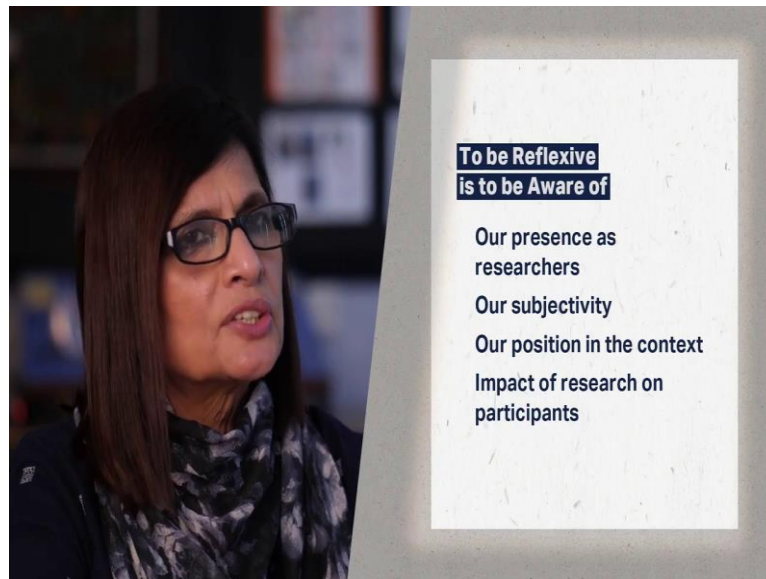


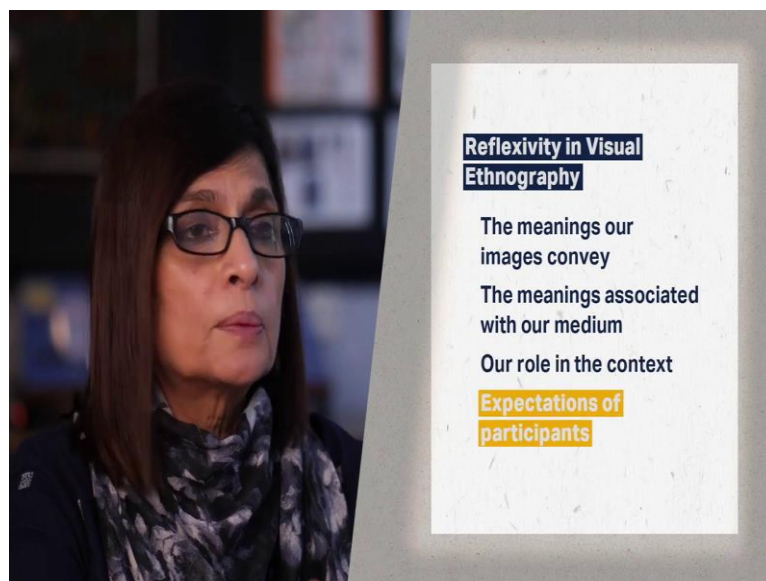
## Reflexivity in Visual Ethnography 1 Module 7 Section 7

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In earlier discussions, we have spoken about the importance of reflexivity in ethnography. Now we would like to discuss what reflexivity means with regards to visual ethnography. To be reflexive is to be aware of our presence, our role and our behaviour in the research environment. It involves being conscious of our location in the context of our participants. And therefore to be acutely aware of our participants' expectations from us and our work.

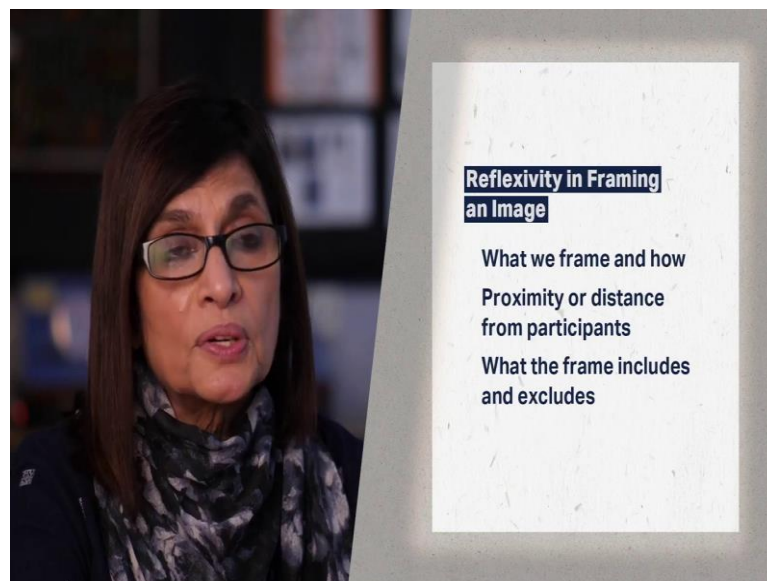
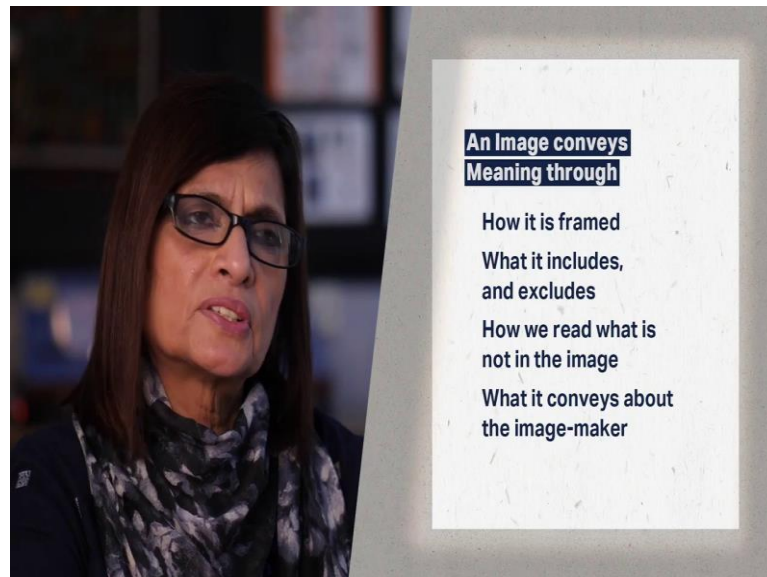
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This also means to be conscious of the ways in which we use visuals to represent the other. It requires us to be aware of the ways of seeing that influence the interpretation of visuals and

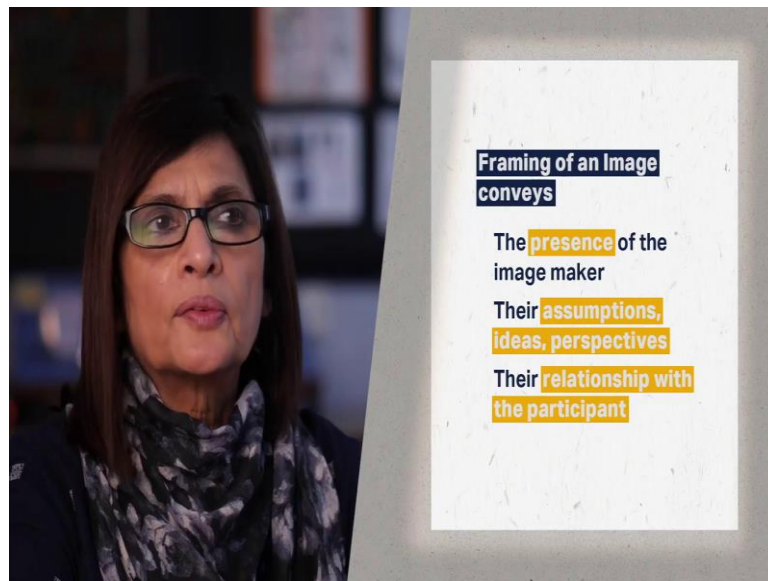
of the meanings associated with various visual media. We have to consider how our participants and viewers will interpret the visuals and how it may impact them. So, how do we bring reflectivity to our ethnographic records and representations?

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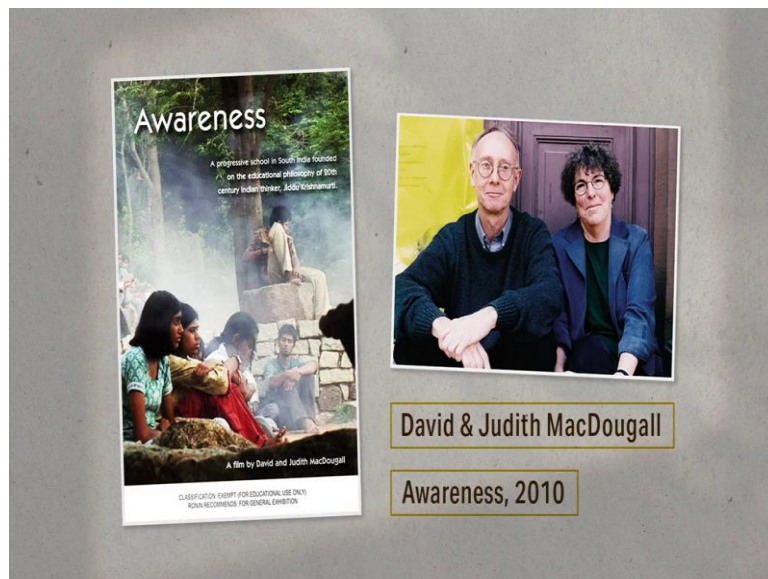
The first step is to understand the meanings that our images convey. What we frame and how what we include and leave out of the frame, how close or distant are we from the participant or their objects? These decisions define the meaning and the message of our images. The framing of an image conveys a lot more than we realize.

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It conveys our presence that is the presence of the image-maker and the ideas and assumptions which influence our ways of seeing. Importantly, it conveys our relationship with the subject of the image. Let us understand this further.

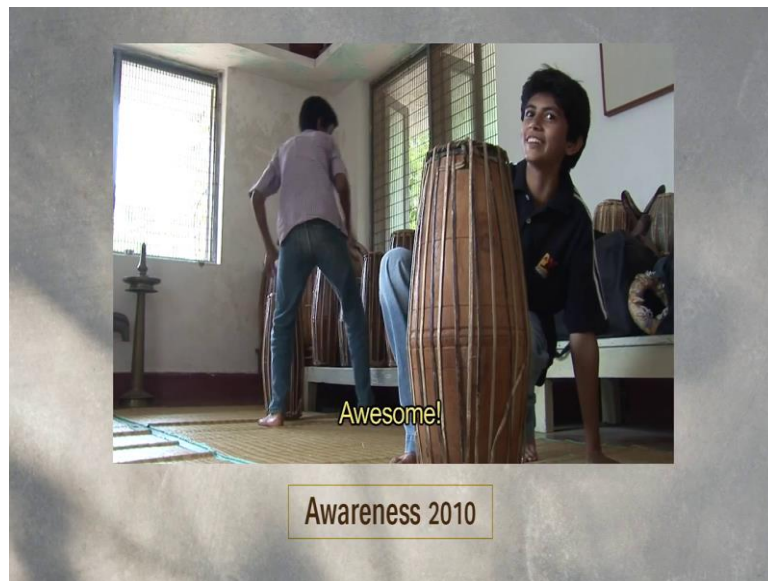
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Here is a short clip from the film Awareness by the MacDougalls. This film is also set in the Rishi Valley School.

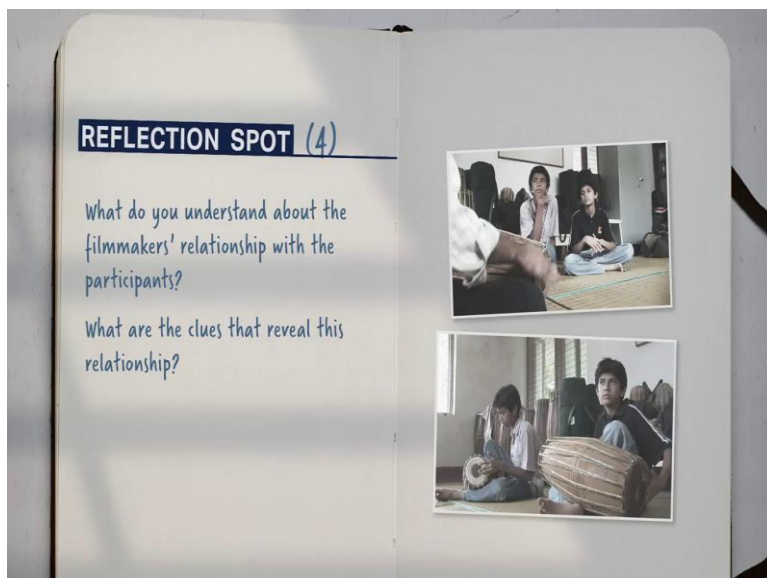


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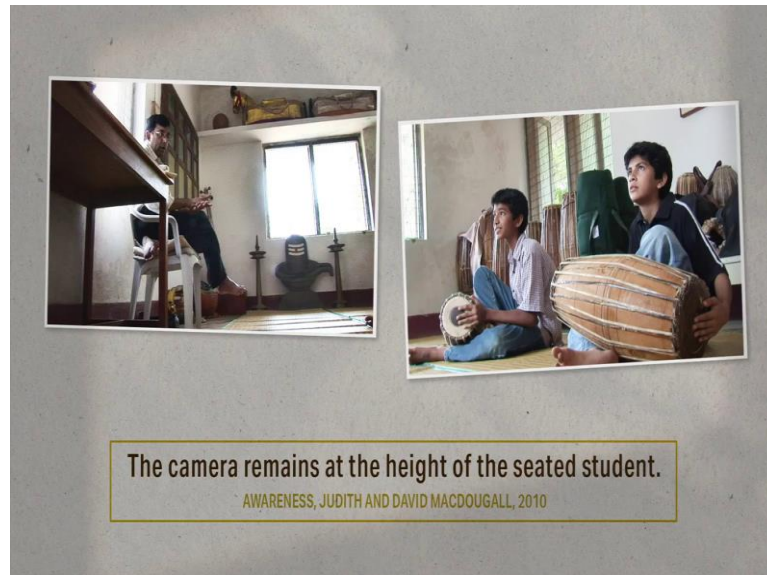


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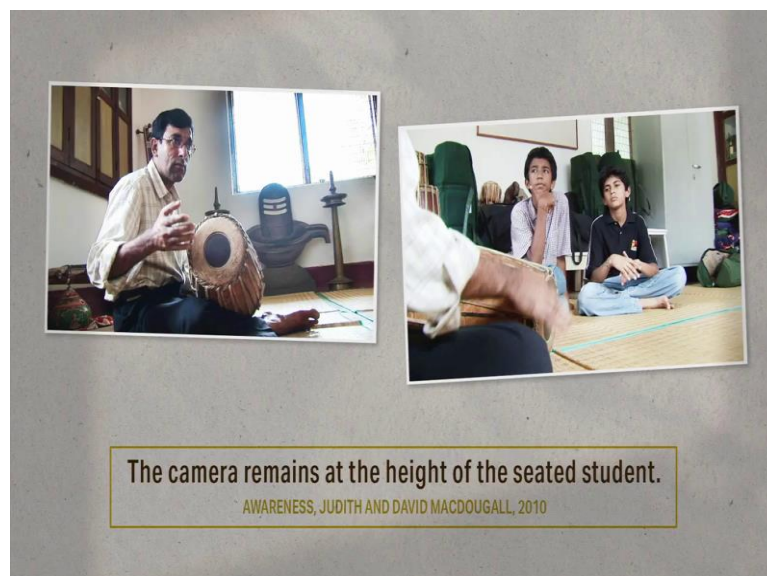
Watching this clip, what do you understand about the filmmakers' relationship with the participants? And what are the clues that reveal this relationship? I would like you to note down your answers. Some of you may have noticed that the camera is always at the same level as the students.

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When the student is seated on the floor and the teacher on the stool before him, the camera is at a low angle looking up at the teacher, reflecting the student's point of view. It replicates the relationship between the two from the perspective of the student.

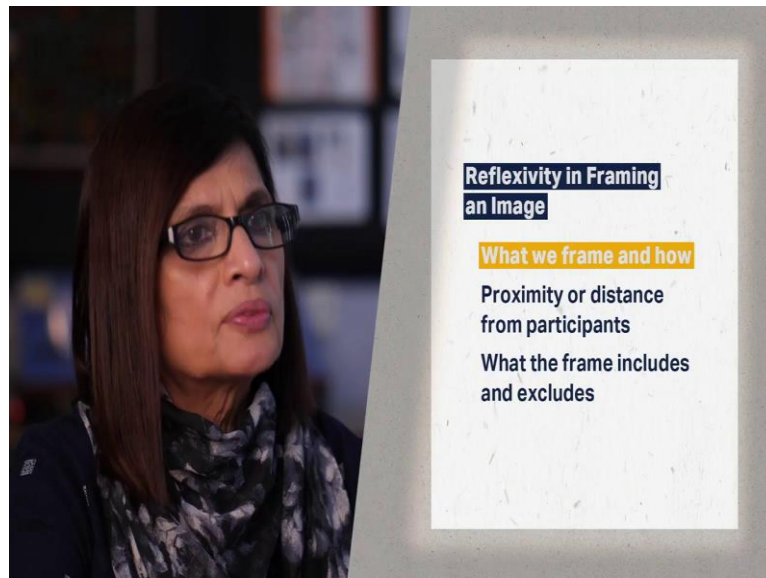
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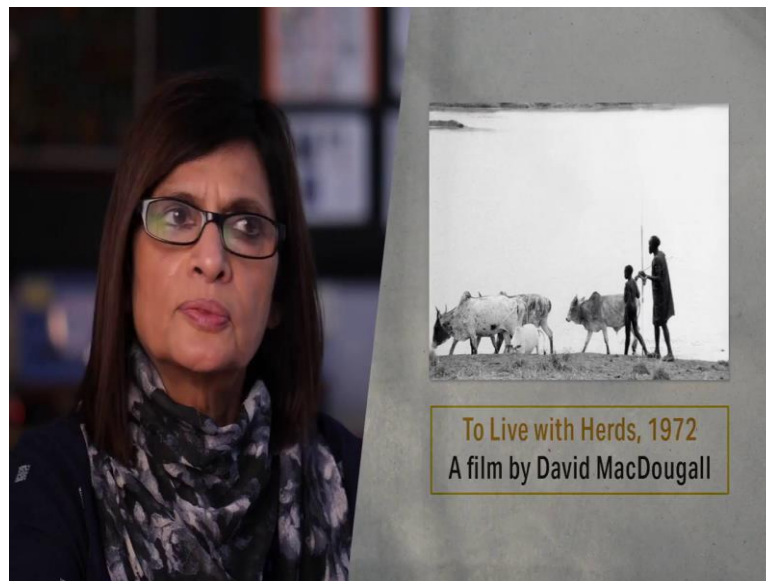
Later, when the teacher sits on the floor playing the mridangam for his students, the camera is at level with the teacher. Once again, the camera sees from the student's perspective, which is now at eye level. You may notice that the filmmakers have not placed the camera standing above the student looking down at him as he plays the instrument nor are they looking up at him like they look at the teacher on his chair.

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In this manner, the framing of the scene reveals the perspective the filmmakers are representing. In positioning the camera in this manner, the filmmakers establish a relationship of empathy with the student, and the visuals convey the sense of equality in their relationship. Let us take one more example to understand how researcher participant relationships translate into visual representations.

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This one is from David MacDougall's early film, *To Live With Herds*. The film is based among the Jie, a tribe of semi-nomadic cattle herders in the Karamoja district of Uganda. The film is set in 1972 about ten years after the country's independence from Britain. In this period, the national government of Uganda was trying to establish a system of administration and bureaucracy. These systems sometimes conflicted with the interest and ways of living of tribes such as the Jie.

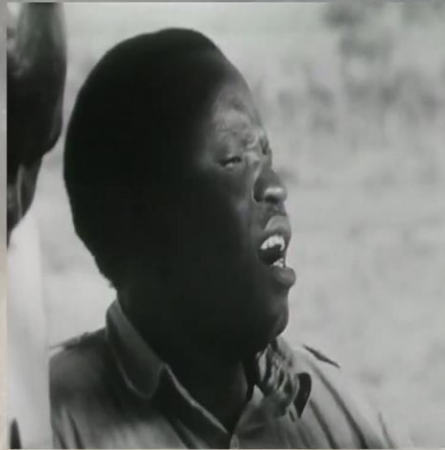
In the sequence, we are about to watch an officer of the local government holds a meeting with the senior members of the tribe. He wants to explain to them some of the new rules and systems the government is putting in place. Come, let us watch the scene.



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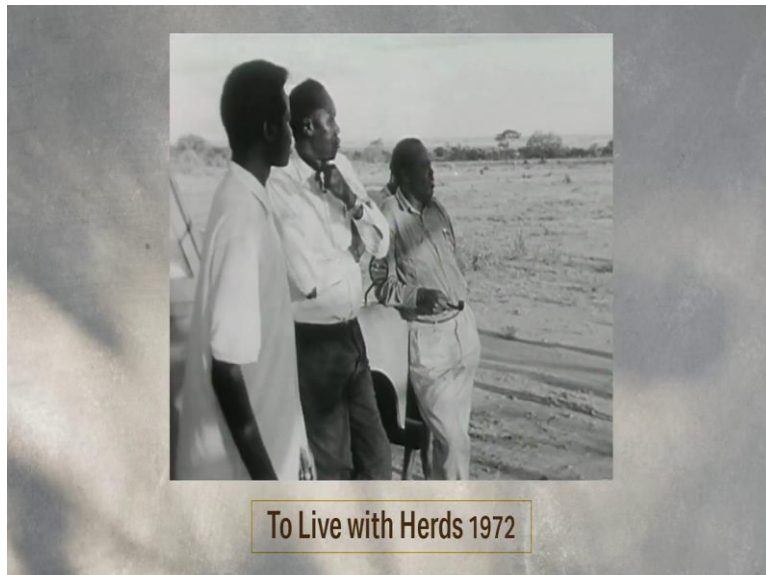
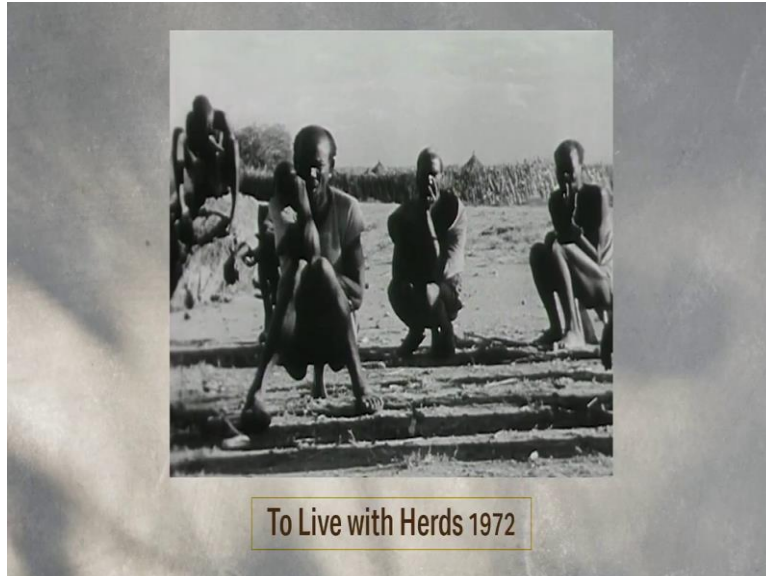
To Live with Herds 1972



To Live with Herds 1972

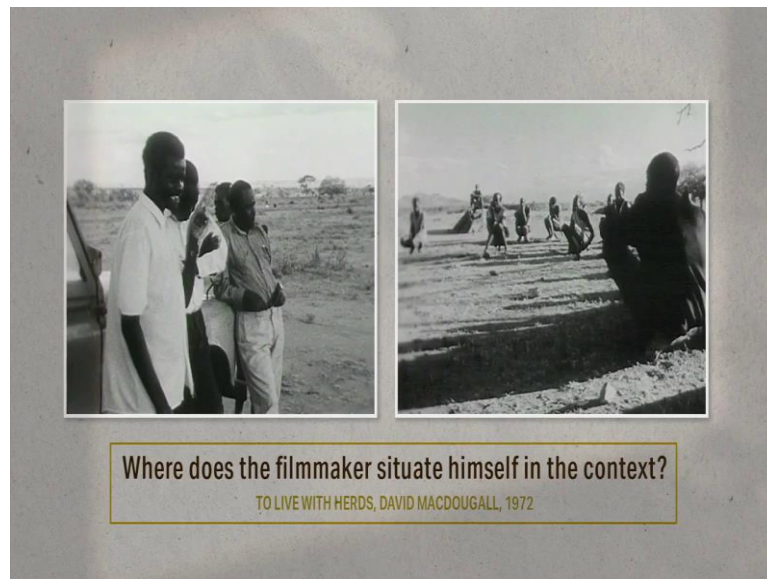


To Live with Herds 1972



The sequence begins with the filmmaker having a conversation with the officer, the additional district Commissioner as they travel in his car. The commentary that the filmmaker provides at the beginning of the sequence establishes that he is attending the meeting at the request of the officer. So, we might assume that he is engaging with the officer and not so much with the Jie.

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And in the meeting, the camera is positioned in a somewhat neutral space, not on the side of the officer nor the Jie attendees. None of this shows him as being close to the Jie community members. And yet, we are left with the understanding that the filmmaker's attention and concern lies with the Jie and not with the officer. But how do we know this? There are a couple of clues.

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During the meeting, the camera rests longer on the Jie members. This establishes that it is the community members who are the centre of the filmmaker's attention.

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And a more definite giveaway is that the camera stays with the members of the community as the officer drives away in his vehicle.

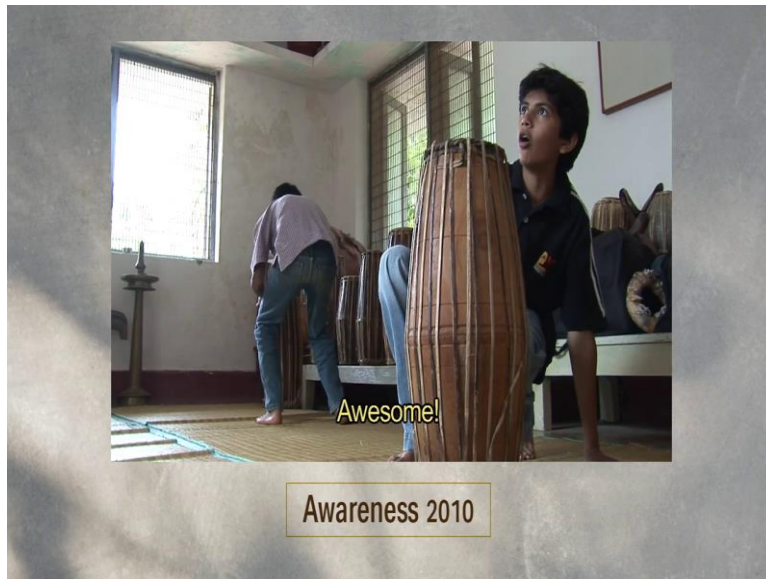
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These decisions of what to film and from what position visually express the filmmaker's relationship with his participants. Let us watch the scene from Awareness once again. This time, I would like you to pay attention to the frames that show the students playing the mridangam.

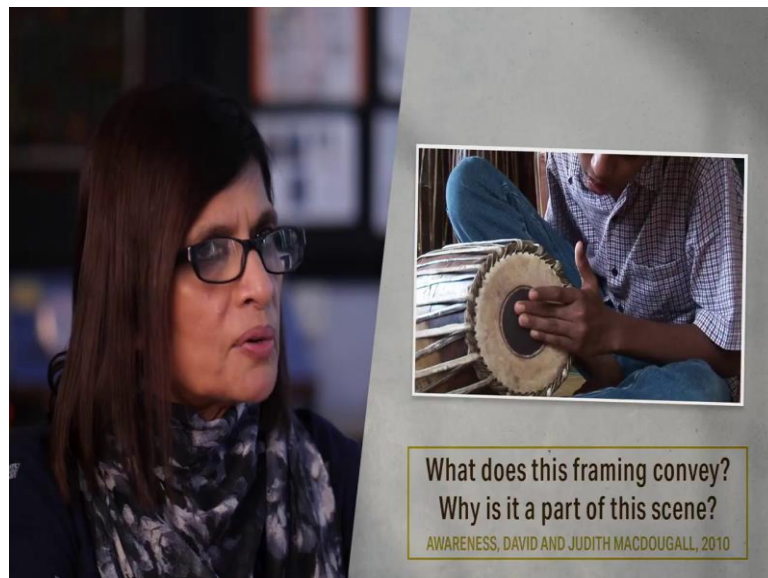


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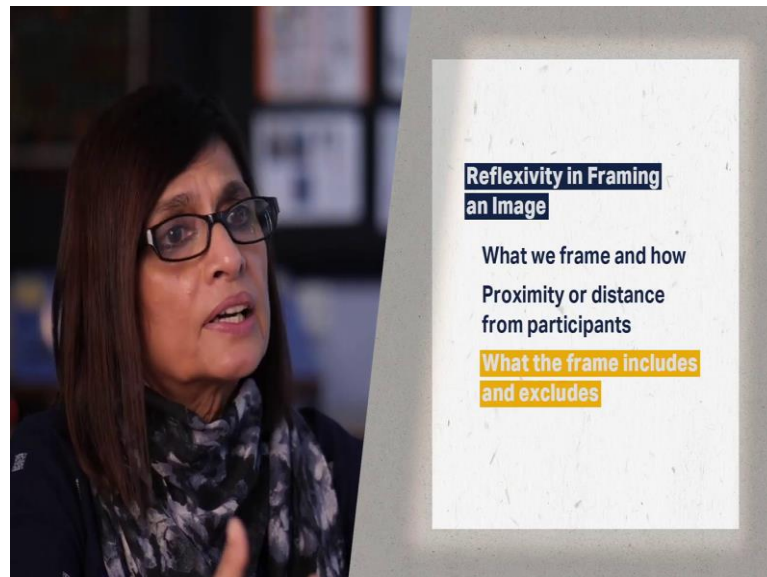


Some of you may have noticed the camera often focuses on the student's fingers as they hit the instrument. The frames shift between a tight close-up of the fingers, and the mid-shot showing the way he sits and holds the instrument. The scene moves between the student playing, the teacher's instructions and the teacher playing. In each of these, the focus often returns to the player's hands, their finger movements or their body as they play. Why is this framing a part of the sequence? And what do you think it conveys?

Perhaps the filmmakers are trying to show us the relationship between the player and the instrument and the role of the body in building that relationship in learning to play the mridangam. In learning the instrument, the student must learn how to sit with it, how to hold

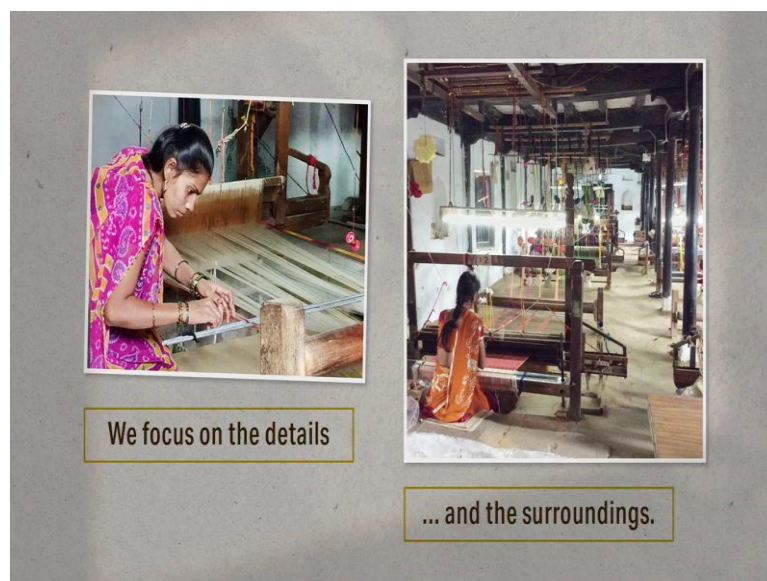
it, how to position his hands and fingers over it. These very physical aspects of learning are expressed through the close framing of the fingers and hands, the attention to the player's body and posture and so on.

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This is another important aspect of how we read images, the proximity and distance of the image-makers from the subject of the image. How far or how close we position ourselves. What we focus on and what gets left out of our frames? This depicts our interest and what we want to represent. Do we contextualise a phenomenon? Or do we focus so closely on one aspect of it that we leave out its environment?

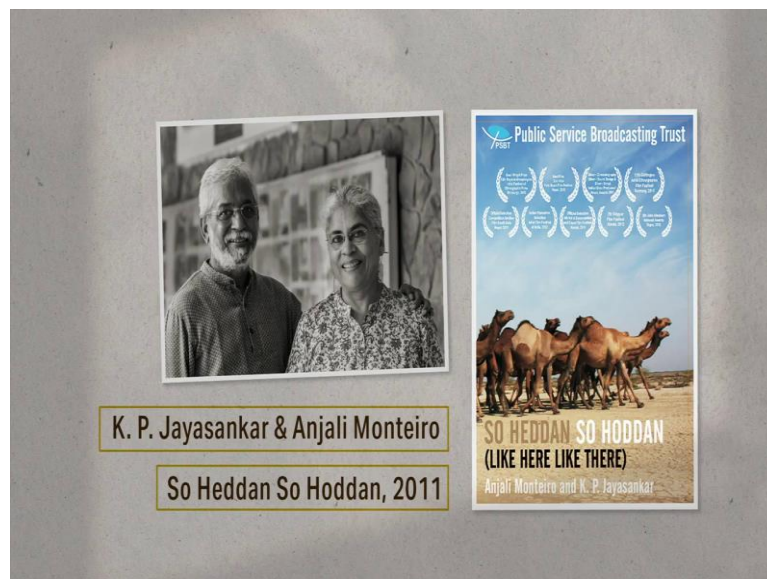
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For example, if we are recording the making of an object, such as a craft piece, we might focus closely on the hands of the maker, and forget to include the body of the craftsperson, and their surrounding environment. Thus, we focus on the craft, and not on its maker, and the context of its making. This reveals a gap in our study. After all, being contextual and paying attention to human experience is one of the fundamental principles of ethnographic practice. Let us take another example where the particular human experience is situated in its context.

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So Heddan So Hoddan 2011



So Heddan So Hoddan 2011



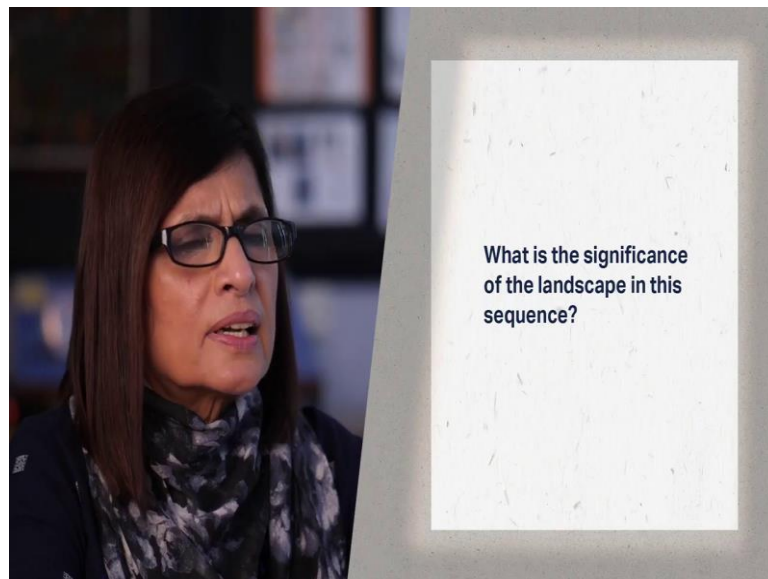
So Heddan So Hoddan 2011



We return to another excerpt from Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar's film, *So Heddan So Hoddan*.

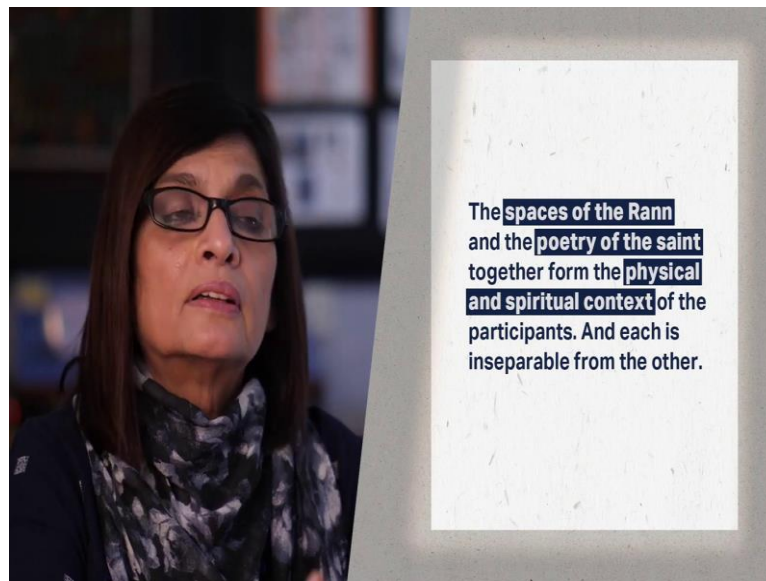
[Music playing in background]

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As we watch this sequence, we might ask ourselves this film is about singing and music and the spiritual connection that people feel with Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. Then why is the camera focused on the landscape? Is it simply to show us a pretty picture? Not really. Here, the focus on the landscape expresses the role that the spaces of the desert play in the music of the community. The landscape forms the context of the participant's lives and inspires their music.

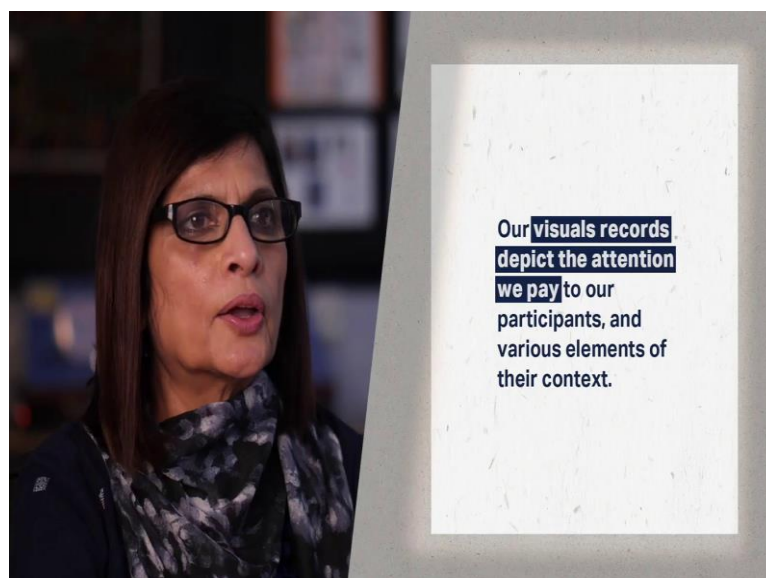
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In this scene, as the camera lingers on the landscape, the music plays. The visuals and the sound together connect the spaces of the Rann of Kutch with the poetry of Bhittai, and the lives of the participants. Another important aspect of this scene is the steady lingering gaze with which it watches the landscape. This we could say, is the video counterpart of observing the context.

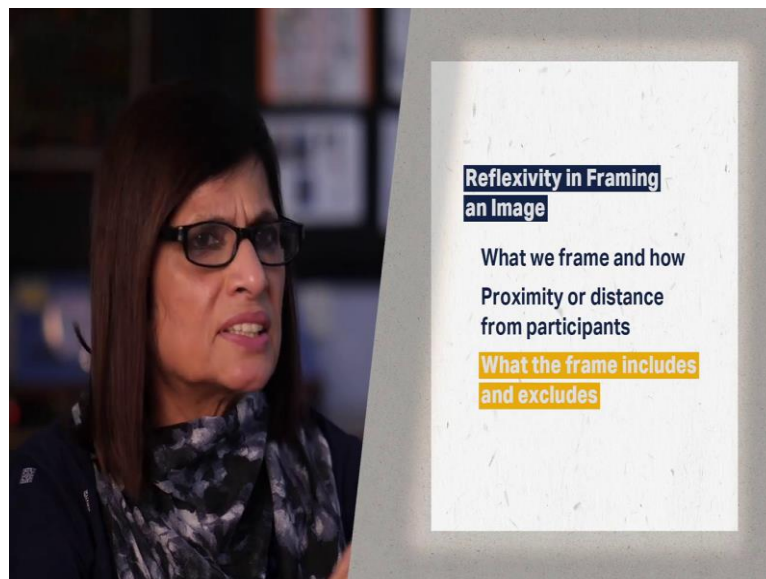
The task of observation, as we know, is to spend time in a context, to pay attention to it as a whole and to the activities and elements that form a part of it. A continuously shifting camera or one that moves too much from one activity to another makes it difficult for viewers to rest their gaze to immerse themselves or reflect on

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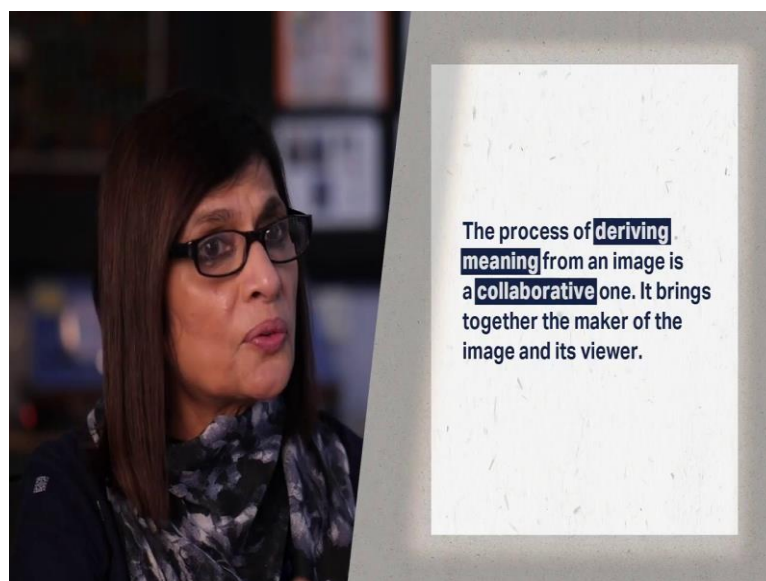
We may apply the same principle that we follow in an interview while making a visual record. In interviewing someone, we try to ensure that they have all our attention. Our, our visual records must depict the same. If we are looking at something or someone else in the room while our participant speaks, it means we are not paying attention to the participant. It is also distracting for the participant and possibly annoying if we look elsewhere or record other things while they are trying to tell us something.

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As you have understood by now, what we leave out of the frame, expresses just as much as what we choose to frame. As viewers, we read the image and its making.

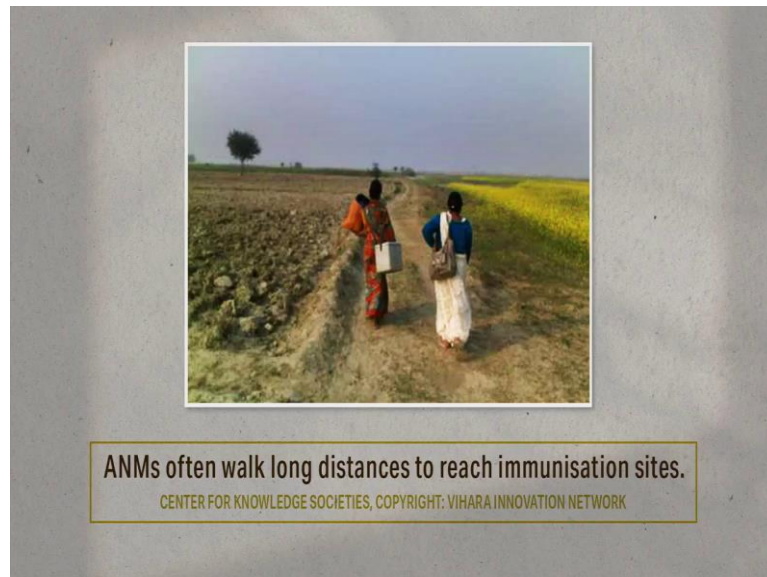
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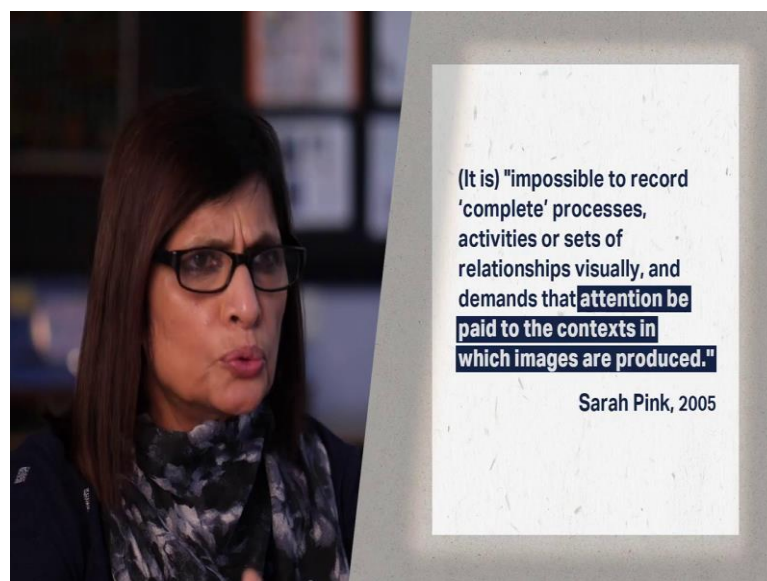
The process of reading an image or deriving meaning from it is the collaborative one between the image-maker and the viewer. The meaning of an image is, therefore, co-constructed. Let us look at another example to understand this.

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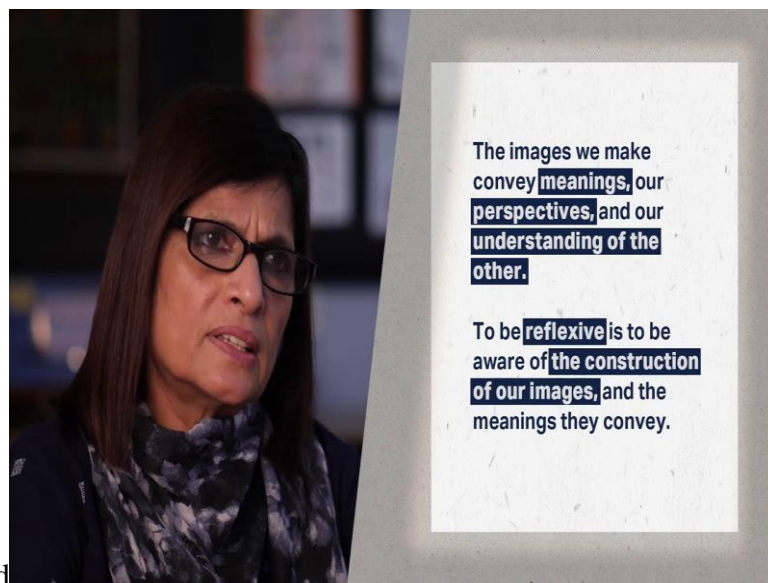
This is a photograph taken by a design researcher, Divya Dutta, from the Center for Knowledge Societies. The picture was taken while Divya was on fieldwork observing the process of vaccination in hard-to-reach areas. What does this image convey about health workers in rural India, working on vaccination drives? The image itself shows little: a woman carrying a heavy-looking bag, walking in the middle of a vast, empty landscape.

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But to those who knew of the context, the participants, designers and researchers on the project, it spoke volumes. It spoke about the difficulty faced by healthcare workers in commuting the long distances they had to travel and the lack of infrastructure. It spoke about the need for a more ergonomic way to carry vaccines and other medical paraphernalia. It depicted for the more careful reader that the healthcare workers also carried personal belongings besides their professional kits. For the designers and researchers working on the project, this image suggested that multiple needs had to be considered by the design team. This single image became a richly detailed expression of the participant's requirements.

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So, let us sum up this discussion. The conscious and the subconscious decisions we make in recording and representing our observations convey meaning. They reflect our ways of perceiving and seeing the other. By being aware of these by learning to read the images we create, we can reflect upon our assumptions and our ways of seeing. This is an important aspect of reflexivity while working with visuals.

There are other aspects that we are yet to discuss, and these shall be the topic of our conversation in the following section.