

Working ethically with gatekeeper and participants: A reflection of an ethnographic inquiry of homestay tourism learning

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Abstract

A gatekeeper's role in an ethnographic study has hardly been explored. Considering this, this article presents an ethnographic study of Nepali homestays' learning in which a gatekeeper was used as an intermediary to enter the research site and have access to the research participants. The key steps and processes we adopted while selecting and working with the gatekeeper have been explained along with our reflections on the role and ethics balancing strategies applied during the study. In this reflective article, we have interpreted and conclusively asserted that the eight words ended with 'ty'— intentionality, neutrality, conformity, familiarity, mutuality, reciprocity, anonymity, and sustainability— play significant roles in balancing and ethically working with the gatekeeper and the research participants.

Keywords: ethics, ethnography, gatekeeper, homestay tourism, Nepal, qualitative

Introduction

Tourism plays significant roles in the overall economy of Nepal; and it has also multifaceted roles in the societal and cultural development including national image promotion (Dangol, 2007; Pandey, 2014; Government of Nepal [GoN], 2019; National Planning Commission [NPC], 2019; Ministry of Culture Tourism and Civil Aviation [MoCTCA], 2020; Nepal Tourism Board [NTB], 2020). Among different sectors within the tourism, accommodation sector deserves specific role to contribute to the tourism incomes. In Nepal, homestay is an important part of the tourism accommodation system; with dominant cultural and local flavors (Kanel, 2021; Nepal Rastra Bank [NRB], 2015; Sharma, 2019); and thereby it comes as a type of tourism as well (e.g. 'homestay tourism'). In recent times, this promising concept is gaining popularity globally. Nepal is also promoting homestay

tourism from the late 90s, starting from Sirubari village of Syangja district (Kanel, 2010; MoCTCA, 2010). Since then, it has gradually been increasing throughout the country (MoCTCA, 2010, 2016 & 2020; Taragaon Development Board [TGDB], 2016; NPC, 2017; Sedai, 2018; GoN, 2021). Homestay tourism emphasizes on promoting local traditions, rituals, cuisines, attires, songs, music, arts & crafts, and so on. More importantly, homestay tourism provides unique opportunities for earning, learning, empowering and developing infrastructural services in the communities (Kanel, 2021; TGDB, 2016; Lama, 2013). Acharya and Halpenny (2013) have claimed that homestays can also serve as an alternative tourism product for sustainable community development.

In the course of pursuing the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) study in Development Studies, the first author (PhD Scholar) chose an ethnographic method within the qualitative approach for the field research. The primary purpose of the exploration was to understand the reality of homestay learning practices in Nepal, focusing on a case from the 'Mahabharat Hills' (renamed for anonymity), in the Bagmati Province of Central Nepal. According to Yin (2009), qualitative research becomes a 'continuous process of constructing versions of reality' (p. 19). Ethnographic research is one of the dominant qualitative research methods in which participant observation, in-depth interviews, and study of artifacts play crucial roles in gathering qualitative and quality information. Ethnography is a research strategy combining different methods 'based on participation, observations, and writing about a field under study' (Yin, 2009, p. 468). In the study process, generally, a 'field' is approached through a reliable gatekeeper (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009). According to prominent literature (e.g. Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Goode & Hatt, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009; Yin, 2009), the use of the gatekeeper facilitates easing the researcher's access and other processes during the research work. This is considered as an essential task to reach the research participants.

Generally, in any research, by 'gatekeeper' we understand a person who allows research participants to enter the premises or facilitates for research purposes connecting them to the available sources of information. Hammersley and Atkinson (2009) state that the use of gatekeeper is essential to get relevant participants, to establish and develop good relationships with the informants, and accordingly 'to hold productive interactions/ interviews' (p. 4). Field researchers use different types of persons as gatekeepers, including government officials, local political leaders/cadres, school-teachers, established business persons, police, tourist guides, local drivers, etc. Different authors have explained the roles of gatekeepers in the research process (e.g. Campbell & Lassiter, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009; Yin, 2009). According to them, the gatekeeper may influence the researcher(s) and, subsequently the research outputs since he/she has the role of convincing and influencing the potential respondents in any research. In such conditions, the research-outputs might be influenced by the situations, circumstances, moods and quality of cooperation of the gatekeeper and the respondents. Even, one respondent within the 'gate' has the role to create influence in the whole research process, like McEntire and Williams (2013) in their book entitled 'Making Connections' mention: 'There is a saying that a butterfly flapping its wings in Japan can cause a hurricane in North America' (p.92). They further claim that gatekeepers' roles in the community/institution become immensely vital for the field researcher(s). Discussing the quality of research, irrespective of the facts, the researcher's roles are expected to be guided by certain norms and ethics. Not only the researcher, but also the gatekeeper and the research participants should equally be responsible for generating research-outputs ethically. Ethical behaviours

should be demonstrated by all research stakeholders such as the researcher himself/herself, the gatekeeper and the research participants. However, in real field situations, ethical problems arise deliberately or inadvertently. For instance, the gatekeeper, among others, can have certain vested interests in linking the researcher with the participants. Similarly, the researcher can also demonstrate some unethical behaviours like impractical commitments, biasness, misinformation, under-information or over-information, and so on (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015).

Limited literature from Nepal and elsewhere focuses on ethnographic methodological practices and the associated roles of the gatekeeper. In Nepal, some scholarly write-ups are based on ethnographic research and reflections (e.g. Dahal, 2017; Adhikari, 2020; Hamal, 2020; Pun, 2022); however, experiences in working with the gatekeeper(s) have rarely been reported. Hence, with these problem statements and backgrounds, in this methodological paper, our key objective has been to illustrate and discuss some of the practical reflections and personal learning regarding the use of gatekeepers in exploratory ethnographic research work to add new knowledge within the qualitative explorations. An established homestay site linked with their learning practices has been the case site for this research.

We have particularly made an effort to tell the experience-based tales of our research field, focusing on the key research questions like what roles are expected from the gatekeeper and how those roles are played; what sorts of expectations are expressed and activities are performed by the gatekeeper and the research participants; and, how the researcher(s) manage to approach and work with the gatekeeper and research participants in a balanced way throughout the research work. Also, in this article, we have tried arguably to show the nexus between effective gatekeeping and ethical behaviors among the researchers and the research participants.

Ethnographic research, research ethics and the gatekeeper

An ethnographic study is an ethical commitment from the start to each step of the research and writing (Madden, 2010). Baker (1999) has defined ethnography as 'the observational description of a people or some other social units' (p. 497). With elaboration, Flick (2009) further clarifies that ethnography is a research strategy combining different methods, but based on participation, observation, and writing about a field under study; and, the overall image of details from this participation, observation, and interviewing is unfolded in a written text about the field. According to him, the way of writing gives the representation of the field a specific form.

According to ethical theory, there are four major issues to be addressed in any qualitative research work: i) *Non-maleficence* (researchers should avoid harming participants); ii) *Beneficence* (research on human subjects should produce some positive and identifiable benefit rather than simply be carried out for its own sake); iii) *Autonomy or self-determination* (research participants' values and decisions should be respected); and, iv) *Justice* (all people should be treated equally) (Murphy & Digwall, 2001, as cited in Flick, 2009, p. 37). It is claimed that ethical issues in research are much debated; thus, doing research ethically is a big challenge for every researcher (Flick; 2009; Hammersley & Atkinson; 2009) since several codes of conduct of research for ethical reasons are a must. The main purpose of such codes is to avoid harming participants involved in the process by respecting and taking their needs and interests into account.

Methodological processes adopted

In this ethnographic research, the first author as a main researcher tried to become an active participant-observer, *bhalakusari* or *kurakani*-initiator, and also a focus group discussion facilitator, as suggested. Additionally, to study the 'social unit', the first author occasionally tried to gather empirical information through various methods including non-participant observation, semi-participant observation, and virtual & distant observer as well (Field Reflective Notes, November, 2021). *Bhalakusari* or *kurakani* means informal talks, chitchats, or conventional style of dialogues (Dhakal, 2021). *Bhalakusari* is a more formal way of holding *kurakani*, which we have extensively used in this research.

While gathering data, particular focus was given on understanding the sociological, anthropological, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects of community homestay development & management and associated learning practices in the rural setting of the research site. The area is one of the famous rural tourism destinations in Nepal, where predominantly Chepang people, indigenous ethnic community, reside. Chepangs' total population in Nepal is about 70,000 (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2011). They have their own language, culture and traditions (Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994; Sapkota & Uranw, 2013). Chepangs have rich cultural traditions, assets and values which could be great 'resources' for community-based rural tourism promotion in Nepal. These cultural assets have attracted the stakeholders to facilitate and develop this Mahabharat Hills area as an authentic 'cultural tourist destination' focusing on tourism activities linked with rural poverty alleviation in joint partnerships with various organizations. The initiatives emphasized on developing new tourism products such as homestays, along with social mobilisation, small infrastructures & enterprise development, etc. The area is rich in natural resources and assets as well. The height of Mahabharat Hills is around 2000 m. above the sea level and is surrounded by dense green forests and hard rocks from where spectacular views of the Himalayan range and mesmerizing rivers & streams along with beautiful sun-rise and sun-set scenes can be viewed. Realizing this fact, the area has been developed as a new tourism site by the government of Nepal with a unique tourism branding as well. In this area, particularly in Pipalneta village (renamed), homestay development and management efforts are going on for more than fifteen years as a part of sustainable rural tourism development, promotion and marketing. According to the locals, caring and conserving the local environment and culture, promoting women's participation, enhancing local production system and reducing the leakage through expanded linkages; and, paying much attention to the poor households were the key objectives for ensuring the sustainability of homestays in the Mahabharat Hills.

According to the nature of this ethnographic exploration, the main author spent more than twelve weeks in the field. The total period of engagement was spread over three years from March 2019 to December 2021 and due to global pandemic of 'COVID-19' there were some disturbances in carrying out field visits as per the original plan and stay prohibitions in the homestays were also imposed. In 2020 and 2021 there were several 'lockdowns', restrictions and quarantines for long time—ranging from one month to three/four months (Pandey, 2020). During these 'lockdowns' communities also did not entertain any outsiders and visitors which prevented the researcher to carry out research and observational activities as well. After a long wait of the restriction on field visits, only in October and November 2021, the last two visits were made which lasted for about a week each.

Tales from the field: Impressions and reflections

In the ethnographic research, the implications of ethical codes are the most valuable and more sensible than in other types of research (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). In this research, too, we adopted basic norms of ethnographic/qualitative research codes as suggested by various scholars (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009; Flick, 2009; Baker, 1999; Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). Major codes of ethics include: using local gatekeepers to get easy access to the research field and participants; getting informed consent from the participants; avoiding any kind of harm to the participants; not invading their privacy (autonomy); sharing the researchers' aims/objectives clearly, not deceiving and taking any kind of undue advantage from the participants, etc.

Similarly, we have maintained *anonymity* (of the village, tole/settlement and research participants involved) in all analysis and write-ups where applicable. *Anonymity* helps avoiding the dangers and disadvantages to the participants due to the results of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2009). To maintain the ethics of *anonymity*, we have used pseudonyms, when and where required.

Equally, while working with the gatekeeper and the research participants, we tried to address the key four issues of 'ethical theory' as suggested by Murphy and Digwall: '*Non-maleficence*', '*Beneficence*', '*Autonomy*' or '*self-determination*' and '*Justice*'. The following sections will elaborate how the first author went through the whole processes.

Finding an appropriate gatekeeper and initial works with him

One of the friends of the main author who used to work in the area long ago as a tourism project staff (locals used to call him 'Bhagawan sir', name changed for anonymity) who now lives in Kathmandu, was the first contact person for further research. It was almost fifteen years back that he worked there for a couple of years.

Mr. Bhagawan was the main person to suggest the first author to contact the 'local guide' ('gatekeeper' in scholarly language, which is an unfamiliar word for general professionals or people from non-research backgrounds) before approaching the field. He had already informed the guide/gatekeeper about the first author's initial visit to the area. After Mr. Bhagawan's suggestion, the first author felt more comfortable to step into the field as a research scholar. Consequently, he met the gatekeeper on the very first day of his field-entry before doing anything.

On the very first day of the visit, the first author met the gatekeeper Mr. Ishwar Bhai (in his 40s and renamed for anonymity) and introduced himself and shared the purpose of his visit in detail. In the first face-to-face meeting, Ishwar Bhai said, "*Bhagwan sir has already shared many things about you.*" It made the first author very easy and felt more comfortable to carry on his interaction with him. The gatekeeper said, "No problem, I can take you to all the sites as per your needs and will also facilitate meetings with the related officials and community people".

Later, it was known that he was familiar with everyone in the village and surrounding areas; and he was also one of the trained tourist guides in that area. He was working as an active tourist guide for the last fifteen years or more. Along with his study, Begley (2007, as cited in Bhattarai, 2015, p. 210), the first author was trying to understand the gatekeeper's and research participants' personal values and ethical awareness as well as their nature and behaviour that helped him to be an 'ethical ethnographer'. From a tourism destination's point of view or commercially speaking,

interestingly, the first author was a 'domestic tourist' (paying guest) for the area; he was a 'longer-stay-tourist' too! The locals were also getting gradually acquainted with the first author and his everyday life in the field and they were also trying to hold friendly chats (*bhalakusari* or *kurakani*) with the first author whenever they had opportunities.

In this exploratory ethnographic study, the first author held several informal talks (*bhalakusari*) with the research participants other than the planned formal talks, scheduled interviews and discussions, which encouraged the research participants to express their experiences, feelings, opinions and hidden talents (songs, poems, jokes, role-plays, etc.) freely, frankly and spontaneously. For the locals too, holding *bhalakusari* with the tourists arriving in the village is the part of their everyday life. The first author was interested in seeing, talking and experiencing such everyday lives. Familiarity and mutual understanding were gradually strengthened. Thus, '*mutuality*' (sharing feelings, action, or relationship) with them was also increased. The issues of '*non-maleficence*' and '*beneficence*' were deliberately considered.

Gradually, the gatekeeper Ishwar Bhai took the first author to the houses of village officials, key persons (informants) of the area such as the rural municipality ward chairperson and members, school teachers, community leaders, shopkeepers, and so on. And, more importantly from the very beginning, he facilitated the meetings and talks between the first author and the homestay operators of the area, who were the prime participants for further observations, in-depth discussions and talks (*bhalakusari/kurakani*) along with some FGDs to be held during the research processes.

As the days passed, the first author became closer and knew most of the key stakeholders in his research area, and epistemologically they were the research-partners, so it was not a difficult task for the first author to access them saying '*namaste*' (greetings) and '*sanchai hunuhunchha?*' (How are you?). There was no problem or barrier to talk to them in Nepali (national) language. Later it was experienced that even Chepang people of the Mahabharat Hills could speak very good Nepali language. It was strange to note for the first author that some Chepang boys and girls were not able to speak Chepang language, instead they preferred to communicate in Nepali, and were able to read and write in Nepali language.

Whenever the first author met and held *bhalakusari / kurakani* with the locals, they were clear about the purpose of the visit and his longer stay in the community. They knew that the first author was in the field as a research student from the Kathmandu University. Due to his studentship (reasonably 'paying guest'), they did not expect much from him.

They, with mutual verbal consent, agreed to manage the first author's stay in the village(s) to provide relevant information and other supports as required. The first author stayed there rotationally almost in all homestays, but mainly in three homestays. However, he stayed longer in Chepang homestays as he was more interested in exploring Chepangs' ethnic traditional cultures linked to homestay learning and practice for his Ph.D. thesis. According to the historian Clifford (1988), 'Culture is a deeply compromised idea [we] cannot yet do without' (as cited in Campbell & Lassiter, 2015, p. 14), and there are cross-cultural differences in tourists' behavior as well (Reisinger, 2009). As far as the first author's 'paying guest-cum-researcher' status was concerned and since he had shared with them that he was personally pay for the whole study/research,

he was offered discounts in most of his expenditures. This was a greater understanding of the research participants of the Mahabharat Hills. Furthermore, in tourism, there is a principal or common understanding that the longer you stay, the less you pay; or the longer you travel, the less you pay (Tourtellot, 2013). With this principle, the first author also got some discounts, which eased his longer stay in the research field.

The gatekeeper-approach to access the research-participants worked well for this research case as well. In this context, the first author was also guided by the Kathmandu University's (KU) 'Doctoral Research Guidelines'. Additionally, a recommendation letter (*'To Whom It May Concern'*) from the University (KU-School of Education Dean Office) provided the first author with an extra confidence to carry out the research with the selected participants in the famous touristic area, the Mahabharat Hills.

Key issues emerged

Using a local tourist guide as a gatekeeper in the research process, this study has gained some unique experiences, which are worth-sharing with wider audiences through this paper. These issues and experiences are categorised in four major themes:

- Clarifying the roles of the researcher and the gatekeeper
- Meeting the expectations of the gatekeeper
- Community perceptions towards the gatekeeper and his roles
- Major ethical issues and their tactical management

In the following sections, we will reflect on major views and experiences one-by-one on the above themes.

Clarifying the roles of the researcher and the gatekeeper

As an ethnographer, the first task for the researcher was to clarify the purpose and objectives or the intention (*'intentionality'*) of the research work or longer stay in the site. Thus, the first author was much aware of this issue and the steps that he should follow. The gatekeeper, Mr. Ishwar Bhai, who was informed by a friend—Mr. Bhagawan—prior to the first author's first field visit, was well briefed by the first author on the very first day of the site-entry about the visit-purpose and modalities of the scholarly research work. Then, gradually, the gatekeeper informed the villagers and other officials as and when required. The first author was also much concerned about the duty or roles that he should fulfill during the ethnographic research process. While visiting the areas, the first author often made visits with the guide/gatekeeper; but, while entering into a particular household (homestay) for close observation and *bhalakusari*, he was there as 'homestay guest' to stay overnight or to have a lunch or dinner at the first author's 'host' family. Sometimes, on request of the first author, the gatekeeper would also take breakfast/ lunch/dinner or tea/coffee together with him. Those all processes facilitated and strengthened a strong bond, mutual trust, confidence and better *bhalakusari* between the first author and the research-participants—the homestay operators of Pipalneta village, of the Mahabharat Hills.

For any homestay operator, it is not a big deal to talk to any outsider(s) about his/her experiences/opinions/feelings. Considering this fact, the first author easily approached them and requested to share experiences about their homestay learning practices. It was not much difficult to take

information about their homestay initiatives, learning experiences, challenges faced and other associated issues. However, as a researcher, the first author was always very conscious about 'not to talk' regarding the politics or ideologies, neither own nor of theirs. This process helped maintaining '*neutrality*' (impartiality) in the field. Neutrality in the field research is very important to make the research program a success.

In some stances, the first author practically felt uneasy to talk to older persons with hearing difficulties and in such cases, he used local assistants such as research participant's son/daughter or other family members; and sometimes local teachers and non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff, who were very helpful. They were happy to support the researcher and took it as a privilege and an extra benefit for them. They wanted to talk to the first author regarding Nepal's academic, educational and other social/developmental issues. The first author was also delighted to share relevant experiences and intellectual knowledge with them. At every step, the first author was much conscious about following '*neutrality*' (impartiality) as an integral part of the research ethics, which he was advising also the gatekeeper to adhere to wherever applicable.

Meeting the expectations of the gatekeeper

The gatekeeper was very positive towards the researcher which perhaps was due to the first author's old friend's request/approach; and the first author's own simple and positive behavior towards him. He was keen to learn new things and visit new places. One day, he said, "*Sir, I have visited more than forty districts of Nepal; I have visited Terai, 'Pahad', Himal; I have reached Namche, I have reached Muktinath; and three times I have made trips to Annapurna and Dhaulagiri base camps as a porter and guide. I have visited so many places of Nepal, and perhaps the first person of this area to visit such different places. Now onwards, I want to visit Eastern and Far Western parts of Nepal. If you have any chance to support me, please tell me sir, please link me to those opportunities sir....."*

Every time, he was enthusiastic to share his experiences, feelings, emotions and opinions with the first author when there were opportunities to hold informal talks (*bhalakusari*) for sharing personal matters. The first author also listened to his every word keenly and attentively. All those 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen, 2011) were special 'inputs'/matters for the explicit exploration from the research field. And, at the same time, the first author also used to add personal experiences along with his concerns. This process allowed the first author to 'reciprocate' knowledge and experiences in the tourism and community development sectors. We were mutually creating the 'tales of the field'. In a *bhalakusari* he shared, "*One day I want to be an 'experienced and a renowned guide' with good English competency. So, you should help me improve my English. I will speak in English with you sir, is that ok?"* His proposal was simple, and it was not a big deal for me. We tried to speak in simple English; and during our *bhalakusari* the first author started correcting his English where some errors or mistakes were found. He, in a few weeks, himself felt that he had improved his English-speaking skills a bit.

One day while walking through a forest towards a local shrine (at the hill-top), he said, "*I am taking very good benefit from you sir. I have slightly improved my English-speaking 'power' now".* Honestly speaking, the first author was happy to hear those words from him. At the same time, it was also realised that the relations always sustain at the same level of understandings and '*reciprocity*'

(practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit). Kawulich (2011) also gave emphasis on 'reciprocity' in her ethnographic study with Muscogee (Creek) indigenous people, in the USA.

The gatekeeper was voluntarily helping the researcher by facilitating meetings with the new persons and visiting new sites in and around the village(s). One day, the first author approached him and offered some money as 'tips', but he strongly refused. He said, "*sir jasto anusandhaan garne byakti laai yati saano sahayog gareko maa pani maile paisaa lina milchha ta, mildaina sir. "Sorry sir, I cannot take money for my small help"*. His indication was that he wouldn't take any money for his voluntary support; but some sort of 'reciprocity' may or will continue between us in the future. (Field Note, March, 2019).

In that case, the first author remembers a famous Nepali proverb: "*Mit lai maile sittaimaa halo diyen; mit le pani malaai sittaimaa ghiu diye*" ("I gave a plough to my ritual friend (mit jiu) free-of-cost; and he also gave me some ghee free-of-cost"). It denotes that, in Nepali culture, 'reciprocity' sustains mutual relationship; and this practice has continued for centuries. This 'reciprocity' culture and tradition, which we have inherited from our parents and grand-parents from our childhood, convinced us that we should learn to ensure mutual benefits for both the parties. It made the first author realise that some intellectual support or any other support in kind, must be offered to Ishwar Bhai if he does not accept 'money' from us.

And, one day morning, while the first author was coming back to Kathmandu from the village in the middle of his field studies, the gatekeeper, Ishwar Bhai, appeared in the front-yard of the homestay where the first author was staying, and he cordially offered a small 'zebra-bag' (a type of nylon-bag very common in Nepal) and said, "*Sir, this is for your madam (wife), a small gift from my madam (wife)*." The bag was full of local vegetables such as *eskus* (chayote), *simi and bodi* (green beans and runner beans). He said, "*Some home-grown vegetables sir, these vegetables are purely organic, sir.....*".

After two weeks, the first author went back to his research field and he carried some special things such as a cap, chocolates, some sweet and sour candies known as '*lapsi paaun*' etc. from Kathmandu in the same 'zebra-bag'. It was the matter of happiness to offer some gifts to Ishwar Bhai from the 'town'. When Ishwar Bhai received the gifts from Kathmandu, it could easily be observed that he was also very happy to get something 'reciprocally'. Later, in other visits too, some exchanges between us continued. Being a very good 'research friend' during the field study, the first author was very happy and certain to continue the relationship with him in the future, too.

Even if the first author took some edible items to the village as gifts, he always felt concerned about the quality of the things that he took from the town because they might not be as organic as in the village. Nonetheless, Ishwar Bhai always keeps saying, "*Never believe in organic products unless you produce yourself in your own field or farm (bari/khet). I am struggling to maintain such organic practices only in small area of my farm-land for my home-consumption*". (Field Note, September, 2019)

His expressions were evidently 'making the meaning' that organic production now-a-days has been almost impossible in the rural areas as well. His reflections were convincing us to compromise with the quality of food items offered in the homestays during our field study.

To summarise the reflections related to our gatekeeper's expectations and ethics, we can say that, in the Nepalese culture (the Eastern culture), everything is not seen from monetary perspective only, that is to say, small voluntary supports are provided 'not for money'; however, sometimes for maintaining better relationship and collaborations, 'reciprocal exchanges' are obviously expected from both the sides. Mutual understanding and certain levels of 'reciprocity', be they in intellectual or materialistic forms, are crucial factors to sustain confidence of the field-researcher, to continue relationships with the field participants, as well as to extend collaborations during the research and beyond. It was one of our experience-based special learnings from the ethnographic field. As stated by Kawulich (2011, p. 69), in our case also, 'all relationships are not equal' because relationships depend on the nature of the participants as well.

Community perceptions towards the gatekeeper and his roles

We were fortunate to use a local tourist guide as the gatekeeper, due to which approaching the research-participants was easier for us. Mr. Ishwar Bhai was very familiar and known among the villagers. He was a trained and experienced guide. During the course of our initial days of the research, while walking with the guide, the first author instantly asked one homestay-owner (lady) whether she knew Mr. Ishwar Bhai well or not. She immediately answered, "*Ishwar Bhai Guide laai pani yo chhetra maa kasale chindaina ta! Uhaan laai nachiiine pani kahi chhaina; uhaanle nachinne pani yo gaun matra pani hoina waripari nai kahi chhaina hola. Uhaan ta prasiddha maanchhe ho yehaanko. Uhaan sadhain hansilo, faraasilo ra sahayogi bhaawanaako hunuhunchha.*" (What an amazing question; who doesn't know Mr. Ishwar Bhai in this village and surroundings; and who is not familiar with him? He is a famous person and well-known to everyone in this village. He is frank, smiling, unbiased and is also a very supportive person).

During my initial visit and in a gossip (*kurakani*) with a local leader in his 60s, he shared, "*Mr. Ishwar Bhai is a good guy. You have selected a right person to walk together in the village/homestays because he knows everything about the area including people, animals, farming practices, local heritages, jungles, and so on. His simple and straight-forward nature helps insiders and outsiders to be familiar with each other very quickly. Frankly speaking, our village and surroundings need some more Ishwar Bhais to properly guide the tourists in this area.*" (Filed Note, March 2019)

One day, the first author was observing an informal talk (*bhalakusari*) between a school-teacher (male) and Ishwar Bhai, as a part of the whole research process. They were talking about the English names of local plants and trees. And, Ishwar Bhai was helping him. When the first author joined the group closely, then Ishwar Bhai introduced him with the teacher. The teacher was saying, "*Ishwar Bhai is our encyclopedia and dictionary too; he knows everything; when we are in doubt about some English terms related to local culture/ resources/ materials, then Ishwar Bhai helps us. He is a person with lots of tourism-related and geographical knowledge.*" (Field Notes, November 2021)

These community voices proved that the gatekeeper was the right person to play the role of a 'responsible gatekeeper' and a good guide where and when needed. He always introduced the researcher (the first author) with the key persons of the community, new places and new practices where appropriate. He not only facilitated the researcher's visits to the research area, not only developed the confidence to stay and work in the village(s), but also eased the process

of knowing many local things and cultural practices in the village and surroundings. He was not a demanding person; he was always rationale and a straightforward gatekeeper. In the initial stage of the research, when he was busy for his personal and domestic matters, he always informed the first author in advance so that field visits would be altered and/or re-arranged accordingly. That understanding and the practice of pre-information allowed the first author to manage time and read the reference books that he had taken to the field. As Campbell and Lassiter (2015) suggest, 'Literature review never ends, it can continue even in the field in ethnographic inquiry'; and therefore, the first author kept himself busy in studying reference reading resources (books) whenever he had time in the field (at homestays) as well.

Even after completing the field-work, the first author still gets regular phone-calls in Kathmandu from the gatekeeper and other key research participants. During the field work, the first author never made any commitments to them for any support in return of their time and help in the field; however, now-a-days we think about how we can help them professionally, intellectually; and how the university (KU) can support them 'academically'. We have also thought of some plans for 'University-Community Collaborations' in the days to come. However, so far, nothing has been committed with the locals so as to ensure better ethical disciplines, but we are convinced with a notion that an ethical ethnographic researcher should always think of '*sustainability*' in post-field relations and also ethical accountability and responsibility. Even after the field research, the first author has been trying to sustain virtual and distant (mobile) conversations with the gatekeeper, and sometimes with the research-participants, too. Here, from capability approach and mutual experiential learning perspectives, sustainable relations are very vital. Let's see in the days to come!

Major ethical issues and their tactical management

As a qualitative researcher and an ethnographer, it is essential to remain in face-to-face touch with the research participants. This helps strengthen mutual relationship between and among researcher(s) and the participants, including the gatekeeper(s). The key research ethics in this case is not to tell lies, and not to show any impractical commitments (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). As a research scholar (the first author), it would be wise for him not to show any commitment in return of the quality information from the participants. This research philosophy guided us to be rationale, practical and ethical in the field. Furthermore, providing intellectual supports in Nepal's developmental practices is an easy job for us. Hence, based on our long experiences, the first author was requested to facilitate one or two sessions in local meetings; share experiences of his homestay field-visits from other parts of Nepal; share the legal and other statute-related provisions of rural and homestay tourism in Nepal, and so forth.

Many times, invitations were received to join some of the local cooperative and homestay group meetings as well where the first author often had two opportunities: knowing more about their 'social world' and also sharing his own knowledge and experiences about tourism, guests' behaviours, local products, social mobilisation, saving and credit cooperatives, entrepreneurship and enterprise development, etc. (mostly in an informal way- *bhalakusari* style). All these processes helped us gain confidence in the research field and also strengthened our rapport with the community people for our longer stay in the field. In an ethnographic research, scholars suggest becoming an 'insider' and using an 'emic-lens' for better results from the inquiry (Hammersley &

Atkinson, 2009; Yin, 2009). The first author did the same in the field to gain those perspectives as far as possible and practicable. The practices we tried to use enabled us to observe the 'local cultural worlds' through better rapports and relations with the locals which developed our 'conformity' meaning compliance with standard rules or laws. It was very easy to hold informal talks (*bhalakusari/kurakani*) and FGDs during the process of whole research.

In addition, as locals desired, I (the first author) had provided some professional connections related to tourism sector especially with the national tourism authorities, national trekking guides and agencies, some tourism and development-related professionals, tourism journalists and travel writers for better promotion of the community homestay of Mahabharat Hills in the Bagmati Province. Again, this was a professional or intellectual support to the community, as 'reciprocity' from our side. This was also one way of doing justice to the communities.

Conclusion

Entry into a research site with confidence is a challenge for many qualitative researchers. In such cases, a reliable reference or recommendation in finding an appropriate gatekeeper is a prerequisite for gaining more confidence before proceeding to the research field, at the time of entry and the initial familiarisation process of the research work. Based on the learning, once an appropriate gatekeeper is selected, other sub-gatekeepers (in every *tole* or settlement, for initial one or two visits) can be located easily, whose roles are to welcome the researcher(s) in the settlement and facilitate preliminary meetings for acquaintances and relation-building with the local participants. Even a single household's key host (key-informant) may become the sub-gatekeeper in the repeated visits of the researcher(s). In fact, all these people facilitate the researcher(s) to get acquainted with and build good rapport with the local research participants.

On the whole, it can be summarised that by keeping in mind these eight words ending with '-ty': *intentionality, neutrality, conformity, familiarity, mutuality, reciprocity, anonymity, and sustainability*; we can play significant ethical roles in accessing the field and the research participants through a helpful gatekeeper. These eight words and 'ethical actions' in the research process may not be in sequential order always. Based on this practical experience from the Nepali rural contexts, we can suggest that any researcher can take these 8-words ending with 'ty' based 'actions' in mind while conducting ethical ethnographic field research using a reliable local gatekeeper. His/her practical and balanced roles could be considered very vital and supportive in the whole process for efficient, effective and successful exploratory ethnographic studies through close observations, intimate talks (*bhalakusari*) and specific issue-based focus group discussions or informal group interactions for better triangulations of the research findings. These actions also help us abide by the essential research ethics, as discussed above. Future researchers who use the ethnographic method can further test their approaches and steps with these 8-'ty' actions to enhance their research efficiency.

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