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In this section, we will address the first two questions. ***What are we seeking, and why are we interested in it? How is this all relevant, and what is its purpose in a wider context?*** The rest of the question we will address in later sections. So, let us begin with the first one. ***What are we seeking, and why are we interested in it?***

Some of us may be commissioned to do research, and some of us may initiate it on our own. In either case, it is important that we have some clarity on what we are seeking and how we may find it. Otherwise, we will land up like Mulla Nasruddin. Let me tell you that story if you don't already know it.

Mulla is looking for something outside his house in the night. A passerby stops asks him, what are you looking for? He says 'Oh, I have lost my keys'. The passerby decides to help him. 'When did you last see them?', he asks the Mulla, who answers, 'I had them when I went to the forest to get some grass for my donkey'.

'So could you have lost it in the jungle?'

'Yes, I am pretty sure I did.'

'Then why are we looking for them over here?'

'Well, because it's too dark there, and here there is light!'

We must have some clue about what we are seeking and some ideas on where we may find

the answers. Often, there is a broad subject that we are interested in. But in order to take it forward as research, we have to identify an aspect of it that we find interesting and have the means to pursue.

For instance, we may or may not be interested in fashion. But we may be curious to learn about how people make decisions about clothing. We might find it interesting to learn about the perceptions attached to clothes- what a saree means to someone; or how someone is perceived when they wear a dress. Or we might be curious to look backstage and see how clothes are made, and the lives of those who make them.

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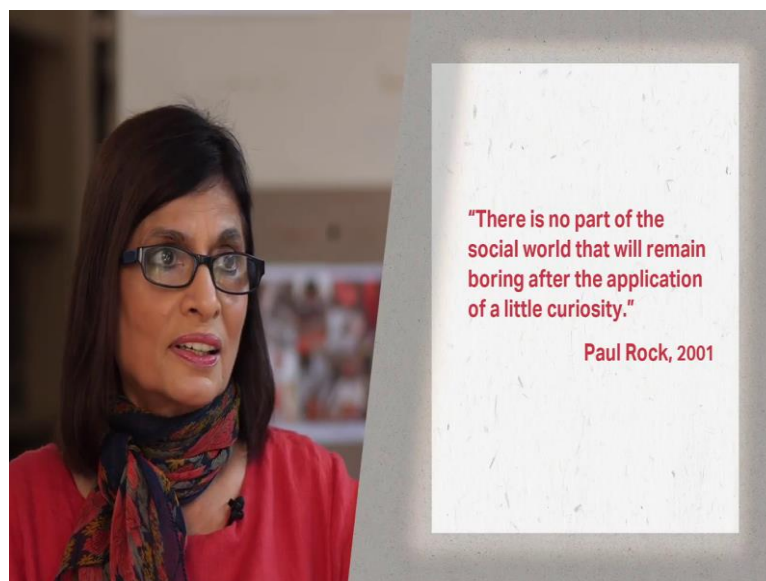
The deeper we get into a subject, the more likely we are to find something about it that intrigues us. The more we learn, we realise how much more there *is* to learn. Of course, we cannot possibly hope to be equally interested in all subjects under the sun, but in each subject, we can find something of our interest.

Ethnographic research, as we know, requires direct and sustained engagement with a subject, for an extended period of time. For this, we require access to the context and material resources. So it is crucial we choose a subject that we feel deeply interested in. Else we might find ourselves feeling trapped and wanting to quit midway.

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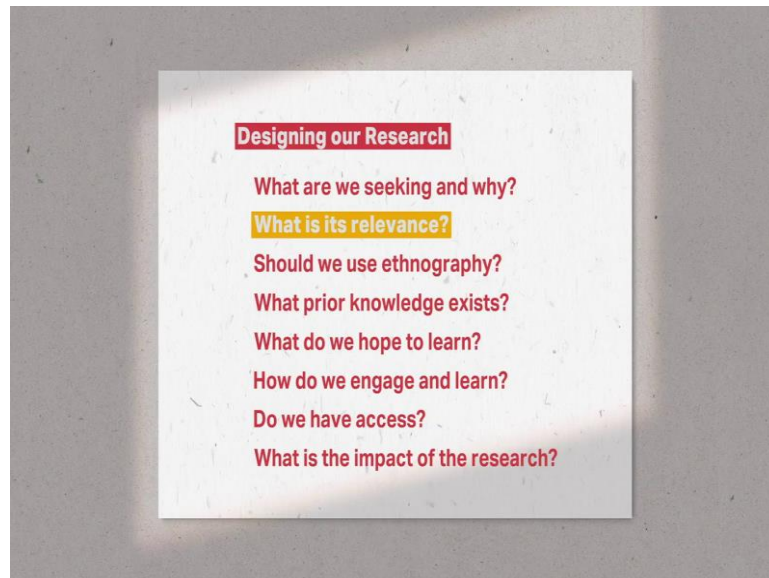
Having decided on a subject, we need to examine the relevance of our research. Why is it important for us to be pursuing it at this point in time? To address this question, we need to think about which people or groups might benefit from the research. And, in what ways could the research affect the people, communities, organisations, or environments associated with our chosen subject.

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Weavers at work, Maheshwar, MP

Embroidered Narratives of Kutch come to mainstream audiences through Kala Raksha.

For instance, our research may focus on a form of craft. Through our research, we could contribute to the craft's preservation and propagation, and celebrate the lives and works of the artisans. In studying the lives of a marginalised community, our intent may be to make their stories visible to mainstream society. The designers, social workers or strategists amongst us might want to improve the working and living conditions of the communities we work with.

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A study aimed at designing low cost urban housing.
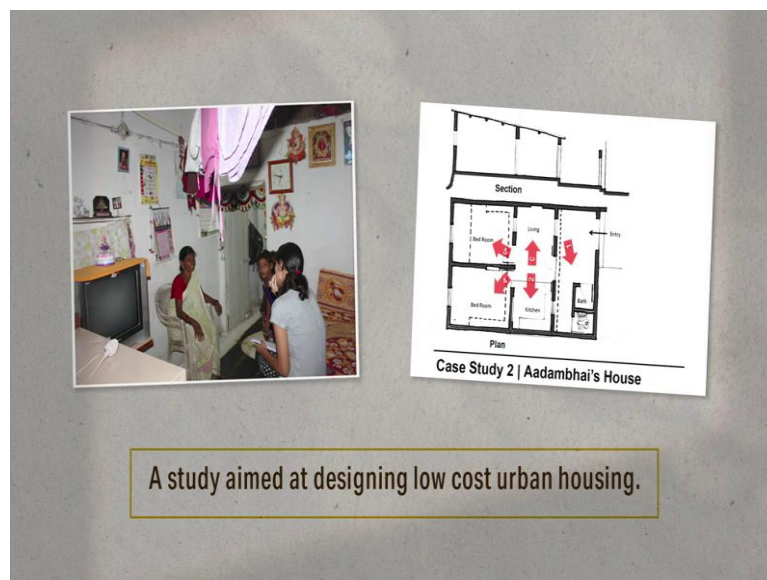
We might want to do this by making better tools and processes for existing tasks. Or by developing better living spaces. In each of these cases, our work begins with understanding the existing universe of our participants. This understanding gives our research project its purpose. To a great extent, the purpose of the research defines the knowledge we hope to access, the nature of our inquiry and the methods that we may employ.

For example, if we want to work towards better housing conditions for an urban community, we have to understand what people mean by 'better housing'. So, the knowledge we are trying to access is *'what a section of the urban population means by better housing'*. This, in turn, defines the methods we may use. A well-defined purpose is all the more important in application-focused disciplines like design or management where the research is not an end in itself.

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Once we are decided on a subject and are sure of its relevance, we need to articulate the question that our research aims to address. This is called the *research question*. We may start with a whole lot of smaller questions and then tease out the nodal question that holds them all together. This becomes our research question.

Alternatively, the research question may be broad, to begin with, but eventually, it must be articulated into a set of sub-questions or themes. Breaking down the research question should tell us what nature of information we are looking for- quantitative, qualitative, factual, or more ambiguous.
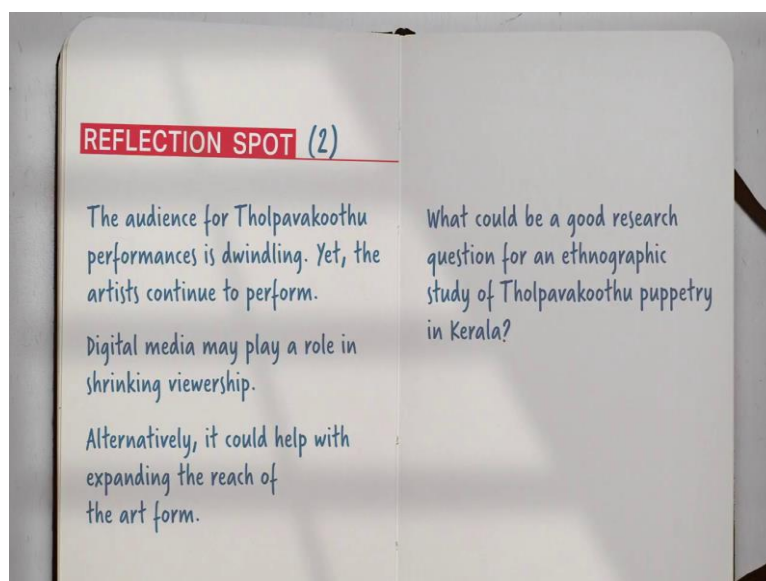
We may find ourselves redefining this question now and again as we learn more about our subject. A well-articulated research question can also help us determine if ethnography is the method we need for our study.

Being present at a Tholpavakoothu performance in Palakkad, Kerala.
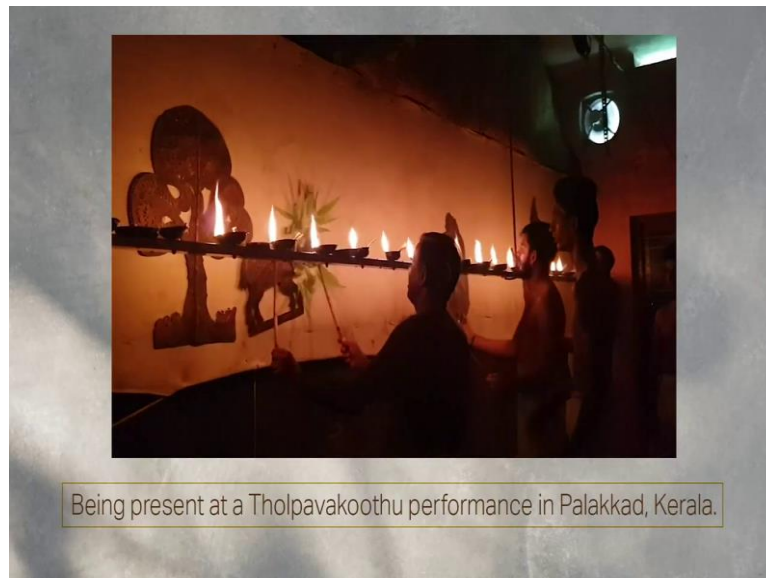
Consider for example, that a student wants to undertake a research on the practice of Tholpavakoothu puppetry in Kerala. He wants to understand how the art form, a ritual performance of shadow puppetry accompanied by music, is faring in this day and age. As he explores a little bit about the subject, he realises that Tholpavakoothu does not have many patrons. Moreover, the puppeteers receive little payment and a very small audience for their performances. So, he wants to learn why they continue to perform. What are the interests and motivations of the puppeteers and their few patrons, that keep them engaged with the art form?

REFLECTION SPOT (2)

The audience for Tholpavakoothu performances is dwindling. Yet, the artists continue to perform.

Digital media may play a role in shrinking viewership.

Alternatively, it could help with expanding the reach of the art form.

What could be a good research question for an ethnographic study of Tholpavakoothu puppetry in Kerala?
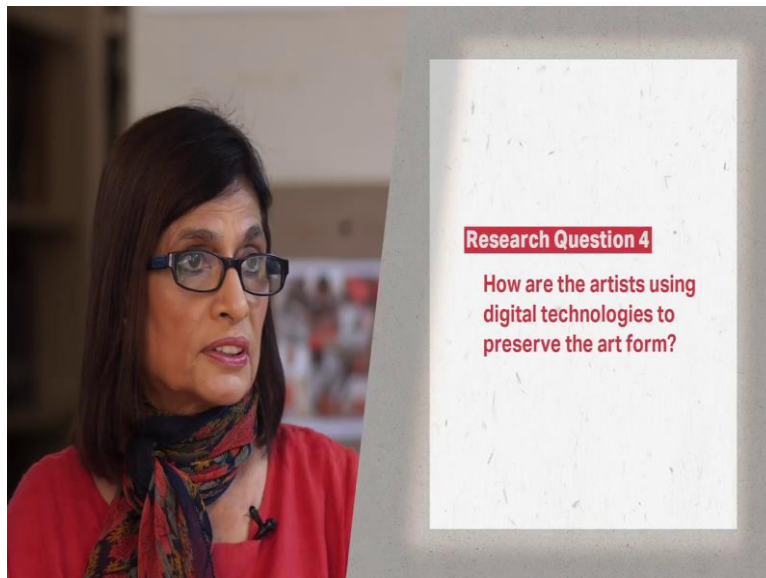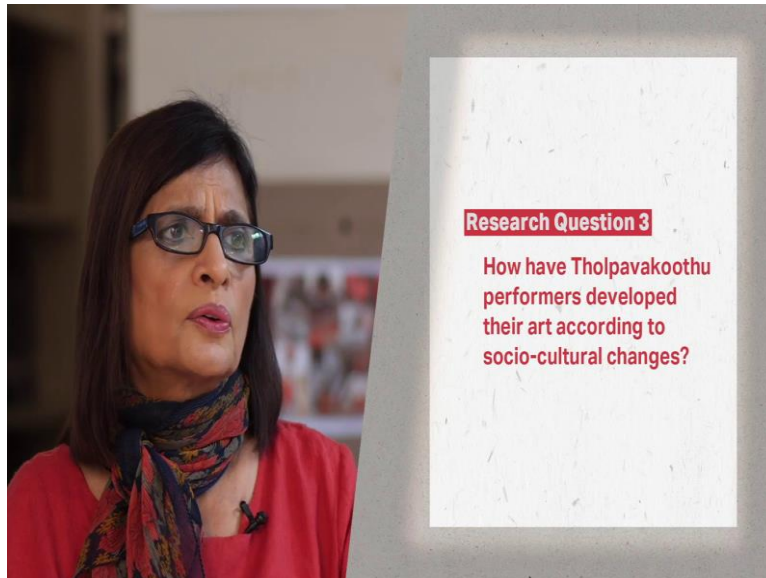
As a student of design, he is also interested in learning what role digital media and technology might play in encouraging the art form, or in turning people away from it. What do you think could be a good research question for his research? Let us consider some answers you might have thought of.

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Some of you may have framed a question about the motivations that encourage the performers to continue their art form.Some of you might have thought of the research question is about exploring the factors that have enabled the art form to survive. And others may have thought of the question about the ways in which Tholpavakoothu performers have developed their art forms and skills.

And maybe some you framed a question about the role of digital technologies in preserving the art form. Let us discuss these questions.

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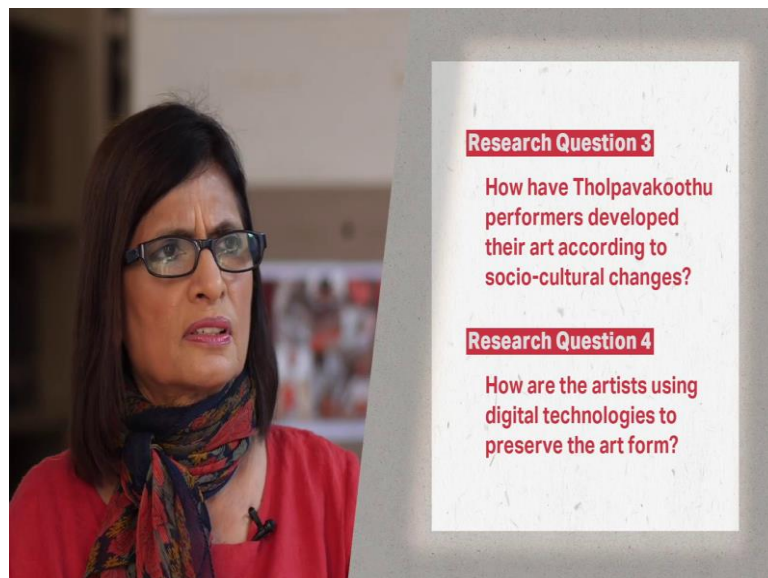
While there are no incorrect answers as such, options 1 and 2, are the closest to a research question that takes his interest forward. Options 3 and 4 are good questions, but they address a limited aspect of the students' research interest and do not cover many other aspects of the phenomenon. Some of you might think that the first two options are too broad and vague. However, these questions will be further broken down, later in the process, to suggest multiple different aspects of the research.

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For example, as the researcher explores *the motivations and drivers that encourage Tholpavakoothu artists to continue performing*, he will have to look at *the ways in which their lives and art have adapted to social and economic changes*. As we define our research question, we get a clearer idea of what exactly is the focus of our research, within the subject we are interested in

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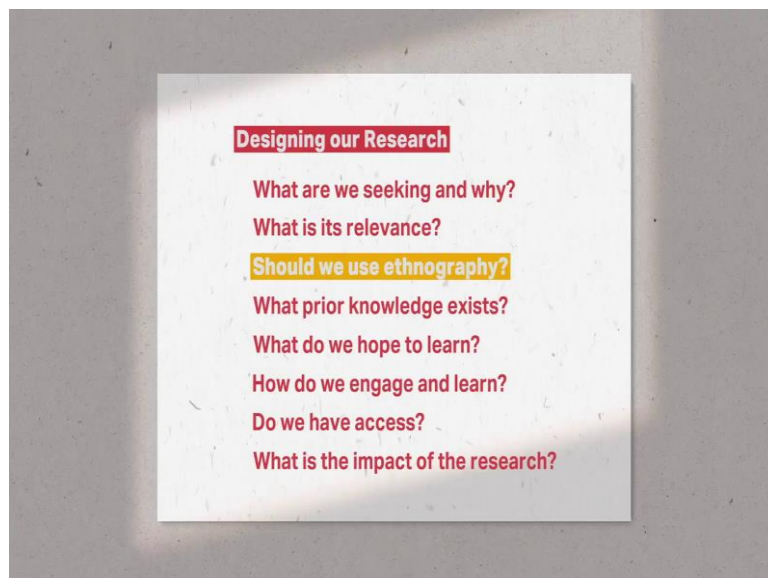
And this enables us to determine the research method we should use. So our next step is to choose the research method. We will discuss this in our next session