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# The Practice of Visual Ethnography: Examining Identity and Lived Experiences of Marginalised Communities

*Edited by*

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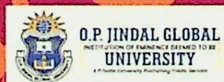


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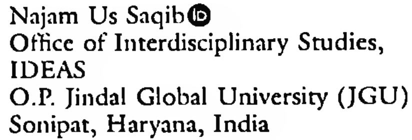

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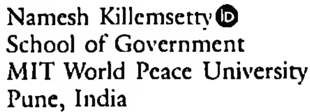

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*Dedicated to the voices of the voiceless*

*Acknowledgements* We owe deep gratitude to the communities whose lives and words form the heart of this work. Without their trust, this book would have remained an empty shell. We are equally indebted to Dr. Prabhir Vishnu Poruthiyil, whose suggestion and encouragement helped give this work its present form.

At CNES, we have been fortunate to work alongside a team whose dedication sustained the project through its many phases. My heartfelt thanks to Shivani Agarwal, Shubhangi Derhgawen, Jignesh Mistry, Rekha Pachauri, Tavleen Kaur Saluja, Ashika Thomas, and Ishfaq Ahmad Wani. Their insights and hard work have been invaluable.

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*Ethics Approval* We confirm adherence to ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all human participants, and animal studies complied with legal guidelines.

# Before We Begin

Books are not born in a moment. They take shape slowly, through countless conversations, fragments of field notes, moments of listening, and even long silences that resist easy interpretation. *The Practice of Visual Ethnography: Examining Identity and Lived Experiences of Marginalised Communities* is one such book. It has grown out of years of patient observation, reflection, and field engagement across India. In many ways, it is less a conclusion and more a continuation, a milestone along a much longer journey that stretches ahead.

The origins of this book lie in the efforts of the *Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) at O.P. Jindal Global University*, where a team of researchers began engaging with marginalised communities to understand their lived realities and the multiple layers of identity shaping their experiences. What began as a series of field studies soon grew into a larger methodological reflection. We realized that documenting and analyzing was not enough, we also needed to reflect critically on how we conducted these studies, and how visual ethnography could open possibilities for rethinking representation itself.

In 2024, during a workshop at the Ashank Desai Centre for Policy Studies, IIT Bombay, coordinated by Dr. Prabhir Vishnu Poruthiyil, this realization deepened. It was Dr. Vishnu who suggested that the Centre consider developing a methodology text that would bring together the scattered experiences of fieldwork and make them accessible as a structured reflection. This book is the outcome of that suggestion, and of a

collective effort to translate years of fieldwork into an account of practice, challenge, and learning.

The journey has spanned six years and taken us across the country, from the valleys of Kashmir to the coastal belts of Tamil Nadu, from the artisanal communities of Gujarat to the diverse societies of the Northeast. Each site posed its own demands, tested our assumptions, and reminded us of the limits of universal categories. What unites these efforts is not a single methodology but a commitment to remain attentive: to listen more, to speak less, and to bring emotions into words rather than leaving them behind as unrecorded residues.

At times, the process of writing felt like standing in the middle of a crowded marketplace, where every sound demanded attention, yet only by listening carefully could one make sense of what was being said. We had to learn not to rush. To slow down, to return to the same stories again and again, to notice what was unsaid between words. This book carries that discipline of listening, sometimes unsure, sometimes searching, but always attentive.

It also carries the weight and joy of emotions. We're always taught in academia to keep a distance, to be objective, to hold back emotion. But working in the field, we learned that distance can sometimes mean erasing the very humanity we set out to understand. This book is our attempt to let emotion stand as truth, to honour the trust and relationships that shape every story. The responsibility to represent, and not reduce, is what guided every word in this book.

The journey wasn't easy. There were days when the pressure to finish fast felt overwhelming, when deadlines threatened to rush what needed time. Those moments made us realize how essential patience is, writing isn't about speed, but about building meaning that will last beyond the present.

Above all, this book is a product of many hands and open hearts. While it may bear our names, it exists only because communities let us in, mentors pointed the way, and colleagues lifted us up. The spirit and encouragement we found, in conversations, in research clusters, and in quiet moments with peers, were what carried us through. Their commitment reminded us that scholarship is never solitary; it thrives in collective spaces where ideas are tested, challenged, and nurtured.

If there is one hope we carry for this book, it is that it may stand out not for grand claims, but for its attentiveness. To stand out, in this sense, is not to overshadow others but to serve as a reminder that careful

listening, patient writing, and emotional honesty still matter. In a time when speed often defines value, perhaps this book can affirm the worth of slowing down, of resisting haste, of letting meaning ripen.

The miles ahead are long, and this volume is only the beginning. There will be other books, other projects, other journeys. But this one remains special, because it taught us how to listen more carefully, how to write with patience, and how to imagine with foresight. If it succeeds in stimulating interest, in sparking reflection, or in encouraging another researcher to pause and listen more deeply, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

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CHAPTER 1

# Framing Impact: Introduction to Visual Storyboards

*Najam Us Saqib, Namesh Killemsetty, Hima Trisha Mohan, and Deepanshu Mohan*

**Abstract** The chapter introduces visual ethnography as an innovative research methodology within the social sciences, highlighting its methodological foundations, practical applications, and transformative potential for documenting marginalized communities. Through a detailed account of visual ethnography's evolution, the roles of collaborative teams, and the integration of digital tools, the chapter illustrates how visual methods—such as photography and participatory video—enhance the analysis of identity, representation, and cultural practices. The discussion is anchored by real-world case studies, including those from Kashmir and India's field sites, emphasizing methodological rigor, ethical considerations, and the

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empowerment of participant voices. Visual ethnography is presented not only as a research tool but as a powerful mode of engagement that bridges academic, activist, and community perspectives to address contemporary social complexities and inequalities.

**Keywords** Visual ethnography · Qualitative research · Methodological innovation · Identity and representation · Digital storytelling · Cultural analysis · Ethical research

## 1 Introduction

Research approaches in social sciences are essential for understanding human behaviour, societies, and cultures. These approaches offer the frameworks necessary for systematically examining intricate social phenomena, enabling researchers to collect, analyse, and interpret data effectively. Qualitative research, in particular, is inherently inductive, with the researcher typically investigating meanings and insights within a specific context (Strauss and Corbin 2008; Levitt et al. 2017). Qualitative research is a social inquiry that emphasises how individuals interpret and comprehend their experiences to grasp their social reality. It employs

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interviews, diaries, notebooks, classroom observations, immersions, and open-ended surveys to acquire, analyse, and interpret data through content analysis of visual and textual resources and oral history (Zohrabi 2013). The approach denotes a variety of data gathering and analytical methodologies that employ purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Dudwick et al. 2006; Gopaldas 2016). Qualitative research encompasses multiple approaches, including logic, ethnography, discourse analysis, case study, open-ended interview, participant observation, counselling, therapy, grounded theory, biography, comparative method, introspection, casuistry, focus group, literary criticism, meditation practice, and historical research (Cibangu 2012). It is investigative and aims to elucidate "how" and "why" a specific social phenomenon or program functions as it does within a given setting. It seeks to elucidate the social environment in which we exist and the reasons behind its characteristics (Polkinghorne 2005).

In observing and understanding human behaviours across diverse cultural landscapes, ethnography has been one of the most effective research methods in the social sciences. By integrating fieldwork and participant observation, ethnography allows researchers to engage deeply with complex socio-cultural environments, offering nuanced insights that might be missed or overlooked by traditional research methodologies. While ethnography is a robust anthropological technique, it coexists with other research methods, each contributing unique perspectives to understanding human interactions and cultural dynamics.

Ethnography transcends mere research methodology; it represents a profound mode of interaction with the world. It enables us to transcend our viewpoints and engage with the lived experiences of others, revealing the nuanced, frequently imperceptible connections that constitute the fabric of human communities. The intellectual foundations of ethnography are based on the understanding that knowledge is contextual and subjective. In contrast to approaches that aim to separate the researcher from the subject, ethnography advocates that comprehension arises via interpersonal connections. This relational methodology necessitates that researchers get thoroughly immersed in their field sites, engaging in observation, participation, and introspection regarding their roles and prejudices. Ethnography transcends mere description to elucidate the

meanings and dynamics of social existence. Ethnographic methods, originating from socio-cultural anthropology, have been adopted by sociologists, psychologists, and other social scientists due to their capacity to yield insights into human actions and behaviours.

Anthropologists employ the term ethnography in two contexts. In its primary definition, an ethnography is a documented analysis of the sociocultural factors influencing a specific human population. In the second sense, conducting ethnography involves extensive fieldwork and employs a combination of qualitative research methods designed to yield insights into sociocultural ties and the perspectives of the "natives" (Geertz 1973; Mainowski 1925). Fife indicates that in this context, "native" pertains not to the notion of aboriginality but to "anyone who has grown up within a specific cultural milieu" (Fife 2005).

Ethnographic research methods are particularly effective for delineating or examining cultural practices, beliefs, behaviours, and interactions among diverse groups. Most ethnographic research does not include explicit theory-testing. Instead, it uses "grounded theory," which involves performing field research on extensive themes and leveraging the obtained facts to construct robust ideas. Ethnography can be regarded both as an art and a science. It entails a nuanced equilibrium between methodology and creative freedom. Fieldwork, the foundation of anthropological research, necessitates involvement in the subjects' daily lives under investigation. This immersion enables researchers to collect comprehensive, detailed data via participant observation, interviews, and the examination of material culture. Nonetheless, the ethnographic technique presents particular challenges. Establishing trust with participants, addressing ethical difficulties, and handling the emotional challenges of fieldwork are essential to the practice. Moreover, ethnographers must navigate the conflict between representation and interpretation, aiming to portray participants' viewpoints while authentically recognising their positionality. There are various forms of ethnographic research. For instance, confessional ethnography, life history ethnography, feminist ethnography, realist ethnography, and critical ethnography, among others. Among the several forms of ethnographic research, the most prevalent are "Realist Ethnography" and "Critical Ethnography." "Realist Ethnographic Research" is sometimes referred to as traditional Ethnography research, while "Critical Ethnography Research" focuses on marginalised groups within society (Sharma and Sarkar 2019).

Numerous other research approaches exist besides ethnography, each providing distinct insights and addressing specific study enquiries. Therefore, comprehending many techniques, including case study research, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and surveys, is crucial for researchers seeking the best strategy for their specific investigations. These diverse research methodologies help a researcher to examine the extensive alternatives available to them, emphasising how methodological choices can profoundly influence research results and the progression of knowledge in the discipline. A comprehensive understanding of these procedures allows researchers to critically interact with their selected methods and contribute meaningfully to the broader social scientific conversation. To obtain the most suitable outcomes, all studies must have a clear, methodical, and systematic strategy.

This book explores these problems and provides practical solutions for conducting ethical and productive ethnographic research. Through the presentation of real-world examples and case studies elaborated in subsequent chapters, we demonstrate how ethnographers adeptly manoeuvre the unpredictable aspects of fieldwork, transforming problems into opportunities for enhanced comprehension. We examine methodologies for obtaining access to field sites, establishing rapport, and navigating the intricacies of data collecting and processing. At its finest, the ethnography as a method serves as a transforming experience for both researchers and participants. For researchers, field immersion frequently results in significant adjustments in viewpoint, questioning established beliefs and enhancing awareness of cultural diversity. This book presents instances of ethnographic research that have facilitated change, including the advocacy for the rights of the marginalised indigenous communities. These instances illustrate the capacity of ethnography to bridge divides, enhance understanding, and promote a more equal world.

This book elucidates how ethnography facilitates the comprehension of cultures, customs, and identities, providing insights into the intricacies of human existence. The necessity for ethnography has reached unprecedented urgency. As globalisation intensifies, cultures globally are becoming more integrated yet increasingly fractured. Accelerated technological progress, migration, and environmental issues transform communities, frequently resulting in cultural subtleties being misinterpreted or disregarded. Ethnography facilitates navigation of these difficulties, enhancing understanding and empathy by emphasising the viewpoints of people directly affected. It serves as a countermeasure to simplistic

narratives and reductive assessments, encouraging the appreciation of the complexity and diversity of human existence.

## 2 Scope and Objective

The book focuses on visual ethnography. In contrast to traditional ethnography, which involves researchers immersing themselves in the field and engaging with their subjects over extended periods (Howell 2018), visual ethnography integrates visual methods into the ethnographic research framework. These visual methods can include photography, film, and video (Pink 2020). This method improves the documentation of cultural practices and social interactions, enabling researchers to capture intricate, visual elements of life that may not be effectively communicated through language alone. Visual ethnographers may utilise methods such as photo-elicitation, wherein photographs stimulate debates and reflections among participants, or documentary filmmaking, which conveys ethnographic findings in an engaging narrative manner. This style of ethnography utilises visual media to enhance the narrative aspect of research, rendering the findings more accessible and practical to a broader audience.

At the Centre of New Economics (CNES)[1] at O.P. Jindal Global University, there is an emphasis on Visual Ethnographies to elucidate narratives that alternative methodologies cannot accurately capture. The Visual Storyboard team at CNES conducted extensive fieldwork through multiple case studies that apply visual ethnography, elaborated in this book. This book is divided into multiple sections, each focusing on a fundamental feature of ethnography. The initial portion examines the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the discipline, providing practical direction for the design and execution of ethnographic research. The book addresses field site selection, data gathering methodologies, and analytical approaches.

[1] The Centre for New Economic Studies (CNES) at O.P. Jindal Global University is a research centre dedicated to exploring the interdisciplinary applications of economics. It focuses on integrating economics with various fields, including political science through political economy, psychology through behavioural economics, history through economic history, and legal studies through law and economics. Further details about the centre is available at: https://jgu.edu.in/ideas/research/the-centre-for-new-economics-studies-cnes-at-op-jindal-global-university.

Visual ethnography is important for analysing identity, especially how individuals navigate and express their cultural identities. Researchers utilise photographs and visual narratives to document the complex identity creation and development processes, facilitating powerful expressions of individual and collective experiences. The integration of visual data with ethnographic research for a more thorough examination of how identity is generated, preserved, and altered in various circumstances. Visual ethnographers may study and record how individuals use clothes, decoration, and other visual symbols to express particular facets of their identity (Hunter 2020). In these investigations, the ethnographer documents the exterior manifestations of identity and interacts with participants to understand the personal significances underlying their visual representations. This dialogic method underscores the significance of participant voices in the research process and the fundamental principles of ethnography.

Identity is intrinsically embedded within particular cultural contexts, rendering visual ethnography an effective and potent approach for evaluating the impact of culture on identity development. Researchers can employ visual methodologies to investigate how various social, historical, and environmental elements influence individual identity construction. For instance, visual ethnography can demonstrate how novel cultural environments influence identity negotiation, adaptation, and expression in research on immigrant populations. Visual ethnographers elucidate the evolving nature of identity by documenting daily actions and interactions within their cultural contexts. This method improves knowledge of personal and collective identities and promotes cross-cultural discussions by enabling participants to express their experiences and viewpoints. Evoking photographs to stimulate talks and reflections among participants is an essential instrument for revealing the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. Moreover, collaborative filmmaking enables participants to engage actively in storytelling, cultivating a sense of ownership and agency in representing their identities and cultures.

This book establishes these methodologies and theoretical foundations of visual ethnography. It examines the tools and case studies employed by Visual Storyboards at CNES, highlighting its ability to contest conventional power dynamics in research and amplify marginalised voices. This book brings together contributions from various researchers

from different areas, emphasising the diversity and depth of visual ethnographic studies and their importance in comprehending the complexities of modern society. This investigation of visual ethnography seeks to highlight the transformative capacity of visual methods in social science research and emphasise their ethical considerations. This book of Visual Ethnography aims to assist researchers in proficiently using these approaches, enhancing understanding of human experiences and furthering knowledge in the social sciences.

The following section explores the uses of the visual ethnography methodology and the case studies taken up for the study. We demonstrate the adaptability of ethnography and its relevance to modern challenges through case studies and examples. It examines the application of ethnographic research, the ramifications of global interconnection, and the shifting ethics of representation.

## 3 The Visual Storyboards (VS) Methodology

The Visual Storyboards team developed a systematic approach to ethnographic research that combines rigorous methodology and innovative visual documentation techniques. This approach addresses the challenges of representing complex social realities while maintaining scientific rigour and ethical considerations. The team followed a structured yet flexible approach as elaborated:

1. Identification of research problem and conceptualisation: Identifying a research problem is fundamental to any research activity, especially in visual ethnography. The initial stage in establishing a research problem in visual ethnography is contextualising the research within its cultural and social framework. Researchers must interact with the group they aim to investigate, considering its individuals' distinct cultural practices, values, and obstacles. This engagement typically commences with exploratory observations, recce, or casual discussions that may reveal pertinent topics. A visual ethnographer investigating urban youth culture may discern issues of identity formation, social marginalisation, or community cohesion by participating in community events, attending local meetings, or conducting informal interviews. Comprehending the context necessitates acknowledging broader societal dynamics, encompassing historical, political, and economic elements that may impact the

community in focus. By contextualising the study problem within this broader framework, visual ethnographers may guarantee that their investigations are significant and pertinent to the participants' experiences.

2. Formation of a back-end team: The strict standards of ethnographic research frequently need a comprehensive methodology that extends beyond conventional fieldwork performed by ethnographers. Forming a back-end team has become a vital technique for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of research procedures. This team provides support by aiding in literature review, developing questionnaires, and transcribing interviews, thus reducing the workload of field ethnographers.
3. Methodological framework: A literature review is a crucial element of academic research, serving as an extensive assessment and analysis of existing scholarly literature in a particular subject. It integrates previous studies, outlines main topics, evaluates techniques, and stresses knowledge deficiencies. Within ethnography, a literature review fulfils multiple essential functions, influencing the research process and augmenting the study's rigour.
4. Making of tentative questionnaire: Thematic questionnaires are designed to get detailed responses from participants, allowing researchers to explore the complexities of human experiences. Unlike traditional closed-ended questionnaires, which limit responses to predefined options, thematic questionnaires encourage participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words. They are usually open-ended, therefore very flexible. One of the primary advantages of thematic questionnaires is their flexibility. Researchers can tailor questionnaires to address themes relevant to their study, allowing room for unexpected insights. It gives a participant freedom to answer as they want to, thus a researcher can have more observations.
5. Pilot Study and Reece: A pilot study is a smaller-scale version of the main study designed to evaluate the feasibility, time, cost, risk, and adverse events involved in a research project (In 2017). It typically involves a small number of participants and identifies any methodological issues that may arise when the full study is conducted. The overall purpose of the pilot study is to enhance the quality of the subsequent leading research by addressing potential problems in advance. Pilot studies are particularly significant

in the context of testing questionnaires. Researchers employ these studies to assess whether the questionnaire effectively elicits the intended information, captures participant perspectives accurately, and provides reliable data for analysis. The feedback from pilot testing enables researchers to refine their questionnaires, ensuring they are appropriately designed for the target population.

6. Discussing pilot study results with the back-end team: Once the results have been discussed with the back-end team, researchers can begin the process of refining and detailing the questionnaire.
7. Review feedback: The first step involves methodically going through the feedback from the pilot study. Researchers categorise the responses based on common themes, including clarity of questions, relevance to the research objectives, and participant comfort levels when responding to specific items.
8. Revise question wording: Based on feedback, researchers can refine question wording to ensure clarity and to eliminate ambiguities. This may include simplifying language, avoiding jargon, and ensuring that questions are direct and unambiguous. Suggestions of participants in the pilot are also taken into consideration.
9. Field work: After finalising the questionnaire, the field work can be started. Two or more ethnographers usually conduct fieldwork to get vibrant and correct observations.

The VS methodology primarily relies on field documentation and data management and analysis, each serving specific research objectives.

1. Field Documentation: Field notes are essential to ethnographic research as they offer comprehensive documentation of observations, interactions, and reflections gathered during participant observation. As researchers engage in the field, these notes document intricate details that quantitative methods may neglect. Absence of field notes might result in the loss or oversight of significant cultural nuances, behaviours, and contextual elements, hence compromising the quality and depth of the research findings (Delabrer 2017). Furthermore, the field notes are essential data sources for ethnographers, enabling them to contemplate their experiences and ideas. According to Schwandt (2015), field notes assist researchers in internalising their findings and comprehending the cultural contexts that

inform participants' behaviours. It facilitates the researchers in examining themes and patterns for later reporting and interpretation, providing a basis for academic writing and reinforcing the legitimacy of the research findings. Thus, field notes are essential for documenting the nuanced aspects of the research experience and informing the following analysis (Delabrer 2017).

2. Data Management and Analysis: Data Management is primarily done using master spreadsheets. Master Excel spreadsheets effectively manage and organise transcribed material in anthropological research. The intricacy and magnitude of qualitative data gathered in ethnographic research require meticulous documenting and organisation. A master Excel sheet enables researchers to methodically categorise and organise their transcribed interviews, field notes, and observations, facilitating data analysis and retrieval as required. The transcribed data is fed into an Excel sheet, thematically and question-wise. Excel's functionalities enable data sorting, filtering, and analysis, allowing researchers to easily identify trends, patterns, and themes from extensive qualitative data. This systematic arrangement assists researchers in retaining a comprehensive overview of their studies and guarantees their ability to address research enquiries proficiently. Without a master Excel sheet, researchers may struggle to manage their data cohesively, resulting in possible discrepancies and hindrances to practical analysis.

   All acquired data is stored using cloud storage, that has transformed data management by offering a scalable and accessible platform for storing research data, including transcription datasets. Storing all acquired data in the cloud enables ethnographic teams to guarantee that vital information is easily accessible to all members. This accessibility is essential in collaborative research settings, where shared input and analysis lead to substantial conclusions. Cloud storage enables team members to access and contribute to data from diverse locations and devices, boosting collaboration while preserving data security through encryption and routine backups. Additionally, real-time editing and version control functionalities allow many team members to edit the same documents while monitoring alterations collaboratively, optimising the research process and improving data integrity. Moreover, cloud storage mitigates issues associated with data loss or mismanagement resulting from

hardware malfunctions. Storing all data securely in the cloud safeguards researchers from the hazards of physical storage and ensures their information is reliably backed up. This accelerates research and guarantees that data is a dependable basis for insights obtained from field observations and transcriptions.

The timeline for projects varies depending on their nature. Typically, a short-term project lasts between 8 and 10 weeks. The first two weeks are spent identifying the research problem and conducting the necessary literature review. The following two weeks are spent conducting the pilot study and discussing the questionnaire with the relevant stakeholders. The fieldwork is usually done in three weeks between weeks 5 and 7. The last three weeks are dedicated to analysis and dissemination of data.

## 4 The Back End Team

A back-end team is of critical importance in ethnographic research, which consists of proficient specialists who specialise in several critical aspects of the research process. Their participation enables ethnographers to concentrate on the significant aim of interacting with participants and gathering qualitative data. The primary roles of the backend team are as follows:

- **Literature Review**: A thorough literature review is essential for formulating research questions and establishing the study context. The back-end team is responsible for discovering relevant literature, synthesising findings, and summarising existing research gaps. Their proficiency in browsing databases and academic journals guarantees that the ethnographers possess a robust theoretical foundation and critical insights when they commence fieldwork (Galvan and Galvan 2024).
- **Questionnaire Development**: A valid questionnaire corresponding to the study aims is essential for obtaining precise data. The back-end team partners with ethnographers to formulate precise, transparent, and pertinent questions adapted to the specific cultural context of the study. Implementing optimal practices in questionnaire design enables team members to improve question clarity and reduce potential biases, yielding more trustworthy data collection.

- **Transcription of Interviews:** Transcribing interviews is an intensive and time-consuming process, particularly in qualitative research. The back-end team engages in this critical task to ensure accurate representation of participants' voices. By handling transcription, the team takes off a substantial burden from field ethnographers, allowing them to concentrate on data interpretation and analysis. Moreover, having dedicated professionals for transcription helps maintain consistency and accuracy in the data collection process.

Having a back-end team has multiple benefits. First, field ethnographers can allocate more time and energy to engaging with participants by delegating tasks such as literature reviews, questionnaire formulation, and transcription. This focus on direct interaction fosters richer, more immersive experiences in the field, allowing researchers to develop deeper relationships with their subjects and understand the cultural context more profoundly.

Secondly, the specialised skills of back-end team members contribute to improved data quality overall. With experts conducting thorough literature reviews, ethnographers are better informed about their research themes, while well-constructed questionnaires lead to more valid and reliable responses. Additionally, transcribers ensure that the nuances of participants' speech, including tone and emotion, are accurately captured in the transcripts, enriching the subsequent analysis.

Finally, the collaborative nature of a back-end team streamlines the research process, making it more efficient. By assuming routine tasks, the team allows ethnographers to focus on higher-level analytical work and integration of findings, thus accelerating the overall timeline from data collection to analysis. This efficiency is particularly beneficial in longitudinal studies or projects with tight deadlines.

## 5 Book Structure and Chapter Overview

The book comprises eight chapters, with the introductory chapter presenting a theoretical framework for examining the theoretical dimensions of visual ethnography and the methodologies employed by visual storytelling to elucidate the narratives of these communities. The introduction chapter has situated visual ethnography within a broader methodological and theoretical framework, establishing the foundation for the book's exploration of marginalised communities. The second section

addresses the case studies of the communities, the navigation of these communities, and the researchers' experiences during the ethnographic process. The case studies will examine the use of specific methods in each study, detailing why and how those methods were employed.

Chapter 2, **Expanding Horizons: Methodological Innovations and Literature in Contemporary Ethnography**, situates visual ethnography within a broader methodological and theoretical framework, establishing the foundation for the book's exploration of informal settlements. Ethnography has historically been a cornerstone of qualitative research, providing profound insights into communities' lived experiences, cultural practices, and social dynamics. Over time, the discipline has progressed, using many techniques to address the intricacies of contemporary cultures. This chapter examines the methodological framework of ethnography, emphasising its transition from conventional participant observation to contemporary methods like digital and visual ethnography. The chapter analyses seminal texts that underscore the intersections of power, representation, and ethics in ethnographic methodology. Significant focus is placed on the function of narrative and visual storytelling in amplifying underrepresented voices, bridging divides between researchers and the participants, and cultivating deeper insights into socio-economic disparities and spatial dynamics.

Chapter 3, **Marginal Frames: Visual Ethnography of Excluded Communities in Kashmir**, explores how novel applications of visual ethnography have been applied to elevate subaltern voices and contest established narratives, offering a nuanced comprehension of resilience, identity, and socio-economic challenges faced by many marginalised communities in Kashmir. Over the years, visual ethnography has become a transformative methodology and instrument for depicting marginalised populations in the union territory of Kashmir, where socio-political complexities merge with the lived experiences of structural exclusion. The study highlights the importance of visual narratives in redefining representation and methodology in modern ethnographic practice through intensive fieldwork and multidisciplinary research. Visual ethnography presents a compelling alternative in Kashmir, where narratives are frequently overshadowed by political discourses or filtered via a securitised perspective. It allows communities to express their narratives on their terms, dismantling singular representations and revealing the diverse experiences and identities that characterise the region. This chapter examines the different cultural "invisible" groups in Kashmir, from nomadic herders

and fish dwellers witnessing the onslaught of development to caste and linguistic minority communities who have been victims of majoritarian discourses. In these projects, visual ethnography has served as a conduit for participatory action, allowing participants to record their challenges and ambitions. This chapter aims to highlight that visual ethnography not only documents but also actively interacts with the politics of visibility. The methodology promotes ownership and empowerment by engaging underprivileged communities in creating and distributing visual material. The chapter discusses how visual ethnographic techniques provide a potent framework for examining the intersecting realities of marginalised populations in Kashmir by highlighting the transformative capacity of visual techniques in promoting inclusion, elevating subaltern voices, and reconfiguring the politics of representation in ethnographic research.

Chapter 4, **Framing Lived Realities: Employing Visual Ethnography to Document Informal Settlements: Casestudy of Kapashera,** examines the application of visual storytelling as a methodological framework to investigate Kapashera, an informal settlement located on the Delhi-Gurgaon border. Techniques like photography, participatory video, and spatial mapping were utilised to document the locals' daily lives, challenges, and resilience. These methods enable researchers to transcend textual representation, crafting tales that are both descriptive and profoundly evocative. Visual ethnography has emerged as an essential methodology for examining the intricacies and complexities of informal settlements, providing an immersive perspective to understand their spatial, social, and cultural dynamics. Informal settlements accommodate a substantial segment of the worldwide population and are marked by unstable living conditions; visual tools effectively document and communicate the experiences of underprivileged people, frequently neglected in conventional research methodologies. This methodology connects research with advocacy, providing politicians, urban planners, and the general public with a clear insight into life in these areas. This study emphasises visual ethnography's methodological foundations and ethical implications, illustrating its capacity to humanise neglected populations, contest prevailing narratives, and guide the development of more inclusive urban policy.

Chapter 5, **Crafting Narratives: A Visual Ethnography of Paper Machie Artisans in Kashmir**, examines the visual ethnography of artisans in Kashmir, explicitly focusing on paper machie workers and their

daily experiences through visual methodologies. It underscores the importance of visual techniques in depicting the intricate reality of these artists, whose lives are profoundly connected to Kashmir's cultural and economic framework. The research utilises several visual techniques, such as photography, video documentation, and collaborative storytelling, to highlight the experiences of craftsmen frequently eclipsed by larger socio-political discussions. This chapter examines the methodological process of performing visual ethnography within this environment. The study examines the ethical implications of interacting with marginalised populations, the dynamics of collaboration between researchers and participants, and the practical difficulties associated with employing visual technologies in the field. These issues encompass establishing trust, managing power dynamics, and ensuring that visual narratives accurately reflect the voices of craftsmen without forcing outsider interpretations. This chapter adds to the literature on visual ethnography and its application in researching neglected populations. It promotes the utilisation of visual tools to democratise research, elevate marginalised voices, and cultivate significant community interaction. This study highlights the paper machete artisans of Kashmir, documenting the depth of their work and emphasising the significance of visual ethnography in reinterpreting marginalised individuals' tales.

Chapter 6, **Visual Storyboards in Action: A Methodological Journey in Assam's Bodoland,** highlights the work of Action Northeast Trust (ANT), a local NGO working in education, women's livelihoods, and youth sports for peace-building in Assam's Bodoland region. In this chapter, we reflect on a collaborative visual ethnography project that used interviews and visual methods to capture Bodo women and youth's everyday realities, aspirations, and labour. Moving beyond conventional NGO "impact narratives," this chapter presents visual documentation as a research method and a solidarity mode. Through images and stories of weaving, learning, and organising, we explore how cultural preservation and economic empowerment are deeply entwined in the lives of tribal women of Assam. This chapter is methodologically situated in visual ethnography, drawing from participatory and feminist research practices that recognise community members as knowledge-holders and co-curators of their own stories.

Chapter 7, **Framing Craft: A Visual Ethnography of Ajrakh Artisans in Kutch, Gujarat,** explores the use of visual ethnography as a methodological tool to document and interpret the lived experiences,

material practices, and evolving cultural identities of Ajrakh artisans in the Kutch region of Gujarat. Drawing on immersive fieldwork, participatory photography, and video documentation, the study captures the nuanced transformations within this traditional textile craft amidst rising global demand, migration, and technological integration. Visual narratives serve as records of artisanal technique and critical lenses into intergenerational knowledge transfer, gendered labour dynamics, and the socio-environmental challenges impacting the community. The chapter underscores how image-making can offer deeper insight into cultural resilience, adaptation, and agency by integrating visual methods with reflexive ethnographic analysis. This methodological approach advocates for a more embodied, sensory understanding of craft cultures in transition.

The final chapter, **Reimagining Ethnography: Reflections and Future Directions for Visual Storytelling**, consolidates the key themes and insights examined in this book, highlighting the significance of visual ethnography in comprehending and representing marginalised populations and spaces. This chapter highlights the transformative potential of visual storytelling in documenting lived experiences, promoting collaborative research, and connecting academics with activism through an examination of methodological advances and case studies. Through case studies like informal settlements and institutional narratives, this chapter illustrates how visual ethnography not only records reality but also intensifies voices sometimes marginalised in mainstream policy and academic discussions. It reexamines this methodology's ethical implications, obstacles, and prospects, promoting its wider incorporation across several fields to tackle modern social and urban issues. The chapter concludes by envisioning the future of ethnographic practices, advocating for multidisciplinary frameworks and participatory approaches to guarantee inclusive and impactful research. This chapter emphasises the importance of visual and textual narratives in transforming our comprehension of intricate social realities, providing a guide for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to interact effectively with marginalised people and their changing circumstances.

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CHAPTER 2

# Expanding Horizons: Methodological Innovations and Literature in Contemporary Ethnography

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**Abstract** This chapter situates visual ethnography within the broader evolution of ethnographic research, tracing the shift from conventional participant observation to methods such as digital and visual approaches. It reviews key debates on power, representation, and ethics, highlighting narrative and visual storytelling as central to engaging with marginalized voices. By discussing positionality, authorship, and participatory methods, it lays the conceptual foundation for later case studies. The chapter shows how contemporary ethnography engages with socio-economic and spatial

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inequalities, reframing research as a collaborative and politically engaged practice.

**Keywords** Visual ethnography · Methodological innovation · Narrative · Ethics · Representation · Qualitative research · Socio-economic disparities

## 1 Introduction to Methodological Innovation

The evolution of research methodologies has been shaped by epistemological debates, technological advancements, and the need to better capture the complexities of human experience. Historically, research methods have been divided into two dominant traditions: quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative tradition, rooted in positivism, emphasized measurement, objectivity, and generalizability, seeking to

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establish universal laws through statistical analysis. In contrast, the qualitative tradition, influenced by interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, aimed to understand social realities through rich descriptions, narratives, and in-depth contextual analysis (Mohajan 2018).

As John Gerring outlines in extensive scholarship, methodological choices have always been contingent on the nature of the research question and the philosophical orientation of the researcher (Gerring 2011). Max Weber, in his *Methodology of Social Sciences*, argued that while empirical research seeks to maintain objectivity, complete neutrality is impossible, as researchers inevitably bring their values and perspectives into the analytical process (Weber 2017). This recognition led to a gradual shift towards mixed-methods research, which integrates the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The mid-twentieth century saw the expansion of case study research, ethnography, and participatory methods, as scholars sought to capture the richness of lived experiences that could not be adequately represented through numbers alone (George 2005). In particular, the Chicago School of Sociology pioneered immersive fieldwork and qualitative interviews, moving away from rigid survey-based methods. During this period, narrative research, discourse analysis, and grounded theory also gained prominence, providing researchers with tools to analyze language, meaning-making, and social interaction in ways that extended beyond traditional data collection techniques (Mohajan 2018).

Despite these advancements, textual analysis continued to dominate qualitative research, with written transcripts, interview excerpts, and thematic coding serving as primary means of interpretation. However, scholars began to question the limitations of purely textual representation, arguing that text alone could not fully encapsulate the embodied, spatial, and affective dimensions of social life (Wiles et al. 2011). This critique laid the groundwork for visual methodologies, which sought to integrate photography, video, and graphic representations into social science research.

## 2 The Emergence of Visual Storyboards in Research

The increasing adoption of visual methodologies in research was driven by a recognition that text-based methods, while powerful, could not fully capture the nuances of social experience. Researchers sought to

incorporate visual elements to document, analyze, and represent human interactions in ways that traditional approaches struggled to achieve. The use of photography, video, and graphic illustrations allowed researchers to explore dimensions of social life that were previously difficult to express through text alone. These methods provided opportunities for capturing non-verbal communication, spatial relationships, and emotional expressions, offering richer and more immersive insights into research subjects' lived experiences (Mohajan 2018).

Early proponents of visual methodologies viewed them as a natural extension of ethnographic traditions, where participant observation had long been a cornerstone of qualitative research. However, unlike written fieldnotes, which were filtered through the researcher's interpretation, visual data provided a more immediate and direct form of representation. This shift was particularly significant in participatory and community-based research, where visual methods enabled participants to take an active role in shaping how their experiences were documented and understood. This participatory turn also raised critical questions about authorship, interpretation, and the ethics of representation, leading to discussions on how visual research should be conducted responsibly (Wiles et al. 2011).

Despite their promise, visual methodologies faced skepticism, particularly within disciplines that prioritized text-based scholarship. Critics questioned whether visual data could meet the rigorous analytical standards of traditional research, arguing that images and videos were inherently open to multiple interpretations. Wiles et al. (2011) highlight that early visual research often lacked established frameworks for analysis, leading to concerns that findings might be subjective or anecdotal. Over time, however, scholars developed methodologies for coding and analyzing visual materials systematically, integrating visual research within established qualitative traditions. The result was a growing acceptance of multimodal research approaches that blended text, imagery, and other forms of representation to produce more nuanced and layered interpretations of social reality (Della Porta et al. 2008).

As visual methodologies gained traction, researchers began experimenting with ways to integrate textual and visual elements into a cohesive analytical framework. One of the most innovative developments in this space has been the adaptation of visual storyboards as a methodological tool. Storyboards, originally developed in film and media production,

were designed to map out sequences of events visually, providing a structured yet flexible way of organizing narratives. In research, this approach has proven invaluable for capturing processes, interactions, and transformations in ways that static images or textual descriptions alone could not (George 2005).

Storyboarding allows researchers to depict sequences of events in a structured yet dynamic format, enabling a clearer representation of causality and change over time. Bennett and George (1997) emphasize that one of the persistent challenges in qualitative research is demonstrating how social phenomena unfold across different contexts. Traditional case studies often rely on linear textual narratives to explain these processes, but such descriptions can sometimes obscure the complexity of interactions. Storyboards, by contrast, enable researchers to illustrate these connections more explicitly, providing a visual timeline that makes patterns and relationships easier to discern.

Moreover, the participatory potential of storyboards makes them particularly valuable in collaborative research settings. Unlike purely observational methods, where the researcher remains a detached analyst, storyboard methodologies often involve participants in the construction of visual narratives. This approach allows respondents to map out their experiences, offering insights that might not emerge through interviews or written surveys alone. By combining visual representation with annotated textual explanations, storyboards provide a multi-layered analytical tool that bridges the gap between traditional qualitative methods and newer visual approaches (Wiles et al. 2011).

The adoption of storyboards in research has been particularly influential in fields such as ethnography, psychology, education, and health studies. In ethnographic research, for example, storyboards have been used to document migration journeys, social movements, and historical memory, providing a visual reconstruction of lived experiences. In psychology and healthcare, they have been employed to illustrate mental health narratives, patient treatment paths, and therapy progressions, offering an alternative to written case studies that may not fully capture the emotional or experiential dimensions of illness (Mohajan 2018).

Despite their advantages, storyboards also pose methodological and ethical challenges. One of the primary concerns is interpretation bias, as visual sequences can be read in multiple ways depending on the viewer's perspective. While textual data often allows for direct quotations and verbatim analysis, visual representations require additional layers

of contextualization and explanation to ensure that meanings are not distorted. Additionally, ethical considerations surrounding participant consent, representation, and data ownership are particularly critical in visual research. Researchers must navigate these issues carefully, ensuring that participants have control over how their stories are depicted and that sensitive content is handled with respect (Wiles et al. 2011).

Another challenge is the institutional acceptance of visual methodologies. While multimodal research is becoming more recognized, many academic institutions and publishing standards still prioritize text-based outputs over visual representations. This creates barriers for researchers who wish to integrate storyboards into their work but face limitations in how these methods are evaluated within traditional scholarly frameworks (Gerring 2011). To gain wider acceptance, advocates of visual methodologies must continue to develop rigorous analytical frameworks that demonstrate the validity and reliability of storyboard-based research.

## 3 The Evolution of Visual Storyboards in Research

Visual storyboards have emerged as a methodological tool in research, providing a structured way to represent dynamic processes, interactions, and transformations. Unlike static visual methods such as photographs or illustrations, storyboards depict sequences of events, making them particularly valuable in qualitative, ethnographic, and participatory research (Mason 2005). By blending text and imagery, storyboards allow researchers to organize data in a way that enhances interpretative depth while maintaining the immediacy of visual representation (Rose 2022).

The roots of storyboarding can be traced to the film industry, where it was first used in the 1930s by Walt Disney Studios to map out animated sequences before production. Storyboards helped filmmakers plan narrative structures visually, ensuring coherence and continuity in storytelling (Rose 2022). The success of this method in cinema influenced its adoption in advertising and graphic design, where professionals used sequential sketches to develop marketing campaigns and product designs (Hartman et al. 2011).

Beyond the creative industries, anthropology and social sciences have integrated storyboarding as a research tool to document cultural narratives and social interactions. Visual anthropology, which has long utilized ethnographic films and photographs, increasingly turned to storyboards

to structure visual data in a way that emphasizes both sequentially and participant agency (Mason 2005). Researchers using participatory methods have employed storyboards to enable communities to map out their own experiences, a practice that aligns with broader trends in participatory research and action-based methodologies (Hartman et al. 2011).

Historically, static images such as photographs and illustrations were dominant in visual research methodologies. These visuals were primarily used to document moments in time, provide illustrative support for textual arguments, and serve as ethnographic records (Mason 2005). However, scholars soon recognized the limitations of static images in capturing complex, evolving social phenomena. A single photograph could depict a moment, but it could not fully illustrate processes, transformations, or interactions over time (Rose 2022).

This recognition led to the gradual adoption of dynamic visual sequencing in research, where images were arranged in structured progressions to depict changes and narratives more effectively. Mason (2005) argues that such a transition allows researchers to engage more deeply with participants, as visual sequencing provides a way to illustrate subjective experiences and lived realities that may be difficult to express verbally. One of the key strengths of visual sequencing is its ability to facilitate engagement and interpretation. Unlike text-heavy research methods, storyboards help both researchers and participants visualize relationships between events, enhancing comprehension and analytical rigor. For instance, in occupational science, visual research methods such as photovoice and body mapping have been used to explore how individuals experience their everyday activities, reflecting the shift towards more immersive and participatory methodologies (Hartman et al. 2011).

## 4 Theoretical Foundations of Visual Storyboards

### *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*

Multimodal Discourse Analysis ('MDA') offers a robust framework for understanding how visuals and text interact in visual storyboards, emphasizing the integration of semiotic resources to create meaning. At its core, MDA examines the intersemiosis between text and imagery, where

distinct modes (linguistic, visual, gestural) combine to enhance communication (O'Halloran 2011). Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) seminal work on multimodal semiotics underscores how images are not merely illustrative but carry their own grammar, functioning alongside text to construct meaning. This challenges the conventional dominance of language, recognizing that in a visual storyboard, images do not simply support the narrative but interact with text to co-construct meaning (Constantinou 2005).

Jewitt (2009) highlights that textual and visual modes often engage in semantic expansion, where meaning multiplies as different semiotic resources reinforce or contrast with one another. For instance, in film and digital media, the integration of written captions and imagery can create nuanced interpretations depending on the spatial positioning of text, color schemes, and framing (O'Halloran 2011). Moreover, resemiotization—the transformation of meaning across different semiotic modes—plays a crucial role in storyboarding. As social contexts shift, so does the relationship between visuals and text, often leading to new interpretations based on cultural and technological factors (Jewitt 2009).

### *Narrative Theory*

Narrative theory provides a structured framework for analyzing visual storyboards, examining how sequences of images, text, and temporal progression construct meaning. Traditionally rooted in literary studies, narrative theory has expanded to encompass multimodal texts, including visual storyboards, which merge linguistic and visual elements to tell a cohesive story (Phelan 2006). One of the central concepts in narrative theory is the story/discourse distinction, where story refers to the raw sequence of events, and discourse concerns how these events are presented (Herman et al. 2012). This distinction is crucial for visual storyboards, as story manifests through depicted events, while discourse includes framing, sequencing, and spatial organization of images relative to text.

Additionally, focalization—the perspective from which a story is perceived—is particularly relevant in visual storyboards. Through the use of camera angles, panel arrangements, and proximity of text to images, visual storytelling controls how audiences interpret narrative viewpoints (Phelan 2006). These focal shifts align with rhetorical narrative theory,

which examines how authors guide audience perception through strategic design (Herman et al. 2012).

Further, cognitive narratology emphasizes the audience's role in co-constructing meaning. Unlike traditional literary texts, visual storyboards require viewers to integrate textual and non-textual elements simultaneously to derive a coherent narrative (Herman et al. 2012). This aligns with the theory of narrative worldmaking, where storyboards do not merely represent events but construct immersive worlds through sequential imagery and text placement.

### *Semiotics and Representation*

Semiotics provides a foundational theoretical framework for analyzing visual storyboards by examining how signs, symbols, and codes contribute to meaning-making. In the context of visual storytelling, semiotic analysis explores the interaction between images and text, recognizing that meaning is neither fixed nor inherent but rather a socially constructed process (Curtin 2009).

Signs consist of a signifier (the form) and a signified (the concept), and their meaning is determined by cultural conventions rather than intrinsic properties (Curtin 2009). This is particularly relevant in visual storyboards, where images operate as signs that acquire meaning through their relationship to other elements, including text. Barthes extends this by distinguishing between denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural or symbolic) meanings, emphasizing that images are not self-evident and rely on interpretation (Curtin 2009).

Representation in visual storyboards is also shaped by Peirce's triadic model of signs: icons (direct resemblance), indexes (causal or associative links), and symbols (arbitrary cultural associations) (Matus 2018). These distinctions highlight how images and text interact in multimodal compositions, creating layers of meaning. For instance, a storyboard frame featuring a clenched fist can serve as an index of anger, a symbol of resistance, or an icon of physical action, depending on textual cues and context. Ultimately, semiotics reveals that visual storyboards are complex representational systems where meaning emerges from the interplay of signs rather than being dictated by a single mode. The interaction of visuals and text constructs layered narratives, shaping audience perception through culturally embedded codes (Matus 2018).

### *Embodied Cognition and Visual Thinking*

Embodied cognition challenges the traditional notion of cognition as an abstract, symbolic process, instead emphasizing the role of the body, perception, and action in shaping thought (Iachini 2011). Within visual storyboards, this perspective suggests that meaning is not passively received but actively constructed through interaction with visual representations. One of the central tenets of embodied cognition is simulation, where cognitive processes involve re-enactments of sensory and motor experiences (Iachini 2011). When engaging with visual storyboards, viewers do not merely process images as static symbols but simulate movement, depth, and interaction, creating an embodied understanding of the narrative. This aligns with mental imagery theories, which argue that visual cognition operates through dynamic, perceptual reactivations rather than abstract propositional reasoning (Lindblom 2015).

Additionally, mirror neuron research provides insight into how visuals evoke embodied responses. Studies suggest that when individuals view an action in a storyboard, their motor systems partially simulate the movement, leading to a deeper cognitive and emotional engagement with the narrative (Iachini 2011). This highlights how visual structures shape knowledge production by influencing how viewers process and internalize information.

Furthermore, perceptual symbol systems argue that cognition is inherently multimodal, meaning that knowledge is constructed through interactions between visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experiences (Lindblom 2015). As a result, visual storyboards are not merely representational tools but active participants in shaping thought, structuring conceptual knowledge through embodied experience.

## 5 Applications of Visual Storyboards Across Disciplines

Visual storyboards have emerged as a critical methodological tool across multiple disciplines, enabling researchers to illustrate complex social, cultural, and political dynamics through sequential visual representation. Unlike static visuals, which capture isolated moments, storyboards provide a structured, process-driven approach to data collection and representation (Rose 2022). Their increasing adoption in anthropology,

sociology, media studies, and public policy reflects a broader shift towards multimodal and participatory research methodologies (Mason 2005).

### *Anthropology and Ethnography*

Anthropology has a long tradition of incorporating visual elements into research, from early ethnographic photography to contemporary digital storytelling and participatory mapping (Rose 2022). Storyboards have proven particularly effective in documenting cultural practices, rituals, and everyday life while providing a means for communities to narrate their own experiences. Unlike traditional ethnographic text, which relies on thick description, storyboards enable researchers to illustrate sequences of events, interactions, and transformations over time (Hartman et al. 2011).

One of the most compelling applications of storyboards in ethnographic research has been their use in collaborative storytelling, where participants visually map their experiences, histories, and aspirations. Hartman et al. (2011) highlight that visual methodologies such as photovoice, body mapping, and textual analysis offer researchers new ways to engage with tacit and hard-to-articulate aspects of everyday life. For example, in migration research, storyboards allow displaced individuals to construct visual timelines of their journeys, capturing both their challenges and adaptive strategies in a way that traditional interviews often fail to do (Rose 2022).

Furthermore, the reflexive nature of visual storytelling provides a powerful tool for decolonizing research methodologies, giving agency to marginalized communities by enabling them to shape how their stories are represented (George 2005). Unlike static photographs, which often frame subjects through an external gaze, storyboards allow for dynamic, co-constructed narratives, offering a more holistic and participatory approach to ethnographic research.

### *Sociology and Political Science*

In sociology and political science, visual storyboards have been used to map power structures, social interactions, and institutional mechanisms. The discipline has increasingly recognized the limitations of purely textual analyses in capturing the complexities of social behavior, group dynamics, and political movements.

One significant area of application has been in studies of surveillance, governance, and resistance movements, where researchers use visual sequencing to examine how power is exercised and contested in everyday life. For example, Rose (2022) notes that visual methodologies can uncover hidden structures of power by illustrating spatial, behavioral, and communicative interactions. Storyboards have been employed in research on policing, protest movements, and urban governance, helping scholars illustrate how different social groups navigate and contest authority in public spaces.

In addition, visual storyboards are increasingly being used in network analysis and social media studies, where they help researchers visualize online interactions, misinformation flows, and digital activism. Given the dominance of visual culture in contemporary politics, storyboards provide an effective tool for analyzing media representation, framing effects, and public perception of political events.

Another crucial application in political science has been the use of storyboards in participatory governance. Public deliberation forums and community-based decision-making processes have integrated visual tools to help citizens articulate policy preferences and envision alternative futures. Such methodologies democratize knowledge production, making research findings more accessible and actionable for policymakers and the public alike.

### *Media and Communication Studies*

The field of media and communication studies has long been at the forefront of visual research methodologies, given the central role of images, narratives, and digital storytelling in contemporary media landscapes. Storyboards have been used extensively to analyze audience engagement, media framing, and the persuasive power of visual storytelling. One key application is in advertising and branding research, where storyboards help scholars examine how visual sequences influence consumer perception and emotional engagement. Media researchers often deconstruct advertising storyboards to understand how brands construct identity, use symbolism, and evoke emotional responses through carefully curated visual narratives.

Another major area of study involves film and television analysis, where researchers use storyboards to map out cinematographic techniques, narrative structures, and character development. By breaking

down visual sequences, scholars can analyze how media representations shape cultural ideologies, reinforce stereotypes, or challenge dominant discourses. In addition, storyboards play a significant role in digital media research, particularly in social media studies. As platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube prioritize visual storytelling, researchers have adapted sequential image analysis to study user engagement, meme culture, and viral trends. The increasing use of interactive and ephemeral visual content makes storyboards an essential tool for tracking how visual narratives evolve in real time and how audiences interact with digital media.

### *Public Policy and Advocacy*

Visual storytelling has proven to be a powerful tool in public policy and advocacy, enabling researchers, activists, and policymakers to communicate complex issues in accessible and compelling ways. Storyboards have been used in public health campaigns, environmental advocacy, and social justice movements to illustrate policy challenges and potential solutions. One significant area of application is public health communication, where storyboards help visualize health disparities, patient experiences, and healthcare accessibility issues. Researchers have used visual narratives to document the lived experiences of marginalized communities, providing policy-relevant insights that traditional statistical reports often overlook.

In environmental advocacy, storyboards have been employed to illustrate climate change impacts, resource conflicts, and conservation efforts. Visual storytelling has played a crucial role in shaping public discourse on sustainability, making scientific findings more relatable and emotionally impactful. Moreover, visual storyboards have been integrated into participatory policy-making, allowing communities to co-create narratives that reflect their needs and aspirations. For example, participatory urban planning initiatives have used storyboarding workshops to visualize neighborhood transformations and advocate for more inclusive development policies. By involving local communities in co-constructing visual policy narratives, storyboards serve as a democratic tool for amplifying marginalized voices and influencing decision-makers.

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CHAPTER 3

# Marginal Frames: Visual Ethnography of Excluded Communities in Kashmir

*Najam Us Saqib and Deepanshu Mohan*

**Abstract** This chapter examines how visual ethnography helps study marginalized groups in Kashmir whose voices are often overshadowed by dominant narratives. Using participatory image-making and storytelling, it highlights communities such as nomadic herders, fish-dwelling groups, caste and linguistic minorities. Visual narratives document resilience, identity, and socio-economic struggle while challenging politics of visibility. The chapter argues for visual methods as tools of co-creation that redefine the ethics and politics of ethnography in contexts of exclusion.

**Keywords** Kashmir · Marginalized communities · Subaltern voices · Participatory methods · Visibility · Resilience · Identity

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## 1 Introduction

In the shifting landscapes of contemporary Kashmir, the lives and struggles of marginalized communities; Hanji, Watal/Sheikh, Pashtun, and Tibetan Muslims, often remain in the shadows of dominant narratives and developmental paradigms. "Marginal Frames: Visual Ethnography of Excluded Communities in Kashmir" seeks to illuminate these overlooked worlds through a methodology anchored in visual ethnography and deep, participatory engagement.

This chapter opens a window into the lived realities of groups whose stories of dispossession, resilience, and adaptation are rarely told in their own voices or on their own terms. By foregrounding visual storytelling, photographs, sketch maps, participatory videos, and material culture, alongside in-depth interviews and day reconstruction methods, we aim to make visible both the pressing challenges and enduring strengths that define everyday life on the margins.

Our approach is rooted in the recognition that **exclusion is not only material, but spatial, cultural, and symbolic**. Displacement from Dal Lake to the marshy outposts of Rakh-e-Arth, struggles for recognition and autonomy within urban ghettos, the negotiation of identity across generational lines among Pashtuns, and the ongoing search for home among Tibetan Muslims: each narrative is rendered more immediate, more tangible, when captured through the lens and narrated in the voices of those who live it.

The chapter traces not only community histories, but our own **methodological journey**: the ethics of access, the negotiations of trust, the challenges of speaking across boundaries of caste, gender, and language. By interweaving visual documentation with fieldwork narratives and participant quotes, we seek to provide a "thick description" of

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marginality, one that refuses to flatten complexity, and instead attends to the nuances and textures of everyday exclusion and resistance.

In doing so, "Marginal Frames" aspires to reframe both scholarly and public understanding of Kashmiri society. It insists that the margin is not a peripheral space, but a vantage point from which to challenge dominant frames and imagine more inclusive futures. Ultimately, the chapter stands as both a testimony and an invitation: to see, to listen, and to engage with the worlds that exist in Kashmir's margins, with humility, openness, and a commitment to collaborative, ethical witnessing.

## 2 Methodological Journey

### *Developing the Research Framework and Questionnaires*

This research emerged from a fundamental concern: how do processes of dispossession, marginalization, and socio-spatial exclusion unfold among subaltern communities in contemporary Kashmir? In approaching this question, we focused on four distinct but equally marginalized communities: the Hanji (traditionally water-dependent fisherfolk), the Pashtuns (a historically migrant ethnic group), the Sheikhs (living in historically stigmatized neighbourhoods), and the Tibetan Muslims (descendants of Kashmiri-origin Muslim traders who migrated from Lhasa post-1959). Each of these groups has experienced varying forms of structural vulnerability, ranging from displacement and cultural assimilation to caste-based discrimination and linguistic erasure.

Designing our research instruments began with identifying a set of central analytical variables. These included livelihood disruption, displacement, caste and ethnic identity, access to infrastructure and services, gendered exclusions, and spatial marginality. Our key intent was to document everyday experiences of these communities as shaped by state-led development, cultural dominance, and systemic neglect. Consequently, the framing of our semi-structured questionnaires was not merely technical but deeply shaped by the intellectual frameworks that guided our field orientation.

The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Urdu and Kashmiri. For the Pashtun community, interviews were conducted primarily in Pashto, with the help of community-based research assistants.

The language of the questionnaire itself was not a neutral choice, it was a methodological decision shaped by the sociolinguistic terrain of each field site. Where language functioned as a barrier, it also became a point of reflection on power, access, and the nature of social belonging.

The questionnaire covered a wide array of themes, including household structures, occupational patterns, displacement history, relations with neighbours, caste experiences, aspirations, experiences with public institutions (schools, hospitals, police), traditional knowledge, and cultural practices. Importantly, we also incorporated open-ended prompts to capture memory, emotion, and resistance, elements that are often lost in rigid survey structures. For example, instead of asking only "Do you face discrimination in hospitals?" we also asked, "Can you recall an experience at a hospital that made you feel excluded or treated differently?" The responses we received revealed far more than yes/no binaries.

Our process of designing these instruments was deeply informed by multiple perspectives. Feminist ethnography, for instance, pushed us to consider how the field is not neutral but gendered. This perspective was especially critical while working with women in the Pashtun and Hanji communities, where purdah norms, gendered spatial boundaries, and norms of public speech required that we approach interviews with reflexivity, caution, and consent. Similarly, postcolonial and subaltern studies informed our positionality as researchers, not merely as "experts" gathering data, but as guests in historically marginalized spaces where knowledge flows must be dialogic and accountable.

This iterative process of design, translation, pre-testing, and revision led us to a set of community-specific questionnaires. These were further customized in the field as we began to see which questions elicited meaningful engagement and which ones were received with silence, suspicion, or hesitation. In that sense, the questionnaire itself became a living tool, reshaped by encounters in the field.

### *Incorporating Visual Ethnography*

Beyond textual methods, our project integrated elements of visual ethnography to supplement and complicate the oral narratives we were collecting. We treated the visual not merely as "evidence" but as a distinct epistemological tool, one that could access layers of experience not always

verbalized. This included photography, spatial mapping, visual observation of objects (such as religious icons, tailoring tools, or household architecture), and digital storytelling.

In the Rakh-e-Arth resettlement colony, for instance, it was difficult for participants to articulate what had been lost in the transition from Dal Lake to their new homes. But visual methods, walking tours with residents who pointed to cracks in their walls, flooded alleyways, or makeshift drainage systems, allowed us to document displacement not as a singular event but as an ongoing process of infrastructural neglect. The act of photographing these everyday realities opened a space for residents to comment, explain, or critique what they saw as failures of the promised "state-of-the-art" colony.

> There is no public health centre or a small dispensary in our locality. What is the worst part of the sorry state of affairs is that we don't even have transport facilities available to rush to the hospital in case of any medical emergency, said *Bilal Ahmad*, one of the residents.

Similarly, in the Tibetan Muslim community, images of tailoring shops, old family photo albums, and traditional Tila Dozi embroidery work provided a different register of storytelling, one rooted in aesthetics, memory, and craftsmanship. Often, visual prompts invited deeper conversation: an old black-and-white portrait of a Tibetan ancestor would lead to recollections of Tibet, the exile, and the painful re-rooting in Srinagar. These visual traces helped map identity not as a static category but as a narrative in flux, shaped by historical ruptures.

Importantly, visual methods were never extractive. We followed ethical protocols of consent, anonymization, and shared ownership. Whenever feasible, we shared the photographs or maps with community members and invited their comments. In a few cases, participants requested that certain images not be used or circulated, especially when they touched upon politically sensitive issues such as the status of Tibetan refugees or caste discrimination.

The plaque on the masjid reads as Masjid e Hijrat (hijrat meaning migration) in remembrance to their migration from Tibet

*From Narratives to Case Studies*

Case studies were not "selected" from data; rather, they emerged from the field as powerful narratives that carried both empirical richness and analytical depth. Our goal was not to present representative types but to illuminate how the larger processes of marginalization are lived and narrated by specific individuals or households.

Take the case of Nazir Ahmed from the Hanji community. His recollection of being displaced from Dal Lake to Rakh-e-Arth, the loss of his fishing-based livelihood, and the daily indignities suffered in hospitals and schools became a central narrative in our chapter on displacement. Nazir's testimony brought into focus multiple axes of marginality: caste-based stigma, infrastructural failure, bureaucratic neglect, and the erosion of social networks.

> Yem che Weichan assei neiche nazrei, yehndi khetre che aies Achoot (They look down upon us, for them we are untouchable).

Another case, that of Sanaullah Khan from the Pashtun community, revealed the layered nature of cultural retention and linguistic decline. As a retired broadcaster who once read Pashto news on All India Radio, his sorrow over the disappearance of Pashto programs and the silence on the radio mirrored the fading of his community's linguistic heritage in Kashmir. His room full of books and his nostalgia for radio frequencies became metaphors for memory, loss, and erasure.

In each of these cases, the decision to highlight individual voices was guided by a broader commitment to dignity and depth. We did not aim to render them as objects of study but as co-narrators in a shared intellectual and ethical project. Each case study was contextualized within its socio-political milieu but also allowed to stand on its own, testifying to how large-scale policies and discourses materialize in specific lives.

## 3 Navigational Challenges in the Field

Fieldwork among socially marginalized and politically invisible communities in Kashmir brought with it multiple navigational challenges, logistical, epistemological, and ethical. This section outlines our experience of "administering" fieldwork as a form of ongoing negotiation, rather than a fixed protocol. The process of data collection was as much about manoeuvring structural barriers and affective boundaries as it was about asking questions and recording responses.

### *Access and Trust: Gaining Entry in Marginalized Spaces*

The first and perhaps most persistent challenge we encountered was that of access. This was not simply geographic or logistical, though in many cases the lack of roads, drainage, or transportation posed genuine barriers, but social and relational. Working with marginalized communities like the Hanjis and the Sheikhs, especially those displaced from their original habitats, meant that we were entering spaces marked by suspicion, hurt, and broken promises by state actors and external organizations.

In the Rakh-e-Arth colony, where displaced Hanjis had been relocated from the Dal Lake area, our arrival was met not with welcome but with a series of anxious questions: *"Are you from the Power Department?"*

*"Have you come to cut our electricity?" "Are you from a government agency conducting a survey?"* These questions were not rhetorical. They were born from real experiences of surveillance, neglect, and state intrusion. The members of the community associated the arrival of outsiders, especially those with official-looking files or formal tone, with punitive action, bureaucratic delays, or unfulfilled promises.

We quickly learned that trust could not be assumed. It had to be earned. This meant returning multiple times, sometimes without asking any questions, simply spending time in the local grocery store or waiting on a bench with community elders. In the absence of formal leadership structures (unlike the Tibetan or Sheikh communities), access had to be brokered through personal relationships. Eventually, two elders from the Dal Lake area, who had not been displaced, agreed to accompany us to Rakh-e-Arth and introduce us to their relatives. Even then, rapport-building took weeks, not days.

Among the Tibetan Muslim community, the dynamic was slightly different. Access was controlled through formal structures such as the Tibetan Muslim Welfare Association (TMWA), which had decided that all interviews must first be vetted or conducted through the Association. This form of gatekeeping had its own logic: as a politically sensitive community, often viewed with suspicion by both the Indian state and Tibetan Buddhists, the Association had evolved to act as both representative and protector. Our early interviews were limited to office-bearers. Only after several weeks of interaction and transparency about our research objectives were we invited to individual homes and businesses.

Pashtun communities, particularly in the Watlar and Gutlibagh areas, presented yet another kind of challenge. Unlike the displaced Hanji or refugee Tibetan communities, the Pashtuns of Kashmir were semi-integrated rural communities. While they did not exhibit immediate suspicion, the challenge lay in the absence of formalized cultural mediators and the presence of strong gendered boundaries. In Gutlibagh, the gender norms were so strict that male researchers could not even speak to women in public. In a few cases, Pashtun men refused to sit for interviews if there were women researchers present. Conversely, Pashtun women preferred to speak only with female researchers, and only in the absence of male relatives. Respecting these boundaries required us to develop flexible, gender-sensitive field protocols and employ community-based female research assistants.

Across all four communities, we understood access not as a one-time event but as a process. Even after conducting interviews, we would often be tested by participants, asked to revisit, clarify, or justify how their stories would be used. This "sceptical hospitality" was a valuable check on our positionality. As Mahmood (2003) and Shaw et al. (2020) remind us, marginalized communities have a right to be suspicious of those who come to study them. It is often a form of resistance against being misrepresented, exoticized, or instrumentalized.

### *Gendered Fieldwork and Asymmetries of Power*

A recurring challenge across all our field sites was gender access, particularly among the Pashtuns and displaced Hanjis. Among the Hanjis living near Dal Lake, women were relatively visible: they sold fish in open markets, participated in community events, and were used to interacting with strangers. However, in the Rakh-e-Arth colony, this visibility disappeared. Women were mostly indoors, and their professional roles were largely confined to household work. Speaking with them required prior introduction, cultural sensitivity, and, in some cases, female intermediaries.

Pashtun women were especially difficult to reach. The purdah system in these communities is strictly observed, and public interaction with non-kin males is discouraged. Our first conversation with a female teacher in Gutlibagh illustrates this vividly. She agreed to speak to us only if the interaction happened through a female researcher, inside her workplace (a girls' school), and with her remaining veiled throughout. Even in this protected setting, her performance of cultural codes, such as veiling and controlling the terms of conversation, was a powerful assertion of agency. Her conversation was shaped not by passivity but by cultural reflexivity.

These dynamics were not incidental, they were foundational to our methodology. We came to understand that "field access" is not a neutral matter of logistics, but always mediated by gender, class, and caste. As researchers from relatively privileged academic backgrounds, our own positionalities carried weight. We were perceived, sometimes correctly, as agents of the dominant. Our challenge was to remain aware of this perception and to not reproduce the very hierarchies we were trying to critique.

To navigate this, we employed a mixed-gender research team, practised team-based field notes, and engaged in ongoing reflection through research journals. These tools allowed us to flag discomfort, reflect on

refusals, and identify power asymmetries within our interactions. Feminist ethnographic insights (Mahmood, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 1991) reminded us that silence, hesitation, or withdrawal were not failures but data points in themselves.

Hanji women selling fish on the footpath

### *Structural Constraints: Bureaucracy, Geography, and Crisis*

In addition to relational and gendered challenges, we also faced material constraints that impeded smooth data collection. The very conditions that made these communities vulnerable, lack of infrastructure, bureaucratic neglect, absence of public services, also made them hard to research.

The Rakh-e-Arth colony, for instance, is located on flood-prone marshland. A few days of rain rendered the area nearly inaccessible. Streets turned into mud channels, alleys flooded, and participants cancelled appointments due to fear of illness or inability to leave their homes. Even when we reached the field site, basic facilities such as electricity or water were unreliable, affecting our ability to take notes, record conversations, or conduct long interviews.

In the Tibetan colonies of Eidgah and Hawal, the crowded lanes and tightly packed houses left little room for privacy. Discussions in public spaces were often cut short, either by onlookers intruding or by speakers themselves, wary of being overheard when touching on sensitive issues like Chinese repression, Indian citizenship, or internal community tensions.

Bureaucracy was another challenge. Some community members, particularly Tibetan Muslims and the members of the Hanji community, mistook us for census or intelligence officials. In a region where identity is layered through Aadhar, ration cards, state subject status, and refugee certificates, even simple questions about name, age, or work could create anxiety. To ease this, we showed academic credentials, used consent forms in multiple languages, and assured confidentiality.

Participants were also hesitant about recordings, fearing misuse of their voices or misrepresentation that could endanger them. We adopted flexible methods, taking field notes by hand, recording only with verbal consent, and revisiting conversations to check translations, clarify meanings, or share edited transcripts before publication.

Finally, the work carried an emotional toll. Listening to stories of trauma, displacement, and neglect was draining. As a team, we held regular debriefings to process this labour, reminding ourselves that ethnography is not only intellectual but also emotional, requiring patience, care, and presence.

## 4 Nature of Findings: Intentions, Outcomes, and the Role of Visual Ethnography

Our research set out to document everyday forms of dispossession among historically marginalized communities in Kashmir. We anticipated that our fieldwork would reveal systematic exclusions shaped by state-led development, caste-based hierarchies, and ethno-political boundaries. While these themes remained central to our analysis, what emerged during the fieldwork was far more complex and layered than our initial framing had allowed. This final section reflects on the disjuncture between research intentions and outcomes, the unexpected insights enabled by visual ethnography, and the broader ethical implications of witnessing vulnerability and resilience.

### *Disjuncture Between Intentions and Outcomes*

At the outset, our intention was to generate an empirical understanding of marginalization through data that could speak to developmental failure, exclusionary governance, and infrastructural neglect. We were also interested in exploring how state mechanisms interacted with local caste, ethnic, and linguistic hierarchies to create persistent forms of everyday vulnerability.

However, what unfolded during fieldwork disrupted any straightforward mapping of these processes. Rather than fitting neatly into policy categories like "urban poor," "refugees," or "scheduled castes," the communities we engaged with presented complicated stories of cultural belonging, fractured identity, emotional loss, and historical memory. These stories pushed us to move beyond structural critique towards a more nuanced ethnographic interpretation that could accommodate pain, hope, nostalgia, and ambivalence.

For instance, while we expected the displaced Hanji community at Rakh-e-Arth to focus on the lack of amenities (roads, water, drainage), many of them instead began by speaking of emotional rupture, the loss of Dal Lake not merely as a home but as a cultural world. They narrated how their relationship to the lake was tied to ancestry, ritual, memory, and livelihood. Displacement, in their words, was not just a change of address; it was a form of exile. Nazir Ahmed told us, "They threw us out from our birthplace by calling us polluters." This formulation turned the conservation discourse on its head. The lake, supposedly being saved from pollution, was rendered culturally and socially barren by removing those who had historically sustained it.

Similarly, in the Tibetan Muslim community, we expected to encounter narratives of refugee experience and material deprivation. What we found instead was a deep, ongoing negotiation of identity. Many elders identified strongly with their Kashmiri ancestry, while younger Tibetans saw themselves caught between three cultural anchors: Tibetan, Kashmiri, and Muslim. One respondent noted, "We are not Tibetan enough for Dharamshala, and not Kashmiri enough for Srinagar." This identity crisis, rooted in history but refracted through the lens of urban belonging, schooling, and inter-community dynamics, was not something our initial questionnaires had accounted for.

Among the Pashtuns, our focus on cultural resilience and economic transformation led us to overlook, at first, the gendered silences that shaped community life. It was only through repeated attempts at interviews, most of which failed, that we began to recognize how gender operated not just as a thematic concern but as a fieldwork barrier. Purdah norms were not merely restrictive; they were expressive of moral orders, collective anxieties, and honour-based social organization. The silences of Pashtun women, their conditional interactions, and their careful regulation of space, time, and language opened up a different register of inquiry, one that centred on embodied practice rather than verbal narrative.

These disjunctures taught us a valuable lesson: the field does not yield what we want to find; it reveals what it must. Ethnography, when practised with attentiveness and humility, refuses closure. It invites the researcher to dwell in ambiguity, contradiction, and surprise.

### *Visual Ethnography: Seeing What Was Not Said*

One of the most powerful tools in bridging the gap between expectations and actual field experience was visual ethnography. Photographs, maps, object analysis, and informal videography enabled a different form of witnessing, one that captured the textures of everyday life in ways that words alone could not.

In the Rakh-e-Arth colony, for example, we documented cracked houses, stagnant floodwater in alleys, and corroded electric poles. These images became evidence not only of infrastructural neglect but of a deeper dispossession, the failed promise of a "modern colony" replacing the organic and community-based ecosystem of Dal Lake. When we showed these photographs back to residents, they responded with stories we had not heard during interviews. One woman said, "Look at this road. Even if you put gold on it, it will sink." This metaphor, so visually resonant, spoke volumes about the community's sense of betrayal by the state.

Hanji women selling fish on the roadside, negotiating the prices with male customers

Among Tibetan Muslims, visual methods helped uncover cultural continuities that remained invisible in verbal discourse. Family photo albums revealed styles of dress, wedding rituals, and migration stories. In tailoring shops, the presence of embroidered Qur'anic verses, Tibetan motifs, and Kashmiri patterns reflected a unique syncretism that was hard to describe but easy to observe. These visual cues helped us analyze cultural hybridity not as a theoretical abstraction but as a lived reality, one stitched into shawls, displayed on shop walls, or worn during religious festivals.

A woman in traditional Tibetan Attire

In the Pashtun villages, photographs of community tandoors, ritual gatherings, and old weapons preserved by elders gave us insight into traditions of hospitality, conflict resolution, and moral codes. One elder showed us his family's ancestral "pagri" (turban) and explained its role in the jirga system, where it signified responsibility, honour, and witness. This visual artefact became the entry point for a rich conversation on declining indigenous justice systems and the community's relationship to formal courts.

Locals eating together after helping their neighbour build a house. The practice of Asher

Importantly, visual ethnography also allowed for multi-vocality. By sharing images with participants and inviting their interpretation, we created space for their own narratives to shape the analysis. In this way, the visual became not only a documentation tool but a dialogic medium. It disrupted the monopoly of the researcher's gaze and restored agency to the participants.

Visual data also helped us understand spatial marginalization in literal terms. In Gutlibagh, we drew maps with local residents to document their access to public facilities. What emerged was a spatial narrative of exclusion, Pashtun homes located far from public schools, health centres, and municipal services. One participant noted, "On this side of the road, we are not seen." That one sentence, coupled with the map they drew, became a powerful statement about invisibility.

### *Between Documentation and Solidarity: Towards an Ethics of Witnessing*

As our fieldwork deepened, we began to realize that the act of documenting marginalization is never a neutral or passive task. When we sat in a Hanji elder's house as he recounted the floods, or watched a Tibetan Muslim woman demonstrate how her mother used to hand-stitch

prayer rugs, or walked through alleyways filled with sewage in the Sheikh neighbourhoods, we were not merely collecting data. We were bearing witness.

Ethnographic research, especially with subaltern groups, comes with a moral imperative. To listen, record, and write is not just to describe suffering, it is to engage with it, to understand its conditions, and to challenge the structures that make it possible. We do not claim to have "given voice" to these communities. They have always had voices. What we did, at best, was make ourselves available to listen, and to ensure that what we heard was represented with care, context, and complexity.

This also meant revising some of our writing practices. Where participants requested anonymity or redacted certain portions, we honoured those requests. Where stories felt too raw to be immediately interpreted, we let them sit. We slowed down our analysis to accommodate emotion. We recognized that grief, anger, nostalgia, and silence are all valid forms of knowledge.

In this sense, our findings were not simply outcomes of a research process; they were co-produced through encounters, relationships, and ethical commitments. Many of our most meaningful insights emerged not from formal interviews but from tea-time conversations, impromptu walks, or hours spent sitting quietly in someone's courtyard.

To document marginalization is also to confront privilege, our own as researchers, and the larger systems that allow some voices to circulate and others to be silenced. We saw this most clearly when we tried to discuss caste-based discrimination in public forums and encountered resistance or denial from those in dominant communities. We saw it again when Tibetan Muslims spoke of being treated as "outsiders" despite having lived in Kashmir for over half a century. And we saw it yet again in the way Pashto language programs disappeared from radio channels, silencing an entire linguistic archive.

Our research does not claim to offer solutions. But it does hope to offer clarity, about how marginalization works not just through big events like displacement, but through everyday practices of exclusion, neglect, and erasure. It also hopes to document resilience, not in romanticized terms, but as a material, relational, and affective force that enables communities to survive, adapt, and assert their presence.

## 5 Conclusion

The ethnographic methodology we adopted for this project was grounded in a commitment to context, reflexivity, and relationality. It was shaped by the politics of the field, the vulnerabilities of the communities, and the limitations of our own tools. Our journey, methodological, emotional, and intellectual, taught us that fieldwork is less about mastering knowledge and more about cultivating humility.

Through visual methods, narrative case studies, participant observation, and gender-sensitive engagement, we were able to construct a multi-layered portrait of dispossession and resistance in contemporary Kashmir. What emerged were not generalizable conclusions but situated knowledges, each rooted in a particular community, history, and social formation.

As ethnographers, our task was not to reduce this complexity but to honour it. In doing so, we hope this chapter contributes to broader conversations on how to ethically research and represent communities living under the shadow of development, caste, displacement, and cultural erasure.

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CHAPTER 4

# Framing Lived Realities: Employing Visual Ethnography to Document Informal Settlements, Case Study of Kapershera

*Hima Trisha Mohan and Deepanshu Mohan*

**Abstract** This chapter studies Kapashera, an informal settlement at the Delhi–Gurgaon border, through photography, participatory video, and spatial mapping. It captures everyday life, precarious labor, and the resilience of residents facing urban marginality. Visual methods are framed as both research and advocacy, bridging scholarship and policy. The chapter demonstrates how visual ethnography humanises marginalized populations, challenges dominant urban narratives, and offers insights into informal settlement dynamics, contributing to more inclusive debates on governance.

**Keywords** Informal settlements · Kapashera · Visual storytelling · Urban marginality · Participatory video · Policy advocacy · Resilience

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# 1 Introduction

Kapashera is a dense informal settlement on the Delhi-Haryana border, home to thousands of rural–urban migrant workers employed in nearby industrial hubs. These migrants are mostly from India's poorest states. They live in cramped one-room units with shared toilets and scarce amenities, chasing economic survival under precarious conditions. The research problem at hand was to understand and represent the everyday experiences of precarity, marginalization, and survival in such an informal migrant community. Conventional qualitative methods, like interviews and textual fieldnotes, provide rich narratives but often struggle to capture the embodied, spatial, and visual dimensions of life in slums. Researchers increasingly argue that text-alone cannot fully convey the intricate, visual elements of life that may not be effectively communicated through language alone. In response, our study adopted visual storyboarding as an innovative ethnographic method to document and analyze daily life in Kapashera. By creating storyboards from video and photo material recorded in the field, we aimed to produce a nuanced, multifaceted account of life from the margins. This approach is grounded in visual ethnography, which integrates photography and video in research to reveal aspects of culture and identity that elude purely verbal description.

The use of visual storyboards addresses both an empirical and a methodological gap. Empirically, migrant workers in settlements like Kapashera are an invisible population in urban policy, often omitted from official data and poorly understood by policymakers. Capturing their voices and daily struggles is vital for informing inclusive development policy. Methodologically, visual storyboarding extends traditional ethnography by offering the explanatory value of visualizations of findings and challenging word-only representations with a mode of inquiry that can reveal the subtle and the difficult aspects of social life. In this study,

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visual storyboards helped bridge the gap between abstract descriptions of precarity and the lived reality in Kapashera's alleyways and workshops.

This chapter is structured as a case-based methodological exposition. We begin with the Methodological Journey, detailing how the study was designed from framing survey questionnaires and interview guides to employing visual ethnography and developing storyboards as case studies. We highlight our analytical process and how multiple perspectives were incorporated. Next, in Navigational Challenges, we discuss the on-the-ground difficulties of doing fieldwork in Kapashera's context including building trust, collecting data under practical constraints, and ethical or logistical hurdles, and the adaptive strategies we used. We then describe the Nature of Findings, showing how visual storyboards enriched our understanding of precarity, marginalization, and everyday survival in Kapashera. Through examples, we illustrate how the visual dimension provided distinctive analytical and representational insights into the community's struggles. Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the methodological contributions of this case study, the limitations of the approach, and directions for future research and policy. By sharing this in-depth account, we hope to demonstrate the value of visual storyboarding as a research method for scholars and practitioners interested in ethnography, visual methods, and development policy.

## 2 Methodological Journey

Our inquiry was guided by the central question: *How can a participatory visual ethnography capture and convey the lived experience of law, precarity, and marginalization in development contexts?*

In early 2021, a team of ethnographers from the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) initiated fieldwork in Kapashera. An ethnographic case study approach was chosen, aiming for a deep, contextual understanding of this single settlement as an exemplar of broader issues facing migrant workers. Ethnography, by its nature, requires immersion in the participants' world and an openness to their perspectives. To that foundation we added a visual methodology, recognizing that images and visual narratives can powerfully document processes of identity and survival in context (Pink 2008). This study was conducted in the wake of

the COVID-19 pandemic and this timing pushed us to rethink conventional methods. During the pandemic, researchers often faced restricted access to communities and had to rely on remote or visual means for data collection. Visual storyboarding offered a way to maintain a form of co-presence with participants despite any physical distance. It allowed us to compile stories from what we could observe and record, ensuring that critical moments and environments were not lost even if note-taking or prolonged interviews became difficult under pandemic conditions.

The displacement of migrant lower and middle classes with low levels of cultural capital highlights the importance of education and skills in the new job market (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

### *The Research Team*

A key feature of our methodology was the involvement of a diverse research team, which helped integrate multiple perspectives throughout the project. The team included academic researchers with varying backgrounds in economics, sociology and law as well as a visual ethnographer/ photographer. We also collaborated closely with local non-profit workers

from Kapashera notably a youth-led NGO called IYRC that works with second-generation migrant children. These local partners acted as cultural insiders, facilitators, and translators during fieldwork. Embracing such support enhanced our efficiency and depth of insight. Research assistants helped with literature reviews, questionnaire design, and transcription, which freed the field ethnographers to focus on direct engagement. This aligns with the CNES Visual Storyboards team's approach of having a back-end team to improve data quality and allow field researchers to concentrate on immersion.

The multiple perspectives within our team with an insider/outsider perspective, disciplinary variations, male and female researchers, functioned as a form of triangulation. It ensured that our interpretation of visual and textual data was critically examined from different angles, increasing the study's rigor. For example, while sociologists on the team examined community power dynamics, the visual specialist focused on non-verbal cues in photographs, and local NGO colleagues alerted us to nuances such as gender norms, that an outsider might miss. This collaborative, interdisciplinary ethos resonated with the broader trends in ethnography that emphasize reflexivity and the researcher's positionality. We were mindful that every image or text we produce is embedded in power relations and our own standpoint must be reflected upon critically (Rose 2022).

It is important to consider other parameters that demarcate lines of differentiation among people and create a complex configuration of social structure (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

## *Questionnaire Framing and Pilot Study*

Before launching full-scale fieldwork, we developed a semi-structured questionnaire to guide interviews and a community survey. Drawing on prior studies of urban informal workers and on initial visits to the site, we identified core themes of employment and wages, living conditions and access to services, daily routines (using a Day Reconstruction Method), gender roles, social networks, and experiences during the pandemic (lockdowns, migration, etc.). The questionnaire was prepared in English and translated into Hindi (the lingua franca for migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in Kapashera). We conducted a pilot study with a handful of respondents in early 2021. This was a smaller-scale trial to ensure our questions were clear and culturally appropriate. Feedback from the pilot led to several refinements. We simplified academic jargon, rephrased sensitive questions, especially around income or identity and to be more open-ended. We also added prompts for visuals by asking if they had any

photos of their living space they might share, or if we could photograph certain daily scenes.

The pilot also tested our planned integration of visual methods. For instance, one pilot interview was accompanied by photographing the participant's household and workplace commute, to see how comfortable people were with a camera present and to gauge the kind of visual data we might capture. After the pilot, the team regrouped to discuss results and finalize the instruments. We decided to proceed with ethnographic fieldwork spanning observations, interviews, and visual documentation over approximately 10–12 weeks (a timeline consistent with our project planning framework). Fieldwork was carried out in two phases: an initial phase in early 2021 spanning three months and a follow-up 6 week phase in early 2023, allowing us to observe changes over time and in different pandemic/post-pandemic contexts.

### *Visual Ethnography and Storyboard Creation*

In the field, our ethnographic technique combined traditional participant-observation with systematic visual recording. Two ethnographers lived near Kapashera for the duration of each phase, spending days in the community by talking to people, joining in local events, and observing everyday activities. They kept detailed field notes, which are crucial in any ethnography to capture context and reflections. Alongside, with consent, we took hundreds of photographs and hours of video footage. Photographs included scenes like the interior of a one-room dwelling, clusters of workers gathered at the mazdoor mandi (labor market) each morning, women cooking over a shared stove in a hallway, and notice boards advertising tailoring jobs. Short video interviews were also conducted. For example, asking a respondent to narrate their daily schedule on camera, or filming a walk through the narrow lanes to the water distribution point. We were careful to obtain informed consent for all images, explaining that these would be used for research and possibly included in publications in storyboard form.

The changes in the class structure of Kapashera and Narela can be observed by analysing their demographic composition (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

In keeping with ethical guidelines in visual research (Rose 2022), participants' privacy and agency were deeply respected. They could request not to be photographed or filmed in certain contexts, and we showed them some of the images when possible to ensure they were comfortable with how they were depicted. We also informed that they could withdraw their consent at any given point. Participants did not themselves produce the visuals. Instead, the researchers acted as the storytellers behind the camera. While this meant the authorship of images was ours, we strived to centre participants' perspectives by closely aligning visuals with their narrated experiences. For instance, if a worker described how crowded the rental rooms are, we would visually document that exact context. If a mother spoke of sending money home every month, we might photograph her doing a remittance transfer or writing a letter home to include as a storyboard panel. In this way, the storyboard content was very much from the participant capturing their world, though by the researcher, who curated the content into a narrative sequence.

After fieldwork, the visual materials were organized and curated into a series of photo and video essay that comprised a visual storyboard. Each storyboard is essentially a series of still images—photographs or video

stills, coupled with captions or dialogue excerpts, arranged to illustrate a particular story or theme. We developed case studies of several prototypical individuals in Kapashera. One storyboard follows Raju, a male migrant worker, through a day in his life—waking before dawn, preparing tea in a cramped room, traveling to a factory, working an arduous 12-hour shift, and returning home late to dine with roommates. Another storyboard portrays Sangeeta, a young mother and garment-factory worker, highlighting the double burden on women—from cooking for her family at 5am to standing all day at work, then tutoring her children in the evening by the roadside as space inside the home was limited. These narrative case studies were closely based on real participants (with identifying details altered for anonymity). We chose them to exemplify key patterns from our data: precarious work, gendered roles, community coping mechanisms, and the impact of pandemic disruptions.

In assembling the storyboards, we effectively conducted a visual analysis by selecting which moments to include and in what order. This required interpreting the significance of those moments. We often integrated verbatim quotes from interviews as captions to give voice to the images. This is an approach that is in line with a multimodal narrative technique, where text and image together construct meaning (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2020). By combining visual evidence with participants' own words, the storyboards achieved a multi-layered representation, bridging what is seen and what is said. This method by blending text and imagery can enhance interpretative depth while maintaining the immediacy of visual representation (Rose 2022). In our case, the visuals provided context for the quotes, and the quotes provided clarity and personal voice for the visuals, together creating a richer narrative than either alone.

### *Data Management and Analysis*

Managing the diverse data survey responses, interview transcripts, field notes, and images required a systematic strategy. We employed a master Excel sheet to catalogue and cross-reference the textual data, i.e., survey results and interview excerpts, by theme. Each respondent had an entry with key demographics and summary answers, which allowed us to detect patterns (e.g. most common sources of income, average remittances sent, changes in working hours after COVID). The qualitative responses were coded thematically. For example, all mentions of housing conditions or overtime work were grouped.

Meanwhile, our visual data was organized into folders by theme and case study. We tagged photos with keywords (like "crowded room," "women's work group," "factory floor") to assist in retrieval. During analysis, we iteratively went back and forth between textual and visual data—a process akin to triangulation. If survey data showed a significant drop in income post-pandemic, we examined interviews for explanations and also looked at photographs that might reflect the change such as images of migrant families departing during lockdown, or belongings packed up. One analytical tool we used was creating a visual timeline for certain participants, laying out photos in chronological order next to their narrated timeline from the Day Reconstruction exercise. This helped us visualize their entire day (or key events over months), making it easier to identify cause-and-effect sequences or repeated challenges. For instance, one worker's storyboard made evident that each month's end brought a period of hunger because wages had been exhausted paying debts. This was something that emerged when we saw images corresponding to the interview segment about skipping meals. The multimodal analysis was informed by looking at how different semiotic modes (visual, textual, spatial) interact to create meaning. We treated images not just as illustrations but as data points to be interpreted in context. As recommended by visual methodologists (Pink 2008; Rose 2022), we considered how an image was produced and what it potentially communicated. For example, a photograph of a worker's hands covered in dye from a textile unit was analyzed for what it said about occupational hazards and health neglect. These were details that the worker himself hadn't verbalized in the interview but were starkly visible in the image.

The concentration of factories and workshops in this area highlights the role of industry in shaping urban geography and the dismal employment opportunities available to the working-class population (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

Throughout analysis, maintaining reflexivity was crucial. We regularly discussed as a team how our presence and choices might shape the data, acknowledging, for instance, that people might act somewhat differently on camera, or that our storyboard narratives were one of many possible interpretations. This reflexive stance aligns with the ethnographic principle that researchers must be aware of their biases and the power they hold in representing others. We attempted to involve participants in validating certain interpretations whenever feasible. After assembling a storyboard draft, if possible we returned to the participant or a community representative to share the story outline, inviting their feedback. We asked: Did this feel like an accurate portrayal? Did we miss something important? This member-checking, while limited due to time and some participants having left the area, provided an added layer of perspective. Thus, the methodological journey fused conventional ethnographic techniques with visual storytelling, and multiple sources of data came together into a coherent analysis. By carefully planning the research design, leveraging a team's diverse strengths, and iteratively analyzing across visual

and textual realms, we endeavored to produce a case study that is both methodologically robust and richly insightful.

## 3 Navigational Challenges

Conducting fieldwork in Kapashera presented a range of challenges, testing our methodological plan and requiring on-the-spot adaptation. We describe here the major hurdles we encountered and how we navigated them in practice.

### *Gaining Access and Trust*

As outsiders entering a marginalized community, we initially met understandable suspicion and hesitance from residents. Early on, one migrant worker retorted to us in frustration, *"Madam, stray dogs live better lives than I ever will. Is this what you want to hear from us?"*. His exclamation revealed a fear that researchers only sought sensational stories of suffering. Building trust required patience, cultural sensitivity, and partnership with local actors. We leveraged our connection with the IYRC NGO, whose staff were mostly young people from Kapashera or similar backgrounds. They introduced us to families, vouching for our intent.

We made multiple preliminary visits just to chat informally over tea, without pulling out cameras or questionnaires. By immersing ourselves in daily community life, we gradually established rapport. Over time, participants saw us less as interrogators and more as allies or listeners. This trust was critical, especially when it came to the intrusive act of photographing personal spaces. We found that once relationships were built, many residents were surprisingly open and even proud to have their reality documented, hoping it might bring positive change. Still, we remained cautious and respectful. If someone appeared uncomfortable with the camera, we stopped immediately. We also addressed trust by transparency, explaining our research goals, and even showing some of our prior visual outputs from other case studies to demonstrate how their community's story might be portrayed.

### *Ethical and Privacy Concerns*

Visual ethnography amplifies ethical considerations. In Kapashera's tight-knit environment, anonymity is hard to preserve in images. A photo

might show faces, home interiors, or landmarks that make participants identifiable. We obtained written or filmed consent for all interviews and photographs, but we also took steps to protect identities in dissemination. In published materials and presentations, we sometimes obscured faces or used wider-angle shots focusing on context rather than individuals (e.g., a silhouette of a group of workers walking to the factory, rather than a closeup portrait). For storyboards intended for academic audiences, we changed all names and avoided any sensitive personal data in captions.

Another ethical challenge was representational accuracy. We carried the responsibility to portray people's lives truthfully and respectfully. We were mindful of avoiding dramatic images that can exploit suffering for shock value. Instead, we aimed for dignity in our visuals, showing resilience and agency alongside hardship. For example, instead of photographing someone in a moment of vulnerability without context, we would frame the shot to include an element of their agency, like a woman cooking her family's meal—poor conditions but she is the active subject. We drew on ethical guidelines from visual researchers, who emphasize treating participants as partners and ensuring they have control and voice in how they are depicted (Prosser 2012). Indeed, the multi-perspective collaboration helped here. Our NGO partners could alert us if an image might be taken the wrong way or stigmatize the community, and participants themselves often guided us to what they wanted to show. For instance, one participant said "***Please take a photo of this cracked wall, so people see how we live.***"

### *Gender and Cultural Barriers*

Gender dynamics in Kapashera introduced specific challenges. The community is socially conservative, and our attempts to interview or photograph women initially met resistance from some men. In the first field phase, many women were either not allowed by their husbands to speak at length with us or were very reserved, especially with male researchers present. We adapted by ensuring female researchers led interviews with women. During the second phase (2023), out of 32 in-depth interviews, 18 were with married women working as daily wage laborers. This was a considerable improvement in representation. To achieve this, we often scheduled visits in late mornings or afternoons when husbands were away at work. We sometimes conducted group interviews in safe

spaces like a tutoring room at the IYRC NGO with 2–3 women together, which created a more comfortable environment for them to speak up.

Nonetheless, some topics remained delicate. For instance, domestic issues or reproductive health struggles were not easily discussed. We respected boundaries, steering conversation gently and allowing interviewees to skip any question that caused discomfort. Visual documentation involving women had to be particularly sensitive. Some women did not want their faces photographed due to social norms or simply privacy. In such cases, we focused on hands at work, or took photos from behind, to still include their presence without violating norms. Despite these obstacles, engaging with women's perspectives was crucial, as our findings on gender-specific challenges revealed. The effort to apply a sensitive gender lens throughout was rewarded with rich insights into women's workloads and coping strategies that would have been missed had we acquiesced to the initial resistance. This experience highlighted how power structures in the field (patriarchal norms) can impede research, and how careful negotiation aided by female team members and gradual trust-building can navigate such barriers.

### *Physical and Logistical Difficulties*

Kapashera's physical environment posed practical challenges for data collection. The settlement is a maze of congested lanes and semi-permanent structures. Conducting a formal interview in a quiet, controlled setting was nearly impossible. There is constant noise from machines from workshops, loudspeakers, children, traffic, and no private space free from interruptions. We adapted by embracing a more fluid, on-the-move interviewing style. Rather than a sit-down Q&A, many interviews became walking conversations through the neighborhood, or chats while participants continued their tasks. This required multitasking from researchers—one leading the conversation, another mentally noting or filming key points.

In the case of Narela, cultural capital has become increasingly important in determining social status and economic opportunities as was evidenced through our field work in skill training centres and child education programmes held in Narela (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

We also had to deal with environmental factors like heat as Delhi summers can be 40 °C in shade, which made afternoon work exhausting for both participants and us. We adjusted our schedule to do more observations and photographs during daylight, and conduct longer interviews in the cooler evenings when people were more relaxed and available. Another issue was data management in the field. With patchy electricity, keeping devices charged and safely storing the large volume of photos/videos was a daily concern. We carried backup batteries and routinely uploaded data to cloud storage whenever we got a stable connection off-site, to prevent loss—a practice aligned with recommendations for robust data management in ethnography. Transportation to Kapashera was also tricky during the pandemic lockdowns. At one point, official restrictions meant our researchers had to obtain special permission to travel into the area. Public transport was also halted and this meant travelling into/inside the area by foot and on the NGO workers' scooters. These hurdles taught

us the value of flexibility in field methods. We learned to gather information in snippets and unconventional ways. This meant a brief informal chat or an observational note jotted in a corner often substituting for a formal recorded interview when the latter wasn't feasible.

### *Pandemic-Related Challenges*

Conducting ethnography during and after the COVID-19 pandemic added a layer of complexity. In early 2021, India experienced waves of infections and intermittent lockdowns. Although by the time of our fieldwork the strictest lockdown had lifted, there was lingering fear of outsiders potentially bringing the virus. We had to follow strict safety protocols by wearing masks, sanitizing, and sometimes conducting interviews outdoors with distance. Some older community members were reluctant to meet at all due to health worries. Moreover, the pandemic had caused population flux as many migrants left during lockdown, and some had not yet returned, leading to a dynamic where our target population was in flux. For example, a few households we approached in 2021 were empty and neighbors told us the entire family had gone back to their village during the lockdown and never returned. This meant our sample of respondents and visual subjects in 2021 skewed toward those who remained who were often the most desperate who could not leave.

By 2023, many had returned or new migrants had come, so we had to effectively re-sample and update our understanding. The pandemic context also required an ethical stance. People were under immense stress with job losses and health crises, and recounting these experiences risked retraumatization. We took care to conduct interviews about the pandemic impact in a compassionate manner, sometimes offering breaks or ending an interview early if it became too emotionally taxing for someone to relive their hardships. From a methodological perspective, the pandemic highlighted why our visual approach was valuable. During lockdowns when we couldn't be present, a few participants shared with us video clips via WhatsApp of their situation. Those clips became part of our visual dataset, effectively enabling a form of remote visual ethnography when physical presence was impossible. It underscored that ethnography can adapt to digital and mediated forms in times of constraint, maintaining a connection to participants' lives even at a distance (Pink 2008).

### *Interpretation and Analytical Challenges*

Using storyboards as a method also presented some analytic dilemmas. One concern was the potential for interpretation bias. A sequence of images can tell multiple stories, and it was incumbent on us to ensure we weren't imposing a misleading narrative. We addressed this by grounding each storyboard in the participant's own account nu using their quotes as much as possible, and by discussing each storyboard within the team to get fresh eyes on it. Nonetheless, we remained aware that a viewer might read a storyboard differently than intended. For instance, an image of a child alone might be seen as neglect, whereas in context it might be simply that both parents were out working to feed the family. We tried to pre-empt misreadings through careful captioning and choice of images. This challenge echoes a broader scepticism in academia about visual data. Critics argue that images are too ambiguous and subjective (Saugmann et al. 2020). We mitigated this by following emerging best practices for systematic visual analysis like coding visuals for recurrent symbols or conditions, and by integrating visuals with corroborating text or statistics (multimodal triangulation).

Another challenge was institutional acceptance of our methodology. When writing up results or presenting to a scholarly audience, we encountered the issue that some traditional researchers still prioritize text-based outputs over visual representations. To ensure our study was taken seriously, we explicitly articulated our methods section, much as in this chapter, to demonstrate rigor, and we provided theoretical justification for storyboarding. We also supplemented storyboards with conventional analysis like quotations and tables of survey data in publications to meet expected standards. In essence, we had to translate our visual findings into the academic language of prose, without losing the insights the visuals gave. This was a balancing act that required careful writing and sometimes creative presentation, such as embedding a reduced-form storyboard within a conference paper to visually illustrate the argument. These experiences underscore how academia has been slow to embrace visual representation, often due to conservatism or lack of frameworks, but that such resistance must be navigated by visual researchers being flexible and creative in design and presentation (Prosser 2012).

## 4 Nature of Findings: Insights from Visual Storyboards

The use of visual storyboarding in our Kapashera study proved invaluable in illuminating the lived reality of precarity and marginalization. By blending visual evidence with narrative, we gained distinctive analytical insights that would likely have eluded a standard text-only approach. Here, we discuss the nature of our findings and illustrate how the visual method enriched both our understanding and the representation of those findings.

### *Precarity of Work*

A central finding was the extreme precarity and exploitation inherent in Kapashera's labor conditions. Through conventional interviews we learned that most migrant workers were on temporary, casual contracts or no contracts at all, despite sometimes having worked for the same factory for over a decade. Many described themselves as "permanent" workers simply because they hadn't been let go yet, not realising they lacked formal job security or benefits. Visual storyboards allowed us to capture how this precarity plays out in daily life. For instance, one of our photo essays had a photograph of a tailor named Nilesh hunched over a sewing machine in a dim workshop alongside dozens of others. A caption quotes his words about piece-rate pay: "*Before COVID, we earned ₹30 for a shirt; now the rate is ₹50. Yet we only receive ₹30 per piece because the middleman pockets ₹20.*" This single frame with a close-up of Nilesh's hardened hands holding a shirt paired with his quote, concisely conveys the "squeezing" of the workforce. Even when output increased or wages nominally rose, subcontracting arrangements meant workers saw little benefit.

The visual context with the cramped workshop, identical pieces piled high, the strained body postures, reinforced the concept of neo-bondage, where workers remain trapped in an exploitative setup reminiscent of bonded labor albeit under modern contractual guises (Breman 2010). By examining sequential images, we also noticed aspects that interviews hadn't explicitly highlighted. For example, photos revealed that many workers continued to labor during what should be break times. An image of a wall clock reading 8:00 PM with workers still at their station speaks to the normalization of overtime. Indeed, our survey data showed that overtime work had become a financial necessity. Over 60% of respondents

reported working well beyond standard hours to make ends meet. Yet after the pandemic, overtime opportunities dwindled even as base wages stagnated, intensifying vulnerability. This insight emerged clearly when comparing pre- and post-pandemic storyboard panels; a "daily timeline" storyboard from 2019 (reconstructed from recall) versus 2023 showed that the segment of the evening labelled "overtime shift" had disappeared, and the worker was instead seen idle or searching for gig jobs. The visuals thus helped us visualize change over time in a tangible way.

Furthermore, the storyboards helped illustrate the blurred line between permanent and contractual employment in Kapashera's economy. We captured photographs of help-wanted posters plastered at the settlement's entrance advertising "tailors and finishers needed" on a contract basis. Together, these depicted the constant churn and insecurity—a workforce always in flux. As one migrant (Manish Kumar) noted in an interview, companies have reduced their workforce by almost 50% after recent economic shocks, leaving many scrambling for any day's work. A visual capturing a nearly empty factory floor during lockdown, followed by one teeming with workers shoulder-to-shoulder months later, underscored the precarious ebb and flow of employment. These visual narratives validate and enliven Jan Breman's theoretical point that informal labor is characterized by lack of bargaining power and chronic insecurity (Breman 2023).

### *Marginalization and Living Conditions*

Our findings also highlight how Kapashera's residents face systemic marginalization in living conditions and access to services. Survey responses and interviews conveyed that basic amenities like water, sanitation, and electricity are unreliable or organized informally by local vendors or community leaders rather than the state. The spatial layout of the settlement itself is a manifestation of exclusion. It is tucked away behind factories, virtually invisible from the main road, and absent from official urban plans. We found that visual methods were exceptionally powerful in interpreting this marginalization. One panoramic photograph taken by our team shows Kapashera's cluster of shanty buildings hemmed in by the high-rises of Gurgaon's corporate offices in the distant background. This single image symbolically contrasts two worlds: the bleak density of the slum versus the gleaming skyline, capturing what one might call the geography of exclusion.

Inside the homes, our storyboards depicted the material realities of marginalization. In one photo essay, we focused on living conditions of the residents of Kapashera. One frame shows a family of five adjusting on floor mats that take up nearly the entire room area. Another frame shows a mother cooking on a tiny stove next to the bed, children crouched nearby doing homework because there is no separate space. These visuals illuminated patterns we interpreted as spatial precarity of overcrowding, lack of ventilation, and the multi-use nature of each corner of the room (living, sleeping, cooking all in one). Notably, this visual evidence enriched our understanding of why participants reported certain outcomes. For example, survey data indicated a high incidence of health problems like respiratory issues and water-borne diseases. The storyboards provide context by seeing the cooking smoke with no chimney, or the stagnant water around communal toilets, made it clear how the environment contributes to such ailments.

Our visual approach also shed light on psychosocial aspects of marginalization. One recurring theme was a sense of invisibility and insecurity. In interviews, migrants often expressed feeling like second-class citizens in the city. Visually, this emerged in scenes of their interactions (or lack thereof) with the wider society: a woman stepping off the footpath as a corporate employee walks by without acknowledging her; a man being ignored by auto drivers at a stand near the Gurgaon border; or residents quietly watching from doorways as city officials pass through without a glance. These moments, when storyboarded, underscored the silent hierarchies embedded in urban space and everyday movement, revealing how marginalization is also lived through micro-gestures of exclusion and erasure.

### *Everyday Survival and Coping Strategies*

Perhaps the most profound insights gained were about the everyday survival strategies of Kapashera's resident and how they navigate precarity on a daily basis. Our use of visual documentation created a granular understanding of daily rhythms and tactics. Our visual diary revealed patterns of an early morning rush for communal resources like the water tap and toilets, midday adjustments like skipping lunch or eating sparse meals to save money, evening income supplementation with some men doing small side gigs after their main work, and nighttime economizing with children doing homework by a single shared light.

Our qualitative analysis found that resilience and resourcefulness were key to survival. Visual evidence corroborated several coping strategies: communal support (families cooking together to save costs), multi-job hustling (working factory shifts and street vending), thrift and sacrifice (living with few possessions), and identity strategies (gathering for folk songs or displaying village photos). Visualizing these allowed us to grasp not only economic behavior but emotional coping and psychological resilience. For instance, a storyboard of a woman revealed how her day extended from pre-dawn to late night, performing both paid and unpaid labor. This led us to quantify gendered burdens and interpret the embodiment of poverty through fatigue, joint pain, and emotional distress as visible signs of marginalization.

## 5 Conclusion

This case study from Kapashera demonstrates the significant methodological contributions of visual storyboarding to ethnographic research. By integrating visual ethnography into a field study of migrant precarity, we uncovered layers of insight and presented them in a format that resonates beyond the page. Methodologically, the chapter illustrates how storyboards serve as analytical tools: organizing qualitative data into coherent, temporal sequences that make visible the causal and structural underpinnings of marginalization. The method allowed us to trace how a day unfolds for informal workers, how one event links to another, and how structures of power impinge upon the everyday. Visual sequencing facilitated a kind of thick description that textual interviews alone may not have captured, such as the changing rhythms of work before and after COVID, or the embodied toll of gendered labor.

Our approach also exemplified a mixed-methods synergy. By combining surveys, interviews, and imagery, we achieved greater analytical depth and triangulation. In doing so, we responded to the call for "methodological eclecticism," choosing visual tools where they best illuminated our questions (Ussher 1999). Further, although the storyboards were researcher-created, they were grounded in participant narratives and often reviewed with community members. This participatory and reflexive process aligns with evolving debates in visual sociology and anthropology about collaborative visual research (Pink 2008).

Representationally, storyboards bridged the gap between academic research and public understanding. Visual narratives offered a mode of

dissemination that spoke across audiences, from policymakers to peer researchers. Following Rose's (2022) call for critical visual methodologies, our work highlights how visuals can amplify the voices of the marginalized and expand the impact of ethnographic insight.

Of course, the method had limitations: selection bias, ethical constraints, and the labor-intensive nature of image curation were challenges we encountered. Moreover, certain internal states like fear or stigma remain difficult to visually capture. Yet these limitations do not undermine the method's potential. Rather, they signal areas for future development, such as participatory photovoice projects or digital tools for visual coding. Ultimately, our experience affirms that visual storyboarding is not just a technique of representation but a mode of knowledge production. It reveals, communicates, and dignifies the lives it documents, thereby making a powerful contribution to critical and engaged social research.

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CHAPTER 5

# Crafting Narratives: A Visual Ethnography of Papier Mâché Artisans in Kashmir

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**Abstract** Focusing on papier mâché artisans in Kashmir, this chapter explores how visual ethnography documents artisanal lives within fragile political and economic contexts. Using photography, collaborative storytelling, and video, it reveals challenges of sustaining craft amid socio-economic change. Methodological concerns around trust, ethics, and power imbalances are discussed, with emphasis on artisans as co-authors

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of their stories. This approach democratises research, amplifies muted voices, and foregrounds the cultural significance of craft traditions.

**Keywords** Papier mâché · Kashmir artisans · Visual ethnography · Cultural heritage · Collaboration · Ethics · Craft traditions

## 1 Introduction

In the softly illuminated confines of a traditional Kashmiri workshop, the story of papier mâché finds resonance through the hands of artisans like Mirza Ghulam. This chapter explores the vibrant world of Kashmiri papier mâché artisanship by deploying visual ethnography as both methodology and narrative device. Through patient observation and visual documentation, we uncover the intricate processes, enduring community ties, and cultural meanings embedded within this centuries-old craft.

Visual ethnography offers a powerful lens to interpret the life and work of these artisans, emphasising not just the end product, but the sensory world in which the art is conceived. Our approach is informed by the lived realities of craftsmen, documenting their creative spaces, production processes, and the daily rhythms that shape their practice. The glow of sunlight on canvas, the patient layering of paper, the delicate dance of colour and gold leaf, all become data, capturing how tradition persists and adapts.

Historical context further enriches this narrative: the arrival of Persian artisans in the fourteenth century, the evolution of techniques under local hands, and the flourishing of papermaking communities in regions like Kamangar Pora and Hasan Abad. Visual storytelling reveals how such crafts are embedded in the social fabric, particularly within the Shia community, and how they foster a sense of religious fulfilment and collective identity.

As our images and observations illustrate, the story of Kashmiri papier mâché is also marked by transformation and loss. The contemporary struggles, erosion of authentic knowledge transfer, market pressures, and generational shifts, challenge the continuity of the craft. Yet even as imitation products proliferate and international appreciation waxes and wanes, the authentic process remains a testament to patience, resilience, and cultural ingenuity.

By employing visual storyboards and ethnographic methods, this chapter makes visible what is often invisible: the tacit knowledge, communal labour, and spiritual meaning that animate this delicate art form. The photographs, stills, and sketches within these pages are not merely illustrations; they are fragments of narrative, evoking the textured realities of those who, like Mirza Ghulam, persist in crafting beauty against the passage of time.

## 2 Methodological Journey

### *Beginnings in the Workshop*

The morning light enters the karkhana in gentle shafts, catching the golden shimmer of unfinished papier mâché artefacts stacked on low wooden shelves. On a modest floor mat sits Mirza Ghulam, brush in hand, steady as a surgeon. He works quietly, unmoved by the hum of the street outside or the murmurs from the adjacent room where his wife grinds mineral pigments in a ceramic bowl. Their work is silent, ritualistic, rooted in repetition, memory, and unspoken understanding.

It was in such spaces, half workshop, half home, that our research began, not with a questionnaire or camera, but with tea, pauses, and stories. We arrived not as outsiders mapping a craft, but as listeners seeking the shape of silence. How does one trace a disappearing tradition? How does one document an art form passed more often through muscle memory than manuals? The answers, we learned, would not lie in cold data points, but in the pauses between brush strokes, in the tilt of a worker's spine, and in the quiet refusals that sometimes followed our questions.

### *From Conversations to Questions*

Our methodological journey began with a decision to decentre formal interviews. Instead, we embraced a feminist ethnographic approach that prioritised relationality, reciprocity, and the ethnographer's own vulnerability. Rather than asking, "How long have you been an artisan?" we

asked, "When did you first see your father paint?" These were invitations, not interrogations, allowing the research process to be as textured and layered as the art it studied.

Our questions, when they came, emerged from time spent observing and assisting in the karkhana. We watched papier mâché pulp soak in metal drums. We documented the delicate process of layering, each step governed by ancestral knowledge. This process shaped our central variable: cultural embeddedness. Not just a theoretical concept, but a lived condition, of being rooted in place, community, and a fragile economy of tradition. We also allowed ourselves to be shaped by different perspectives, those of women mixing colours in the kitchen courtyard, children tracing floral outlines on scrap wood, elderly artists lamenting the loss of motifs. Their voices, dissonant at times, helped us refine not just what to ask, but how to ask it. Our instruments, therefore, were not static documents but living frameworks, shaped through iterations of conversation, field notes, and unexpected revelations.

### *Visual Ethnography as Ethic and Method*

From the beginning, visual methods were not add-ons but ethical tools. Cameras captured what language often couldn't: the bodily toll of twelve-hour workdays, the slow choreography of crafting, the moment of pause when an artisan looked up to ask, "Will this be seen abroad?" The visual allowed for presence without intrusion. Footage was always shown back to participants, creating loops of reflection and co-analysis.

Photographs of colour mixing, paper pulp, and brushes made from cat-tail hair became more than illustrations, they became archival interventions. We saw that visuals also evoked emotion and recognition. One artisan, seeing an image of his grandfather's wooden moulds, whispered, "That's not just a tool, that's our inheritance."

The intricate designs and labour-intensive processes have required significant amounts of expertise (Photo: CNES)

These images also revealed gendered geographies: women's presence often obscured in the karkhana was made visible through documenting the spaces of preparation, kitchens where colour was ground, courtyards where sun-drying occurred, and stories were shared while mixing varnish. In this way, the visual methodology did not merely document reality, it reframed it. The visuals also transformed our engagement with space and temporality. We began to observe how artisans moved between spaces, between the bright storefronts and dark backrooms, between domestic and commercial zones. Each threshold offered insight into the multiple worlds within which the papier mâché craft lives and struggles.

### *Case Studies Rooted in Everyday Life*

Rather than treat case studies as discrete research units, we approached them as stories of survival, inheritance, and fracture. Each karkhana or household visited became a window into a different configuration of craft labour. Some were multi-generational workshops held together by a sense of ancestral obligation. Others were fragile collectives of cousins or neighbours struggling to adapt to international orders and commercial demands.

The case of Aadil Hussain, whose workshop was lost in the 2014 floods, brought into focus the precariousness of livelihood and the

absence of institutional support. In contrast, Mirza Ghulam's steady but mournful practice revealed the quiet dignity of persistence. These case studies were not "samples" but textured narratives of life under pressure. Women, often excluded from formal records, emerged as central actors in many of these stories. For instance, in the case of Nusrat and her two daughters in Nowpora, we found a unique model of collective craft-making. Although considered "unskilled," their work in varnishing, colouring, and design correction formed the invisible backbone of the karkhana's production. By grounding our case studies in narratives of embodied practice, familial obligation, and adaptive resilience, we uncovered the larger socio-political and economic ecologies within which this endangered craft operates.

## 3 Navigational Challenges

### *Administering Fieldwork in a Vulnerable Landscape*

Navigating the field meant more than entering physical spaces, it required negotiating trust, translating silences, and respecting the invisible rhythms of daily life. In a region marked by political uncertainty and economic fragility, the act of conducting fieldwork became deeply contingent.

Administering fieldwork in Kashmir's papier mâché ecosystem was shaped by constraints beyond our control. Curfews, winter closures, and unpredictable power outages often meant rescheduling visits or conducting interviews in candlelit rooms. Even the most basic act, sitting down for a conversation, was sometimes interrupted by security announcements or sudden shifts in family labour needs.

Initial hesitations were common. Artisans asked questions such as, "Who are you really?" or "What will we gain from speaking?" These were not expressions of cynicism but caution, born from years of broken promises from officials, NGOs, and researchers. To navigate this, we leaned into a form of slow ethnography. We built presence before seeking answers. We helped mix glue, cleaned brushes, and waited. And in that waiting, trust emerged, opening pathways to memories, grievances, and aspirations that formal settings often obscure.

We also traversed the physical geographies of craft, narrow alleys, homes doubling as workshops, winter-blocked roads. The spatial marginality of these sites mirrored the social marginalisation experienced by artisans.

### *Challenges in Data Collection*

Fieldwork demanded a deep sensitivity to temporality. Artisan routines are cyclical, shaped by drying seasons, export orders, material availability. Our data collection had to mirror these rhythms. Days were spent waiting for varnish to dry, workshops to open, or electricity to return.

Quantitative data, on earnings, hours worked, or production numbers, was scarce and often inconsistent. Artisans described labour through exhaustion, pride, and rhythm, rather than in minutes or rupees. This challenged extractive research logics and centred narrative evidence instead. Women's work, especially, resisted datafication. Their labour in colour mixing, polishing, and organising production cycles remained hidden, unacknowledged, yet indispensable. Visual ethnography helped surface this invisible labour, images of hands stirring pigment or trays drying under the sun spoke volumes.

Exporters and middlemen added another layer of complexity. Some restricted access to artisans, wary that our presence might disrupt pricing structures or expose exploitative practices. In one case, an exporter barred us from filming a karkhana, citing "confidentiality," though artisans later suggested it was to conceal poor working conditions. Our very presence sometimes altered the field. Artisans showcased their "best" work or deferred to male supervisors. Recognising this, we often suspended interviews and returned at quieter moments, allowing more natural and layered conversations to unfold.

### *Getting In: Gaining Entry in Craft Clusters*

Field access was shaped by a delicate choreography of kinship, caution, and continuity. Many papier mâché clusters lie in downtown Srinagar, areas burdened with surveillance and unrest. Some workshops were inaccessible due to curfews or barricades. Others, located in basements or homes, opened to us only after kin-based introductions. Formal letters or university affiliations held little value. What helped was persistence without pressure, returning without expectations, sitting quietly, and helping in small tasks. Trust emerged not from explanation but from presence. In some cases, artisans invited us in only after watching us return multiple times, witnessing our willingness to wait, and recognising our respect for their space and pace.

### *Suspicion, Fatigue, and the Politics of Being Studied*

Artisans were no strangers to the gaze of researchers, journalists, and development workers. Many spoke of being photographed and forgotten, left with no credit or outcome. Some questioned: "What difference will this make?" or "Will you remember us?".

Their scepticism was justified. Decades of extractive documentation had turned their stories into "case studies" without benefit. In response, we adopted a dialogic approach. We returned drafts, shared photographs, welcomed correction. One artisan pointed out: "You wrote that I work alone. But my sister folds the items, my mother polishes them." That correction reshaped our writing, to foreground collective labour, not individual genius.

This feedback loop transformed our process: research became relational, not transactional.

### *Gendered Space and Uneven Visibility*

Accessing women's narratives required patience and attentiveness. While men occupied the front spaces of karkhanas, women worked behind walls, polishing, varnishing, and managing schedules. Our presence, initially, was met with silence or avoidance. Women shifted rooms, spoke in gestures. But with repeated visits came subtle shifts, a shared story, a

half-finished design, a comment passed while preparing tea. One woman showed us a motif she had drawn years ago, then stopped painting after marriage. Another narrated how she painted late at night, hidden from in-laws.

These fragments, quiet, layered, interrupted, unveiled gendered authorship. Craft was not a male preserve but a shared, negotiated practice. Many contributions remained invisible by design, hidden not due to lack of skill but to protect dignity, family dynamics, or religious propriety. Their silences became insights: about the costs of visibility, the terms of participation, and the unspoken labour of care.

Women working of the articles at home

## *Rhythms of Craft and Research*

Papier mâché is slow art. Each object, layered, dried, shaped, painted, takes days or weeks. Our fieldwork tempo had to adapt. "Come back in four days," an artisan would say. We returned. Sometimes, nothing had changed. Rain had delayed drying. A wedding had disrupted routine. Over time, these repetitions became a lesson: craft lives by a rhythm of its own, interrupted by weather, politics, illness, or domestic needs. To observe a design unfold across weeks was to understand time not as linear but circular, textured, and deeply material. This slowness deepened our intimacy with the field and reminded us that good ethnography honours the pace of its subject, not its deadline.

Paper Machie craftsmen on work

### *Infrastructure, Interruptions, and Everyday Fragility*

Power outages, internet shutdowns, roadblocks, these were not anomalies but everyday conditions. They affected artisans and researchers alike. One video was lost in a blackout; an entire locality became inaccessible due to sudden lockdown. Rather than treat these as logistical hurdles, we came to see them as data. The very infrastructure of craft was fragile. No electricity meant no painting. No water meant no paste. No transport meant no deliveries. These interruptions revealed the infrastructural vulnerability of artisanal economies. They also became moments of shared endurance, of sitting in the dark together, of drinking tea by candlelight, of waiting for power to return and stories to resume.

### *Consent, Shame, and the Ethics of Visibility*

Photography, a key part of our visual ethnography, raised questions around dignity and representation. Some artisans posed eagerly, adjusting

light and backdrop. Others asked not to be filmed, or to blur their faces later. One said, "My neighbours think I looked dirty in that video, can you remove it?" These weren't vanity requests, they were assertions of control. They reminded us that consent is fluid, contingent, and emotional. Visual methodology, we realised, had to move with care, negotiated at each step, reviewed, and open to revision. We developed a protocol: verbal consent for every image, the right to delete, no public use without explicit approval. Our role was not to document "truths," but to co-narrate lives with respect and reciprocity.

### *Youth, Ambivalence, and Inherited Dissonance*

Young artisans posed a different challenge: ambivalence. Many felt disconnected from the craft. They saw little value in continuing a tradition that brought neither prestige nor profit. Some worked in call centres, others aspired to migrate. One remarked, "Why should I spend a week painting something I'll be paid 200 rupees for?".

To engage them, we reframed questions. We asked, "What would you change in this design?" or "Would you teach your child this craft?" These opened conversations about pricing, design preferences, digital marketing, and new aspirations. Their hesitations were not rejection, they were critiques of a broken system. They marked the tension between tradition and transformation.

### *Researcher Reflexivity and Field Position*

We were outsiders, non-Kashmiri, institutionally affiliated, educated. Our presence shaped the field: sometimes respected, sometimes distrusted. Reflexivity was essential. We never promised impact. We clarified our purpose. We listened more than we asked. At times, artisans told us, "You're the tenth person to ask about this. What makes you different?" We had no perfect answer. Only this: "We will return. We will listen. And we will write with care." Fieldwork became not about authority, but humility. Not about expertise, but companionship.

What Refused to Be Said

Some data never came. Finances were rarely disclosed. Tensions between artisans and exporters were hinted at but avoided. Mental health, caste, exhaustion, these remained beneath the surface. We documented

silence as method. The shrug, the pause, the deflection, these were not gaps to be filled, but signals of what could not be spoken safely. We respected those boundaries. Refusal, we learned, is also knowledge. It tells us where power rests, and where it doesn't.

## 4 Nature of Findings—Intentions vs Outcomes and the Role of Visual Ethnography

### *Did Intentions Match Outcomes?*

The initial intention of this research was to document decline, to trace how a once-celebrated craft was deteriorating under the pressures of mass production, generational apathy, and institutional neglect. But what we found was far more nuanced. While decline was part of the narrative, so too were resilience, adaptation, and a deeply rooted emotional economy of care. Artisans expressed sorrow at the dilution of motifs, the commercialisation of their labour, the invisibilisation of women's work. But they also showed pride, pride in continuity, in ancestral skills, in small acts of refusal. Some artisans rejected synthetic materials despite economic loss. Others painted quietly at night, treating the act not as labour but as devotion.

Our findings complicated our assumptions about marginalisation. Yes, there was precarity. But there was also resistance, quiet, creative, and often gendered. Women's labour, in particular, operated in spaces of invisibility but was deeply significant. Their stories challenged the notion of craft as static heritage, and revealed it instead as an evolving negotiation between family, memory, and survival. Perhaps most importantly, the findings underscored the importance of cultural memory, not merely as nostalgia, but as active practice. Motifs carried legacies. Tools bore fingerprints of the past. Even as the craft shifted form, the memory of elders, of vanished techniques, of intergenerational whispers remained central. It became clear that any policy intervention or market strategy that ignored this memory would remain superficial.

As time went on, Kashmiri artists added their own flourishes to the genre, attracting admirers from all over the world to their compositions (Photo: CNES)

### *Visual Ethnography as Amplifier*

If written ethnography gave the research structure, visual ethnography gave it texture. The camera was not an extractive tool, it was an interlocutor. A photograph of drying bowls sparked a memory. A video clip of pigment mixing led to laughter and correction. A sketch of an old design drew out a forgotten story.

The visual archive became both mirror and counter-archive. It showed artisans what others often missed: the choreography of daily labour, the intimacy of repetition, the embodied intelligence of their work. It also became a tool of affirmation. Shared on WhatsApp, viewed by family members, shown in schools, the images and clips extended the research beyond academia and into community life. In editing, we made conscious choices, to retain hesitation, laughter, and interruptions. These were not flaws but signatures of authenticity. They reminded viewers that craft is process, not spectacle. One artisan told us, "When my daughter saw the video, she said she wants to learn now." That moment, unplanned, affective, transformative, said more than any graph could.

### *Beyond the "Dying Craft" Narrative*

One of our early frameworks positioned papier mâché as a declining art form. And while that is partially true, the narrative of "decline" alone erases the complexity of survival. We encountered artisans experimenting with new motifs for younger consumers. Some modified techniques to suit export deadlines. Others collaborated with NGOs or digital platforms. A few exited the craft entirely but spoke of returning to it in old age. The problem was not simply the disappearance of tradition, it was the absence of support. Poor infrastructure, limited market access, and middlemen monopolies, not lack of skill, were the primary obstacles. Artisans weren't resisting innovation; they were surviving exploitation.

In this way, our findings dismantled the binary of "tradition vs modernity." Instead, we saw hybridity, resilience, and the constant remaking of what craft means.

### *Gendered Erasure and Unrecognised Labour*

Our exploration of production processes revealed an overwhelming pattern: the invisibilisation of women's labour. Women varnished, mixed pastes, dried pulp, packed goods, but were called "helpers," not artisans. In one rooftop photograph, a woman stands behind rows of painted bowls, her face obscured. She did not want to be named, but she said, "This is our work too. They just don't call it that."

This became one of our most powerful findings: that recognition is a gendered act. The government artisan rolls listed no women. Exhibitions, catalogues, and awards rarely credited their hands. And yet, without them, production would collapse.

By centring these stories, our visual ethnography disrupted the official archive. It insisted on naming the unnamed, on showing what is structurally rendered invisible.

### *Between Heritage and Hustle*

Many artisans framed "tradition" as both anchor and shackle. For some, it offered continuity, identity, and a sense of pride. For others, it constrained creativity or economic viability. A young artisan shared: "I want to make something new. If I copy my grandfather's design, no one buys it." He

had begun experimenting with stencils, faster paints, and digital tools, not out of disdain, but out of urgency.

We found that heritage was not a fixed inheritance, it was an evolving grammar. Artisans edited it, questioned it, sometimes rejected it. But rarely did they abandon its spirit. This challenged our nostalgia. It reminded us that fidelity to tradition does not require stasis, it can also mean transformation with care.

### *Visual Ethnography as Collaborative Encounter*

One of the most significant outcomes of our visual method was how it transformed research into collaboration. Artisans narrated their videos, critiqued our framing, requested retakes. One said, "Don't show only the good parts. Show how the paint spills. Show the mess. That's real."

The camera, then, became a co-researcher, not just recording but provoking reflection. It democratised the gaze. It made the field visible to itself. This changed our understanding of evidence. What mattered was not only what we saw, but how we saw it, who controlled the frame, whose perspective was centred, and whose silence was protected.

### *Generational Disjunctures*

We had hoped to document smooth intergenerational transitions, the passing of skill from father to son, mother to daughter. What we found was more fractured. Many younger artisans were reluctant participants. They entered the craft not from passion but from constraint. Some felt trapped by it. Others practised quietly, for memory's sake.

Still, there were signs of new beginnings. A few used Instagram to sell directly. Others ran community workshops. One designed eco-friendly packaging. These shifts suggested that while lineage was broken, innovation was alive. The future of the craft, we realised, might not mirror its past, but it could still carry its essence.

### *Markets, Middlemen, and Disconnected Value Chains*

Perhaps the most sobering insight came from mapping how value circulates. Artisans rarely sold directly. Middlemen dominated, setting prices, filtering orders, managing clients. The producers saw only a fraction of the final cost.

An artisan said, "We just do the work. Others make the money." Many had no idea how their products were priced, displayed, or marketed abroad.

This disconnection revealed a larger structural injustice: artisanal skill was being celebrated in boutiques, galleries, and government reports, yet the artisans themselves remained economically marginalised. This, we concluded, was not a craft crisis. It was a systemic failure of recognition, redistribution, and institutional accountability.

### *When Research Changes the Researcher*

Perhaps the most unexpected outcome was how the field changed us. We began with hypotheses and thematic maps. We ended with messy notes, altered assumptions, and the realisation that control is an illusion in ethnography. Some interviews failed. Some images went unused. Some moments confused us. But in those disruptions, we learned to let go. We became more patient, more porous, more attuned to what could not be neatly summarised. Ethnography, we learned, is not just method, it is an ethic of humility.

The gap between intention and outcome became a site of learning.

### *Visual Methodologies as Counter-Archive*

The visual archive we created, of tools, gestures, shadows, cracked walls, and painted fingernails, became a counter-narrative to official accounts. Where bureaucratic forms listed numbers, our archive held stories. Where policy reduced artisans to "beneficiaries," our photographs showed them as creators, thinkers, agents. We do not claim to have captured "truth." But we hope we have held fragments of dignity, memory, and resistance, enough to ask others to look again. As one artisan said: "Show the world that we are not just poor hands. We are minds, we are families, we are history."

## 5 Conclusion: Towards a More Ethical Ethnography of Craft

This chapter, through its methodological, visual, and narrative engagements, offers not just an account of research but a commitment to ethical encounter. The ethnographic study of Kashmiri papier mâché is not a

record of a dying art; it is a testament to lives lived through labour, care, resilience, and imagination.

We learned to listen more than speak. We accepted that refusal is data, that silence is meaning, that beauty exists alongside pain. By allowing the community to shape the pace, questions, and form of our research, we de-centred the researcher and foregrounded collaboration. The feminist visual ethnography practised here did not just record craft, it honoured those who sustain it. In their stories, we saw not only fragility, but strength. Not only erosion, but endurance.

The future of this craft is uncertain. But its past and present are alive, in gold leaf, in glue, in grief, and in grit. And it is a future worth fighting for, one brushstroke, one image, one story at a time.

CHAPTER 6

# Visual Storyboards in Action: A Methodological Journey in Assam's Bodoland

*Hima Trisha Mohan*

**Abstract** This chapter presents a collaborative project with Bodo women and youth in Assam's Bodoland, conducted with Action Northeast Trust (ANT). It documents weaving, livelihoods, education, and empowerment through photography, video, and interviews. Moving beyond NGO-driven impact narratives, it positions visual ethnography as both research and solidarity practice. Recognising Bodo women as co-creators, the chapter highlights weaving as intertwined with cultural preservation, economic autonomy, and collective transformation, contributing to feminist and participatory methodologies.

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**Keywords** Bodo community · Weaving · Participatory ethnography · Feminist methods · Cultural preservation · Empowerment · Solidarity

## 1 Introduction

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam is marked by the legacies of prolonged ethno-political unrest, rural underdevelopment, and complex inter-ethnic relations. Decades of conflict have left fragile institutions, uneven access to education, and persistent socio-economic disparities. For researchers, this context presents a dual challenge: developing methodologies that are culturally sensitive yet analytically rigorous, and designing approaches that move beyond the limitations of text-based, interview-centred data collection. Literacy barriers, linguistic diversity, and trauma-related silences often constrain verbal accounts, risking the loss of crucial spatial and relational dimensions of lived experience.

This chapter addresses that methodological problem by detailing the development and application of visual storyboards as part of an integrated visual ethnography conducted in partnership with the Ant (Action Northeast Trust), a local NGO working in education, women's livelihoods, and youth sports for peace-building. In our approach, visual storyboards were a central device for eliciting, co-constructing, and interpreting narratives. Drawing on photography and participatory methods, this enabled participants to express experiences and perspectives that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

The relevance of this methodological intervention is threefold. First, it advances debates in visual anthropology, participatory action research, and development studies on the use of visual and multimodal methods as primary sites of knowledge production. Second, it offers grounded methodological insights for research in post-conflict, rural education and development settings, where the politics of representation and the ethics of engagement are heightened. Third, it demonstrates how co-produced research, rooted in collaboration with a local organization, can align scholarly inquiry with community priorities without compromising either.

The chapter is organized into three sections. Section 2 traces the conceptualization of visual storyboards, questionnaire framing, integration of multiple perspectives, and case study selection. Section 3 examines the ethical, logistical, and relational obstacles encountered in BTR and

the adaptive strategies employed. Section 4 analyses how visual storyboards enriched the dataset, using examples from education, sports, and livelihoods to show how visual methods revealed patterns and dynamics invisible to interviews alone. Together, these sections position visual storyboards as an ethnographic practice of observing, recording and interpreting especially vital in contexts where what is unsaid can be as significant as what is spoken.

## 2 Methodological Journey

The Bodoland case study in Assam's BTR was designed as an in-depth visual ethnography of education and youth development interventions in a post-conflict rural setting. Decades of ethnic conflict and political instability in BTR had left the region socio-economically underdeveloped, with severe inequities in access to basic services like schooling. Our research team at the Centre for New Economics Studies' (CNES) *Visual Storyboards* unit identified the Ant, a local NGO, as a pivotal case through which to explore these challenges.

The Ant had launched the Learning Ecosystem Augmentation Project (LEAP) in 2019 to improve primary education quality for over 8000 children across 120+ government schools and to bring schooling to remote forest villages via community learning centers. We chose this case for its significance in addressing widespread learning challenges in a conflict-affected region and its practicality, as the NGO welcomed researchers to embed with its team. By spending six weeks on-site in Chirang District, living on the NGO campus, we were able to closely observe programs in action and engage with community members in their own environment. This prolonged immersion and partnership with the Ant formed the foundation of our methodological approach.

### *Framing the Research and Questionnaire Design*

Before heading to the field, the team at CNES conducted a thorough literature review and consultation with subject experts to frame our research questions. Key theoretical perspectives shaped this process. For instance, a peace education perspective, as advocated by UNICEF for conflict zones, prompted us to ask how schooling in BTR incorporates social cohesion or trauma healing. A rights-based lens given the Right to Education Act (2009), led us to examine gaps between policy and ground

reality. We also used an ethnographic lens focusing on daily lived experiences, which encouraged open-ended questions about students' routines, teachers' roles, and community attitudes.

Our questionnaire was therefore semi-structured with a mix of fixed topics and flexible probes, allowing participants to narrate experiences in their own terms. We developed the instrument in English but adapted it with the help of the ant staff into the local languages of Bodo and Assamese to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance. This collaborative questionnaire development was critical for valid data. The back-end research team iteratively refined question wording for clarity and lack of bias, and the Ant's bilingual field staff provided translations during interviews. As a result, the final interview guide covered themes like schooling history, conflict experiences, gender norms, language barriers, and perceptions of NGO interventions, all phrased in an accessible way for villagers and teachers.

### *Integrating Visual Ethnography Elements*

A distinguishing feature of our methodology was the use of visual storyboards combining photography, narrative, and participant input. This method acted simultaneously as both a data collection and analysis tool. Visual ethnography recognizes that purely textual methods cannot fully capture the spatial and emotional nuances of social life. By incorporating cameras and sketching tools into our fieldwork, we sought to document processes and interactions in a richer format. We attended school lessons, community meetings, and youth sports sessions with cameras in hand (after obtaining consent), creating a visual record of key moments. These included moments such as a child solving a puzzle on the blackboard, a circle of girls and boys playing Frisbee together, a teacher using handmade learning materials, etc.

At the same time, we encouraged participants to contribute to the visual narrative. For example, children were invited to illustrate their favourite game and teachers helped map out timelines of changes they observed in the community's education over the years. These participatory visual exercises empowered community members to "show and tell" their experiences, yielding insights that might not surface through standard interviews alone. Blending images with words creates a multi-layered analytical tool that bridges traditional qualitative inquiry and creative visual approaches (Wiles et al. 2011). In our study, the photographs and

sketches became central to identifying patterns (such as body language indicating student confidence levels) and to stimulating deeper conversations (participants often explained the context or story behind an image, adding nuance to our understanding). We also maintained detailed field notes alongside visual data to annotate each image with contextual information and initial interpretations, ensuring that later analysis would accurately reflect participants' realities.

### *Case Selection and Perspectives:*

The choice of the Bodoland was deliberate in representing a confluence of development challenges like ethnic diversity, conflict recovery, and rural education deficits. Innovative methods like visual storyboards are especially illuminating in a case such as this. In selecting this case, we applied multiple perspectives to ensure a holistic approach. We prioritized the voices of local stakeholders which included students, parents, teachers, recognizing that their worldview would shape what "education" or "peace" means in context. This led us to include questions about daily hardships and aspirations to capture local priorities.

Given BTR's history, we were extremely mindful of trauma and mistrust in communities. We thus framed questions gently around conflict by asking how schooling was affected "during difficult times" rather than directly probing painful incidents. We also looked for non-verbal cues in visual data that might indicate lingering fear or tensions. Importantly, we recognized gender roles would influence experiences. For instance, girls historically had less access to sports or higher education. Our instruments explicitly sought women's viewpoints interviewing mothers and female teachers and our observations paid special attention to girls' participation in class and play.

Further, BTR is multi-ethnic (Bodo, Santhali, Assamese, etc.), so we viewed the research through a multicultural lens. This meant including multiple languages in the process and asking about cultural traditions such as festivals, songs, games which are integrated into learning, acknowledging that education here is not culturally neutral. Finally, we considered the government and NGO perspectives—how the state education system and the Ant's interventions intersect. We reviewed project documents and education policy reports, which informed our inquiry into topics like training quality and resource gaps like lack of textbooks or infrastructure.

By triangulating these perspectives, we shaped a questionnaire and observational checklist that was well-rounded and sensitive. The diverse viewpoints also helped guard against researcher bias. Each team member brought a disciplinary lens and during daily debriefings with the rest of the team on what the ethnographer observed on field, we reflected on how our own perspectives might be influencing what we noticed or asked. This reflexive practice further refined our methodology, aligning it with the participatory ethos of ethnography.

### *Data Collection Methods*

Once in the field, we employed a mix of qualitative techniques, anchored in ethnographic tradition: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, all enriched by the visual component. We began with a pilot period in the first week, simply observing and casually conversing to build rapport. This low-key immersion like attending a village school's morning assembly, sharing tea with villagers, helped participants become comfortable with us "outsiders" and allowed us to fine-tune our approach. Formal data collection followed. We conducted one-on-one interviews with a range of stakeholders: teachers at learning centres, the Ant project staff, parents of student and even some students.

Each interview lasted roughly 45 minutes, often split across multiple sittings to accommodate participant availability. We used the semi-structured guide but remained flexible. Often, the most insightful information came when interviewees deviated into storytelling. For example, one teacher passionately recounted how she continued teaching despite low pay because *"I wish to pass on what I learnt to the children"*– a statement that highlighted intrinsic motivation beyond anything our questionnaire had directly asked. We also facilitated very informal group discussions with parents' groups to gauge community perceptions, and with youth participating in the sports initiative to understand peer dynamics. These group sessions evolved organically.

Throughout all interactions, we had to be attentive listeners and also visually attentive observers, often scribbling down descriptions of a setting or taking a photo of a learning aid on the wall to complement what was said. This dual capture of spoken narratives and visual context formed a robust dataset for analysis.

### *Ethical and Practical Considerations*

In framing and executing our methodology, we adhered to ethical research standards, especially given the vulnerable population (children) and the sensitive post-conflict context. We obtained informed consent from all adult participants and assent from children (with parental consent via the Ant). Prior to any interview or photo, we explained our purpose and how the information would be used in research outputs. Many participants were excited that their stories might be told in a national platform as the study was later published as a series of articles, but we also encountered hesitancy. For instance, some parents were initially uneasy about photographs or voice-recordings. In such cases we reassured confidentiality, offering to anonymize faces or names as needed, and in a few interviews we took handwritten notes only to respect a participant's comfort.

Another concern was interpretation bias with visuals. Images can be ambiguous and easily misread by researchers. To mitigate this, we adopted a participatory approach in interpretation: when possible, we would review key photos the Ant staff to get their read on what was happening. This helped, for example, in one instance where a photo showed a girl actively leading a game; a local staff member explained that this girl had recently benefited from the Ant's sports mentorship, giving context to the image that we might have missed. Such practices ensured that the multiple perspectives we valued were also present in analysing the data, not just in designing the tools.

Our methodological journey was an iterative, collaborative process. We started from broad questions on how an NGO-led initiative might improve education in a conflict-torn region, and honed in on specific, grounded inquiries guided by theory and local insight. By framing a flexible questionnaire, embracing visual storytelling, and remaining responsive to the field context, we set the stage to collect rich, multifaceted data. The next sections describe how we navigated on-ground challenges and how this approach ultimately enriched our findings.

## 3 Navigational Challenges in the Field

Children engaged in a learning session at a Forest Learning Centre (FLC) in Chirang District, Assam. The makeshift classroom built with timber and tin sheets reflects the resource constraints in remote villages. Photograph by Jignesh Mistry

Our fieldwork in Bodoland presented a host of practical challenges common to ethnographic research in remote, marginalized regions. From the very start, access and logistics required careful navigation. The communities we studied were often geographically isolated. Some villages with Forest Learning Centres lay 5–10 km deep into forest areas, with no paved roads. Reaching these sites meant traveling by whatever means available—driving on dirt tracks as far as possible, then proceeding on foot.

During monsoon rains, dirt paths turned to mud and nearby streams swelled, sometimes cutting off villages entirely. Even more unpredictably, wildlife also poses concerns as the BTR region is an elephant habitat. We learned to schedule village visits accordingly, departing early and

returning before evening, and always accompanied by a local guide who knew the terrain intimately. The operational dynamics of delivering education here face hurdles from spatial issues like flooding and elephant encounters that hinder accessibility. We experienced those very hurdles in our fieldwork, giving us first-hand appreciation of the physical context in which any educational intervention must operate.

### *Building Trust and Managing Expectations*

Conducting research in a post-conflict society required physical access but more importantly, social access. Gaining trust of people who have reasons to be wary of outsiders. The history of Bodo agitation and inter-community violence meant some villagers were initially guarded about our intentions, perhaps wondering if we were government inspectors or journalists who might misrepresent them. To break the ice, we leveraged our partnership with the Ant's. We were introduced not as strangers, but as part of the Ant's extended team who were there to learn with the community. Still, trust had to be earned gradually.

We spent considerable time in regular day-to-day activities like helping teachers organize school sports days and attending local cultural events. These informal interactions proved invaluable and people began to see us less as researchers and more as friends or colleagues. Only after this rapport-building did we commence formal interviews, and even then we approached sensitive topics cautiously. For example, when discussing conflict experiences, instead of direct questioning, we often invited storytelling: *"Could you share what the village was like some years ago when times were hard?"* Such open prompts allowed participants to reveal difficulties like displacement from violence, at their own comfort level. On the whole, our patient approach paid off as many participants opened up with striking honesty. One staff member of the Ant frankly told us that before the learning centers, parents *"had no hope of their children receiving education at all... Now, parents involve themselves any way they can... It is a positive change"*. Such candor was a sign that community members trusted us to convey their reality and hopes.

Another social challenge was managing expectations and power dynamics during fieldwork. In one village meeting, we noticed that some respondents, especially women, deferred to what they thought we (or the NGO staff present) might want to hear, rather than their true opinions. This was evident when discussing the impact of the sports program. Initially, a mother simply praised it as "very good" in front of NGO staff. Sensing a power dynamic, we later spoke to her one-on-one and discovered she had concerns about girls spending time playing. We learned to conduct some interviews away from authority figures and to phrase questions neutrally. For example—"*What changes have you noticed?*" rather than "*Has X helped you?*") to encourage honest input.

Additionally, because the Ant had multiple initiatives (education, healthcare, weaving livelihoods, etc.), villagers sometimes assumed we were there in a development capacity and would request assistance like scholarships or infrastructure, once they shared their problems. We had to gently clarify our role as researchers, not aid donors, to avoid unintentionally raising false hopes. These ethical tightropes are part of the navigational challenge in any participatory research setting.

### *Language and Communication*

Linguistic diversity in our research area also presented challenges in data collection. The BTR region is home to Bodo, Assamese, and other communities, each with their own languages. While many people spoke some Hindi (which our team understood), nuances were often lost in translation. We addressed this by working closely with translators who were often the Ant's field staff or local youth volunteers for interviews in Assamese or Bodo. Translators not only converted language but also helped interpret cultural context explaining, for example, that a particular idiom a villager used carried an emotional weight beyond its literal meaning. We prepared our translators in advance, briefing them on the interview topics and emphasizing the need to translate everything (to avoid summaries that might omit details).

### *Scheduling and Fatigue*

Fieldwork in rural communities seldom follows a 9-to-5 schedule. We had to adapt to the rhythm of village life. Many participants were working, which meant daytime hours (when we initially planned interviews) were

often inconvenient. We shifted many interviews to early mornings or evenings. A typical day in the field started at dawn—conducting a couple of interviews, then observing a mid-morning school session. Afternoons were reserved for community meetings or youth sports practice. Based on availability, we would often do interviews in the evenings as well. This irregular schedule was tiring for the team; we had to be mindful of researcher fatigue.

To address this, we had the entire back-end team on standby, so we could take daily notes while the ethnographer explained his insights. The team also held weekly rest and review days to avoid burnout in the field—an important but easily overlooked aspect of fieldwork management. Despite careful planning, unexpected hurdles forced on-the-spot adaptation. Since our fieldwork took place towards the end of the pandemic lockdown, local restrictions were still in place, and there was ongoing fear surrounding in-person visits. As a result, we had to pivot to phone interviews for some key informants at the Ant. This experience underscored the need for flexibility in methodology—our planned trajectory met an unforeseen roadblock, and we adjusted methods to still collect data while respecting public health guidelines.

In overcoming these navigational challenges, several strategies proved effective: partnering with a local organization for community entry, investing time in trust-building, employing translators and visual communication to bridge language gaps, and maintaining flexibility in scheduling and data collection modes. Each challenge we encountered also became data in itself revealing structural conditions (like geography, infrastructure, and social dynamics) that are intricately linked to the issues of education and conflict we were studying. By documenting not only what we found but how we found it, we enriched our understanding of the context. The next section will illustrate how our visual ethnographic approach, combined with the negotiated access we achieved, led to a deeper and more nuanced set of findings about the initiatives in Bodoland.

## 4 Nature of Findings and Insights Gained

Young participants in the Colouring the Rainbow sports programme prepare for an Ultimate Frisbee session in Chirang District, Assam. Photograph by Jignesh Mistry

The use of visual ethnography and storyboards profoundly enriched the quality and depth of our findings in the Bodoland case study. Through traditional interviews alone we could certainly have reported that LEAP improved literacy rates or that a sports program increased youth engagement, but it was the combination of spoken stories, observed behaviors, and visual evidence that allowed us to capture the full narrative of change in this community. Our analysis revealed three broad themes, each illuminated by our methodology: (1) improvements in educational outcomes and pedagogy, (2) social cohesion and peace-building among youth, and (3) persistent structural challenges. We discuss each below, highlighting how visual and participatory methods added insight.

### *Educational Transformation in a Post-Conflict Setting*

One clear finding was that the ant's interventions (like LEAP) had a measurable positive impact on children's learning and the culture of teaching in these villages. Teachers reported, and we corroborated through observation, that students in the community-run Forest Learning Centres were learning faster and more joyfully than their peers in regular government schools. For example, whereas many government schools in remote Assam still struggled to have Class II students recognize the alphabet, the learning centres were successfully teaching the alphabet in Class I. Our field observation notes described scenes of interactive learning: in one class, children formed a circle on the floor, arranging letters into words with the teacher's guidance, laughing and helping each other. A photograph of a classroom wall adorned with handmade posters and vocabulary charts stands as visual proof of this enriched learning environment. By coding our visual data, we noted the prevalence of such Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs) and lively classroom setups in LEAP-supported centers, versus the bare walls we saw in a few government schools. This visual contrast supported interview testimonies that *"learning [is] more enjoyable and inclusive"* due to the new methods.

The team also found an emphasis on holistic, "peace education" in these classrooms, wherein participatory and democratic activities were used to heal and include children from conflict-scarred families. One teacher explained that instead of scolding, they use peer group discussions to resolve issues among students, cultivating a sense of mutual respect. We might have taken such statements with a grain of salt if only told to us abstractly. However, during visual documentation striking example was witnessed: a classroom dispute between two boys over a seat was resolved by a student-elected class monitor who mediated, rather than by teacher punishment. This level of insight of seeing peace education in action was a direct result of the team's ethnographic presence and visual attentiveness.

Importantly, the findings highlighted local agency and motivation behind these educational improvements. Because the team had engaged with teachers and community members as active participants (not just research subjects), we gleaned personal motivations and community dynamics. One of the teachers noted, *"As is usually the case with teachers the salary is not that high; I continue to stay because I wish to pass on what I learnt to the children"*. This statement underscores that it was the will to

improve the community's future, rather than material incentives, driving the educators.

We had many informal conversations during our photo and video sessions where teachers expressed pride in being part of a violence-prevention mission through education. Visual storytelling techniques allowed us to document those intangible outcomes of the project: hope, and changing attitudes. For instance, the team would see a group of mothers volunteering to clean and repair a thatched roof of a learning center—something we learned they never would have done in earlier years when they saw little value in schooling. When we inquired about this change, a mother's response was simply, "*Education is above the conflict. It is about the future of the children. So, they can live better than we do now*". Capturing that quote and situating it alongside photographs of parents actively supporting the school painted a vivid picture of community buy-in and mindset shift. In short, the methodological approach enabled us to substantiate outcomes (like improved literacy and confidence) with hard evidence and rich narratives, while also exploring the *why* or the human element of commitment and belief behind those outcomes.

Children mimic along with Teacher at Model Learning Centre (MLC) in Koraibari village, Chirang District, Assam. Photography by Jignesh Mistry

### *Social Cohesion and Youth Development Through Sports*

Our case study also encompassed "Colouring the Rainbow" (CTR), an Ultimate Frisbee sports initiative aimed at fostering youth leadership and inter-community harmony. Here, the visual ethnography approach was perhaps even more illuminating because the very essence of the program was action and interaction, best captured in real time. CTR's objective was to bring children from different ethnic and religious groups together on the playing field. The team attended multiple frisbee sessions and sports camps, recording scenes of boys and girls from different communities mixed in teams, strategizing together and celebrating each other's plays.

The team observed girls huddling with male teammates, giving assertive instructions—a visualization of empowered female leadership that words alone might not convey. The value of such imagery became evident when we analyzed social cohesion outcomes. We noted, for example, that during games with no referees (an intentional feature to teach collective rule-making), children were actively learning about each other. The team heard and filmed candid post-game reflections as well. These moments illustrated the programme's impact, as one project coordinator, Noni Bhagat, put it, the mixed teams and self-officiated games provide a unique way of resolving conflict because it's about "*understanding your own mistakes, and improving together*".

Players shake hands post Frisbee game at Deosiri village, Chirang district. Photograph by Jignesh Mistry

By embedding ourselves in the activity, we were able to quote such insights from the coordinators and immediately corroborate them with field examples and visuals. The storyboard of a frisbee match, from the pre-game circle where a trainer taught a value (like mutual respect), through the game play, to the post-game ritual of teams huddling and shaking hands, became one of our compelling findings. It demonstrated how sports can serve as a microcosm of society by breaking down ethnic barriers and teaching life skills. Our visual documentation even noted body language changes. Children who were initially shy or clannish gradually opened up, began high-fiving peers from other villages, and took on captain roles regardless of gender. In fact, CTR led to more girls acquiring leadership skills and becoming team captains, which addresses gender-based inequities in a tangible way. We would see girls confidently giving commands on the field, something villagers later confirmed was a new and positive development. The diversity mandate of CTR was key to its success. In all tournaments in the Ant, only those teams are allowed to compete who have players of not just both genders but also if there are players of 3 mother tongues and 3 religions. This finding that structured play can build social cohesion, was strengthened by having both qualitative narratives and visual proof. It also allowed to discuss peace-building in an innovative light. Beyond workshops or dialogues, peace was being built on playgrounds.

Utilising a participatory approach meant that in some sessions, researchers joined the games or at least the post-game discussions. This further broke down the observer-subject divide and yielded candid input. Youth participants spoke freely in group interviews later. Some admitted that before CTR, they rarely mingled with kids of other communities and had biases or fears that now seemed to be fading. Such admissions might not surface in a formal survey, but in the relaxed atmosphere we cultivated, they did. We also learned through visual cues that CTR's impact extended to parents and the broader community. At one "parents' day" game we photographed, we saw mothers and fathers of different communities cheering together on the sidelines. This was a simple yet profound image of social cohesion beyond the children. In interviews, parents noted improved relations among families that used to not even speak to each other. Our data thus indicate that the CTR project made valuable

contributions to reconciliation and intercultural learning in the region, a conclusion we feel confident in, backed by evidence from multiple modalities.

Activity during the parents' session at Basugaon village, Chirang district, Assam. Photograph by Jignesh Mistry

### *Persistent Challenges and Contextual Insights*

Our study also unveiled ongoing challenges. Here again, the methodology helped ensure a nuanced understanding. One major finding was that despite the NGO's best efforts, structural issues like poverty, inadequate state support, and geographic isolation continued to hinder sustainable progress. For example, we documented that many learning centers struggled with shortages of material resources like not enough books, or lack of electricity for evening classes, which limited their impact. Likewise, even as education and sports fostered hope, older youth still faced a dearth of advanced educational opportunities or jobs, risking frustration. These kinds of findings emerged from our holistic data collection. By observing day-to-day life beyond the interventions, we saw, for instance, teenagers idle after finishing the highest grade available locally,

or families struggling with livelihoods. This gave us insight into aspirations and anxieties that quantitative metrics might miss. It reinforced the constraint that without broader economic development, the gains from education might plateau. We cited such qualitative evidence in our analysis to temper any overly optimistic interpretation of the NGO's impact.

Moreover, our method allowed us to contextualize the interventions within the wider socio-political fabric. We were able to connect micro-level observations to macro issues. For instance, the Right to Education (2009) Act's limited reach in border areas was both talked about by respondents and evidenced by what we saw—government schools in disrepair, teachers absent, etc., until the Ant stepped in. In these remote forest villages the right to education often appeared as "ink on paper", i.e. a legal promise unfulfilled on the ground. This phrasing came from our collective analysis of interview data (parents saying the government did little in their area) and our on-site verification (some villages had no state school at all).

Additionally, engaging visually with the environment drew our attention to factors like ecology and security. We noticed many schools were built in stilts or had elephant fencing, reminding us that human-wildlife conflict and floods are everyday concerns that any initiative must contend with. We might not have grasped the intensity of these physical challenges without being there in person to see a school compound trampled by an elephant herd or flooded after heavy rain. Such observations enriched our findings by providing a realist picture. Yes, community-led efforts yield remarkable improvements, but the battle is uphill against nature and neglect. In presenting our findings, we were therefore able to make concrete recommendations (in an academic and policy sense), for example, suggesting that government support is needed to provide durable infrastructure in these forest hamlets, or that mental health counseling should accompany educational programs given the trauma signs we picked up among some children.

## 5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological rationale, process, and outcomes of employing visual storyboards within a broader visual ethnography in the Bodoland Territorial Region. By integrating participatory visual tools into the research design, we were able to generate data that captured not only verbal accounts but also the spatial, relational,

and affective dimensions of participants' lives. The approach proved particularly valuable in a post-conflict, rural setting, where conventional interview-based methods may fall short in eliciting nuanced, culturally embedded narratives.

At the same time, the methodology carried limitations. The co-construction of visual storyboards required significant time investments for relationship-building, which limited the number of sites and participants we could engage. The reliance on local facilitators, while essential for trust and translation, introduced interpretive layers that may have influenced how stories were framed or prioritized. Furthermore, the visual medium's interpretive openness, while analytically rich, poses challenges for standardising data analysis across contexts.

These limitations point toward a fertile scope for future research. Comparative studies across different post-conflict or multilingual rural settings could test the adaptability of visual storyboards as a methodology. Further, integrating digital and interactive platforms could expand the participatory dimension, allowing communities to archive and narrate their own storyboards over time. Finally, advancing analytical frameworks for systematically coding and interpreting visual sequences would strengthen the method's credibility within both qualitative and mixed-methods research traditions.

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CHAPTER 7

# Framing Craft: A Visual Ethnography of Ajrakh Artisans in Kutch, Gujarat

*Najam Us Saqib and Shubhangi Derhgawen*

**Abstract** This chapter documents Ajrakh artisans in Kutch, Gujarat, through participatory photography, immersive fieldwork, and video. It explores how globalisation, migration, and technological change affect this historic craft. Themes of intergenerational learning, gendered labour, and ecological challenges shape the discussion of artisanal life. By presenting craft as a lived and evolving practice, the chapter highlights resilience and agency while advancing visual ethnography as a method to understand craft cultures in transition.

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## 1 Introduction

Amid the salt-laden winds and arid plains of Kutch, a centuries-old textile tradition takes shape, each motif carved in teak, each layer of blue and madder fixed by the sun, water, and human hand. **Ajrakh block printing** is much more than a craft: it is the living archive of the Khatri community, a textile language of memory, adaption, and survival. This chapter, "Framing Craft: A Visual Ethnography of Ajrakh Artisans in Kutch, Gujarat," explores the world of Ajrakh through the interwoven lenses of image and narrative, opening up the textured lifeworlds of its makers as they stand at the crossroads of heritage and change.

At a moment when Ajrakh is celebrated on global runways yet endangered by mechanized imitation and ecological precarity, our approach foregrounds not just techniques and products, but the embodied labor, social relationships, and environmental realities that sustain the craft. Drawing on fieldwork, artisan testimony, and visual ethnography, photographs, participatory mapping, hands-at-work video logs, we seek to capture the craft's rhythms, its challenges, and the pride of those who keep it alive.

The chapter traces Ajrakh's journey from its embeddedness in local ritual, reciprocity, and collective knowledge, "The world sees only the colours, but not the tired hands behind it," a master artisan reminds us, to increasing market-driven disembeddedness and commodification. It situates Ajrakh printing within wider processes of shifting economic structures, environmental crises such as water scarcity and climate shocks, migration after the 2001 Bhuj earthquake, and the changing aspirations of youth in the face of urban employment and global taste.

Through visual narration and layered field accounts, we illuminate:

- The step-by-step artistry and improvisation behind each Ajrakh textile,
- The gendered, generational, and social hierarchies interwoven in daily production,
- The negotiation of tradition and innovation as artisans balance local identity with global demand,

- The subtle and overt ways in which *"making Ajrakh"* is both acts of resilience and acts of hope amid forces of marginalization.

Ultimately, "Framing Craft" does not seek to romanticize Ajrakh or to reduce its makers to heritage bearers. Instead, it invites readers to witness the ongoing work, practical, emotional, communal, involved in keeping a craft meaningful and viable. It positions Ajrakh not as a frozen artifact, but as a living, adaptive practice, one whose margins, and the people who inhabit them, hold vital lessons about dignity, creativity, and survival in a rapidly transforming world.

## 2 Methodological Journey

### *Entry Points: Conceptualizing the Field and Identifying Variables*

Our ethnographic inquiry into the Ajrakh block-printing tradition in Kutch, Gujarat, began with a set of broad research questions: What happens when a deeply rooted craft form transitions into a commercially valued commodity? How do artisans, especially within the Muslim Khatri community, negotiate changing expectations from tradition, aesthetics, and the market? What is lost, retained, and reimagined in the everyday lives of artisans when their labour shifts from embedded cultural practice to commodity production?

Workers engaged in hand block printing at a workshop in Dhamadka, Gujarat (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

To investigate these questions, we approached Ajrakh not just as a textile product but as a lived practice, one situated within specific socio-economic, historical, ecological, and gendered contexts. Our central variables emerged organically through field engagement and included: (1) the spatial migration of the craft (from Dhamadka to Ajrakhpur), (2) gendered division of labor within households and workshops, (3) ecological dependencies of production, (4) intergenerational knowledge transmission, (5) responses to commercialisation, and (6) market restructuring and state intervention.

These variables shaped our inquiry into the structural transformation of the craft economy and formed the scaffolding for questionnaire design, field protocols, and thematic analysis.

### *Framing the Questionnaire: Perspectives, Ethics, and Layers of Inquiry*

Our questionnaire was developed through an iterative process of desk research, stakeholder consultations, and preliminary interviews. Rather than following a rigid set of fixed questions, we designed a modular questionnaire structured around key thematic clusters:

- Craft history and identity (family lineage, geographic relocation, origin narratives)
- Labor process and production cycles (tools used, seasonal rhythms, skill transmission, ecological considerations)
- Gender roles and everyday practice (who does what, when, and how decisions are taken) Market relations (buyers, intermediaries, pricing, online platforms)
- Perceptions of change (craft modernisation, technology, threats, state support)
- Future aspirations and anxieties (what does the next generation want?)

Each cluster had a combination of closed, semi-open, and open-ended prompts, ensuring we captured both specific data and subjective narratives. For instance:

> "Can you describe the difference between how your grandfather used to print and how you do it today?", "Do women in your family also participate in block printing or related processes? If yes, how?", "Has the relocation to Ajrakhpur impacted your production methods or resource access?"

The questionnaire was translated informally into Kutchi, Hindi, and Gujarati during field interactions, as we engaged participants in their preferred languages. Consent was oral, with verbal agreements recorded in notebooks, and interviews were audio-recorded only after clear permission was granted. Where recording wasn't possible, detailed field notes and reflective journaling ensured data richness.

Our framing was deeply influenced by perspectives from feminist ethnography and critical craft studies. Feminist fieldwork principles reminded us that knowledge production is relational, power-laden, and embodied. We did not assume neutral observer status but positioned ourselves transparently, as researchers interested in the lives, labour, and transformations of artisans within systemic structures. Critical craft studies, meanwhile, cautioned us against romanticising tradition or treating artisans as passive bearers of heritage. Instead, we centered artisans as agents navigating and shaping change.

### *Visual Ethnography: Seeing, Documenting, and Co-constructing*

Ajrakh is a visually rich practice, marked by precision, pattern, and pigment. To understand its transformation, we adopted visual ethnography not merely as documentation but as a methodological intervention. Our visual tools included:

- Processual photography (every stage of cloth making: washing, dyeing, printing, drying, finishing)
- Spatial mapping (workshop layouts, dye pits, rooftop drying areas)
- Portraits of artisans at work
- Tool and object photography (blocks, vats, ladles, indigo stones, hand-carved motifs)
- Short video snippets and reels capturing rhythm, texture, gesture, and narrative

This approach helped us capture a different layer of knowledge, what was not always articulated verbally, but expressed bodily or spatially. The intimacy of an artisan handling a centuries-old block, the collective rhythm of women beating cloth on a stone slab, or the sheen of indigo under the afternoon sun, these visual cues became analytical entries into the emotional and aesthetic life of the craft.

Crucially, we treated visual materials as co-produced. Participants were often invited to choose what we could photograph, how we might frame a scene, or whether they wished to appear in images. In some cases, women requested that their faces be blurred or only their hands shown, especially when photographing dye work, cloth cutting, or finishing processes. Visual analysis also allowed us to contrast workshops and production sites across Ajrakhpur. Newer, commercialised units had cleaner finishes, modular processes, and more automation. Traditional units were more atmospheric, slower, messier, but with higher degrees of individual skill engagement. These contrasts became visually legible and conceptually powerful when juxtaposed side by side.

An Ajrakh print on cotton fabric at Ajrakhpur in Kutch district, Gujarat (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

### *From Narratives to Case Studies*

We did not begin with predetermined "case studies." Rather, certain individuals and households emerged through the fieldwork as holding particularly rich, layered stories that intersected multiple analytical themes. These case studies served not as representative types, but as critical entry points into the structural and emotional world of craft.

#### *Case Study 1: Master Printer as Custodian and Entrepreneur*

One such case was of a third-generation Ajrakh printer whose family had moved from Dhamadka after the 2001 earthquake. His household combined deep commitment to natural dyeing techniques with active engagement on Instagram, exporting Ajrakh scarves to Europe and running a YouTube channel. He saw no contradiction between authenticity and expansion, telling us: "If Ajrakh is to survive, it must walk in both worlds." His workshop was also a site of informal training for younger boys, whom he mentored in traditional motifs and pattern layering.

#### *Case Study 2: Women as Invisible Artisans*

Another case emerged around the women in a household who did not identify themselves as artisans but whose daily labour, cutting threads, preparing dye mixtures, folding fabric, managing home-based production, was central to the craft's survival. One woman noted, "Hum toh sirf madad karte hain", "We only help", a phrase that appeared frequently, underscoring the gendered invisibilisation of craft knowledge.

#### *Case Study 3: Young Worker and the Question of Continuity*

A younger male worker, trained in digital printing, shared how he was disillusioned with the long hours and slow pace of hand-block printing. "Everyone says Ajrakh is beautiful, but it pays too little and takes too much time." His narrative foregrounded the tension between heritage pride and economic viability, between tradition and aspiration.

These case studies, along with several others, were not extracted from survey data but built through ethnographic intimacy, repeated conversations, trust-building, and contextual observation. Each was triangulated with visual data, workshop visits, and social media analysis.

## 3 Navigational Challenges—Administering Fieldwork and Barriers to Access

Fieldwork is rarely a linear process, especially in contexts where caste, community, gender, and commerce intersect in unpredictable ways. In the case of our Ajrakh ethnography, the field was not a static site but a constellation of people, practices, and politics that constantly shifted. Administering fieldwork among craft-based communities, whose lives are shaped by seasonal rhythms, labour constraints, gendered expectations, and market fluctuations, required continual negotiation. This section outlines the logistical, relational, and epistemic challenges we encountered and the strategies we developed in response. It draws from team reflections, field diaries, and methodological improvisations.

### *Field Sites and Access: Mapping the Terrain*

Our research was anchored in two primary sites, Dhamadka, the historical village associated with Ajrakh, and Ajrakhpur, a newer settlement formed after the 2001 Gujarat earthquake. While Dhamadka represented the traditional heartland of the craft, Ajrakhpur had emerged as a state-supported "model" craft village, complete with paved roads, designated workshops, and tourist interest. However, this spatial clarity did not translate into easy access. The village layouts were complex, and locating the most appropriate households or workshops required insider knowledge. Initial contact was made through the well-known Khatri family networks, but it became evident early on that visibility and influence were unevenly distributed.

Master artisans with high public profiles were easy to access, but their workshops often functioned more like showrooms, catering to journalists and tourists. While these spaces offered valuable insights into Ajrakh's contemporary visibility, they risked flattening its complexity. We thus had to work harder to access more marginalised voices: younger workers, women, temporary labourers, and dyers who weren't part of heritage promotion circuits. Our first challenge was gatekeeping. In a tight-knit community where reputation is everything, unknown outsiders, even researchers, are approached with caution. Some participants worried that our work might reflect poorly on the craft's reputation or expose internal

conflicts. Others assumed we were journalists or design students looking for free documentation. To overcome this, we relied on referrals, returned multiple times to build rapport, and emphasized our long-term interest in craft systems, not just Ajrakh as fashion or textile.

### *Language, Trust, and Relational Ethics*

Language shaped every interaction. While many elder artisans preferred Kutchi or Gujarati, younger respondents, especially those active on social media, were more comfortable switching between Hindi and English. Women, particularly older ones, often spoke in softer dialects that required careful listening and culturally sensitive translation. In many cases, women would only speak if male family members were absent or gave consent. Our fieldwork thus depended not just on asking questions but reading atmospheres. If we sensed discomfort, silences, brief responses, avoidance, we would pause the interview or shift the focus. One young woman, engaged in cutting and drying cloth in a household courtyard, initially said, "There's nothing to say." But after returning twice, and after her husband left for work, she began talking about how her daughters were not allowed to enter the workshop space, even though she herself worked there daily. Her voice was hesitant, but deliberate.

Building trust also meant practicing what feminist fieldworkers call reciprocal presence. We listened as much as we asked. We participated in dye testing, helped fold cloth, shared meals when invited, and returned printed photos of our previous visits. This slowly transformed how we were seen, from extractive outsiders to interested witnesses. Importantly, we were aware of hierarchies within the field. Master printers often dominated conversations, while younger apprentices hesitated to speak freely. Women deferred to men; dyers deferred to printers. The most marginal voices, those of day-wage workers, teenage helpers, or women engaged in "finishing work", were also the hardest to access. Our method thus included silent observation, informal note-taking, and conversations away from formal interview settings.

Workers dye cotton cloth in Harde (myrobalan) at Dhamadka in Gujarat (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

### *Temporal Rhythms and Labour Constraints*

Unlike survey-based research, ethnography must respect the temporal rhythms of the community. Ajrakh production follows the cycle of seasons, weather conditions, and labor availability. During the monsoon, printing slows down due to water sensitivity and drying delays. During festival seasons, production accelerates, leaving artisans too busy for extended interviews. We often found ourselves rescheduling visits, waiting for the right time between dye cycles, or conducting interviews while participants worked. Some of our richest data came during these in-between moments, when artisans waited for cloth to dry or while sipping tea during lunch breaks.

But the pressure of economic precarity also meant participants had limited time. Artisans were not salaried researchers, they were working against timelines, market demands, and logistical delays. Our presence

was tolerated, even welcomed at times, but always conditional on their availability. We kept interviews short, offered flexible timings, and often adapted our questions to fit the rhythm of the workday.

### *Gendered Fieldwork and Invisible Labour*

Perhaps the most enduring challenge we faced was accessing the gendered dynamics of craft. Women play a central, yet often invisible, role in Ajrakh's production ecosystem. They prepare dyes, wash cloth, stitch borders, finish products, manage accounts, and support household-based craft. And yet, they are rarely referred to as "artisans." Interviewing women involved navigating family hierarchies, space boundaries, and self-perceptions. In many households, women worked in the same compound as men, yet were rarely acknowledged as skilled participants. When asked about their roles, most said things like "Bas madad karte hain" ("We just help"). Their labour was unrecognized and unpaid, but crucial.

We faced additional hurdles when attempting to photograph or film women at work. Some declined outright. Others allowed partial documentation, only hands, backs, or anonymized silhouettes. In these moments, we followed the principle of ethnographic refusal, recognizing that saying "no" is also a form of agency. To gain deeper insight, we relied on repeat visits, female research team members, and longer informal conversations. In one household, it was only on the third visit that a middle-aged woman showed us her personal collection of old Ajrakh prints and explained how she identifies quality through smell and touch, not just design.

### *Positionality, Power, and the Ethics of Being There*

As researchers affiliated with a university and a research center, we carried institutional privilege into spaces of informal labour. We were often perceived as "experts," even when we were there to learn. Some respondents assumed we could help them secure exhibitions, design collaborations, or government support. While we clarified our roles, we also acknowledged that research itself is a transactional act, we take people's time, stories, and labour to create knowledge. We addressed this asymmetry through transparency, long-term engagement, and follow-ups.

We shared drafts of visual outputs, returned photographs, credited participants in outputs (where permissible), and provided translated summaries of our research in accessible formats. But we remained aware that no form of reciprocity can fully equalise power.

Moreover, the very act of documenting marginality raised questions about representation. Were we romanticizing the craft? Were we focusing too much on decline and precarity? Were we speaking over the artisans, rather than with them? These questions shaped our methodology. We began treating refusal, discomfort, and ambivalence as valid data. We did not aim for perfect clarity or linear narratives. Instead, we honored fragmentation, contradiction, and complexity. One artisan could simultaneously complain about low prices and speak proudly of exporting to Europe. One woman could decry unpaid work and insist that her daughters not enter the workshop. These tensions were not errors, they were evidence.

### *The State, Bureaucracy, and Infrastructure*

Even as Ajrakh is celebrated as an "intangible cultural heritage," the infrastructure supporting the craft is uneven. During fieldwork, we repeatedly heard complaints about lack of water access, erratic electricity, inflation in chemical prices, and absence of institutional credit. Many artisans had no health insurance or retirement support. While a few accessed government craft schemes, most were unaware or unable to apply. The bureaucratic barrier, form-filling, online submission, English documentation, was often insurmountable. This infrastructural precarity shaped how participants viewed our research. Some hoped we were NGO workers or officials. Others shared frustration at being repeatedly interviewed by students or journalists without any follow-up. These moments taught us the importance of field accountability, to show up again, to clarify intent, and to avoid extractive interactions.

Dyed fabric dry on the bamboo rack at Dhamadka, Gujarat (Photo: by Jignesh Mistry)

### *Navigating Research Fatigue and COVID Disruptions*

A less visible but real challenge was research fatigue. Ajrakhpur, being a well-known craft village, receives dozens of students, interns, researchers, and journalists annually. Several participants expressed frustration: "Everyone comes and asks the same questions. Nothing changes."

This cynicism was understandable. It reminded us to be humble, patient, and careful with our questions. We often began by asking what participants had previously been asked, and then shaped our interviews differently. COVID-19 also disrupted our fieldwork rhythm. Some artisans reported losing months of orders. Several workshops had shrunk. Labour flows were affected. Families experienced economic distress. These aftershocks made us reflect on the ethical stakes of doing research during or after a crisis. While our study was not about the pandemic, it inevitably shaped the conditions of knowledge production.

### *Adaptive Strategies and Lessons Learned*

Administering fieldwork in the Ajrakh context taught us several critical lessons:

- Refusal is data: Not all questions are answerable. Not all stories are available. And that's okay.
- Relationships matter more than protocols: Trust, rapport, and shared time are more valuable than pre-designed instruments.
- Embeddedness is layered: Even in commercialised spaces, traces of community, memory, and rhythm remain.
- Power must be acknowledged, not denied: We carry privileges that shape how people see us. Recognizing this is the first step to being ethical.
- Slow ethnography produces depth: It is in the waiting, returning, and staying that the richest insights emerge.

## 4 Nature of Findings—Intentions vs Outcomes and the Role of Visual Ethnography

When we first designed this ethnographic study, our intention was to explore the transition of Ajrakh from a culturally embedded practice to a commodified, globally circulated textile. We hypothesized that this transformation would involve shifts in labour, gender dynamics, material sourcing, and community relations. We expected to find tensions between traditional aesthetics and market trends, between artisan autonomy and state-mediated support systems, and between heritage conservation and ecological degradation. While many of these expectations were borne out, the actual field experience deeply unsettled, reconfigured, and enriched our understanding. This section reflects on the disjunctures between our intentions and the outcomes that emerged through the field, and how the visual dimension of ethnography helped us capture the layered textures of these transitions, often in ways that verbal interviews could not.

### *From Heritage to Hustle: Shifting Frames of Craft*

We entered the field expecting to encounter artisans struggling to retain traditional practices under the pressure of commercialisation. And indeed,

there was evidence of this: some families no longer used natural dyes, others had reduced the number of printing stages, and several younger artisans had migrated to digital printing altogether.

But we also found that this narrative, of loss, erosion, and decline, was only partially true. In many cases, tradition and commercialisation were not in opposition but entangled. One artisan told us:

> Hamare liye Ajrakh ek zariya hai, rozgaar ka bhi, pehchaan ka bhi.
> (Ajrakh is a medium for us, of livelihood, and of identity.)

This sentiment was echoed repeatedly. Artisans did not see themselves as "losing" their culture, but as adapting it. One family produced two sets of textiles, one using fully traditional, slow techniques for exhibitions and collectors, and another with minor shortcuts for bulk orders. This dual-track approach allowed them to survive economically while retaining pride in their craft. Our initial lens, shaped by heritage discourse and critical craft studies, was therefore reoriented. Instead of viewing change as dilution, we began to see it as craft in motion, a dynamic process of negotiation, not collapse.

Young workers engaged in the Indigo dyeing and drying process at Dhamadka, Gujarat (Photo: Jignesh Mistry)

### *Intentions Meet Everyday Realities*

We had designed our research tools to uncover structural processes: displacement after the earthquake, the role of state schemes, the impact of social media. But in many interactions, what people wanted to talk about were everyday struggles: water shortages that disrupted dyeing, back pain from long hours of block printing, unpaid dues from urban designers.

One woman, who stitched borders onto Ajrakh dupattas from home, explained:

> Kya fayda kala ka, jab bijli hi nahi hoti do din?
> (What is the use of craft when there's no electricity for two days?)

These "mundane" disruptions often held more explanatory power than grand narratives. They pointed us to the fragile infrastructure within which heritage crafts exist, subject to failing water systems, inflation, gendered care burdens, and the unpredictability of client preferences. Our intentions to study "systems of commodification" therefore shifted toward a deeper attention to systems of survival, the everyday calculations artisans made to keep their practice alive.

### *Visual Ethnography as an Epistemic Tool*

One of the most transformative aspects of our methodology was the use of visual ethnography. Photography, video, and spatial mapping did not merely illustrate our findings, they shaped and enriched them.

For example, our processual photographs of block printing, taken in sequence over a single production cycle, revealed the temporal density of the craft. A single piece of cloth required over 14 steps, spread across 8–10 days, with drying periods interspersed. This visual sequencing allowed us to appreciate the labour involved in ways that verbal descriptions could not. More significantly, visual data unlocked new conversations. When we showed participants images from their own workshops, they often responded with extended narratives, clarifying details, or sharing personal

associations. In one case, a woman, upon seeing an image of herself stirring a dye vat, said:

> Yeh toh meri maa karti thi jab main chhoti thi. Ab main karti hoon.
> (My mother used to do this when I was small. Now I do it.)

Such reflections connected personal memory to material practice, foregrounding the emotional durability of craft, not just its economic dimension.

### *Seeing Gender, Differently*

Visual methods also helped make gendered labour visible, especially in cases where women themselves downplayed their roles. In many households, women performed tasks like pre-washing cloth, preparing resist pastes, or organizing finished goods for packaging. These were often dismissed as "madad" (help), not work. But through photographs and videos, we captured these actions as skilled, repeatable, embodied practices. When we shared these images with the women themselves, they began to articulate their expertise more assertively. One participant said:

> Haan, is paste mein mitti ka hisaab galat hua toh print kharab ho jaata hai.
> (Yes, if the mud proportion in this paste is off, the print gets ruined.)

This exchange shifted the narrative. The "help" was in fact technical labour, with clear consequences on product quality. Visual ethnography, in this sense, functioned as a recognition technology, surfacing undervalued knowledge and labor through the visual frame.

### *Documenting Spatial Inequalities*

Through spatial mapping and drone footage, we noticed clear material inequalities within Ajrakhpur itself. Households that were early movers post-earthquake had larger workshops, better equipment, and higher connectivity. Newer entrants or renters operated in cramped spaces, with shared access to vats and limited infrastructure.

One map we co-created with residents showed this hierarchy in color-coded form: green for well-equipped, blue for intermediate, red for vulnerable. The map sparked a debate within the community, with some

contesting the labels. This exercise showed us that space is political, not just physical. These visual tools also helped us see absence: the lack of women-only spaces, the marginal placement of migrant labor quarters, and the absence of public signage crediting lesser-known artisans.

### *Reframing Aesthetics, Ownership, and Design*

Another domain where intentions and outcomes diverged was in our understanding of aesthetic ownership. We had assumed that master printers would resist market-influenced design changes. But many were open to experimentation. What they resented was copying without credit, particularly by urban designers or fast-fashion brands. One artisan showed us a screen-printed scarf from Delhi that replicated his family's motif. He said:

> Yeh toh humne banaya tha, aur ab Amazon pe milta hai.
> (We created this, and now it's on Amazon.)

The issue was not that innovation was unwelcome, it was that authorship and ethics were being erased. Through visual comparison (side-by-side analysis of original and copied designs), we tracked how motifs travelled across platforms, often stripped of their provenance. This led us to reconsider how IP (intellectual property) frameworks apply to artisanal knowledge, especially in communities where design circulation happens orally, relationally, and intergenerationally.

### *Heritage for Whom? Market and State Mediation*

Our initial questions had focused on the tension between state-led heritage promotion and community autonomy. What we found was more layered. While some artisans benefited from GI tags, craft fairs, and tourism, many felt alienated by the paperwork, bureaucracy, and politics of recognition. One respondent said:

> Hamesha wahi log bulaye jaate hain jinke paas connection hai.
> (They always invite those who have connections.)

Visual ethnography helped us document who gets seen and who doesn't, whose faces appear in catalogues, exhibitions, and awards, and whose do

not. We created a small visual audit, comparing craft promotional material with our field images. The gap was stark: women, junior workers, and non-English speakers were mostly absent. These findings reoriented our focus from commodification as a market issue to commodification as a representational issue, shaped by elite curation, media aesthetics, and institutional gatekeeping.

### *Beyond Binary Outcomes: Contradictions and Continuities*

Perhaps the most important outcome of our fieldwork was the realization that intentions and outcomes are not opposites, they are entangled. Artisans simultaneously mourned lost rhythms and embraced faster production. Women resented their invisibility but resisted being labeled as formal workers. Younger artisans admired foreign buyers but worried about losing cultural grounding. These contradictions are not failures of coherence. They are signs of a living system, a practice negotiating historical depth, economic precarity, and aspirational futures.

Visual ethnography was crucial in honoring this complexity. It allowed us to hold contradiction without collapsing it, to see multiple truths operating within the same household, the same workshop, even the same artisan.

### *Ethics of Representation: Who Speaks, Who Shows, Who Decides?*

Finally, we confronted the ethics of representation. As outsiders, what right did we have to narrate these lives? What does it mean to photograph precarity? How do we avoid aestheticizing struggle?

We took several steps to remain accountable:

- All visual materials were shown to participants before publication.
- Consent was obtained for every image used, with options to anonymize.
- Where requested, we shared credit or omitted sensitive details.
- Outputs were returned to the community in print and digital formats.
- Participants were given access to transcripts, translations, and findings.

These practices do not eliminate asymmetry. But they affirm our commitment to reflexivity, reciprocity, and responsibility, cornerstones of ethical ethnography.

## 5 Conclusion: What the Field Taught Us

Our original research design aimed to track Ajrakh's journey from embeddedness to commercialisation. What we found was not a linear trajectory but a terrain of entangled transitions, economic, ecological, gendered, aesthetic, and political. Intentions were necessary for focus. But outcomes required openness, to silence, to contradiction, to the unexpected. Visual ethnography did not just document the field, it transformed it. It made visible what was ignored, audible what was suppressed, and relatable what was abstract.

In the end, the most important lesson was this: Ajrakh is not just a cloth. It is a lifeworld, and like all lifeworlds, it resists neat summary. Our role was not to define it, but to sit with it, learn from it, and represent it with care.

CHAPTER 8

# Reimagining Ethnography: Reflections and Future Directions for Visual Storytelling

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**Abstract** The chapter explores the transformative potential and ethical complexities of visual ethnography and storytelling methods in representing and empowering marginalized communities. By analyzing field studies from contexts including Kashmir, Assam, Gujarat, and Delhi, it demonstrates how participatory visual techniques—such as photography, video, and co-created digital exhibitions—give voice to silenced groups and humanize structural inequalities. The chapter highlights the importance of collaborative, decolonial, and community-driven research paradigms and addresses challenges arising from new digital technologies, such as AI and social media, emphasizing the necessity of rigorous ethical reflexivity. Ultimately, the chapter advocates for visual ethnography as an instrument for social justice, epistemic empowerment, and inclusive transformation in contemporary research and activism.

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Visual ethnography and storytelling are potent and perceptive methods that have become immensely popular in recent social research, activism, and campaigning. These methods are great at engaging with and speaking for marginalised groups and recording the emotional, situated, and human qualities of experiences that conventional methods tend to miss. The case studies in the book bring to life the experiences of marginalised communities, giving voice to these groups and richening the analysis of structural disparity through meticulous use of photographs, videos, and participant-driven narratives. Insights from previous chapters allow us to consider the visual narrative's exceptional value and vital significance in presenting and affirming grassroots experience. The book contends that visual ethnography is a potent instrument for advancing epistemic justice and social activism. However, its practice must be underpinned by a rigorous ethical schema rooted in collaborative and decolonising paradigms, especially as emerging digital technologies confront the discipline.

The foundational idea of visual ethnography rests on the understanding that people's experience is not just about words—it also uses the senses and the body. Visual ethnography moves from research that focuses on text. It shows the worth plus rich analysis that comes from visual sources (Roy and Ghone 2016). When one does not look at the visual and sensory parts, the ethnography remains incomplete and poor. This fails to show the whole nature of life as people live it (Pink 2021). Visual methodologies, like photographs, films, or digital stories, capture the small, unstated parts of social life; they show the small movements of a body, the meaning of objects, and the complex ties between bodies, places, and social groups. For communities long put aside, whose views dominant text records left out or twisted, the visual form becomes powerful. These methodologies allow individuals to articulate their lived experiences, allowing them to represent their own realities and contest the external categories that often define them (Wang and Burris 1997).

Participatory and collaborative processes are the essence of the value of visual ethnography, particularly in marginalised or underrepresented

communities. Processes like PhotoVoice (Sutton-Brown 2014), participatory video, and co-created digital exhibitions move away from the "researcher as observer" approach, so that community members become co-researchers and co-creators. This framing democratises representation, prioritises lived experiences, and resists extractive research practices by establishing dialogue and shared authority in the making and sharing stories (Kukreja 2022).

Visual ethnographic techniques build empathy and insight by making real emotions, spatial environments, and bodily experiences. This is particularly revolutionary for historically misrepresented, stereotyped, or silenced marginalised groups. One of the recurring themes in the case studies in this book and across the wider literature is the move away from imposed, external representation towards a dynamic, community-controlled narrative. In participatory projects, communities determine what needs to be heard and witnessed, thus taking control over their agency and stories (Kukreja 2022). This is critical in environments where communities are misrepresented in powerful discourses and rendered invisible by policy, media, and institutional silence. Telling the story visually makes abstractised inequalities and systemic injustices tangible and engaging. Visceral imagery, first-person video testimonies, and digital narratives are publicly accessible evidence in advocacy work, beyond scholarly and bureaucratic communities, to the larger public and policymakers. The examples of migrant workers, craftspeople, and minority groups in this book provide evidence of how visual narratives are used to humanise statistical information, to promote empathy, and to generate broad-based support for systemic reform.

This epistemological gravity is powerfully demonstrated by the capacity of visual narratives to communicate systemic suffering and individual tragedy. The Kapashera migrant workers' case study, where the community experienced unprecedented precarity during the COVID-19 lockdown, is a stark and heart-wrenching instance of systemic abandonment and individual tragedy. Visual narratives placed the viewer eye-to-eye with the economic desperation, housing uncertainty, and psychological pain felt by day labourers who stayed behind in cities after their employment disappeared overnight. The project's images and interviews revealed not just the tangible deprivation, including rent and food struggles, but also the underlying, gut-level feeling of powerlessness and betrayal experienced by workers, abandoned by both employers and state systems. The unadorned pain reflected in migrants looking directly into the

camera cannot be conveyed through mere written words, highlighting the strength of visual storytelling. Such visuals lift the issue above theoretical data, providing an "experiential realism" that policy briefs and statistics do not. Through these direct and intimate testimonies, the audience is confronted with the stark structural inequalities that define urban migration in India: the glaring absence of labour protections, affordable housing, and social safety nets. This intimate portrayal fosters a deep empathy, humanising a group frequently reduced to the impersonal label of "migrant labour," and advocates for change by making their struggles impossible to ignore.

On the contrary, visual ethnography is just as capable of recording and communicating the subtleties of resilience, happiness, and community-driven change. The activities of the Action Northeast Trust (ANT) in the conflict-affected Bodoland Territorial Area District of Assam graphically illustrate its beneficial effects. Visual records of ANT's educational campaign illustrate not just the geographical remoteness and infrastructural inadequacies of these communities but also the impact of conflict on their minds. Significantly, however, the visual testimony is not one of exclusive difficulty; it also captures profound moments of hope. Audiences can see the energetic enthusiasm of children in under-equipped classrooms, the unstinting dedication of local teachers, and the tangible changes facilitated by ANT's interventions. Images and camera shots enable the viewer to see these far-flung locations and experience a strong emotional connection with individuals in these environments. The commitment of workers in communities, the dignity of women weavers, and genuine smiles on students' faces are all enormously expressed through body language. Subtleties like the indications of satisfaction, hope, and persistence tend to escape written descriptions but emerge through skillfully conceived visual accounts.

Visual ethnography in Kashmir reveals the richness and vulnerability of multiple communities, the Pashtuns, Hanji (boat people), and Watals—minority groups who usually get left out in security-oriented or nationalist discourses. The films and photographs subvert mainstream representations, affirm cultural resilience, and invite a re-validation of socio-political hierarchies. In photo essays and interviews, Kashmiri women speak about their negotiations between tradition and modernity, mainly regarding education, mobility, and religious identity. Images of women's meetings, schools, and everyday lives present sophisticated accounts of their accommodation and resilience, avoiding simplistic or frozen portrayals

of "Kashmiri culture." Through their own words and images, these marginalised communities avoid being reduced to being simply "victims" or exotics, instead highlighting their autonomy and pride. In the Watal and Hanji communities, ethnographic visuality captures experiences of exclusion based on caste, housing precarity, and the dynamic between historical memory and the present marginalisation. Visual ethnography is, therefore, a participatory witnessing, confirming the lived lives of persons whose identities are frequently contested or erased.

The Ajrakh block-printing community in Gujarat's case study is a powerful example of how visual narratives can convey the complex relationship between cultural pride, artistic heritage, and contemporary economic pressures. The image narrative provides greater insight into craft as an economic endeavour and a meaningful expression of cultural identity and patrilineal pride. With meticulous cinematography and honest video testimonies, the film accentuates the painstaking nature of the work, the symbolic richness inherent in the ornate designs, and the rhythmic, near-meditative beauty of the printing process itself. The artisans reveal their deep spiritual attachment to their craft, taking pride in a heritage transmitted over generations. Their tales document historical government recognition and respect for their work, enhancing the justification of their craft. The pictorial medium brings alive the prints, colours, and apparel, making them seem to be symbols not just of beauty values but also of embedded identities.

However, the visual content masterfully resists sentimentalising the craft. The images and the stories make evident the gravity of the economic issues threatening a centuries-old practice. In taped interviews, the printers' agony and fear become vividly real when they talk of the aggressive competition from cheap, machine-made cloth inundating the market. The visual story tells of their anxiety as they suffer under the heavy burden of having to sacrifice quality to stay in business. These rich tensions are challenging to comprehend fully through numbers and text, but they become immediate and irreversible through voices heavy with emotion, longer contemplative silences, and concerned faces. They bring attention to a craft at a decision-making crossroads, where the needs of the contemporary digital market threaten to devalue both their craft's merit and cultural role. Through both the beauty of this heritage and the fear that it might be lost, these images lead the viewer directly into the world of the artisans. Such engagement inspires understanding and respect and a sense

of urgency for serious policy or marketplace interventions designed to safeguard this precious cultural expression.

## 1 Ethical Imperatives

Visual ethnography's history is inextricably bound up with the colonial endeavour, wherein ethnographic vision tended to be a means of exercising power (Clifford 1983). It was employed to observe, classify, and often sensationalise non-Western subjects for a Western consumer. This remains a legacy of an extractive and objectifying vision, emphasising the imperative of ongoing and rigorous ethical reflexivity in the field. There needs to be a fundamental move towards participatory and collaborative methodologies for the work of decolonising research to happen. Decolonising methodologies challenge the long-standing power hierarchies of colonialism that continue to exist within academic research. They consciously seek to place the epistemologies, values, and research agendas of the communities themselves at the centre (Smith 2012). This means there is a need to fundamentally reorder the research relationship on terms of respect, reciprocity, and mutual benefit.

Visual data present significant ethical concerns, especially when engaging with vulnerable or marginalised groups. Concerns regarding privacy, consent, and possible misrepresentation are increased by the permanent and easily circulated nature of photographs and films. Participatory visual ethnography attempts to mitigate these issues through ongoing discussion, collaborative authorship, and community ownership of the direction and dissemination of narratives (Clifford 2012). Researchers need to recognise their positionality, not only as observers or facilitators but as participating actors who themselves influence the process. There are known risks: images intended to empower can be manipulated, used cynically, or have detrimental effects for those represented. Thus, collaborative analysis and contextualisation, wherein community members explain and provide background on visual material, are crucial.

The Kashmir and Assam case studies are the best examples of ethical practice in action. In Kashmir, a region marked by high political tensions and cultural complexity, visual narrative functions as a means to reveal the "interior worlds of marginalised communities" of the Pashtuns, Hanjis, and Watal colony residents. Video stories centred on the Pashtun people

present a population fighting to maintain their distinctive language, traditions, and cultural identity in the face of significant pressure to assimilate. This method permits rich, multi-voiced, layered narratives that honour complexity and allow audiences to hear and interpret without overlaying an outside, authoritative structure. Thus, ethnography is made to participate, not simply viewing a culture from the outside, but experiencing it in practice, with all its inherent tensions and successes.

Equally, the ANT Assam case study is an example of empowerment using a decolonised, participatory methodology. The livelihood project, where previously homeless women work as weavers, is a stunning example of integrating research and intervention for social good. The visual platform conveys the "complex artistry of indigenous fabric production," carefully recording every phase in the weaving process, while foregrounding the women's roles as skilled artisans and breadwinners. These photo-narratives offer profound insight into "empowerment in social and family contexts," demonstrating how purposeful economic involvement can transform identity and self-esteem. Another project, the "Colouring the Rainbow" initiative, uses sport to promote emotional and social skill-building among young people. Video clips of girls playing frisbee in areas hit by riots capture laughter, teamwork, and deep emotional catharsis, showing how sports can be an effective vehicle to build peace, develop gender sensitivity, and create social integration in post-conflict environments.

However, visual ethnography is not free of complications. Ethical issues are always lurking in research. Consent must never be just a signed piece of paper; it must be continual, communicative, and responsive to cultural nuance and power differentials. There is always the possibility that a photograph, once posted online, can be misread, commodified, or used as a weapon against the people it was intended to help. This risk is particularly acute in conflict and migrant communities. The permanence of digital data only adds to the complexity: who owns the story once it is told? Moreover, the visual ethnography demands time, trust, and shared purpose. It cannot be seen as a "parachute methodology," a drop-in and record process followed by a drop-out. Instead, it requires ongoing interaction, capacity development, and a co-written vision between participants and the researcher. Without this, even the most stunning images taken may ring hollow or contribute to the very injustices they would seek to question.

From an institutional point of view, researchers who undertake visual ethnography tend to work within a tension between tradition and innovation. While there is a growing body of literature acknowledging visual research as scholarly and rigorous, many academic institutions still prefer writing for criteria for tenure, funding, and publication. This preference can cause barriers to gaining institutional legitimacy for visual projects or converting these projects into policy leverage. These barriers mirror a more general marginalisation of practice-based or community-focused research in the academic ranking systems.

## 2 Future Trajectories of Visual Storyboards

The practice of visual ethnography is significantly changing with the new emerging digital technologies. The availability of smartphones with high-quality cameras has ensured that visual production is made widely available to numerous individuals. Furthermore, social media sites have emerged as significant, albeit complicated, platforms for disseminating visual narratives from marginalised groups. These platforms enable social movements and individuals to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers, enabling them to disseminate their experiences to a global audience and create new types of visual activism and citizen journalism. An example is how smartphone footage has been used to document human rights violations as a necessary tool to ensure accountability and support legal advocacy in international arenas (Aronson 2017). However, this digital landscape is not without its perils. How algorithms curate content on social media can lead to loss of context and misinterpretation of nuanced social issues. Moreover, the digital space is full of particular risks concerning surveillance, data privacy, and the well-being of activists and vulnerable people whose narratives are posted online.

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) poses added levels of complexity and possibility across multiple disciplines. AI-powered image and video analysis tools can aid ethnographers in recognising patterns in large visual data sets. However, as Noble (2018) also explores in *Algorithms of Oppression*, the built-in biases in AI algorithms, which learn from current data, present a real threat to reinforcing and even exacerbating societal prejudices against disenfranchised groups. If these technologies are used uncritically, they may give rise to new modes of algorithmic regulation and social sorting, further solidifying the inequalities ethnographers seek to research and subvert.

Virtual Reality, celebrated for its potential to produce immersive ethnographic experience, has the potential to increase empathy by enabling users to "live" others' points of view. Initiatives that recreate the experience of refugees or people with disabilities aim to engender a broader understanding of various lived realities (Shin 2018). We must, however, be careful with the notion of VR as an "empathy machine." The moral considerations involved in producing immersive spectacles of suffering are profound, and it is legitimate to ask whether a simulated experience can ever adequately represent the complicated reality of someone else's existence. Using these technologies in particular contexts, such as a VR immersion in a migrant's life in Kapashera or an AI deconstruction of cultural signifiers in Kashmir, promises a lot but also risks serious misrepresentation. Generative AI in visual ethnography has transformative potential, enabling researchers to process and analyse large volumes of visual data.

It can further create synthetic ethnographic situations for further investigation. Generative AI can help organise large and heterogeneous image datasets, uncover latent visual themes, and enable new means of interacting with research objects. This could involve employing conversational agents or "synthetic interlocutors," allowing researchers to engage directly with digitised field notes or participant accounts (de Seta et al. 2024; Rettberg 2024). These developments create new possibilities for collaborative, iterative, and generative ethnographic research in terms of scale and depth of visual research methods. There are, though, substantial issues with generative AI.

For example, it can replicate and reinforce cultural, racial, and gender biases in its training data, potentially marginalising non-Western narratives and perpetuating already established stereotypes (Hosseini 2024). Researchers warn that too much dependence upon AI-generated representations might cause cultural narratives to become homogenised and lose local specificity, creating ethical concerns regarding authorship, consent, and representation. The tendency of the technology to "hallucinate," producing realistic but incorrect or false outputs, complicates trustworthiness and authenticity in ethnographic interpretation. Thus, while generative AI can increase the analytical capability and creative potential of visual ethnography, its use needs to be critically reflexive and placed within ethical, decolonial, and context-sensitive research methods.

## 3 Conclusion

Visual ethnography and storytelling are fundamental elements of social research and advocacy; they are the basis for an expansive and just understanding of knowledge. For disempowered people, such approaches empower people to reclaim their representation, foster self-expression, and act as valuable tools for justice. By bringing together stringent research practices with participatory ethics and inventive expression, visual ethnography possesses the singular ability to revolutionise both scholarly work and social change. Through the integration of lessons learned from case studies in Assam, Gujarat, Delhi, and Kashmir, the distinctive value of visual ethnography and storytelling in bringing out the lived realities of marginalised populations is forcefully brought out. These approaches are not just documenting; they also function as effective empowerment, awareness-raising, and critically evaluating systemic problems tools. Humanising data and statistics is one of the most significant accomplishments in these varied settings. Visual narrative turns intangible systemic issues into concrete, contextualisable human experiences. It brings to light emotions and complexities, which are revealed in the joy of studying in a virtual classroom in Assam, the fear of an Ajrakh craftsman facing an uncertain future, the stark pain on the faces of migrant labourers in Kapashera, and the silent resolve of a Pashtun elderly woman who is saving her language in Kashmir.

By cantering on participant storytelling and lived experience, these approaches provide genuine self-representation for groups whose histories are otherwise spoken for. In democratising representation, they give voice to voices that are habitually silenced in the dominant discourse. In the process, they create empathy by rendering close and immediate access to viewers' emotional and environmental backdrops to people's lives. In addition, it deepens advocacy by making personal stories powerful commentary on inequality and resilience. From the remote classrooms of Assam to the precarious workshops of Gujarat and the neglected alleys of Kapashera, visual storytelling captures what life feels like, not just what it is.

Ultimately, these case studies affirm that visual ethnography is more than a form of documentation when exercised ethically and collectively. It is a vehicle of solidarity, resistance, and transformation. As we enter a future that is ever more formed by digital technologies, the obligation to use this rich tool with caution, reverence, and a firm devotion to social

justice has never been more paramount. The real value of visual ethnography will be ascertained by how much it can not only show the world but also help create a more equal and fair society, ensuring that those who have been rendered invisible are now brought into light on their own terms.

In the future, the discipline must continue innovating participatory, reflexive, and technologically responsive practices with critical attention to ethics, ownership, and representation. Visual ethnography's future will be collaborative, immersive, and highly politically motivated by communities as much as by researchers, and always responsive to the changing dynamics of power, visibility, and transformation.

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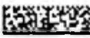



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This book presents visual ethnography as a transformative approach to understanding, documenting, and representing the layered realities of marginalized communities and often-overlooked institutional contexts. It demonstrates how visual storytelling tools ranging from photography and video to infographics and spatial mapping can uncover the subtle social, cultural, and economic dynamics that traditional textual research tends to miss. Drawing on diverse case studies, the volume shows how visual narratives not only illuminate lived experiences but also foster collaboration and challenge dominant representations.

By highlighting its multidisciplinary reach, the book situates visual ethnography within the intersecting domains of urban studies, development research, and policy engagement. It also delves into the ethical and methodological dimensions of visual storytelling, underscoring its potential to bridge academic inquiry with public understanding and policymaking. Ultimately, this work advocates for visual ethnography as a vital instrument of inclusive research and transformative communication, one that amplifies marginalized voices, strengthens social connections, and inspires meaningful change in contemporary urban and social landscapes.

Readers will be drawn to its inventive methods, compelling findings, and thought-provoking themes, which together weave strong links between scholarship, advocacy, and on-ground practice.

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