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*Article*

# Field Immersion Study During COVID-19 in Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how the remote study method could be utilized during COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries faced the COVID-19 pandemic, including Bangladesh. The daily activities significantly dropped during the pandemic in the country. Moreover, it also affects research activities. However, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) took the initiative to start remotely conducting fieldwork with the help of digital technology. For example, the Master of Development Studies (MDS) students of BRAC University conducted remote fieldwork. This remote fieldwork was conducted between 2021 and 2022 in Bangladesh. The students were required to complete this fieldwork to complete the poverty course, which was a part of the academic curriculum of the MDS. The paper focuses on the methods, learning strategies, and experiences gained from a remotely conducted field investigation in Bangladesh during COVID-19. The research used qualitative methods to collect data. Moreover, the study used secondary documents to support the paper. Based on this experience of remotely conducted fieldwork by the students of BRAC University, the paper claims that research methods can be modified or added innovatively according to the local culture and environment. Finally, the paper suggests that this type of innovative remote research method could be applied during the pandemic in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; remote fieldwork; peer researcher; BRAC

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## 1. Introduction

Bangladesh is located in South Asia. The country faced a socio-economic crisis during COVID-19, similar to other developed and developing countries. During the pandemic, most public and private academic institutions could not continue their educational activities properly. For example, BRAC University in Bangladesh faces a challenge in continuing its academic activities. The University offers several undergraduate and graduate programs that align with the modern educational curriculum. Master of Development Studies (MDS) is one of them, and the BIGD runs it as part of BRAC University. This MDS Degree requires completing a poverty course (DEV502), which is followed by a field-immersion study. This course focuses on poverty: concept, measurement, and policy. The traditional research methodology was unsuitable for conducting field research during the pandemic. That leads to remote fieldwork during the pandemic. Subsequently, it became a successful research method for adapting to the local context and environment.

BIGD focuses on a novel situation of COVID-19, which led to the use of an innovative research methodology. The COVID-19 pandemic created barriers for researchers to conduct research following a traditional methodology. This qualitative research is focused on field experience in the context of Bangladesh. Initially, BIGD worked on a remote data collection approach in 2020 through peer researchers (PR). Working with the peer researchers (PR) technique is a community-based research method. PRs are part of the local community, but they have enormous knowledge about the field of interviews. The BIGD team hires them after a rigorous interview. This PR research method was used before as a sensitive research technique in Bangladesh. For example, PRs need to be trained to build up their experience with research methods and tools. It requires innovative research tools to

adapt to the local context. Later, MDS students used this research method in 2021 and 2022. This paper proves that this method can be applied to field investigations in the greater academic world.

This field immersion study is probably a new concept for students and the academic world. The students apply remote fieldwork instead of visiting the site during the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 restricts the movement of students in Bangladesh. However, the MDP students conduct their fieldwork with the help of the PR. The PR collects data on behalf of the students. The PR makes the connection between the interviewers and interviewees. So, the students are not required to visit the research site. However, the students and PR need strong internet facilities to communicate without interruption. Here, PR tries to reflect the viewpoints of the local participants and stakeholders to researchers.

This paper explores how remote studies can be conducted from anywhere if there are internet facilities and minimal financial support for peer researchers and field investigators. Communication technology plays a key role in conducting remote research. Then, PR is one of the key people who connect the local participants and researchers. The MDS students successfully conducted this virtual fieldwork, which is a new research method in a qualitative study. It is a local coping and research strategy to adapt to the local setting. Most of the daily activities and academic activities are hampered by COVID-19. However, this new research design made it possible to conduct remote fieldwork with the help of PR, internet facilities, and other modern digital communications. Remote research techniques are applied in a cancer centre in the USA, and most participants responded that they prefer to work remotely during COVID-19 [1].

The ethnographer applies remote fieldwork during COVID-19 in Bangladesh and outside of it. For example, video-recorded tours and remote interviews were used instead of face-to-face interviews to collect qualitative data during COVID-19 in Australia. Later, the informants were asked to draw a map to use as a focal material for the interviews [2].

This is another example of Doctoral research conducted through research assistants (RAs) involving in-depth household interviews and focus group discussions with ethnic minorities in Vietnam [2]. Research assistants are essential in this study because the principal researcher does not physically visit the field. Several techniques were applied to complete the remote fieldwork, such as regular meetings, collecting opinions, and developing confidence in the team. Nguyen points out that researchers can cope with the difficulties of fieldwork through designing, homework, rigorous preparation, and continued assistance to research assistants [3]. Then, it explains how the public and private universities of the USA conducted fieldwork and their experience during COVID-19. Virtual ethnographic research is a valid field investigation technique. Political science scholars must consider adapting to a new virtual space for people who have moved from qualitative interpretative research. A recent study explores that remote field work managed to collect data smoothly from diverse police forces of the UK, better than expected [4].

There has been less research on field immersion studies in Bangladesh. However, BIGD and BRAC include remote field work in their MDS's poverty courses, which is a unique research method in the scholarly world. The research investigates how BIGD conducts the field immersion study while applying remote fieldwork.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This section discusses the methods used during the data collection period. Then, I discuss students' research experiences using an innovative research methodology. For example, this section explains how research teams have utilized digital technology for qualitative data collection, including field investigation and observation.

This fieldwork is remotely conducted, but researchers must work closely with the peer researchers (PR). Peer Researchers provide technical support to collect data from the field. PR and MDS students conduct interviews collectively during fieldwork. Moreover, it is a collaborative approach. For example, PRs update their field observations and findings regarding the research themes and questions for the students.

A field immersion study is a part of qualitative research methods. This paragraph argues how field immersion has been successfully conducted with the help of several research techniques. To understand the field-immersion study, I have researched ten reports and tried to understand the results of the remote fieldwork. The research techniques are key informant interviews (KII), in-depth interviews (IDI), and focus group discussions (FGD). Then, the students follow the day lining technique, a daily activity shared between the MDS students and PR. Later, students apply photograph sharing and in-depth interview sharing through video clips. PR also arranges life history and experience-sharing sessions to understand the themes among the respondents from different regions. This creates opportunities for beneficiaries from the different areas to share multi-contextual experiences. A daily debriefing session is conducted at the end of the day. The debriefing session allows students to update the field activities, such as daily experience, the data collection approach, challenges, and opportunities. Interviews and notes are recorded electronically and transcribed later thematically for data analysis.

This section attempts to draw some points on how qualitative researchers coped with the novel situation and continued their research with an innovative mindset. This section offers a unique research method conducted during the lockdown situation of COVID-19.

Conducting direct interviews and field observations was difficult during COVID-19 in Bangladesh. The researchers applied different research methods to collect the data, such as online-based observations, content analysis, and telephone interviews with primary informants [4]. For example, the BIGD team adopted different digital platforms to gather data from the field during COVID-19 because there was a restriction on movement and social gatherings. The digital platforms use digital technology, a virtual communication platform, in-depth telephone interviews, online focus group discussions (FGDs), and visual content observation such as photograph taking, video recording, and sharing [5].

Digital research tools were used during the pandemic. The research tools are day-line interviews, visual data, virtual discussion, shadow observation, and resource mapping. Day-line interviews (asking questions to the respondents via Peer Researcher) are telephone interviews that explore the daily activities, followed by recording and note-taking. Virtual discussion is conducted with the local participants through a live video conference. Then, shadow observation was applied to assess the experience and perception of BRAC's staff regarding the area. The resource mapping tool tries to understand the facilities used by the respondents, such as soap, water, sanitizer, and the placement of handwashing materials. Moreover, a physical visit was a challenge during the pandemic, so the study used digital technology such as e-mail, Facebook, imo, and WhatsApp [6]. The study further argues that this is a novel type of research model of qualitative fieldwork, which is a ground-breaking experience developed from the local setting of COVID-19.

The following section explains the findings of MDS students who conducted research twice between 2021 and 2022. Finally, this section discusses the MDS remote field immersion experience from an academic perspective.

### 3. Results

BIGD divided the students into five groups and allocated different research topics to these groups. The five groups work in five regions in Bangladesh. The students gathered data from five regions between 2021 and 2022. The students select the research topics. Most of the topics are related to developmental issues such as how climate change affects the local people's livelihoods and their capability for adaptation, how the local people's income and economic opportunities have been affected due to the increasing pressure on local resources, and how do the ultra-poor people experience vulnerabilities and poverty traps due to natural calamities.

The BIGD team arranged three training sessions for PRs to become familiar with the remote research, students, research themes, and tools. The students also participated in this session. This session clarifies both parties' understanding of the remote study. This training session makes a bridge between the students and PRs. Hence, they work together to gather data from the field.



The students are required to conduct interviews based on their research themes. For example, PR and MDS students interview government officials, local governments, local leaders, NGO officials, and BRAC officials. The BRAC official is important in connecting with local governments and other potential stakeholders to conduct the study. BRAC has offices in most areas of Bangladesh. So, it helps to understand the local community, culture, and environment. Moreover, BRAC works collectively with multi-stakeholders at the local level.

This section argues how the MDS students of 2021 (fall semester) applied remote fieldwork in Bangladesh. The team made an effort to follow the guidelines given by the BIGD. Moreover, the students applied their research skills to gather the data successfully. Chowdhury [7] states how they collected the data:

Observations were conducted to have a concrete idea about the living standards, conditions, and body language of the UPGP participants so that data triangulation or cross-matching could be carried out with their interview answers and the original scenario. Additionally, a live experience sharing session was also conducted. Two UPGP participants from two different intervention regions (Jamalpur and Rangpur) had a video conversation arranged by the peer researchers and MDS students, where they shared their life stories, particularly the phases of before and after UPGP intervention [7] (pp. 21-22).

Rangpur team argues that the above statement applies live experience sharing with the UPGP (Ultra Poor Graduation Program) beneficiaries in two places through video discussion. In this live discussion PR researchers, MDS students, and UPGP participated in the event to exchange their experiences. Additionally, the Rangpur team applies participants' observations via online to understand the real picture of the community. The team tries to explore similar statements, events, and the success of the UPGP program.

Second, Cox's Bazar team studies the impact on livelihoods at the community level after Rohingya refugees came to Bangladesh. The Cox's Bazar team focuses on one main research question, followed by five sub-questions. The team applies key informant interviews (KII), in-depth interviews (IDI), field observation, visual data sharing, and peer respondents' experience sharing. The team applies KII to the primary informants with the help of PR and video conferences. Moreover, the team uses online observation techniques such as the research area, local settings, interviews, audio, and video clips. The team shares a live experience with the Dhaka team over the Zoom session. The team recorded the data electronically and grouped it later thematically for analysis [8].

Third, the Satkhira team conducts research in Satkhira, where the Sundarbans forest is located. Climate change affects this region. The team mainly applies KII and IDI to collect the data. PR teams update their findings every day and share them with MDS students. They also discuss what they will do the following day. The team chooses the Upzilla Chairman, the Branch Manager of Gonomukhi Foundation, and the BRAC UPG representative as participants. Moreover, Satkhira team mentions research ethics. The team serves the following statements.

During the research, research ethics were fully maintained and consent was duly obtained prior to conducting interview, recording and taking pictures. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the discussion at any point. Privacy and confidentiality was maintained by not disclosing KII findings to other groups/circle. Sensitive issue subject to religion, ethnicity, caste, sexual identity, and gender were discussed carefully. Research was done following local and national guidelines regarding Covid-19, wear masks at all time, maintain social distancing, carry hand sanitizer or wash hand frequently [9] (pp. 5-6).

Last, the MDS students of 2022 (spring semester) applied for remote fieldwork in Bangladesh. This second cohort has worked on remote field investigations in the same regions in the country. The research explored how and what changed over the years for the community.

Jamalpur team argues how the BIGD research team trains the MDS students and PR team before the fieldwork. BIGD officially guides students until they complete the field work and report submission. Moreover, the students learn about research design, the data collection process, and data analysis through this training session. This session trains the students to collect data professionally

and unbiasedly while maintaining local research ethics. This training session also explains how to apply theoretical knowledge after completing the data collection process. The students claim that field immersion is an innovative research concept because it is a remote field investigation using the experience and support of PR. Field immersion study helps the students to understand the real situation at the field level. The following statement claims the significance of PR in the field immersion study [10].

The responsibilities of the peer researchers were very important as they had to conduct the data collection on field as the students were unable to visit the fields due to time and logistical constraints and also Covid19 restrictions. This made data collection faster as the peer researchers being native are well accustomed with local people, their culture and location from where data can be collected [10] (pp. 13-14).

The Rangpur team conducted a field immersion study in 2022 in Northern Bangladesh. The team argues that they chose the head of the Union Parishad (the lowest stratum of the local government of Bangladesh) as the Key informant interviews (KII). Then, they conduct four in-depth interviews with UPGP beneficiaries. The team also carried out two case studies focusing on the pros and cons of the UPGP programs. Finally, the Rangpur team arranged life experience sharing with participants within two regions to understand the experience, success, and failure of the UPGP program in Bangladesh [11].

#### 4. Discussion

This unique research method was applied during COVID-19 in Bangladesh. This remote fieldwork method has been applied successfully to gather the data and continue the academic program of BRAC University, though it faces COVID-related challenges. Apart from this novel research, the study suggests a new methodological standpoint that indicates the prospect of such innovative research initiatives and methodologies. Similarly, a study identifies that researchers can communicate easily and comfortably with participants during Zoom meetings and video chats [12]. Research information was sent to participants by e-mail, and they were asked for their interest and consent. Then, remote interviews started with WhatsApp, phone, and Zoom meetings. Another key research claim is that remote fieldwork has become a common practice during COVID-19 in Europe while conducting research in Africa [13].

This remote field research method plays an important role during COVID-19 in Bangladesh. Research activities were minimized during COVID-19 in the country. However, the students of BIGD, BRAC University, successfully conducted the remote fieldwork as a part of their academic requirements of the MDS program. The academic coordinator and the course teacher provide monitoring services during the data collection process. Finally, the educational team of BIGD ensures that the data collection process has been carried out successfully. Thus, MDS students of BRAC University continued their remote fieldwork until COVID-19 was over in Bangladesh. The challenge of the research method is that the students should be trained in using modern digital tools and data collection approaches [14]. BIGD trains PR about data collection tools and methods. Similarly, the researcher talks directly with the research assistant (RA) about the goal of the research, the local participants' worldview, and the rapport-building approach while interacting with participants [15].

This remote fieldwork could be a new dimension of field research, particularly during the future pandemic. This research indicates that remote fieldwork is an effective research method. This research method has several positive sides. The researchers are not required to visit the field site. The movement of the researchers has been minimized. Then, it is a cost-effective research because they can save time and money compared to a direct field investigation. Remote fieldwork is demanding because it is less expensive [16]. Moreover, participants can maintain their privacy in this research method. Direct in-person interaction is suitable for clinical training, but remote programming tools and facilities can be used successfully for intern students [17]. Remote fieldwork approach applied to a study of African migrant women in the UK. The study uses a community mobilizer to recruit the key participants because it requires familiarity with modern digital tools such as Facebook, e-mail,

and text sending [18]. Scientists worked from home by using video conferencing, collaborative communication, and cloud sharing facilities [19].

However, the research has a limitation. The psychological connection and confidence between the field respondents and researchers were missing. Data validity may be an issue in this research method because the researchers did not visit the site. Lastly, how much the research is ethically acceptable may be an issue, even though data collection techniques meet all the required criteria.

The limitation of remote fieldwork is ensuring the data quality. The course faculty regularly keeps in touch with the students over the phone and using digital tools. Moreover, the Academic coordinator follows up on the data collection to ensure it goes on properly. However, faculty members and coordinators do not visit the research site because of restrictions on physical movement during COVID-19 in Bangladesh. They virtually monitor the data collection process. So, there is a possibility of data manipulation and ethical issues. Future researchers may be focused on ethical issues of data collection. Then, data collection methods should be followed strictly.

## 5. Conclusions

Bangladesh has a record of natural disasters. Bangladeshi people carry knowledge and experience of how to survive and face natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, heatwaves, and excessive rainfall. Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has taught people how to cope with the pandemic. COVID-19 damaged the socio-economic sector of Bangladesh significantly. Then, it affects academic and research activities in the country. Most educational institutions were forced to close according to the government guidelines. However, academics and research continued online. Moreover, field research became a challenge because human movement was controlled to stop the spread of COVID-19. Subsequently, BIGD, BRAC University, adopted a new research method, which was revealed to be effective with a minimum budget.

## Notes

I was an Academic Coordinator at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University, between 2022 and 2023. That facilitated my investigation of the remote field work and access to primary and secondary data.

**Supplementary Materials:** There are no supplementary materials in this research except findings and secondary documents.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Raw data are available.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** There is no conflict of interest in this research.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BIGD BRAC Institute of Governance and Development  
BRAC Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee  
MDS Master of Development Studies  
UPG Ultra-poor Graduation

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