matters (Andreotti, 2007). Thus, a combination of unlearning, co-learning, and relearning helped me in overcoming tendencies to subscribe to a single story or perspective in an uninformed way. Such engagements also guided me to experientially acquire more nuanced understanding of lived realities and dynamics at the margins. In a journey together, community members and I as co-researchers not only learn and share knowledge with each other but also try to cocreate avenues to address local issues in a collegial way. In other words, such efforts help build credibility and trust in research contexts, as well as aid in potentially reducing power disparities in the process of knowledge creation and thus contribute to achieving more rigorous accounts and meaningful representations of Indigenous cultures and contexts.

Therefore, in underserved contexts of the global South, the unlearning, co-learning, and relearning (UCR) approach could contribute to advancing current knowledge through bringing about epistemological ecology and transformative plurality. Embodying intercultural sensibilities and by favoring interactions and exchanges of various situated knowledge, the approach can create possibilities for mutual learning and enriched cultural understanding; such processes not only strengthen the relationship and alliances between Indigenous and exogenous stakeholders but also pave avenues toward...
ensuring social justice, human dignity and decency (Santos, 2016).

There are many under-researched underserved contexts in the global South, which are diverse in terms of purposes, approaches, and goals, and they are interdisciplinary in some cases. The framework of unlearning–co-learning–relearning can be used in many such scenarios with varying degree of applicability to prepare ourselves, to innovate collegially, and to discover novel attributes of situated dynamics, for example, to understand the complexities of under-researched contexts, populations and their situations/discriminations in terms of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class, and other geopolitical issues. Finally, such engagements potentially influence and transform the lives of the inquirer, and therefore, are foundational in creating avenues for transformative researches and in imagining a model of social change (Denzin, 2017).

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Notes
1. Underserved Indigenous populations of rural India: Government of India document (Planning Commission, 2008, 11th Five-Year [2007–2012] Plan) stated, “A large number of STs (indigenous people) who are living below the poverty line are landless, with no productive assets and with no access to sustainable employment and minimum wages” (p. 114). Again, as per the 12th Five-Year (2012–2017; Planning Commission, 2013) Plan document, “Most of them live in isolated groups in relatively remote areas” such as in “forests, hills, undulating inaccessible areas.” About indigenous spaces, the document further noted, “not only poverty continues at an exceptionally high levels in these regions, but the decline in poverty has been much slower here than in the entire country” (p. 228).
2. Global South: Santos (2016) argued that global South is not a mere geographical concept, rather it is a metaphor for exclusion, silencing, and marginalization of underserved population; it also symbolizes the essence of agentic efforts from the below to overcome and minimize the sufferings.
3. The theories and concepts of co-learning are used/applied in a variety of contexts including various populations, communities, and organizations. However, in this article, the term co-learning is discussed by paying focused attention to rural, grassroots, and Indigenous contexts of the global South.
4. Members of lowest sociocultural caste (including Indigenous people), who are also depicted as untouchables (i.e., considered as impure or polluted from birth) and therefore face discrimination (and violence) from upper caste populations in many parts of south Asia.
5. A tropical cyclone formed over Bay of Bengal caused vast damage in coastal Bangladesh and eastern India; more than 1 million people were remained homeless and many died.
6. In geographically remote and socioeconomically “backward” districts of Bengal (where most of the research were conducted), nearly one-third rural Indigenous people are illiterate; in addition, another one third of the population leave school after Grade 4 (World Bank, 2017).

References


