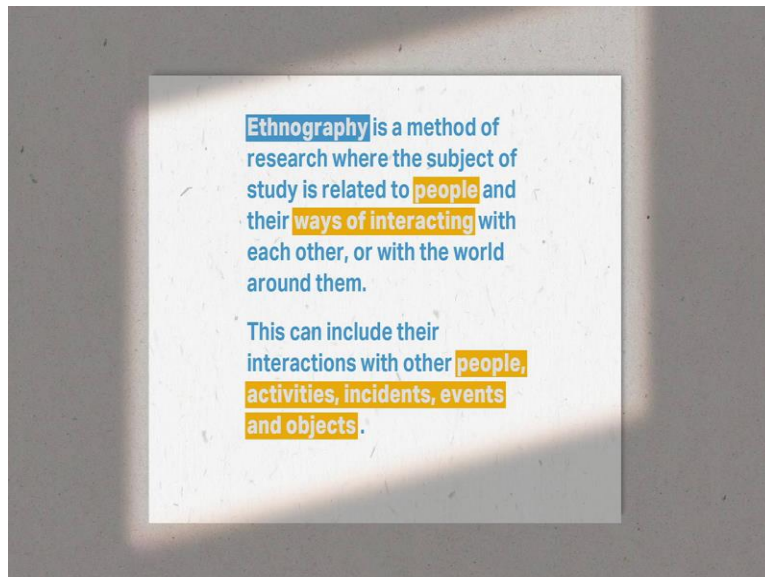


Understanding Ethnography: A way to engage with the other
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Lecture No. 1
Module 1: Introduction to Ethnography

Welcome to the course Understanding Ethnography, a way of engaging with the other. I am Nina Sabnani. I teach at the IDC School of Design in IIT Bombay. Ethnography is a qualitative research method that enables us to understand people, their social behaviours and their cultural practices.

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We spend time with people, in the environments in which they live, observing and speaking with them. It does seem odd that we have to learn how to do that. Spending time observing does not that come naturally? Of course, some of it does, but there is a huge difference between casual observing and the depth and rigour that the ethnographic approach requires. We derive insights by making observations and by drawing connections between these observations and theoretical concepts. And this leads us to make sense of what we perceive.

Few other research methods enable such an understanding of the human world. So far, we have explained the term ethnography, now let us talk about the other and what we mean

by that. In the context of ethnography, the other is often that person or set of persons who we see as different from us, and who we attempt to engage with. And who we see as other changes with changes in context.

In our home country, for instance, we may see someone from another region or community as the other. But when in a foreign country, anyone from our country, no matter what region or community they come from, are seen as like us, and those from other countries are seen as the other. So, before we travel any further or begin to define anything, let us look at an example that may help in understanding how we practice ethnography.

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Let me share my own experience of researching a community of storytellers from Rajasthan. I was interested to learn why the tradition of telling stories with a Kaavadiya story box was still alive when people had access to TV and other modes of entertainment. Did this have to do with the lack of access to electronic media in remote Rajasthan, or was it performing some other unknown role in their lives? I wanted to understand what meaning this story box had in the lives of the community.

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The community



The storytellers and their patrons

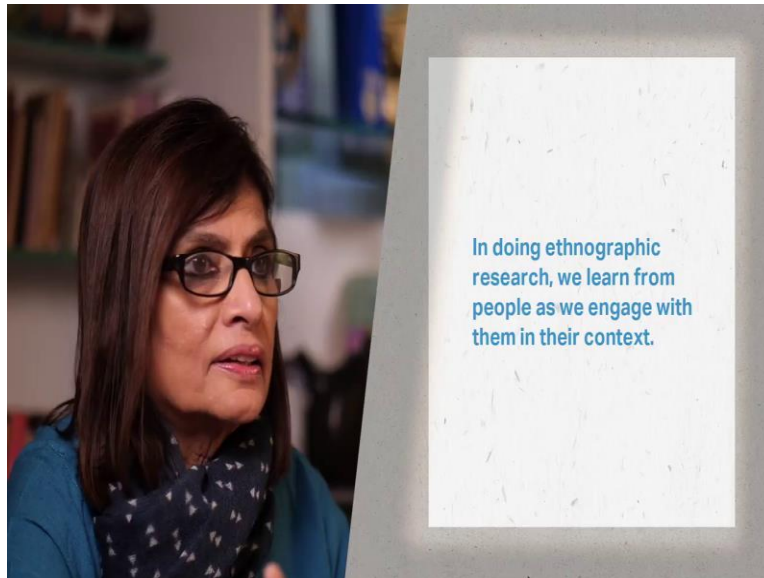


To explore these questions, I spent some time getting to know the community- the people who made the Kaavads, the storytellers and their patrons, by travelling together, asking questions, sharing jokes and also making films together.

In the process, I certainly discovered some things that I had expected to find but was also surprised by so much more. Their world was very different from mine, and so were their notions of reality. Many of the ideas that the storytellers and their patrons attached to the Kaavad put several of my assumptions to test.

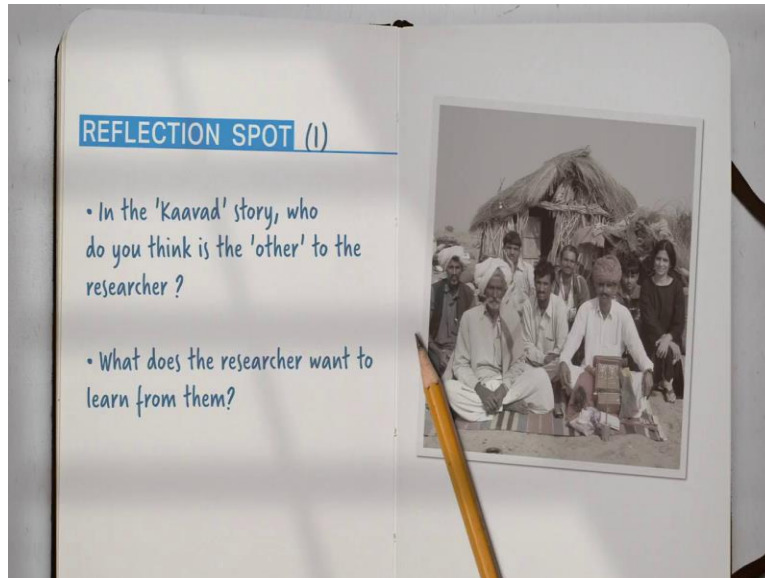
I had assumed that the kaavadiyas were simply storytellers, but as I engaged with them, I came to see that they are much more than that. They are genealogists who map and recite the ancestry of their patrons. They are, in fact, custodians of memory for their community. [Video being played from 3:56 to 4:21], I came to see that the story box was more than just about stories or their lineage - it was a pilgrimage. These insights changed the way I looked at folk traditions.

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I also realised I had a lot to learn about storytelling from my friends. All this came about because I had the opportunity to engage with them at length and in their context. This method helped me learn what lay beneath the surface of the colourful Kaavad story box and its performance. Let us pause here and reflect on some questions.

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In the Kaavad story, who do you think is the other to the researcher? What does the researcher want to learn from them? Some of you may have answered that the other here is the Kaavad storyteller. Others might have also noted that the patrons, the listeners, are the other. Given that we are viewing the sequence from the perspective of the researcher, then everyone outside the research team is the other.

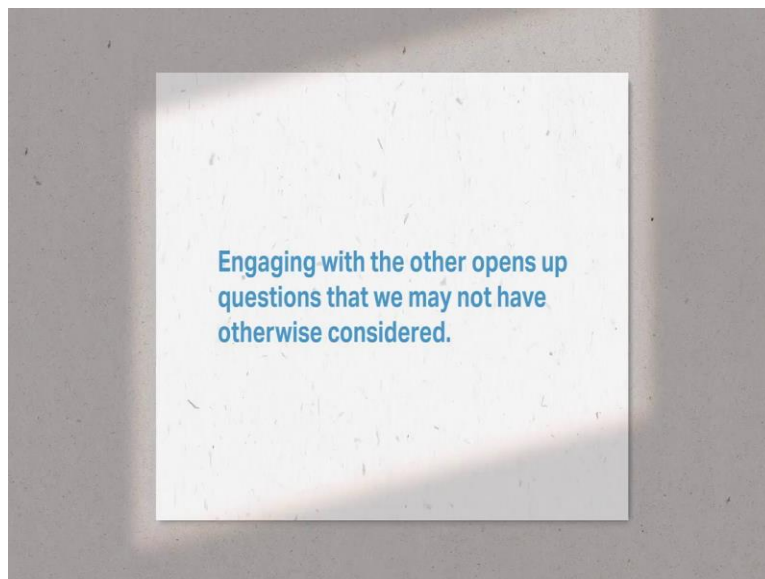
Some of you may have noted that the researcher wants to learn about the lifestyle of the Kaavad storytellers. Others may have thought the researcher wants to understand how the Kaavad story box is faring in the digital age. Both answers are acceptable. I did enter the research with curiosity about why the Kaavad remains so popular in some communities?

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But in order to learn about the Kaavad, I had to spend time with the makers and storytellers.

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And this opened up many questions that my research would go on to address. So, we could say that the core of this research - as of any ethnographic research - is the

process of being engaged with those who our research is about. And many ethnographers will vouch that it is actually a most interesting way of doing research.

It emphasises learning about other people by spending time with them, immersing ourselves in their everyday lives, understanding their context. It is certainly no rocket science, but it is not casual observing either. It has its methods and its processes and its fundamental principles, all of which we will discuss as we go through this course.

We will speak about the process at length, but first, there is an old story I would like to share. It has appeared in many versions, and this one is from the Vishnudharmottara-purāna, an ancient text from the sixth century that speaks about the arts and the relationship to each other.

King Vajra is very keen to learn the art of icon making of the deities he worships and asks the Sage Markandya to take him on as a student. The sage tells him that to understand the principles of image-making, he must first acquire the knowledge of painting. The king agrees to be trained in this art but is told that he cannot grasp even the rudiments of painting unless he is an accomplished dancer.

The king now accepts to learn dancing, but the sage explains that proficiency in dance is impossible without a keen sense of rhythm or knowledge of instrumental music. The king requests he be taught music and rhythm. To which the sage says that before he becomes proficient in instrumental music, a mastery of vocal music is necessary. Finally, the king goes through all these stages before the sage teaches him the art of iconography.

And so, it is with ethnography too. In order to understand ethnography, we must understand the fields it comes from – Mainly, sociology and anthropology. And that is what we will discuss in the next section.