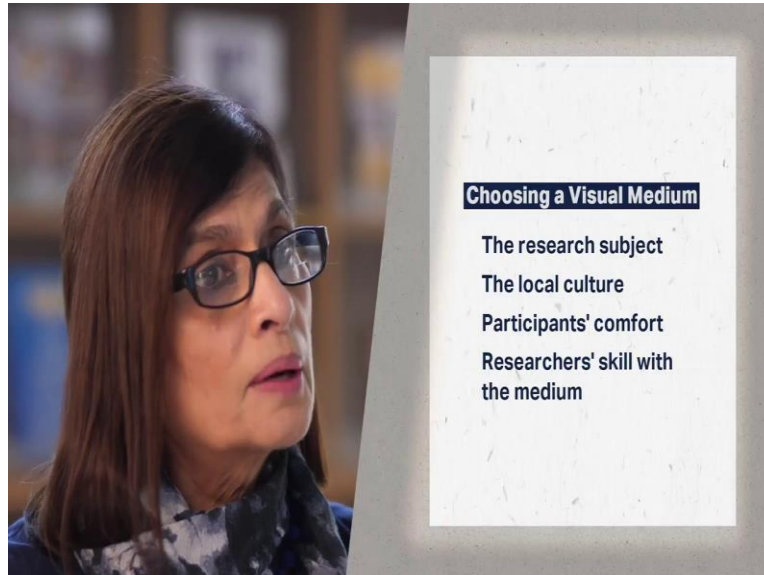


**Choosing the Visual Medium**  
**Module 7 Section 5**  
**Lecture 56**

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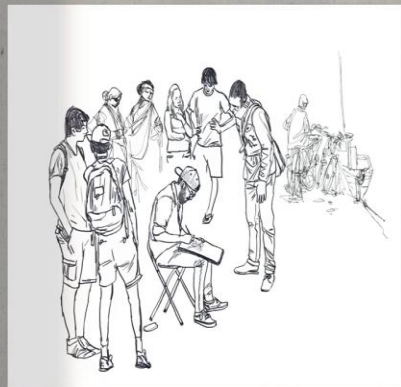


As we design our research, we must consider the choice of visual media and their implications for our participants and for us. The subject we are researching, the culture of our participants, their comfort and our skills will determine our choice and preference for a particular visual media. Using visual media such as photography, or video, or even drawing, can make us more visible in the context. All the more so when we are new entrants and still in the process of immersing ourselves.

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Filming is a great way to record activities, but may be too much of an interference in some contexts.



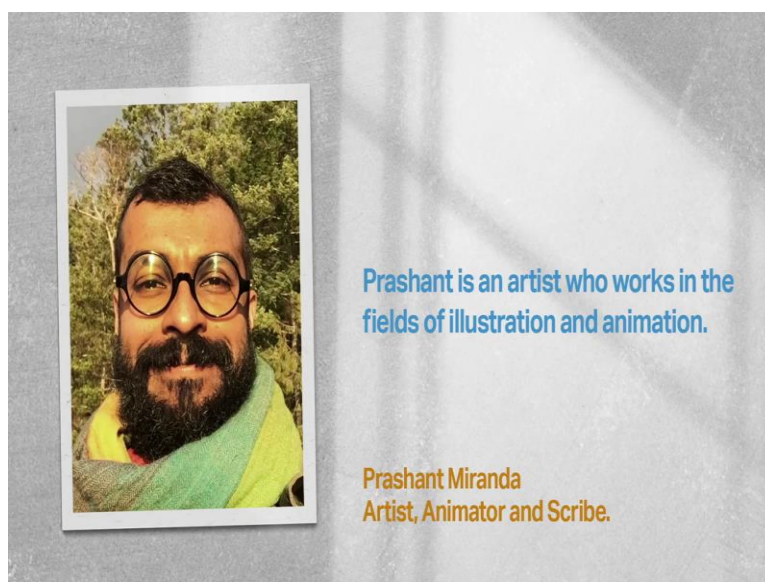
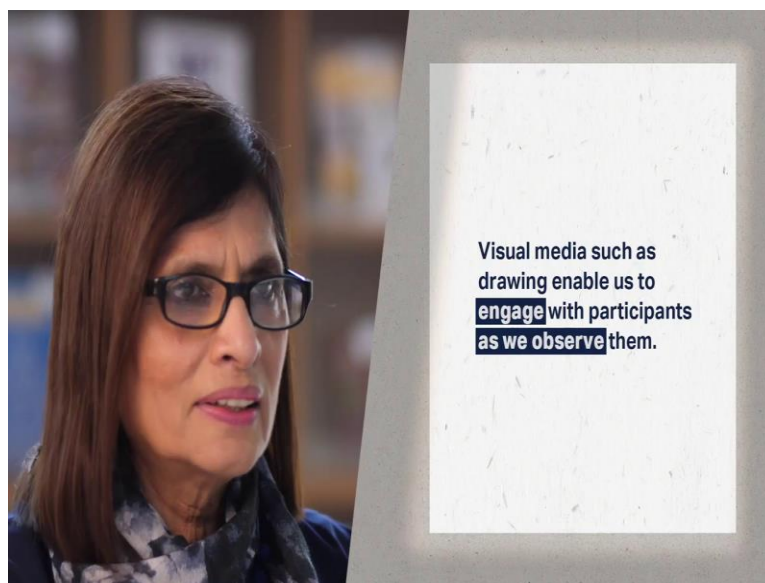
While drawing may be a less invasive form of visual recording, it sometimes draws more attention than is desirable.

Depending on how our tools or equipment are viewed in our participants' culture, this visibility may make it easier or more difficult for us to gain access. Using drawing, for example, is likely to draw curiosity and attention to us. A researcher working with children living in the streets in Vijayawada used drawing as a way to access and learn about her participants in the early part of her fieldwork. Her participants were children and young women who worked at the scrap dealer's unit. She would visit the scrapyard every day. Not wanting to distract the children from their work and antagonise their employer, the owner of the scrapyard, she would sit in a corner of the

yard and sketch images of the children as they worked while making her observations about their activities.

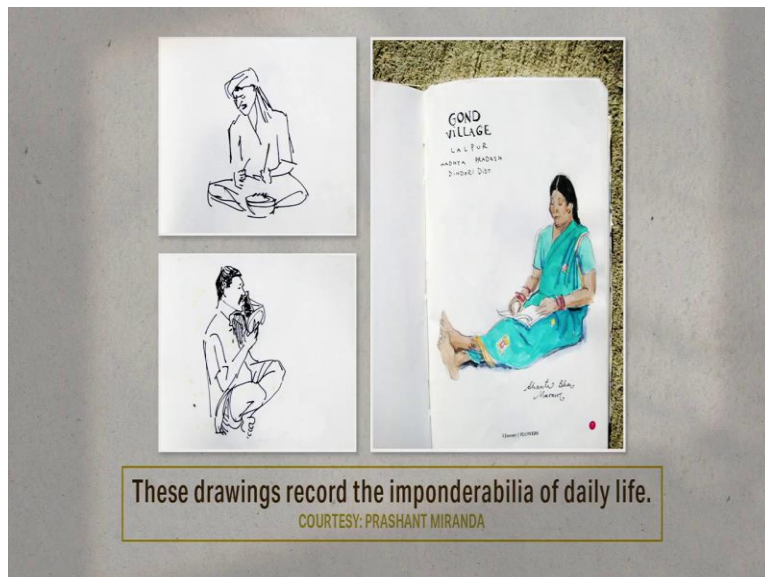
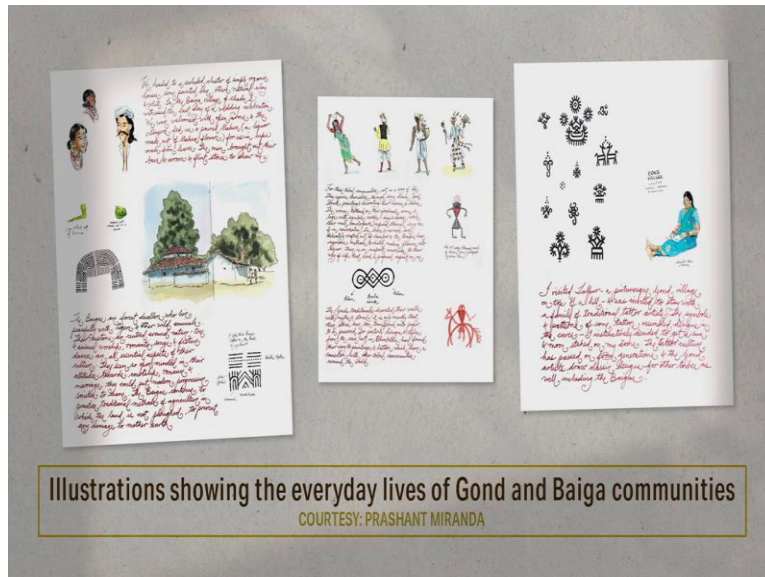
For several days this continued without any verbal exchange between the participants and the researcher. One day, as she was walking through a street close by, she was approached by one of the young women who worked at the scrapyards. The woman asked the researcher to make a portrait of her when she came to the scrapyards the next day. Drawing images of the participants had thus made her a benign and even a welcome presence in the context.

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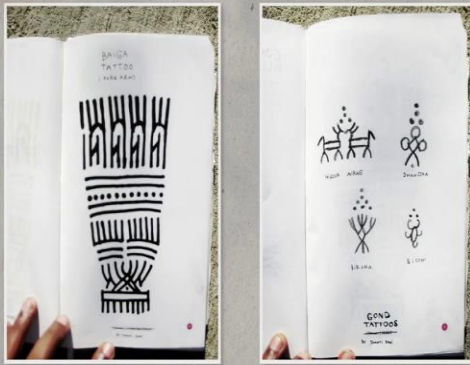


In fact, many researchers and visual artists find that drawing enables them to engage with participants as they observe and record. One such work is that of artist Prashant Miranda. Prashant is a visual artist who uses sketches to document his travels and observations.

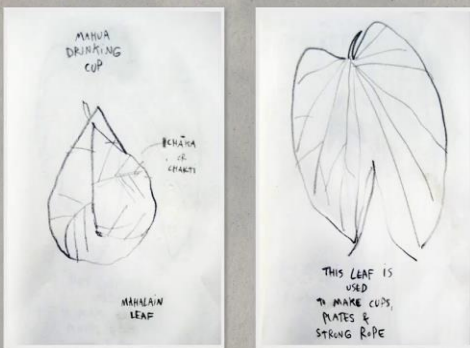
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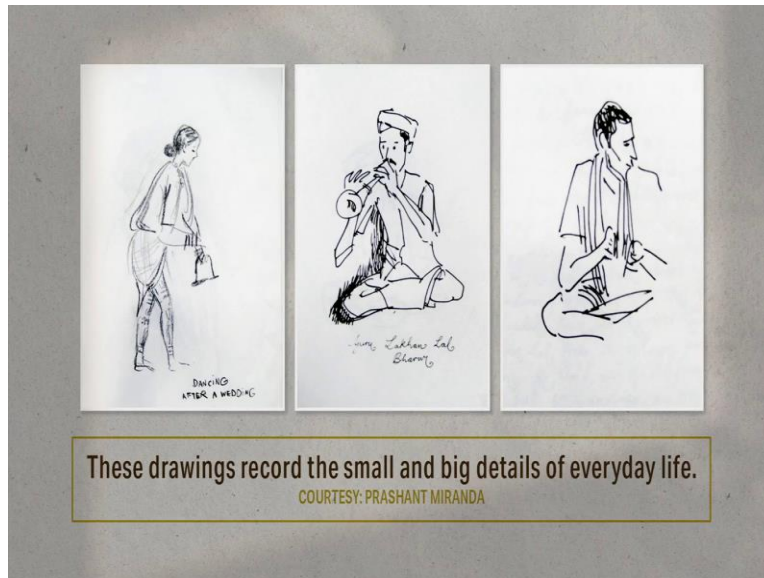




The details of tattoos of the Gonds and the Baigas  
COURTESY: PRASHANT MIRANDA

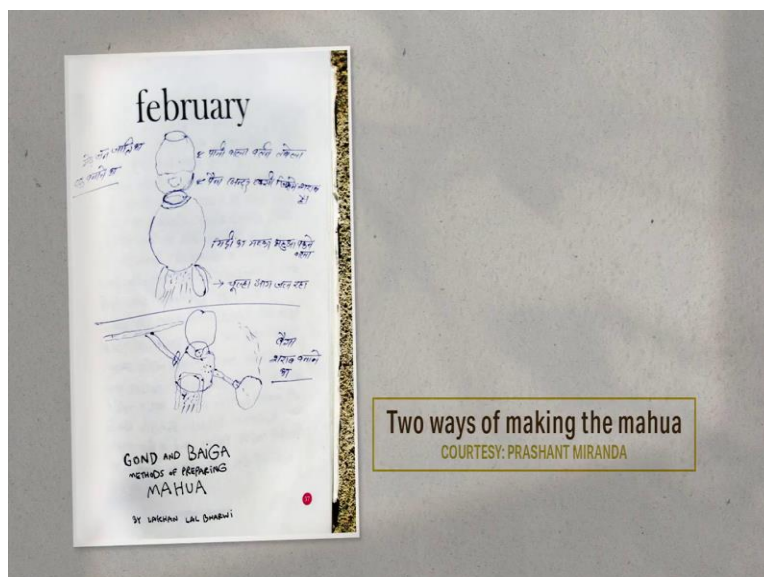


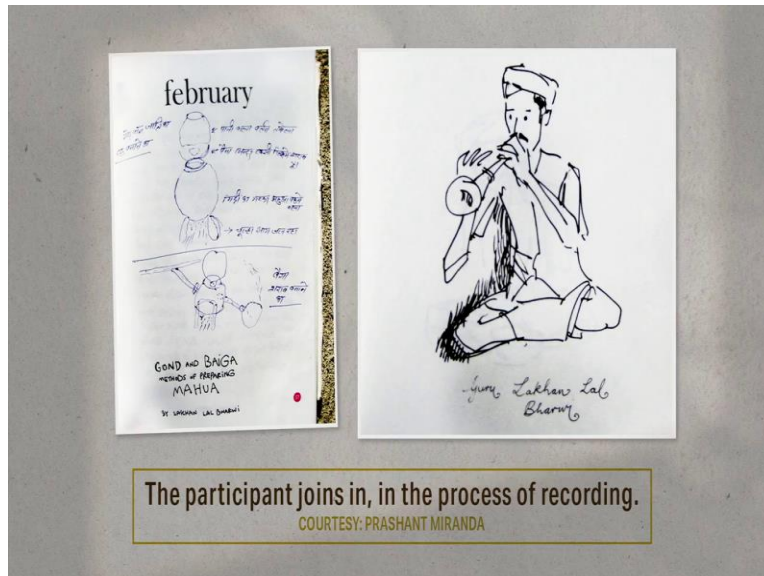
The cup used for drinking mahua  
COURTESY: PRASHANT MIRANDA



Here we want to share with you one of his sketchbooks, where he recorded his time spent with the Gond and Baiga communities in Madhya Pradesh. In these sketches, we see the everyday life of his participants, the imponderabilia. His sketches carefully record objects and visuals that exist in the context, the patterns of tattoos, the structure of the mahua drinking cup, the traditional costumes and dances.

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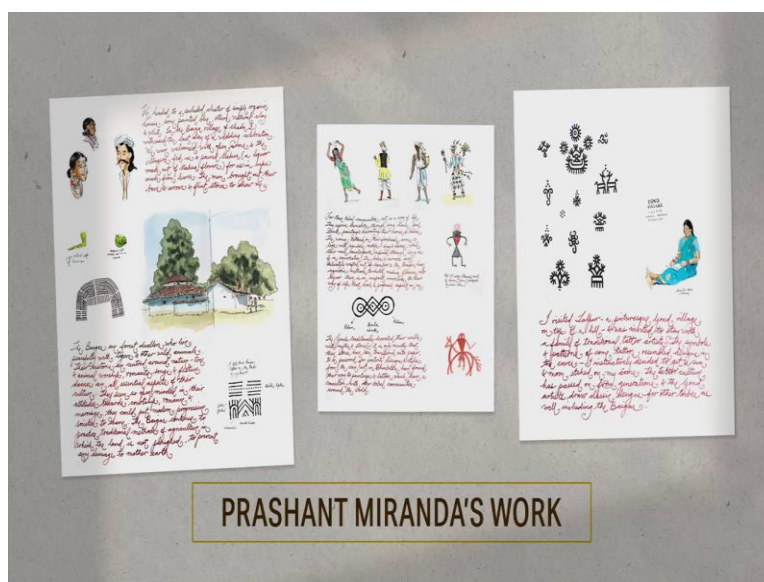


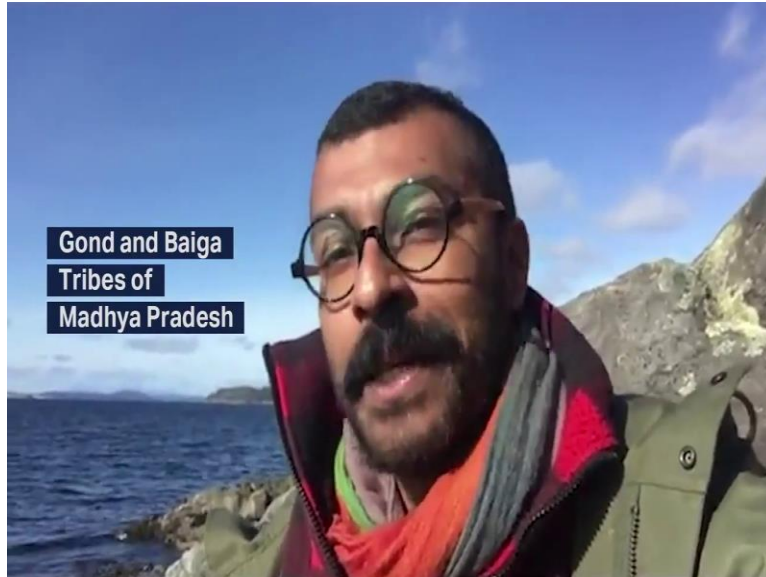


You might have noticed one drawing that explains two different processes of preparing the mahua drink. This sketch is made by one of his participants, Lakhan Lal Bharwi. This kind of shared record-making makes the process a collaborative one. Let us hear from Prashant on how he uses drawing as a medium for engagement and learning.

Prashant Miranda: Hello, I am Prashant Miranda and I am in beautiful cuttact which in the local A I Jutam language of the indigenous people here, who are the claimant people, this space and the word cuttact means working together

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I was lucky enough in 2012 to spend some time with the Gond and Baiga tribes in Madhya Pradesh, which was just the most beautiful time. They were so welcoming and generous of me being there.

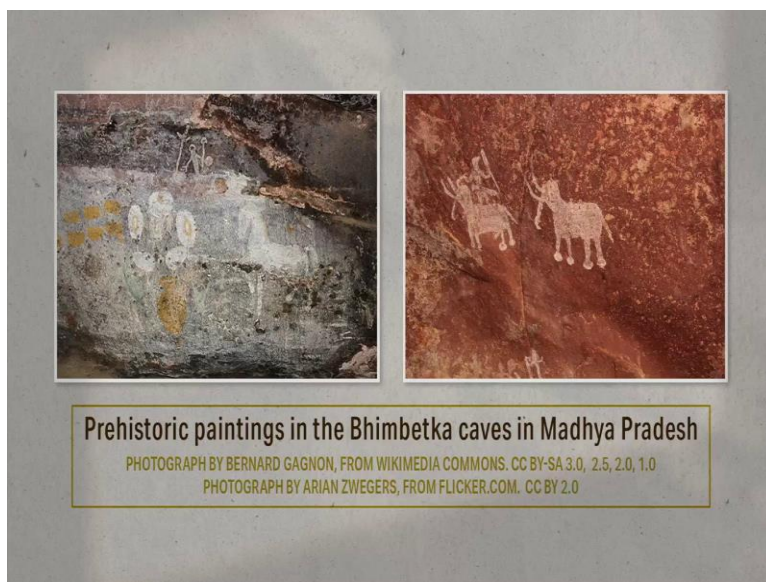
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But one of the things that struck me very deeply while being there was the visual medium with which they interacted amongst themselves, and I would say with the rest of the world or the universe.

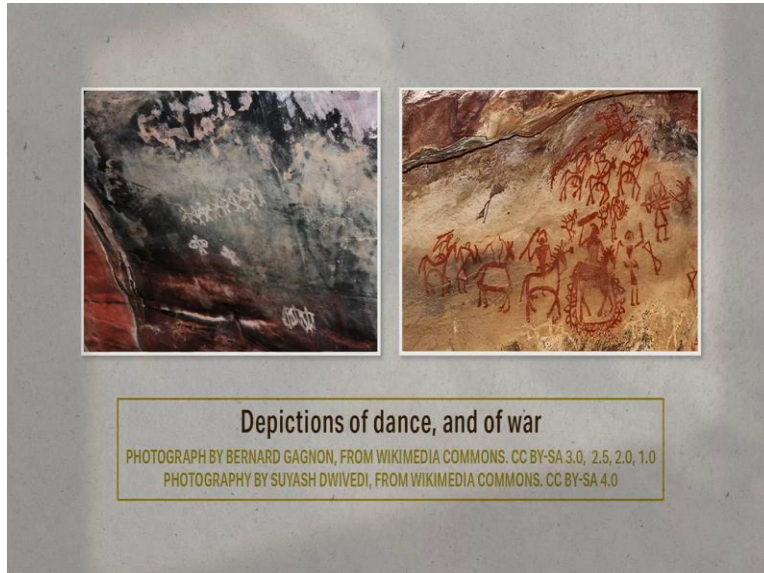


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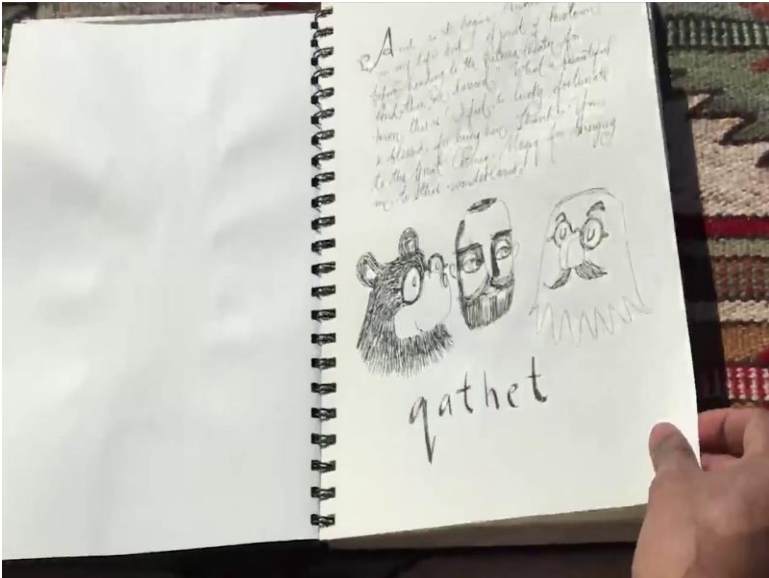
**Prehistoric paintings in the Bhimbetka caves in Madhya Pradesh**

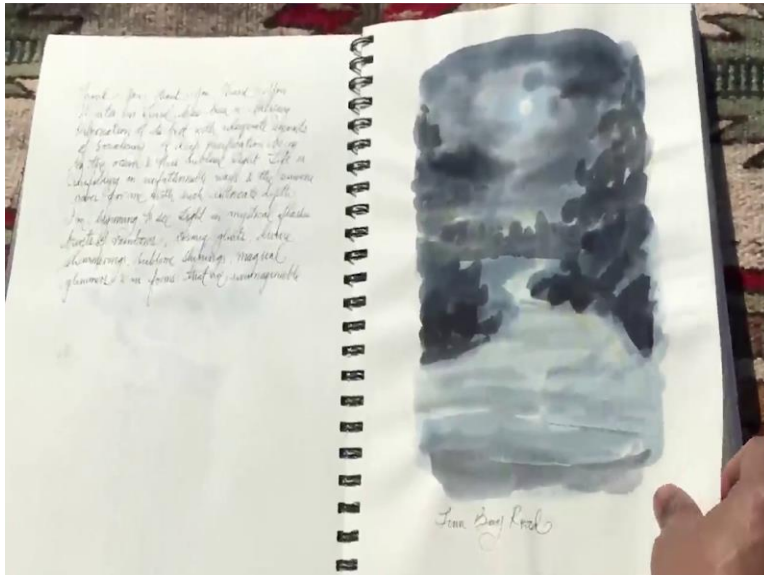
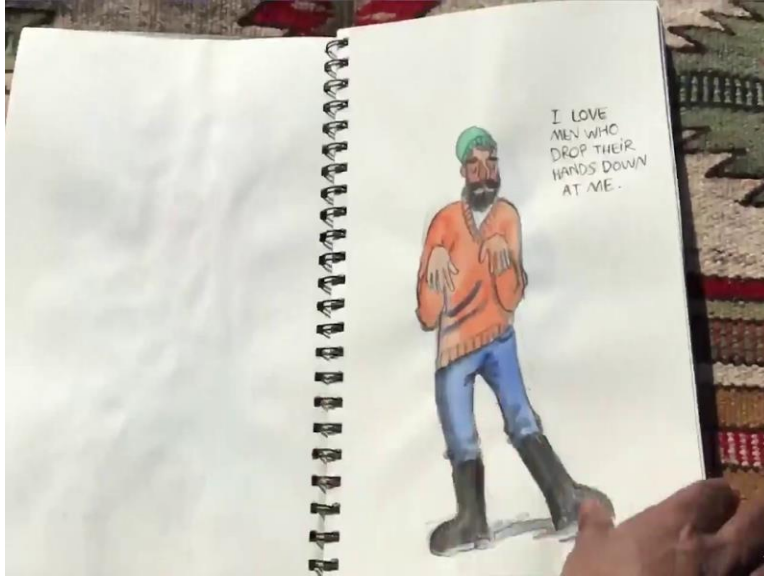
PHOTOGRAPH BY BERNARD GAGNON, FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS. CC BY-SA 3.0, 2.5, 2.0, 1.0  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ARIAN ZWEGERS, FROM FLICKER.COM. CC BY 2.0



When I was in Bhimbetka, there were these rock shelters and cave paintings from more than 20,000 years. Neo palaeolithic drawings on the walls. And then in the Mesolithic period horses were introduced to India. So, then you see horses being drawn on these rocks. And then people on horseback after that. And the way of life of dancing, riding horses, hunting, which for me was a way of documentation, a way of recording their lives.

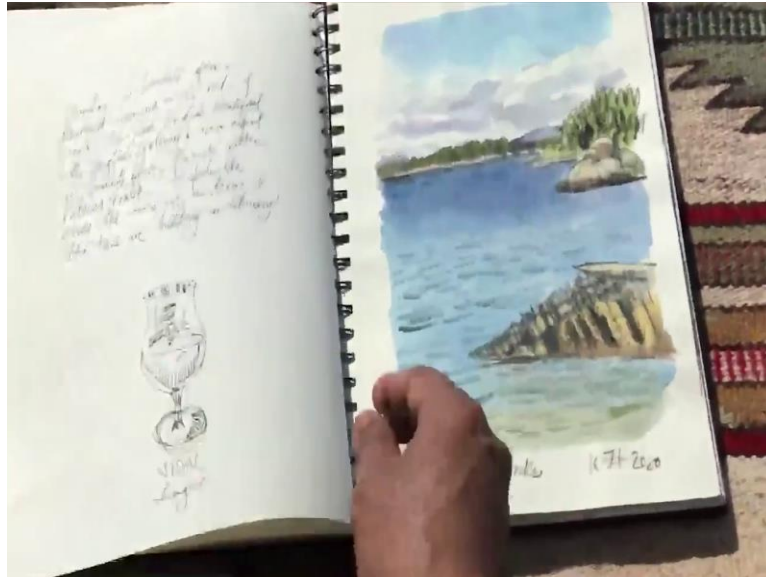
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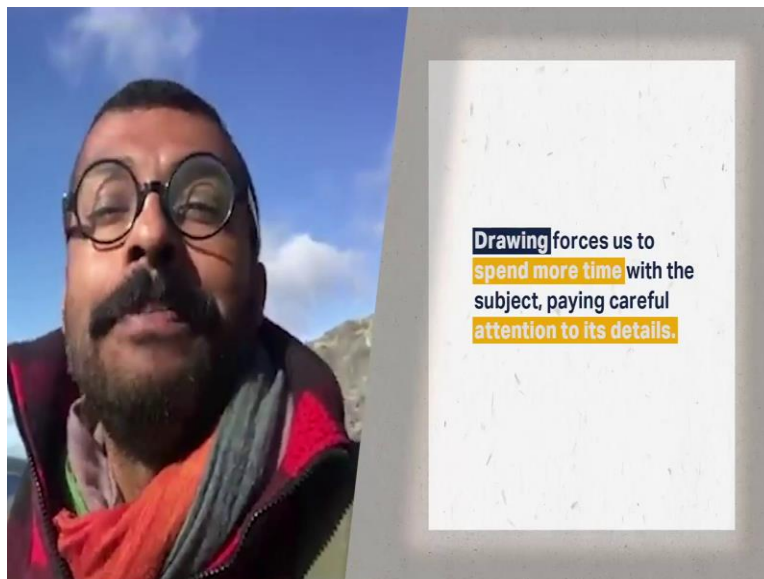






which I have been doing for close to 30 years in my sketch books. So, the medium of drawing is such that we can participate and observe details and nuances of things going on in the environment, which sometimes cannot be communicated through words. While doing it, of course, I get to pay attention to a little bit more of the details going around.

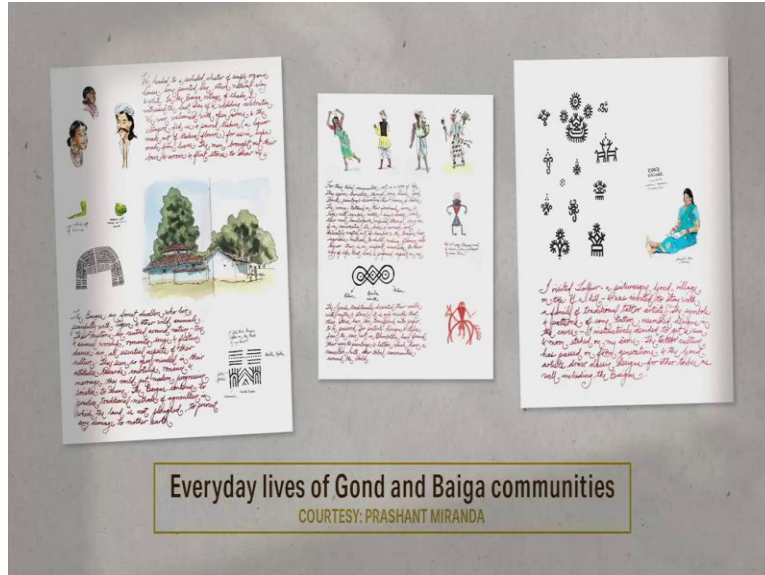
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So, whether it is me drawing a tree or a person's face or a building, or a structure, it forces me to spend that much more time observing. And I find that to be an amazing tool. Because it is not as pleating as a snapshot of a photograph, because that is so immediate, it is like getting a little glimpse, and you move on. Whereas drawing for me as a tool helps me engage a little bit more

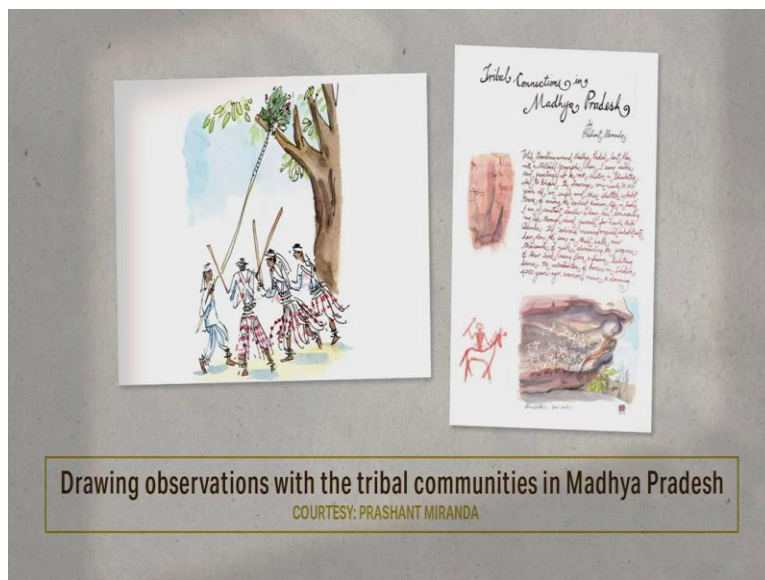
deeper with my subject and participate in a way that is I feel a bit, a bit more of a dialogue that is happening.

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So, it helps me look at intricacies of details that I would normally not have paid attention to if I was just taking a little snapshot on my camera.

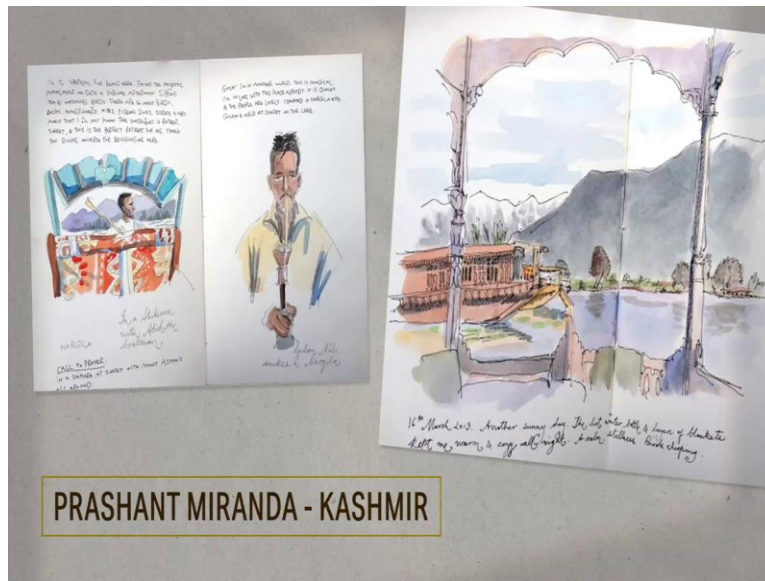
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Noticing that they fold their leaves into cups to drink mahua. Or these little observations help, and while drawing it you will realise, okay this is a particular kind of leaf. And even if I do not

have the capacity at that time to find out what the name of that leaf is, or from what tree it comes, it is a great reference for me to go back to at a later date and do some research on what these things could be. Whether the bamboo they are using as a still or a pipe and the earthenware pots in which they boil these flowers and how it is distilled.

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Just by the fact that I am spending that more time in, in observing the details helps me then question a lot more. And in the process, helps me engage with whether it is my subject or my audience, or communicate in a different way.

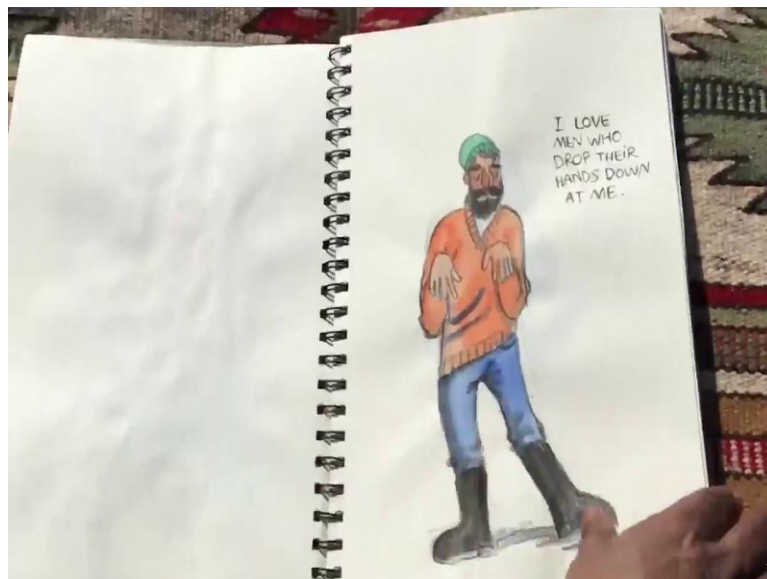


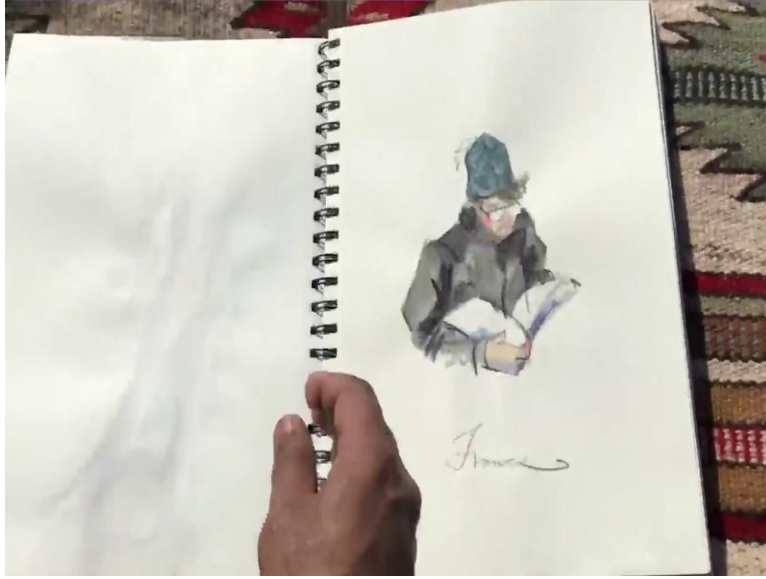
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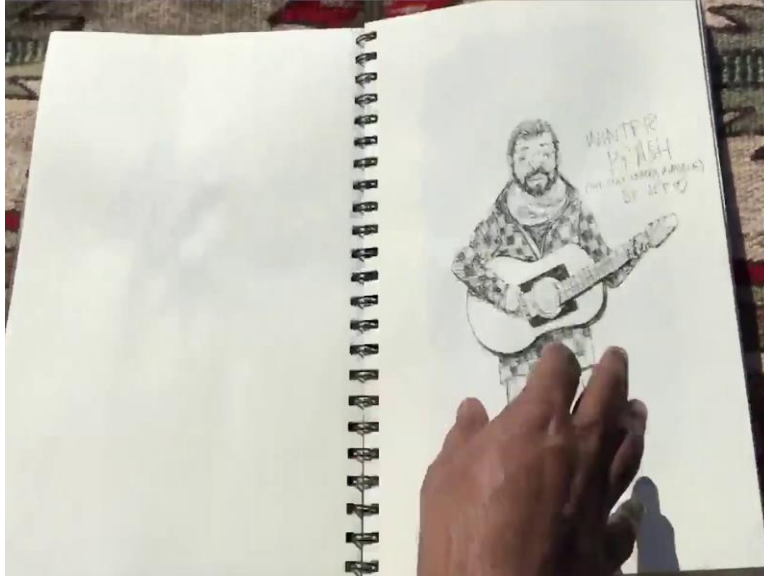


I have realised that one of the things about drawing kind of very simply breaks down barriers.

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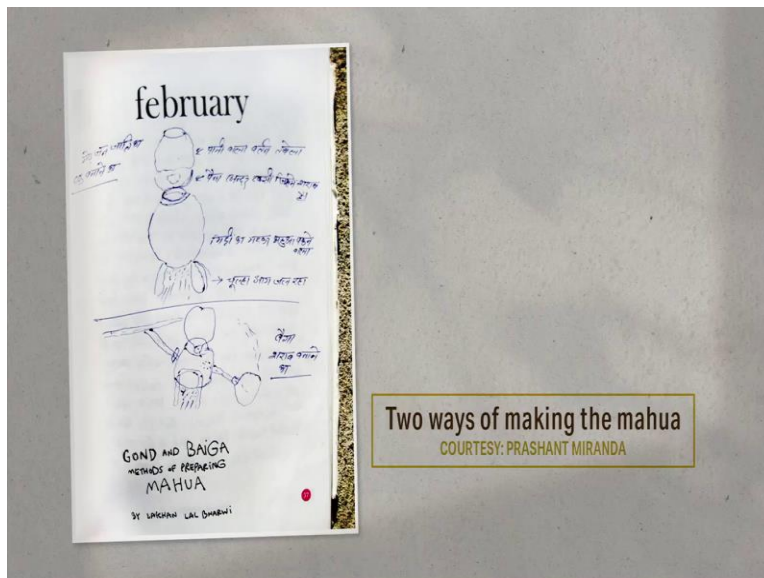






So, when I draw in front of people while I am interacting with people, it feels like it is a less intrusive medium for me, because does not feel like I have a camera in my face, or putting a camera in someone else's face, that automatically makes me a bit more conscious, or the other person a bit more conscious. Whereas drawing is a little less intrusive and a gentler way to participate in an event or in a your surroundings. It is a different language altogether and you do not need words when you are using drawing as a tool.

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And likewise, while being with some villages of the Baiga tribe, I could not speak or communicate in a way. But there are other ways while drawing or asking how mahua has been

made. While engaging with these people also helps me to interact and say, can you draw and show me how this is made because I cannot visualise it. But you know, it helps to form a kind of a communication which otherwise would not have been possible for me just purely through words. Sketching for me is really important to notice and to observe and to pay a little more attention to the details in these everyday life events.

We see from these examples, that people often enjoy being sketched. They consider it a kind of compliment, and a harmless, less intrusive form of documentation. The use of still or video photography may bring a more diverse range of reactions. On the one hand, if photography or videos are already common in the context, making images can be a good way for us to be a part of the context. It can make us accessible and useful to our participants.

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You might recall the visual ethnographer Sarah Pink, whose work we discussed in the last section. She began her research on bullfighting culture in Spain by attending the many public events organised to felicitate bullfighters. Photography is common at such events, and there are often professional as well as amateur photographers present.





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Many of these people eventually became her friends and participants. And the images she was asked to make became valuable research records. Later in her research, she would discuss these images and the moments they represented with the participants who had asked her to make them.

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Through such discussions, she gained insights into what her participants saw as a valuable moment and why. For example, some of her participants wanted to be photographed with a particular bullfighter, or with some other important person.

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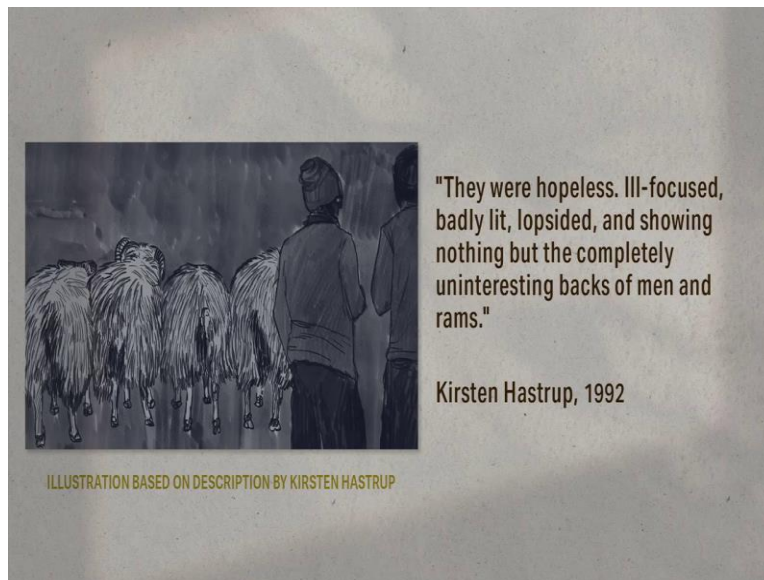
This gave Pink a sense of the value that her participants associated with various personalities in the social world of bullfighting. However, if the camera is uncommon in the context or makes participants uncomfortable, it can create additional challenges in our attempts to gain access.

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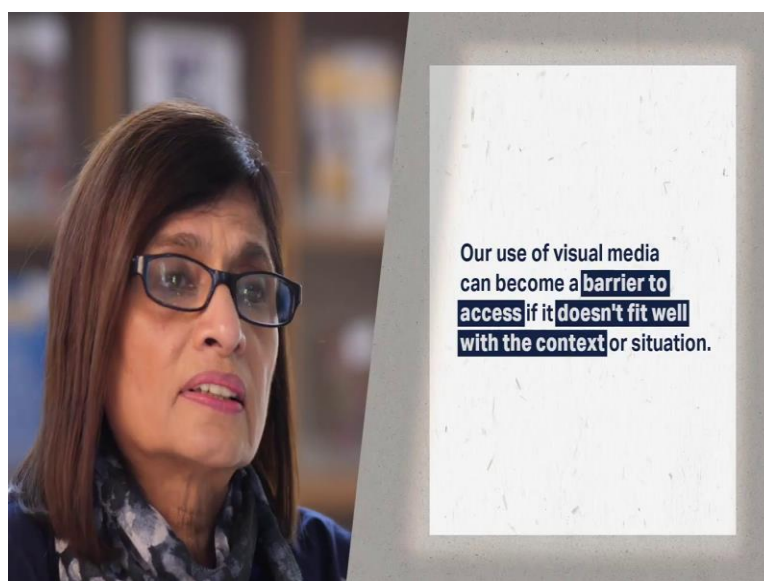
This is something that anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup discovered during her fieldwork in Iceland. Hastrup was studying a particular event, an Icelandic sheep market, which is usually attended only by men.

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Uncertain about her own presence and the presence of a camera in a gathering from which women were otherwise excluded, the pictures she made failed to convey the essence and meaning of the phenomena. Instead, they showed completely uninteresting backs of men and rams. The presence of Hastrup, woman from another culture with a camera were both transgressions against the culture norms of the gathering.

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Thinking back, Hastrup interpreted the poor quality of the images as a reflection of the inhibitions that she felt in going against these established norms. The tools, methods and devices that we use often come to be associated with us and define how our participants see us. The relationship that we build on the field are defined as much by our behaviour, as by the techniques and methods we use. Imagine being approached by someone who is holding a sketchbook or a small camcorder. And now imagine being approached by a crew of people with a big camera, sound recorder, some lighting equipment.

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A heavy-duty setup is quite likely to intimidate even those who are not uncomfortable with photography in general. It is possible that the discomfort and the curiosity that participants feel with being visually recorded through photography or sketching changes with time. As the device and the ethnographer are seen more and more, they both become a ubiquitous presence.

Even if we expect the discomfort to reduce in time, we cannot take it for granted that it will. If while recording, the participant seems uncomfortable, it is a good idea for us to pause and speak to them and make them comfortable. And if they feel better with the camera turned off, then we can continue with audio recording and written notes.

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**Making visual records**

- Engaging
- Learning from participants
- Recording observations
- Interpreting observations



Making visual records

**Engaging**

- Learning from participants
- Recording observations
- Interpreting observations



Making visual records  
Engaging  
**Learning from participants**  
Recording observations  
Interpreting observations



Making visual records  
Engaging  
Learning from participants  
**Recording observations**  
Interpreting observations



From our discussion so far, we have come to see that making visual records is a lot more than documenting. In making visuals during fieldwork, we are simultaneously doing several things. We are engaging with our participants, learning from them, recording our observations and interpreting them. Often visual ethnographers use the recorded material to represent the outcome of their research. We shall discuss representation in our next section.