Bas kuchh baatcheet

Restitching participant-researcher relationships through conversation & reciprocity

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“Mujhe mazza aaya aaj. Aap vaapis kab aaoge?”

“I had fun today. When will you come back?”

Rabia*, 17

The digital version of this zine is best viewed on a PDF viewer with the page display set to ‘two-page view’ and the ‘show cover page’ option selected.

*Participants’ faces have been obscured and their names changed across this zine to protect their privacy.

In February and March 2024, the four of us travelled to eight locations across India to understand from women their experiences of interacting with digital platforms. These women, ranging from teenagers to women in their sixties, belong primarily to underserved and marginalised communities in both rural and urban areas. Their access to digital devices is often mediated by several forces, including patriarchal attitudes surrounding women's usage of technology.

As researchers, we were interested in unpacking the affective idea of digital trust, and its construction and enactment by our participants. To this end, we devised methods borrowing from human-centred design: an approach that sought women's articulations of their own experiences and simultaneously attempted to narrow the gap between participant and researcher. Based on learnings from secondary research, conversations with experts, and previous fieldwork, we crafted four research activities (or "games"), using tangible artefacts like cards to foster a sense of play and encourage uninhibited conversation. We set participants at ease by letting them know it was nothing intimidating or complicated—*just a chat*, bas kuchh baatcheet.

We soon discovered that these activities, and the manner in which we facilitated them, enabled us to unravel far more than initially anticipated. Through aspirations and regrets shared in confidence, our participants let us into their lives in unexpected and moving ways. As women studying women, we found common ground with many of our participants. At the same time, we were constantly grappling with our positionality as women with socioeconomic and caste privilege conducting research with women from marginalised communities.

This zine is a stitching together of individual and collective reflections from our field experiences. It is also an invitation to reimagine the fabric of field research and the threads that constitute it—beginning, perhaps, from the delicate and ever-changing relationship between participant and researcher.

Aditi, Antara, Ava & Manvi

Women in rural and urban India are busy. Their days are packed with household chores, childcare duties, and endless emotional labour. As researchers, we strove not to add to this burden, instead hoping to infuse moments of leisure by prioritising interactivity and fun in the design of our research activities.

We found that sometimes, the most organic way to understand someone's perspective is to make sure they know that they hold all the cards. Asking people to recognise key icons commonly found on devices—the camera icon, for example—works really well for digitally-confident women. However, women who are underconfident may think of us as the ones in control, that we are evaluating their knowledge and not just curious about their personal patterns. The participant-researcher hierarchy rears its head despite attempts to break away from it.

Women, then, need to know it's all in their hands, and that we are merely trying to learn from them. So when Rakhi began to feel nervous, we flipped the script.

"Rakhi, forget what I said about telling me what you know. Think of me like your student. If you had to teach me how to use this, how would you

do it?" The difference in her response was palpable. She went from being a participant to being a teacher in that moment—her answers gained authority, and she, more confidence.

Our "What Would Asha Do?" activity served as a playground in which women claimed control, as they responded to various dilemmas of trust. While it began as an exercise hinging on predetermined options we presented to participants in conjunction with the dilemma, we tested something different with Ghazala. Ava explained to her the fictional dilemma, and said "Help me finish this story. How do you think it should go?" This change in tactic enabled a more creative power for Ghazala, who then saw herself as an equal agent.

Framing this activity as one of "co-writing" also encouraged her to own and express her opinions and attitudes in ways that felt safe. The stories featured protagonists that partially resembled her, giving her the leeway to share personal experiences with us without feeling burdened to "perform" a correct answer.

As researchers entering participants' homes and other spaces, it was also important for us to make the interactions as familiar as possible. By using icons—of apps, phone features, or one's social environment—or calling them "buttons" (a reference to older, more familiar keypad phones), we were able to account for varying literacy levels, and more broadly, speak a language of the digital that the participants were fluent in. Our flexibility made the activities more comprehensible, while extending familiar cues between participant and researcher.

Participant power, then, was the axis around which to make activities flexible —we had to adjust to the little hints of discomfort and underconfidence that tend to plague research settings, particularly for women. We matched women's tones, explained that there are no wrong answers, and recalibrated our own behaviour and strategy based on what we observed of their body language. We also leveraged the physicality of the cards to encourage active play by the participants.

Lalita, an enthusiastic eleventh grader, loved holding the cards herself. She was in charge of the game, and we were playing by her rules.

Our intention, from day one, was to prioritise iteration over perfection. We were not afraid to change pace or tactics, and lean into the participants' excitement to maintain a positive environment for their expression.

We even eventually moved from conducting interactions in pairs to one-on-one conversations with participants, allowing an ultimate form of privacy to become the norm around interactions. In that spirit, we also made blank cards available to participants to account for anything we may have missed, but more importantly, as an active invitation of their inputs. Ultimately, we were not only shaping the activities together, but also the very knowledge that would emerge from it. ◆

During my interview with Harsha, I realised she wasn't very comfortable in Hindi. So I switched to Marathi midway, and I think that really helped. Although she wasn't confident in my ability to converse in Marathi (and rightfully so), I insisted that I understood her perfectly. Eventually, we settled into a flow that worked for the both of us.

I tried a similar approach with a few women who had migrated from Andhra Pradesh. Despite my spoken Telugu being so poor, this improved the conversation in more than one way. Being able to speak in a language that they felt more at ease in encouraged them to let me into their worlds and share experiences and intimacies they would not have otherwise. And while I definitely felt foolish scrambling for the right words, they could see that I was making an effort to meet them halfway instead of imposing another language upon them.

It's crucial for us as researchers to meet our participants where they are, not enter their spaces with little regard for the time and energy they expend to participate in this work. Despite the conversational frictions our limited knowledge of a language generates, it does ease the back-and-forth and decreases our reliance on a translator.

And this becomes critical when participants don't feel comfortable around the translator, which was often the case when the translator was a man or a familiar face from the community—sometimes it's easier to reveal parts of yourself to a stranger than it is to someone who might gossip about you.

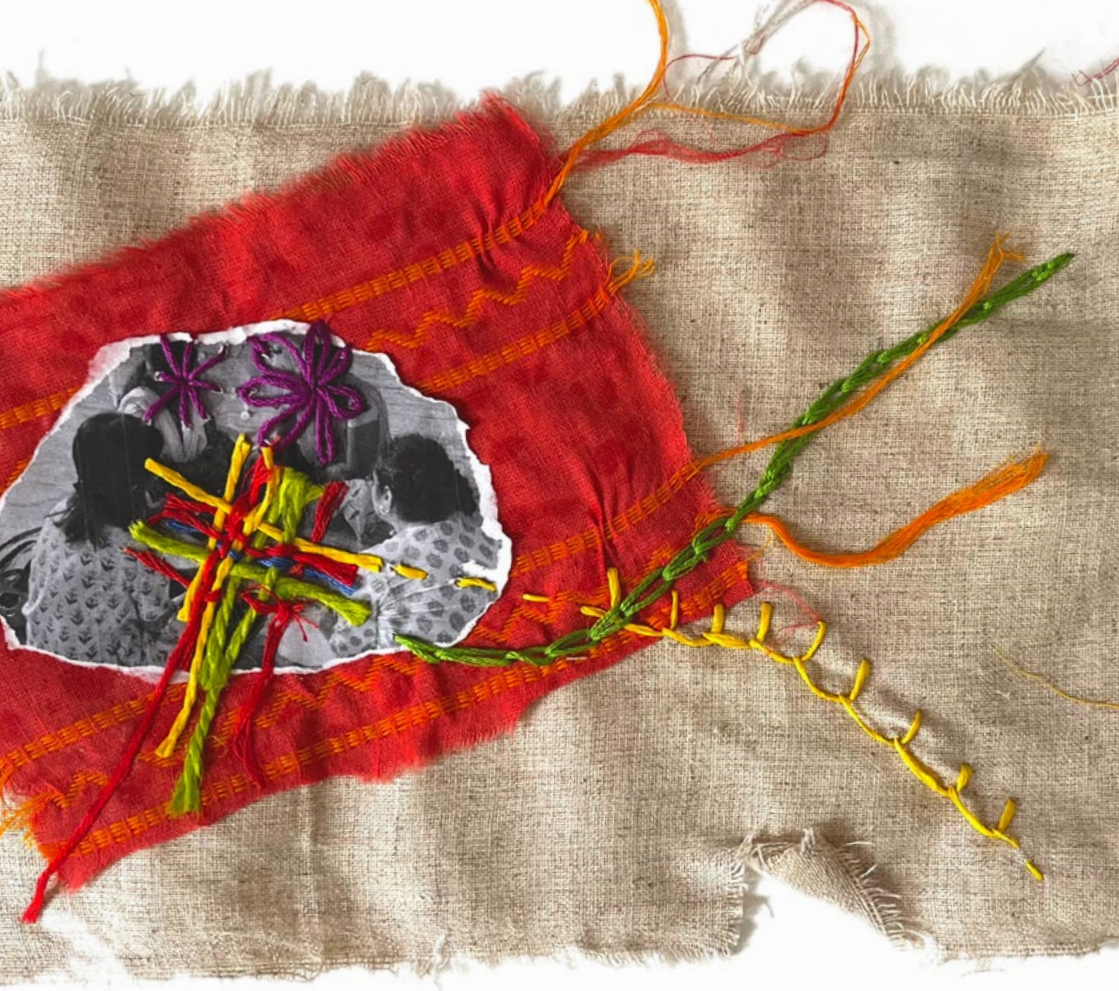
During a focus group discussion conducted in Hindi—which only a fraction of the women understood—the field partner intervened to translate, but also ended up steering the conversation at times. In an attempt to shorten the gap between the participants and us, I hesitantly volunteered a question in Marathi. A few women, previously half-engaged, sat up straighter and demonstrated a newfound

interest in the discussion. The field partner continued to be integral to the conversation, and we were still speaking some Hindi, but widening that channel of communication did wonders for everyone involved. I experienced that again during our interaction with Sushila, this time as the third party. I imagine the interaction would have been significantly more staggered and "interview"-like had you not made the effort to speak with her in Telugu. I could see her open up to you in ways that felt comfortable to her.

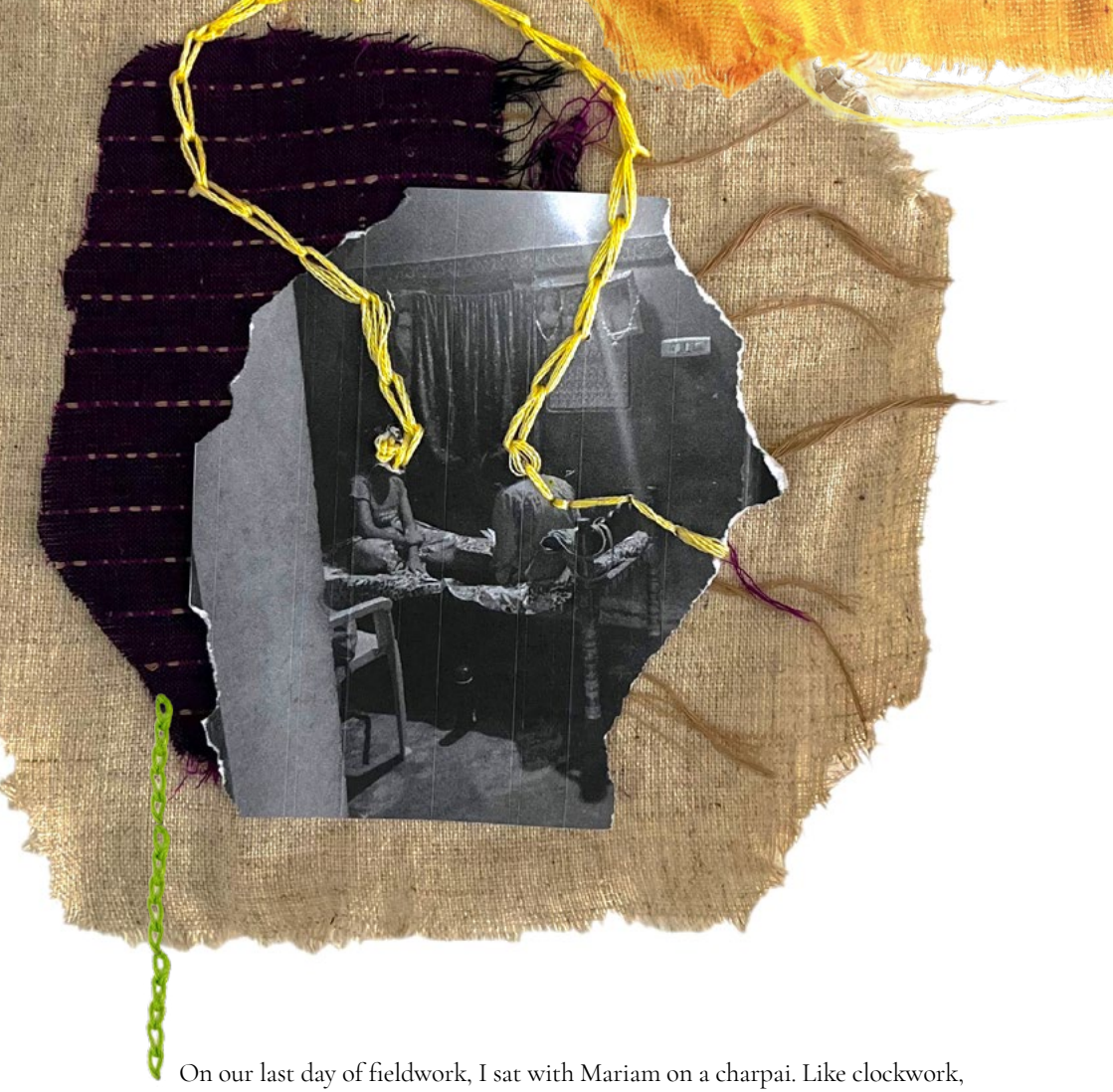
I got the sense that since getting married and moving across the state border, **Sushila hasn't had as many opportunities to speak in her mother tongue and to do as she wishes; this seemed to be a rare moment for her to share her story with two strangers who were willing to listen.** I was touched by how she shared as much as she did—feeling left behind by more educated siblings, her regrets about her marriage, her pain in censoring herself to appease others.

Even for somebody who didn't entirely follow the conversation, the gradual formation of a cadence over the course of that hour was unmissable. The only times you would break that momentum was to catch me up so I could take down notes. But, eventually you stopped doing that too. Although that took me by surprise initially, I saw the good it did the rest of the interaction. The rhythm of the conversation couldn't be compromised; it had a sacred quality to it. And I also trusted you to share her story at a later time to the best of your ability.

In particular with Sushila, when I chose not to catch you up, it was because I wasn't always able to separate her words and my analysis of them in the moment. It felt inappropriate, perhaps even rude, to share the latter in her presence. And so when I was able to relay her



answers without attaching my opinions to them, I would do so in Hindi. This allowed her to follow and then correct me if I didn't interpret her responses in the way she intended. **When speaking between ourselves, I'm glad we always did so in a language the participants understood. Of course it helps maintain accuracy, but it's also just common decency to ensure participants are not othered.** ◆



On our last day of fieldwork, I sat with Mariam on a charpai. Like clockwork, I told her about myself, the objectives of our research, that it was okay to share as much as she wanted, and pulled out the cards for our first activity.
The card with the phone symbol in hand, I asked her who she calls most often.

Gazing intently at the card, a pause heavy in her breath, she looked me in the eye and asked, "Bata doon? *Shall I tell you?*" Momentarily taken aback, but with a sense of what was to come next, I nodded. "Bata do, aap ki marzi. *Go for it, only if you'd like to.*"

For the next hour, she let me into her private life, something it seemed those around her were only permitted small glimpses of. She told me about the man who was her "friend" and the various apps they did "chatting" on—they often blocked each other on one app or the other and would then take to another to continue their conversation. I was amazed by Mariam's ingenuity in asking her sister to initiate conference calls so she could speak to this friend without any trace of this relationship appearing on the call log of her husband's phone. She went on to rave about the apps and filters she liked best, painting a picture of a deeply rich and connected digital experience that created an escape through which she could express her desires and needs.

I am grateful to Mariam for opening up to me, and **I know that it was, in part, my role as stranger more than researcher that allowed her the security it did.** The few times other women were in earshot, she would go quiet and I would quickly switch topics, only resuming that conversation when we were afforded more privacy.

Women were not always readily forthcoming, and understandably so. A young girl Ava met had experienced online harassment by an older boy in her village. Although this was difficult to talk about, and she was skittish in the presence of others, there was a visible need to talk to somebody about it. There were also moments of renegotiation, as with Sunidhi, who alluded to a village tragedy during the first activity, but was only willing to offer details towards the end of the conversation, when she felt comfortable in Antara's company.

Although we went in with the intention to take notes and record conversations, we were never married to the dream of a picture-perfect archive. Miloni shifted in her seat at the mention of a recording and so I put my phone away. Salma requested we turn it off while she shared a deeply personal anecdote, and reminded us to turn it back on so that we would still have a record of the rest of the conversation to reference later.

At the end of the day, a voice recording or scribbled anecdote would always come second to a participant's ability to express themselves as safely as possible.

It was important to us to have these conversations the way we would any other social interaction, treating participants as fellow humans before all else. ◆

Through most of our conversation, fifteen-year-old Pallavi was practical and cheerful, talking a mile a minute about Instagram, YouTube, and her favourite influencer. When I asked if anyone disapproved of her using the phone, her face fell and her tone shifted—she had to stop going to school because a male classmate had been sending her inappropriate messages. I let her know that she didn't have to finish the story, we could stop at any point.

Pallavi chose to continue, speaking slowly but evenly, and used the end of her dupatta to wipe away the first sign of tears. Given the circumstances, offering comfort felt insincere, and moving onto another question insensitive. I told her that I hoped she knew this wasn't her fault.

This was the first time I had ever consciously communicated my opinion to a research participant. I knew it wasn't the neutral thing to do. Pallavi thanked me; she agreed, but some community members weren't of the same opinion. Her reaction confirmed my instincts: sometimes my empathy is more important to my research practice than an attempt to be unbiased.

Many traditions of research emphasise objectivity during fieldwork—by interrogating the research subject, prioritising impersonality, and 'controlling' for variations in interactions by adhering to a predetermined order of questioning. Such approaches sometimes forget that the person sitting across from us is not just a data point in a soon-to-be-published report. At an interpersonal level, participants might need more from us to feel a sense of ease, dignity, and agency in such interactions.

Part of understanding our participants' experiences is drawing connections to (or letting them into) some of our own. This was sometimes as simple as recognising a shared identity. Manvi was met with sunny smiles from participants in Odisha after mentioning that she was an Odia bahu or daughter-in-law of an Odia family; Wafa felt more comfortable opening up to Ava upon realising they were both Muslim women.

As general practice, we'd begin and end our interactions by checking with participants if they would like to ask us anything. For some women, the idea seemed absurd; they were used to being 'interviewed' and the questions typically flowed one way. We wanted to dispel that notion.

Our participants were generous with their stories, their time, and their homes; creating space for any questions from them was a small way for us to reciprocate. In encouraging them to ask and tell us as much as they wished, we often heard anecdotes and opinions that would not be strictly relevant to our analysis. We were happy to listen. Sometimes these stories revealed a richer and more complete picture of the lives we were attempting to understand. At other times, our willingness to listen cemented our participants' trust in us and led to fewer inhibitions later. Nearly always, and perhaps most importantly, this created a safe space for women to speak more freely and at leisure, briefly unencumbered by daily responsibilities. ◆

A group of young women, unaccompanied by male chaperones, asking questions about technology and phones? This benign curiosity was expressed by many of the women we spoke to.

They asked about our work—why were we doing it, when would it be finished, how would it help. Others asked for advice. A few young girls satisfied their curiosities about life in a big city like Bengaluru. In some ways, we represented an exotic species: dressed differently, living away from family, and nearly all of us unmarried.

Shanaya, for instance, wanted to know more about our jobs and the reasons for our presence in her community. She asked Manvi how much she earns—expressing a desire to be as independent as she perceived Manvi to be, as well as searching for encouragement to pursue her own aspirations. When we spoke about her interests, she mentioned using YouTube extensively for general knowledge and understanding requirements for different jobs.

Much like us, our participants' ambitions for a professional journey coincided with understanding how other women grew into their success. Some women voiced their aspirations, away from societal expectations that came with being boxed into roles of mother, wife, or daughter.

While we always welcomed questions, we had to maintain an appropriate distance as researchers in answering them, whether to ensure this wouldn't influence our participants' behaviour around us or to respect our own personal boundaries.

However, balance was key. It was equally important to lean into the participants' mode of building familiarity—often this meant sharing food together or accepting (and never refusing) gestures of hospitality such as offerings of tea. We also attempted to reciprocate these instances with gestures of our own, like sharing water.

Building trust with participants, however difficult, had to be about more than just being transparent in our intentions with them. **Our positionality as researchers in the life of a participant was of a 'temporariness'—we would be there to talk for a few hours, share some food and tea as we spoke, perhaps see each other again the next day. But our time together would inevitably come to an end.** ◆


WHO
ARE
YOU?

The physical and mental toll of conducting the same kinds of interactions on repeat across eight locations in four weeks was immense. Maintaining energy and enthusiasm for each interaction, while keeping the activity fresh for every participant, was a recurrent challenge. In moments of celebration, but equally in these instances of overwhelm or fatigue, our support for one another proved invaluable in encouraging us to keep going.

We found rhythms that sustained us: chai breaks with participants and field partners to recharge, decompressing in the car between visits, and daily debrief sessions during which we processed emotions together just as much as we analysed new learnings.

Our camaraderie and mutual learning was often interwoven with how we conducted ourselves on the field. For example, spectators would often distract participants either by instilling a fear of judgement, or by inviting themselves in the spaces of confidentiality that we as researchers sought to build. We improved our facilitation skills by observing and building upon one another's tactics to manage onlookers. In some cases, we would politely request them to leave by explaining how it was important to prioritise the comfort of the participant. In one instance, Antara started another "interview" with an inquisitive young child at a suitable distance so that our participant could continue speaking to Ava in privacy. Such quick thinking and tactful communication helped us maintain the rhythm of our conversations and reassure participants of our intent.

Our end-of-day collective reflections also fostered peer learning in ways that pushed our boundaries as researchers. We shared which activities we thought had worked better with a participant, in what form, and in which order. Strategies of all kinds were exchanged too; Aditi reported having made an activity easier to understand by using cards from another. We would go around the room, each one of us analysing all that we had learnt that day, as well as talking about our feelings and experiences, making room for the good and the not-so-good.

Indisputably, one of the most touching aspects of our shared experience and teamwork was the empathy we extended to one another. This meant sharing or giving space when the situation called for it and being attuned to each other's mental, emotional, and physical needs. We approached each other with the same compassion and understanding we sought to offer our participants. ◆

A note on the design

The zine is peppered with mixed media visuals combining fieldwork photographs and our attempts to stitch, embroider, weave, and braid with and on Indian textiles. The variations in stitching evoke each of our voices: Manvi through the purple herringbone and Ava via the maroon cross-stitch, while Antara and Aditi communicate using the yellow blanket and green chain stitches, respectively.

Our intention with using fabric and needlework as a medium is manifold. For one, to acknowledge the history of these crafts being carried out primarily by women, often to chronicle their lived experiences. Another, to question persistent notions that photographs are objective records of past events, while art is a subjective interpretation. By bringing the two together, we hope to remind readers that research always holds an element of subjectivity; who asks the questions and how they do so invariably has bearing on the conclusions. And lastly, to visibly capture the additions and (mis)stitches of many hands on a single piece, much like the collaborative and iterative nature of our research.

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