Chapter IV

Methodology and Methodological Challenges from the Field

Introduction:

The present chapter brings forth the methodology adopted to carry out the study and the methodological challenges faced in the process. The chapter is classified into four broad sections. The first section states the rationale, objectives and the research questions that guided the study. It further lists down operational definitions used in the study. The second section highlights the methodology adopted by the researcher from the day of inception of the idea of the research till the day the researcher exited from the research setting and began writing the thesis. In continuation, the third section discusses the methodological approach adopted to conduct the study and highlights how various methods were brought to use during the process of fieldwork. Lastly it discusses the ethical consideration taken into account while conducting the study followed by its limitations. The last and fourth section brings out the various methodological challenges faced by me while conducting the study in a conflict zone. Focus has been laid on the challenges thrown by the field and how attempts were made to overcome them and negotiate for spaces.

1. The Study:

1.1. Rationale:

The ongoing conflict, in the central Indian tribal belt, has been posing a challenge to the Indian State for over four decades now. There have been debates centring around this conflict amongst the intelligentsia, activist, academicians, policy makers, civil society groups and researchers. At the centre stage of these debates and discussions, the State of Chhattisgarh has emerged as a discourse and has been objectified suitting individual interests. It is often looked at as an entity that is characterised by conflict and violence. These debates and discourses have been dominating the scenario, but not much has been
stated about life and everyday living experiences of the native people of the region. This overarching phenomenon of conflict characterised by frequent violent confrontations between State and Maoist have completely shifted focus away from the everyday life of these tribal population who have been caught in this crossfire. In the midst of this, children have emerged as the hitherto ignored population that has been silently bearing its brunt.

Looking at the larger picture of children growing in situations of armed conflict, it can be stated that mostly the studies in this domain are based on adult interpretation and emerge from the psycho-medical paradigm that looks into the psychiatric and psychological impacts of conflict on children and projects children as passive and vulnerable victims of conflict in need of constant care and protection. However, there remains a major gap in understanding children, their knowledge and their position in such adversities. Further it is argued that ‘investigation is needed to balance the weight of research based on psycho-medical paradigm with work that looks at, for example, how conflict, affects the socio-economic roles and integrations and intergenerational relations’ (Boyden and Berry 2004: xvi- xvii) and also the social interactions, response to adversity and children’s agency in the context of the everyday social world within which children live.

In the context of Chhattisgarh, the predicament of the tribal people and children in specific has hitherto been overlooked. Therefore, identifying this major gap, this study is an attempt to bring the focus back on to the children and explore their everyday life in this conflict zone. It also attempts to highlight that living in situations of conflict for years, has led to the shaping of children’s subjective understanding of the conflict, the environment around and their social world within which they are growing. The study, thus, aimed at moving beyond the adult interpretation and explored how children internalised, gave meaning to and also resisted the adult discourse, how they reconciled their everyday experiences with adult interpretations of conflict and how they practiced their agency to respond to the adverse situation like the one prevailing in Chhattisgarh. The study has attempted to accorded voice to children, treating them as competent active social actors in their own right.
1.2. Objectives of the Study:

1. To explore and analyse the everyday life in an erstwhile Salwa Judum camp with focus on children

The counter insurgency campaign Salwa Judum played an integral part in this conflict. Despite having been declared unconstitutional in the year 2011, the Salwa Judum camps continue to exist highlighting the aftermath of the campaign. The study will highlight the everyday life of the displaced people with special focus on children. It will closely look at the everyday life being led by the people in the camp in regards to creation of meaningful spaces, the nuances of everyday life, its challenges, negotiations etc. Children’s everyday life in the camp will also be looked at through their experiences, their efforts to adjust to the new life and the everyday life challenges being faced by them.

2. To explore children’s lived experiences of the conflict and analyse their meaning making and understandings emerging from it

Children growing in this situation of conflict have been affected by it in some way or the other wherein a large number of children have lived through the turbulent times of Salwa Judum, witnessed killings of family members from closed quarters, experienced conflict-induced displacement and separation from family, etc. The diverse lived experiences of children will be explored and analysed and attempts will be made to understand why, how and what meanings and subjective interpretation do children draw from these.

3. To explore and analyse the everyday social world of children

The everyday social world of children as created by them, comprising of their peers, caregivers, teachers, security force personnel etc. will be explored and analysed. Social world will be explored in close context to the ashramshala where children live and spend most of their time. Family as an integral part of their social world of children will also be explored.
4. To explore and analyse children’s agency in adverse situation

Children in situations of armed conflict are looked at as vulnerable, passive agents in need of constant care and protection. An attempt will be made to explore children’s agency in this adverse situation. Efforts will be made to closely look at the everyday life of children and explore how children exhibit their constructive nature and make use of their agency in the ashramshala or in the camp in order to adjust and adapt to a new life and respond to adversities.

5. To study the context of conflict in Chhattisgarh

When one is attempting to study children living in situations of conflict in Chhattisgarh, it becomes utmost important to understand the larger context of this conflict within which these children are located. Hence, efforts will be made to understand the context holistically.

1.3. Research Questions:

1. What are children’s and camp residents’ everyday life and living experiences?
2. What meaning do children make of the context they live in?
3. What kinds of social interactions take place between children and adults and amongst children in the everyday life?
4. How has the conflict altered the social roles and responsibilities of children vis-à-vis their everyday life?
5. How do children exercise their agency as a child and negotiate spaces for themselves on an everyday basis in the conflict zone?

1.4. Operational definitions:

1.4.1. Children: According to Article 1 of The United Nations Conventions on Rights of a Child (UNCRC 1989), any person below eighteen years of age has been defined as a child. However, in the present study, the definition of children is limited to the boys of Kasoli ashramshala and Pre-Metric boys’ hostel along with all those living in Kasoli Camp. The definition of children in the present study does not limit to age, mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, with no authentic age proof, it is difficult to ascertain the age of a
child here. Secondly, pertaining to the non-availability and accessibility of education in the region due to decadal long presence of conflict, a large number of children are newly enrolled and have been mainstreamed into the education system very late. This has led to a mix age group of children in every class. In order to keep the study all inclusive and non-discriminatory, all those studying in the aforementioned settings were considered as children.

1.4.2. On-going conflict: The term on-going conflict appearing in the thesis refers to the larger context of the State-Maoist conflict existing in Chhattisgarh which can be considered on-going in the everyday life also. Although, conflict is not physically visible in the camps and ashramshala in terms of encounters, bloodshed, violence, killing etc., but is manifested through the omnipresent armed security forces, the restricted lives, phenomenon of displacement and separation. The term, on-going conflict thus, refers to the larger ambit of the conflict within which people continue to live in the present times as well.

1.4.3. Epicentre of Conflict: In the present study, Chhattisgarh has been referred to as the epicentre of this ongoing conflict. The reference comes out of the stated facts, figures and findings of various government departments, fact-finding reports of non-governmental organisations and articles by independent scholars and journalists. Especially from the time of the launch of the counter insurgency campaign Salwa Judum, Chhattisgarh has been ranked on the top in terms of the number of incidents of violence between the State and the Maoists resulting in massive numbers of killing, separation, displacement etc. Therefore, the term epicentre of the conflict has been used in the context of Chhattisgarh.

1.4.4. Significant others: The term ‘significant other’\(^{27}\) is referred to those who are of sufficient importance in an individual’s life to affect the individual’s emotions, behaviour, and sense of self. These may include family members, close friends, mentors, peers etc. It is argued that through interactions with significant others and their responses to one's behaviour, an individual gains a sense of who he or she is, and comes to understand how to act in a given context and role. In the present study significant

\(^{27}\) Retrieved from http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2013_chunk_g978140512433125_ss1-119
others is referred to those individuals who have a significant influence on the lives of children. These comprise of family members, peers, teachers and caregivers at the ashramshala and security force personnel and some influential individuals in the camp.

1.4.5. *Experiencing the Conflict:* ‘Experiencing the conflict’ in the present study refers to the past lived experiences and the present everyday living experiences of children. These experiences may range widely from witnessing the death of parents and other family members, witnessing killings and violence, experiencing and witnessing displacement and separation from family during and after the times of Salwa Judum, experiences of having security force personnel in and around the camp at all times, experiencing restriction of movement and experiencing the everyday challenges of living in a guarded camp.

1.4.6. *Displacement:* Displacement, in the present study, has primarily been referred to the phenomenon of uprooting of people from their settlements back in villages (voluntary or forced) and settling in the camps established by the State government during the times of Salwa Judum. A large number of people in Chhattisgarh continue residing in these camps and leading a displaced life.

2. *Inception of the Research:*

*Chhattisgarh,* a name that now holds an incredible position in my life not only in capacity of a researcher but an individual too. My first exposure to Chhattisgarh was through a fact finding report. I was still in the process of finalising the topic of the study. During my search around the broad area of children and armed conflict, I came across a lot many articles on children in situations of civil war, political violence, and terrorism, mostly centered around the Sub-Saharan nations and others from Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka etc. but not much on India. Literature around the ongoing violent conflicts in India, mostly positioned the State- Maoist conflict as posing a threat to the Indian State for over four decades now. The literature mostly positioned it either as the biggest internal security threat or as a conflict emerging from the State- market nexus for appropriation of resources, highhandedness of government officials.
To my surprise and disappointment, barring a few journalistic articles, there was next to negligible mention of children of this region. It made me uncomfortable. The seeds for my thought were sown there. I started reading more on this issue and mostly came across debates and articles focusing on the cause and effects of this conflict. Out of all the states affected by this conflict, government reports and other fact finding documents highlighted Chhattisgarh as the emerging center of the State-Maoist conflict with the year 2005 being the most turbulent year in terms of violence, displacement and deaths, having launched the counter insurgency campaign called Salwa Judum. The plight of the adivasis from the districts of Dantewada, Bastar, Narayanpur and Sukma (both carved out of Dantewada later) were highlighted. My reading around Chhattisgarh continued and it was then that my doctoral supervisor suggested me to go and visit these places and see for myself, the everyday life of people in State with the a focus on children. I, therefore, took on a month long pilot study in three districts of Chhattisgarh.

2.1. Conducting a Pilot Study and Selecting the Research Setting:

A month long pilot study was carried out in May-April 2012. It was primarily undertaken to get an exposure to the field about which I had only heard and read. Secondly, pilot study was also undertaken in order to visit the potential sites for data collection and finalising them accordingly. On 15th May 2012, I landed in Raipur. The mercury had touched 44 degrees by then, however, it was never an impediment. The pilot study was conducted in three districts of Chhattisgarh, namely, Dantewada, Narayanpur and Sukma and one district of Andhra Pradesh namely Khammam. The former three districts are the southern most districts of Chhattisgarh and were selected on the grounds of being the most sensitive in terms of the conflict as the Maoists activities are mostly concentrated in these districts. Khammam, that shares its borders with Sukma, was chosen because of the fact that during the times of Salwa Judum a large number of tribal people migrated from Chhattisgarh and settled in Khammam. The whole idea behind migrating was to escape the fatal dangers of the conflict and maintain a neutral stand, not take sides with either the Maoists or the State (see Appendix I, Map 3 for internal displacement).

Brief visits and stays were made in ashramshalas and erstwhile Salwa Judum camps in all aforementioned districts. Interactions were carried out with people and children in order to get a sense of their life and present day living experiences. It further
helped in getting a sense of the factors to be taken cognizance of while finalising a site for this research work. During the pilot study, Ashramshala and Salwa Judum Camps emerged as two settings having an integral position in the present day lives of not just children but others too. Another rationale behind choosing ashramshalas in specific was that children from interiors and remote villages come here due to non-availability and defunct schools. Reaching out to maximum number of children through the ashramshala was the most feasible option available. On the other hand, camps were chosen as a large number of children alongwith their families live here. Camp life in itself is a different experience for these children. Hence, it was realised that locating oneself inside a camp would also give a good exposure to the everyday camp life of its residents and children.

These two settings emerged as the only options available to me wherein a direct contact could be developed with people of the region as visiting and stationing oneself in villages was not feasible and permitted by the district authorities. Hence, it was decided that Ashramshalas and Salwa Judum camps would be covered in these three districts of Chhattisgarh during the pilot study and thereafter a site for fieldwork would be chosen. The following visits were made during the pilot study:

- **Ashramshala: In Narayanpur district:** Ramkrishna Mission Ashram was visited. *In Dantewada district:* Kasoli Ashramshala and two other ashramshalas run by Non-Government Organisations namely, PRAYAS and Tomorrow’s Foundation were visited. *In Sukma district:* Dornapal Ashramshala was visited.

- **Erstwhile Salwa Judum Camps: In Dantewada district:** Camps in Kasoli, Bangapal and Chitalanka were visited. *In Sukma district:* Camps in Dornapal and Errabore were visited. A camp for the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kewak, Khammam district was visited.

The sensitivity of the area, permission by the district authorities, feasibility in context of a female researcher, etc. posed challenges in selecting the site for fieldwork. Finally, keeping all these factors in mind, Kasoli ashramshala (district Dantewada) located inside a Salwa Judum camp came up as the most feasible option. The research setting had an added advantage of being located inside a camp and thus, gave exposure to camp life and ashramshala life of children and others too. It was also important to decide upon a site wherein lodging for a long duration would be possible for the researcher. Further during the pilot study, it was realised that as the study focussed on
the everyday life of children, ashramshala would be an appropriate setting as it will provide the researcher with space and time along with an opportunity for observation and interaction with a large number of children under one roof and over a longer duration.

### 2.1.1. Gaining Permission and Getting Started:

Researching in a conflict zone did entail some level of ground work and administrative formalities prior to conducting the fieldwork. The ground work was done during the pilot study wherein sites for data collection were finalised based on feasibility, logistics and other factors. But the research did entail some amount of administrative work too in terms of seeking permission from the district administration. During the pilot study, initial contacts were developed with district authorities who were then briefed about the study and my further plans for it. I took on a ten hours long road journey from Raipur to Dantewada. Before I started the fieldwork in Kasoli, I made a visit to the District Collector of Dantewada with whom I had established prior communications via emails and telephone calls. A copy of my research proposal and student bonafide certificate from TISS was submitted to him for any referral. I briefed him about my plans and he gave me a go ahead to conduct my study. Once I entered Kasoli, I was by myself and did not pay any visit to any of the officials or seek their logistic help whatsoever in those six months.

### 2.2. The Research Setting:

The study was conducted in an ashramshala located inside a *Salwa Judum camp* in *Kasoli village, Dantewada* district of Chhattisgarh (see Appendix 1, Map 4). Kasoli is situated at a distance of approximately 333 kilometres from the State’s capital Raipur and 30 kilometres from the district headquarters of Dantewada. Kasoli comes under Geedam sub-division of the district Dantewada and falls 5 kilometres inside the National Highway (NH) 16 (see Appendix I, Map 5)

*Kasoli* camp is home to a total population of approximately eight hundred persons. A total of approximately five hundred boys in an ashramshala and seventy boys residing in a Pre- Metric hostel, both of which are located inside the camp, also stay in Kasoli. Kasoli ashramshala was my home away from home, for a period of six months starting from 18th November 2012 to 30th May 2013. With such large number of children
around, there was never a dull moment during my entire stay. During the span of fieldwork, I also visited three other camps, namely Chitalanka camp (Dantewada district), located on a major road close to NH 16 around 3 kilometres from district headquarters, Dornapal camp (Sukma district) on NH 221 around 35 kilometres from district headquarters and Jagargunda camp (Sukma district) one of the most sensitive and remotely located camps on NH 221 around 85 kilometres from district headquarters. Efforts were made to bring out the prevailing life conditions of people in these camps and draw a contrast between those of Kasoli.

2.3. Research Participants:

The study focussed on the everyday life of children living in situations of conflict in Chhattisgarh. With this prime objective, the participants in the study were boys residing in Kasoli ashramshala and pre-metric hostel in Kasoli camp. However, children were, not looked at in isolation but in relation to their significant others in their everyday life. The other participants include the significant others, who in the study comprised of the residents of the camp, parents and siblings (if family of the child resided inside the camp), teachers and caregivers at the ashramshala, security force personnel and other influential individuals in the camp.

3. Taking an Ethnographic Approach:

In the larger realm of researches in conflict zones, it is believed that most of the researchers had to rely upon historical sources and oral histories and thus, ‘there is a severe lack of field-based data from conflict zone as most of the studies are conducted post-conflict’ (Shah and Pettigrew 2009: 230). Conducting fieldwork in a conflict zone is considered challenging (Hoffman 2003; Kovats- Bernat 2002; Peritore 1990; Pettigrew et. al. 2003) with fieldwork in Chhattisgarh being no exception to it. From the obvious challenges that entailed the personal security related anxiety and feasibility of the study, challenge was also to choose the right approach to the study. As the study was attempting to look at children in their everyday life in a conflict zone, their lived experiences of the conflict that included highly sensitive issues of death of parents, siblings, and separation from family, the approach primarily had to be sensitive and not mechanical. Therefore, keeping all these factors in mind, an ethnographic approach to
the study was adopted. Ethnography can be defined as a ‘research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time’ (Aull 2008: 5).

Another challenge faced while conducting the study was not to put children and their significant others into a homogenous categories as all had experienced this conflict in different ways. Some had directly experienced and witnessed the conflict from closed quarters and some underwent the experiences of displacement and separation. Many people were caught in crossfire between the State and the Maoists wherein some were in support of State and its counterinsurgency strategies while others, did express their support to the Maoists. Hence, to capture this complex and dynamic reality that existed in the research setting was a challenge in itself. Looking at this reality of conflict and its manifestations to the participants with a pre-determined approach and method meant taking sides.

Therefore, an ethnographic approach was taken for the study wherein the complex realities of every life of people living amidst conflict situations could be captured with no pre-determined notions, ideas, theories or perceptions. Adopting an ethnographic approach helped in closely looking at and understanding the continuities, transformations, contradictions, tensions, negotiations done by people on an everyday basis. The study aimed at representing those people who are caught in this conflict and not simply reiterate on the discourses of the conflict. In this context, I was reminded of what Shah and Pettigrew (2009: 235) have stated, ‘this is not just story telling for the sake of story telling, but a record of the lives of people whose stories and points of views are rarely heard, who get homogenised in most other accounts- from both Maoist and anti-Maoists perspective- as ‘the people’.

‘Ethnography allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.’

(Prout and James 1990: 8-9)

Having an ethnographic approach also helped in long term engagement and gave me time and space to build rapport, which further lead to in-depth and nuanced
understanding of children’s words and actions and provided a perspective which helped in prioritising children’s voices and experiences. In order to follow the inductive approach, no prior theories and assumptions were taken while entering the field, in order to make space for the participants and their data to ‘speak’ and subsequently identify the themes, patterns and concepts emerging thereof. This approach also provided me the opportunity to share space with children for a long duration but also helped in closely looking at and understanding how this conflict has played a role and continues to play a role in their everyday lives in terms of affecting their socio-economic roles and development of their own meaning and understanding of the conflict and how they make sense of their environment.

3.1. Conducting the Ethnographic Study: Keeping the sensitivity of the topic in mind, the data collection was not carried out in haste but for duration of six months. This span of six months did not include any break or travel back home. During this span I stationed myself in the ashramshala in Kasoli, carrying out my study and engaging with children at various levels. The research methods and tools included- Participant Observation, Unstructured In-depth Interviews, Focus Group Discussions and Informal Discussions. I maintained a personal diary wherein I recorded the happenings of the day coupled with fieldnotes.

3.2. Researching participants in their natural setting: It is believed that collecting data in the ‘natural’ setting, i.e. which has not been set up for specific research purposes gives ethnographic work a distinction from the rest (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). In the present study, the ashramshala and camp provided the natural setting for children wherein it served as their school and also home at the same time. Children were thus, studied in their natural context: their everyday social world in the ashramshala and camp. As it is stated that the naturally occurring interactions are considered to be the foundation of understanding society (Adler and Adler 1987: 219), therefore an analysis of children’s everyday life and not that of a specific event was done.

Most of the interviews were conducted within the ashramshala but they never appeared formal and hence, did not seem to invite an additional pressure on children.
Same applied for the residents too. For the camp residents, the conversations were carried out within the camp but in an informal way, for e.g. while I went to collect milk for the ashramshala, I had a conversation with the man who was milking the cow. Efforts were made, not to put anyone out of their natural setting in their everyday lives.

3.3. **Researching the Everyday Life:** The focus of this ethnographic study was on the everyday life of children living amidst conflict situation in Kasoli. It attempted to highlight the nuances, negotiations, adjustments, challenges, strategies and meaningful spaces that children and their significant others have created while living amidst adversities and how it is in their everyday lives that these meanings are produced and reproduced. It thus, tries to shift the focus from the prevalent discourses of this conflict, and bring the focus on to the everyday life interactions occurring in the social world of children and their significant others. Lefebvre’s (1971) conception of everyday life seemed relevant here wherein he characterises the everyday life into two broad dimensions- misery and power of everyday. Misery comprises of the repetitive routine and activities of everyday. On the other hand, this everyday also encompasses the power to arrest the misery of this routinely repetitiveness and create a new everyday which again encounters misery and this intersection continues as part of everyday life.

In context of children living amidst conflict situations, the everyday life has brought misery in terms of being constrained to the camp, ashramshala and confined to a guarded life. However, at the same time the people in Kasoli (including children) have created ways of accepting and rejecting the despair in their everyday life while they are continuing to live in the larger context of conflict. Certeau (1984) has argued that the practices of everyday life create ‘spaces of freedom from an oppressive structure’ and according to him, ‘the tactics to escape from a given everyday life can be found in the repressive system itself’. In similar context, Scott (1985) and Guha (1983) present the ‘everyday’ as a space for resistance. Drawing from all these stated works, the study has explored the everyday life of children in this conflict zone.

3.4. **Becoming a Participant Observer:** Participant observation entails establishing oneself in a natural setting for a relatively long-term basis ‘in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in
that setting, and this comprises of one of the core activity of ethnographic fieldwork’ (Emerson et. al. 2001). Arguing in favour of long term fieldwork and participant observation, Utas (2004: 210) states that ‘researching in the field of children and their lives amidst conflict situations, these methods are of importance’ as the researcher is able to establish long-term personal contacts with the participants as these are very sensitive issues. It is this method of participant observation that many regard as having the greatest potential to engage children actively in the research (James 2001: 251).

Residing in the ashramshala inside the Kasoli Salwa Judum camp gave me the time and space to become a participant observer. As M. N Srinivas states ‘a way of carrying out participant observation involves the researcher leaving his academic and social milieu and taking up temporary roles’ (Srinivas 1975: 1393). I took up the role of a teacher and also of a caregiver to children in the ashramshala. Most importantly getting involved in the daily lives of these children made it possible for me to interact with them in a variety of physical and social settings and, in this way, witness a wide range of responses. Being a participant observer brought me close to the participants and gave me space not only observe them closely but also to establish relationship with them that was based on mutual trust and enabled me to ask personal sensitive questions with ease and did get thoughtful answers with relative ease too.

Participant observation during the fieldwork helped me for employment of direct research methods, like in-depth unstructured interviews and informal discussions etc. With passage of a couple of weeks, children looked at me like any other teacher at the ashramshala and not just an outside researcher. Stay at the ashramshala made me a part of it in on an everyday basis and also helped me spend a good quantity and quality time with these boys, mostly conversing in a casual manner in the ashramshala, while moving around in the camp, while washing clothes at the hand pump, sunday visit to Geedam mandi (vegetable market), while taking children to Geedam hospital almost every week and even at the chai tapri (local tea stall located right next to the camp’s entry check post). This long term residence with the children in the ashramshala helped me internalise the basic beliefs, fears, hopes, expectations and process of meaning making of the context of conflict within which the participants of the study lived. The subtle observations that were happening on an everyday basis while visiting mandi or mela (fair), or simply going to the pond for bathing, cooking and talking in the ashramshala.
kitchen, lying down and talking with the *didis* in their rooms post dinner, taught me how children produced and reproduced meaning.

Being a participant observer and living inside the camp often also gave me an additional opportunity to have an unstructured interview at any point of time with no prior planning. While having informal interactions, issues of my research interest often came up, I did not let go of such opportunities. Fife (2005: 101) has argued in similar context stating, ‘unstructured interviews can be looked at as a virtually invisible part of participant observation, which occurs every time a researcher participates in a conversation and, upon hearing a subject come up that interests him/her, decides to try to keep that particular conversation alive for a period of time’.

However, being a teacher did invite little hesitations and apprehensions in the minds of children during the initial days. However, with the passage of a couple of weeks, children started opening up. Although, by now they knew that I was a researcher, but my everyday conduct with them, made it easier for them to open up to me. I ate with them sitting on the rags provided by the ashramshala, served them food, washed utensils at the hand pump, broomed my room, played with them like a friend, taught them on regular basis and welcomed them anytime of the day to talk or simply wile away time. A room was vacated for me in order to give me enough space to carry out my research work. I appreciated the gesture of the ashramshala authorities, however, I requested two other teachers (both from Kasoli village) to come and stay with me. This helped me in two ways. One, I got an opportunity to stay with two local girls who gave me ample information, formal and informal, regarding the camp life and the times of Salwa Judum and everyday life challenges here. Secondly, staying with two local girls broke the ice between me and other teachers and caregivers of the ashramshala who were already in amicable relationship with these girls. Also the children, who were already comfortable talking to these teachers, automatically let me in into their personal spaces with ease. Adding on, during the daytime I kept the door of my room open for children as I did not want any sort of hierarchy to exist in my relation with them. This came as a strong thought within the first week of stay when one morning children categorically wrote outside my door “*room matem ka*” (Madam’s room) (see Appendix II). I considered the ‘door’ symbolic of the distinction between ‘*them*’ and ‘*I*. Hence, I let the doors open.
3.4.1. Attempt at learning the local dialect ‘Gondi’: Learning the language or local dialect of the people being researched is often considered an important aspect of fieldwork in ethnography. It is often stated that ‘it helps the researcher gain more trust, acceptance and rapport in the field under study’ (Ogbu 2008: 73). It is believed that as one immerses oneself in a group, one learns the cultural language as well as the spoken language and this enables one to begin to understand the group more fully (O’Reilly 2005: 95). However, especially in situations of armed conflict, there are practical constraints involved in terms of limited time period in hand. However it is still argued that ethnographer must do their best to that they can with their lower linguistic competence than is ideal (Tonkin 1984). Mead (1939) was one the first to suggest that when we argue in favour of learning the language or dialect of the people under study, one is not suggesting to attain a mastery over it for an effective fieldwork, but it is about being able to follow everyday conversations and basic questions and this is sufficient for many research purposes. Learning the local language, atleast, helps in establishing rapport and the process of learning the language can itself serve as an important data.

In context of my fieldwork, majority of people spoke and understood Hindi too. It was an added advantage to me as it helped me understand and analyse better. However, many people conversed in their native dialect Gondi followed by Halbi. However, Gondi was more prevalent. I believe it is a very difficult dialect to pick up however, reading it was relatively easy as it is written in Devnagri script. I wanted to learn Gondi at least at the basic conversational level wherein I would know how to greet someone, make basic conversations with people around. My two room-mates and many other people in the fieldwork setting, including young children in the ashramshala taught me Gondi. I made notes of it and practiced it on a regular basis. I realised that although, I was conversing at a very basic level however, it gave me a certain level of comfort in the setting. Although, attempts to learning the dialect did invite some embarrassing moments too, wherein children, didi and bhaiyas used to gather around and giggle. But as I started picking up, they all became my biggest teachers and supporters. I did get a mastery over a lot many statements. My day started with greeting people “Nimmale Mindanin?” (How are you?) or asking children “Nim Baatakimuntin?” (What are you doing?). As taking children to Geedam hospital was a regular task assigned to me, children often asked me where was I going in the morning, to which I, with much
confidence, replied, “Aspataal Dai Muntan” (I am going to the hospital). Living with children gave me enough time and scope to learn Gondi and thus, helped me build a good rapport.

3.5. **Interviewing the participants:** It is often stated that participant observation and interviewing go hand in hand in ethnographic researches and many of the data coming out of participant observation comes from informal interviewing in the field (Fontana and Frey 2000: 652). I conducted *In-depth unstructured interviews* with children, camp residents, teachers and care givers at the ashramshala, *focus group discussions* only with children and *informal discussions* with the security personnel and Salwa Judum activist in the camp etc. All these enriched my experience and understanding of the social-political and historical context in which these people are leading their daily lives. I carried out in-depth unstructured interviews with the research participants at all the possible times while in the process of carrying out participant observation. The approach to these in-depth unstructured interviews was informal and they seemed casual conversations having an implicit agenda. The informal approach was taken throughout this ethnographic study in an attempt to explore what children think and how they perceive their lives amidst the conflict situation on an everyday basis. ‘Informal interviews are considered to be useful in establishing and maintaining healthy rapport’ (Fetterman 2010: 41) which in the present study was of utmost importance as there was already the environment of trust and mistrust prevailing due to the presence of the conflict. Therefore, while conducting interviews on a sensitive issue one had to adopt an approach that not only brought out the complexities of the context but did it without imposing any prior categorisation that may itself limit the field of inquiry.

As the primary participants in the study were children who have lived through the turbulent times of the conflict, the approach had to be highly sensitive and not intruding in any manner. Mostly the interviews were kept open ended and free-flowing. The interviews were more like a conversation so that children did not get intimidated by the whole idea of being interviewed and also not to impose my own framework of ideas and thoughts over them. As I was staying with children, I did not face any time constraint to complete an interview. Ample time was given to children to encourage reflexivity so that children could delve into and express their own thought, bring out any sort of
contradictions that they faced in their everyday life along with their deep engrained fears, apprehensions and hope for a future. Children were not interrupted suddenly if the conversation took a different turn, but gradually attempts were made to bring the conversation back on the issues related to the research, although, sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not. I sometimes used some probing questions and that prompted to elicit more description. However, I was mindful to respect children’s willingness to share, to make sure that they do not become uncomfortable. The primary focus was to get children’s own perspectives, an insider’s view and this would not have been possible with imposition of questions on them. This approach allowed children to contribute more about the issues of their lives and living experiences of everyday.

However, I feel it is important to highlight how the initial few interviews conducted in the field did come with certain amount of challenge in terms of time and space. During the initial days of being a part of the ashramshala, I was too enthusiastic to conduct interviews and so I did not want to miss any single opportunity to have a conversation with children. This, later I realised, was impinging on the personal time of children sometimes. It did not take much time for me to realise that children needed to be interviewed at their own convenience and this helped me in conversing with them for a longer durations. On the other hand, finding a suitable place for interview was also a challenge, as during the first few days every child was curious to know what I was doing. Interviews in the first few days could not be conducted on a one-to-one basis. It did make me uncomfortable initially, but with the passage of time children seemed more comfortable to be interviewed in company of their friends. Hence, I never prohibited other children from being present as long as the participant was comfortable with it. However, with passage of time, interviews did not attract much attention.

3.6. Taking Narratives: It is believed that taking a narrative approach to explore and understand children’s accounts, one pays less attention in verifying the ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ of a story, and instead focusses on the meaning that the story has for the child and what it might convey about the way a child understands himself and his relationships with others (Holland et. al. 2008: 7). The study focusses majorly on the narratives and throughout the research extensive direct quotes from narratives are used that bring forth the first-hand account of lives of children. This also helped to look beyond the prevalent
discourses of this conflict and its affects and brought out the sense of the present everyday life and living experiences of children in this conflict zone. Hence, it can be stated that the central evidence in the present study is majorly drawn from the narratives of children who have experienced this conflict and continue to experience them.

I attempted to closely attend to the content of narrations (what was told), and also the process of narration (in process of telling) alongwith the unsaid silences. The non-verbal cues like the body gestures, facial expressions, etc. were also taken into account. The narratives were analysed holistically capturing the personal, interpersonal, socio-cultural, economic and political influences of the conflict on the lives of children and their significant others. Children were asked to narrate their life stories and experiences of growing in the conflict. It is often argued that ‘this process also facilitates an understanding of what children prioritise in their own minds and what they want to disclose to the researcher rather than assessing the levels to which they are affected by the issues that an adult nominates’ (Cook- Sather 2002; Lundy 2007). By paying attention to what children were narrating, I listened to what these children chose to talk by framing their own experiences of lived life and present day life in their own words, thus, challenging the dominant adult discourse about children and childhood. This led to recognising children as social actors.

A long-term stay with these children did lead to developing of good rapport which in turn led to large amount of sharing done by them. During the initial days, the responses by children used to be very brief and extremely polite with very stiff gestures. Gradually children became comfortable and spoke in depth about their past experiences and more so about their everyday life here. However, I would not say that they became less polite, but they opened up in a friendlier manner and often came up to me and asked me about my life and about the current research too.

3.7. Taking Field Notes: Ethnography is carried out through what Atkinson (1992: 5) calls the ‘double process of textual production and reproduction’. The process of writing down of an ethnographic work is on a day-by-day basis with writing of fieldnotes that are concerned with the observations and reflections from the field. Field notes are the brick and mortar of an ethnographic edifice (Fetterman 2010: 116). There is no concrete definition of what the field notes are. They mostly consist of the primary data from the daily observations and interviews. Fieldnotes can also be called the raw
data which is later used in the process of research writing and is then elaborated more for analyses (ibid; O’ Reilly 2005). While taking fieldnotes, one is not precise about what is being explored but takes it down as being relevant in the future. Therefore, ‘fieldnotes are usually messy and unruly’ (Marcus 1994). Fieldnotes are also selective in nature, as not everything can be captured and put under them. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 142) state that writing ‘fieldnotes is a trade-off between breadth of focus and detail’.

Fieldnotes were taken in the present study too. As there is a tendency to forget what is observed, thought or heard, efforts were made to carry a small note book everytime to jot down the highlights of an observation, interview or any other sort of sharing and then later the notes were processed and were written in a more detailed manner. I was well conscious of the fact that the memory fades quickly and the unrecorded information can easily be overshadowed by the subsequent events. As Fetterman (2010: 116-17) states that ‘too long a delay sacrifices the rich immediacy of concurrent notes’. However, many a times in the process of detailing the fieldnotes, it was felt that the content was not relevant for the study. However, nothing was eliminated from the notes till the end. Many a times the content that did not look important at the time fieldwork did look relevant at the time of writing the thesis. The fieldnotes contained details about the interviews and conversations with the participants. It included not just the highlights of what they said, but also the non-verbal cues like their abrupt silences, body gestures, eye contacts etc. Efforts were made to put little note about the context and who, when, where and what of the specific entry. This helped later in recollecting and detailing of the entry. I also experienced that with the passage of time and more immersion in the field alongwith a better clarity of the research objectives, the fieldnotes looked more focussed and directed than the initial ones.

3.8. **Personal Diary** was also maintained from the first day of the fieldwork till the exit. I recorded details about my day that included the details of the activities undertaken (observation made, informal conversation conducted) and also about the personal feelings, emotions, fears, apprehensions, doubts, embarrassments, etc. that I encountered during the day. The personal diary also captured my own inputs on specific events (observation or interview) that were highly subjective. It captured events wherein I felt
caught in a dilemma of the insider-outsider debate going on within my own self, times when I felt I was not needed in the ashramshala and times when children just held my hand and asked me not to leave ever. The personal diary became not just a mate to me but also an effective coping strategy against the adversities and uncertainties that prevailed around. However, some days my personal diary only read “I do not want to write anything today”.

Interestingly, the initial days of writing the diary did invite a lot of inquisitiveness and curiosity from not just children but others too. What surprised them the most was the amount of English I was scribbling down my diary. Children said, “Ji madam, aap itna engliss kaise yaad rakhte ho?” (How do you manage to remember so much of English?). I realised the curiosity was context based too wherein this was the first time most of these children were being exposed to the educational system with English and other subjects being introduced to them for the first time. In order to bridge this gap that was created with the whole act of writing diary, I decided not to write the diary in my room anymore. I sat at relatively open spaces in the ashramshala, like the kitchen area, outside my room, under the Sal tree etc. The strategy worked as gradually my writing diary became a daily routine for all and gradually, the curiosity faded.

When I looked back and read my personal diary, it reflected immense attributes of my personality, attitude, judgements, strengths and weaknesses too that might have prevailed at that particular time of the research. On an average I used to spend an hour at night before going to bed to write my fieldnotes and personal diary. It was this time that I had for myself as most of the times I was surrounded by children, other camp residents or engaged in some ashramshala related work. However, ethnographic fieldwork being an exhaustive one, sometimes left me with no energy to write. In such times, I either postpone my writing to early next morning or wrote down important points. Sometimes there were overlaps between the fieldnotes and personal dairy and I tried not to replicate the entries. I feel that despite of the fact that the entries made my personal diary would not find much space in this current thesis, but they will always remain one of the most integral parts of my fieldwork experience.
3.9. **Use of Voice Recorder:** As immersing oneself in the field, does challenge ones memory. Despite of how much one wants to remember and write one tends to forget. In order to overcome this challenge, I used a voice recorder for my interviews and other informal conversations that looked into the concerned area of research. Using the recorder helped in the research process in two major ways. One, it helped to keep a record of the minutest details about the areas of concern shared by the research participants and second, it helped me in engaging into lengthy, informal, unstructured interviews with the participants. It recorded the verbatim and kept the conversations going in a natural flow. Once the recordings were transferred to the laptop, it could be re-heard, re-written and analysed over and over again. The recorder too, was a piece of interest to many. I did have to demonstrate how it worked until the time children knew that it was not a mobile phone but a simple voice recorder. All the participants in the entire process of research were informed about the use of voice recorder during interviews.

3.10. **Newspapers and Reports as Secondary Data:** With fieldwork providing the primary data for the present study, some amount of secondary data was derived from newspapers, fact finding reports of varied human rights organisations, government documents, online journals and research papers focussing on Chhattisgarh. However, it becomes important to highlight here that most of these secondary data did not focus on children in Chhattisgarh, barring a couple of journal articles and one fact finding report that specifically focussed on the recruitment of children as Special Police Officers (SPOs) during the times of the counter insurgency campaign of Salwa Judum.

3.11. **Analysing the data:** The analysis of the present ethnographic study was an ongoing process. It is believed that ‘in the ethnographic studies, the process of data collection and analysis is interlinked and on-going’ (O’ Reilly 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Analysis of the data began with writing of fieldnotes and diary and transcribing the recorded interviews. The verbatims were translated and written down in English and are used extensively in the thesis. The primary data including the transcribed in-depth unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, fieldnotes and data from the personal diary was organised together and analysed. Following Hammersley and Atkinson’s (*ibid*) argument on importance of knowing one’s data, the data collected and transcribed in this study was read and re-read throughout
the process of fieldwork and later. It was only then that the broad thematic domains and sub-themes could be identified from across the data. Keeping the objectives, that guided the research in mind, linkages were drawn from various themes and sub-themes and written down. Attempt has been made to present thick descriptions. The thematic arrangement of the data helped in identifying and bringing out the nuances captured by the ethnographic study. It brought out the multiple aspects of the everyday life of children in a conflict zone and thus, looked beyond the hitherto dominant discourses on this current conflict. The analysis looked at the way the everyday life of children unfolds while they grow in this conflict situation. It also brought out children’s construction of realities through the way children experienced and understood their social world. The primary unit of analysis were children. The erstwhile Salwa Judum Camp of Kasoli and the everyday life of its residents was analysed closely throughout the course of fieldwork. The data emerging from the participants in the form of narratives were further supplemented with fieldnotes, observations, personal diary and also the observed and recorded non-verbal communication.

3.12. Ethical Considerations:

Conducting a research with children in a conflict zone involve a number of ethical considerations to be kept in mind by the researcher. It is believed that ‘the environment prevailing in situations of armed conflict poses a great challenge in conducting an ethical and safe research on children’ (Hart and Tyrer 2006). Ethics in a research would mean the broad guidelines that the researcher ought to follow while conducting the research. Some of the ethical considerations that were maintained in the course of fieldwork in the present study were:

3.12.1. Informed Consent: It is believed that for field research to be ethical in nature, the researcher must obtain an informed consent from the participants to participate in the research and make use of the data provided by them to meet the specified objectives of the study. Adding on to this, the research participants should be made well aware of the objectives of the research, future usage of the data as well. In short, giving informed consent would mean that the participants have agreed to participate in the research with full understanding of the nature of the work, the
challenges and potential risks. In the present study, informed consent meant that the research participants should understand the purpose of my study and agree to participate in it with an informed understanding of the risks, challenges that they could run into for talking to me and only after this, would decide to talk / not talk to me and participate / not participate in the research. However, I had realised during the course of fieldwork that informed consent in the present study had to be oral and not written. There were two major reasons behind choosing oral consent over written. It was believed, out of personal experience in the field that written consent could serve as a record for participant’s association with the research hence, putting him/ her in risk as any data that I possessed could be checked by the security force personnel, other influential individuals inside the camp or even by Maoists when travelling in the interiors. Although the latter did not happen but during the initial days of my coming to the camp, my fieldnotes were looked at by the company commander posted in Kasoli while having an informal conversation with me at chai tapri. During a couple of more occasions, this was also done by an erstwhile Salwa Judum leader residing inside the camp. Hence, I realised that in the present study, more than obtaining the informed consent from the participants, the primary task was to ensure that no individual faced any adverse consequence for participating in the research. Another reason for taking oral consent was because many of the participants in the research were illiterates or first generation learners having below basic reading and writing skill.

The research participants were briefed about the work whenever I had interactions with them. During the initial days, this invited a lot of curiosity and hence had to repeatedly acquaint everyone about my research. The stated objective of the research was to capture the past lived experiences and everyday living experiences of children in Chhattisgarh. I projected myself as a researcher working to obtain an academic degree. As most of the people did not understand what a Ph. D. or even Master’s meant, therefore, I informed that I was studying in 21st class (calculating number of years after completing Intermediate). The stated outcome of the research, as informed to everyone, was a detailed study in form a book used for academic purposes. No benefits were stated. Consent was also taken to use a recorder or write down points during the interviews and other details of the participants. I also informed repeatedly about my non- association with any other project that was simultaneously running by NGOs in and around the area. The principal emphasis of the oral informed consent was to provide
the participants with knowledge about my research work and not just gain consent from the participants but also provide them space to participate or not participate in the research at any point of time. As Mills (2002: 7) states, ‘instead of a single moment of gaining consent, researchers should take responsibility for a continually negotiated and reaffirmed consent’ and this would also mean that the researcher provides non-biased and real options to children to pull out at any time in the research process.

3.12.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Researching in a conflict zone brings on an added responsibility of handling sensitive information with extreme caution and care. In the present study too, once the participants showed trust in me, it became my prime responsibility as a researcher to keep the information confidential and the participants anonymous. For my own sake, I used some code words to refer to certain individuals residing in the camp who often appeared in children’s conversations. I assured the research participants that their identity and information provided by them would be kept confidential. However, most of the children did want to share their names and even photographs in the book. But anonymity has been maintained throughout the study. Children were repeatedly reminded of having the option to quit from the research at their own disposal. All the names used in the present study have been changed for confidentiality purposes. I transcribed a lot many interviews in the field itself. Hearing them from the voice recorder, I wrote them down and then typed them in my laptop. The notebook, with the written fieldnotes, were sent back home by courier once in a months or so. The typed documents were e-mailed to my email id. No written document was left in the computer. However, this practice of sending courier did not last for long as it was practically impossible to travel all the way to the post office in Dantewada everytime. And more so, with the passage of time, people in and around the ashramshala did not show much inquisitiveness in the written documents as mostly they were in English and were a part of my dailiness.

3.12.3. Non-Discrimination, Inclusivity and Representation: Efforts have been made in the present study to practice non-discrimination and inclusivity in the research process in terms of the participants. The research process embraced children regardless of their age, socio-economic status, their inherent nature and closeness with the researcher. However, with a fairly large number of children participating in the research,
it was practically impossible and unrealistic to represent each and everyone in the study. Keeping the specific objectives in mind, selection of participants and their representation in the study is done. However, it needs to be mentioned here that in the process of interviewing, no child was discouraged to share his experiences even if the sharing did not cater to the objectives of the present study.

3.13. **Limitations of the Study:**

The present study has certain limitations. **Firstly,** the focus of this ethnographic work is on children in an ashramshala inside an erstwhile Salwa Judum camp of Kasoli and hence, this study cannot be generalized to look into the larger domain of children living in conflict situations. Further, the study has focussed on the subjective interpretation derived out of experiences of children and my observant participation and hence, one cannot generalize the finding beyond the participants under focus. **Secondly,** one of the major limitations of the study is that due to highly restricted movement and other imposed restrictions, I could not capture the Maoists’ version of the conflict from the field. I relied heavily on secondary data in this regard. As the study was being conducted in a State run institution, i.e. the camp, the sharings by the participants were sometimes influenced by this fact. People staying in the areas that are completely neglected by the State, and thus, dominated by the Maoists, could not be interviewed due to accessibility and permission issues. **Thirdly,** research in a conflict zone has its own implied limitations for the researcher that range from restrictions of movement, existing fears of trust- mistrust, apprehension in sharing one’s fears, anxiety and uncertainty on an everyday basis. Although, conscious efforts were made to keep these challenges aside and make sure that they do not affect the fieldwork and writing in any manner, however, some influences of it could be inherent in studies conducted in this conflict zones. **Lastly,** another major limitation of the study is the fact that the study represents only boys as its primary participants. With limited accessibility, permission, and available resource and logistic support, staying in Kasoli boys’ ashramshala was the only feasible option available to me. Hence, my observations and writings on ‘children’ refer only to boys.
4. Researcher in the Field: The everyday challenges of conducting fieldwork in a conflict zone

While carrying out a study in a conflict situation, any researcher faces a ‘number of challenges and dilemmas not merely with regard to theory, conceptualisation and analysis but also in terms of practical constraints, methodology, methods and ethics’ (Boyden 2004: 238). The researcher is also expected to anticipate the challenges in order to minimise the risks. With no exception, in the present study too, conducting an ethnographic research for a span of six months did involve a number of challenges and risks. The one month pilot study conducted in the region gave me a glimpse of some of the challenges that I would be encountering while conducting fieldwork, like restriction of movement, breaking down of communications, an overall environment of suspicion, mistrust and uncertainty and my gender, etc. Additional caution had to be taken to ensure that being an outsider, researching on a sensitive issue focusing on children, should not affect any of the participant and the social dynamics in any manner. Adopting an ethnographic approach to this study and participating in the everyday life of people did help in this regard as gradually people in the camp, ashramshala and Geedam market (which was frequently visited) started looking at me as an ashramshala teacher. However, I would like to pen down some of the challenges that the field threw to me in the process of fieldwork.

4.1. Maintaining non-association with government actors: Before the onset of the fieldwork, it was decided by me that I would maintain a non-association with any government actor. I did not seek any sort of help from the district administration during the course of my fieldwork. From day one, no association was kept in any form. I did not visit any of the officials for any sort of personal help, or logistic help once I started my stay in Kasoli. Maintaining a non-association status was a continuous challenge for me as any sort of projected association (implicit or explicit) would have brought me unnecessary attention and risk and more so would have influenced the sharings done by the participants. It was during the last few days of my fieldwork, when the ashramshala superintendent once mentioned that he was happy that my presence in the ashramshala did not become an added responsibility to him and that he never felt that I was a girl from a city, for him I was a Bastari (native of Bastar).
Adding on, the practice of non-association with the government actors gave me the freedom to explore and understand the context of the study better. Once on the field, I did not plan my fieldwork in consultation with any government official as by doing so there were chances of imposed restrictions and selective exposure to reality. This freedom also gave me scope to venture into areas that were highly sensitive and remote. Government officials would have never given me the permission to venture into those regions. My short term travel to places like Dornapal, Jagargunda, Chintagufa, Paunaar etc., or visits to local melas (fair) and haats (weekly markets) or even my motorbike rides to villages like Katekalyan, Faraspal etc. were never discussed with officials.

4.2. **Changing Identity:** As stated earlier in the chapter that my stated identity in the field was that of a researcher who was conducting fieldwork for an academic degree. However, being a teacher at the ashramshala became a more prominent identity people associated me with. I was rather considered a teacher who was simultaneously pursuing her own studies. Hence, I did not have to undergo any changed identity throughout the course of my fieldwork barring one instance, wherein I was accompanying a journalist as we ventured into some of the most sensitive and remote areas in the region like Chintagufa and Jagargunda camps in Sukma district. I was a pillion rider to the journalist and when we were stopped at check posts, he introduced me as a fellow journalist writing an article on the region. He later informed that any other identity would have been risky, even of a researcher from outside. More than the Maoists, it would have created suspicion amongst the security forces. He further informed that it is the journalists whom the Maoists do not harm and security personnel do not interrogate much. The journalist had fixed up a meeting with the Maoists in the area however, we got a communication from them that due to some sudden change in their location, they would not be able to meet us.

4.3. **Personal Security:** What is often highlighted in researches conducted in conflict zones is the threat to personal security of the researcher. I too entered the field with similar frame of mind. The conceived threats of Maoists attacking the camp where I stayed, being harassed by the security force personnel in the camp, getting caught in an encounter etc. did cross my mind. However, with a strong will to conduct the research
and stay within the camp premises with children always over-powered these passing thoughts. I have to categorically mention here that barring a couple of incidents of eve-teasing within the camp, I did not encounter any conflict induced security threat. In the beginning of my stay in the ashramshala, I was informed by the caregivers and some teachers while having informal conversations that my whereabouts would have reached the Maoists by now and if they found my presence in the area inappropriate, they would send any kind of communication to exit. However, I never got any message. I did visit a number of mela and haats during the course of my fieldwork but never encountered any such security issue barring few curious gaze.

However, I would like to share how I was harassed by a local contractor and how it did affect my fieldwork at the time of its closure. Assuming that I would be facing threats from the Maoists or the security force personnel, I was taken by surprise how I rather faced severe mental harassment from a local contractor. He was from the neighbouring State of Madhya Pradesh and had undertaken the contract to construct a cement concrete (CC) road inside the ashramshala premises. He was accompanied by his labourers too. As his work was supposed to last for a period of two to three months, he alongwith this labourers was given a room inside the ashramshala itself. During that time there were a couple of young volunteers from an NGO, working in the ashramshala on some project. We all did share a good rapport. The contractor became good friends with the volunteers and hence, we were also introduced (I alongwith my two roommates). With all of them being much younger to me, I never felt any sort of threat from anyone. On many occasions, we ate together or had chai at the tapri. Least did I realise that the contractor developed some sort of feelings for me which he shared much later. I was taken aback and was very stern in my response to him. But it did not go well with him and he started harassing me.

Initially I did ignore it and did not share it with anyone. With the prime focus on research, I tried to pacify him by talking to him. This continued for two- three months. I did not share it with any of the ashramshala authorities or even my parents out of the fear of being called back from the field. I kept dealing with it at my own pace, which was highly challenging. I was often disturbed in the middle of my interviews with threatening calls by him, which I ignored. He left from the ashramshala in the month of January but this continued. I was suffocated and restless. Sometimes children used to see
me shouting over the phone or throwing my phone on a few occasions wherein I reached my threshold of patience. Deep down I knew that my not complaining and not taking actions against him was giving him undue encouragement but by now, I had become too adamant and involved in my work and so there was no looking back from there. I somehow tried maintaining a balance. I soon realised that this was now known to a lot many people in the ashramshala including children. They all extended their help. Children ensured that he would never be able to enter the ashramshala premises ever. This support meant a lot to me but in the process, I did lose a couple of relationships that I had developed in the ashramshala. I could no longer be cordial with one of the teachers who blamed me for this entire incidence. It was getting too much for me to handle hence, I decided to ignore them.

This episode did affect my mental status for long and was life threatening too. However, with a strong will I continued with my work. But when the ashramshala closed down for vacation during the month of May, I had to plan my exit as it would have been impossible to stay without children and other caregivers around in the ashramshala. My exit happened in a very disorganised and abrupt manner and I regret till date about the same. In order to avoid any unpleasant incidence from the contractor’s side, I had to lie to many children that I was leaving for a short visit to another district and would return once the school reopens. But I never returned. I could not bid a proper farewell to everyone in the camp or in the ashramshala. However, I have planned to go back to Kasoli soon to bring a proper closure to my work.

4.4. Being an unmarried woman: Gender of the researcher plays a crucial role in the research process. Studies have highlighted how ‘role of a woman fieldworker, in particular, often bars them from certain areas and activities and at the same time, opens up others that are not accessible to men’ (see for e.g. Roberts 1981; Golde 1986; Whitehead and Conaway 1986). In the present study too, my status of being an unmarried woman did invite a lot of inquisitiveness. As I was in an area where early marriages are prevalent, I was way too old for marriage. The question of why I was still a spinster was always thrown at me. The whole idea of me travelling all alone from outside, staying there for a period of six months, with no family or peer support was something new to the people of Kasoli. They found it quite strange why I, who
according to them was pleasant looking woman, was still unmarried. This often became a point of worry and concern for the older women who often told me that they would find a suitable match for me in and around Kasoli. Even the didis and bhaiyas in the ashramshala referred to some pandit (Brahmin) boys for me. Caste is an important aspect of marriage amongst people here and so they were all very cautious of the fact that they had to look for a Brahmin boy for me as according to them I could not settle down with any tribal or other caste boy. However, I often told them that I would not look only for a pandit when it comes to marriage. On the other hand, a couple of security force personnel also showed interest in me one of them sent a proposal via an ashramshala teacher who did convey it to me. I had to send back a message stating that I did not have any plans for marriage in the near future. However, the whole idea of the locals thinking of finding a suitable match for me and referring to some boys in their own relation did give me a feeling of acceptance and made me feel like an insider at times. As Erving Goffman states that, ‘the fieldworker can consider him/ her to be ‘in’ if ‘members of the opposite sex are attracted to you’ (1989: 129)

However, being a single woman did invite trouble to me on some occasions, brief about which has been mentioned above. My regular visits to a chai tapri helped me develop rapport with a large number of people, but it did led me being labelled as an outgoing girl initially. But with passage of time, it was the chai tapri only where most of the ice-breaking with the people took place. These not only included the residents of the camp but also the security force personnel posted in Kasoli.

However, on the other hand, my gender did help me in gaining access to a certain settings that would not have been accessible otherwise. I could develop a close bond with both women and men caregivers with ease. Women in Kasoli and other tribal areas visited were quite outspoken and hence, my presence did not intimidate men in the ashramshala or camp. My mornings were spent in the kitchen area with the bhaiyas serving me tea and conversing at length with me with no signs of hesitation. I had free entry into didis’ room which was a centre of a lot of information to me which they could not give me in open. They freely spoke about the dynamics of camp life and also how vulnerable it is being a woman in a conflict zone. They shared their experiences with no apprehension and hesitation. Being a woman also helped me gain their confidence better
and they shared about how everyone had perceived me initially and how they now have a changed perception. Maitrin, who works at the ashramshala kitchen once shared,

“Ma’am the first time you came here during summers, I was asked by the superintendent to make tea for you. I was very angry and so I did not add sugar to your tea and informed that there was no sugar left in the stock. But now I love staying with you. You are like my sister now. Now I give you tea everyday. One day I will give you my saari to wear”

(Maitrin, cook at the ashramshala)

4.5. **The everyday living challenges:** Although I would not call them challenges only, but the everyday experiences I went through during my stay in Kasoli. However, the everyday challenges came from the change of an overall context for me. However, from day one, I had decided that I would enjoy my fieldwork and never get disheartened whatsoever. Some of the everyday living challenges were to take shower in open for a week before a section of washroom was assigned to us, fetching water from handpump, limited water supply, changed food habits, non-availability of shops for buying basic necessities, adjusting to the extreme weather conditions (especially during the summers) the tin-roof top made the room extremely hot in the afternoons, monthly issue of disposing of sanitary napkins too. The whole idea of using sanitary napkins is culturally alien to the women of this region and hence, not all medical stores in Dantewada kept it with them. The female staff members were of the opinion that it was not a good practice to use it, and hence, could not extend much support to me in this regard. However, my roommates did give me immense support in this as well. With five hundred boys around at all times, finding a suitable time and space to burn down the napkins was a continued challenge till the last day of fieldwork. Amusingly, in first such incident of burning off napkins on a winter night, a boy came running to me and said that even he would like to sit next to the fire and warm his hands in the fire. It was my roommates who helped me in this awkward yet humorous situation.

4.6. **Building rapport with the security force personnel:** Rapport building with children did not take much time and was relatively easy. Children seemed interested in talking to someone from outside their world, and also because these children found me as a resource of information about a lot many topics of their interest, Bollywood being one of them. However, on the other hand, rapport building with the security force
personnel was not a one-day affair. As I had a long term stay in the camp, it was important to build rapport with the security force personnel too. Out of obvious reasons, I was looked at with suspicion in the initial days. Whenever I walked past any security personnel, it used to be evident on their faces that they had a lot to ask me. A number of them did tease me making the rapport building exercise rather difficult. These incidents did leave me with a bitter heart and I often gave up the idea of talking to the security force personnel. However, I did realise that this attitude could bring adverse results to my study and so I did make attempts to build rapport with them.

My first ever direct encounter with a security personnel happened on the second day of my stay while I made a visit to the small temple set up by the security force personnel for inside the camp. I was stopped at the gate, given suspicious gaze and asked about my whereabouts. I did share about me being a researcher from Mumbai and now a teacher at the ashramshala and that I was taking a round of the camp and wanted to visit the temple. It was while coming out that I smiled and told him “You have set up the temple very well. Thank You.” He reciprocated with an even bigger smile and replied,

“Madam I have never seen you here before and hence, asked you so many questions. Sorry. You can come to this temple whenever you want. Let us know if you need any help during the stay”

(A Chhattisgarh Force Security Force personnel on duty)

I did pay a few visits to the weekly bhajan sandhayas (programme of singing religious songs) organised by camp residents and security force personnel. For me it was also a platform for ice-breaking with the residents and security force personnel. It took many conversations with the company commander and other security force personnel, at the chai tapri, bhajan Sandhya or evening stroll at the camp to build a certain level of rapport with them and also understand their meaning making processes while living in this conflict and situation.

4.7. **Emotional Challenge:** Staying away for a period of six months with limited contact with family and the outside world did become emotionally challenging at times. The initial days when my energy and enthusiasm levels were high, if any single day passed away without substantial data, I would feel restless. Gradually I realised that it is
a process and I will have productive and not-so-productive days in the entire period. During the entire course of fieldwork, I did experience a wide range of emotions ranging from fear, impatience, anger, anxiety, helplessness to love, happiness, attachment, detachment etc. However, none of the emotions were persistent. With so many children around there was not a single dull moment. I made attempts to not let my research get affected by the emotional vagaries. My belief in my research was sustained by the ownership taken by children and other residents of the camp and their willingness to spend hours with me telling me about their life experiences. People gave importance to my research work and my presence in their environment and this gave me immense strength to keep going.

But the process of carrying out interviews and discussions sometimes used to be emotionally taxing. To enquire about children’s lived experiences, their social, economic and cultural lives, was often disquieting especially when the inner worlds of children were touched upon. The inner worlds in a conflict zone like this, included stories of brutality, separation, killings and many other troubling experiences. The initial interviews were emotionally difficult to take, but with time I learnt that one needs to be composed and empathic rather than sympathetic while being a researcher. However, drawing this line between empathy and sympathy was not as easy as it appears. Interviewing a deceased Maoist’s sister at her home was one of the most heart wrenching experiences. Her dilemma of actually being related to deceased yet trying to maintaining a distance from her was evident and disturbing.

However, one emotional challenge that I could not overcome till date has been that of my personal attachment with a five years old orphan boy named Sanju. His name has appeared innumerable times in my diary. I do not even remember the day when we actually got attached emotionally. Our attachment to each other was quite evident. He was an extreme case of being an introvert and shy boy. People informed that no one had ever seen him open up to someone as he did to me. I took pride in the fact that he found comfort in me. However, this relationship did cost me a little too. Although initially everyone called me his yaayo (meaning mother in Gondi) as I often helped him take bath at the hand-pump, fed him meals, took him to hospital and spend quality time with him. He often used to come and sit on my lap while watching television or take Sunday afternoon nap in my room. I never discouraged him. Infact, I went to the extent of
discussing his adoption with my mother. But gradually it became a much debated issue in the ashramshala. A male teacher in the ashramshala once accused me for Sanju’s carefree nature and arrogant behaviour towards others. Sometimes a couple of other young children came up and asked why I did not spend time with them as I did with Sanju. I attached myself to Sanju to an extent that coming out became a challenge for me. However, with good amount of time in hand, I could gradually bring normalcy to our relation, which Sanju also understood well. However, I still feel I could have handled it better.

Further, I did not take any break from my fieldwork. It was completed at a stretch. However, speaking out of personal experience, I would say that the researcher should at least take one break, not just to rest but for reaffirming a sense of reality of one’s own life. In my context, I was too immersed in the field and that, sometimes it acted as an impediment to my thinking.

4.8. Practicing involvement, non-attachment and detachment: As stated above, practicing non-attachment was one of the major challenges faced by me as a researcher. Sanju’s example was one of the most prominent ones. However, this is not to suggest that leaving others in the ashramshala and the camp came easily to me. In the entire research process, practicing non-attachment consciously and then detaching oneself after the completion of fieldwork was the most difficult challenges that I faced. Being a participant observer posed the challenge of involvement and detachment. In practice, ‘both are an art and science’ (Sluka and Robben 2012: 1). It can be argued that involvement is necessary to observe and understand the realities of everyday life and its meaning for the participants, detachment is necessary for constructing meanings out of the abstract reality, social relations etc. of the participants independent of them (ibid). However, practicing it was not easy as the study was looking at a sensitive issue involving children as primary participants. At every step, I had to think and choose to move further and develop a closer bond with an individual (children, teachers, caregivers and residents) or protect my position as a researcher in Kasoli. I had to take spontaneous decisions about helping or not helping an individual. For e.g. with passage of time, when people became comfortable in my presence, some of the caregivers started asking for money. They assumed I had a good amount of money because during one of
the conversations on ATM cards I had mentioned that even I possessed one. On the other hand, on one of the occasions, I paid a handsome amount for a child’s treatment of severe burn injuries. Children did come to me asking for a rupee also to buy toffees. These may seem meagre issues but my denial to give this small amount did create some dynamics, although very short lived, in the relation I shared with these children. However, the decisions to help an individual or not help were not based on trust or closeness but were very spontaneous and happened in the spur of the moment.

4.9. An Outsider Inside: The entire process of fieldwork kept throwing the question of me being an outsider or insider. However, as it is often argued that the status of a researcher as an ‘outsider’ or ‘insider’ is not static or one-dimensional, it is rather a fluid status (Rabe 2013: 150). In the present study, I speak of being an insider or outsider not out of its theoretical sense but by the level of acceptance and rejection faced by me as an outsider researcher inside a setting. Being a participant observer provided me with the space and time to build rapport, trust, and acceptance in the lives of children and their significant others in Kasoli.

I made several attempts to go native. This ranged from dressing up as simply as I could with only six pairs of clothes that I used for the entire period of six months. I took no precautions to avoid tanning of my skin as I was relatively light skinned. I wanted to get a skin colour which was more native. Despite of being a non-drinker of alcohol, I did enjoy the locally made liquor mahua, sulphi and landaa at various occasions. In tribal societies, drinking is not a taboo and women equally enjoy drinking as men. It is served on festivals and other socio-cultural celebrations. I also attended a couple of murga ladaai (cock fight) and also learnt the local dance form called jhelamaari to a large extent and did perform it with other camp residents at weddings and other functions.

Feeling of being accepted as an insider, as part of their everyday life came very strong at various occasions whenever children shared their personal issues with me that were nowhere related to the research. Children participated in the research not just by giving their time for interviews but also by trying to maintain discipline during the course of group discussions in order to help me conduct the session smoothly.
Acceptance not just came from children, but from adults too. Women shared their intimate details with me and seek my advice. With passage of little time itself, people started acknowledging my presence and greeted me warmly whenever we met. People were no more reluctant and hesitant to talk and share. I was gradually being considered as a part of their lives, with me being called for almost all celebrations in and around the camp. In the span of six months, I attended two marriages, four _melas_, one birthday meal, one _chatthi_ (celebrating the bestowal of name on a new-born child) and also a funeral. I was also called over for tea and fish in many households in the village. Women, not just in the ashramshala but from the camp too, offered me their traditional dresses and accessories to be worn for _melas_. The company commander posted at Kasoli camp also asked me for some inputs on how they could connect better with the local people in order to create a sense of normalcy in the camp. As and when these incidents occurred, I felt very much accepted in the context. I felt that I had fit considerably well into the socio-cultural system of the people I was living with.

However, there were many instances wherein I did feel that sharing a good rapport did not mean complete acceptance. I was always kept out from the running of the ashramshala. It was only in the everyday life of children in the ashramshala and in camp that I gradually started becoming an insider. In terms of ashramshala as an institution being run by government guidelines, I was an outsider. Although, I was part of all the cultural and social events in Kasoli and around but when it came to performing _pooja_ or any other religious act, I could not participate. Although the prohibition never came too strongly but the non-verbal communications were clear. I was often told during the course of interviews,

"You will not understand madam, you have not experienced it. People from big towns and cities are at a better situation than us. How will you ever understand? We wish you do not go through these kinds of experiences ever."

(A common expression of people during interactions)

On few other occasions too I felt that despite of my continuous attempts to become one of them, I was still an outsider. On one such occasion, alongwith a few other ashramshala staff, I took a boy to Dantewada hospital. We were not entertained well by the doctor on the grounds of being from NGO and being irresponsible. It was on our way back the staff member said that the doctor got annoyed because I was accompanying
them. According to him, I being a fair girl and non-tribal too, looked very much like those “NGO people” who come from outside and just play with children and go. Similarly on other occasions too, I was told that I was ‘different’ because I was relatively fair. I interpreted being “different” as being an outsider. One of my personal diary note reads:

“I have never hated my colour so much as I do now. It makes me an outsider in Bastar. Despite my innumerable attempts to become one of them, I fail to do so.”

(Note from Personal Diary, 18th January, 2013)

I feel I was an outsider who was considered as an insider during the course of fieldwork. But this acceptance as an insider never came in totality. I could relate to what Bandyopadhyay (2010: 52) writes about her fieldwork experience of working in a prison. She states, ‘I had equated the difference with distance. I struggled to bridge the distance between them and me all the times, but difference remains an undeniable fact in fieldwork’. Similarly, my attempts of becoming one of them were mere acts of bridging the ‘distance’ and not the ‘difference’. Initially these attempts were strategies adopted in order to gain better access into the everyday lives and thus, understand the social realities better. But I can be said to have gone into a romantic zeal to become one of them and create strong social and cultural connections with the people I was living with, but in this process, I did ignore the essential fundamentals of fieldwork. These fundamentals were reminded to me, not intentionally though, by people I was living with, who in their subtle ways communicated that I was “not them”.

4.10. Exiting the Field: As stated earlier in the chapter my exit from Kasoli was sudden and not planned. There were two reasons for the exit. One I was mentally drained due to the unpleasant incidents happening in the field (brief of which has been given earlier in the section) and secondly, also because it was during the month of May that ashramshalas close down for vacation. With all ashramshalas in the region closing down, logistically it was not possible to continue staying in the ashramshala and carry out fieldwork. However, I was caught in a dilemma of letting children know about my exit and at the same time, I did not want to disclose it in order to avoid any further trouble for me. But I started withdrawing gradually from the everyday life of children and others in the ashramshala and camp. I reduced the number of classes I took earlier
and asked the concerned teachers to resume their classes, however, I was always available to help children any time they wanted.

On the other hand, in my conversations with children, I started mentioning about how even I miss my home like they do and how I would someday go back home. I purposely decided to do other field visits outside Kasoli during the last month before my exit because it was the final examinations time for children and hence, they were too busy with it. It was a good time to gradually distance from them and yet not completely exit. I started making short duration visits to other parts of district Dantewada and Sukma district. Children got used to my going and coming.

However, I would like to mention here that how during my first such visit outside Kasoli, a lot many children felt that I had left permanently. Apparently, hearing this news Sanju went back home to his village Salnaar without informing anyone. It was only after my return that I observed his absence. No one knew of his whereabouts. I insisted on going to his home the same evening to check on him. He was there. His body language spoke volumes of his happiness after seeing me. I brought him back with me and also had a realisation about my responsibility of carefully and gradually briefing him about my actual exit someday.

Vacations had begun and ashramshala started getting a deserted look. Some children went back home while many others were taken to a summer camp in Dantewada where they were being given classes on dancing, singing, etc. It was a suitable time for me to exit. I could not do anything for children. But for the caregivers at the ashramshala, I decided to give some small gifts as my token of appreciation and thank you to them. They realised that I was leaving and were upset. Like any other researcher, exiting the field was the most difficult and emotionally wrenching phase for me. However, for me it became all the more painful as I could not bid a proper farewell to the children who helped me in this entire journey. I was informed later by my roommates of Kasoli how children repeatedly asked them about me and that how could I go without meeting them. This is an on-going discomfort for me even today as I write this down as I feel that I could not reciprocate in any meaningful way to the generosity of all those who helped me in this entire journey. However, I wish and long to visit Kasoli after the completion of my research and extend my gratitude to all.