



## ‘Story of My Village’: Participatory Arts Based Methods and Acts of Thinking Energizing Change in Rural India

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Our work is a collection of artefacts: drawings, storyboards, films, music and poems created by a tribal community in rural India during interactive workshops which used various participatory arts-based methods to tell stories about the experiences related to a new solar powered community building. Energy use is deeply connected with human cultures, practices, norms and values. This article challenges assumptions about linear progress between energy access and women’s empowerment, demonstrating that the impact is not immediate but requires social adaptation over time. It gradually uncovers complex power dynamics and social hierarchy within the tight-knit community. This article is also a five-year journey (2019–2024) of four different researchers from diverse backgrounds and their attempts to capture and edit various acts of thinking surfaced through these methods. As global momentum towards sustainable energy gathers pace, our work reflects different ways of engaging, stimulating various ways of thinking and structuring dialogue about energy transition within the community. We focus on the potential of these methods to capture the embodied dimensions in the forms of artefacts as shown in the film. We position our work as a novel approach in energy studies that uses the lens of embodied research to understand the frictions of social realities in energy transitions, and surfaces hidden factors like socio-economic status, stakeholders’ involvement, and the critical role of gender in energy.

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**Keywords:** participatory methods; community solar; energy transitions; film-making; rural India

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## VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.18655>.

Available for download here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.18655.mp4>.

## STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





## VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

[Note: This is a transcript of a video article. Onscreen text appears left justified, while spoken words are indented. Individual elements from the transcript, such as metadata and reference lists, may appear more than once in the document, in order to be properly read and accessed by automated systems. The transcript can be used as a placeholder or reference when it is not possible to embed the actual video, which can be found by following the DOI.]

[00:10]

“STORY OF MY VILLAGE”

PARTICIPATORY ARTS BASED METHODS AND ACTS OF THINKING  
ENERGIZING CHANGE IN RURAL INDIA

[A verse from a Marathi devotional song praising Lord Shiva, accompanied by a traditional tribal string instrument, is sung and performed by a Khuded community member in the background.]

Findings from:

The Strategic University Network to Revolutionise Indian Solar Energy (SUNRISE):  
Swansea University led GCRF/EPSRC (£6.2M) initiative (2018–2023)  
British Academy/Leverhulme (2022) and ESRC Impact Acceleration Award (IAA) (2024)

SUNRISE international collaboration aimed to  
develop research capacity, share knowledge and  
demonstrate photovoltaic advances.

This research was co-created by Carol (Swansea University)  
and Khushboo (Tata Institute of Social Sciences –TISS).

TISS co-led the development of the strategy, piloting of  
participatory approaches, research activities and reporting.

Minna (University of Cambridge) and Dani (Studio Hasi, Mumbai)  
later joined the collaboration, bringing new perspectives and  
creative methods to the project.

Making and performing are also acts of thinking, and that meaning is created and expressed in multiple modes (Kress 2010, Brown & Banks 2014, Kullman 2014)

Reflexivity plays a crucial role in participatory arts-based research, especially in diverse and complex settings (Benson & O'Reilly 2020)

[0:42]

## MIGRATION

Ravi\*, 27

Khuded, Maharashtra

\* Names are anonymized

70% of migrants to Mumbai come from Maharashtra state

The average age of migrants is 20–21 years and 64% are male

Most of these migrants are economic migrants

and they return home at the beginning of crop growing months

[1:20]

‘Story of my village’ – Marathi poem by

Bhagwan, Khuded village

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*Brother, what should I say;*

*Brother, what should I say,*

*The story of my village*

*Gheu thode kashta*

*Hou ek nishtha*

*Ashi aahe aamchya gavachi goshta*

*We will make efforts,*

*And we will come together*

*This is the story of my village*



*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazya gavachi goshta*

[01:49]

## **KHUDED**

Khuded

Households: 80

Mean population Age : 28

Carol: Khuded is a site of a community energy project under the sunrise initiative, a UK India collaboration.

Khuded

Livelihood : 85% Agriculture

Average annual income: Rs 13400/ \$ 160

Carol: I have been a researcher on this project since 2019. The village has an almost equal mix of semi-pucca homes made for materials like bricks with roof tiles and huts made of mud, thatch and other local materials. Most households rely on kerosene for lighting due to frequent power outages, and use wood or dung for cooking. Nearly 80% experience over three hours of load shedding each day. Average household incomes are low, around 13,000 rupees, and many residents report that high energy costs strain their limited budgets.

The Solar Oasis is our fullscale demonstrator building. It is located in a village in rural Maharashtra, India. It uses solar power to generate, store and release energy to be shared by the residents, acts as a flexible community space. The solar oasis generates more power than it consumes. This surplus energy is intended to be shared locally, supporting daily activities and providing business opportunities. This can promote economic growth and reduce the need for temporary migration.

These expanded income generation opportunities, provide alternative options to the seasonal migration that disrupt family life and agricultural practises, exposing individuals and communities to greater economic insecurities, and instead allow people to stay and thrive in their community other than seek work elsewhere.

[3:28]

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

### Pre-Build January 2021

Dr Khushboo Ahire

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India

Dr Carol A Maddock

Swansea University, UK

Carol: To look at underlying principles, that we could ground our research within. And the capabilities approach and participatory arts based approach fitted in with this, making sure we were involving the public throughout this process of, you know, what the building was about, and how it was going to be designed, where it was going to be put, who was going to be using it?

Khushboo: We acknowledge the inevitable power dynamics between donors, project partners, researchers and community participants. To mitigate this, we focused on building trust by working with local NGO, participants were encouraged to share critical perspectives, emphasising there were no right answers. Participatory arts based methods aimed to counter critique traditional models of community engagement, overcoming barriers such as language, illiteracy and scientific jargons. Underpinning all activities, was the importance of respecting socio-cultural, environmental and historical contexts. There were 58 participants comprising men and women, aging from 18 to 60 pulse years old.

Carol: So when you were talking about the multiple stakeholders, to an extent, though, the villagers have got quite a well, they have a very positive view, because obviously they have been very supportive over a long number of years, that many people are benefitting, others who aren't benefitting so much, and to really get that understanding of others' views and abilities and access, back to this equitable access of the building, are we definitely seeing that? And maybe it has been a little bit limited in that we've also got members of the group who are community members.

Khushboo: And since we are also trying to understand a future scope for this project, how we can help them further and how we can improve the things which currently they are facing problems with.

Khushboo: Using arts based research, encouraged communities to express and communicate their outlooks, support each other in the process, and learn together through fun and creative activities. We used four qualitative research methods. First body mapping, wherein a life sized outline of the participants's body was created on a large sheet of paper and they were encouraged to express their thoughts, feelings, and social experiences directly on to the body outline to convey their personal narratives as embodied knowledge. Second, was the convoy model of social relationships. This technique helped us understanding the social relationships of community members and the types of emotional and instrumental support that they receive from their close, closer to closest relationships within their family and social circles, third technique, occupational mapping, developed our understanding of various rules, skills, and occupations of community members in the area, especially to identify enabling and constraining environmental factors that influence individual and group capabilities. Lastly, in participatory diagramming, the participants were encouraged to discuss the challenges in the community, and what would be helpful for them to overcome these challenges.

[7:31]

## **PARTICIPATORY FILMING**

### **Post-build November 2022**

Carol: is really fundamentally grounded in the experiences of the community. So it's got a number of processes, each individual element, so it's about the storytelling and how we actually get the participants to talk and describe their own individual stories as a first step. Storyboard is a really useful way of really making sure that they are going to capture the aspects of the story that they've decided on.

Khushboo: First drawing it, then people start sharing their ideas

Carol: You've got the main storyteller who's drawing it, but everybody is contributing in some or the other ways. So you get that that feeling that it is a it is a combined approach to actually telling the story and even when it was sort of more fully completed the you know, all the boxes then each time we came back to a session, we sort of came back to that initial individual stories to the almost like a collective analysis of the story, in understanding which one, which main story they want to to tell and and how they want to tell it.

Khushboo: I think that whole process also gives them an opportunity to reflect on each other's experiences, which is very, very important. Generally, it is just my experience



and I would be limited to thinking in a certain way. But when I hear about different experiences, my horizons are more broadened. So that really helps them to understand each other better and think about or think about more opportunities or explore what they can do in future.

Dani Kalarikalayil Raju  
Studio Hasi, India

Dani: As a designer, I always believe that everyone is a designer. It's just that our tools need to be more accessible for everyone to participate. It was wonderful to see that the community members quickly picked up the skills that's required for filmmaking, whether it's the awareness of what's in the frame, whether the audio visualization on the screen is still moving, and quickly moving from shot to shot based on the storyboards they created. It was an example of how people can reflect on their own lived experiences, how they can come together to collaborate on a storyboard, how they can work together, and act various roles, of the people who are operating cameras, people who are directing, people who are acting and these amalgamation of activities into the wonderful process of filmmaking. Editing was very interesting and a lot of intermediation was there in the process, partly because of the complexity of the editing software. And we would sit together over multiple sessions, to kind of use all the shots and lay on a timeline based on the story boards and find gaps where shots are missing. They will go back, shoot and then we'll add it together and then iterate over the multiple versions of this edit, collectivity. And it was a very joyful experience for all of us involved and that is truly reflected in the final film also.

Clips from the participatory video created by the community

Earlier everything was simple. We had houses made by using twigs and branches, plastered with mud and flooring made by using cow dung. We didn't have drinking water in the village for two-three months a year. We used to fetch water from Mahuli Pada and other far away places. We had to walk 30-40 minutes to fetch water. Now we have a well, still the issue of water persists. Earlier we didn't have a flour grinder in our village. We used a traditional stone grinder. Earlier we used to start grinding from 4 AM. Now with the solar building we have access to an electric grinder. Earlier we had to sit on the ground and take a lot of effort to grind. As electricity is available we are now able to use the electric grinder. The flour is used to make flatbread (Bhakri). The rice kernels are threshed to get rice grain, which is part of our diet. Earlier we had to go to other padas (hamlets) 3-4 km to get the flour. Now we have a flour grinder and a rice husking

machine in the solar building. These machines have solved our problem of grinding and husking with the help of solar power. We feel empowered. The solar building has reduced the pressure of work.

We pick the flower buds early in the morning and in the evening and store it in the fridge till the next day, after which it is taken to the market without any wastage.

We initiated the bamboo project, but due to lack of mechanisation, it used to take us a long time to prepare the products. Now that we make use of the bamboo slicer, we don't have to cut bamboo by hand. The slicer has helped us to deliver the products in a time efficient manner.

Khushboo: I think the idea of them being on the bigger screen or them being in the video, excites them and then it is also kind of a memory which they can replay again and again. So they would like to do that and because that excitement was there, that interest was there, they were also very quick. Of course they made mistakes and also corrected themselves. And this is an opportunity to convey their messages, convey their voices, and be aware about what they really want, what they don't want, and what things can be improved. So this whole process, as you said, really, you know, helps them to brainstorm, enhance their thoughts and the whole process of understanding every aspect of village development.

Carol: Yeah, and I think we've sort of mentioned right from the outset. There's this certain elements of dynamics within the community, power dynamics and, you know, and they have to stay here within the community, so they don't want them necessarily raise contentious issues, but they want to be able to comfortably discuss them in the group and see what they can, what they are happy to say and and what they might not want to include, but might, you know, they can discuss amongst themselves. So it has promoted wider discussion, even amongst the group.

[14:55]

## **VALIDATION WORKSHOP**

**June 2024 - 320 days after inauguration**

Carol: I have a story about the building. The first time I saw this, there were many people there. It is a very nice experience for me to be here.

Is it a benefitting factor or not a benefitting one?

Is it sun, sunrays or is it cloud, rain?

Benefitting factor?

Please share why did you chose the sticker?

Semi structured interviews

We are here almost one or one and a half year, isn't it

So what all changed in this period?

Rest of the people are not paying much attention..

Then it is just our one family that goes there,  
makes us wonder what we will do there?

Why don't the rest of the people pay attention?

How can we say what's in their mind..

Prof. Minna Sunikka-Blank

Cambridge University, UK

Minna: The participatory research we did clearly revealed social realities and structures of power in the village. Some are obvious and physical, like the land ownership, but they are also more hidden ones among the women themselves. All these influence energy consumption patterns, who benefits and what the energy is used for. It also matters for ownership and maintenance. As one participant said in our workshop, those who are well off benefit the most. For example, the women in the key family benefit, perhaps the most, and they were keen or assigned to participate in our workshops. The old lady in the key family clearly has direct and indirect power, and this can then trickle down through a network of women in the village. It also matters how the energy is used. So it is clear that firewood is used for cooking water and food, solar energy is often used for fans or comfort in the houses and electricity from the grid is used for mobile phone charging, therefore for communication and entertainment. If this is so, then solar energy is for comfort and communication, not so much for cooking. It might therefore be that electricity benefits men more than women in the village. It should also be considered that energy needs in the village are shaped by very urgent priorities, especially during seasonal drought. And the priorities are water, food, and farming.

[18:26]

## AT HOME

### Acts of thinking

Dani: We are all back home. During the course of the last few months after our visit, we made an effort to think through our own thinking and try to distill our new learnings into reports and films that others can learn from. We did various acts of thinking, from different perspectives, perspectives of our audiences, perspectives of our funders, perspective of the people that we met in Khuded. Participatory arts based methods, anchored us and helped us crystallize these various acts of thinking in the forms of drawings and pictures and visuals and poems, it's all there in front of our eyes, if you want to look through our biases and our versions of history, it's all in front of our eyes.

‘Story of my village’ A Marathi poem

by Bhagwan, Khuded village

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazyava gavaichi goshta*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazyava gavaichi goshta*

*Brother, what should I say;*

*Brother, what should I say,*

*The story of my village*

*Brother, what should I say;*

*Brother, what should I say,*

*The story of my village*

*Vikramgad talukyachi nirmiti zali*

*Khuded gavaichi vibhagni zali*

*Khuded gavaichi vibhagni zali*

*Gram panchayat geli Vikramgad madhe*

*Panchayat samiti geli Jawhar madhe*

*Tahsil kacheri geli Jawhar madhe*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*Vikramgad District was created*

*Khuded village was divided into two*

*Gram Panchayat was in the Vikramgad sub-district*

*While Panchayat Samiti moved to Jawhar*

*The sub-district went to Jawhar*

*Brother, what should I say;*

*Brother, what should I say,*

*The story of my village*

*Sarkari kaama sathi Jawhar la jay*

*Saheb mhanto tu Vikramgad la jay*

*Jawhar la jay tu Vikramgad la jay*

*Bolnara bolto, adchan sodavato*

*Sadha bhola far kantalun jay*

*Sadha bola far kantalun jay*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Dada, kai sangu*

*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*When we go to Jawhar for government scheme work*

*The officer says you'll have to go to the Vikramgad,*

*The one who can talk well,  
solves the problem by discussing,  
But the innocent ones get very tired*

*Brother, what should I say;  
Brother, what should I say,  
The story of my village*

*Gavatli shala hi athvi paryata hay  
Master pahile tar teenach hay  
Master pahile tar teenach hay  
Pudhil shikhshanala pora  
Baher gavi jay  
Sakhryala jay, koni Walwandyala jay  
Sakhryala jay, koni Walwandyala jay  
Dada, kai sangu  
Dada, kai sangu  
Mazya gavachi goshta  
Dada, kai sangu  
Dada, kai sangu  
Mazya gavachi goshta*

*The school in the village is only up to 8th grade  
But if you look at the teachers,  
there are only three teachers*

*Children have to go to town for further education  
Some go to Sakhra,  
whereas some go to Walwanda*

*Brother, what should I say;  
Brother, what should I say,  
The story of my village*



*Gavat ST chi soyach nahi*  
*Shikshana sathi por chalat jai*  
*Shikshana sathi por chalat jai*  
*Chalun chalun pora kantulun jai*  
*Yacha vichar kon karta ka nai*  
*Yacha vichar kon karta ka nai*

*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Mazya gavachi goshta*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*There is no state transport bus facility in the village*  
*Children have to walk long distances for education*

*The children get very tired of walking.*  
*But is even anybody bothered to think about it*

*Brother, what should I say;*  
*Brother, what should I say,*  
*The story of my village*

*Ashi aahe hi doke dukhi*  
*Gavchi janta kadhi hoil sukhi*  
*Gavchi janta kadhi hoil sukhi*  
*Geu thode kashta, hou ek nishtha*  
*Ashi aahe aamchya gavachi goshta*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Mazya gavachi goshta*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Dada, kai sangu*  
*Mazya gavachi goshta*

*So this is the headache we live with  
We don't know when would  
the people of the village be happy*

*We will make efforts,  
And we will come together  
This is the story of our village.*

We would like to thank all the villagers  
of Khuded, Maharashtra, India for their  
contributions to this film.

#### Special Thanks

PM Sandhya Rani, Professor and Chairperson,  
School of Development Studies, TISS, Mumbai  
S. Siva Raju, Professor (retd),  
School of Development Studies, TISS, Mumbai

The project has created an alternative and accessible energy source for the village.

Participatory arts based methods facilitated discussions and understanding of  
individual and collective experiences irrespective of literacy level, gender and age.  
They gave participants confidence and courage that grew over time.

This film captures the initial stages of a development project which is active  
and quantitative data about the impact is due.

This film reflects the personal perspectives of the researchers and does not represent  
the official views of the institutions with which we are affiliated.

As researchers engaging with a community as outsiders, we acknowledge the  
potential biases in presenting participants' creative expressions.

We would like to thank our funders for their generous support, which made this  
collaboration possible. We also extend our gratitude to the academic institutions  
and partner organisations involved, whose commitment to inclusive, co-produced  
research has been essential in enabling this work.

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Swansea University — Prifysgol Abertawe — Impact Acceleration Account

TISS — Re-Imagining Futures sunrise

The British Academy

UKRI — UK Research and Innovation

GCRF — Global Challenges Research Fund

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