**Understanding Ethnography**
**Indian School of Design**
**Lecture No. 29**
**Immersion**

In our last section, we discussed what role we might play in the world of our participants. While we discussed taking on the role of the professional researcher, one need not stick to that throughout fieldwork. Sometimes by just being a researcher, we serve little purpose in the lives of our participants and their community. Thus, researchers often choose to engage in a manner that is mutually rewarding. It contributes to their research *and* to the lives of their participants.

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A great example of this is the work of Verrier Elwin, a well-known ethnographer who spent much part of his life working with tribal communities in central India. Elwin started work among his participant communities as a researcher.

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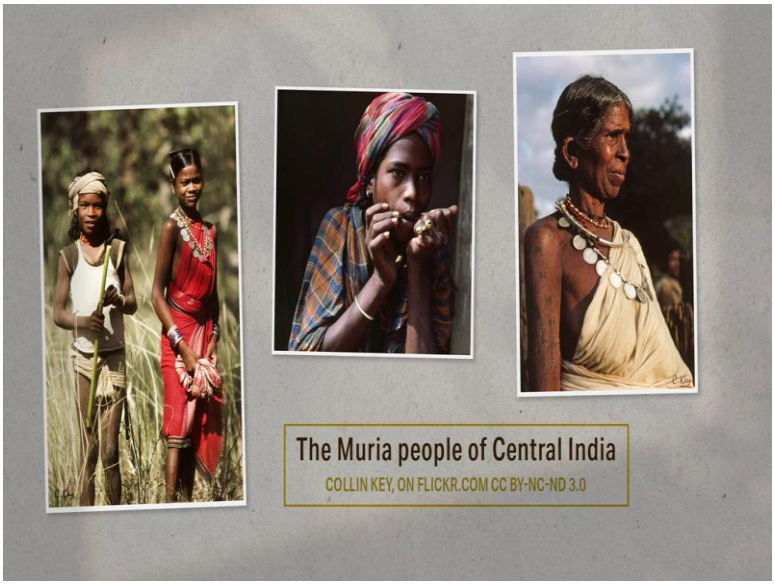


As his relationship with his participants and his understanding of their world developed, he realised it was important to safeguard their ways of life from non-tribal communities. For this, he came to believe; they required education and literacy.

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And so, he took the initiative of literacy programs for the Gonds. His role shifted from being just a researcher, to being a researcher *and* an educator among his participants. Taking on such a role enabled him to become a part of the community and contribute to their lives. This form of engagement made his work non-transactional and mutually beneficial. It is important to note that the shift in Elwin's role among the Gonds was not something he could have accomplished without the acceptance and cooperation of his participants.

We could say that his role as educator and researcher was co-created by him *and* his participants. In fact, this may be true for any role that we take on in the field. Whether it is the role of a professional researcher, collaborator, educator, or any other,

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our on-field role is defined by us, our participants, and the circumstances in which we engage with each other.

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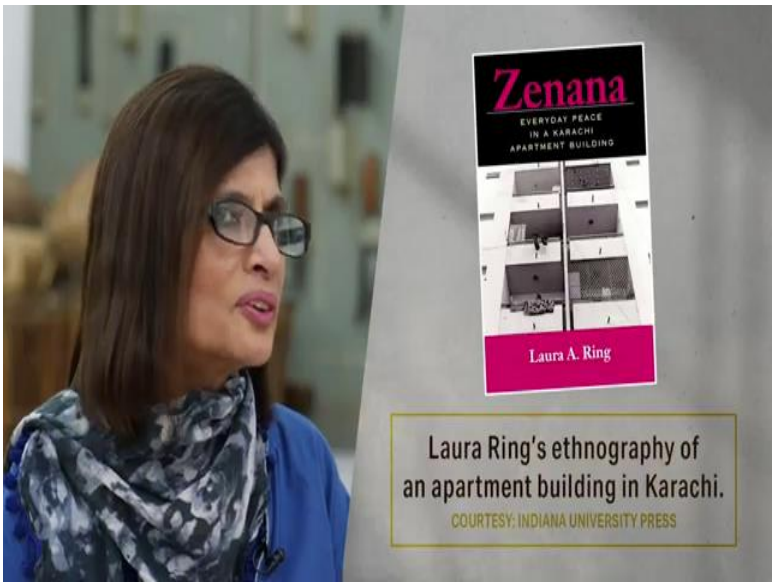


Take for instance, the case of Laura Ring, whose work we had discussed in our last module. She entered the community of apartment dwellers in Karachi as a researcher. The women residents of the building who were her participants were aware of her role. But as she spent

time living in the building, they started to see her more and more as a neighbour, and as a mother, and a wife, much like themselves.

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The role assigned to her became that of neighbour, friend, fellow woman, who happened to be doing research on life in the building.

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Whatever role we take on, or are assigned to by our participants, the intention is to be a part of the community, to immerse ourselves in the context.

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To immerse ourself in the context means to become a member of our participant community. It is to absorb and inculcate behaviours that are common in the community, by spending a considerable period of time in their environment. To immerse ourselves in the context means to be an insider as well as an outsider in the community. It means to be familiar with the phenomena that occur in the context and to look at them afresh so as to analyse them. In immersing ourselves, we participate in the context but also step back and observe it, as though from a slight distance.

This dual nature of immersion is core to ethnography. It is the tension between these dualities that makes ethnography a particularly interesting and unique method of research.

As you know from our previous discussions, immersion is given great emphasis in ethnographic practice. This importance is based on the belief that by spending time and living as our participants do, we understand them at a deeper level. Through immersion in their culture and society, we learn their interactions, relationships and behaviours. And we learn the structures and beliefs that shape these. So how do we immerse ourselves in this manner?

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There is no fixed or prescribed way to do this. But broadly speaking, and for the sake of explanation, we can say that there are at least three different 'degrees of immersion'.So there is Complete membership, active membership and the peripheral membership. A complete membership means a total immersion in the other's culture, where we participate in all the activities of the community, just as any other member would. We are accepted as part of the community. We relate to our participants as equals and share in their activities and experiences. This also makes us subject to the social and cultural norms of the context. Let us reflect on this for a moment.

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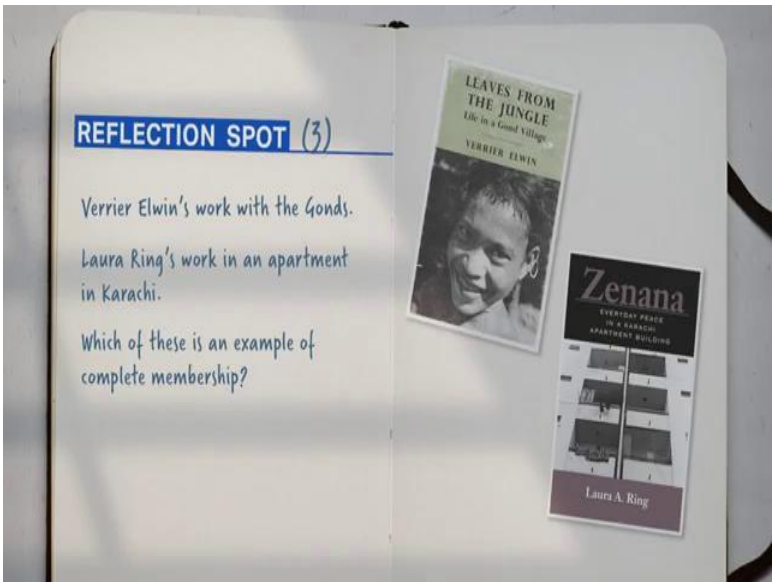


Recollect the two example of immersion we have just discussed. Verrier Elwin's work with

the Gonds, and Laura Ring's work in an apartment building in Karachi. Which one of these is an example of complete membership? Some of you may have identified Verrier Elwin's work with the Gonds as a classic example of complete membership. You are so right. Elwin's work qualifies as complete membership because he spent several years of his life living in a Gond village, building a house and starting a family among the community.

Others may have said Laura Ring's work is an example of complete membership. This, too, is correct. Even though she did not spend many years in the context, during the period of her research, she participated as an equal member in the life of the apartment building. And she was a member of her participants' lives as a neighbour and a friend. Thus, for a limited duration of time, she had complete membership in the community. So both Elwin and Ring are examples of complete membership.

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An active membership is only slightly less involved than a complete membership. Here too, the researcher is considered a part of the community but is not involved in all activities. My work with the Kaavad makers and storytellers is an example of active membership. I spent time with them and learning from them, but did not become a Kaavad maker or learn the art of Kaavad performance from them. I was a welcome and frequent visitor, living in their surroundings for short stretches of time, participating in their rituals and performances.

However, my engagement with them was limited to activities that related to Kaavad making and Kaavad performance alone, which was only one part of their lives.The third position one could take is that of peripheral membership, which, as the name suggests, is marginal

involvement, where the researcher, though welcome, is more an observer than a participant (Refer Slide Time: 7:54)


An example of this is my work with the embroidery artists in Kutch where I visited them every day for the duration of the project, got to know them, their narratives and their art intimately, but did not attempt in any way to situate myself in their daily lives or their community.The nature and degree of immersion is also defined by the kind of time we spend in the field. This is dependent on the phenomenon we are studying.

Some subjects may require us to spend a continuous stretch of time, ranging from a few months to a year, in close proximity with our participants. This would be the case if we were studying phenomena related to everyday life.

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This could include studies on the daily activities of persons. Or studies about relationships and identities, which manifest in everyday behaviours and interactions. Laura Ring's work in Karachi is an example of that.

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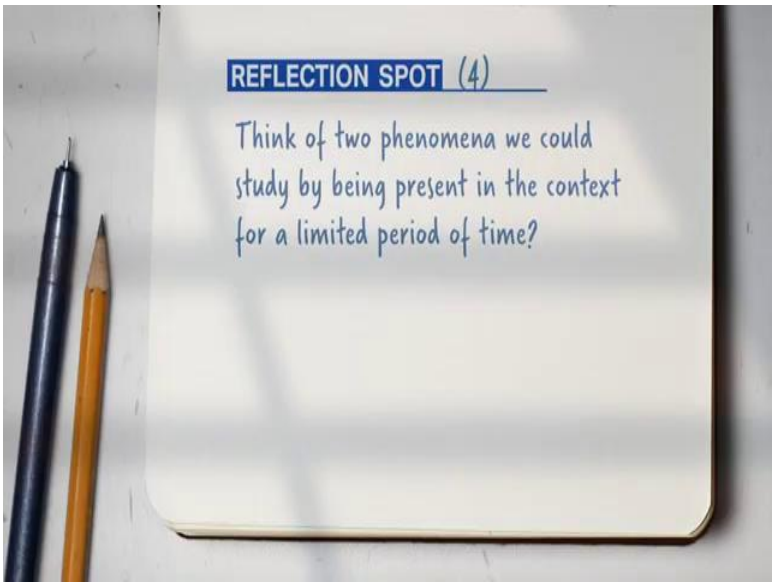
We also need to spend considerable time in the context if we are studying phenomena that last for a long time. Say, if we were studying the life of a farming community, we would want to understand their lives across at least one cycle of different agricultural seasons. Or if we were studying the life of a school or its students, we would want to go across an academic cycle or at least a semester from beginning to end.

Studying such phenomena requires us to have an overview of our participants' lives over a particular time cycle. But not all studies require such extended engagement.(Refer Slide Time: 9:31)




Can you think of two examples, of phenomena that we could study, which would require us to be present in the context only for a limited period of time? Did you think of phenomena like rituals, performances and festivals? Yes, of course, these require us to be present for a limited period.

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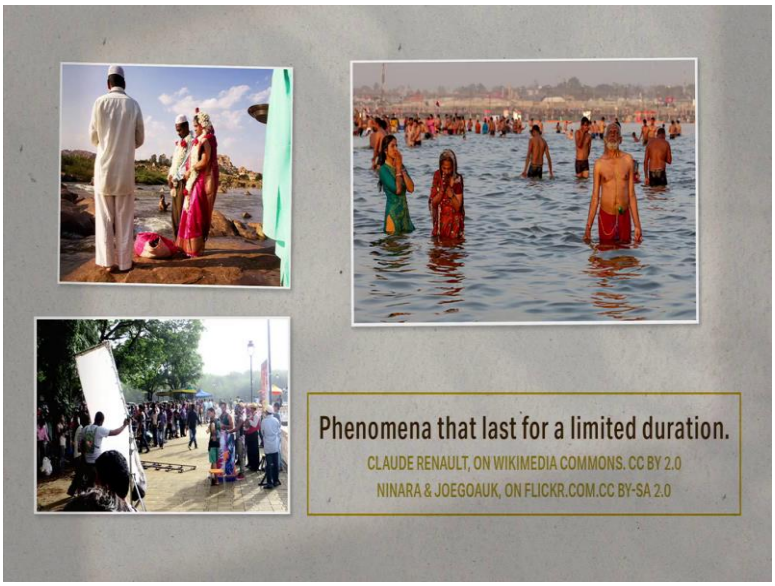


For example, the Kumbh Mela, or a wedding, or a film shoot. In these kinds of studies, we can be present for a period just before the event, then during the event, and a period after

when it is over. We may not need to spend an entire year in Allahabad, but we need to be there when its preparation begins, and its aftermath once the Mela is over.

Now suppose we want to just study the process of art direction in filmmaking. Then does it make sense to being present for the phases of post-production where no art direction activities are taking place? It may not contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon, right? However, being present after an event has ended where rituals were performed, or a festival took place could add or bring new knowledge.

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Whatever intensity and duration of our engagement, ethnographic encounters are always a blend of distant observation and intimate participation. This mix informs our primary way of learning. In our next module, we will discuss how the tension between the processes of observation and participation, helps us learn from our participants.