

“Who is the boss of the film?”

An exercise in authorship

-Sehjo Singh

Film-maker Christine Cornea and Research Associate Alexandra Smith travelled to India in March 2020 to create a series of short films about food and nutrition for the [CHIRAG](#) research project and trained local youth volunteers in the process to make more films. These films were to be used to support the development of a virtual knowledge center, managed, and shared by the communities for knowledge exchange about food diversity and sustainable practices under the project CHIRAG.

What is the CHIRAG project?

The CHIRAG project (Creative Hub for Innovation and Reciprocal Research and Action for Gender Equality) is funded by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), through the UEA's Global Research Translation Award (GRTA). The Indian research partners, PRADAN and Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), are working with communities in Chakai, and Koraput and Kandhamal respectively, to study nutrition, health, and wellbeing to generate practical knowledge. This knowledge will be shared through an innovative digital hub, called CHIRAGVaani, hosting video podcasts, creative writing, interviews, films, and other tools.

When the CHIRAG project trained tribal youth in using digital video cameras, it did it with the purpose of documenting traditional food practices.

However, a year down the line now, there has been a welcome spin-off not fully anticipated. The digital camera in the hands of the youth has not only inculcated an agency, an authorship, a romance with the power of technology but also built a stake of the younger volunteers in traditional knowledge by default and generated the potential of making traditional foods aspirational goals again.



Women in Barmasia village of Chakai trying their hands on the digital camera. The picture was taken by Simon Baskey, one of the local youth volunteers in Chakai

The politics of representational technology and the power of image-making has a huge potential. Deployed by the project to get younger people to document the knowledge and skills of their elders, it could validate and legitimize the traditional knowledge and knowledge keepers, in a way that paper documentation could not. But before they could do that, they had to solve one more problem.

They had to tell the story of the traditional recipes foraged from forests with the skill passed down generations and in danger of being lost. They were making films and uploading on their [YouTube channel](#), but something seemed amiss. The films did not have the stamp of their authorship. Additionally, they had to find out how to tell the story, and to do that they needed to decide who they were telling the story to. To address this and support the youth, I joined the PRADAN and KISS teams over

several sessions of mutual learning and exciting discussions spread over three months, early this year.

Sculpting the story

The task was as the CHIRAG team put it, “identifying the boss of the film”, the primary audience, people who must watch the film.

There was no other way to learn except—test, pilot, test, evolve, question presumptions, and learn from peers. Furthermore, it involved identifying local film critics and understanding how good they find the films made by the local youth.

Some other guiding questions in front of the team were: How to get honest feedback? How to ensure that the trial audiences do not second guess and only tell us what they think is what we would like to hear? Are we/they trying to fit into what is the conventional notion of films?

There was no shortcut. It meant editing various versions of the product, testing, and coming back for discussions with the feedback.

1. We needed to build a storyline that can remind the target audience, be it the tribal community or any other audiences, not to forget who we are and to value our food culture that has sustained humanity for millennia.
2. We needed to find the right music: the opening and closing to become attractive signature tunes for the films, be contextual and varied – finding local Santhali / Kui talent.

Ethical decisions

The next question was what to do when the given reality does not fall into neat places to support our intentions and some things can conflict with our objectives and principles. We need to take some decisions at the time of the shooting, and others at the time of editing regarding such apparent conflicts.

The teams were asked to see my film, "[The women Betrayed](#)" made with two tribal groups on the question of witch-hunting and to observe how I had answered some of these difficult questions.

Rituals around food often involve strictures around the inclusion/participation of women and girls. We were faced with such a situation in the rituals of Sohrai, an especially important annual harvest festival among the Santhals.

The CHIRAG team was heavily invested in the festival and decided to make the pilot film around it. After a lot of technical hitches in finding an editor, the Pradan team decided to learn editing by themselves. [Atul](#), the project anchor based at Chakai edited the first draft of the film on the ritual food of Sohrai, and then we discovered that women and girls could participate in cooking but could not eat the ritual food. This was in direct conflict with our objectives. We decided to shelve it, as it would either send a wrong message or make the issue confrontational.

However, the film was cut quite well by Atul—so served the purpose of a useful exercise and gave the Pradan team confidence in becoming self-dependent for editing.

Final Template

A film on [Banwar Peetha](#) was selected as the film for template creation for Pradan. Here too, the issue of only men/boys hunting, and eating Banwar (or field rats) was resolved differently. We decided to put it as a question at the end of the film: why not encourage the girls and women too, to partake in the consumption of the protein-rich recipe.



A still from the film used for template creation in Chakai: [Banwar Peetha](#)

For the KISS team, the agreement was to have the film on [Red Ant](#) be the first edit as it has great footage—and had intrinsic value with men cooking and women and girls commenting and eating.



A still from the film used for template creation in Koraput: [Aai-Kai \(Red Ant\)](#)

Voice of God?

We all quickly agreed that the first cut of the film will be primarily aimed at the tribal audience—and so we decided that all the important information will be included in the

spoken word, including the names of the people who are speaking. The written text on the screen should be an option.

A quick edit became a starting point for the understanding of voice-over and its politics. It was discussed through several examples how voice-over is perceived as heavy and authoritative or warm and friendly. What is the power relationship between the people in the film and the audience? Should it be like a conversation and or a preacher's monologue?

Despite the difficulty with the editor having to take leave, the KISS team still managed to produce two versions to experiment with the possibilities of voice-over – as dialogue, as storytelling – as the voice of an elder or friend.

Question of language – English, Hindi, Odiya, Santhali, Kui

Dealing with a multiverse of languages, this decision had to be taken carefully based on the range of the audience. Santhali was chosen as the language of the film by the Pradan team, but street-Odiya was considered appropriate for KISS as the Kui group, where the film was shot is too small a language group to be a viable audience group. In addition, we made an important decision to use English terms of nutrition for the ease of meaning—protein, calcium, vitamins, etc. as we wanted some of these to be added to the local parlance.

Spoken word crossing the literacy barrier

The opening montage of the film has a spoken introduction to the concept of CHIRAG, that serves as a short preface. It also introduces the title of the film.

In the same vein, the team decided that the closing credits would be spoken too, at least for those people who would be recognized by the local audience—such as the youth volunteer who shot the film, the village location the people who supported production, the local musicians, and the people in the film. This allowed the audience who cannot read also register the names of the local people who are part of the

production and have helped to author it. This was followed by the normal credit roll that will include the rest of the technical credits.

The team accepted the two important suggestions emanating from the collective GRTA meeting in March 2021

First, the issue of unhealthy ingredients such as refined flour and sugar, that have come into traditional recipes would be addressed. It would be included in the voice-over as a question to the audience.

Second, including the recipe on screen as the ingredients are fairly unconventional. A recipe slide was incorporated to recap both the ingredients and the nutrition question.

Subtitling

The subtitles make the films open and accessible to all, without losing their ground, which makes the films more universal. Decisions regarding subtitles and name tags and their relative importance to varied audiences become strategic decisions—because they decide the centrality of the audience and how to cater to them.

The team was also trained in the principles of subtitle creation and rendition, such as condensing the text without disturbing the visual flow. These two films, **Banwar Peetha**, and **Red Ant** are now featured on the [Table-to-farm videos](#) map created by the Youth Alliance for Zero Hunger in line with the UN Food Systems Summit 2021.



Sehjo Singh (bio)

Sehjo Singh worked as an Advisor for Participatory Films on project CHIRAG. She has worked as an independent filmmaker for more than twenty years. Her films examine critical issues of land struggles and the right to education, trying to find newer and different ways of connecting social movement and society. Thereafter, she served as the Executive Director of the National Centre for Advocacy Studies and later as the Director, Programmes, and Policy for ActionAid India. She has recently served as Mission Specialist for Industree Foundation and International Trade centre, Ethiopia, Africa.