
VISUALISING THE EVERYDAY: PARTICIPATORY FILMMAKING IN RURAL INDIA

Sue Sudbury, *Bournemouth University*

ABSTRACT

Participatory visual research methods are increasingly used as a way to generate new forms of knowledge and to decrease the power differential between the researcher and researched. In this article, the author, who is both a documentary filmmaker and academic, draws upon her research experience working with a group of women filmmakers in Andhra Pradesh in southern India. She filmed the women as they made their own film, but also asked four of them if they would use their cameras to film their everyday lives. Some of the women chose to challenge their husbands from behind the camera, while others in the group spoke openly about their lives in video diary interviews. This way of working generated five different sources of footage, which were edited together to form a coherent narrative and create a 'third voice'. The author discusses her findings and what she learnt from this process and considers the strengths and limitations of this form of research.

KEYWORDS

Participatory filmmaking; documentary; video diaries; Indian women; the everyday

BIO

Dr Sue Sudbury is a Principal Academic in Film and Television Production and Direction in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. She is also a documentary filmmaker and has directed over 20 films for British television. Her personal research interests include visual ethnography, anthropology, participatory filmmaking, politics and gender issues.

smsudbury@bournemouth.ac.uk

Introduction

In this research, I wanted to bring together the techniques of both ethnographic and participatory filmmaking, with approaches used in documentary production. The former with its emphasis on the voice of, in this case, rural women in India, and the latter with its concern to engage an audience through narrative and imagery.

The idea for this research came from a promotional email I had received from the American charity, Video Volunteers. They had been asked by the Indian NGO, Velugu Society for Rural Development, to help them set up the Sneha Praja Video project in Andhra Pradesh. Over a six-week period, Video Volunteers trained eleven local village women were in video production and reporting skills and produced a film about child marriage, which was subsequently screened in villages throughout the region. The women had been selected by the Indian NGO on the basis of their proven skills as community newspaper reporters, a project similarly set up to give village women a voice and the right to self-determination. Through this video initiative they were, according to Video Volunteers and the Indian NGO, gaining confidence and challenging long-held domestic roles in their communities.

As an academic and a documentary filmmaker, with both doctoral research and a potential broadcast documentary in mind, I wanted to find out more about this project and the ways in which it might be changing these women's lives. So I contacted Meera Shenoy, the Project Manager at the Indian NGO, to find out if this would be possible. She agreed to this plan and suggested that I fly out to Hyderabad to meet with her and the women involved.

Attendant ethical issues

When I met with the women in the group I explained, through the translator, the parameters of my research (both the doctoral research and the broadcast documentary), and answered any of their questions. I made sure that I gained informed consent by fully explaining the project in their native language, Telegu. The ESRC Research Methods Review Paper (Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research, 2008) states that the researcher needs to ‘brief the participants about seeking permission (from others) and explain the purpose prior to taking images of others’. So I made sure that the women explained to their families what they were doing and how their footage would be used in my research. At the start of this research project I also consulted Bournemouth University Research Ethics Code of Practice to make sure that my intended working practice would comply with all ethical considerations and completed Bournemouth University’s online Research Ethics module and tests.

Another ethical consideration, when undertaking participatory research, is the subject of reciprocity. I discuss this in detail elsewhere (Sudbury, 2016).

Methodology

Four of the women were particularly keen to be ‘on camera’, while the other seven women took on roles behind the camera. I filmed them as they made their film for the Sneha Praja Video project and then each of the four women used their own mini-DV cameras to film whatever they wanted to about their own personal lives. To what extent can a combination of observational documentary techniques, video diaries and participatory filmmaking methods be used to explore the interior and everyday lives of women from another culture?

The visual anthropologist, Andrew Irving asked women in Africa to consider how they would tell their experiences to someone living in England (2011:29). I similarly asked my subjects to show us what their everyday lives are like. Irving noted, one of the main characters in his project “actively selected certain events, dilemmas and experiences that she judged would communicate...to imagined, unknown others she had never met, living in a far-away country she had never visited” (2011:29).

This collaborative way of working created 23 hours of footage from five different sources which are described below.

Video diaries shot by the 4 women	Facilitated and interviews conducted by me
Self-shot actuality by the 4 women	Facilitated by me
Film of the 4 women shot by other women in the group or relatives	Facilitated by me
Film of the 4 women, actuality sequences and general views (gvs)	Filmed by me
Sneha Praja project video about child marriage	Reflects the women’s own concerns about child marriage. Initiated and managed by Velugu and Video Volunteers. All these sequences in the film are shown in a Recording frame.

The Video Diary interviews

When I first suggested to the women that they could use their cameras to make video diaries it was evident that they were not familiar with them. So I decided to accustom them to looking directly down the lens by asking them to do this when responding to my interview questions; often they would hear the translated question and then, after a moment’s thought, switch the camera on and speak their answer directly to it. The advantage of this way of working was that the women were always very conscious of being recorded and could decide when to turn the camera on or off. The women themselves also chose where to place their cameras, in terms of both the room itself and the place within that room. So location became an important part of their representation.

When I have used video diaries in Britain, the main contributors often appeared self-conscious and did not know what to say. In stark contrast, in India, each woman, particularly Indira and Latha, spoke with such urgency into the camera lens and had so much they wanted to say. They were all keen to talk

about how the Sneha Praja Video project had changed their lives. Latha talked of how on the first day (of the training), she was scared to hold the camera, “my hands were shaking so much” but of how the camera has now “become like a weapon for us”. In these words she encapsulated a very powerful image. Latha was also keen to talk about the years of abuse she had suffered at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. Indira even cried at the beginning of her video diary because she said she was so happy to have, for the first time, the chance to express her opinions. As one of the participants of the Witness Nakamata project (www.witness.org) said (Gregory, 2006:195), “this camera means that someone in this world cares about us, about our struggles, seeing this camera here today means that we are not alone”.

When Indira had stopped crying and I had ascertained, through the translator, that she was crying ‘tears of joy’ at the chance to speak, rather than feeling upset by the situation, she spoke with such feeling and fervour into the camera lens; ‘the situation for women is getting worse and alcoholism has become a real problem. Men are trampling on women. All because of this marriage necklace, women have to leave their families and friends... and do their husbands respect them?’. Although Indira was always speaking in the third person, it was clear from the passion in her voice that this was most likely a ‘first person’ narrative.



FIGURE 1: Indira's video diary

For the filmmaker Ross McElwee, if there is “something real at stake emotionally” the audience will detect it, while if not, they will “be turned off by it” (in Dowmunt, 2009:177). So in the end, the audience becomes both judge and jury, perhaps unsurprising in that all films are ultimately being produced for this imagined ‘other’. As a documentary maker, I am constantly trying to record such emotional moments but am also considering the context in which they are being revealed and also the repercussions, if any, for those that are revealing them. In the context of video diaries and autobiographical filmmaking, these ‘emotional moments’ can possess added power. Renov is one of many who have recognised the power of autobiography, “filmic/videographic autobiography has become a tool for coupling liberatory public testimony and private therapy” (2004:xvi). The confessional character of the diary promises a site of veracity and authenticity, partly due to the fact that ‘ordinary’ people are telling us ‘personal’ stories while looking straight down the lens. It feels as if we are watching something less mediated.

Indira's eagerness to speak her thoughts meant that she did not pause for breath and kept talking. I was keen to preserve her ‘speaking position’ and the integrity of her testimony, but at the same time my role as storyteller brought other conventions to bear on the situation; namely, I was thinking, how will I manage to edit this material. Other filmmakers have discussed how they feel conflicted by these

professional considerations; in a Masterclass (Sheffield International Documentary Festival, 3 - 7 November 2010), Kim Longinotto said:

At times, it makes me really hate myself...I'm filming...(and) I'm genuinely really with her and caring about her...but at the same time, I'm thinking I've got to hold the camera still...if you were being a normal human being and not a filmmaker, you would either be withdrawing in a respectful way or hugging them, you wouldn't be in-between, filming them. It's an odd job that we do.

It is in these moments that these tensions and power dynamics surface. In fact, as a documentary filmmaker, one has most likely facilitated this emotional moment by asking probing questions and so feel all the more uncomfortable with being concerned with the camera or thinking of the edit; one is seeking to capture moments of genuine emotion that will travel and speak to a global audience but the images also need to be in focus.

Parvati began her video diary interview by speaking in a very matter of fact way about her daily life. In order to tap into her feelings, I then asked her what makes her happy and sad and that was when in response to the last question, she disclosed the death of her son. At that point, not only Parvati but Jayasree, our translator, started to cry so I knew that Parvati was revealing something meaningful in her life. Here, I am clearly not the objective observer, simply recording what is present, but shaping the material by my questions; I am justifying this position because I am conscious of the imagined audience who need to be engaged with something beyond the superficial data of a person's everyday life. However, this process of mediation inevitably changed the message. I have appropriated a certain kind of filming discourse in which I have tried to be fair and transparent but nevertheless have shaped the nature of that discourse. However, though this interview delved into an area of emotion and trauma, this was entirely directed by the participant in that Parvati was able to, and did, switch off the camera when she felt she had nothing more to say. One could claim that one of the advantages of the video diary interview is that the participant is always aware of the camera as they speak into it, unlike in more conventional interview settings, when the interviewer is trying to get the interviewee to ignore its presence.

As a documentary filmmaker, I am trying to reach these universal emotions because I am wanting the audience to relate to the people 'on screen' and to be moved by emotional moments, to laugh *with* them and to cry *with* them; I am wanting the audience to empathise with them.

Hogan and Pink refer to the emergent anthropological focus on interiority – inspired by a question posed by Rapport “concerning the importance of interior dialogue, mood, reverie and imagination in anthropology” (2010:2). Hogan and Pink propose that these are shifting interior states, “fluid rather than reified” (2010:2) and that art therapy can become a “route through which interiority...not simply comes to the surface...as a static event...but through an anthropological paradigm that views inner states as being in progress, rather than ever static” (2010:2). Similarly, I consider these accounts as momentary ‘snap-shots’ of these women's lives; ‘true’ at that moment of articulation but these feelings, although still felt, will never be articulated in exactly the same way or manner again.

Vinodha spoke frequently about her religious conversion as she had, in common with many from the Dalit caste, rejected Hinduism, the religion of her birth in favour of Christianity. However, I did not include this aspect of her video diary testimony. As mentioned in the Introduction, I am in this research combining approaches used in both visual ethnography and documentary production so many visual ethnographers might see this as a limitation of this work. However, as a documentary filmmaker I am, at all times, wanting the audience to relate to the main characters; while we can all empathise with someone who has lost a child not all of us can relate to religious fervour. Interestingly, she was the only woman in the group who did not point out religious iconography when doing the ‘walk through’ of their home; the pictures of Christ were evident on the wall but, unlike Hinduism, there is no prayer corner so that may be the simple reason why she did not.

At times, it felt as if all the women were speaking to themselves and in that respect the term ‘diary’ is very relevant; I think this aspect of self-revelation and reflection is present in video diaries recorded in Britain, too. As Gibson argues, video diaries “provide examples of doing ‘identity work’, whereby participants position themselves in a given way for a perceived audience. Video diary accounts can thus be analysed not only for content but also for how participants engage in identity construction” (2005:36). Holliday has discussed how video diaries are pre-reflectively produced for an imagined ‘other’ and that how this other is conceived of is related to one's experience as a viewer of media productions; “we are

likely to imagine audiences of our productions through a strong process of identification; we imagine ourselves as audience for our own productions” (2000:512). Both Parvati and Indira had televisions in their homes; indeed, Indira is filmed, by her husband, having a ‘TV dinner’ with her children, while Parvati mentions how much she enjoys watching a particular television ‘soap’. Therefore, it is feasible for both of them to imagine their audience in this way. However, both Latha and Vinodha live in more remote villages, three hours’ drive south from Hyderabad, and Vinodha having no electricity, has no television.

Dovey (2000:106) refers to Foucault’s critique of the confessional act which, in Foucault’s opinion, always takes place “within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it” (1998:61). As I was instigating these video diary interviews, I was particularly conscious of my role as ‘authority’ figure and tried to be sensitive to the imbalance of power that existed in this exchange as not only the instigator but the editor of the material. However, like Dovey, I believe fundamentally that this process of making video diaries can elicit “empowering statements not just for the individual speakers but for the social body” (Dovey, 2000:107).

When I left the women with the tapes and instructions to make their own video diaries, Parvati was the only woman who did. One morning at dawn, she spoke directly to the camera for about ten seconds to say that she had got up early to get the house ready for visitors. However, this was the only video diary she made on her own and I did not use it as such a short and random statement did not fit in the final film.

Self-shot actuality

All the women were familiar with film conventions and their six-week training, provided by the charity Video Volunteers, as part of the Sneha Praja Video project, covered basic camera techniques, such as the need for ‘establishing shots’ and ‘close ups’. The training centre at Chilkoor was a six-hour return trip for both Vinodha and Latha, so they demonstrated agency in using the, often unreliable, local bus service to get there and back home afterwards.

The women used the same mini-DV cameras from the Sneha Praja Video project to shoot their everyday lives; the development of low cost, lightweight and easy-to-use video equipment made both projects viable. The advent of low grade cameras has produced a new aesthetic and increased the sense for the audience of accessing ‘the real’ and has made an advantage of the shaking camera movements; “the shaking camera movements, the embodied intimacy of the technical process, appears to reproduce experiences of subjectivity. We feel closer to the presence and process of the filmmaker” (Dovey, 2000:57). This use of mini-DV cameras was particularly beneficial to my research, in which I was attempting to get close to ‘the other’ through collaboratively producing ‘intimate media’.

a) ‘Walk throughs’ inside their homes

Irving (2007, 2011), in his own participatory research, invites participants to walk around urban contexts while narrating and photographing their memories of pivotal moments in their lives. There is a tendency now in documentary production to interview people as they are doing something. I believe this is, in part, because it is more visual to see someone in action rather than just sitting down with a static background and in my experience, when people are moving their speech and thoughts are also more ‘fluid’. As Irving says “the method plays on the capacity of significant places and practices to elicit interior dialogues and verbal testimonies” (2011:27).

I asked all four women if they would ‘walk through’ their houses and introduce us to their families and homes, while at the same time talk about what they are filming. When the four women did the ‘walk throughs’ both Indira, Parvati and Latha pointed out where they do ‘pooja’, as they all have Hindu shrines in the corner of a room. I did include Indira’s and Parvati’s family shrines in the film but I did not refer again to their religion because, as discussed earlier, I think different religions can emphasise difference rather than our shared humanity and this project was aiming to understand and empathise with the ‘other’. However, it was interesting that Sai Baba is the very first thing that Indira mentions when she enters her house and her sitting room, even before her husband and children who are sitting underneath his picture.



FIGURE 2: Indira's 'walk through'

When Indira enters her kitchen, she immediately tells us that she had left the children to clean up and that is why it is messy: "I have left the children to take care of the house so it is a bit disorganized". I kept this part in as it is a universal situation that we can all relate to. Likewise, when Indira shows us Tommy, her puppy on the floor, it is something a Western audience can relate to. However, just by owning a pet, we know that Indira's family is in a more privileged position than Vinodha's. Vinodha lives with her three children in one room: "we live with all our children in this room; everything is here, living here, cooking here".

b) Talking to their husbands

Only three of the women live with their husbands, Latha having left her husband, after the continual abuse. All three wives chose to use the camera, or while 'on camera' in Vinodha's case, to challenge their husbands. In some way, the camera affords them protection and from behind it, they appear liberated. Indira's husband is, at certain moments, visibly intimidated by the camera and when she confronts him from behind it, he loses. A clear example of the power of technology – the camera does not blink and, as Latha says, "it is like a weapon for us".

Vinodha did not herself challenge her husband while holding the camera but was filmed by another village woman as she did it. When Vinodha asks his permission to leave the house and go with the group to film, it feels as if this is what she has to do every time she leaves the house and her community. He hesitates before he replies and looks directly at the camera indicating that he is very aware of being recorded; then after a pause, he says "Go...but come back quickly" showing he has the power to dictate her actions. Of course, she is also demonstrating his power and allowing him to exert it, by asking his permission in the first place. In the West, women do not usually have to ask permission from their husbands to leave the house. However, because women are often assumed to be the primary carer of young children, she might still have to ask her husband to look after them, in order for her to leave to carry out 'adult only' tasks outside the domestic sphere.



FIGURE 3: Footage of Vinodha's husband shot by one of the village women

When Vinodha asks her husband “why do you work when you are not getting paid” and to his reply that “they will pay” she retorts “when will that be?”, it feels that she knows how to touch his own insecurities and he appears at that point, the victim – a ‘low-waged’ or rather ‘no-waged’ man from the Dalit caste, powerless and at the bottom of a hierarchical caste-based society. He is visibly uncomfortable and shifts from side to side and it feels that this conversation is an on-going tension in the household. These two sequences are very telling moments in the film and say a lot about the complexity of gender relations. However, such scenes are played out between men and women throughout the world. Highmore asks “is the everyday a realm of submission to relations of power or the space in which those relations are contested (or at least negotiated in relatively interesting ways)” (2002:5). One could see the derogatory term ‘nagging’, an activity most frequently associated with women, as a way in which women contest this, sometimes hidden but assumed, male power in the domestic sphere. Some people might see Vinodha’s questioning of her husband about when he will be paid for his work, as an example of ‘nagging’; in this way, the everyday is, in fact, “a site of invention and resistance” (Highmore, 2002:38). This material is a particularly strong example of the innovation of this participatory methodology; this footage would never have been generated by more traditional methods, such as observational filmmaking. Interestingly, all the husbands disappeared when I was there so it did feel that we are getting a view of a community that I would not have been able to capture myself.

Indira shot more tapes than any of the other women (six in all, though three were of her video diary interviews); she consistently used her camera to put her husband on the spot, trying to get him to admit to being against her participation in the Sneha Praja Video project. At times, these exchanges are very amusing as on one occasion he laughs with embarrassment and Indira’s daughter can be heard saying “Stop filming” – which Indira does, but only minutes later continues once her husband has decided on how he is going to respond to her question. The issue of obtaining consent from other subjects in a participatory film is complex but including these moments in the finished film means that the potential voyeuristic power that all filmmakers have over their subjects is exposed. It also helps the audience to feel they are accessing ‘the real’, something so ‘real’ that it cannot be revealed ‘on camera’ and creates a sense for the audience that they are privileged viewers, watching something that the subject has only just allowed to be revealed.

The scene in which Indira’s husband scolds her for knocking his watch off the side table, is shot by her husband himself but most of the domestic scenes which include Indira and her husband, are shot by Indira’s adult children. One could argue that Indira ‘othered’ her husband by exposing his misogynistic

attitudes when he finally admits that “if ladies go outside the home like this, we have small problems like cooking”.



FIGURE 4: Indira’s self-shot interview with her husband

Parvati uses her camera to ask her husband where he has been, though she is laughing while she does this. At first, he resists her question by asking her, “should I tell you where I go?”. He appears embarrassed and then, rather defensively, says that he “is taking care of all (her) worries, solving all the problems of the house”. She does not ask for any more detail and it is not clear if she fully comprehends his rather vague reply; maybe, she feels she cannot question any further or perhaps does not want to know. Many of the husbands (in particular Parvati’s and Indira’s – they told me this ‘off camera’) have a tendency to disappear for a while, not saying where they have gone, in sharp contrast to the women who have to account for their every movement outside the domestic sphere. It is interesting to note that when Parvati’s son is late back from school and she asks him where he has been, like his father, he questions whether he should tell her. Gender relations are established at a young age.



FIGURE 5: Parvati’s self-shot footage of her son

c) Filming their children

All four women have children and the footage they shot of them shows the importance placed, in their village communities, on education. The three women with younger children, Latha, Vinodha and Parvati, all filmed their children doing homework, or in Latha's case, was filmed by her father helping her son with his. Vinodha also shoots her husband working with some wood outside their house but focuses, in the main, on her children – doing their homework, reciting English days of the week, singing and playing outside. It is understandable that education is seen as a route to advancement and so is the Sneha Praja Video project for the women themselves. Parvati touches on this when she interviews her own mother to ask her if she is proud of her daughter's participation in it. This brief conversation between mother and daughter embodies a shared intimacy between the two of them which could only have been caught 'on camera' by using this collaborative way of working.



FIGURE 6: Parvati's self-shot interview with her mother

As Wang et al state when referring to their photo novella project with Chinese village women, "(they) are visual anthropologists. They use photography to record images to which outsiders are much less likely to have access...photo novella creates the opportunity for village women to promote outsider's empathy – rather than paternalism, condescension or idealism-toward their lives" (1996:1399).

Latha is doing an Open University course in computing, and was filmed by her father reading, next to her son while he was sleeping on the floor, at the end of the day. Signs of education and self-advancement were present in a lot of the footage. Indira's children are now young adults and when she is 'walking through' her house with her camera, she finds her youngest daughter, Sonia, in the kitchen; the very first question Indira asks her is about her education and Sonia replies that she is in "BSc final year". However, traditional India is never far away as in the next question Indira asks her daughter, when she will get married and her response, "when my parents make me" is received by Indira with both amusement and pleasure. Despite higher education, her daughter is still going to comply with traditional expectations.

Actuality of the 4 women shot by others

All four women chose to be filmed by the other women (or relatives) cooking and collecting water because these are important everyday tasks that they perform several times a day. Some of the women were filmed washing clothes (Indira and Vinodha), others were filmed washing dishes (Indira and Latha), cleaning the house (Latha) and tending to animals (Parvati). In answer to Highmore's question as to

whether “everyday life is characterised by singular, individual acts (an accumulation of particularity) or understandable as an overarching structure common to a large group of people” (2002:5) one could say it is a bit of both. All the women performed domestic duties but there were individual differences between them in the way they performed them. Sometimes these differences denoted difference in wealth; in particular their position in relation to water. Indira was the only woman who had her own well in the backyard of her house, while Vinodha had to walk some way from her house to collect water by bucket from the communal well. Both Parvati and Latha also used a communal village well but at least theirs had a hand pump so water was more easily accessible. So although there were differences in the particular ways women performed their everyday tasks (Vinodha washed clothes on a rock away from her house, while Indira washed clothes in a bucket in her backyard near to her own water supply) all these tasks were exclusively ‘women’s work’.

Some daily tasks denoted differences in religion; all the women, except for Vinodha who had recently converted to Christianity, were filmed chalking patterns on the ground in front of their house - an important daily task performed by women and part of the Hindu tradition and seen as bringing good fortune to the household.



FIGURE 7: Footage of Latha shot by her father

Most of the footage of Indira, performing daily tasks around the house, was shot by her teenage daughter or son. Interestingly, her son zooms in on his father’s bad tempered face as he stands above her mother washing the dishes. Latha’s father shot most of the ‘everyday’ footage of her and demonstrated strong filmic skills, despite the fact he had taken no part in the Sneha Praja Video training.

The footage I shot

As mentioned previously, I was there asking the women questions when they recorded the video diaries so as they spoke I used my camera to contextualise the situation, showing them in relation to their cameras recording the video diary material. Similarly, I filmed the women as they ‘walked through’ and introduced their homes.



FIGURE 8: My footage of Latha recording a video diary

I recorded two ‘walking’ interviews, one with Parvati in which I asked her general questions about marriage and divorce in India and one with Latha about their film screenings. I also interviewed Latha’s mother about Latha’s marriage; she was sitting in the room as Latha was recording her video diary and it seemed right to include her view of her daughter’s difficult marriage. I also shot some observational documentary footage of the women at one of their own film production meetings, watching rushes on their cameras, going around Parvati’s village telling everyone about the screening that evening and then the night screening itself.

I also shot landscape shots, ‘gvs’ (general views) of the different villages in which the women lived to give a sense of where we were; these types of shots are essential ‘bridging’ shots between different sequences and actuality and allow a film to ‘breathe’.

The Sneha Praja Video child marriage report

Dervin and Huesca make a distinction between ‘participation-as-means’ and ‘participation-as-end’ stating that the latter suggests “participation as a political and moral choice, a fundamental right regardless of outcome” (1997:48). In contrast, ‘participation-as-means’ has a more functional purpose.

I believe that the Sneha Praja Video project itself was both in that the project had two functions; that of empowering the women but also of producing educational films to screen in villages across Andhra Pradesh. All the women speak in my film of the empowerment they felt from taking part. Vinodha says “this (Sneha Praja) video training has changed my life” and later, talks more specifically when she says that now the “village elders treat me with more respect”. This is of great significance for her, not only because she is a woman but is also from the Dalit caste.

As they explained in my film, the women chose the subject of child marriage because they themselves had been married as children and had suffered a lot because of it. Video Volunteers had trained all the women to use the cameras over a six-week period and trained them in video journalist skills such as interviewing and how to construct a story. The women did not actually edit their own film about child marriage made through the Sneha Praja project as these skills were felt to be too complex to teach in a short timescale but the Video Volunteers team did involve the women in making editorial decisions.

It was clear from the content of their film that they were keen to uncover and expose some horrific cases of domestic violence and child marriage. Particularly shocking was the young woman’s story of her husband murdering their baby because she was a girl.

At another point in the making of their child marriage film, the women came across a group of traveling street performers and beggars who were living in the open, as they moved across the country. Among this group, they noticed a young girl wearing a marriage necklace; this was Jyothi who, aged nine, had been married twelve days previously to her 36-year-old brother-in-law. They interviewed Jyothi, her mother and sister about the marriage and went back to the training centre in Chilkoor with the footage. The women were deeply moved and upset by Jyothi's situation and discussed whether they should do something about it. They discussed their role as video journalists and decided they were not there to just record injustices but to intervene and prevent them. So they returned to the place where they had met the family but found they had already moved on. It was not clear whether the women intended to turn the family over to the police (child marriage is illegal in India despite continuing to be a common practice) or to try and 'remove' Jyothi from the situation; however, it was interesting that they had a ethical debate about their role as video journalists. This family, as travelers and beggars, with no 'fixed abode' were 'other' to the women themselves so this was yet another layer within this research. Not only are there layers of footage in my research film but also layers of relationships and positions and associated ethical questions surrounding them.

Backstage and frontstage

These different sources of footage have combined to produce an account of the frontstage and backstage of the women's lives. We first meet Vinodha in the film as she brushes her hair while looking in a small mirror on the floor. She is very much 'backstage' (Goffman, 1990:114-122) but also one could say 'backstage' before appearing in the film itself, putting on her bangles and packing her camera in a bag. They are extreme close-up shots, filmed by one of the other women in the group, which adds to their intensity and intimacy. For De Beauvoir these moments of backstage activity are usually ones from which the male audience is absent:

With other women, a woman is behind the scenes; she is polishing her equipment, but not in battle; she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics; she is lingering in dressing-gown and slippers in the wings before making her entrance on the stage; she likes this warm, easy, relaxed atmosphere (1949, 1984:557).

I have used other 'backstage' moments in the film, for example when Parvati is putting on her bindi, before attending the screening of their child marriage film. I shot this myself because, as a filmmaker, one is always looking for these intimate 'backstage' moments. They add to the sense of access (the audience is really seeing all that there is to see) and contrast well with 'frontstage' moments.



FIGURE 9: My footage of Parvati

Another ‘backstage’ moment is when Parvati’s son is doing his homework and spelling out as he writes the word ‘milk’. It is an extremely intimate moment that could have only been recorded by the child’s mother, Parvati herself.

One could argue that when I was there with my camera, I was very much ‘frontstage’, openly there and ‘performing’ in the role of documentary filmmaker. While at the same time, the husbands were ‘backstage’ to me as they never acknowledged my presence or even said ‘hello’.

Ethical considerations are fundamental to filmmaking because ‘backstage’ moments become ‘frontstage’ once they are shot and then selected in the edit. Therefore, there were some ‘backstage’ moments that I decided to leave out precisely because of ethical considerations. For example, Indira’s footage of her husband doing pooja (praying) with a bare chest, naked except for a cloth over his lower half. This footage felt too intimate and in any case, did not advance the storyline.



FIGURE 10: Indira’s self-shot footage of her husband

Similarly, Parvati’s daughter shot her mother, father and brother one evening, in bed on the floor, laughing and joking. Although her father appeared ‘good natured’, it was clear that he was drunk at the time and the scene felt a little too intrusive so I decided not to use it. I also did not include a sequence shot by Indira’s daughter of Indira having a difficult exchange with her mother-in-law; it felt that the mother-in-law did not want to be filmed as she was trying to move away from the camera. I did, however, use the first few seconds of this exchange until Indira raises her hand to ask her daughter to stop filming. Although her daughter continued to film, I decided to respect that signal myself and cut at that point. Even this short sequence cuts well with Indira’s impassioned video diary words about the problem of mother-in-laws.



FIGURE 11: Indira with her mother-in-law shot by her daughter

In television and theatre, the ‘half-way’ place between back and front stage is the ‘green room’. This is where the actor goes after they have come out of their dressing room or the guest goes on arrival at the TV studios, perhaps for coffee/tea with the other guests, before appearing on stage or TV. There were several ‘green room’ stages in the film, in particular when the women were together in the street about to tell the other villagers about the screenings.

The edit

In this research, there were logistical and resource implications of involving the women in the edit. There was so much footage generated by this way of working (23 hours of it) and editing is a time consuming process. However, I did send a DVD of a cut to Jayasree, the translator, who screened it to the women before I finalised the film to make sure they were happy with the way their lives were represented and for them to be able to feed back any concerns and comments. For some people working with participatory media, the fact that the women were not actively involved in the edit will call into question whether this project is really participatory. However, I believe one can justify a ‘sliding scale’ of participation. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, this project aimed to combine techniques of both ethnographic and participatory filmmaking, with approaches used in documentary production and it is at this point in the production process where documentary production methodology ‘took over’. I believe that my concern with audience engagement led to the project having great visibility, fulfilling the women’s own expressed desires to have their stories heard by a wider public, beyond the academy. This research resulted in the production of three different films - a short 20 minute cut for Al Jazeera’s Witness strand which, after transmission, was viewed over 56,000 times on their YouTube channel, a longer 23 minute version that was screened at many international film festivals and a 45 minute version that was the subject of my doctoral thesis.

However, I am sensitive to these issues of power and authority and aware that it is in the editing of this material that I am preserving a degree of authorial control. The women viewed the film before it was finished so they consented to how their lives are portrayed but, ultimately, I am reaffirming my power in the edit, by deciding not only who gets to speak, but how and when. As Ruby notes:

Being able to hear people tell their stories...represents a major shift in attitude about where one looks for authority and authenticity...however, editorial control still remains in the hands of the filmmaker. The empowerment of the subject is therefore more illusionary than actual. While new voices are heard, traditional forms of authorship have not been significantly altered (1991:54).

Gadihoke also acknowledges that the power between a filmmaker and her/his subjects can never be equal because of the director's final control over representation. "Even a first person narrative ultimately represents the subjectivity of the filmmaker who selects, edits and crafts the film or video" (2003:280). Gadihoke suggests that one way of dealing with this is to delineate 'our' narrative from 'their' narrative, to foreground subjectivity, to be aware of the process of filming as 'constructed' and to be reflexive about one's own positioning vis-à-vis one's subject (2003:280). I think there is a tension here between this need to 'foreground subjectivity' and the danger of detracting from the women's own stories. Because of this I decided to keep my narration to the minimum, using it at the beginning of the film, to foreground my 'authorial voice' and to set up the film and explain quite a complicated situation in which there are two separate video projects, the Sneha Praja Video project, which existed before I arrived, and my research which generated the different actuality footage shot by the women, the 'walk through' footage and the video diaries.

Early ethnographic films attempted to film 'whole' contexts and as Pink observes Collier and Collier even insisted that "the spatial and temporal order in which images were recorded must be maintained" (2001:105). They also rejected 'cutaways' and close-up shots for the same reason that they interfered with the objective recording of 'reality'. This approach has been now superseded by the work of MacDougall, among others, and Pink acknowledges "a linear visual chronology may not consistently represent the way in which reality was experienced or conceptualised by all the individuals involved" (2001:106). The documentary tradition has never attempted to edit shot material chronologically but there is an understanding that the inherent meanings of the situation, as perceived by the filmmaker, must not be distorted in the edit.

Regardless of stylistic choices, all audiences need clarity and with so many different layers of footage, some of it self-shot by the four women, I decided it was important to clearly distinguish each woman's story so that the audience could identify them from each other. Not only do I have a sense of responsibility to each woman to make sure we know which is their footage but also too much confusion in a film is known to disengage an audience.

My research film also attempts to show the ways in which the Sneha Praja Video project was transforming these women's lives, both financially (the project pays them more than field work) and in terms of gaining respect in their communities. Therefore, it was important to include clips from their own video reports; these give the final doctoral research film another layer, and also a different tone because these clips employ a journalistic register.

All the women had voiced that there was a problem with domestic violence in their communities so it was important for me to include this. Latha's story was a good way to safely raise the subject as she was now living many miles away from her ex-husband and protected by her new location in her parent's home. In Latha's walking interview she had said that "when the women go to meetings, sometimes the husbands get drunk and when they return home, their husbands harass them" and I was able to place this voice-over over footage of the women's meeting without being too specific about a particular woman's relationship. It is interesting that when the women move out of the domestic sphere, that it is then that there is a particular risk of domestic violence. At that point, the wife is directly challenging their husband's masculinity, a masculinity that has been observed by others as being built and maintained on a greater use of physical space (Wex, 1979).

Highmore, when referring to the study of the everyday, says it is "precisely to go behind the scenes and reveal underlying structures and latent contents" (2002:8). However, one can only guess at these structures and 'latent contents' because they are not necessarily visible so this is one of the limitations of visual research. However, I believe, it is through editing that one can hint at these structures.

Conclusion

To an extent, I have democratised the filmmaking process by putting cameras in the hands of subjects and opened up alternative discursive spaces. I believe that participatory filmmaking in this instance has produced footage that would not have come from using more conventional methods; certainly not of the area focusing on gender experience and familial relations in rural India. In the edit, I have interwoven different elements of this footage to tell a story with the aim to engender fresh insights into complex issues for the benefit of distant others, some of whom have never been to India. I have considered the different sources of film material, which I was able to generate and believe that the combination of methodology

used, participatory and observational filmmaking and video diary interviews, produced a nuanced picture of the interior lives of four rural women. In screenings, some audience members have been moved to tears as the stories they heard resonated with them.

However, according to Frota (1996), when Western news teams went to the Kayapo Indian villages, this tribe would often ‘enact’ the behaviour expected of them (that of being aggressive and bellicose) because they understood very quickly that this would give them visibility. So, it is very important to acknowledge the limitations of visual research and participatory video projects and to rigorously question any ‘findings’. What we see may not be what is really there.

Moore, also referring to this Kayapo Indian project, notes that in the videos made by the Kayapo Indians themselves, men are shot in dynamic movement while the women are relatively immobile, “framed off-centre and close-up; when they are moving they are shot with a static camera, closer up than men thus weakening the dynamism of their movement” (1994:128). Moore asks; “are these conventions learned from television and anthropologists, or do they reflect the general state of affairs there as well?” (1994:128). The argument that power relations get magically transformed at the grass roots, ‘assumes that indigenous video-makers are immune from “hierarchical power structures’ and ignores the possibility that image making itself carries its own hazards” (Moore 1994:128).

Inevitably the camera has a ‘blind spot’ and is as partial and subjective as those that wield it; but this can be a strength if the camera is democratised and more and more people in the world have access to it. The ‘blind spot’ has often been, as well as class and ethnicity, gendered but this ‘blind spot’ is coming into visibility as feminist methodology concerns itself with, and appreciates, women’s subjective experience and recognises its significance.

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