Understanding Ethnography: A way to engage with the other
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Lecture No. 6
Module 1: Objectivity and Subjectivity

Often, we think of research and researchers as being concerned with getting to the *real, the objective truth.* While this may be true for some disciplines, it is not always the case with social sciences, where we study people, societies and cultures. In these disciplines, we accept that there are different ways of seeing and multiple realities. Each person, or group, has their own *subjective* view of the world, and these multiple subjectivities are more important than a single objective understanding.

So, we try to understand a phenomenon by learning the multiple meanings attached to it- by us, and by different participants. These meanings are a complex of ideas, values, beliefs and experiences associated with the phenomenon. Our task as ethnographers is to access these meanings by observing interactions and behaviours.

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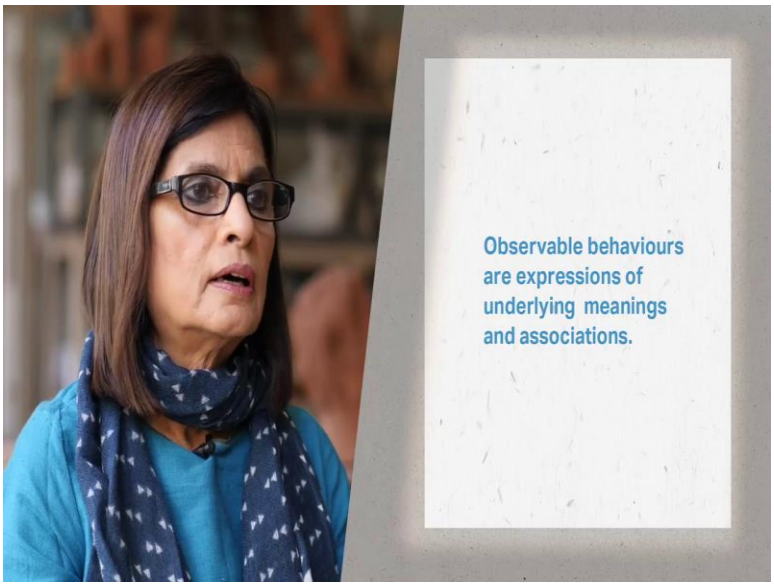

Because we believe that observable behaviours are an expression of underlying meanings and associations. For instance, when a funeral procession passes through a street, some

people, regular passers-by, may stop briefly, bow their heads or fold their hands in the direction of the procession. And then, continue on their way. These ways in which people interact with the ritual, shows us that they attach some meaning and values to it, even when, in all likelihood, they do not know the person who the procession is for.

Observing their behaviour, we try to deduce the meaning that the funeral, or funerals in general, hold for them. Here, for example, we may infer, that there is a social and cultural practice of respecting the dead and maybe, death itself.

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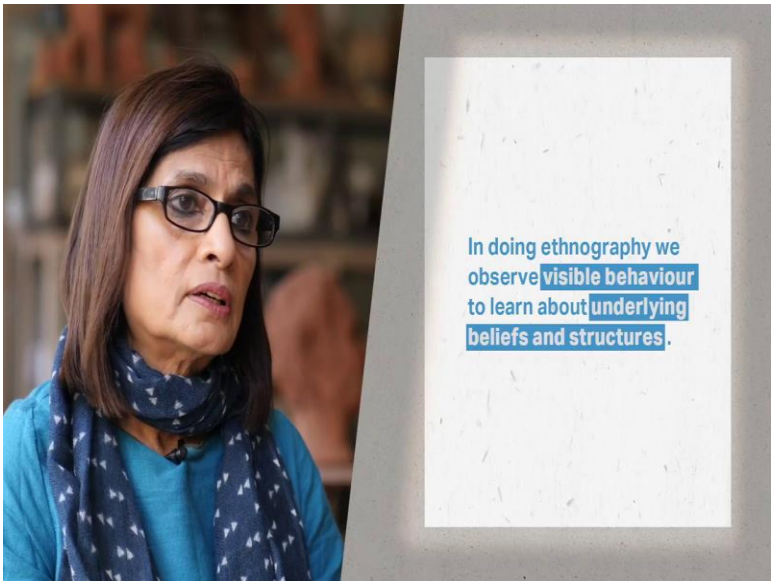

This inference is a tiny piece of knowledge about a society in which we observe this behaviour. In this manner, we analyse and interpret our observations to access knowledge. This is a simple example to show the task we undertake in doing ethnography. From our discussion so far, we have seen that there are multiple realities and multiple meanings that anyone might attach to a phenomenon. As ethnographers too, we have a particular view of reality. And it isn't any more or any less 'real' than that of our participants.

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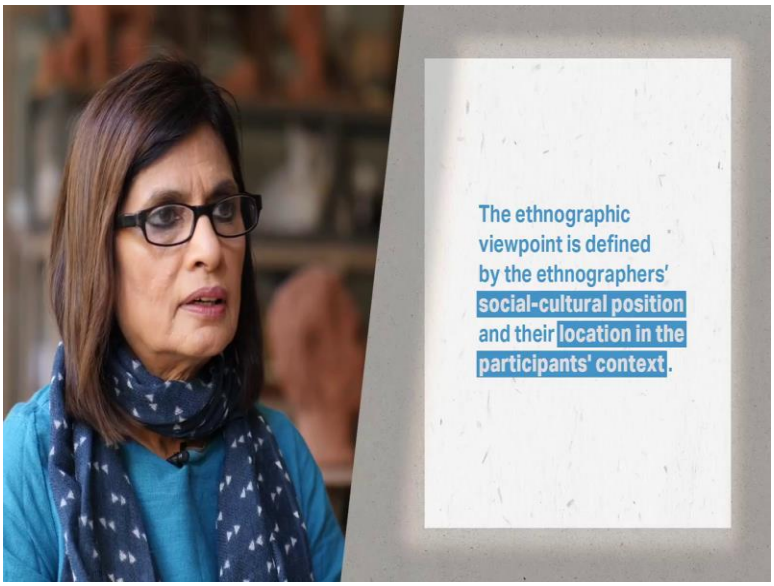

Our interpretation of what we observe is defined by where we stand in relation to the other - as members of a social-cultural context, and as individuals.

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Consider a scenario. At a busy intersection on a road, an argument is underway between a motorist and a pedestrian. The incident is witnessed by people standing at different vantage points- a man standing in a ditch by the side of the road fixing underground cables; another man standing on the foot overbridge that passes over the intersection;

a traffic policewoman standing on a platform in the middle of the intersection; and a woman sitting in a bus halted at a red light.

Each of these persons sees the incident, but from a different angle, a different direction. Each of them sees something that the other does not. And each of them is also busy with their own activities- digging out cables, managing traffic, talking on the phone, and so on.

Pause the video now, and answer a question based on this scenario.

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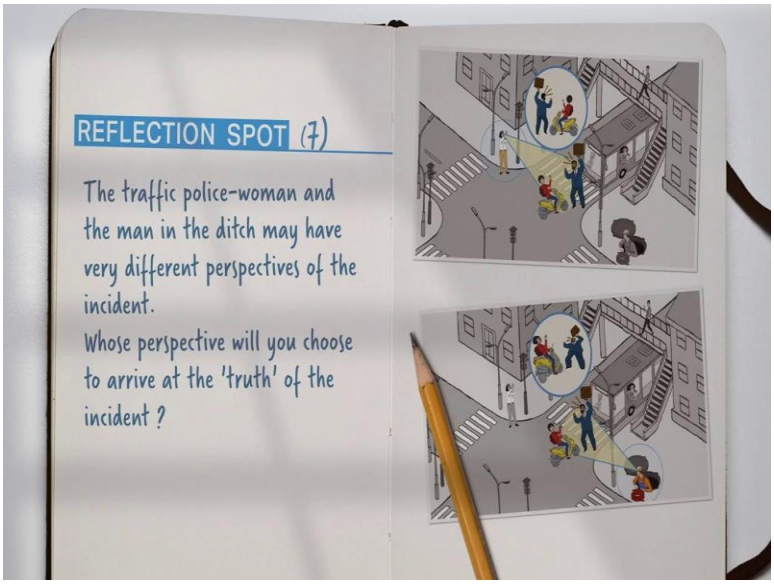

The traffic policewoman and the man in the ditch may have very different perspectives of the incident. Whose perspective will you choose to arrive at the 'truth' of the incident?

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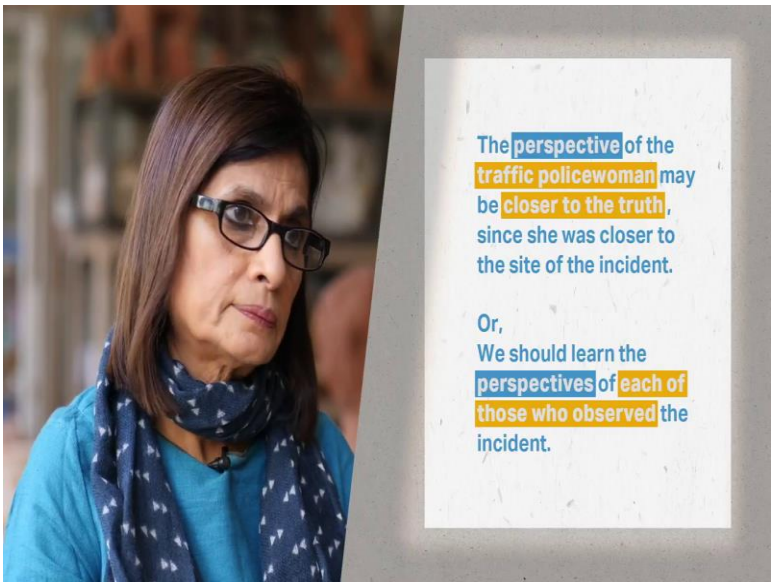

Some of you may have said that it might be best to go with the perspective of the traffic policewoman since, she was closer to the site of the argument. Some others may have suggested that we should learn what each person sees from their unique perspective. This answer is more in tune with the principles of ethnography. However, taking this path leaves us with a complex question:

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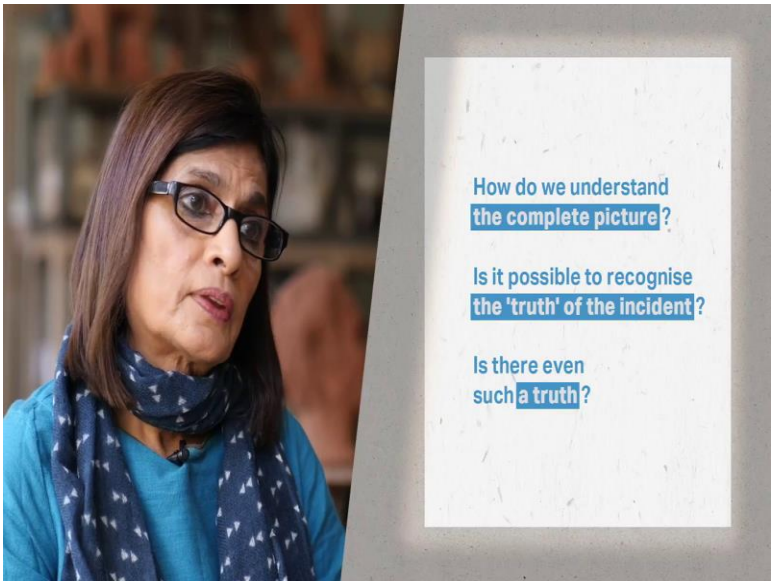

What about the whole picture? Is it possible to recognise the ‘truth’ of the incident?

Is there even such a thing called truth? This is a question that people working in the human sciences and in philosophy have grappled with since time immemorial. While there is no fixed answer to it, there have been, and continue to be, several explorations and debates. Some of these discussions have evolved into different schools of thought that influence how we do ethnographic research today.

One such school of thought says that our task is to record and understand what each of the persons saw.

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In putting together their disparate perspectives, we will arrive at a more complete, layered and complex understanding of the incident. Our aim then is not to create a single, authoritative, objective telling of the incident. But rather, to construct a nuanced representation, made of multiple descriptions, all of them juxtaposed against each other.

Another school of thought, and one which has become increasingly popular from the 1960s onwards, takes a more ideological, political stand on this question. Broadly speaking, this school of thought proposes that in doing research in human societies, we should be able to take into account the differential power equations among those who occupy a given context.

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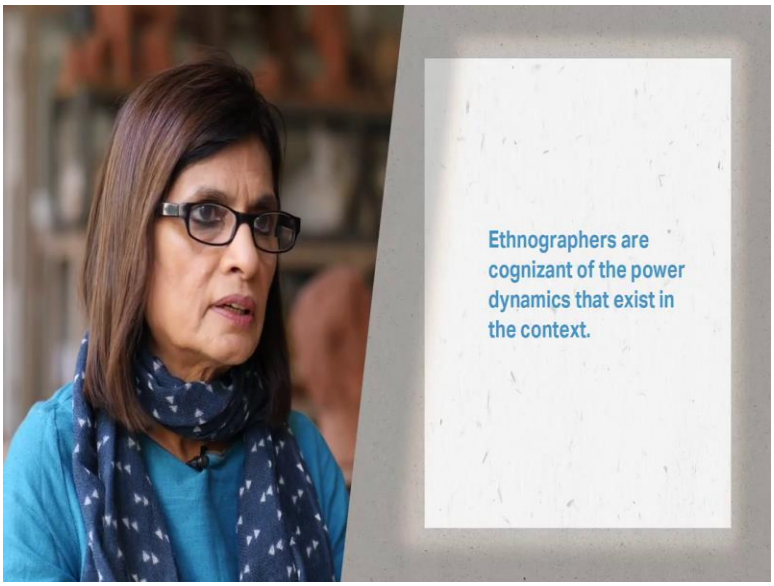

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So, in our story of the argument between the motor vehicle driver and the pedestrian, we need to not only understand and describe each person's perspective but also understand how their positions affect their view. For instance, does the account of the traffic policewoman hold more sway as compared to say, the man in the trench, given the authority invested in her profession? Or, is there a power difference between the motorist and the pedestrian, the balance skewed in the favour of one or the other?

As ethnographers, we need to consider how these various power relations feed into the different interpretations of the incident. Some social scientists argue that in writing our ethnographies, we must, privilege perspectives and voices of those who are less likely to be heard given the power structures of this context.

So, in the scenario described here, we might privilege the narrative of the man working in the ditch. Because his perspective may not find a place in official records of the incident, such as a police report or a newspaper article. Or, we might want to understand the unique perspective of the policewoman, playing a role that is mostly associated with men in our society.

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We could try to understand what it means for her to be responsible for breaking up an argument between two men in a public place. Each of these would be a different ethnography. Neither would be any more authoritative or true than the other. But each could show us a different aspect of the incident, all mediated through the lens of the ethnographer.

These are a couple of approaches that suggest how we may explore the questions and complexities that come with accepting the idea of multiple realities. For now, we rest our discussion on the understanding that ethnographic work is based on an acceptance of

reality.

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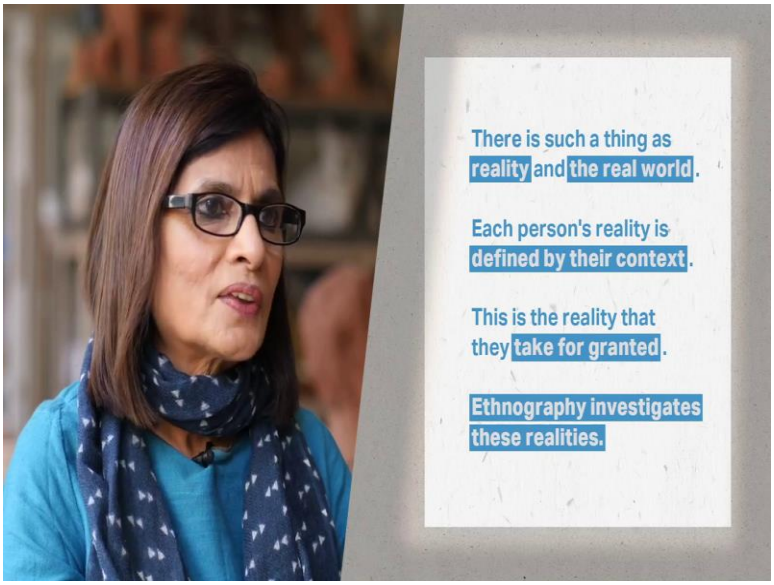

That there is such a thing as ‘the real world’ and its reality is many layered and multiple in nature. We believe that the context that each person exists in makes up their version of reality. Each of us takes the reality of our immediate context for granted. And as ethnographers, our aim is to investigate this reality. Those of you interested in further exploring this concept of constructed realities, we have some additional material that you may refer to. And there is a quiz relevant to the material that you can take after going through it.