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COMPLEXITIES OF GATEKEEPING: A REFLEXIVE ACCOUNT

Abstract

Gatekeeping is the access-constraints of the field. As this underscores the methodological challenge of any research, it is important to provide a reflexive account on them. The central argument of this article is developed from ethnographic fieldwork in an elite school in India. While the fieldwork was exploring the institutional positions on Education for Peace (EfP), the authors have noticed the subtler gatekeeping mechanisms marked by social controls based on the asymmetry of power. The present research deconstructs the complexities based onsocial-psychology of power. The article concludes by arguing that gatekeeping is an inherently political process.

Keywords: *Gatekeeping, Ethnography, Elite School and Social Control.*

Introduction

Ethnography is 'living with group of people for extended period in order to document and interpret their distinctive ways of life, beliefs and values integral to them' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:1). It is a reification of social thought which considers the subjective interpretation of social reality of people. Srivastava sharply puts it as 'knowing from them what they know about themselves' (2012:361).Hence,the perception of social reality becomes more important than the existing objective reality as it involves interpretive understanding of the meanings rather than just externally observed behaviour. The access to the information which shapes this reality often gets controlled, and the mechanism of control shapes the reality itself. This expression is based on the fundamental assumption of gatekeeping which suggests that information helps shape the social realities (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Hence those who have control over information also control social realities. There exists a dialogical relationship between social realities, information, the control of the information and the 'display' of that control.

In this backdrop, the paper deconstructs the complexities of

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gatekeeping as 'theoretical consideration beyond the practical considerations'(Campbell et al. 2006:117) of ethnography. At the outset, it must be acknowledged that most of the ethnographies suffer a fundamental dichotomy. On one hand, the researcher wants to fully assimilate with the field to get maximum insights; while the field may not fully accept the researcher, on the other hand. This dichotomy is precisely the reason why ethnographies have difficulty in finding patronage and are usually marked by gatekeeping. Hence, gatekeeping becomes a 'normal' or even expected phenomenon for any fieldwork. Venkataraman (2014) explains such subtleties in his discussions on an orphan schooling in Tamil Nadu.

School as the field site

As an elite international residential institution,Rolland Schoolwith its extensive campus and exorbitant fee structure today caters to the *crème de la crème* of the globe. It represents the acme of school education with years of educational legacy. School's student body boasts of diversity with students and staff coming from different parts of the globe. Typical to elite school, it maintains a teacher-student ratio of 1:7 [1] (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009). The school anchors its identity in strong philosophical underpinningswhich guides its vision, mission and educational discourse. The curriculum offered at the school is tailored according to the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP).[2]The school has boarders as well as the day scholars. The latter are generally the children of staff but also include a few others staying locally. Situated in the pristine settings, nature serves as the rhythm of life for the school community.

As part of ongoing ethnographic work, a fieldwork of six-months was undertaken at Rolland to explore its stance on Education for Peace (EfP).[3] It must be noted that the 'EfP intends not only to build competencies, values, behaviour and skills to confront violence but alsobecomes a practice where the purpose i.e. why to teach, the content i.e. what to teach and the pedagogy i.e. how to teach, are conducive to nurturing values of peace'(Kester 2010:59).Thus, the fieldwork was aimed at understanding the institutional structures and processes, per/formative;[4] of the school governed by the ideals of EfP. The central aim was to explore institutionalization Education for Peace at Rolland School i.e. how EfP is realised in practise. Harbor and Sakade's (2009) empirical work raises questions on the compatibility of EfP and formal schooling as it exists today.

Most often case-studies such as this are considered as a unique educational ecology or as an 'ideal type' in Weberian understanding with its findings being under-represented for comparative analysis and not applicable to the wider social Ideal type.[5] In this backdrop, it is important to locate the school as an 'ideal' site. For studying complex structures like schools, ethnographers engage in 'both explicit and implicit forms of sampling' (Ball 1984: 75). Sampling here does not imply in the statistical sense but as an opportunity for the naturalistic coverage

of the research area. Explicitly, school's educational philosophy is reflective of its commitment to values of peace. While mainstream school's drive towards uniformity and standardization; Rolland is presumably outside the system. It's liberated from rigidities and limitations of a mainstream school in its structures, size and operations. Such schools are seen as 'facilitators of introduction of peace issues in their curriculum and practice' (Brantmeier and Bajaj 2013: 143). Hence, the choice of this school was driven not only by methodological demands but equally by the demands of an educational context in the background of peace and violence framework. Given variables associated with EfP framework, the site seemed conceptually proper to explore the intersection of theory of peace and its educational practice.[6] The fieldwork naturally granted the authors an opportunity to study if the institutional structures, processes and pedagogical models undermined its very goals of education which signify peace. If so, do they produce violence and what expression that 'violence' takes? In other words, to understand if the 'schooling' at any level interferes with its 'education' to produce violence or whether its schooling is as peaceful as its educational goals. Hence, a school like Rolland was a favourable field site to analyse these intersections. Secondly, while 'mainstream / traditional' narratives of schooling or 'subaltern' perspectives have both long been part of sociological inquiries of education, but 'elite schools' which have been the choice of the privileged have rarely been subject of educational research. This is because negotiating access to elite spaces such as Rolland is considered difficult (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009:224). One such academic inquiry has been Srivastava's (1998) work on the lifeworld of an elite educational institution as 'making of modernity' through the lens of post-colonialities in India. Lastly, 'institutional support' also determined the prospective sites for the study.

Institutional Access

Rolland School- given its rich legacy, strong alumni network and long distinguished history, is amongst the most sought-after old tie network of schools in India. It seeks to contrast itself with the new aspirational schools mushrooming all over the country by taking pride in its humanistic traditions and ideals of its educational philosophy. This is crucial as the school subscribes to humanism as the greatest value when the larger 'the educational narrative has turned a blind eye to it' (Kumar 2008)[7]. Pursuing these precious values is commendable considering the neo-liberal education regime. The 'resurrection of humanity' within the commodity market of education is central to the vision of the school. Naturally, the current emphasis on EFP was of significance to align with its institutional goals.[8] Hence, agreement to host the study was indicative of the social reality which the school itself was convinced about, because 'it is the cultural practises and meanings found in research settings which helps shape researcher's (dis)ability to conduct the research' (Bondy 2012:586).[9] The school Principal was contacted through an email outlining a proposal for an ethnographic study. Despite the school being on vacation, a

prompt reply and follow-up weregiven by the Vice-Principal and other school leadership[10]. Initial email exchanges were followed by an on-site meeting[11]. The school,bymaintaining informality of the interaction, did not term this meeting as a formal interview:

> A sense of informality pervades through the course of today's meeting. This face-to-face interaction was not an arch-typical face forward conversation but a communal process of thinking through the nuances of the proposed research, much facilitated by the configuration of the physical space of the office of Vice-Principal. The dynamic utilisation of space with chairs placed in a circular setting was giving visitors to his office a sense of social proximity, i.e., a sense of equality, warmth, togetherness and accessibility.
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> (From the field notes, Office of Vice-Principal, Rolland School, 2018)

The school enquired neither about the researcher's background, ideological orientations etc. nor was themanagement persuaded about the potential benefits out of the research. A formal research proposal was submitted for consideration. Initially, the school authorities indicated a desire for a larger stakeholder buy-in including that of researcher's institution to formalise the research but later settled for a more informal exchange of terms and conditions. In retrospect, perhaps stakeholder arrangement with the researcher's institution might have been beneficial in negotiating the subtler gatekeeping (Broadhead and Rist 1976).Thus, the school took some time for necessary approvals to facilitate the research. This is understandable given the systemic considerations and procedures. A Research Ethics Committee (REC) was also set up to ensure that the research proposal adheres to standard research ethics guidelines with the most important being 'informed consent' of the research participants. This was to ensure the autonomy and respect of the participants involved (Singh and Wassenar 2016).

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is defined as access-constraints. This is based on the discursive ways of controlling through 'selection, addition, withholding, display, channelling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard, and deletion of information', both explicitly and implicitly (Barzilia-Nahon 2008:1496). In this backdrop, the first expression of constraint was manifest when the school 'pulled back' from its offer to provide the on-campus accommodation to the researcher. The newer terms and conditions also indicated a further set of restrictions. As this was unexpected in the initial days of fieldwork, thepreventive measures'ensured' the separation of activities and processes which the school found to be risking its privacy. In addition, the institutional denial to access the student information system (*SysCo*), kept the researcher away from the student-specific information. The subtler restrictions like the inabilities to collect the

background details of the student body limitednot only the researcher'sassociation with the school as a 'community' but also delicately curtailed the academic richness of the study.Such guarded positionality of the school, raises questions around what possibly the school was trying to keep the researcher away from? The school had set clear boundaries towards not exploring the 'social register' of the school. While acting cautious was to possibly safeguard against social fault lines, voices of dissent and researcher's exploration of critical analysis of social life of the school.

Revoking on-campus stay was seemingly one of the tautological efforts of gatekeeping and, hence, was a designed pre-emptive effort by the school. The terms and conditions of the research stipulated by the school were accepted as 'adaptive preference'.[12] Suitable accommodation despite the difficult geography of the field site was obtained at walking distance from the school campus (though hitching rides during extreme weather had to be resorted to). Serendipity gave advantages to staying 'away' through opportunities for the researcher to interact with outsiders to know more about the school.The researcher's diary entry from the first day of the fieldwork is reproduced below to show how the initial interactions gave rise to a possible sense of uncertainty even before the study began. The sense of perturbation, despite riding high on scholarly fervour, would be common for any first-time ethnographer.

> As I leave for the school, I feel nervous, I feel overwhelmed by the complex ethnographic study I am likely to undertake. I wonder if the school would be an overwhelming experience for a commoner like me.

(From the Field-notes, Residence of the researcher, 2018)

While the researcher based in the field felt the inhibitions to navigate the nuances of the 'changing' realities, she was conscious of her class positions to deconstruct the elite school. The cognitive constraints due to the *tastes* and cultural easewere challenging for the fieldwork alongside the subtler gatekeeping constraints by the school. The tightly controlled security gateswith its readiness to welcome the researcher based on the pre-arranged schedule ironically provided the initial respite. This initial 'ease of access' with the formal welcoming by the security personnel indicated not only efficiency but also formalization of the entry into the site. The first day was marked by a campus-tour and introductions to the social actors 'significant' in the school demography. The researcher shared anxiousness of her presence in the school with the institutional actorsupfront. Their positive response about the visitors did exhibit institutional openness. Naturally, the researchersaw an eclectic mix of visitors. This includedparents, ex-staff and alumni, interns, guest lecturers, government officials, educators, researchers, residential scholars, board members, accreditation agencies and others. The researcher's long stay amidst these endless visitors 'normalised' her presence as an 'insider' over the months. The 'formal' introduction to the staff ensured her access inside the weekly meetings. These enabling conditions

must be appreciated considering her inability to get into the weekly newsletter of the school. Due to this, the students were not formally made aware of the research in the initial weeks. The researcher's daily interactions have ensured them to know about her worksonly in due course. The researcher did realised this as a conscious attempt to limit her school-wide publicity, such 'precautions' gave indirect control in ensuring the barriers in the field.

The initial period of familiarisation was spent in understanding the school community's worldviews to discover their background assumptions and their socio-cultural makeup. This was attempted by the researcher by being all around and outside the school to converse with security guards, faculty, leadership, staff, porters, students, parents, visitors, alumni, board members, shopkeepers and drivers.Given ethical considerations, parent consent for interviewing the students (they are being minors) was a major condition. Accordingly, the 'opt-in' strategy seeking parent consent did not seem to work in the first few months. Apprehensions regarding this were shared with the school and were persistently followed-up by seeking alternatives. Though it was disheartening at that time, it must be acknowledged that the institutional actors did not compromise on their stand and even advised to (initially) limit the research to 'largely observational'.

The start of a new semester provided the opportunity to seek parental consent, especially with the parents of new admissions given their physical presence on campus. The school leadership further agreed to a blurb about the research in the new parent orientation session but maintained their 'only facilitators/host' stance stating 'We would not like to be reflective of giving any 'encouraging conditions' for the research' said a senior member of the leadership. Thus, convincing parents to sign the consent agreement was difficult without institutional support. It did, nonetheless, offer an avenue for understanding parents' perspective on research as well as schooling. Subsequently, a strategy of 'opting–out' was initiated through an update in the parent newsletter, excerpt of which is quoted below.

> We are pleased to be hosting the researcher. Until December, she is conducting ethnographic research at our school to ascertain the degree to which our school educates for peace. One aspect of her research involves interviewing students. Their names and identities would not appear anywhere in her final research. Participation in this project is completely voluntary for all involved, and they may withdraw their consent to participate at any point in the process.If you object to your child participating in this study through interviews, please do let us know.

(*Weekly Newsletter*, Rolland School, 2018[13] (On 31st August, 2018)

It must be observed that the school supported the research from the very beginning with the explicit intention of leveraging this academic endeavour only for understanding the school's distinct offerings.

> In principle and in the substance of your proposed research, we want to make clear that we fully support this project and anticipate that the findings will be of significance for us, as a school. This line of inquiry is of great value to us.

(Excerpt from the letter of approval for the study[14])

But the inhibiting factors to the study nonetheless manifested themselves due to ethical considerations. This may possibly have led to inconsistencies in the school's outlook towards the research. These inconsistencies found expressions in the 'provided' vis-a-vis the 'desired' impetus to facilitate the research. These inconsistencies resulted in gatekeeping, reflected in the extent the ethnographer 'could' vis-à-vis to the extent the ethnographer was 'allowed' (or atleast was given the impression of being allowed) to penetrate the school and its social reality[15].

In addition, the control on information-flow was exercised by gatekeepers by acting as intermediaries between the researcher and the larger school community. This was done through discursive ways like 'blocking off certain lines of inquiry or shepherding the researcher in one direction or the other' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:51) by largely determining what was 'appropriate'. For instance, the class observation schedules, formal interviews, and all other appointments orany requests were most often 'filtered' through the first round of approvals. Most often, any attempt to approach individuals directly did not materialise, despite the researcher's constant yet subtle persistence to explore certain intersections. Some doors, deemed off-limits due to whatever reason, were 'politely' kept closed. To take one example, exploring residential life and curriculum was of immense significance for the research but was kept away from the ambit of observations.

The request for classroom observations wasmostly accommodated but wasdismissed upfront some other times. In one instance, interest in observing a subject from social sciences did not find favour with gatekeepers. A senior member from the leadership said, 'The teacher would be less comfortable with class observation given that she is teaching some sensitive topics'. Similarly, PSHE (Physical, Social and Emotional Health) classes - a major intersection with the research area – were allowed only for limited interaction period due to 'sensitivity' of the issues being taught. From the school's perspective, this approach may be justified but it did hamper the research.

School's official policy documents served as another data source. Some of these documents were floated in public space and, hence the problem of accessibility was managed by the researcher. Most others had to be formally requested through diverse actors who were turned out to be the gatekeepers in the long run. While some requests were acceded to, some others (like the criteria for scholarship) were outrightly rejected. Few others were agreed to after initial diffidence (like the demographic data on religious, nationality parameters) possibly after due

'deliberations'. Yet others were kept hanging for approvals till the end of the study (like the demographic profile of the faculty of the school, foundational documents of the school, request to observe and understand the advisor-advisee relationship). Thus, the school was unwilling to share the information which they found 'sensitive'. To address these issues, like that of requests circulating in a loop or were hanging in for approvals and the likes, the researcher started to maintain a weekly progress report; one to keep the gatekeepers abreast of researcher's activities, second to keep track of requests made and third also to additionally provide the gatekeepers with researcher's activities which were not looped through them. This way the researcher made her activities more palatable.

Thus, gatekeeping found expression in every aspect of data collection. The gatekeepers expected routing the survey questionnaires to the respondent population via a public platform. The survey questionnaires were floated through a public link via 'Google forms' for further circulation of the link by the gatekeepers. This served the school two purposes. First, it obviated the need to share the email identities of the respondents (which could have valid privacy concerns). Secondly, this kept the gatekeepers in-the-loop beforehand of the questions the survey entailed. In this way, the gatekeeper's approval was enforced even without asking. Against a request for two rounds of surveys with the respondent population, only one survey with the students happened due to the assertion by the school that the on-going semester was over-crowded with surveys from the accreditation agencies and hence unable to accommodate two surveys for this research. This argument was flavoured with a demand foran empathic understanding from the researcher that the additional survey might undermine the quality of all these surveys, including hers.

Access to information was thus subtly shaped by unequal power relations between the researcher and the institutional actors. This power was not only exercised through overt ways of actions and decisions but covert ways of inactions which were aimed at shaping the researcher's preferences and awareness (Nahon 2008:1500). The asymmetry of power reflected in the negotiations with the gatekeepers given that the researcher's activities were always routed through them. As like student survey, the teacher survey was also routed through the gatekeepers with a link on google forms. The researcher constantly followed up with the gatekeepers on floating of the questionnaires only to hear that they had been floated but with no ensuing action. This surfaced up during interactions with the faculty; while seeking (almost canvassing) their support for filling up the survey questionnaires. Cognizance of this fact perplexedthe researcher.

The surveys themselves experienced inertia both from the students and the staff. Tackling survey inertia for the staff was attempted initially (in agreement with the leadership) through an announcement in the weekly staff meeting which did not materialise (or perhaps was not allowed to materialise) considering many other announcements lined up that day. The request did

subsequently find space in the staff newsletter, but the impact was considerably limited. Apprehensions about the staff survey were shared with the Principal during a casual, chance encounter. Though cutting through hierarchy was resorted to, the Principal readily gave consent to the proposals and the survey received maximum respondents only after his intervention. Did this pick in survey response after Principal's intervention find any correlation with (un)ethical dispositions of the school community? To overcome inertia in the student survey the last push was given by making special announcements requesting students to fill up survey questionnaires. These announcements were made by the researcher visiting different 'house-rooms'encouraging participation.[16]Thus, negotiating high tides of gatekeeping transmuted data collection 'experience' into a scouting 'exercise' for the researcher. This pressurized the researcher to depend upon key informants.

Key informants play a crucial role in data collection, being not only a major source of information but also providing insights that are otherwise difficult to obtain using the given tools of observations and interviews alone. Limiting the researcher's diffusion into the school community through subtler acts limited the opportunities of building relationships which could act as key informants to collect the unregulated information filtered through. It was only with the passage of time that some bonds could be fostered with select members of the school community. These resulted from organically fostered friendships rather than being forced upon or fabricated to suit research interests. In such a case, these individuals acting as 'key informants' helped fill in the gaps left by the 'ideal' responsibility of the school at the manifest level (in terms of helping to keep the researcher abreast with the institution) besides at the latent level by providing understandings beyond the brackets of a given bandwidth of being a researcher.

Lastly, the novelty of the subject also acted as a barrier due to differing perspectives and understandings of EfP. So much so that some apprehensions were shared about the researcher's actions/questions not finding acceptance with the members of the community. The community at times found researchers' engagements, not in any correlation to the (pedestrian) idea of Peace. This may have been due to the limited understanding of the category of significance (the idea of peace) but created additional challenges for engagement with the respondents.The eclecticism of the term 'peace' subjected it to a haze of misinterpretations as well.

> Looks like people are misunderstanding or not understanding the concept of Peace. The kind of questions you are asking, people are not able to correlate it through the perspective of peace and one staff was apprehensive of what you are trying to look at. She says, 'is she trying to look at if we physically abuse our children?'says a senior member in the leadership of the School

(From the field notes, High School building, Rolland School, 2018)

This propriety of the term 'peace' was exploited by the gatekeepers to encourage the researcher to function within the 'safe' bandwidth of inquiry and to dissuade her from exploring the contested narratives which might bring complexities of the social realities of the school. To dwell upon the positives, the most useful conversations happened when social actors had their passions chartered to understand and reflect the larger educational narrative of the school. Though it came less often but did come when there was an empathetic understanding of the researcher. In addition, the institutional actors were vociferous on issues which ring true to their hearts and were relevant to the research. This was crucial since it is 'social actors' active interpretation of their life world which is the essential part of 'new style' ethnography'(Reeves 2010:320). Some other occasions provided for uninhibited conversations due to few social actors who were to shortly leave the school and, hence, had no qualms about speaking more freely. This adds an important dimension to the quality of the data due to systemic regimentations and gatekeeping rigidities.

Such data reflected understandings which surfaced the gap between school's normative discourses and reality. It was these informal conversations called as they occur 'naturally' (Woods 1986:31) that was (as it remains) a good means of data collection. To cite one such casual encounters with a staff who has had a long association with the school in different capacities starting off being a parent to the kids who studied in this school. He shares his concern about how the quality of education has gone down the hill over the years. He says 'Its hard time for us just giving the students a lesson in basic courtesy. But they don't learn'. His involuntary opinion as an insider shared casually during an informal encounter, for instance, substantiates the access constraints. It was this intimacy with the field that the gatekeepers were most cautionary about. This reflected in suggestions like the following:-

> 'Whenever you are talking to somebody and find the conversation or excerpts from the conversation relevant to be used for your research, inform them 'a priori', said a member of the leadership of the school'.

(From the field notes, Dining Hall, Rolland School, 2018)

This was much in perspective with their inability to understand the ethnographic nuances. Such restrictions only dilute the vivacity of qualitative study like this one. But as an imperative of ethnography, it was not taken as a politically neutral practise. It was considering the discursive positions of the informants, that the authors interpreted and presented their experiences (Lu and Horner 1998). There were also instances where despite the researcher sharing a good rapport with the institutional actors, they often restrained from systemic discussions. The public acknowledgement of not uncovering the 'lifeworld' communicated a dominant sense of loyalty to the school and its community.

> It was the fag end of the duration of the study. An institutional actor with whom I have developed a bit of friendliness checks on my wellbeing and the progress of the study on the breakfast table. I tell him that it is in its concluding stages. He checks if I have been able to get what I wanted. I tell him that I will be glad if he can add layers to my understanding through his perspectives. He responds telling me that, 'you know this man..., he got me here…. he has been amazing with me…… despite being a small stakeholder I often get to drink with him…… he holds me in high personal regard………… and, it is in his honour I should better keep mum. And you know what, discrepancies; they exist everywhere, what's the big deal'

(From the field notes, Dining Hall, Rolland School, 2018)

Hence, it was sometimes due to the strong sense of community bounded cohesion that there were instances when despite the prodding, the school actors politely resisted to open themselves up. Fewer voices of defiance could be indicative of the fact that the community stands bonded together or alternately may be suggestive of a lack of space for critical engagement. Though in the instant case the former seemed prevalentthe sense the researcher imbibed but largely the communication within the members of the community was strong and uninhibited and interactions between members were frequent and cohesive. Hence, the information about what thrives in a school culture was widespread, reinforced and became a 'social fact'.[17] Thus,these diverse constraint-mechanisms reinforced researcher's presence as an 'outsider' and as someone not part of the community. Hence, it is essential to note that the engagement with the school did not progress on the lines the authors planned. The 'felt' transgression, wherein the school perceived researcher's presence and movements as an assault to their privacy was manifest in its 'willingness' to *even* terminate the study at one point of time. Perils of being a researcher layered up with school's non-endorsing and threatening stance pushed the gates towards a perfect storm at a personal level.

Mechanics of control

Gatekeeping experiences also found expression in the social constraintsfor the researcher. The constraints were accomplished interactionally through *everyday* encounters of the school actors. Limiting this communication by the gatekeepers was an attempt to limit the researcher's scope to 'thrive' in the study. Through subtler cues of body language and even through small acts and words, the researcher felt unwelcomed. This often created a sense of institutional marginalisation. Episodes of sparse and sporadic interactions made it difficult for the researcher to learn about the institution's realities. Hence, the scope to gauge the institutional dimensions was regularly negotiated by the contextual factors.

Controls were accomplished through various ways and means. Primarily, all possible visual cues which might be indicative of the researcher's inclusion in the community were avoided by the gatekeepers. For example, the decision not to provide on-campus accommodation 'limited' the opportunities of sustained observation of the 'imponderabilia of actual life' (Malinowski 1922:21) and building proximate relationships with the community. It was more about the researcher's presence and cohabiting in the school campus than just a matter of accommodation. But from the school's perspective, it essentially was an attempt to keep the researcher away from the informalities which had the potential to lay bare intricacies and complexities of the institutional realities. Similarly, being denied access to the school email Id not only proved to be a non-verbal cue and a visible marker of the researcher's non-membership to the school community but also made it difficult to figure out activities and events (points of interaction with the field). Even information about standard school practices like the Assemblies, House-rooms came with sustained observation for some period and after seeking clarifications. At times, even basic information which the school would gladly have shared was left to accidental chances. Instances included getting to know of a school department hosting a special conference on issues of environment and sustainability, school staff volunteering for English language training classes for the Indian ground staff of the school or the school hosting Hindi language learning session for its non-Indian staff.

However, the gatekeepers were closely monitoring the movement of the 'researcher' than of the 'research'. During the period of the study, the researcher 'felt' being closely observed. Ironically, observations featured from both sides of the spectrum. There were also instances where researcher's inquiries, activities and actions were being filtered to the gatekeepers or were being inquired about by the gatekeepers *themselves*. The public display of the researcher being monitored, and her presence and activities being inquired about, naturally led people drawing themselves away from her over social interactions since gatekeeping have subliminal effects. These acts of subtler controls not only affected the nature of gatekeepers' relationship with the researcher but also the researcher's relationship with the institution. It affected the nature of engagements and relationships because actions carry their own social cost. Mistrust, suspicion, not being sympathetic came along as natural reflections of gatekeeping and featured as limiting and constraining aspect of interactions with the community members. Thus, gatekeeping - charged with intent and meaning - created challenges and ambiguities in interactions because 'co-construction of this interactional data was happening in the shadow of researcher's relationship with the gatekeeper'(Campbell et al. 2006:117). Again, to take an example, after the classroom observation sessions there were times when requests for the course curriculum of the subject being taught were deferred (possibly) as the teachers were unsure of whether it is something 'safe' to be shared without the management's permission. There were also times when some teachers were antipathetic to the researcher's presence in

their classrooms. The following chain of events for a classroom observation session is indicative of this.

> While most of my other classes get cancelled for the day, I approach a high school social science teacher to join his class session for today. Being in conversation with him suggested that in words he sounds 'no objection' to be a party to his class but his body language and the intonation suggests disapproval. He said:'what I am teaching today perhaps won't be of any great interest to you'. I go randomly visit his class the next day, with a prior email to the all-academic staff of the school that I shall be in and out of classes without intimation for a week. Little did I know that despite a prior intimation from my end, my entrance would be marked by a sense of apprehension with him.He says 'I am just screening a film today and I am sure it's not *that*peaceful'. The following day when I approach him again,he sounds a regret saying that 'it is a test for them today'. He abruptly asked the researcher, *what am I looking at?*

(From the field-notes, High School Building, Rolland School, 2018)

It was these experiences of diverse constraints which not only underscored the institutional complexities but also the conception of relational values of peace professed by school in their vision statements.Thus, thepersistent controls by the diverse actors led to subtler forms of resistance which made it difficult for the researcher to actively associate with the everyday activities. Though there are rare opportunities when the researcher was invited to house parties or any faculty or staff get-together. These windows of opportunities often helped the researcher to shed the loneliness away. It was only very gradually and way later in time that the researcher was able to develop a relationship with some of the institutional actors.

Cathartic Reflections

Ethnographic fieldwork often involves experiences of solitude and isolation. The distinction being that isolation is given and solitude is self-induced. Solitude for leading ethnography was marked by moving away from one's own self to that of an 'insider'. But it was encounters of 'isolation' marked by gatekeeping efforts underscored enormous personal meanings. It communicated ethnographer's 'foreignness' and 'otherness'. They resulted in a variety of negative emotions to funnel through the social exchange processes affecting the strength of the 'inside'.

This confirms the importance of personal vignettes in ethnographic researches since it operationalizes on a human-to-human spectrum Thus, they not only add to representational richness and reflexivity of gatekeeping

experiences (Humphrey 2005), but they also have epistemological implications in ethnographic researches. The expressions of reality with the researcher being 'human' also shape ethnographic expressions. Thus, the cause of being 'human' with the condition of being an 'ethnographer' guides the analysis.

Therefore, building trust and rapport are the most important factors in institutional ethnographies. Often, isolation largely stemmed from distrust. This created a sense of otherness as the researcher 'felt' theconstraints of freedom. In one instance, when the researcher experienced a malfunction in her personal computer, a request for 'temporary' access to the school systems was abruptly denied due to the perceived apprehensions about providing access to the data files on the drives. Thus, the researcher did not get to see any acknowledgement of her needs; even during the vulnerable situations. The emotions forming out of suspicion, mistrust also got transmuted into a sense of exclusion. Through the transition of this journey, the researcher felt emotionally accustomed to the sense of otherness leading to a nagging sense of anxiety and fear, adding to the sense of *helplessness* and loss of excitement. The 'felt' paranoia even led the researcher to experience fringe thoughts about the people who spoke freely to her being 'implants' to gauge the researcher's 'density of engagements' by the school. This validates the understanding that social and inner experiences of researchers affect their interpretation of human behaviour (Hedican 2006:23). But with the passage of time, acknowledging barricades of gatekeeping, researcher re-oriented herself to not become a subject matter of any controversy. These were the times which marked the sense of encouragement to foster agency amongst vulnerability with the researcher; agency to navigate fieldwork without 'being imprisoned by immediacy its own details' (Geertz 1973:24).

There is a gender dimension to this vulnerability. Being 'female' researcher also had its own implications in India. Navigating interactions entailed working in the fuzzy boundaries of maintaining professional distance vis-à-vis establishing personal connects. Traversing these grey areas, many a time, left the researcher to experience vulnerabilities of gender in a patriarchal social world. Ethical considerations for the research were not only important to the school but for the researcher as well. This led researcher to maintain 'due' restrain while entering not restricted yet uninvited spaces of interaction. The Principal of the school hosts 'Open House' for new staff for the year and a trip to a nearby recreational site as a team building measure. The researcher not being on the school's email list remained officially uninvited to these events and exercised restrain from these engagements despite them serving as a potential window for understanding institutional realities. Hence, cultural intelligence, normative expectations of behaviour, reflexivity, sensitivity, perceptive smelling guided the actions of the researcher. To a large extent, this gave the researcher a greater leverage to present herself well into those complexities.

In addition, there were moments of classical fieldwork dilemmas. The researcher was observing the school not only for the research documentation but got sufficiently engaged in contested narratives to the extent of sharing and discussing them as well. The reflections of these were not taken well and often furthered the tightness of gatekeeping. Many other times, it also demanded walking the thin line of ethically marked behaviour, especially in proximate relationships. Friendly meetings were never appropriated as opportunistic moments for data collection (Thapan 2006:244). But trying circumstances like these have a surprising impact on the metamorphoses of the personality. It brought the researcher the skilling at the art of being 'perceived' by other people; impression management and helping her come out from her own shell. Her own personality as introvert transformed by adjusting with the shades of being an 'ethnographer', which involved talking to people and initiating conversations thus, transgressing limitations of researcher's own personality.

Conclusion

Thus, the paper highlights the complexities of gatekeeping in ethnographic fieldwork which became inherently political in nature. It underscores that gatekeeping efforts are made of institutional ideologies. This affirms a perspective that gatekeeping functions beyond the itemized and routine ways of decision making,as a sophisticated process. It is situated in the implications of the critical positionality of the researcher and researched vis-à-vis the asymmetry of power structures. The data often gets constructed through the 'negotiated'interactions with its own contextual uncertainties. Such gatekeeping is achieved by the social construction of realities and functions in silence at a systemic level.These muted tones of gatekeeping mechanisms were visible through the tenuous balance between different actors in their relationship with the researcher, in cues of body language suggestive of researcher's disengagements with some of them, at times polite and at times upfront dismissal of sharing of information, in intentional and pre-emptive terms and conditions of facilitating the research.

These discursive ways of gatekeeping resulted in subtler controls, which reflected in institutional actors' desperations to find all possible excuses during the data collection. Sophistications of gatekeeping found expressions in absence of 'no', because 'no' is often 'old fashioned'. It reflected in institutional actors' 'hesitations' which meant 'no'. These hesitations found reflections when institutional actors use to stop reciprocating, get quiet, appear tense and stiff, avoid making eye contact, pause or slow down the tempo of interactions. Hence, the context of data collection itself became the data. This subscribes to the narrative of EfP where 'way is the goal'; here 'way was the data'.This also underscores an understanding of dismissal of pedestrian understandings of consent in fieldworks.

Disclaimer: For the purpose of ethical masking, the name of the school used in the article is a pseudonym. All the details which can potentially reveal the identity of the school or the participants has also been de-identified to maintain anonymity.

Notes

1   The average teacher-student ratio mandated by GoI is 1:30 (MHRD Report, 2017) https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Student-Teacher%20Ratio.pdf, accessed on 17th January 2020).

2   The International Baccalaureate (IB), formerly known as the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO), founded in 1968 is an international educational foundation headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The IB offers an education for students from age 3 to 19, with four programmes which focus on teaching students critical and independent thinking, and inquiry with care and logic. To teach these programmes, Schools must be authorized by the IB (https://www.ibo.org/about-the-ib/ accessed on 17th January 2020). Advanced Placement (AP) is a program in the United States and Canada created by the College Board which offers college-level curricula and examinations to high school students" (https://ap.collegeboard.org). Accessed on 17 January, 2020)

3   The fieldwork period was between April and December 2018.

4   Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgement, comparisons and display as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change-based on rewards and sanctions(both material and symbolic). The performances of (individual subjects and organisations) serves as a measure of productivity and output, or of display of 'quality' or moments of promotion or inspection" (Ball 2003:216). "It has profound consequences on nature of teaching and learning and inner life of a teacher(ibid: 226)

5   According to Weber, Ideal type is a methodological tool. It is a way of investigating selectivity. An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more point of view and by synthesis of great many diffused, discreet, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomenon, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. In other words,reality is looked from a certain point of view (as told by the researcher) andbuilds a model of reality highlighting only those elements which are relevant from only that point of view (Weber 1949:90).

6   The diversity of the school community, its setting in natural environment, a holistic curriculum, and its deep educational philosophy.

7   Reflected in school's mandate, vision, mission and educational philosophy.

8   'In principle and in the substance of your proposed research, we want to make clear that we fully support this project and anticipate that the findings will be of significance for us, as a School. This line of inquiry is of great value to us.' (Excerpt from the letter of approval for the study, 2nd April 2018).

9   Ability in terms of ease to find patronage for the study and disability in terms of difficulties of gatekeeping (reflected in forthcoming paragraphs).

10   On 11th January, 2018

11   On 9th February, 2018

12   Adaptive Preferences are 'preferences that persons would not choose to have. It does not mean that the persons that have them did not make choices. Nor does it mean that only preferences that have been consciously chosen are non-adaptive'. (Khadar, 2009:185).

13   On 31st August, 2018

14   On 4th April, 2018

15   Herron's (2018) ethnographic fieldwork provides similar accounts of relational complexities, ethical frictions, ambiguities and emotional vulnerabilities of educational ethnographers working in school settings.

16   Houserooms are half an hour slot wherein a class gets together to discuss / deliberate plans, activities, and other important announcements.

17   Social facts are ways of acting, thinking, feeling which can exercise an external constraint on an individual member, which are generally diffused through a given collectivity and which exist in their own life independent of individual manifestation. They develop when a collectivity of human beings who live in a morphological setting (geographical), develop social currents (shared beliefs and ideas). When these currents get institutionalized in time, they become social facts (Durkheim, 1982:50).

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