

# Trust in Ethnography: Narrating the Difficulties, Rewards and Dilemmas of Entry, Engagement and Exit (3Es) in the Research Field

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## Abstract

Field engagement of the researchers in ethnographic research determines the quality and the rigor of academic work. The engagement of the researcher in the field to elicit information, however, is a result of confidence and/or faith, named trust, that the researcher develops with his/her participants during the research process. Trust-building is a basic but fundamental research phenomenon that a researcher goes through in his/her fieldwork. But how to establish trust with research participants? This article is a reflection based on the product of my fieldwork and narrates my experience of the trust-building process that I had undergone in my research field. Though hailing from the same area, I had entered my ethnographic space like a university researcher rather than my native identity for different reasons. Thus in this paper, I narrate my field experiences of difficulty, reward, and the dilemma of my field journey i.e., difficulty in establishing trust while entering the research field; rewards with my shifting identity (revelation of my native identity) while engaging in the field; and my dilemma in protecting my participants' trust and their voices while exiting from the field. Out of many perspectives and approaches to conceptualize and establish trust, I take one put forth by Williamson (1993), who says trust builds mainly on repeated positive experiences, formally or informally, made over time and longstanding relations, and is built on the initial knowledge about the other.

**Keywords:** engagement, native, positionality, trust.

## Introduction

As an ethnographer, my first entry in the research field had made me realize that one of the most complex features of field relations is building rapport and establishing trust. Trust becomes an issue surrounding the relationship between the researcher and the researched because 'trust has to be established through fieldwork practice and does not occur automatically' (Hosokawa, 2010, p. 5). As LeCompte and Schensul (2010) also state trust is not built overnight; it takes time and considerable effort. They further state that to build trust takes even more time and effort when researchers are perceived to be or perceive themselves to be different from the research community in such distinguishing features as gender, social class, culture, ethnicity, race, language, age, religion, caste or role, sexual identity, etcetera. Nor is trust a one-shot agreement, which, once won, need never be addressed again. Trust has to be continually worked at, negotiated and renegotiated, confirmed, and thereafter repeatedly reaffirmed (Brewer, 2000, p. 86). Thus, building trust in the research field is a 'dynamic process, as it is built up, used, maintained, broken and repaired' (Lyon, Möllering & Saunders, 2012, p. 11).

The significance of trust in ethnography is marked by ensuring access to information, field sites, potentiality in obtaining good information (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Hosokawa, 2010); access to wider social networks,

producing more thoughtful and accurate data (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010); understanding participants worldview (Fetterman, 2010); allowing access to participants private lives (Rock, 2001), etc. Hence, once trust is developed participants act more relaxed and candidly while discussing issues and relaying information.

As stated above, the importance of building rapport and establishing trust has been strikingly marked by different authors. Likewise, how to establish trust has also been voraciously scripted in literature. For instance, 'compassionate engagement and empathetic listening with members of the community or participants in natural setting' (Madison, 2008), 'establishing common grounds with participants' (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), 'mutual exchange of trust and respect of relevant information by creating empathy and good relationship before starting interviews' (Neyland, 2008), 'explaining clearly the purpose of the research, procedures, possible discomforts, confidentiality, right to refuse' (Madison, 2008), etc. Non-verbal cues of 'general demeanor and self-presentation', 'open physical posture and friendliness' etc are also considered as the hallmark for building rapport and establishing trust. The author like Brewer (2000) even suggests *going native* in the field when he says, "ethnographers earn people's trust by showing a willingness to learn their language and their ways, to eat like they eat, speak like they speak and do as they do" (Brewer, 2000, p. 85) to gain the trust of the participants.

In this article, I aim to confront the consistent pattern and



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established methodological trust-building process, which I think is somehow guided via a positivistic framework. I find a linear explanation of steps in describing the stages in a field study, such as beginning with how to gain entrée to a setting, explain the research project to gatekeepers and key informants, gain trust and rapport, decide on space and time sampling, interview key informants in an open-ended or semi-structured style, develop field notes, analyze the field notes and interview transcriptions, exit the field and ending up with writing the results of the analyses (Heyl, 2001, p. 372). My arguments, though, should not be distorted when I use the terms such as ‘confront’, ‘positivistic’, or ‘linear’. I am not defying the ‘classic’ works on field methods and the des/prescribed stages of fieldwork on the process of building trust. As a researcher, I cannot *deny* carrying baggage or not get influenced by my academic training and not stick to trust-building guidelines (to go adrift). As Sumner and Tribe (2008) also say ‘not to carry a baggage and not to be influenced or shape our research by our individual and personal viewpoint is not possible’ (Sumner & Tribe, 2008).

Thus, essentially in this article, I direct my arguments through my field experiences and state that the trust-building process has to be analytical and is largely contextual (I will deal with this in subsequent sections). Indeed, trust-building is a gradual and long process and has to go step-by-step, however, I argue based on my fieldwork that during fieldwork certain triggering factors *can* remarkably spark researcher-researched relationship and trust for (and with) researcher ‘*can*’ heightened noticeably. The revelation of my native identity<sup>1</sup> was one instance where trust (and oneness) for me grew with(in) my participants.

The increased level of trust (and oneness), however, I realized and reflected during my field stay (and thereafter) was not only limited to my revelation of being native, but it was also more concerned and connected with my ancestral long-standing relationship and engagement with(in) the community. The legacy bestowed by my ancestor, particularly my father’s ‘legacy and social capital’ had eased a way for bond and trust for me from my participants. Disclosure of my father’s name with one of my participants was more than enough for him to take me as ‘nephew researcher’ then seeing me as a ‘university researcher’. Thus, in this article, I narrate the difficulty, reward, and dilemma of my field journey; difficulty in establishing trust while entering the research field<sup>2</sup>; rewards with my shifting identity (revelation of my native identity) while engaging in the field; and my dilemma in protecting my participant’s trust and voices while exiting from the field.

The next section discusses my methodological grounding, followed by conceptualizing trust and issues of my positionality and nativity. The subsequent sections narrate the context of my difficulties, rewards, and dilemmas of entry, engagement, and exit from the field.

## Methodology of the Study

This article is a product of my ethnographic study for my dissertation conducted between 2016 and 2018 that I had undergone during 15 months of my fieldwork. This paper is an extract of my empirical representation from the large set of data that I had gathered during my stay in the field. And it presents my investigation and experience of social life and the social process of trust-building. By involving my participants over a period of time to understand the social meanings and process of trust-building, I had been able to construct my ethnographic description for this article. Immersing myself in a social-cultural setting of my participants, I had been able to understand and interpret social interaction, shared and learned patterns of values, behavior, and belief of a cultural-sharing group. Thus, inquiring about the culture of people and the community (in the process of trust, acceptance, etc.) and having been able to capture and describe the social and cultural meanings of my participants’ lives in their ordinary activity, behavior, and setting makes this article ethnographic.

To undertake my study, I had selected a school named Sarada Secondary School from Jamuna Municipality of Kaveri District<sup>3</sup> of Lumbini Province. The selected school is located amidst the dominance of Tharu inhabitants, thus the medium of communication with my participants was both Tharu and Nepali. I have used the voices of both (Non)Tharu participants for this piece of work, as the principal and School Management Committee (SMC) chair are Non-Tharu whereas the other participant belonged to the Tharu community. Interviews and observations were the primary modes of the data collection method. The interviews were conducted in Nepali and Tharu language (because of the dominance of Tharu inhabitants) and the voices were recorded on a recorder to grasp the originality of their sayings. The interview(s), both Nepali and Tharu, were later translated into English in the best possible way of researcher’s knowledge and understanding.

## Conceptualizing Trust: Contextual and Embedded Phenomenon

Trust is faith or confident belief in the integrity, ability, or character of a person (Hosokawa, 2010). However, a classic definition of trust often cited in the literature is that found in Rousseau et. al., (1998) which sees, “trust as a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (as cited in Goodall, 2012, p. 96). Hence, trust can be viewed as an individual disposition, a psychological state, or a behavior’. It is an embedded phenomenon and the basis of trust is concentrated on personal relations which are characterized by monitoring, predilections, and discreteness (Williamson, 1993, p. 483-484).

To understand and elaborate on trust, I identify personal trust at its core. Conceptualizing ‘trust’ in this piece of writing had built mainly through repeated positive experiences, formally or informally, made over time and longstanding relations, building on initial knowledge

3. I have used the pseudo name of the municipality and district to protect the anonymity of place and people.

1. I belong to same area where I had conducted my ethnographic research.

2. Though I hail from the same area, I had entered my research field as an university researcher not to influence the process of the research.

about the other. According to Williamson (1993), a personal trust may depend on the characteristics of a group such as an ethnic or kinship group, but it also occurs in bilateral relationships, often longstanding ones, where persons have come to know each other. In this kind of trust-building process, however, the *context* for trust also plays an important role. Context can be interpreted as a function of factors that generally influence trust-building, and of triggers for trust, which reflect situational influences (Welter & Alex, 2012, p. 52).

Thus because of its conceptualization, definition, modulation, and operationalization in a wide variety of ways, trust is a concept that cannot be easily observed or even defined. Nevertheless, it is evident that trust must be built up, and it is created through the relationship and experiences that people have with others over a while. When relationships are positive, trust is established, and when it is negative, distrust can occur. Hence, what trust means and how it is formed is likely to have people's conceptions and building trust, because of the relationship that one has developed or demonstrated in the research field (and also past legacy when doing fieldwork in his/her native area), determines how trust is formed and built in the field.

### My Positionality and the Issue of Nativity

I had initiated my fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation in late December 2016. Though hailing from the same town, I had entered my ethnographic space *solely* as an academic researcher. I did not want to disclose my native identity while entering my research site because of three important reasons: i) I intuitively felt that disclosing my native identity might influence the research process; ii) I felt disclosing my identity would take my participants for granted that I am aware of the surrounding; iii) I presumed the revelation of native identity would limit my scope of obtaining rich field text from my participants. Also, the fact that more than two decades of my stay-away from the town had somehow made me (un)familiar with the people and surroundings, I considered myself as an outsider. Thus, I did not feel like introducing myself as a native rather as a university student while entering the field. Of course, I had considered myself as an *outsider* before I entered the field because I was conducting my research in the Tharu ethnic community<sup>4</sup>, which is socially/culturally, language, and ethnically different from mine<sup>5</sup>. As Sumner and Tribe (2008) also says "all researchers, particularly those in the social sciences, are almost always 'outsiders', in some sense, in regards to the economic, social and cultural status

4. The Tharus are one of the indigenous tribal peoples scattered all along the Southern foot-hills of the Himalayas. The greater part of their population resides in Nepal, although some Tharus are also scattered in India. According to the latest national Census 2011, the total population of Tharu is 1,737, 470 (which is 6.6% of total population. This ethnic indigenous group has a distinct language, culture, rituals, customs and lifestyles. There are several endogamous sub-groups of Tharus, such as Rana, Katharia, Dangaura, Kochila and Mech. This ethnographic work was carried out in Mid-Western Terai, where Dangaura Tharus mainly reside.

5. I come from a Thakuri family, a social/cultural group different than Tharu ethnic group in regards to cast, language, culture etc.

from the 'researched', that is from the 'participants' or 'subjects' of the research" (p. 43). But having been born and brought up in the same town, I had the baggage of nativity which I felt strongly emerged during my fieldwork. The construct, acceptance, and treatment from my participants of being native evolved strongly, it vanished the dichotomy of insider/outsider, in/between or neither/nor position of mine which could have been another exploration of the paper.

So, this article is based on my field experience of taking me as (non)native by my participants, in which I expose how I failed and gained to see and recognize my participant's trust, which had been (re)shaped by native status and my positionality<sup>6</sup>. From the initiation of my fieldwork to the relationship of gaining trust, that had evolved during and throughout my fieldwork, that had been (re)shaped by the realization of my positionality of how I had posed myself and the way I was accepted by my participants and how my shifting positionality had embodied me to situate myself in the research process to gain the trust of my participants is the thrust of this paper. I also say the realization of my positionality was the result of my regular reflections, my ability to step in/out of my own native identity, and interrogate how my identity had shaped my understanding of myself and others during my fieldwork. In the initial days of my fieldwork, because of who I was (a university graduate) and how I was taken (not being native) or maybe because of how I had presented myself (my identity and positionality), I never felt I made to the inner space of my participants.

Thus, I admit at some point in my fieldwork I (had to) revealed my native identity (that to circumstantially), though not to influence my research process but assumingly for my comfortable access for rapport building and gaining trust. During the research process, I also began to (re) shape my understanding of the cultural context<sup>7</sup> and the community I was working with. I slowly began to immerse myself in day-to-day school activities. Gradually with my prolonged stay and meetings with my participants and involvement in the school, I began to feel trust grow. During my field stay, I also began to connect to my participants on a more personal, human level as I heard story after story of hardship (and success both) of building the school from almost nothing to everything. Listening to stories with intent and being empathetic with my participants had also helped me developed a sense of trust with and for me.

### Entry in the Field: I Face Difficulty

The article entails the difficulty, rewards, and dilemmas of entry, engagement, and exit in regards to establishing trust from the study field in an area largely dominant by Thaur people<sup>8</sup>. The selection of the school and the

6. Revelation of my native status and my scholarly/academic position had been continuously (re)shaping my relationship with my participants.

7. The town is dominantly inhabited by Tharu people. I had to re(define) my beliefs, personality, looks, tag of academic scholar, city dweller, utterly Eastern accent beliefs to understand the cultural context of the study area.

8. According to the National Census Report 2011, the total

participants, however, had been purposive and judgmental. As of now, as I sit down to write this article that I had carried out in Sarada Municipality, I retrospect how I had conducted the in-depth interviews, hours and hours of participant observation, informal chit-chats whenever and wherever possible with my participants. The interaction that I have had with my participants, I feel, had given me a new understanding of the meaning and complexity of 'establishing trust' while entering the field.

It is a beautiful winter day in January 2017. I am all set to inaugurate my fieldwork. I had selected my study field, i.e. the school, I was willing to conduct my research. That day I had gone to the school and inquired about the principal's whereabouts to gear up my fieldwork. The watchman standing at the gate notified me that the principal's office is in a separate block which was at five minutes walking distance from there. I was also unaware that the school had two blocks, primary and secondary. Since I was at the premises of the old primary block I felt like meeting with whoever is in charge of the block at least to get started with. The guard pointed towards the staff/office room from where he was standing and notified me to meet Yadav Sir, who was the in-charge of the block, for anything I had to talk about. I thanked him, headed towards the direction he had pointed, and climbed 8-10 stairs approximately to reach the first floor, which took me to the office cum staff room.

The first person I met in the room was an accountant, sitting on a chair with his name and designation written on a wooden plate, fiddling with papers. I greeted him and asked if I could meet Yadav Sir. He showed little interest in my presence and just answered what he had to answer, telling me that Yadav Sir would be available after ten minutes once his class is over. The accountant seemed tied-up with his chores, so I also did not feel like initiating further conversation. Since it was my first encounter with Yadav Sir, I wanted to establish a "quality relationship between me (researcher) and him (participant) (particularly concerning the establishment of trust and its implications for the disclosure of information) (Ranson, 2005, p. 114). I was also aware of the fact that 'rapport can be built via (non)verbal gestures such as eye contact, head nodding and rapport-building can occur during all points of contact with participants, including pre-interview communication' (Leavy, 2011, p. 39), hence aware, I was eagerly waiting for Yadav Sir to arrive. He showed up after ten minutes. The accountant had introduced me to him. I greeted him with a warm and friendly gesture. He nodded my greetings and asked the reason behind wanting to see him.

Since he was the first person that I had met in the course of my field visit, I wanted to present myself professionally as I could. I guess my positionality as a university

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population of the district is 5,52,583 which comprise Tharu, as the most populous caste or ethnic group with 1,63,116 (29.52%) of the total population. Likewise, the total population of Jamuna Municipality where the research was carried out, according to census 2011, is 47, 655, where the number of Tharu population is 26, 905 (56.45%). The total population of Ward-6 of the municipality, where the school is situated is 5014, in which Tharu's population is 2954 which comprise 58.91% of the Ward total population.

researcher had strikingly guided me in my first meeting with him. My excessive carefulness of self-presentation and demeanor to have an open physical posture and be profuse with *namaste*, I felt was markedly apparent to him and the accountant sitting on the next chair. Nevertheless, with all the grace and politeness, I had told him the reason to visit the school. I also told him my selection of the school for my study purpose. He welcomed me and also felt grateful for selecting the school for my study. Though after thinking for a couple of seconds, I do not know what came into his mind, he requested me to talk to the principal, whose office was at the other block, for anything regarding school affairs. I was somehow taken aback by his indifference and short reply. He was direct in answering me that, though he is the in-charge of the block, he would have to take the principal's permission to relay any kind of information regarding the school. Realizing the fact that I have not spent time and have not built enough relationships and as an ethnographer and my job in the field is to cement the relationship with the people I come in contact with. I heeded his advice, thanked him for the information, and had left the room.

### **The Principal's Office: In Retrospect**

A week had gone by. I was frequently contemplating my meet with Yadav Sir. I was somehow discouraged and baffled for not being able to establish rapport with the first person I met in the school i.e., Yadav Sir. Nevertheless, I had gone to meet the principal that day. The new school building that I saw from afar looked magnificent. The two-story school building with cemented fence looked more impressive than the older one which had a barbed-wire fence. As I neared the school, I saw a group of students plucking grasses and weeds that were creeping in the fence and some others collecting fallen dead leaves.

I inquired about the principal (office) with one of the students. He pointed towards a nearby standing gentleman and said he is the principal. The principal was busy instructing students what to do and where to dump the plucked grasses. My warm friendly smile and greetings made him ask who I was and my purpose for seeing him. I told him my name and my purpose to see him. He gave me a much friendlier reception than I had expected. With due respect, he asked me to go wait in his office and said he will be available in no time. He also instructed one of the students to usher me to his office. I followed the student.

Once inside the wall on my way to the office, I saw teachers busy in their classes. No single student was to be seen outside the class. Except the ones who were plucking grasses, the classes were in operation smoothly. The principal's office was on the first floor. The student who had ushered me to the office had left. While seating in the office, I ran my eyes across the room. The office looked organized: a computer on a desk, world and Nepal's map hanging on the wall, a drawer full of books, a sofa-set, and a tea table was neatly placed. In the meantime, my mind was occupied with the old block office setting where I had been to a week ago.

Before I could wander my thoughts, a voice echoed asking me how are you! It was the principal's voice that had startled me. Once both were seated comfortably, I

introduced him as a university student and told him my purpose to see him and visit the school. I also told him the reason behind choosing that particular school. I had told him it was the District Education Office(r) recommendation that had made me choose the school based on well-performing and generating 'adequate' resources for the school. I wondered he felt proud of the school and his achievements. His generosity poured in the form of giving me access to the school's statistical data. 'You can find all the information you need in these records', he said. He even handed me a copy of *Pratibimban*, a detailed statistical record of a yearly handbook, jointly published by the District Education Office and the Resource Center. 'If this is not enough, you can go to the primary block, meet Yadav Sir, we have more records there', he said. He even advised me to talk to the School Management Committee (SMC) Chair Person for more information, as he was the one who had been associated with the school since its inception.

I felt both happy and disappointed, at the same time, by his willingness to assist me. I felt happy because my first visit to the primary block had not yielded anything; this visit, on the other hand, I was able to build some kind of rapport with the principal. I was disappointed because I had entered my research field as an ethnographer. As an ethnographer, I aimed to explore 'multiple realities' by establishing rapport and trust. Yes, statistical data, indeed, would be handy at some point in my research, but at that particular time, I aimed to build rapport and thereafter elicit 'rich' field text. I found myself in dilemma, whether to proceed further or terminate my days' meeting with the principal and at the same time remembering, I must become 'intimately involved with members of the community or participants in the natural setting where I do research and intimate involvement, here, refers to building trust with the participants *over time*' (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Realizing the fact that, this was my first visit, and neither I have spent enough time nor I have build trust with my participant, I cannot expect more than what I had achieved that day. I thanked him for the booklet and his wiliness to assist me, bid adieu, and left the room with eagerness to meet the SMC chair in days to follow.

### I Meet SMC Chair by Chance

I was thinking about the way I had approached Yadav Sir and the Principal and wondered why was I not able to leave a remarkable impression as a Ph.D. researcher, in a sense of building rapport! Why my meetings with them did not last long? (As a matter-of-fact whatever I did during my initial days of fieldwork I thought it was never adequate). I solaced myself thinking it is early days of my research and as an ethnographer, I must undergo 'series of steps to get into the field to develop a relationship with my participants and also I realized I have to constantly work to maintain and manage the relationship through regular communication' (Ocejo, 2013). I wasn't for sure communicating enough with my participants (as much as I should), as it were my initial days in the field. Or maybe I wasn't sure of which way/or how I should approach my participants because of my newness to the ethnic Tharu

culture and community<sup>9</sup> I had landed into, though I kept on visiting the school on regular basis; exchanged greetings, hello/hi with teachers, played games, i.e., cricket, volley with students in several occasion.

Time was flying steadily. January gave way to February. February first week it was, a cold gush of winter was giving way to mild summer. The school had organized a gathering with students and staff to mark a preparation for *Vasant Panchami* which was on 12th February. The principal had also invited me to the program and had said that the School Management Committee Chairperson along with Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) members would also come. I took this occasion as an opportunity to get acquainted with school stakeholders. My arrival in the school that day had introduced me to the School Management Committee, Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) members. The principal had introduced me to the SMC chair and other stakeholders. I, even, was keen to introduce myself to the SMC chairperson because of his longstanding association with the school. I believed him to be one of the prime resources for information. I (re) introduced myself to him as a university student with an exuberant gesture, as I generally did with my participants, and told him the reason behind selecting that particular school. Since the atmosphere at that moment did not allow me to delve into any type of rapport building. All I could do at that time was to introduce and present myself as gently as I could for future meetings. During our informal chit-chat, I put my intention forth to see him and talk to him whenever he was free (to build rapport and gain trust). He told me he was busy with local election preparation<sup>10</sup> at that juncture and promised to spare time with me whenever wherever possible after the election. In the meantime, we had exchanged our phone numbers.

Likewise, I remembered my second meet with Yadav sir had also turned, somehow, unfruitful in a sense that when I asked him if I could see him/talk to him outside school (hours), he had replied bluntly that, 'anything regarding school had to be talked in the school (hours)' and said he was sorry for not being able to meet outside. Likewise, my second meet with the SMC chair had also treated me 'only' as a researcher doing his academic work and I wasn't being able to establish rapport and build trust.

### Engagement in the Field: I Get Reward

By far now, with the time spent in the field, I had realized that to get into the inner space of my participants, to build rapport and to gain trust, 'hanging out', as Bernard (2011) states, and that I had adopted it as a necessary skill as an ethnographer. Hanging out in school with teachers and students with 'ordinary conversation and ordinary behavior' (Bernard, 2011, p. 277) unleashing my identity as an academic researcher' and being one of them had helped me build rapport to large extent. I realized my regular engagement with students in the sporting activities,

9. Tharus have their own culture, special costumes, unique ways of living, language, religious belief, which makes them different from other indigenous communities in Nepal.

10. Local election was held on June 28, 2017.

giving students tips and tricks of batting/bowling skills<sup>11</sup> and to serve and defend in a volley that I had learned during my college days, had undoubtedly sparked my relationship with teachers and students in particular. My visit to the school thickened more as my skill in sports (and extra-curricular activities) was steadily paying off. Teachers and students would look for my assistance while organizing games and activities. Thickening engagement in school activities of mine had put school staff and the students at ease with me. Though I had made a creek in the lives of staff and students to some extent, with my sporting skills and regular engagement, I somehow felt, I wasn't being able to generate enough trust to accelerate my filed work. I was looked upon more as a 'sports guy' than as an 'academic researcher'.

My frequent meeting with the principal, however, had helped me build rapport and establish trust with him. I wonder, he being the in-charge of the school was more generous and in an advantageous position to deliver information and also understood my position as an academic researcher. Or maybe my strategy of 'talk less and listen more' with him had worked. As I had read a quote by Dalai Lama somewhere which said, 'When you talk, you're only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new'. I was eager in listening to whatever he had to say during our meet. He reiterated the story of making the school: the hardship, struggle, contribution, and sacrifices people had to make in establishing the school and to bring it into its present form. I would considerately and with all intent listen to his stories. I felt listening intently and empathizing with him had developed a sense of connection between us. I also wonder that the principal knew how tricky it is to elicit information from participants while doing research, as he had once said, 'few students in the past had come to our school for research and I do understand your hardship to collect data'.

Likewise, my proximity with the SMC chair had come during his busiest election time. It is a hot, lazy afternoon on a fourth of April weekend. I had gone to market with my nephew for necessary toiletries purchase. I happen to see the SMC chair with a group of people, presumably in his election campaign. He recognized me from afar. Once closer he apologized for not being able to give me time. I nodded to his apology. However, to my surprise, he asked me to see him in his house the day after, as it was Saturday and said he would go out for a campaign late afternoon that day. I was elated by his invitation, as it was the first time I was getting an opportunity to meet him closely and in person. As planned, I reached his home early morning. I found him sitting on a chair under the shade of a big Mango tree to avoid the morning heat. I greeted him, made myself seated comfortably in the chair next to him. He yelled for two cups of tea and asked me how my research was going on. I did not feel like rushing into my academic stuff i.e., interview. Rather I asked him how his election campaign<sup>12</sup> was going on. He sounded confident in his

party's win. But at the same time, he also felt skeptical of winning easily because of the betrayal and announcement of a fellow party man as a rebellion candidacy. I sympathized and listened to him intently whatever he was saying.

"Don't worry, my one vote is for your party?", I happen to say circumstantially.

He gave me an awe-stricken look.

"What did you say?", he asked me, probably to be double sure of what I had said. Not to sound foolish, I repeated the same sentence that I had said a while ago.

He was dumbfounded. "How can you vote from this constituency", he inquired.

His inquiry sounded more like he was seeking assurance than asking a question that if I could vote from the constituency.

I (had) told him in length about my ancestral whereabouts. I told him my father's name. After hearing my father's name it was needless to tell him that my family owned a house in the marketplace. After hearing my background, the kind of oneness, I could see in his eyes, behavior, and treatment was beyond explanation. Forgetting his election mood he went in retrospect to explain his longstanding friendship with my father. He became nostalgic and happen to narrate in length about my father's effort and contribution to the building of the school. He said, 'you might not know but your father has also contributed to the making of school, he had arranged in the supply of timber(wood) while the school was erecting'. I learned from him that as a government employee in the Forest Department and while posted in the district, my father had largely assisted in the management of timber for doors, windows, and other needs. I became happy and felt proud of my father's contribution to the school. SMC chairperson seemed completely lost in rejoicing and reiterating good old days that he had spent in company with my father and also with my family members. Regaining his memory, he asked more about me, my mother, and my siblings. He was also somewhat taken-aback and happy to know that I was doing my Ph.D. He was happier to realize that I had chosen that particular school for my study purpose. In no time he called the principal and revealed my native identity. While on the phone, he did not take my name rather he said my '*nephew*' has chosen our school and it is also a good opportunity for us to learn and share from each other. I could see a shift of position for me in his talks and later behavior once he hung up the phone, from academic researcher to nephew researcher.

I felt somewhat privileged by my revelation of my native identity. In days to follow my school entry and with teachers became more easy and accessible. Though my access to school had already developed with my regular visits and engagements, my accessibility with the teachers outside school(time) elevated, surprisingly. I began to spend more time with teachers outside the school.

My meet outside school made me feel that teachers acted informally and would open up more outside the premises of the school. I felt rapport building, acceptance, and trust for me grew more easily and strongly with our informal chit-chats during off-school hours. As we could

11. During my college days, I had represented in district and national level cricket tournament for the district.

12. The SMC president of school was one of three potentially listed candidates selected for the position of Mayor in the

municipal election of 2017. Though at the last moment his candidacy was withdrawn.

let our talks drift anywhere and on anything, from politics to local festival to local development to day to day community issues. Teachers especially Yadav sir and his Tharu mates would crack a joke and laughed and kidded with each other in their language. I laughed along with them, catching most of their humor but no all. I have a naïve understanding of the Tharu language which I had learned while going to my maternal uncle's house.

My maternal grandfather's house was located amid the Tharu community and my mother had grown up and spent her childhood among Tharu mates. My mother has a better understanding of Tharu culture and community and also has a good command of the Tharu language. Now when I have built enough rapport with the community and especially with Tharu teachers, as my privileged nephew(hood) and also cultural understanding, I feel worth mentioning my mother words, on my difficulty to establish rapport with Yadav sir and other Tharu teachers, that I had once shared with her. She had advised me to be patient and take time as Tharu people and the community doesn't easily accept outsiders. They require more indirectness and polite socializing to establish rapport and build trust she had told me. 'It is always difficult to get into the inner circle of Tharu people and community unless they have enough trust in you', she had said. She had told me that for Tharu people, 'Yes is yes and No is no'. 'Never intrude in their lives unless you are accepted by them', she had added.

In retrospect writing this paper now, I remember my first meet with Yadav sir, his unwillingness to relay information, his reluctance to meet outside school, his indifference and short reply, etc. I also felt that I had been direct and inadequate in socializing with him and others.

But after the revelation of my native identity, my language ability, though naïve, my mother's advice of cultural experiences in the Tharu community along with my cultural sensitivity that I had developed during my stay in the research field, I feel like I have made it to the inner space of my participants. I do not, though, overlook my sporting skills (and also persistent visits to school) which I think was an icebreaker of my engagement and initial acceptance by teachers and students. The revelation of my native identity and cultural understanding had for sure eased a way for me to gain trust from my participants. My participants, who had embraced me initially only as an academic researcher (or a sports guy), I feel now have accepted my presence. Accepting my presence had made me believe and argue that I have built enough trust for me with(in) my participants.

This is the context of how my engagement, revelation of native identity, and the way I had situated myself to the cultural understanding had helped me gain the trust of my participants in me.

### **Exiting from the Field: I am in Dilemma**

Because of my native longstanding personal-social relationship with(in) the community, and also as a researcher, I experienced dilemma and predicament as I exit from the field. Thus, in this section, I narrate my dilemma of exiting the field from three perspectives. Exiting, however, used in this section should not be understood as departing or exiting once and for all. As

an ethnographer trust for me from my participants is a result of continuous engagement which I had worked for, confirmed, and thereafter reaffirmed. Thus, the exiting of dilemma in this paper is used as possible discomforts and predicament for both me and my participants as I had experienced while I sit down to write this piece of paper.

My first dilemma in the field came after the revelation of my native identity. Being close to my participants I felt, at times, I lost my sense of ethnographic distance i.e., at times I tend to forget that I was a university researcher carrying out an ethnography. However, informed by Cooper (2001) that ethnographer constantly needs to shift between insider and outsider status to maintain ethnographic strangeness and avoid taking what the community says for granted, I had realized my positionality, as an academic researcher. I was able to step in/out of my own native identity and interrogate how my identity had shaped my understanding of myself and others during my fieldwork. With my regular reflections and a reminder of who I was and my learning of how to maintain social/cultural boundaries and balance social closeness, I was able to keep distance between me and my participants.

I multiple times reminded myself that my acceptance and trust-building with my participants was eased possibly because of my ancestral legacy, which my father, in particular, had with the SMC chairperson. I remember his say '*to learn from each other*', I presume the school and SMC chairperson, in particular, expected from me in the future to help the school grow because of my academic training. As time and again the SMC would say, 'after you Ph.D. you have to come back to the town and serve the school and community. We need a young, energetic, and educated guy like you. Your education and study can help bring positive change in society'. This '*acceptance to expectation*', I say have put me in a predicament and dilemma.

My third dilemma after exiting from the field is in regards to considering how to use my participants' stories. The information shared with me, at times though jestingly, in (in)formal setting was conferred with trust and oneness. For instance, I remember the SCM chairperson, despite knowing the consequences of the sensitivity of the research issue (finances and informal practice) that I had carried out, was insistent in using his real name. I became ambivalent- to or not to- mention his real name. My ambivalence, however, was defeated by my practical moral reasoning. I thought my duty and responsibility, as a research, is to protect my participant's identity. I also made the SMC realize that my job as a researcher is to protect my participants' confidentiality and anonymity and jotting down real names would be no good in the long run. (Un)convincingly, I made him realize and understand the moral aspect of my responsibility towards him as a researcher.

As my participants had welcomed me into their lives and shared their inner stories, I feel considerate to use the shared stories responsibly. Also, my field experience says there cannot be a rule or a principle in guiding how close or distant a researcher should go, I say my continuous reflection of my values and belief of who I was as well as acknowledging my positionality had helped me overcome my dilemma of nephew and a university researcher.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have narrated the difficulty of entry, rewards for engagement, and dilemmas while exiting from the research field. From my field experiences, my understanding says that entering an ethnographic space to build rapport and gain trust with participants is a difficult task and takes considerable time and effort. This time and effort become more lengthy when the researcher perceives or is perceived by the participants to be different from them in regards to culture, language, ethnicity, etc. It is natural and true that to accept someone into your life, trust him/her cannot happen overnight. The difficulty of establishing common ground with respondents is always there.

A meaningful engagement in the research field is a way out of overcoming the difficulty to build rapport and establish trust. While engaging in the field, however, it is imperative not to lose the sense of ethnographic distance. My engagement at times had made it difficult and challenging to lose my sense of ethnographic distance and the work (my research) I was carrying out. I had to be constantly aware of how my perceived 'native acceptance and identity' would/may influence the flow of interaction and the entire research process in the field with my participants. I had to be aware of my academic positionality. Likewise, dilemmas of 'expectation', 'employing the acquired information' etc, while and after exiting from the research field is an aspect which one needs to be constantly aware of.

However, as I conclude this paper, I am grappled with questions that have been formed in retrospect of my fieldwork. The first question that strikingly had come to my mind is what if I had revealed my native status at the beginning of fieldwork? Had the revelation of my native status changed the course of my trust-building process? Another question that has germinated in my mind is 'what if my father did not have a long-standing positive relationship and legacy behind him?' 'How importantly did my participants take my university researcher identity?'

In retrospect, I say my acceptance, easiness, and trust-building with my participants took a dramatic turn after I revealed 'native identity' with the SMC chair, my language and cultural awareness of the community I was working with, etc. and my 'positive' native identity had for sure eased a way for me to a greater extent in the field. Since I did not reveal my nativity at the start of my fieldwork, I am left with all the possibilities of 'what if'!

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