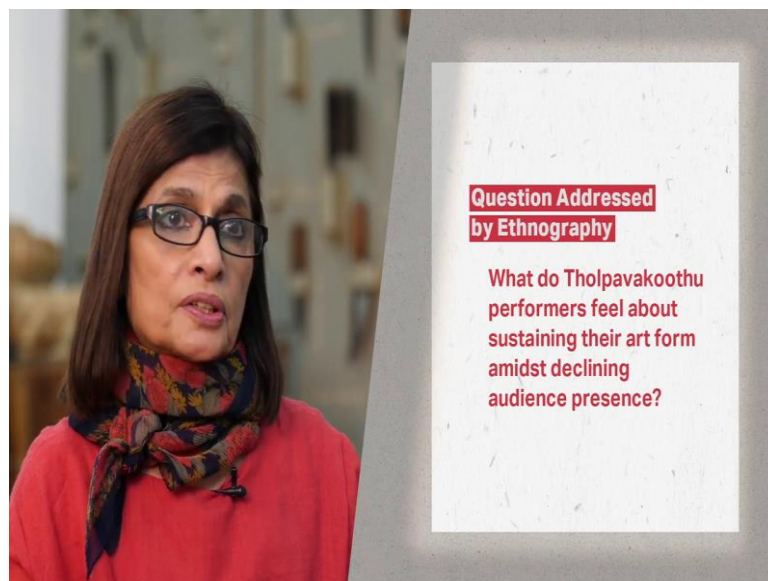
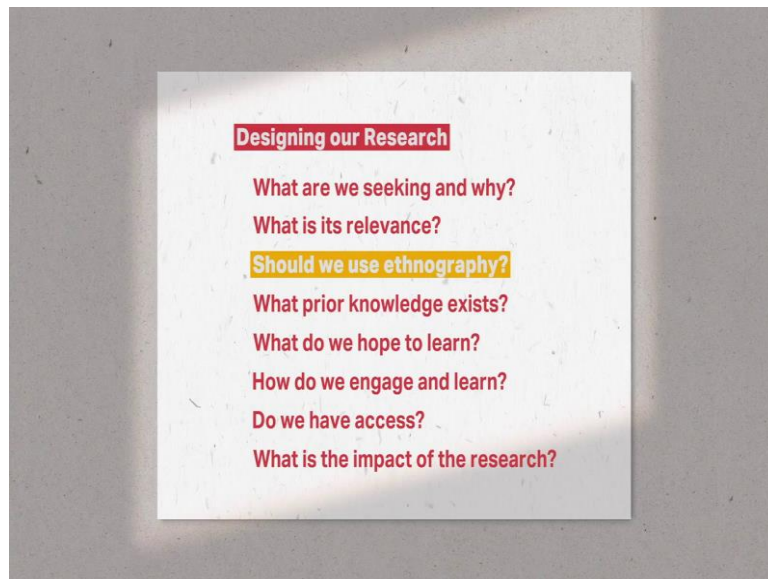


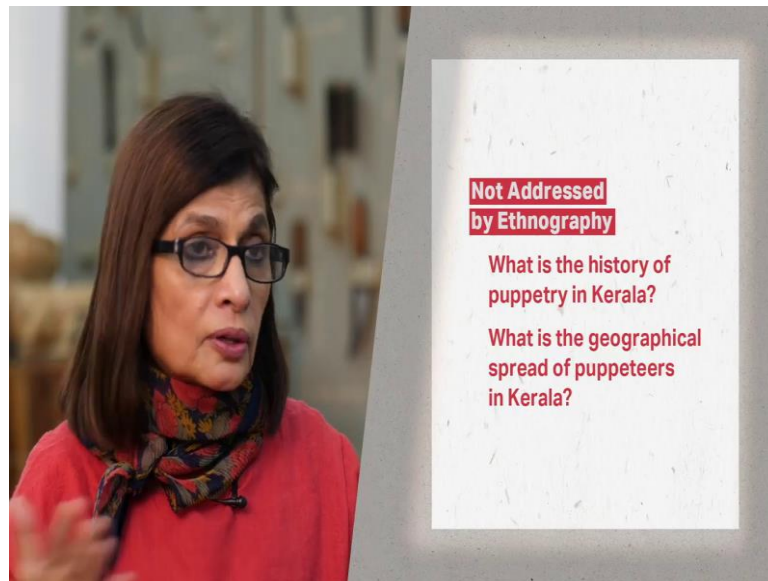
**Is Ethnography the Method?**  
**Module 3 Section 3**  
**Lecture 16**

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Is ethnography the method we need for our study? This is the question we shall discuss in this section. Some research questions may be addressed by ethnography, and some others can't. For example, for the research on Tholpavakoothu, ethnography would be more suitable when we want to study how the puppeteer community feels about sustaining the art form even when there is a poor audience for it.

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However, it may not be the best of methods to study the history of puppetry in Kerala or the geographical spread of puppeteers across the state. There are some areas of study where ethnography is a particularly useful method. Ethnography is a great method when we are trying to understand how people see their world or certain phenomena in it.

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It is also useful for investigating relationships. We might want to understand how certain relationships are formed and maintained and how they end or learn about the dynamics of an ongoing relationship. Here, the term relationship can be described very broadly as an association between people, objects, places, or phenomena.

Human social activity is an area that may be researched through ethnography. The term activity, here, can include all activity that is undertaken by a person or a group of persons. Eating, cooking, going to work, studying, commuting, building, and so on. Through ethnography, one can look at the activities undertaken not only by others but also by oneself, or a group that one is a part of.

Identity is a rather important area of study where ethnography is particularly suitable. Identity, here, refers to how we define ourselves with respect to, or as a part of, a larger group. For instance, I am a woman, an Indian, a member of a certain community. These form different aspects of my identity.

Similarly, being a teacher, a researcher and a filmmaker is also a part of my identity. How did I come to see myself in these different ways? How have these ways of defining myself evolved over years and through various experiences? The formation, transformation and evolution of identities across social contexts, and across time, is primary to our understanding of ourselves.

This is true for individuals, and for groups. Our identity is constructed by us, by various others, and by our context. So, being a teacher is a part of my identity, partly because that is how I am seen by my students. Or, I identify as somebody from Bombay because I have lived in this city for many years. As we try to understand people's relationship with their environments, it becomes almost essential to also understand how they see themselves.

Let us pause here to think about the importance of 'identity' in an ethnographic study. Perhaps we can continue with the example of the Tholpavakoothu performers. The performers have many different identities, as defined by them, by others, and by their context.

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For instance, the government records the community as Saiva vellala Pillai. In government records, this community comes under the OBCs or Other Backward Castes. The patrons of the puppeteers are worshippers at the Kali temples where Tholpavakoothu is performed. They believe that the puppeteers are agents of the goddess Bhadrakali.

Now, for upper-caste patrons, such as the Nambiar community, the puppeteers are lower caste performers, and so, cannot be agents of the goddess. And in a non-religious environment, such as the Sangit Natak Akademi, which is a government institution for supporting the arts, the puppeteers are performing artists. So here's a question for you:

***What is the value of understanding the puppeteers' identity, or many identities, for an ethnographic study of their art and lives?*** Some of you may have said that the identity of the puppeteers defines how they are treated by different people. Others might have said that the resources they may or may not have access to are also determined by their identity.

These are good answers. Because in each context where they perform, their interactions with others, and possibly even their earnings, are determined by how they are identified- as agents of Bhadrakali, as low caste performers, or as performing artists. Some of you may have also noticed that their identity matters only when the society around them cares about their caste identity.

It is true that their caste is an important aspect of their identity. However, even in a context like the Sangit Natak Akademi, where their caste may not be of great importance, their identity as artists determines the opportunities they have access to. So, to do a research on the Tholpavakoothu performers and the art form itself, we would have to understand the many identities of the performers, and how they play out in different contexts.

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So, let us summarise the four broad areas where ethnography may work well as a research method. We will continue this discussion on designing our research in the next section.