

**Village Tales: an exploration of the potential of participatory  
documentary filmmaking in rural India**



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## Copyright Statement

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### A practice-led PhD

This practice-led PhD follows the regulations as set out in Bournemouth University's *Code of Practice for Research Degrees*. It consists of a 45 minute documentary film and an accompanying 29,390 word exegesis:

‘The exegesis should set the practice in context and should evaluate the contribution that the research makes to the advancement of the research area. The exegesis must be of an appropriate proportion of the submission and would normally be no less than 20,000 words or the equivalent...A full appreciation of the originality of the work and its contribution to new knowledge should only be possible through reference to both’.

Extract from *Code of Practice for Research Degrees*, Bournemouth University, September 2014.

### A note on terminology

The term ‘documentary’ refers to my own film informed by the documentary tradition in British film and television. ‘Ethnographic film’ refers to research-based filmmaking, often undertaken by visual anthropologists and/or ethnographers, and that research has also informed my own practice as a documentary filmmaker.

The terms ‘video’ and ‘film’ are used interchangeably.

## ABSTRACT

### **Village Tales: an exploration of the potential of participatory documentary filmmaking in rural India by Sue Sudbury**

This is a PhD by practice, consisting of a documentary film, *Village Tales*, and an accompanying thesis; I locate my practice in the context of documentary and participatory filmmaking. In this research I want, as an experienced documentary filmmaker, 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 research question is ‘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 thesis covers the period of time from 2008 to 2014, which includes research, filmmaking, scripting, editing and screening the documentary to different audiences. The documentary explores what the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) calls ‘dailiness’; that is, films built around the exploration of relationships, feelings and experiences. Leslie Devereaux uses the term ‘sticking close to experience’ when describing this attention to everyday life (1995:72). My documentary is situated in the everyday because the women work primarily as housewives and mothers and the ‘everyday’ is an important site for the construction, maintenance and challenging of gender roles and power.

More specifically, *Village Tales* is concerned with a regional government community initiative in rural India, set up to train local women as video reporters so they can make films about subjects important to them; these films are then screened to other villagers to raise community awareness. However, my documentary is also about some of these women’s daily lives as I asked four of them if they would turn their

cameras on to their everyday lives and make video diaries about their own personal concerns.

The exegesis charts the creative and intellectual terrain that the documentary project as a whole explores. It includes an historical account of participatory filmmaking in the developing world and the use of video diaries, by broadcast television in the UK. I ask that the accompanying DVD is watched after reading Chapters 1-3 of the thesis.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 The Sneha Praja Video project**

This chapter contains an outline of the Sneha Praja Video project and the aims, research question and methods employed in my own research. There is a brief account of participatory methods used in anthropology and, to use a term associated with David MacDougall (1975) ‘participatory cinema’, which have informed my research. Concepts such as ‘othering’ and the ‘everyday’ are introduced, as well as the importance of gender for this thesis.

A local Indian government community video scheme, with funding from the World Bank, was set up in 2005, to train 11 women, from different villages throughout Andhra Pradesh, in video skills; this was an initiative aiming to relieve rural poverty by giving a perceived disadvantaged group ‘a voice’ and self-determination. The monthly video magazine programmes they produced would be screened in villages throughout Andhra Pradesh informing villagers of important issues. Sneha Praja Video was intended to be self-funded after the first year because village committees would be then asked to pay for the screenings. This income would allow the project itself to continue to pay the women to produce their video reports.

The women were selected on the basis of their previous active involvement and engagement with a community newspaper. These chosen women were then trained by the American charity, Video Volunteers, to shoot, interview and script. Video Volunteer workers cut and assembled the programmes with editorial input from the women. The women filmmakers chose the film subjects themselves so the first video they made was about child marriage; they had all been married themselves as children and suffered a lot because of this, and were keen to speak out about this continuing practice.

I had received a promotional email from Video Volunteers and when I clicked on the link to their website ([www.videovolunteers.org](http://www.videovolunteers.org)) I was intrigued by the still photographs of the women filming, using new technology to empower themselves

and report on issues that concerned them. Through this video initiative they were gaining confidence and challenging their long held domestic roles in their communities. As a novice self-shooter myself (the many television documentaries I had produced and directed were shot by a camera operator), I could identify with them. We were all learning how to operate cameras and entering a traditionally male preserve.

As part of my research, I asked four of the women involved with the Sneha Praja Video project to also use their cameras to show us their daily lives, to record whatever they felt was important and they wished to show to a wider audience. Through a translator, I also asked them to use the camera to record video diaries and familiarised them with this technique by asking them questions to which they spoke their answers directly into the camera lens. I will discuss my way of working in more detail in chapter 3 Research agenda and methodologies.

## 1.2 Aims, objectives and research question

One of the aims of this research is to discover, by practice, new ways in which documentary video can reveal and shed light on the everyday lives of women, living in another culture. I intend to use participatory filmmaking and video diary testimonies for this purpose.

By using participatory methods, I aim to explore, through practice, how this particular group of women negotiate their family relationships. What is life like for them living in rural India today? What is important to them? What are the stories they want to tell us about their lives? How is the Sneha Praja Video project empowering them and how do they combine their filmmaking with their identities as rural women?

I test and challenge this collaborative process by creating a situation in which there are five different sources of footage. In order to do this I introduced the women to the video diary and encouraged them to record their everyday lives. The five different components of the video research material are listed 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
Video Volunteers film about child marriage	Reflects the women's own concerns about child marriage. Initiated and managed by Video Volunteers, a US charity. <i>All these sequences in the film will be shown in a Recording frame.</i>

During preliminary PhD work, I obtained some development money to travel to Andhra Pradesh to investigate the feasibility of this research project. From speaking with the Video Volunteers organization in New York, I had learned that the women

filmmakers lived in villages scattered over the whole of the state of Andhra Pradesh, up to five hours apart from each other on minor and difficult roads to traverse. I took my camera with me and after gaining the project co-ordinator's full agreement, as well as the women filmmakers' agreement, I did some sample filming. This was very successful and I realized that this preliminary background research had given me enough information to know that it was viable and to understand the potential scope of the project. With this information I was able to write the initial PhD registration document.

After registration in March 2009, I started to view and have translated some of the 23 hours of research footage that I had amassed, including the video diary material, and the actuality footage. As a documentary practitioner, I see one of my roles as interpreting people's stories and selecting the best way to deliver those to the largest audience as possible. The women in Andhra Pradesh had made it very clear that this is what they wanted me to do for them. I was aware of a strand on Al Jazeera English called *Witness*, which after broadcast, uploads all the films online. So in June 2009, I sent them an initial cut of some of my footage and they agreed to broadcast 21 minutes of it in September of that year. Since then this film, *Sari Stories*, has had over 62,000 views on YouTube and the women are very pleased to see that their stories are travelling far and being shared so widely.

Over the past four years, I have been working on a 45 minute version based on the entire 23 hours of footage. *Sari Stories*, cut for the international news channel Al Jazeera, was inevitably fast paced and had to accommodate advertisement breaks and hold the attention of the audience in a multi-channel environment, while my PhD film tells a slower and more considered story in which the footage is allowed to 'breathe'. In this film I can fully explore the methodology used by visual ethnographers giving priority to the women's voices and their perceptions of their lives as expressed through their use of the camera. The five different sources of footage will be layered and constructed into a narrative that tells several stories and includes a multiplicity of voices. I am able to not only to make a longer and more ethnographic film but also to consider the issues, in particular that of 'othering', and 'the everyday' (Highmore, 2002) which will be raised by the film in this exegesis.

In this research project I want, as an experienced documentary filmmaker, to bring together the techniques of both ethnographic filmmaking and participatory cinema with approaches used in documentary film. 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 final research film presented for my PhD examination reflects ethnographic principles but also adheres to the principles of documentary story telling with the aim of engaging the wider audience. *Village Tales* will hopefully be broadcast on completion on The Community Channel and screened in the academic community at visual ethnographic and documentary film conferences.

Like the visual sociologist Chaplin, I am engaging with the visual, not simply as a mode of recording data or illustrating text, but as a medium through which new knowledge and critiques may be created (1994:16). The methodological implications of this stress collaboration, not solely between the researcher and informants but also between the visual and textual and the producers of images and words. My documentary practice will also aim to create new knowledge by experimenting with different techniques and new forms of collaboration between researcher, informant and the nature of the medium itself.

Is it possible to move beyond the concept of Orientalism (Said, 1978) and create nuanced representations and articulate difference within the Orient? Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2008) cite the work of Ross Chambers who, in reaction to Said's Orientalism, asks if it is possible to have a kind of humanistic knowledge that does not play a dominant role over the people it seeks to study. Can the silent achieve a voice and represent themselves? My research aims to see if this is achievable in this particular creative project.

I ask the women themselves to influence the scope of the research question; they decide what to film and show me what *they* think is important in their everyday lives. The women testify and make available their first hand experiences. I am attempting to reverse the politics of 'othering' by exploring whether participatory filmmaking can

show us the lived reality of women in another culture and help get round the ‘them and us’ dichotomy.

For the purposes of understanding what I am doing, it is important to also consider the work of Ben Highmore who asks if ‘ethnography (can) be a practice that does not render the voices of its informants subservient to the interpretative performance of the ethnographer. How can the politics and poetics of ethnography be reinvented for the future?’ (2002:140). As he notes, the Mass Observation project (1937-65) was ‘less concerned with interpreting the material that was being observed (often diaristic, self-observation)’; it was more interested in letting people ‘speak for themselves’ allowing ‘native informants’ to become their own ethnographers (2002:145). This is the approach I wish to take in my PhD and it correlates with the ‘normal function’ of the traditional observational documentary maker; to be the messenger (though crucially ‘shaping’ that message through the editing process) and to allow previously untold stories to be told to a wider world with much of the interpretation to be carried out by the ‘viewer’. I hope also that by experimenting with different forms of participatory filmmaking this will allow my ‘native informants’ to speak directly to the audience.

I intend to reflect on another question that Highmore asks; is the everyday ‘an arena for the reproduction of power relations or is it the site of invention and resistance?’ (2002:5). My research may show that it is both. I also want to ask what happens when everyday life is viewed from ‘elsewhere’. Highmore observes that making claims for everyday life being in one place rather than another, avoids attending to the ‘movement of the daily’ and it might be this movement, this continual drift of the daily that is most difficult and most productive to register. ‘If we situate a study solely in the home without attending to movement outside of it, we could miss key elements that should be included in the study of the everyday’ (2002:17).

Stanley and Wise, as cited in Gray claim that ‘feminism argues that systems and social structures, whether concerned with the economy, the family, or the oppression of women more generally, can best be examined and understood through an exploration of relationships and experiences within everyday life’ (Gray, 1997:91). I have chosen to situate this research project in the ‘everyday’ because I also believe that the oppression and lives of women can best be examined and understood through

looking at this arena. The 'everyday' is where gendered roles are consolidated and power maintained and resisted; it is where these roles are manifested.

I will engage with recent developments in gender theory, which have had an important impact on ethnographic methodology. For example, Pink identifies the tendency to now stress the plural rather than binary nature of gendered identities so that differences among, as well as between, men and women are accounted for (2001:21). Pink goes on to say that 'it has been argued that the gendered self is never fully defined in any absolute way but that it is only in specific social interactions that the gender identity of any individual comes in to being in relation to the negotiations that it undertakes with other individuals' (2001:21).

In this introduction I have outlined key features of my research and introduced my research subject, the methodological tradition within which I am working and some of the key concepts I will be using.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Visual ethnographic filmmaking and anthropology**

In this chapter, I will not only refer to relevant documentary texts but also the very rich tradition of visual ethnographic and anthropological writing that, in particular, concerns itself with issues relating to filming with people from other cultures.

I start by examining the nature of documentary practice and position it alongside ethnographic and anthropological filmmaking in an attempt to unpick what distinguishes documentary from these other disciplines. This is a highly contentious area, which continues to be fiercely debated, particularly by some leading anthropologists.

Banks states that if the film director is an anthropologist it would seem fair to call the film itself, that s/he makes ‘anthropological’ or at least ‘ethnographic’ (1992:117). I presume that, by this, Banks means that what a person does is usually connected to their established role. However, he goes on to claim that any film which represents ‘the normative subjects of ethnographic enquiry - non-western people doing non-western things (such as gift-exchange, or ‘tribal’ dancing) is inherently ethnographic’ and poses the question, does this mean that all documentaries shot outside of Western culture will be ethnographic? (1992:120).

In answering his own question, Banks says that most ethnographers return from the field and analyse the data collected. He also observes that ethnographic films often add commentary, containing words from the anthropological discourse such as ‘ethnic group’, ‘kinship systems’ and frequently include illustrative diagrams. Banks also claims that anthropologists are less intrusive because they usually participate in the communities they are observing and learn the language of those studied (1992:124). I will not be attempting to learn Telegu though one could question whether white Western anthropologists ever become less intrusive than documentary makers just through participation.

Banks concludes that anthropologists should locate 'ethnographicness' in intention so by that definition my film is not ethnographic in that I am not from the anthropological discipline. However, Banks does recognise that ethnography is a continually redefined cultural construct and 'there are plenty of things that anthropologists do today that our forefathers would not have considered part of the discipline' (Banks 1992: p.127).

Prosser makes the distinction between 'an ethnographic film made for mass consumption, minimally supported by either research or anthropologists and an ethnographic film made by a collaboration between an anthropologist and a filmmaker, based upon a structured investigation which is shown on television' (1998:107). Prosser has in mind the Granada Television series *Disappearing World*, an example of such a collaboration, and broadcast throughout the 70s and 80s on the ITV Network. Prosser goes on to cite an interview with anthropologist, Maurice Block in which Block dismisses ethnographic film as just entertainment and the 'opposite of what one tries to do in anthropology' (1998:107).

The 'entertainment paradigm' in documentary is very important to recognise and is probably the most significant factor in distinguishing the form from visual anthropology and ethnography; sadly, it is increasingly in evidence since television has become more commercial. A series like *Disappearing World* would not be broadcast today on British television and with the change of focus of Channel 4's *True Stories* strand to domestic (or at least English speaking) subjects, BBC *Storyville* is now the only terrestrial strand covering documentary subjects in the developing world. The BBC's *This World* and Channel 4's *Unreported World* strands do excellent jobs covering topical 'current affairs' subjects. In the making of this film, I am not under such commercial pressures but am very aware of the need to engage and communicate with an audience.

In contrast, some visual anthropologists, such as Fuchs, go as far as to completely reject cinematographic or aesthetic considerations in ethnographic film:

A scientific, ethnographic film documentation must satisfy the following requirements: unity of place, time, group and action, together with strict obedience to the chronology

of action in the final version of the film. Artificial manipulation in either shooting or cutting is not permitted. A scientific film also rules out the use of staged scenes (Fuchs 1988: 222).

Heider, like Fuchs, is wary of editing. His principal concern is with 'wholeness'; he believes that ethnographic films should portray 'whole persons in whole acts' (1976:107-109). Both Fuchs and Heider also insisted that any ethnographic film must be supported by written texts (Heider, 1976:127; Fuchs, 1988: 223).

The claim that filmmaking is a scientific endeavour is clearly naive, film footage can never be 'objective'. By pointing the camera in one direction, one is simultaneously ignoring the scene in the other. Film is neither gender nor culturally neutral as the filmmaker will always be influenced by their own subjectivities.

Problems arise, in Heider's view (1976:47), when the ethnographic intention of encoding 'reality' is intruded upon by the 'cinematographic plane'; values from the domains of cinema and television such as the notion of 'good' shots. Heider was particularly keen to prioritise the ethnographic value of a particular shot over and above its cinematographic merit. For example, he gives two examples of film sequences that contain 'soft' (out of focus) shots and defends his decision to include them in his films as 'ethnographic consideration overrode cinematographic considerations' (1976:48). Interestingly, nowadays similarly soft shots often appear in television documentaries because the 'value' (often in terms of 'entertainment') or significance to the story of a particular shot/sequence overrides any technical quality issues. In fact, in this project I also include a shot that is 'out of focus' (that of Latha moving sacks with her mother) because the editorial significance of the sequence outweighed technical imperfections.

While some anthropologists dismiss the visual altogether, feeling it is too open to misinterpretation and too seductive, David MacDougall (1997, 1998) argues that the visual can resolve the difficulties that anthropologists face in researching and communicating 'emotions, time, the body, the senses, gender and individual identity'. The visual has a 'capacity for metaphor and synaesthesia and much that can be "said" about these matters may best be said in the visual media' (1998:68 and 1997:287).

MacDougall acknowledges the dominant assumption, within anthropology, that films are no more than 'slices of life' and have little interpretative capacity without accompanying text; however, he believes that sophisticated ethnographic films have meaning and insights embedded in their very structures (1998:71). As an exponent of editing, MacDougall feels it can provide anthropological meaning. Editing is, of course, a key tool used in documentary to communicate and suggest other meanings than those inherent in just the footage itself. Juxtaposition can take documentary away from the realm of 'scientific observation' into that of 'art'.

MacDougall (1997, 1998) is also a leading exponent of observational filmmaking, which is where visual ethnography seems to overlap most significantly with documentary practice; he emphasises the ability of observational filmmaking to represent a sense of other people's experience. Banks is also quick to lay claim to observational filmmaking as an anthropological tool and acknowledges this cross-over with documentary, 'with observational documentaries we have the added danger that the style of film-making is mimetic of our working practice' (1992:127) but Banks values the style for its perceived objectivity; it 'form(s) the jewel in the crown of the ethnographic film canon....because (they) appear most objective, neutral and transparent' and 'a continuation of the anthropological scientific imperative' (1992:124).

Observational documentary has been viewed with suspicion by many leading feminist film theoreticians. For example, Johnston notes that:

The "truth" of our oppression cannot be "captured" on celluloid with the "innocence" of the camera. The danger of developing a cinema of non-intervention is that it promotes a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis. It is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected (1973:214-15).

I appreciate Johnston's argument but films speak through the filmmaker to an audience and although the process itself should not be viewed as 'objective' and unproblematic, it is important that the viewer is 'engaged' with the message. In

defence of observational documentary, E. Ann Kaplan (in Walker and Waldman, 1999:12) recognises ‘the danger of a theory that ignores the need for emotional identification with people suffering oppression’. One of the values of film is its ability to engage the emotions; too much analysis within a film is in danger of being purely cerebral and, as Waldman and Walker point out, ‘realism is often the first recourse of oppressed groups wishing to counter vicious stereotypes or lies’ (1999:12).

Techniques of filmmaking favoured by some feminists, such as Eileen McGarry (in Walker and Waldman, 1999:8) are montage, expressionistic sequences, music, voice-over and dramatization. Television and theatrical documentaries today are rarely truly observational in the sense of Wiseman and Pennebaker; even the feminist filmmaker Kim Longinotto now uses music (*Salma*, 2013) though still eschews narration and highly constructed montage sequences. Evidence of the hand of the filmmaker/editor is still viewed with suspicion by many feminist documentary makers and seen as a potential distraction from the ‘message’ and emotion contained within the film itself.

So the film I am making comes out of the documentary tradition and contains mixed modes – observational filmmaking, carried out by both the women and myself, and video diaries. Video diaries are interventionist as they necessitate a discussion between the subjects and filmmaker/s and acknowledge the presence of the camera by the subjects looking straight down the lens. There are questions of authenticity and fabrication surrounding ‘the video diary’, which I discuss in chapter 2:6.

In contrast, the observational documentary filmmaker appears to be ‘eavesdropping’ on live events and not influencing in any way what s/he is filming. In reality, a lot of organisation goes on, unseen, behind the scenes before such observational films are shot. The French documentarian, Nicholas Philibert, visited over a hundred schools before selecting the one he felt was ‘right’ for his film *Etre et Avoir* (2002).

## 2.2 The Colonial Gaze

In recent times, anthropologists have begun to take issue with repressive uses of photography during the colonial period. Edwards (1992) discusses the importance of situating colonial photographs of people from ‘other’ cultures in relation to the ideologies and intentions of their producers at that time. She points out that ‘the power relations of the colonial situation were not only those of overt oppression, but also of insidious, unequal relationships which permeated all aspects of cultural confrontation’ (1992:4). Thus regarding colonial photography as symbolic of this power relationship that was ‘sustained through a controlling knowledge which appropriated the “reality” of other cultures into ordered structure’ (1992:6).

Pink cites studies of colonial photography that have characterized the ‘colonial gaze’ on other less powerful cultures as an exploitative and objectifying project to catalogue and classify the colonized; an exercise that implied hierarchy and the oppression that was part and parcel of colonialism (2001:22-23).

Sometimes colonial photography involved using a grid-type background against which physical characteristics of ‘the other’ could be measured. The resulting photographs were seen as scientific evidence of cultural difference and hierarchy, symbols of a ‘controlling knowledge’, domination and inequality (Edwards 1992). The study of this body of work disempowers the archive by challenging the notion that it is a coherent ‘whole’ and suggests that the images are constructed rather than a ‘given’.

Pink describes how the ‘grand theories’ and scientific methodologies of comparative anthropology became, as Fox and Gingrich outline (Pink, 2002:2), increasingly unfashionable throughout the 1970s and accused of supporting European imperialism (by Assad 1973; Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986) and undermined by a critique of its claims to objectivity.

MacDougall observed that visual anthropology was moving towards a discourse that didn’t stress cultural differences but revealed ‘social agency’ and ‘recognisable

patterns of social interaction' that emphasise commonalities rather than difference between individuals in different cultures (1998:256).

Today, no researcher would map a person's face on a grid to measure their facial characteristics as if they were a sample from an exotic species. However, evidently significant imbalances of power still exist throughout the world and all filmmakers/academic researchers have to be aware of and sensitive to these inequalities and careful not to abuse their position.

The photographer Barndt (1997) noted that the act of photography is imbued with issues of power. When photographing the staff of a sociology department, Barndt found that the gendered and hierarchical power relations within the department corresponded with the access she had to different people: 'It seemed much harder to get into the space of the powerful than into the space of the less powerful: the (primarily female) secretaries in the department office were easier prey, for example, than the (usually male) full professors; you had to pass through two doors and get their permission before you could photograph them' (1997:13).

Bearing all these factors in mind, that is why there has not only been a growth in participatory research in an attempt to break down inequalities of power but in the reflexive approach where the subjectivities of the researcher are considered and very often embedded in the actual research artefact.

The Spanish based A Buen Comun Unit believe 'social research should be a form of intervention, rather than methodological practice' which dissolves the 'barrier between researcher and researched' thus making the film's main characters 'full members of the research and film-making process'. They aim to empower those who participate in them, through self awareness gained in the reflexive process of documentary production and create a social intervention by 'revealing the hidden' and making explicit the voices and concerns of people who are usually 'invisible' in public forums. The *Mujeres Invisibles* project worked with women from marginalised barrios in Cordoba in Andalucia and aimed to bring their voices into the public domain (Pink, 2006: 97-100).

However, some academics find these collaborative projects with indigenous subjects, regardless of the extent of control ceded to the subjects, as politically suspect. They see them as just a way to solve the 'representational crisis' by pretending that indigenous people have actually been 'given a voice' when they really have just been brought in as 'bit players' in the perpetuation of self-interested western constructions of the world (Faris, 1992; Moore, 1994). In fact, some of these critics go as far as thinking that the whole tradition of ethnographic research is part of the West's regimentation and control of people in the developing worlds. 'They are a specialized form of pornography...(with) the combination of a voyeuristic interest in the intimate details of other people's lives with the maintenance of distance and, in a desperate search for a lost Eden, the fetishistic catharsis of the Other' (Henley, 1998:52).

Henley argues that academics who have defended the discipline against such criticisms claim that this view is based on 'an over-simplification and...an overestimation of the relationship between anthropology as an academic discipline and the loci of genuine power in western society' (Henley, 1998:52). Morris has also criticised this claim by arguing that these ideas themselves come from a 'phallogentric and culturally relative lineage' (Morris, 1994:53-55, 77).

However, I do think there is some credence to these views but the value, for us in the West, of hearing and listening to these 'other' voices and thus hopefully having a greater understanding of other people's lives and our part in the creation of their everyday realities, needs to be also acknowledged. As Sebastio Salgado puts it when talking about the value of documentary photography:

I believe that there is no person in the world that must be protected from pictures. Everything that happens in the world must be shown and people around the world must have an idea of what's happening to the other people around the world. This is the function of...the documentary photographer...to show one person's existence to another. (2000:111).

Participatory filmmaking developed, to some extent, in an attempt to make the process of 'data gathering' and filmmaking more democratic and to shake off the shackles of colonialism.

### 2.3 The origins of participatory cinema

Participatory cinema is a tradition going at least as far back as the 1960s when anthropologists at the University of Philadelphia gave 16mm cameras to the Navajo Indians and inner city teenagers, as well as to their own students, and sought to relate both the form and the content of the films produced to the social and cultural circumstances of the filmmakers (Worth and Adair, 1972). Worth and Adair (1972) produced *Through Navajo Eyes* by teaching the Navajo the mechanics of camera operation rather than what constituted a 'proper' film of their culture. This example of participatory cinema was motivated, exclusively, by academic research interests; however, at the same time, other participatory work had a more political motive, such as helping indigenous people express their demands.

One such example is the film work carried out on the Fogo Islands in Newfoundland. The Fogo Island Process was developed in the late 60s by the National Film Board of Canada's (NFB) and Memorial University of Newfoundland's (MUN) *Challenge for Change* programme; it pioneered the use of interactive film and video as a tool for social change and empowerment in remote, underdeveloped locations. These communities were given video equipment so they could create films about their social problems (Crocker, 2003:122-141). The process was then embraced by development agencies around the world and is now widely regarded as the forerunner of many more recent developments in participatory communication, sometimes also referred to as 'applied visual anthropology'. Colin Low was the producer/director who headed the Fogo team while Fred Earle, who was already working in the Fogo Islands as a field worker, played a crucial role as mediator between the filmmakers and the community. Community input into the editing process had not been part of the initial plan but after several months of shooting, Low decided that it would be preferable if people could see some of the material produced. After the screenings and community feedback, only one short film on education in Fogo was cut because people objected to the tone of the interview. However, the precedent of community feedback and control of the image, that became the hallmark of participatory film and video, was born. The Fogo Island filming project played a strategic role in opening channels of communication among the island communities themselves and between the islanders

and the Government on the mainland and getting islanders' concerns raised and questions answered.

As well as these participatory initiatives, various technical advances at the time meant that indigenous voices were also being heard more frequently in broadcast documentaries. Lightweight cameras, fast colour film stocks which removed the need for bulky and heavy lighting equipment, meant that filmmakers were able to operate in remote locations. The increased popularity of subtitling in the 1960s meant that film protagonists were able to be heard speaking in their actual voice rather than be dubbed or interpreted by a narrator (Henley, 1998:49).

One of the earliest recorded uses of participatory filmmaking was by the American documentarian, Robert J. Flaherty, who, while making *Nanook of the North* (1922), would solicit Nanook's criticism of the rushes and ask for his suggestions as to what he should shoot next (Flaherty, 1950:15). Other degrees and forms of participation can be found in Jean Rouch's work such as *Chronique d'un été*, (1960) and in MacDougall's 'participatory cinema' *Kenya Boran* (1973). 'Without the participation of our subjects, certain aspects of their situation would have remained unexpressed' claims MacDougall (1998:135) when referring to the making of *Kenya Boran* in which he intervened when filming a group of men having tea, by asking one of the men in the film to raise the subject of the government's advocacy of birth control. 'The result was an explosion of disagreement from ...the most conservative old man present...which he was unlikely to have delivered without such strong provocation' (1998:135). However, there is a clear distinction between participatory filmmaking, which hands the actual means of production – camera and sometimes editing – to the protagonists and MacDougall's 'participatory cinema' in which the filmmaker/anthropologist intervenes in 'real' situations and asks people to 'participate' by suggesting questions they ask.

Pink identifies the fact that since the 1970s anthropologists have increasingly worked in indigenous media. 'Some of this work involves applying visual anthropology to indigenous issues. Other work suggests anthropological approaches to producing indigenous media with and for local people' (2006:11). However, as Pink goes on to

observe, it was not until the '80s that mainstream anthropology began to accept applied interventions of 'participatory cinema' (2006:12).

As Pink explains, 'applied visual anthropology' usually has a problem-solving component and is client/user driven rather than driven by theoretical, substantive or methodological questions deriving from academic practice (2006:87). Relevant to this chapter, 'applied visual anthropology' is usually characterised by collaborative approaches in which the subjects of the research play an active role in the production of data. 'Sometimes they have a personal or community stake in the findings of the research or plan to use the final visual product of the research, in other (usually commercial) cases they might be paid a fee for their participation' (2006:87). Many such uses of video in participatory social development, community empowerment, and notably in HIV/AIDS education/awareness campaigns have indicated a strong belief in the transformative 'power' of documentary film/video for social intervention.

Shirley White (2003) and the contributors to *Participatory Video: Images that Transform and Empower* outline an agenda for using video in development through a participatory process – for example for poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, revealing and re-negotiating social inequalities. In many of these instances, total control over the video medium is ceded to the film subjects by allowing them not only to research, cast and shoot but to carry out all the film's post-production, as well. The Video SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) project, run by Communication for Change (formerly Martha Stuart Communications) has been well documented by Stuart and Berry (1996). Notably, Video SEWA helped self-employed women in the state of Gujarat make a video about their work, *My Work, Myself*. Subsequently, the video was seen by audiences totalling nearly half a million, through community playbacks and was broadcast on Gujarat State television, three days before the 1991 census determining national labour policy.

Some other initiatives claim to bridge the gap between visual anthropology and 'applied' uses. Richard Chalfen (2004) collaborated with Michael Rich (2004), using a method called Video Intervention Assessment (VIA) 'a research method in which children and adolescents with a chronic medical condition are given the opportunity

to create video diaries of their everyday lives with illness. They are asked to “teach your clinicians what it means to live with your condition” (Chalfen and Rich in Pink, 2006:86). Embedded in anthropological principles, VIA is situated by Chalfen and Rich as a hybrid methodology with applied aims at ‘the nexus of visual anthropology, applied anthropology, media anthropology and medical anthropology’. They insist it pertains to ‘a reinvigorated visual anthropology, one considerably advanced beyond the myopic attention to and production of ethnographic film’ (2006:86).

Today, ‘participatory cinema’ and ‘participatory filmmaking’ are terms used across many different disciplines, from visual to applied anthropology and from visual ethnography to documentary filmmaking; the terms cover situations where the subjects are self-shooting and editing films themselves to films, in which their ‘collaboration’ is limited to asking questions suggested by an anthropologist (as in *Kenya Boran, 1973*) or where they are acting out suggested roles (as in *Chronique d’un Ete, 1960*).

In *Village Tales*, I film the women as they make their child marriage video in order to contextualise that separate project and film them as they ‘walk through’ their homes introducing us to their families; I also include footage they have shot of their daily lives, their video diary testimonies and clips from their child marriage video. So the film works on several different levels and is a combination of five different sources of footage in my attempt to fashion a mode of storytelling that combines both participatory filmmaking and observational documentary techniques. However, I have not involved the women in the editing process and I will discuss the reasons in chapter 3.4.

## 2.4 Participatory cinema and the everyday

Some feminist researchers argue that systems and social structures, whether concerned with the economy, the family, or the oppression of women more generally, can best be examined and understood through an exploration of relationships and experiences within everyday life (Stanley and Wise, 1983:53). Examining the everyday does not preclude an understanding of deeper, structural factors; as Highmore claims, the idea of ‘the actuality behind the actuality’ is an important theme in Marx’s understanding of everyday life:

Marx and Freud both attempt to reveal structures that might underpin (and undermine) the everyday reality of experience and to do this they both navigate across the poles of the particular and the general. If Marx and Freud set the scene for modern cultural theory they do so in a way that casts doubt on the veracity of perceived everyday actuality. But they do this contradictorily: on the one hand the surface of the everyday (its manifest content) needs to be given the closest of scrutiny (what you see is what there is) and on the other hand the project is precisely to go behind the scenes and reveal underlying structures and latent contents (2002:8).

I agree that it is important not to be seduced by the ‘surface of the everyday’ and though it is crucial to attempt to go ‘behind the scenes’ and ‘reveal underlying structures and latent contents’, this will inevitably present challenges. However, I will attempt in my research to explore participatory filmmaking’s potential for observing not only the surface but also these underlying structures of the everyday; ‘its grammar, its patterns of association, its forms of connection and disconnection’ (Highmore, 2011:2).

From my research, I hope to make observations about the nature of ‘everyday life’ for the protagonists of my film, both men and women, and to see if there is a shared communality to their ‘everyday lives’.

## 2.5 Gender issues

What cannot be disputed is that there has been, and still is, a tendency for the subject/s of anthropological, ethnographic and documentary films to be “other” than the academic researcher/filmmaker. The protagonist/s is/are most frequently from a lower class and often different gender. In fact, anthropology was once defined as ‘the science of man embracing woman’ (McLuhan, 1965:226).

As Ann Gray asks ‘who can know what about whom, by what means and to what purpose?’ (1997:94). Gray goes on to cite Bat-Ami Bar On who argues that ‘experience is not gender-neutral’; gender is a constitutive element of experience. It may appear that Bar On is stating the obvious, but with a preponderance of visual anthropologists and documentary filmmakers being male this is an important issue to consider.

Gray states that ‘whilst the rich documenting of people’s lives and experiences broadens the picture, these data cannot simply be ‘bolted on’ to existing work more or less unproblematically....A set of more radical questions need to be asked, such as: why have these accounts been rendered invisible? What is it about the established methodologies which hierarchise particular ways of knowing?’ (1997:93). This is a fundamental question though not one I will be attempting to answer here.

Pink cites Henrietta Moore who is critical of the work of visual anthropologists, Clifford (1983), Tyler (1987) and Marcus (1995) for their inattention to gender and a feminist perspective (2006:13). Interestingly, visual anthropologist Marcus Banks is wary of the use of ‘the buzz words of the post-structuralist, postmodernist discourse – such as “gendered subjectivities”, “self and other”....most of the terms have come from other disciplines or from outside academia altogether and are, therefore, poor allies in establishing the distinctiveness of an anthropological discourse’ (1992:122). However, this does not mean that Banks entirely dismisses these concepts rather that he dislikes an uncritical use of fashionable jargon.

A stark example of the preoccupations of some male visual anthropologists is in the following personal account of anthropologist and filmmaker, John Marshall’s

expedition to the Kalahari, referred to by MacDougall; ‘while filming the making of a carrying net “knot by knot” a woman had gone into the bush, had a baby, and returned with it’ (1998:66-67). Gender obviously influences choice and priorities of focus and selection and I doubt that a female anthropologist would find the way in which a net is made more relevant or interesting than the birth of new life. Apparently after this, John Marshall soon turned from filming technology and ritual to the social and psychological contexts of hunting, initiation and possession, still very male concerns.

Leaving aside the choice of subject to study and the stories told, some theorists even consider the ‘data collection/filmmaking process’ itself in gender terms. Don Kulick has likened the traditional narrative structure of ethnography as an exploitative and repressive act where the masculine ethnographer penetrates the feminized ‘field’, generalizing, abstracting and oppressing the ‘feminine’ objects of his study:

When ethnographic texts and fieldwork accounts describe how the researcher ‘penetrates the other space’ either physically or intellectually to become the ‘creator of difference’ between self and other, they automatically place that researcher in a hetero-sexual-masculine subject position, ‘regardless of the gender of the text-image’....The act of ‘interpreting’ the other then constitutes not only a symbolic sexual penetration but a construction of the self as masculine and dominant (1995:78).

Kulick has argued for a different, more feminine, approach to ethnography that focuses on negotiation and inter-subjectivity (1995:22); notions of a ‘field’ impose unnecessary preconceptions and are in danger of becoming, for postmodern ethnographers, an arbitrarily framed and homogenized background to their own self-absorbed ‘experience’ (1995:78). Kulick’s perspective constructs a model of masculinity, which is exploitative and repressive but this does not obviously mean that all types of masculinities are similarly exploitative and repressive; however, these abstracted models are useful metaphors in discussing particular approaches to ethnographic and documentary filmmaking.

Thomas is similarly concerned by gendered approaches and argues for having ‘real’ women work the cameras (1997:145) so as to create an atmosphere which would not

completely replicate the structure of (male) looking – or the notion of the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1989:14-29). However, I agree with Mulvey who argues that the concept of the ‘male gaze’, which she developed in relation to cinema spectatorship, is contingent not on the ‘actual’ sex of the spectator but rather on the ‘masculinisation’ of the spectator position. Thomas also goes on to ‘reluctantly agree’ with Mulvey. Thomas’ research with video considers the development of collaborative approaches that confront and attempt to resolve the gendered power relations of technology and representation (1997:146).

Pink cites recent developments in gender theory (for example in the work of Connell, 1987, 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994; Moore, 1994) which have had an important impact on ethnographic methodology by stressing ‘the plural, rather than binary, nature of gendered identities and thus on *multiple* femininities and masculinities so that differences *among* as well as *between* men and women are accounted for’ (Pink, 2001:21). According to Pink it has been argued that the gendered self is never fully defined in any absolute way but that is only in specific social interactions that the gender identity of any individual comes into being *in relation* to the negotiations that it undertakes with other individuals (2001:21). This is an interesting observation, which I will consider when discussing the findings of my research.

## 2.6 British television documentary and participatory methods

Whilst many British television documentaries sensitively represent the realities of their subjects' lives, broadcast factual films have tended to remain the authored products of the producer/director and the broadcaster's senior executives. The subjects of these documentaries never have the final say in how they will ultimately be represented as editorial control always remains with the broadcaster. Perhaps this is unsurprising if one considers the socio-political context in which television operates. As Ruby states:

Television, whether private or state controlled, whether broadcast, cable or satellite, is by its economic and technological construction a force for cultural centralization. A few conceive, construct and are empowered to transmit to the many. The socio-cultural purpose of television is to reify, underwrite, support and espouse the ideology of the status quo...those who are given the responsibility (to produce television content) tend to come from a privileged upper middle class segment of society that has clearly benefited from the current structure of society (1991:61).

Of course, since Ruby wrote these words, the advent of the internet and in particular, You Tube, have radically changed the moving image landscape but this chapter is specifically looking at television so I am not going to discuss the internet here.

Broadcast documentaries are also expected to meet stringent aesthetic standards, which could be seen as a way in which the television industry maintains this control over product by insisting that it has to be shot and edited, by broadcast 'professionals'. By contrast, in participatory video, the subjects sometimes shoot and edit their own films so they can shape issues according to their own sense of what is important and crucially control how they will be represented. However, in the British television industry there have been some notable exceptions to this disparity.

In 1972, the BBC set up the Community Programme Unit with the intention of helping members of the public create programmes; the first of which was broadcast on 2 April 1973. The programmes usually highlighted a group or point of view that was under-represented in British broadcasting. Owing to the complexity of film

cameras at this time, ‘ordinary people’ did not self-shoot but were ‘lent’ the services of a professional crew to direct themselves; in broadcasting at this time, there was still a lot of importance put on technical standards. According to Corner there were also other experiments in wider participation ‘often involving studio-based work’ but they were ‘regarded as worthy but dull by the popular audience’ (1996:185).

However, with the increased availability and quality of domestic video equipment, in 1990 the CPU started compiling and broadcasting a series called *Video Diaries*, which by 1993 developed into the *Video Nation* project; this continued to be broadcast on BBC2 until 2000 when the archive and new films were moved online. Mandy Rose, one of the Producers, described *Video Nation* as injecting the subjective voice and an ‘amateur aesthetic into the heart of the mainstream schedule’ (quoted in Kilborn and Izod, 2000:183).

An interesting cross-disciplinary example is *Project 4:21*. Maria Pini (2001, 2006) describes why they chose video diaries to chart how social class location informed the life trajectory of thirty working and middle class girls. As researchers in a psychology department, they felt this method would offer them something more ‘authentic’ than ‘a piece of standard observation’ (Pini, 2001:1). They believed it to be a less invasive way of collecting research data as it did not involve the presence of a researcher; ‘mediation through ‘an academic gaze...might be experienced, by research subjects, as a watchful or “surveillant” outsider’ (Pini, 2001:2). There was also a feminist drive towards the production of more ‘realistic’ representations of women, or what we might call ‘counter-fictions’ of femininity’ (Pini, 2006:8). It was imagined that giving over ‘the means of representation to research subjects themselves was a way of somehow “empowering” these young women; enabling them to frame their own lives, tell their own stories, represent their own situation’ (Pini, 2001:3). Towards the end of the project, Channel Four Television contributed funding and broadcast extracts from some of the diaries in a series called *Girls, Girls, Girls* so it became a broadcast project, though conceived and mainly implemented in academia.

Video diaries aim to provide greater authenticity and an in-depth portrayal of a subject; as opposed to ‘hiding’ the camera, its presence is acknowledged as a window into people’s lives, bringing the private into the public sphere. As Dovey observes,

‘video texts shot on lightweight camcorders uniquely patrol, re-produce and penetrate the boundaries between the individual subject and the public material world’ (2000:55). The subjects appear ‘undirected’, in control of the recording and not thrown ‘off balance’ by interviewers’ questions. Through the video diary there is also a very powerful engagement with the audience and, until its invention, this ‘direct address’ was reserved only for newsreaders and heads of government in times of crisis. Most importantly for the broadcasters, this audience engagement led to increased ratings and it is now a technique frequently used in factual output (*Our War*, BBC3 2011, *Kids with Cameras: Diary of a Children’s Ward*, ITV1 2014 and the Diary Room in *Big Brother*, Channel 4/5 2000-the present). However, video diaries have rarely been used in broadcast films about the developing world. This may in part be due to the fact that much of the broadcast output from the developing world is in current affairs strands and this methodology is not particularly suited to that sort of programming. The series *Welcome to India* (BBC2, 2012) did include some incidental video diary material to elicit how one of the central characters was feeling but this was more of an aside.

Dovey suggests that the use of first person media in television, such as the video diary, arose less due to technological determinism, but ‘rather that the regime of truth generated by and for contemporary western culture *requires* subjective, intimate, exposing expression as a dominant form’ (2000:57). I agree with Dovey’s analysis; even before lightweight cameras were produced, a skilled interviewer would attempt to get television contributors to forget the large film crew and cameras present in their living room and to reveal intimate moments. Some forms of documentary have always been confessional; as Dovey observes, ‘we now have confession as an open discourse, de-ritualised as part of the quest for psychic health, as part of our ‘right’ to selfhood’ (2000:107).

However, for some academics the video diary has become problematic; Pini (2001, 2006) found that the working class girls in *Project 4:21* experienced the exercise as still being subjected to the ‘surveillant’ and normative gaze of the (middle class) psychologist, saying they made them out of a sense of obligation. The girls were ‘quite concerned about issues of normality and respectability and...very conscious of being...“on show”’. Built into their video diaries is often the very hierarchy of cultural

capital, the very judgemental structure and the same normative gaze which the researchers hoped to be side-stepping' (2001:7). Pini concludes that 'these diaries often deal with the domestic, the mundane, the everyday, the seemingly inconsequential...they (the video diaries) can just look so 'innocent'' (2006:10). Similarly, Helen Lucey points out that 'because there is no film crew (we think) people act as though they were not being watched or as though the camera was not actually there' (2001:125).

The video diary is still the dominant form of participatory method screened on British television. However, it is rare to see actuality shot by subjects on television screens; in this multi-channel world, 'wobbly cam' is seen as too much of a commercial risk.

In this chapter, I have discussed my own practice as a documentary filmmaker influenced by two different traditions, ethnographic film and broadcast documentary. I have examined the development of 'participatory cinema' and participatory filmmaking with reference to theoretical concepts and ideas including gender, colonialism and power and the role and potential of video diaries.

### **Chapter 3: Research Agenda and Methodologies**

This chapter contains a detailed account of my practice as a filmmaker. I explain how I worked with the women who were involved in the Sneha Praja Video project with reference to the practice of other filmmakers, including Flaherty, Dineen, Longinotto and Fox. I will explain my use of video diaries and address the ethical questions relating to documentary practice in rural India. I will also discuss my approach to editing and decisions about the role of the participants in post-production.

#### **3.1 Rationale for key decisions and procedures followed**

I have used video diaries before in Britain when making a charity-funded video about families experiencing domestic violence (*Moving On*, 2007); I felt this ‘direct address’ could be an effective and powerful way of connecting a Western audience with the ‘other’ and forms part of the basis of my research.

In *Moving On*, I also gave cameras to the contributors so they could have control over what was filmed and the way in which it was filmed. For this research project, I was keen to see if I could use this collaborative way of working with women in another culture, to explore their daily lives and allow them to reveal their inner thoughts and perhaps even emotions. For me, it was important that the women felt in control of image production and decisions as to what to not only say but show; collectively they controlled the decision-making processes of what to film and how to film it.

The American charity Video Volunteers ([www.videovolunteers.org](http://www.videovolunteers.org)) partnered with the Indian based NGO Velugu to set up the Sneha Praja Video initiative in Andhra Pradesh. Over a six-week training programme, eleven local village women were trained 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 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. The video training was based on the Western filmic tradition of using ‘establishing’ and ‘reaction’ shots and ‘cutaways’; the traditional tools of the

trade to order the filmic universe. The Sneha Praja Video project's main focus was to enable the women to report on pressing issues rather than to analyse their aesthetic decisions.

When Michaels was commissioned by the (then) Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to research the impact of Western media on traditional Aboriginal people, he encouraged people to produce their own videos without imposing Western conventions of shooting and editing. In an analysis of one such video, Michaels notes, 'one is struck by the recurrent camera movement, (and) the subtle shifts in focus and attention during the...long pans across the landscape' that Western interpreters might see as "naïve" camerawork (1987a:51).

In my research, it would have been interesting to have seen how the women chose to visualise their everyday lives. However, I decided that if I asked the women to use the cameras differently to the way in which they had just been trained it would have been confusing for them; it would also have undermined them as they were proud of the new skills they had acquired. I decided instead to stress that they had total control over the subject matter they chose to film.

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 also 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).

Before I flew to India, I contacted Jessica Mayberry who runs Video Volunteers from her New York office and she was both encouraging and enthusiastic about my idea for this research. Jessica told me which particular women 'stood out' – in terms of their personalities, personal narratives or how engaging they were. I had decided to focus on only four from the group of eleven women as fewer characters in a film helps an audience identify with them. Jessica also sent me the child marriage film the women had already made and the translated transcripts of interviews she had carried out with the women after their training so I could get a sense of what they might say.

Once I had arrived in India, Meera Shenoy, the co-ordinator of the project on the ground, arranged for me to meet with all the women in the group at the training centre in Chilkoor, just outside Hyderabad. Through the translator, I was able to explain my motivation for wanting to make this documentary, its parameters and answer any of their questions. I made sure that I gained informed consent by fully explaining the project in their native language, Telegu, and asking them to sign translated release forms.

However, it soon became clear that this research presented many challenges. The eleven women in the group lived in remote villages up to five hours apart from each other and although their villages had names, they did not appear on any maps. Jayasree had been assigned as translator; she knew the women well and was herself ‘a village woman’. Fortuitously, she was able to meet me at my hotel as she had some idea of the whereabouts of the different villages; despite this, we still had to ask, once in the vicinity, for directions to the particular houses.

Meera had proposed Jayasree as translator thinking she would put the women at ease however her English was not very good and at times it was impossible to understand what she was saying. However, in hindsight Meera was right to prioritise the feelings of the women above my need to understand fully what was being said. The caste system is so prevalent that a woman perceived as ‘superior’ to them might have made them feel self-conscious. As it was, the women were very relaxed and open throughout the filming process.

From my conversations with Jessica Mayberry, I knew that I was going to ask Latha if she would be in the film because she had a very strong personal story, having escaped her violent husband. She was also very open about this experience having told the other project workers and was apparently keen to tell a wider audience. I chose Vinodha because she was the only Christian in the group and from the Dalit caste. I also selected Indira and Parvati because they engaged with me at the meeting, establishing eye contact and asking me questions through the translator. I felt they had something they wanted to say as they were very keen to be in front of camera, as were both Latha and Vinodha. When discussing casting his own films, McElwee

says, ‘some people have whatever that quality is that makes them interesting on film – a kind of self-confidence, self-assuredness, mixed, perhaps, with a degree of vulnerability...you know it, as a filmmaker, when you see it’ (interview with Ross McElwee, Lucia, 1994:35). I agree with McElwee’s observation; the filmmaker is looking for someone who is confident enough to want to take part in a film but, at the same time, someone who is prepared to be open with their feelings and show any vulnerability and so connect with the audience. Some documentary practitioners refer to ‘characters with unfinished business’ (Rabiger, 2009:479).

In fact, all the women wanted to be part of my documentary in some way, so it was decided that each of the four women, who were to appear in the film, would work in teams with the other women in the group, who would take turns to film them so that they could all be involved.

I decided to not only tell the story of the Sneha Praja Video project itself and the child marriage film that the women themselves had made, but to also ask the women if they would use their cameras to show us in the West what their everyday lives are like and what they feel is important. I gave each of the four teams three 60’ tapes to record on and they used the four existing mini-DV project cameras to film with.

It felt appropriate to ask the women to collaborate by self-shooting, as they then had total control over what to show and when to record. I was also keen to reveal ‘hidden’ biographical experiences, which rely on memory and self-representation; it would have been difficult to uncover these through purely observational documentary filming methods.

Jennifer Fox similarly dismisses observational techniques as a method for capturing intimacy:

I knew if I had a cameraperson observing women talking that they/we would become self-conscious and the very intimacy I wanted to capture would disappear. So I had to find a way to bring the camera into a conversation in a way that would be part of the intimacy, so I came up with this technique which I call "passing the camera." It's very

simple: the camera is just passed back and forth in the conversation. There is no filmmaker and subject, we are both equal...the camera becomes a tool of intimacy, rather than a tool to record (Fox, July 2, 2007).

Fox is talking here about making *Flying, Confessions of a Free Woman* (2006) in which, at one point in the film, she asks a group of Indian women about masturbation. They register disbelief and then collapse into embarrassed laughter; it is certainly a memorable moment in the film but it feels both awkward and culturally inappropriate; as if she has crossed a line in terms of respect and privacy.

Also departing from an observational style, is the work of the *A Buen Comun Unit's Taller de las Cuatro Estaciones* project in Southern Spain (Martinez, 2000:28). Through workshops, local women's identities, desires and sexuality were explored to develop a film narrative based on a series of inter-cut interviews in which the women recounted aspects of their life experiences, focussing on themes of motherhood, family, relationships, work and their survival strategies in adverse circumstances.

I decided to start filming straight away, partly for the reasons that MacDougall outlines below and partly because of budget restraints which gave me only three weeks on location:

One advantage in beginning to film immediately is that your initial response to a place and to a whole society can be quite important, but after a while you may begin to take things for granted. If you do begin to shoot right away, there may be a certain freshness to your shooting that will be useful to the film. It may capture some of the heightened awareness that you'll lose later on. (David MacDougall interviewed by Barbash and Taylor, 1997:70).

According to Barbash and Taylor, Flaherty's wife Frances said her husband's secret was 'non-preconception, a method of discovery as a process of filmmaking' (1997:24). Flaherty lived among the Hudson Bay Inuits for more than a decade before he began to film *Nanook* and was there for a year during the making of the film itself. 'He was convinced that he had to live among his subjects for a long time before he would know them well enough to make a documentary faithful to their lives' (1997:24).

Similarly documentary filmmaker Phil Agland likes to research for up to a year before he introduced the presence of a camera:

With *Baka* we spent a year without filming but then shot most of the film in eight weeks...I really felt we had to have something that took (the participants') attention away from us, so they were really focussed on something that really was changing their lives....we were dealing with a radically different culture and I don't want the audience to observe, I want them to participate in an emotional story that will involve them so much that they won't question whether these people are Chinese, British or Baka.

(Masterclass, Philip Agland and Molly Dineen, Sheffield International Documentary Festival, 1999).

This approach, obviously, necessitates a significant budget and Phil Agland was not a 'self-shooter'. This might of meant that he was mindful of the need to first develop and ascertain his relationships with the contributors before introducing other people onto 'the set' or into 'the field'. By contrast, documentary filmmaker Molly Dineen always starts filming as soon as she has been given the permission to do so and her developing relationships with the key protagonists are a major part of her films' narratives; 'if you know someone too well, you don't have the freshness on film and the questions I want to ask them on film, I will have already asked them' (Masterclass with Phil Agland and Molly Dineen at Sheffield International Documentary Festival, 1999).

It has long been established that however many crew members are on location, our presence inevitably affects the 'reality' of any given situation. As MacDougall puts it, 'the presence of an anthropologist (with or without a camera) can be a significant catalyst in altering people's awareness of themselves (1998:27).

Rothman notes that Rouch often said that he does not film reality as it is, but reality as it is provoked by the act of filming – it is this new reality that wouldn't exist apart from the making of the film that the filming 'documents' (Rothman, 1997:87). I agree with Rouch that the actual process of filming creates a different reality. Like Rouch, who considered it a must to use the "one take/one sequence" method (1997:89), I never asked the women to enact an action for a second time; it was important to me

that the filming process was as relaxed and unselfconscious as possible. I was attempting to preserve the notion of capturing 'reality' so I would rather move the camera to accommodate what they were 'naturally' doing rather than directing them to do so. I was not using a tripod, which makes this approach far easier.

As an introduction, I asked each woman to 'walk through' their house with their camera and introduce their home and family. I subsequently discovered that this methodology was used by the visual anthropologist, David MacDougall, in *Lorang's Way* (1979) and is similar to Sarah Pink's video tour method. Pink asked her subjects to film video tours of their house in an attempt to identify 'a sense of the (gendered) identity, everyday life, priorities and morality of my informants (and) representations of their actual everyday practice' (2006:95). Video was important to Pink in this process for two reasons; firstly 'it facilitated my informants' self-representation, they could 'show' on video...what is important to them' and secondly 'it gave me a visual record of our encounter, which documented not only what MacDougall (1998) has called 'deep reflexivity' of the process of knowledge production, but also the material context where we interacted' (2006:95).

I also asked the women if they would record video diaries, to talk direct to camera about what makes them happy or sad and what is important to them in their lives. However, it soon became clear that they were unfamiliar with this convention of using the camera like a personal diary. So I decided to ask them to talk straight to camera while I was still there and able to ask them questions about certain subjects. I filmed them while they did this and picked up the necessary cutaways. I then left them with instructions to continue to speak directly into the camera on their own about how they were feeling; only Parvati chose to do this, as I discuss in a later chapter.

Citron quotes John and Judith Katz acknowledging the value of autobiographical films, 'the value of knowing, in more realistic fashion, about other people's interior lives is unquestionable' (1999:271). Citron, too, claims the autobiographical film 'can break a silence and by doing so lessen the isolation and despair that we often experience, both personally and culturally' and because honest autobiographical film can 'publicly speak about the socially hidden...gay sexuality...violence against

women....it poses an implicit threat to the status quo' (1999:272). Citron also picks up on its historical significance for women who have traditionally lacked either a voice or a public forum in which to speak but recognises that it is often denigrated when labelled 'confessional'. However, autobiographical filmmaking does raise many ethical issues, which I discuss in the following section.

This was the first time I had made a film in a foreign language but I soon learnt to pick up on many non-verbal clues. Through observing the intensity and intonation of the women's speech, their body language and the atmosphere in the room, I knew when to keep filming.

I shot the film on a Sony PD150 and recorded the sound using radio microphones and the on-board camera microphone. I did not use a tripod or lights for practical rather than aesthetic reasons. I learnt that being a self-shooter does offer advantages and disadvantages. As a director/camera operator I obviously know exactly what I was getting and while keeping my left eye open can respond to action happening outside of frame. However, sometimes it is hard to draw back and view the overall development of the shoot while at the same time considering technical issues such as focus, framing and lighting. On the other hand, the level of intimacy one can achieve with a minimal crew is one of the main advantages and it was particularly appropriate in this situation and with what I was trying to achieve.

The women used their cameras to interview their husbands and family members when I wasn't there and these interviews, I believe, give us a view never seen before. They also filmed each other and I would never have got the actuality of Vinodha asking her husband if she could go to a meeting without that. When I was filming with Vinodha her husband kept well away from me. Even then, one can see his reticence as he is aware of being filmed; he looks at camera before he says 'Go' but because the person behind the camera is a village woman, like his wife, he is behaving relatively 'normally'.

Some decisions, as to how to frame a shot and when to keep filming, are taken at the time of shooting, though bearing in mind decisions taken at the start as to the overall focus of the project. Barbash and Taylor acknowledge that a documentary filmmaker,

while shooting, is making decisions that ineradicably embody his/her theory while on the contrary, textual anthropologists can do the bulk of their thinking and theorizing once they have returned from 'the field' (1997:70). However, many methodological decisions are made before one begins to shoot, as I have outlined above. It is important for documentary makers to not just shoot 'everything that moves'; now that recording mechanisms are cheap it is tempting to do this, but too much footage can lead to many problems in the edit. It is crucial to stick to established parameters though, at the same time, to respond to the unexpected. This tension, I believe, is at the very heart of good documentary filmmaking.

### 3.2 Attendant ethical issues

At the start of this research project I consulted the *Bournemouth University Research Ethics Code of Practice* (September 2009) to make sure that my intended working practice would comply with all ethical considerations. Most recently, I have completed the Bournemouth University on-line Research Ethics module and successfully completed the accompanying tests.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, I firstly made sure that the women themselves were fully informed, in their native language of Telegu, about the aims and parameters of my research. The ESRC *Research Methods Review Paper (Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research, 2008)* also 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. This Paper also cites both Pink (2003) and Banks (2001) who both argue for collaboration as a means to empower participants to represent themselves in the images that are produced and disseminated in ways that meet their own objectives. Such practice will involve showing participants and allowing them to comment on images prior to wider publication or presentation (Pink, 2006). Subject to practical constraints, I followed this principle, as far as was possible.

Pink (2004:29) cites Miller who emphasizes that ethnography in the home is inevitably intrusive but goes on to say that the researcher has to decide what is revealed or not. This is one of the benefits of participatory research as with their own cameras, the women themselves will decide what is revealed about their lives.

Another important ethical issue to be addressed was whether, and how, to compensate the subjects for sharing their lives on camera. It is customary in television documentary to pay contributors a small amount of money, sometimes significantly more if they have lost wages through having to take time off for the film. However, there is a concern that financial reward could make subjects ‘act’ or say things they wouldn’t normally do or say. Therefore, financial contributions are seen as an adjunct

to the filmmaking process, contributors need to, and usually do, have other reasons for agreeing to be filmed.

Reciprocity has always been an issue for anthropologists, too. Lansing (1990) suggests that ‘this process is seldom mentioned because we tend to be a little ashamed of it, preferring to let it be thought that we are much loved by the people we study’ (1990:16). As Barbash and Taylor observe, anthropologists are concerned that by compensating people, they will think ‘they are providing a service for you, rather than continuing to live their lives as they otherwise might; they begin to wonder what services you want, what they should be doing for you, how they should act, what kinds of images or scenes you may be after. Therefore you may want to compensate people only after the fact’ (1997:63).

There is a concern in both disciplines that financial contribution, at least ‘upfront’, can affect the veracity of the film or data observed on location or ‘in the field’. However, as discussed earlier, there are problems around the notion of ‘authenticity’ and it needs to be remembered that ‘what people say about themselves is data to be interpreted, not the truth’ (Ruby, 1991:54).

Financial compensation, itself, can also bring issues in developing countries. Tim Asch considers ‘the effect that money can have on people who live in small, subsistence-based communities’ (1988:19). A single person’s relationship between them and their neighbour can be altered.

So before starting this research project, I asked advice from Meera Shenoy who was in charge of the Sneha Praja Video project itself and she suggested I paid the women the same amount they were given for working on that project so that is what I did. Each woman in the group was paid the same, regardless of whether their lives were featured in the final film; each woman ‘worked’ for 3 days on the film and was paid 250 rupees a day, which at the time of filming was approximately £3.20 a day.

There is no perfect solution to this conundrum but I felt that it was important to financially reward their ‘work’; I did not feel that these payments impacted on my research and the payments were made after the filming had finished.

Pink identifies problems with the notion itself of ‘giving something back’ as she feels this neglects the inter-linkages between the researcher’s personal autobiographical narrative and the research narrative:

Fieldwork, everyday life and writing-up may not necessarily be separated either spatially or temporally in the ethnographer’s life and experience. Ethnographic research may not entail the researcher going somewhere, taking something away and being morally obliged to ‘give something back’. Instead, the ethnography may be part of a researcher’s everyday interactions. There may be a continuous flow of information and objects between the ethnographer and informants. This might include the exchange of images, of ideas, emotional and practical exchanges and support, each of which are valued in different ways (2001:45).

I did in fact take pictures of my children and partner with me because I thought it important to share something from my own personal life with the women. After all, I was expecting them to allow me into their personal lives and was meeting their husbands and children. Indira was very interested to hear that I was divorced and wanted to know how I had managed to leave my husband; it was clear that she was in an unhappy marriage and her questions confirmed this. I think Pink’s position, outlined above, particularly applies to research done in one’s own country with participants of the same class, gender and ethnic group. The old adage, that a film is only as good as the relationship between the subject and the filmmaker usually always bears truth but it is also important to keep professional boundaries. I think it important to not forget that the researcher and researched are in a working relationship. For subjective reasons, filmmakers are usually attracted to certain subjects and as Salgado notes, ‘you must have a big ideological affinity with the subject you will be shooting, because if you don’t, you cannot remain sincere and empathetic for long. You must strongly identify with the subject’ (2000:113).

Kulick observes that ‘in anthropology other people’s secrets are valuable commodities. Ethnographic success is often measured, and anthropological careers often made, by the extent to which the anthropologist gets others to “open up” (1995:11). Interestingly, the same is true for some forms of documentary production

and this research project could be similarly assessed. In fact, Banks disparagingly refers to what he observes as documentary filmmakers' 'great belief in so-called "magic moments" when a character being filmed drops his or her carefully constructed persona and bares his or her innermost soul; this is often connected with tears, memories, moments of personal crisis etcetera' (1992:123). This particular measure of "success" does raise many ethical questions; how aware are participants of what they are revealing if they are at that moment crying or emotionally moved? Documentary makers are often trying to get contributors to forget the presence of the camera but, in so doing, does that mean the participants are in a position to consent to their 'contribution'? That is why signed release forms *after* filming are crucial, as are screenings of the finished film to contributors, when in the 'cold light of day' they can decide if they are happy with their representation, or as some people might say 'performance'.

Kulick goes on to ask what would happen to the way 'we understand and practice our discipline (of anthropology), if success was also seen to be related to the extent to which we revealed secrets of our own, to the people with whom we work?' (1995:11). However, there are other professionals, such as psychotherapists, who encourage people to reveal 'their secrets' without revealing their own. A significant difference in documentary production is that these 'secrets' once revealed will then most likely pass into the public domain. As a documentary maker, one is always conscious of this imbalance and tries to correct this by revealing something of oneself 'off camera'. It is not seen as necessary to include this sharing process in the artefact itself, though for a while, first person narratives were a popular mode of address in contemporary British television.

The aim of a documentary is often to break down the 'otherness' of others, and allow them to communicate to a wider audience concerns that are at the core of humanity; to emotionally 'move' other people, in settings often remote and removed from the subjects of a film. Television documentary is also made in a commercial context and has a remit to 'engage' and usually 'entertain' though a discussion around this will not form part of this thesis.

### 3.3 Us and them: positioning the self

Reflexivity is seen by many academics as a core requirement of any ethnographic research. As Pink acknowledges ‘a reflexive approach recognizes the centrality of the subjectivity of the researcher to the production and representation of ethnographic knowledge...subjectivity should be engaged with as a central aspect of ethnographic knowledge, interpretation and representation’ (2001:19). Pink cites the work of Fortier when she claims that ‘it is not solely the subjectivity of the researcher that may ‘shade’ his or her understanding of ‘reality’ but the relationship between the subjectivities of researcher and informants that produces a negotiated version of reality’ (Pink, 2001:20). Pink goes on to say that ‘researchers... ought to consider how their identities are constructed and understood by the people with whom they work. These subjective understandings will have implications for the knowledge that is produced from the ‘ethnographic encounter’ between researcher and informants’ (2001:20).

I intend, as Pink suggests, to engage with subjectivity ‘as a central aspect of ethnographic knowledge and interpretation’ and, though to a lesser extent, ‘representation’ (2001:19). My engagement with subjectivity will be explicit in the accompanying written thesis rather than throughout the film because I want to allow the film’s participants to communicate and ‘engage’ directly with the audience. I will make my presence known to the audience at the beginning of the film through the use of narration to set up this research project and help the audience navigate the different filmic layers that my documentary consists of. This clear authorial voice intends to contextualise the film, and then allow the women’s stories to unfold, in their own time.

As Rouch (1974:79-98), Colin Young (1974:99-113) and MacDougall (1974:13-43) all expressed in a trio of articles in the same book, the camera, rather than being used simply as a passive means of recording visual data, should be an active catalysing element within the triangle of relationships between film-maker, protagonists and audience. They all reject the idea that film can be objective in any simple sense and they see the subjectivity involved as a strength of the filmmaking process. I agree with this position.

However, like Probyn (1993), I am suspicious of some uses of reflexivity within films themselves. Probyn believes that there is a tendency in anthropology to think that problems of power, privilege and perspective can be diffused, simply by inserting the self into one's accounts and proclaiming that dialogue has occurred:

To the extent that this move leaves unchallenged the epistemological basis of anthropological knowledge, all it does is subsume the other into the project of the self. It is like in Watson's (1991:85) words 'playing chess with oneself, making the moves for both black and white pieces' (1993:80).

Barbash and Taylor (1997) go as far as to say that self-reflexivity is no more an assurance of authenticity or sincerity than any other style. 'If, as Ruby says, "we have the moral obligation to reveal the covert" it is quite possible to dream up a reflexive moment or scene in order to dramatize, quite duplicitously some such divulgence' (1997:61). Ruby does, inadvertently I think, acknowledge the constructed nature of self-reflexivity when he states that 'knowing how much of the self it is necessary to reveal – is the most difficult aspect of being reflexive. When successfully mastered, it separates self-indulgence from revelation' (2000:155). Likewise, Moore notes that sometimes 'microphones and cameras are as awkwardly inserted into films as they were once avoided' (1994:126).

I believe that it is very important to acknowledge one's own subjectivities when creating any artefact but think there is a danger in adding reflexive moments just to 'appear' transparent. Some films are naturally reflexive but I do not believe that this creative project is; I am attempting to get close to other women's lives so including my own presence in the film would distract and get in the way of these women's own stories.

### 3.4 Creating meanings from the footage

Participatory filmmaking has a long and established tradition of frequently involving the subjects in the process of assembling the film. As Barbash and Taylor note Flaherty screened at least some of his rushes (the developed footage) for his subjects, eliciting their feedback and suggestions for future scenes that they could film, ‘Although, he may have transformed his subjects into actors in the process, he also actively collaborated with them to a degree that is still rare today’ (1997:24). This kind of ‘acting out’ was an inspiration to Rouch, who coined the concept of *anthropologie partagee* (shared anthropology) (1974:43-44).

Even though, Mermin acknowledges that ‘film as *experience* is never completely controlled by filmmaker, subject or viewer’ (1997:49), it is in the edit where the filmmaker can exert a great measure of control. It is here where the narrative is created and it is the means by which filmmakers begin to supervise and direct their viewers’ experiences of reading and creating meaning from their films.

So what gives me the right to represent others? It is often assumed that technical and aesthetic skills and knowledge are necessary to make a “good film”, and most importantly one that will engage an audience. As Ruby notes:

It is generally assumed that (documentary making) is best accomplished by having professional filmmakers employ their technical skills, artistic sensitivity, and insight to reveal the “reality” of others...the technical and aesthetic skills and knowledge necessary to make a “good film” are regarded as being beyond the means of most people (1991:51).

A Delhi-based documentary maker, known for his participatory methods, justified editing his footage himself because he needed to do justice to the people he was portraying, ‘if I can create a visually interesting production, then their involvement can successfully affect many other people who may view it’ (Booker, 2003:329).

In my 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 most of it was in Telegu so I needed to return to England to translate it. I did not have the funding to return to their villages to consult the women during the edit and none of them have access to the internet so it was not possible to show them a cut and then re-edit following their comments. 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.

The edit took a very long time. There were five different sources of footage; my footage of the women making their own films, walking through their houses and making their video diaries, the video diary material, the footage the women shot of the main four characters, the self-shot actuality by the four women and the footage of their child marriage film. I needed to interweave these different sources to make a comprehensible and engaging narrative. To start with I went through what would be the underlying script of the film – the video diary material.

Shiva would translate what the women were saying directly and then if I intended to include that section in the cut, we would together, without changing it's meaning, put it into more fluent English. Sometimes it was important to keep the Telegu expressions, such as when Vinodha says 'girls' lives should be 'paved with gold and flowers' and Indira's husband says that she should 'go and return with profit'.

Because I was editing five different sources of footage it was important to clearly establish the identity of each woman; there was a danger that the viewer would be confused as to which woman's footage and 'point of view' they were looking at. At one point in the edit when I was too 'close' to the cut, I showed it to the documentary filmmaker Paul Watson (see Appendix 1), he confirmed my suspicions that I was switching too quickly between the different characters so I decided to keep their narratives in self-contained blocks to make the film easier to comprehend.

Collier and Collier argue that the spatial and temporal order in which images are recorded must be maintained so that they can be analysed correctly as 'reconstructive ordering of photographs can inadvertently confuse the actual sequence of occurrence' (1986:180); they believe that the chronological linear sequence by which images are

produced, forms the narrative that represents their meaning. It was for this reason that early ethnographic film theory and practice suggested film should represent ‘whole’ cultures and avoid close-ups and use minimal editing (Heider, 1976). However, this is not the experience of a documentary filmmaker when frequently images are used in a different order from their capture, in order to make sense of them and create meaning.

This chapter has described my practice and the various theoretical, ethical and logistical issues raised. What will follow in chapter 4 is the case study itself of *Village Tales*.

## **Chapter 4: *Village Tales* Case Study**

In this chapter, I will discuss parts of the 23 hours of footage that was shot collaboratively by the women and myself (see table on page 12); to what extent has this collaborative way of working produced footage that would have been difficult to obtain by other, more conventional filmmaking methods?

In the second part of this chapter I discuss the editing process, reflecting on decisions made and how this research project has given me the opportunity to question, and think very differently about, my own professional practice. It is in the process of editing that I considered the significance of the footage when making decisions about ordering and juxtaposition and tried to do justice to the reflexivity of the women's own stories. The tensions between established documentary professional practices and editorial integrity can be fraught but fundamental to the making of any artefact, which attempts to represent other people's lives; I discuss this in the last part of this chapter.

### **4.1 The footage**

#### **4.1.1 The Video Diary interviews**

The video diary interviews took place in each of the women's homes – familiar places in their lives. As mentioned earlier, I asked the women to talk directly into their cameras in response to my 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 women themselves decided where to place their cameras, in terms of both the room itself and the place within that room; they all chose to be recorded in their living rooms and to sit on the floor. 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

seemed to have 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](http://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 and her comments to me ‘off camera’, and translated by Jayasree, that this was a ‘first person’ narrative.



Fig. 1: Frame grab from 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 Downmunt, 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. However, Russell refers to video diaries as ‘a staging of subjectivity – a representation of the self as performance’ (1999:276) and Pini notes that:

A (video) diarist does not exist as an intact, unified individual whose story can be considered outside of its context. An autobiographical story says more about the conditions of possibility, which allow certain tales to be told than it does about a subject’s ‘inner’ reality...doing the personal is a practice and an increasingly public performance (Pini, 2001:10).

Pini is right that video diaries are a performance limited by the possibilities of their context but they are also a rich source of video material, which, however flawed, do tell us something about the interior lives of the women and allow the documentary audience to identify with common human emotions.

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, 3rd-7<sup>th</sup> 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. As a filmmaker, 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 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 as discussed previously (Pini, 2001). 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 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. 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. At all times, I want 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. I talk in more detail in the next section about what I included in the final film and what footage I left out and the reasons why.

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 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 challenges the 'blanket application of a Foucauldian analysis, which feels to me too neat, too totalising, and too closed a model to account for the wide variety of ways in which the self is produced in contemporary TV' (2000:106). Dovey is referring 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 diaries, 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 continue to make 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.

#### 4.1.2 Self-shot actuality

All the women were familiar with film conventions and their six-week training 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. As Dovey recognises:

The low grade video image has become the privileged form of TV ‘truth-telling, signifying authenticity and an indexical reproduction of the real world; indexical in the sense of presuming a direct and transparent correspondence between what is in front of the camera lens and its taped representation. Secondly, the camcorder text has become the form that most relentlessly insists upon a localised, subjective and embodied account of experience (2000:55).

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’.

##### 4.1.2.1 ‘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. Vinodha has a photograph of Jesus on her wall, which she does not mention on her ‘walk through’ but it is clearly visible in the background. I did include Indira’s and Parvati’s family shrines in the film but I did not refer again to their religion because 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.

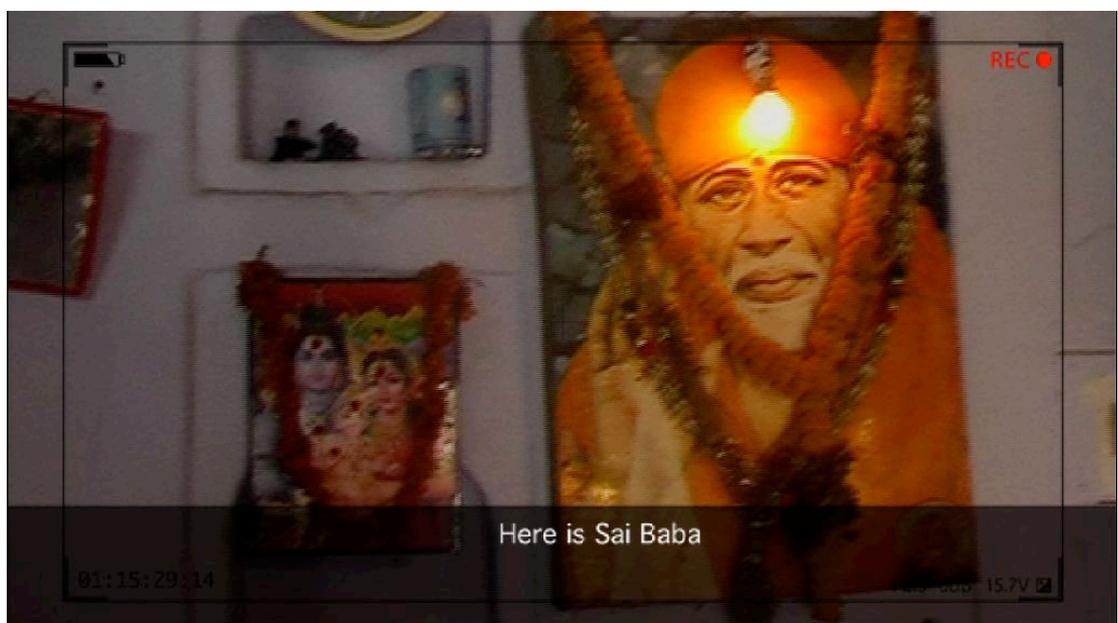


Fig. 2: Frame grab from Indira’s ‘walk through’

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 disorganised’. 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’.

#### 4.1.2.2 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.



Fig. 3: Frame grab from observational footage 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 diaries); 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 questioning. 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'.



Fig. 4: Frame grab from 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.

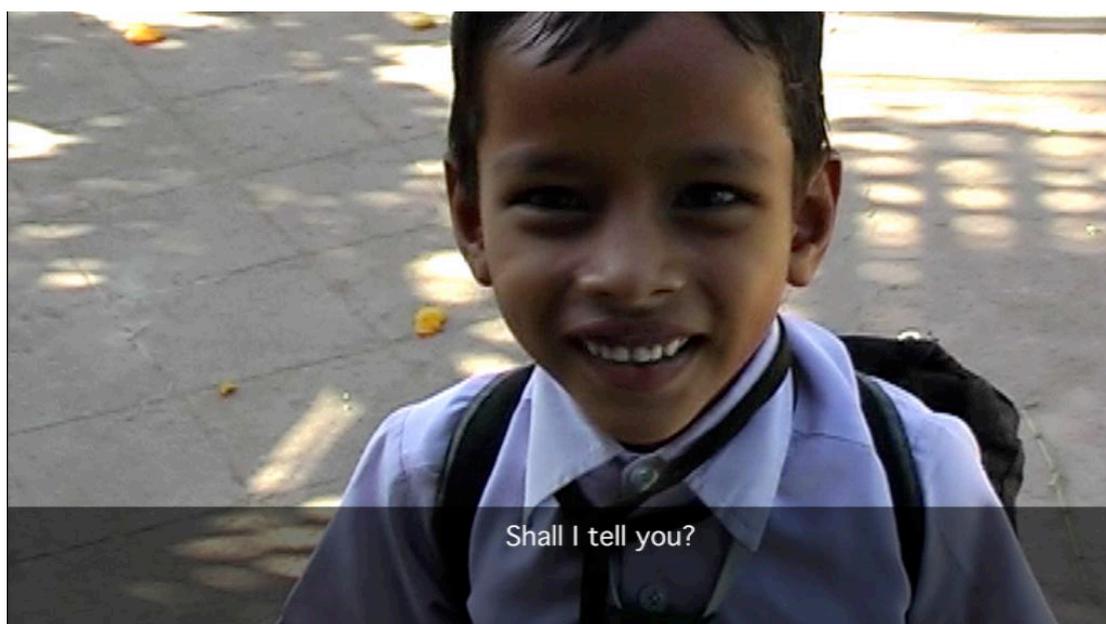


Fig. 5: Frame grab from Parvati’s self-shot footage of her son

#### 4.1.2.3 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.

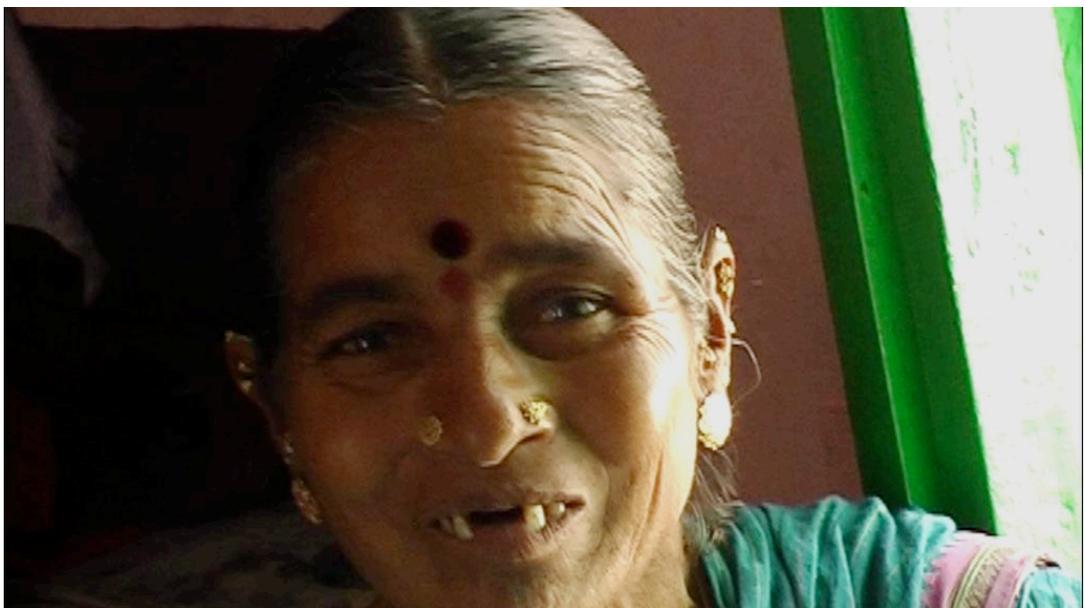


Fig. 6: Frame grab from Parvati's self-shot interview with her mother

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.

#### 4.1.3 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.



Fig. 7: Frame grab from my footage of Latha

Most of the footage of Indira, performing daily tasks around the house, was shot by her daughter or teenage 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.

#### 4.1.4 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.



Fig. 8: Frame grab from my footage of Latha

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’ between different sequences and actuality and allow a film to ‘breathe’.

I also recorded an interview with the project organiser in India, Meera Shenoy; I was not sure if I would use it and Meera was keen for me to focus on the women themselves but it is always diplomatic to acknowledge those in charge and give them an opportunity to voice their perspective.

#### 4.1.5 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 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. One could also identify ‘participatory communication’ in that other village residents are able to voice their thoughts on the continuing practice of child marriage.

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 as these skills were felt to be too complex to teach in a short timescale but the women were involved 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 Anita’s story of her husband murdering their baby because she was a girl. Anita was very keen for her story to be heard but requested that her interview was not shown in her village, so the women respected this. So I, in turn, will make sure that *Village Tales* is not put on the internet where it could, though unlikely, be seen by people from Anita’s village.

At one 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.

Interestingly, this family, as travellers 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.

## 4.2 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.



Fig. 9: Frame grab from 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’. I can only surmise why this was the case.

Ethical considerations, which I discussed in an earlier chapter, are fundamental to filmmaking because often ‘backstage’ moments become ‘frontstage’ once they are shot and then selected in the edit. However, 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 did not advance the storyline.



Fig. 10: Frame grab from 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.



Fig. 11: Frame grab from my footage of Indira with her mother-in-law

I also did not use any of the footage from Latha's 'talking to the community' tape in which she interviewed various people in the village as I would have had to set up who these people were and why she was talking with them; also the conversations were just very general talk about the village. One could say that all the unused rushes are themselves 'backstage' as they will never be shown.

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.

### 4.3 The edit

To an extent, I have democratised the filmmaking process by putting cameras in the hands of subjects and opened up alternative discursive spaces. As I discussed in the earlier part of this chapter, I believe that putting cameras in the hands of people and filming them as they themselves film 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. In screenings, some audience members have been moved to tears as the stories they heard resonated with them.

However, as a professional British television documentary producer/director, I am in many ways bound up in the Western documentary tradition. As Kilborn acknowledges:

So deeply have the broadcast media become embedded in existing power structures that even when it might appear that ordinary people are being given a voice, closer inspection reveals that their participation is severely constrained...the broadcaster is still effectively calling the shots (2003:189).

However, with this particular research project I do not have the implicit, and sometimes explicit, pressures exerted by a broadcaster.

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. So it is here that I am compromised even though I am not claiming that the women are speaking for themselves. The women will view the film before it is finished and I will make any changes they request so they will consent 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).

The film will be screened at documentary film festivals and visual ethnographic conferences, so I am justifying this editorial position in order that I can use my professional knowledge and expertise to decide how best to craft this material. It is here that I am conscious of aesthetic considerations, for example how to structure and pace the film and when it is preferable to cut from a wide shot to a close up. As Gadihoke acknowledges:

The power between a filmmaker and her/his subjects...can never be an equal situation 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 goes on to suggest 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.

Usually, one of the first decisions to make, at the beginning of a documentary edit, is what is the story that is going to be told. Narrative is also fundamental to ethnographic films. As Henley observes:

Ethnographic filmmakers sympathetic to the interpretative approach have been inclined to structure their films around storyline that emerges from within the action itself since in this way they have been able to communicate the meaning of the events filmed to the protagonists. Further, they have often been prepared to edit these storylines according to narrative conventions already well-established within documentary cinema generally (1998:44).

However, with this research project I was not intending to make a television documentary; if I had been, I would have been looking for strong narratives to engage the audience. I might have filmed Latha moving to Hyderabad, perhaps even Indira leaving her husband. This research project is about trying to shed light on the 'everyday' and uncover 'interior narratives' in the lives of four women living in rural India. The latter, in particular, are neither visual nor with a significant 'narrative drive' and therefore not appropriate in the context of commercial television. However, in making any artefact one still needs to find a structure and order for the footage that does tell a story, albeit one with less jeopardy and physical movement.

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. Obviously this is open to subjective interpretation, and indeed misinterpretation, and it is in this section that I will look at how new meanings were in fact created in the edit and discuss particular edits and why I made the decision to cut the material in that way.

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. Engaging the audience is key, especially in broadcast documentary.

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 research film another layer, and also a different tone because these clips employ a journalistic register.

As mentioned previously, it is important to decide before a shoot the broad subject area of the film, but one of the most intriguing parts of documentary filmmaking is that no amount of planning can truly determine what the filmmaker will be able to capture on the day. Interviews and actuality that, after research, are assumed to be key can end up being 'flat' or predictable while something quite unexpected happens while filming. When shooting a documentary, I often film what interests me personally, what suddenly comes to light and intrigues me, so it is ultimately a subjective undertaking. However, this common documentary practice is based on the assumption that we all share a mutual interest in the lives of others. Therefore, having amassed a lot of footage, it can be difficult to detach oneself from it and the circumstances of its capture. So the editor is invaluable as they can view the footage as pure 'visual data' and most importantly, as the audience will, afresh and for the first time.

With this research film, my funding did not cover editing so I had to undertake this process myself. I started by archiving the 23 hours by logging each shot and separating it out into different categories.

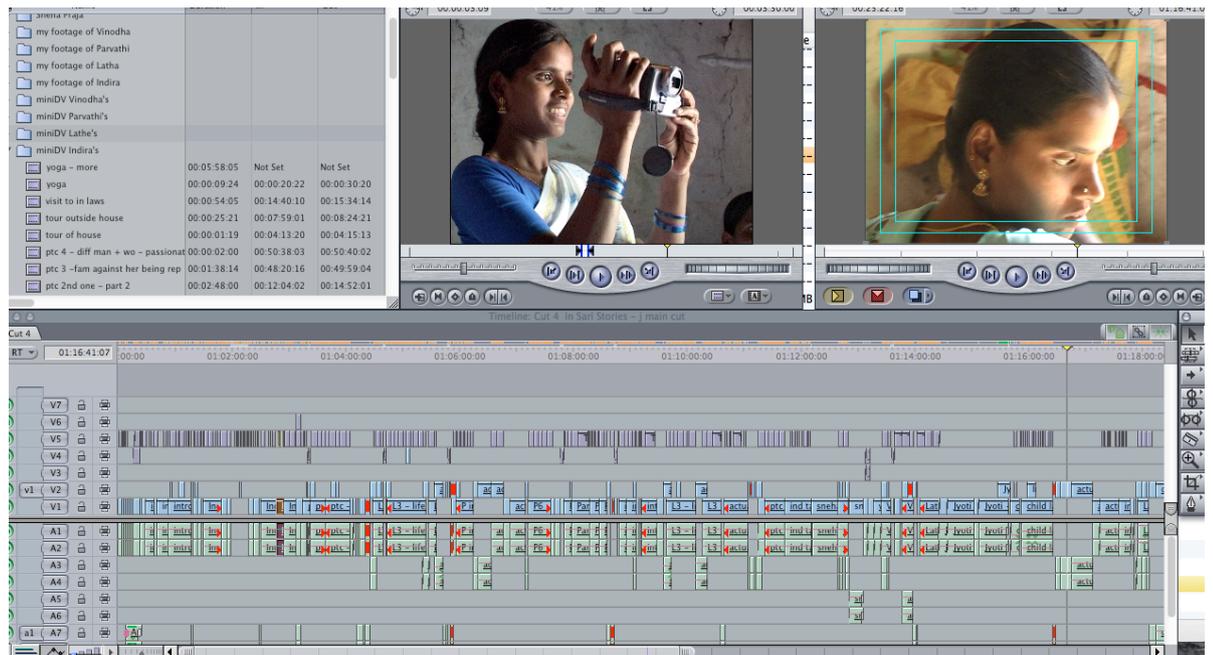


Fig. 12: Screen shot of the edit

I decided to cut the sequence when Parvati is interviewing her husband, asking him where he has been with a shot of their cow and Parvati cleaning out the cowshed. This edit was certainly my choice but I felt it was making a valid point in that he says he is taking care of the house and all of Parvati's worries but she also is taking care of everyday household chores by cleaning out the cow shed. I was also hoping to add some humour to the film.

In the finished film, I kept Indira's interviews with her husband in the order they were shot as she only stops questioning him when he eventually admits that her first priority must be her household chores, cooking and 'taking care of the house', before going out to film. There was a logic to this ordering, which if kept intact, said more than the individual sequences.

The shot that Indira's son took of his father scowling while standing behind Indira washing the dishes, cut well with Indira's 'voice over' from her video diary in which she says how men are abusing women. This sequence also provides a sharp contrast with his 'public' personae such as the footage of him on the phone, shot later in the day by Indira herself.



Fig. 13: Frame grab from footage of Indira's husband shot by their son

However, I am very conscious that I am creating new meanings and interpretations by cutting the footage together in this way. I justify this position by my subjective understanding of Indira's situation and the final cut was shown to Indira before completion, so she did endorse this reading of the material.

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).

As mentioned earlier, Highmore refers to Marx and Freud's approach to the everyday in which the 'project 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 and this limitation of visual research is something I will discuss in the next chapter. However, I believe it is through editing that one can hint at these structures.

After making their child marriage film, the women had discussed making their next film about domestic violence but in the end, they decided the subject was such an on-going issue for them all, that it was too sensitive and current to be able to cover. Anita's report in their child marriage film showed the levels of violence that some men are prepared to go to but it was difficult for the women to actually name this subject as the main enquiry of a future film. In the end, their second film was about disability and their community's handling of it.

In this chapter, I have considered the different sources of film material, which I was able to generate and provided evidence that the combination of methodology used, participatory filmmaking and video diaries, produced a nuanced picture of the interior lives of four rural women.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reflect on what I did in my research and my key findings and argument. I discuss my conclusions and what lessons, if any, can be drawn from this project for the broader practice-led research community.

### **5.1 Key findings and argument**

The three years it took me to edit could be seen as a chronicle of my attempt to find the cinematic language and documentary structure that would interweave these five different sources of footage, to give justice to the women's stories at the same time as engaging and resonating with a Western audience. Gadihoke refers to a world that the camera cannot see 'that encapsulates feeling, subjectivity and the unconscious'; she goes on to ask 'can there be more evocative styles of representation that can hint at some of this?' (2003:278).

My first conclusion is that there can be; the use of video diaries and participatory filmmaking in my research has encapsulated some of the women's feelings and subjectivities in a way that conventional observational documentary filmmaking could not have done. I have experimented with form to discover what story I can tell about the 'reality' of these four women's lives and shine a light into a particular part of rural India. Asking them to use their cameras to film whatever they wanted to of their everyday lives, and contextualising that with my own camera, has generated different perspectives. There is an intensity to the practice of looking directly down a camera lens and being asked questions about one's feelings and thoughts. To some considerable extent, this technique has allowed me to access and capture some of these women's interior feelings at a particular moment. This research has shown that it is possible to get close to the feelings of the 'other' and allow them to reveal universal emotions; from Indira's anger at a husband's disrespect, Parvati's grief at the death of her son to Indira's amused irritation at her teenagers leaving the kitchen in a mess.

When the women ‘walk through’ and introduce us to their homes through the camera lens, they appear to respond intuitively to what they find, talking to us about their prayer corners and their families, in a way that manages to hint at the subtleties of, and hierarchies within, their relationships. This way of working highlights, in an innovative way, the women’s relationships with their husbands and children and also how they feel about their homes; feelings and interiority that would have been very hard to illustrate without using participatory filmmaking and video diaries.

However, I think it is important, in the first place, to select participants who clearly have something they want to say and to build mutual trust with them so that they want to share aspects of their interior lives. Latha, Indira, Vinodha and Parvati, despite sharing similarities in their domestic situations, are all very different to each other as people and the film demonstrates that it is possible to portray nuanced gendered identities and articulate difference in the Orient; that gendered identities are plural, by nature, rather than binary (Pink, 2001). I hope, too, that the film has shown that it is possible to have a kind of humanistic knowledge that does not play a dominant role over the people it seeks to study (Chambers, 1980:512).

My second conclusion is that the film has been able to give us ‘a snapshot’ of the everyday, inevitably partial and subjective and embracing the subjectivities of all the different camera operators, including myself, who chose to point the camera in a particular direction at a particular time. To a certain extent, the film has been able to capture the ‘movement of the daily’ (Highmore, 2002). Not considering the ‘walk throughs’, which have a performative element to them, the film has captured movement within the domestic sphere when the women go to the village wells to collect water and more significantly, and controversially, when they ask their husbands if they can leave it. For example, Vinodha and Indira asking to leave the house to go to meetings.

The Sneha Praja Video project evidently had a marked effect on these women’s lives; Vinodha said that she was being treated with more respect from members of the village, of particular importance to her as she is from the Dalit caste, while Indira talks about gaining confidence to deal with “family problems”. It is tempting to say

they were 'empowered' but as Gadihoke says, 'in our efforts to present our characters as 'empowered' we run the risk of representing them as one-dimensional and devoid of all conflict and contradiction. In trying to narrate "success stories" we often gloss over inadequacies, problems and weaknesses' (2003:278). There is inevitably a danger in this but I think that this particular film does not 'gloss over' the everyday challenges each woman faces.

Keenan when talking about how an audience receives a film, notes that 'images always demand interpretation, even or especially emotional images...this implies a second rule, that of unintended consequences or misfiring' (2002:104-116). In this film, I hope I am not 'misfiring'; I am attempting to engage, inspire, amuse, shock and provoke empathy in the audience towards the women.

## 5.2 Building on this study and looking forward

I agree with filmmaker-anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff, who shortly before her death in 1986 proposed that the researcher-filmmaker should seek to ‘locate a *third voice* – an amalgam of the maker’s voice and the voice of the subject, blended in such a manner as to make it impossible to discern which voice dominates the work...films where outsider and insider visions coalesce into a new perspective’ (Myerhoff in Ruby, 1991:62). I claim that through editing together the five different sources of footage, my PhD film has located a ‘third voice’.

However, it is still important to acknowledge that this ‘third voice’ is not necessarily anymore ‘truthful’. As Pink acknowledges, in her work as a visual ethnographer in the domestic sphere, there is often a difference between what subjects say they do at home and actually do (2004:28). Similarly, in the documentary tradition, even when filming people in action observationally, one can never be sure that the participants would ‘act’ the same if they were not being filmed. 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). Despite this, we often prioritise the visual. As Gadihoke observes, ‘we often simplify the “real” to mean the “visible”. In doing

so, we marginalise whatever cannot be seen or depicted through the camera' (2003:278).

So what aspects of people's lives tend not to be captured through the lens? Moore noted that, in the Kayapo Indian video project, institutionalised Kayapo practices of violence against women were not caught on camera and these "realities" were ignored and not articulated at all:

If ethnographic film continues to maintain that what you see represents the significant rather than the selected, regardless of who has the camera, a less horrific, but still crude hierarchy emerges separating visible people and practices from those that defy visual representation (1994:135).

These examples not only emphasize the importance of democratising access to the camera but at the same time, the need to acknowledge that films are partial 'truths'. This is also where the self-reflexivity of the researcher/filmmaker must be open and transparent. In my research, I did not set out to look at the men's experiences; there are, therefore, many aspects of this community that are not visible in this particular project.

As I mentioned in the last chapter, I also overlooked the women's commitment to religion (both Hinduism and Christianity) but did keep in the final cut their experiences of domestic violence. Domestic violence is an issue which is endemic and a global phenomenon that needs highlighting. I was able, successfully I feel, to hint at its presence in this community without being too specific about a particular family situation. There is also no mention of sex or sexuality; unlike in Fox's film, mentioned previously, the women themselves chose what to film and I felt it was too intrusive as a Western stranger to ask them about this topic.

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. To add to this, feminists, Marxists and other scholars are quite rightly challenging the positivist assumption that objectivity exists in the research process.

Berger has written of the paradox of photographic images that can arouse the audience's conscience but at the same time inoculate against pain, suffering or action; 'for the photographer this means thinking of her or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world but rather, as a recorder *for those involved* in the events photographed. The distinction is crucial' (1980:58). This could be seen as an argument for even going one step further and using those people that are normally the photographed as the 'image makers' themselves, which in turn also avoids any voyeuristic qualities that can be levelled at images of the 'suffering others'.

How might we imagine 'globalising the study of the everyday'? (Highmore, 2002). Perhaps by working in this way, using video diaries and collaborative filmmaking, with women in other communities across the world and linking up their stories on-line. Maybe we are not far from a time when there is no need for the collaborative filmmaker because everyone will have access to a camera phone and the means to upload their images on-line.

So finally, my third conclusion is that I have managed to locate a 'third voice' (Myerhoff, 1986) by blending together the footage to tell a story from a new perspective. At times, my camera looks in, observes the women as they make their films and attend meetings while, at other times, it is their perspective, as they switch on their cameras to speak directly down the lens or use their cameras to question their husbands. As the film reviewer of *The Journal of Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* noted (see Appendix 1) my film gives 'priority to the voice of the protagonists, using their footage and emphasizing the issues that are important for them. However, the film is still an authored piece'. Neither perspective dominates the other but would not 'work' without the existence of each other – these 'outsider' and 'insider' visions coalesce and can tell a unique story to a wider world.

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## Appendix 1

### **Audience/film reviewer's responses to Village Tales**

I have shown the film to a variety of different people (both academic and industry colleagues) in conference presentations at both rough and fine cut stages and at film festivals. These screenings were not done systematically but were useful for me because as I was engaged with this research, it alerted me to how people were making sense of what I was doing and the extent to which the material resonated with them. These screenings were very useful because they made me think differently about what I was doing.

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The film's narrative oscillates between showing clips from the video magazine, behind-the-scenes filming for the magazine, and scenes from the women's daily lives. While it may be confusing on a first viewing as to what is the point of view being presented at any given moment, a more careful viewing will reveal that the image quality signifies whose perspective is being shown. Specifically the protagonist's footage is of a lesser quality than the rest of the film. The different image quality may be illustrative of a methodological tension that, in my view, characterizes the film. On the one hand, the film makes the case for empowering rural women through grassroots filmmaking projects. It is consistent in this by giving priority to the voice of protagonists, using their footage and emphasizing the issues that are important for them. However, the film is still an authored piece. The credits show that the direction, production and camera work were the responsibility of one person, Sue Sudbury. This adds a layer of complexity as to whose story is really being told. I'm not highlighting this as a negative issue. Rather, I suggest that films that address grassroots video projects like these, or films that are the result of collaborations between the filmmaker and the subjects, have the potential to produce interesting discussions on broader matters such as politics of representation, authorship and the nature of empowerment...The overarching message of this documentary is the empowerment and liberating effect of cinema.

Paul Watson, filmmaker:

The multi-layer combination works well though one has to be alert to the quick switching of characters. The women took to you well and that is a talent. Well done!

Television executive producer/friend:

I loved your film; it was really beautifully shot and really interesting and so brilliant to feel that it was in the hands of the women, too. I think its brilliant and could be the start of something really innovative – an exchange of stories online from the most disenfranchised people in the world. Really, really loved your film.

Television documentary producer/director/friend:

Well done on the film. I think all 4 women are great with powerful ‘back stories’ and very strong reports. I personally don’t think you need to identify the women pre-title – no one is going to remember their names and you need to get to their individual stories pretty quickly because then you care and get absorbed. Very nicely filmed and incredible to get such access – they were so relaxed and open with you. That is no mean achievement in India.

Ex-television executive producer/friend:

A genuinely interesting film that told me a lot about what is really an unknown world and all the women came across strongly. The film looked really good, too – you’ve shot it very well.

Awards jury:

An unpatronising and bold production, which gives a real insight into another world and made compelling viewing. Genuinely innovative and progressive by giving a community of women in India the means to tell their own stories.

Organiser, Cambridge International Women’s Film Festival:

The audience loved this film in particular, so much so, that I ended up screening it twice!

Academic colleagues at Bournemouth University:

I've been meaning to tell you how much I enjoyed your presentation. It was powerful stuff and the women with the cameras were so confident and interesting (scooping up horse shit is not the most engaging of tasks -especially dressed in those gorgeous but impractical saris!). It's a brilliant project...I'd love to see more of it. Do let me know if you're having more screenings.

You really capture a sense of the slower pace and rhythm of life there; the fast paced beginning contrasts very well with this.

Fantastic, moving and very inspiring.

This is fantastic. What a great project. Just sat down to watch this...top stuff...you must be really pleased.

You should be very proud of this work.

Feedback on <http://community.feministing.com>:

Amazing and heartbreaking. What a brilliant idea using a simple video camera in their communities to amplify voices.

Awesome. When the people in question talk about issues that affect them instead of an outsider, you get such an enriching picture of the issue.

Wow. Simple wow. The oppression they face is so systematic that it's hard to believe they can smile like they do.

Enlightening.

Great movie.

Very inspiring.

This film was one of the driving influences that lead me to become a documentary filmmaker. It changed my life and I believe it will change other people's lives.

Tender, honest and brave.

Gives meaningful insight into the homes and lives of four women.