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# Design Beku: Toward Decolonizing Design and Technology through Collaborative and Situated Care-in-Practices

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## Global Perspectives

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Increasingly there is a design impulse to “solve” problems for communities in India, especially through technological imaginations and interventions imported from elsewhere that are often irrelevant and unsuited to their context. As public goods, such as education, heritage, health care, and the like, in India shift from ideals of social equity to profit-making, designers engaged in “development” face an important question about their role in the change-making process, with ethical and political implications. In response to this question, we describe our efforts as a newly formed collective, Design Beku, which emerged from our desire to explore if and how technology and design can be decolonial, local, and ethical. Informed by cross-disciplinary theoretical and methodological underpinnings, we present a series of autoethnographic accounts by the collective’s founding members, woven together to describe our experiences, influences, learnings, and reflections on the life of the collective so far. Through articulating the commonalities and differences across our projects, we highlight how co-design becomes for us a care-in-practice, an onto-epistemology enabling us to align with local matters of concern to collaboratively evolve systemic solutions, enabled by but not led by technology. We believe the most powerful critique and challenge to the fascism of corporate and politically motivated technological regimes is by responding through community-centric design practice. We hope that our experiences and reflections will find resonance with other practitioners working within the larger context of the themes articulated by the call for this special issue.

## INTRODUCTION

Design Beku was founded in 2018 as a collective of collectives which emerged from our desire to explore how technology and design can be decolonial, local, and ethical. We work with contexts and collaborators, not clients.

What follows is a series of autoethnographic accounts by the collective’s founding members, woven together to describe our experiences, influences, learnings, and reflections on the life of the collective so far (see [figure 1](#)). Even in the space of two years, we have found that circumstances—global, national, personal—and the myriad ways in which we learn from our collaborators require us to consistently recalibrate our own attitudes and expectations with regard to the sort of work we do. We endeavor to ensure that we consistently remain attentive to our core values, which are aligned with the principles of the Design Justice Network (despite our discovering the network after the fact) (Design Justice Network 2021).

We draw from the feminist ethical frame of care (Bates 2017; de la Bellacasa 2011; Mol 2008; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2015), as a situated, continuous, and collaborative tinkering of matters of concern, drawing upon solidarity with the communities we work with. We also draw from the long-standing practices of co-design and co-production (Albrechts 2012; Binder et al. 2011; Ehn 2008) to inform our approach of establishing and sustaining meaningful relationships with the communities we work with. Furthermore, the calls for decolonizing design (Escobar 2018; Roy 2011; Schultz et al. 2018) and technology for development (for example, “Data Colonialism: Critiquing Consent and Control in ‘Tech for Social Change’” 2016) inform our intent of (re)locating the design—both the imagination and the production—of sociotechnical infrastructures to the very sites where they are intended to work. Through articulating the commonalities and differences across our projects, we highlight how co-design becomes for us a care-in-practice, a combination of worldview and orientation (Ahmed 2006), directedness and ethical action—an “ethico-onto-epistem-

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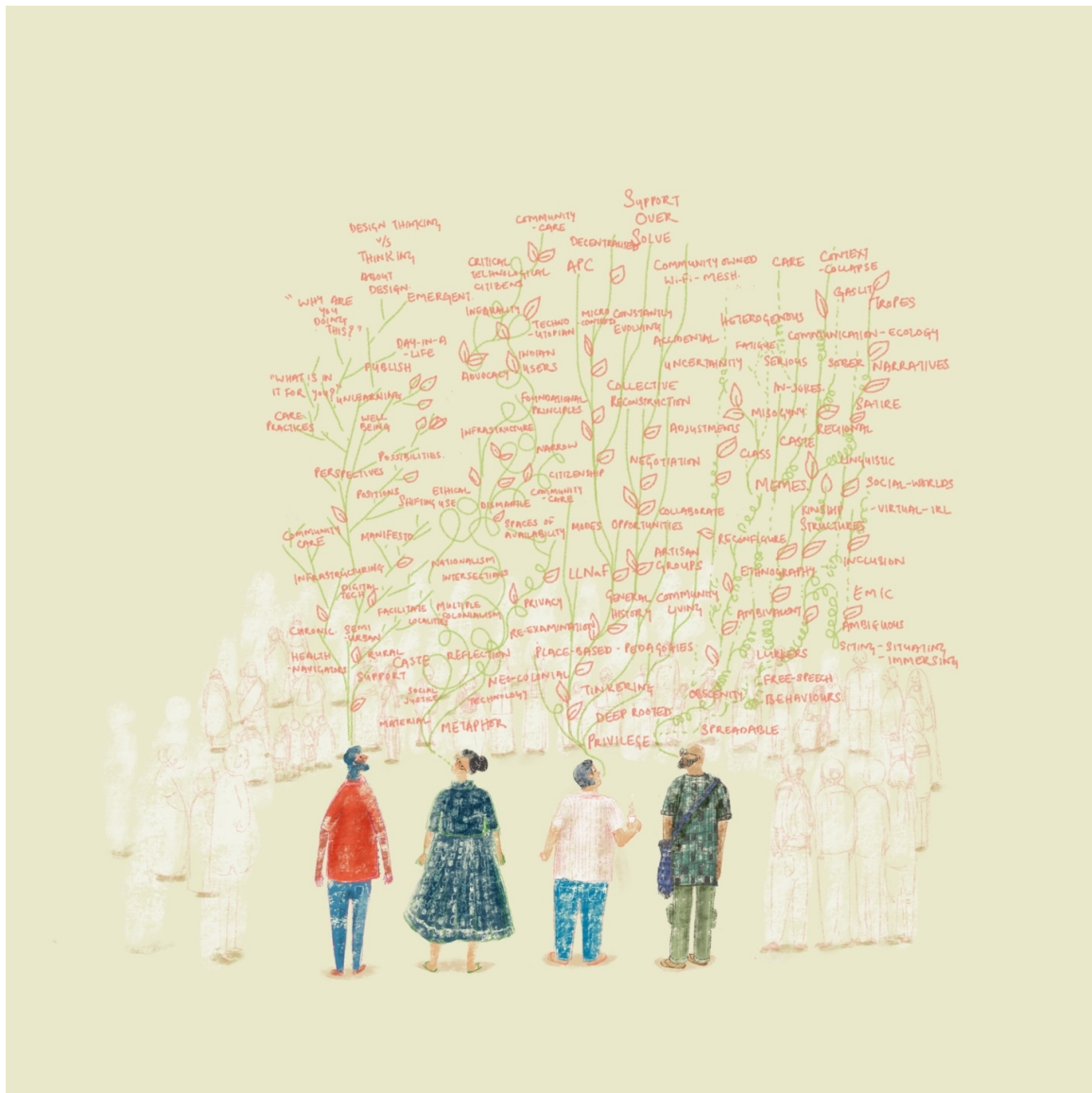


Figure 1. The four of us—Naveen, Padmini, Shreyas, and Paul—and the matters of concern our accounts bring forward. This is the “front page” of the four accounts that follow.

ology,” in Barad’s (2007) terms—enabling us to align with marginalized populations and their concerns to collaboratively evolve systemic solutions, enabled by but not led by technology.

## PADMINI: DECOLONIZATION IS NOT A METAPHOR

In *Digital Dead End*, Virginia Eubanks (2012) chronicles her experience collaborating with women at the YWCA in New York, and how it challenged her perceptions of the role technology should and can play to serve the ends of social justice. While in many ways, Eubanks’s location as a privileged white woman in America might appear superficially to differ greatly from our own, the dynamics of her relationship with the women of the YWCA, often women of color and all from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds, provide a key to dismantling how the framing of “decolonial” practice can never be uncomplicated while being Savarna (ie. dominant caste) and working as design practitioners in the Indian subcontinent.

From its inception, we had imagined that decolonization would be a key value for Design Beku; we were keen for it to respond to and be relevant to local contexts, in a conscious effort to push back on what we saw as digital neocolonialist hegemony. However, our own caste location coupled with our commitment to working with grassroots and marginalized communities (all of whom are almost invariably non-dominant caste / from religious minorities) necessitates us to respond to the contradictions inherent to holding to such an ambition and one that requires constant reflection and reexamination.

Dia Da Costa et al. suggest a crucial framework to think through these contradictions: that of “multiple colonialisms” (Da Costa and Da Costa 2019). This approach takes a nuanced view to assert that “coloniality is not casteless” (Da Costa 2019, 2), taking into account “intersecting structures of precolonial violence (e.g. caste) and casteist coloniality in one time and space (e.g. so-called postcolonial India) to consider its relational constitution with conventionally-recognizable colonialisms (e.g. British colonization of India)—this challenges the paradigm that orients “all conversations about colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism to Europe and the West” (Da Costa 2019, 4). The relevance of this to our practice becomes clear when taking into account both the macro and the micro contexts of our work: the former aiming to challenge dominant design and technology discourse in India, and the latter our commitment to working with grassroots and marginalized communities.

In an article by the global design publication *Dezeen* (Yashawi 2019), a number of Indian designers spoke of how they were rejecting “design-school propaganda” in order to “decolonise their work.” The “propaganda” alluded to here has its roots in the history of design education in India, whose design curricula and pedagogical approaches from their very inception followed the European model, all heavily influenced by the “Ulm Model,” and the already internationally established *Vorkurs* (preliminary or foundation course) as promoted at the Bauhaus also became a staple

of design education at these national institutes (Balaram 2005, quoted in Ray Murray and Hand 2015, 145). In the article, the featured designers are quoted as undertaking decolonization as “inseparable from inward-looking inquiries to articulate and express an authentic and powerful Indian identity.” However, this idea of an “Indian identity” is impossible at best and complicit at worst, demonstrating how a “hegemonic creative economy discourse relies on a caste supremacy that simultaneously renders creativity and heritage upper caste property, whilst also relentlessly projecting upper castes as casteless (Pandian 2002).”

In “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” Tuck and Yang definitively point to “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (2012, 1) as the true aim of decolonization, asserting that the discourse of decolonization is merely a metaphor, and thus inevitably falls dramatically short of fulfilling the aims of decolonization. Indeed, its objectives might be incommensurable with it. While caste supremacy is not identical to settler colonialism, we follow Da Costa et al. in their reading that “rather than place articulations of colonialism under binaries of settler and franchise colonialism, we attend to the actually existing/persisting conditions and practices of elimination, dispossession, inclusion, exclusion, exploitation, extraction, and more, to consider their palimpsestic regional and global relationships to prior and ongoing histories of conventionally-recognizable colonialisms.” The very wielding of decolonizing as metaphor “makes possible a set of evasions...that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity” (Da Costa and Da Costa 2019, 10). The neoliberal academy has embraced the discourse of decolonization, and in turn, academics have instrumentalized this discourse to further tenure ambitions, often, as Tuck and Yang point out, under the aegis of social justice (2012, 2).

Consequently, the neoliberal university becomes a fractured site for shifting from decolonizing (or, indeed, any reparative gesture) as metaphor to praxis. The treadmill of teaching, publishing, conference presentation, and grant seeking, which instrumentalizes research, undermines the notion that “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (Tuhiwai Smith 1998, quoted in Nandagiri 2017, 1). In addition, these demands constantly eat away at our ability to fulfill our responsibilities of care to ourselves, our loved ones, and our larger communities, responding to the constant need to optimize productivity to not succumb to the precarity created by increasingly unstable management and fiscal regimes. As Carpintero puts it, to “respond and be responsible for feminist politics in times of crisis means to stop for a moment, think critically and create spaces of availability to engage with the problems that affect us as a community, as well as broader ones, acknowledging that some positions can respond more than others” (2017, 51).

Despite being fortunate enough to work at a design school that was less preoccupied with outputs than more traditional institutions, market-driven pressures meant that the sort of education we were expected to deliver was in the mode of solution-driven “design thinking” methods to address well-established “wicked problems” without much regard for context, on the assumption that the much-

vaunted design ideal of “empathy” could replace an ethics of care. Consequently, we increasingly felt that the pressures, expectations, and formats of academic research were antithetical to meaningful contributions to the sort of response Carpintero gestures toward, and we wanted to create that space of availability where feminist values of care could inform a reimagining of how technology was designed. The textured response that our contemplation of our own locations demanded was simply not possible in this framework, and was almost akin to a sort of violence. Consequently, Design Beku was founded as a collective through which we seek to “work with, not for,” the communities and organizations it collaborates with, and seek to co-design responses to challenges that are best understood by the communities themselves.

Our work at Design Beku advocates for the responsible and ethical use and design of technology over a range of diverse use cases. In the first two case studies, the “local” becomes a site for slow and careful engagements with technological tools and artifacts—but online, the local is not only distributed but also ring-fenced by national, corporate, and political interests. Our work then also seeks to dismantle this “matrix of domination” by examining and exposing how inequality is perpetuated by design decisions (Costanza-Chock 2020 after Collins 1990). This work is particularly crucial as Indian users, due to plunging data costs and cheaper mobile phones, are increasingly online. In addition, governmental imperatives threaten to exclude the nondigital subject, resulting in an urgent need to challenge extractive data regimes through education and advocacy, and Design Beku’s work particularly focuses on demonstrating how these violations manifest along the vectors of design and/in technology.

In an increasingly authoritarian political climate, where sociotechnical systems are designed to perpetuate technoutopian rhetoric that justifies extractive data regimes, through our work at Design Beku we have learned of varied perspectives from communities, which challenge and expand our imaginaries of data as well as of technology use. Here again, we look to the work of Eubanks, who argued that “[o]ur understandings of *citizenship* are too narrow,” describing the conditions for creating “critical technological citizens who can meaningfully engage and critique the technological present and respond to the citizenship and social justice effects of IT” (2012, 29). Our work, in turn, informs our advocacy for revisioning digital and design practices in India, which currently perpetuate problematic techno-utopian paradigms that are ultimately harmful for citizens and democracy, as they prioritize gathering data in exchange for “development.” In the following account, Naveen shares his account of the role drawing and visioning played in transforming his perspective as he worked with communities of frontline health-care workers. His experiences, which are described in the following section, led him to articulate the philosophy of “infrastructuring for community care,” one of the foundational principles that guide the way we work at Design Beku.

## NAVEEN: AN ACCOUNT OF INFRASTRUCTURING FOR COMMUNITY CARE

MAYA Health is a not-for-profit organization that trains and supports collectives of community health workers, termed health navigators (HNs), for the purpose of enhancing efforts toward preventing and managing chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and malnutrition in the rural and semi-urban localities of Channapatna—a town seventy-five kilometers from Bangalore, in south India. My engagement with MAYA Health began in January 2016 with a pilot project where we focused on (a) facilitating the community health workers to imagine and conceptualize the roles that digital technology (in the form of handheld tablets) could play to enhance their work, and at the same time (b) equipping the members with creative problem-solving abilities, a.k.a. “design thinking.” Over the years, my relationship with MAYA Health has gone beyond the pilot project, and the vision of “infrastructuring for community care” is underway, though not exactly as I thought it would be when I wrote the manifesto, somewhere during the middle of the pilot project.

Before the pilot project, I was engaged as a UX and innovation specialist at Srishti Labs, whose vision was to discover compelling and disruptive solutions to complex real-world problems. I was, in fact, getting tired of projects that could only be described as “helicopter design”—projects with good intentions but driven by placing a “novel” technology in “underserved” contexts of social development, projects that were designed at the lab and imagined elsewhere in Silicon Valley. Thankfully, these projects never took off. In hindsight, it is now clear why the community organizations almost always showed no enthusiasm or outright rejected the ideas we proposed; they were, in their own way, expressing their discomfort with technological ideas being helicoptered in. That we did not have the funding also helped my subsequent path of exploration. And then the pilot project happened. In a reaction to the ideals being pursued at Srishti Labs, and to remind us about what was at stake in the project with MAYA Health, I wrote a manifesto on “Infrastructuring for Community Care” (figure 2).

The project was a place of learning and unlearning. Having had experiences of participatory design in Denmark, where I had done my PhD, I was aware of the ongoing discourses in participatory design (e.g., Dantec and DiSalvo 2013; Ehn 2008; Seravalli 2012) and felt that the project was my opportunity to explore participatory design in the context of community health in India. I found the notion of infrastructuring (Karasti 2014; Seravalli 2012) very closely aligned with what I saw as the possibility for my practice. “Infrastructuring is the work of creating socio-technical resources that intentionally enable adoption and appropriation beyond the initial scope of the design, a process that might include participants not present during the initial design,” write Le Dantec and DiSalvo (2013). So informed, in the pilot project I saw the possibility of engaging with MAYA Health and the collectives of HNs with a twofold objective. The first objective was to enable the women HNs to imagine and conceptualize multiple forms of digital tech-

nology that would enhance their current and emerging care work. The second objective was to collaboratively shape and build a sociotechnical infrastructure enabling the communities of HNs to imagine and design their own practices of care, supported by digital technology. While the first objective falls within the purview of “design for use before use,” the second is within the purview of “design for design after design” (Ehn 2008).

Catalina Alzate (a former colleague) and I mentored six design students and twelve HNs, set up as four teams each having one or two students and three HNs. With the focus on “educating” the HNs with design thinking skills and knowledge, the project was spread over fourteen Thursdays, on which the teams met and went through the stages of a typical design process—namely, need framing, creative ideation, concept development, and testing. The teams worked with the process through designing for a problem space that the HNs chose from their own work experience, broadly focusing on “how to enhance their communication with their clients.” Each stage had twin goals: first, to introduce particular design methods to the teams so as to enable them to use the methods and move toward conceptualization; and second, to formulate a tool kit or a template that the HN community could use in their everyday work practice after the project. The design students were new to the process, and hence all of them worked at the same level, or so we thought.

#### LOCATED LEARNING IN THE “PERIPHERIES”

“What’s in it for you? Why are you doing this?” asked one of the HNs during the first day of the pilot project, after I had explained what we would do over the next fourteen weeks, and why I thought it was important for them, as micro-entrepreneurs, to learn about design thinking and creative problem-solving. This frank, upfront question continues to stay with me, guiding me through my practice. But back then, I responded by saying that I had an academic interest in the project. I wanted to experiment with participatory design methodology in the context of community health care and to publish my learning for the benefit of the larger design academic and research communities. I also expressed how I thought that it would be a situated learning endeavor for my students. This response revealed, to both the HNs and me and my team, a core assumption that the entire project was based on: that the HNs needed training in creative problem-solving as it was “alien” to them and they had to be taught. However, as it happens in projects such as these, our assumption was quite off the mark.

Sketching a “day in a life” was the first activity performed during the project. Each member of the group—consisting of three or four HNs and one or two design students—drew a map or a timeline of the activities they had performed the day before, from when they woke up in the morning to sleeping at night. While the students were very quick to draw the activities, the HNs preferred to write. The HNs asked, “Why drawing, isn’t it enough we write?” Drawing on my education (I was educated in industrial design at one of the “most prominent design schools” in India), I explained that the activity of drawing reveals details that are otherwise missed during writing. Yet the HNs felt very uncom-

*“This is about shifting positions and perspectives. Of what it means to design digital tools for healthcare in ‘under-served’ communities. Of what it means to ‘care’ within such communities. This is about making deliberate moves; caring moves.*

*We move away from the position that design is about “discovering compelling and disruptive solutions” for the messy real-world problems of community-based healthcare. We move towards understanding that design is a mode of highly situated and collaborative inquiry to both, understand what is good care and how it is achieved in practice, and to artfully integrate digital technology as part of local, ongoing practices of good care.*

*We move away from the position that people are mere generators of ‘big-data’, used as evidence for ‘evidence-based’ healthcare interventions. We move towards exploring the possibilities of collaboratively envisioning tools that enable people to blur the distinction between producing and consuming by engaging with their own data in multiple meaningful ways.*

*We move away from the perspective of solutioning. A perspective that propagates the myth that there is this one great solution out there, a magic pill, that can solve all problems of community-based healthcare; it only has to be discovered by designers and innovatively applied to the context of use. We move towards practicing design as a way of infrastructuring. A perspective that foregrounds the building of, over time and through a situated engagement with a particular community, the social and technical resources and infrastructure that enables the members of the community to design solutions for their own issues and implement them in practice.*

*Our ideal, over time, is to democratize the design of digital technological tools for health & wellbeing, and locate it as part of communities and their everyday life. And to democratize the infrastructures of health data so that communities can meaningfully engage with their own data as part of their ongoing care practices.”*

**Figure 2. The Manifesto of “Infrastructuring for Community Care.”**



**Figure 3. HN drawing the “day in a life” with the help of the template the students created.**

fortable drawing, as some of them believed that they were not “good at drawing.” In fact, one HN revealed that her twelve-year-old son said that she should not help him with his homework as she was not good at drawing. To overcome this reluctance, the students quickly created a strategy; they made templates (see [figure 3](#)), which the HNs could use to draw simple figures and objects. However, use of the templates also did not work as we realized that it was not about the skills of drawing; rather, we could not persuade the HNs to understand or experience the importance of drawing in their context of community care work.

During the next session, the teams had to visit the homes of the “clients” (people who paid a subscription fee for the health service offered by HNs) in the community that the HNs served and use the templates designed to draw a “day in a life” of the clients, as part of the “problem-framing”

stage. The clients narrated their day; the HNs used the template to draw (see [figure 4](#)), and as they did, new information about their clients' everyday practices was revealed. The HNs mentioned how, for example, even though they usually asked if the clients had their food properly during their counseling visits, what they ate and how much became apparent only when they drew it on the template.

The HNs had found the value of drawing in their everyday practice, and, in fact, the day-in-a-life template was the only tool in the tool kit that they continued to utilize much beyond the fourteen-week project. The HNs used the template to draw in detail their clients' routines both to reveal details and to arrive at a common understanding, and also to demonstrate that they “care.” As an HN mentioned during my visit to the field about six months after the completion of the pilot project, “The clients think that I am seriously concerned about their life, when they see me drawing their routines. Before we only spoke and we did not take any notes.”

It was noteworthy for me to see how of all the seven templates, only the one for “day in a life” was used beyond the project. Such a repurposing of the template and the fact that none of the other templates were used revealed the hidden assumptions about design and creative problem-solving that we—MAYA Health team, my colleague, the students, and I—had during the project.

When we planned the project, our assumption was that the HNs did not practice “design thinking” and that we would have to scaffold them through an experiential project to learn and pick up the ways of “designerly” problem-solving. Another unarticulated assumption was that design is a process of problem-solving that takes place over time and through focused iterations, moving from “problem framing” to concept development and validation. However, my observations of HNs' everyday practices revealed creative problem-solving of a different kind. The HNs addressed problems of the “here and now” kind, in rapid yet creative iterations, which were not pronounced or visible to my “design-trained” eye. For example, the HNs have formed a network of autorickshaw drivers who are available to transport clients quickly and safely to the hospital during emergencies; and to manage a large number of clients (each HN manages anywhere from two hundred to three hundred clients per month), they have formed smaller groups aimed at preventive exercise and diet. The HNs leverage their position as women of the same religion and often the same caste as the clients toward problem-solving with care. The HNs figured out that the older women in their urban localities were finding it hard to take time out to do exercises at or around their homes. To overcome this obstacle, the HNs grouped the women in smaller clusters and led them on short walks to the open grounds next to the local masjid, where they exercised in groups. They further augmented these groups by sharing video content, both self-made and found over the internet, about exercises. Over time, these smaller groups became self-sustaining hyperlocal practices of exercising and socializing (see [figure 5](#)).

The activity of drawing and how the HNs engaged with it within and beyond the project brought forward how design thinking was narrow and monolithic; rooted in my Eurocentric design education, this understanding of design thinking



**Figure 4.** HNs using the “day in a life” template to capture a client’s day and related information about their care.



**Figure 5.** HN (in the white shawl) leading a neighborhood exercise group on the masjid grounds.

masked other rich and arguably more impactful (or at least having an immediate and direct impact) practices of problem-solving. Given that I had a position of power, of being a dominant-caste male, with a PhD, “teaching” design thinking to the women HNs, the closedness of my thinking about design would have had a potentially limiting effect on their care practice, if not for the HNs' careful disregarding as well as repurposing of the drawing templates in their everyday practice beyond the project.

What also emerged for me and my students was that despite the apparently homogenous visual vocabulary delivered to us via global network flows—for example, industry players such as Google introducing benchmarks for inter-

face design such as material design—contextual richness goes a long way in communicating concepts, especially to nonurban audiences to whom “universal” iconography might seem wholly unfamiliar. One of the key influences on our work at Design Beku is the designer Dr. Lakshmi Murthy, who has been working since 1988 in the field of community health and the creation of “information, education, and communication” (IEC) materials, which are used by health workers to impart awareness, to educate, and, in general, to empower marginalized populations in rural areas about their own health and well-being (Murthy 2003).

### (RE)LOCATING IMAGINATIONS OF TECHNOLOGY

My critical understanding of creative practice and design thinking further broadened as my engagement moved beyond the pilot project and into other projects with the HNs and MAYA Health. One such project was a further development of an idea that one of the HN teams had conceptualized in the pilot project about collaborative diet planning. While we were structuring the ideation and concept development process through activities informed by props and design games (Brandt and Grunnet 2000), the HNs took their own approach. Inspired by the drawing exercise, one HN drew and made a food chart to act as a tool to educate their clients about the benefits of healthy eating (see [figure 6](#)). She tried this out with some of her clients and in the next session shared her experiences. The team then took this idea forward and conceptualized a practice where the HN works with each household to map their food practices and they together plan a healthier diet plan, enabled by a tablet-based application.

After this project, MAYA Health showed interest in taking the idea forward, and along with three students from a technology institute, I worked with the same team of HNs to further conceptualize and design an app that will work on the handheld tablets<sup>1</sup> the HNs were using, with an aim of defining it via in situ collaborative prototyping and testing. As the idea developed through multiple iterations at the site, which included the office of MAYA Health in Chanapatna, as well as the homes of the HNs and their clients, it took on a radically different shape.

The three students coded a simple mock-up of the app, with which we and the HNs role-played collaborative diet-planning sessions before taking the app to the clients. The HNs led the sessions with the clients. Consider the following vignette from one such session (also see [figure 7](#)):

The setting was the living-cum-bedroom of a “client,” a sixty-year-old woman, who was a patient with hypertension and diabetes. Her husband, the HN, three students who worked on the design, and I were present. The HN explained the idea and the plan for the session in Urdu, and invited the woman to be part of the ses-



**Figure 6.** The diet chart made by the HN as a tool to help her discuss healthy eating with her clients.

sion. She opened the app on her tablet and mapped the daily food intake of the household. Then the discussion moved to “ideal” diet, and the woman and her husband both mentioned that they should eat more fruits, more leafy vegetables, and reduce red meat and fatty foods, nodding their heads to what they (and we) have learned about healthy diets in general. When it was time to decide what particular food item the woman would reduce or replace, there was a conundrum. The woman mentioned that she cooks kheema-ball curry three times a week and eats it for both lunch and dinner on those three days, which she knows is quite bad for her health, and she wants to reduce it. The HN asked her if she wants to reduce it to twice a week. The woman says no. Can she eat it only for lunch? No, not possible. She needs to feel the taste of it to be able to sleep. Then the HN asks, “How many balls do you eat each time?” Two. Can she reduce it to one ball or serving per meal? No. She likes to have two. Ever patiently, the HN asks, “What is the size of these balls, narangi ya nimbu [orange or lemon]?” The woman replies, “Narangi.” The HN, with a smile, asks, “Can you make the balls lemon size rather?” The woman replies with a yes. Finally. The app and the tablet are completely in the background, as this back and forth unfolds.

This experience made me rethink my earlier understanding about how different our visions were. The vision of collaborative diet and food habit forming that emerged in this session was ever more radical, opening up for critical questioning all the assumptions about food, diet, and data we had built in the design of the app and the activity it aimed to support. What emerged here was an imagination that I term, to capture the irony, “subjective standards”: a prac-

<sup>1</sup> MAYA Health offered HNs the opportunity to buy the handheld devices running on Android 5 for a base price of INR 3000. Their intention was to not offer the devices for free as they feared lack of ownership and maintenance. While the HNs bought them and actively used the tablets for not only data-driven care work but also creation and sharing of health-care videos, rather ironically, the tablets, designed for obsolescence, have broken down over two to three years of use and have since become unusable. The old tablets were donated to MAYA Health by a corporation as part of a corporate social responsibility campaign. Some of the HNs have now moved to better smartphones that they have bought for their own personal and professional use.

tice of a collaborative diet and food habit formation between a health worker and her “client” household, where there are no predetermined standards of “right” food, be it quantity, quality, or nutrition levels; what is good and ideal emerges out of an ongoing and collective tinkering within and taking advantage of the particular sociomaterial settings of the practice.

In the context of global health and Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICTD), frontline health workers collect data, which is utilized for decision-making at various levels, except at the sites where the data is collected. Such practices render frontline health workers merely data collectors, while they have much social and intellectual capital to offer to community well-being (Ismail and Kumar 2019). Over time, I have observed how the HNs already work with the data they collect to make collaborative decisions enabling them to perform situated care work. For me, the vision of collaborative food planning practices is an example of the emerging idea that “all data are local” (Loukissas 2019).

Most importantly, the experience further challenged my assumption about design-thinking abilities among the HNs. The way the HN and her client rehearsed the future (Halse et al. 2010) brought forward how there is a strong culture of imagination, offering radical alternatives to the kind of technological imaginations of datafication and enumeration being pushed on us from the globally distributed sites of Silicon Valley.

### SHREYAS: AN EVOLVING PLACE-BASED NETWORK OF “CARE”

“Privilege” is of many kinds, deep-rooted within and around us. My privilege comprises being a cis male, inheriting Brahminical upbringing and identity, belonging to the so-called “middle class,” being married to a person with comparable privilege, having access to structured and formal education, being an urbanite and often seen as an “expert” in “my field.” Yet there are facets of which I am not aware, and acknowledging privilege is often a retrospective process—my awareness of privilege has been through negotiating my own privilege in spaces that usually fall outside my comfort zones. My conditioning and my privilege have shaped my “practice”; however, this uneven narrative as a result of the privileges has a role to play in the way I have seen and continue to see my “practice.”

From 2016 to 2019 we have been tinkering with place-based pedagogies and facilitating collaborations to co-create a learning platform to build relationships with people, communities, and organizations in the Dakkhani region (see [figure 8](#) for a visual timeline). This region is distinctly known for its syncretic practices when it comes to community living. In recent times, especially post-independence, this region has been tagged as the most underdeveloped region and as a drought-prone region, and unfortunately, it has attracted unwanted attention due to the relatively high Muslim population residing in the region. However, it is also popular as a tourism destination due to its heritage sites. In the works related to the general history of the region, published in English, one thing has been grossly left



**Figure 7. The HN (in black, at bottom center of the image) and her client discussing the size and quantity of kheema balls—a glimpse into collaborative food habit forming supported by a local data application, which was being mocked up and enacted in this scene.**

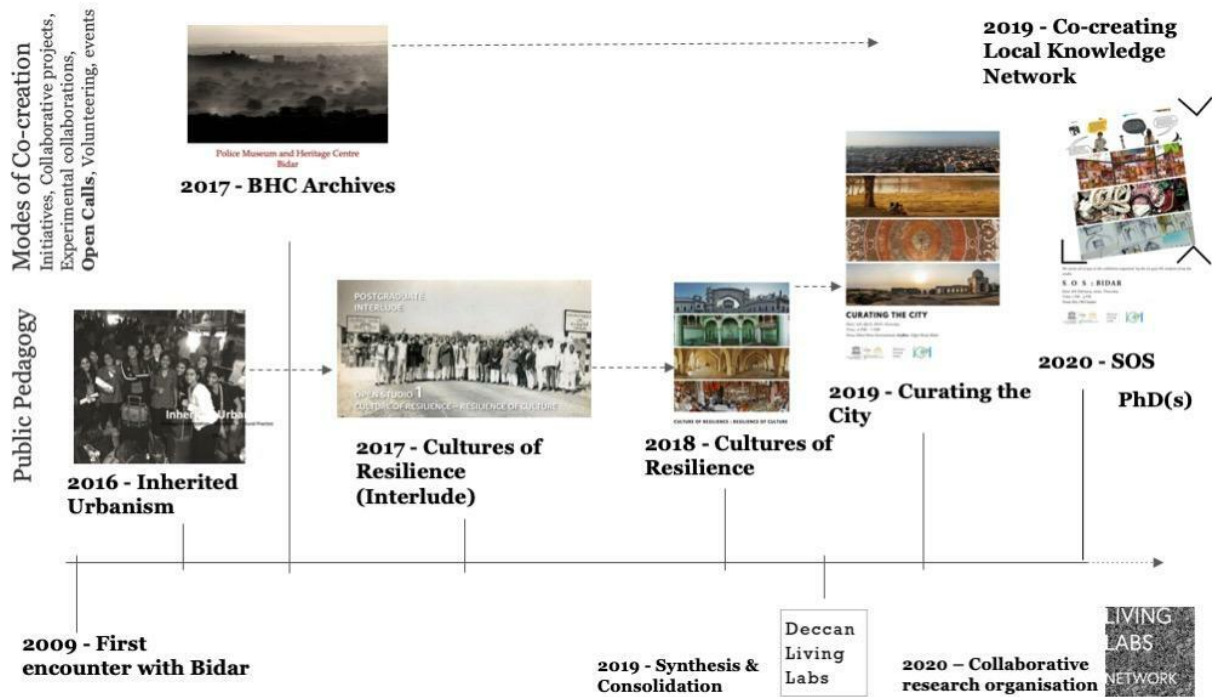
Data about food cooked and consumed in the past twenty-four hours is captured by the app on the tablet, which visualizes it in the form of a thali (a plate for food) with directly relatable categories—rice and rotis, meat, sambhar and curries, milk and curds, coffee and tea—that are color-coded. Through conversation mediated by the application, the HN and the client discuss and choose to reduce or replace one item of food that they consider to be harmful. They together track a way to open up periodic discussion about challenges posed by what the client has decided to cut down on. This vision of collaborative diet planning that departs from all the mainstream applications that “count calories” evolved through a ground-up engagement, with the HNs actively shaping what should go in and what should not.

out: the histories and practices of ordinary people, communities, and their way of shaping their settlements and habitats.

I started working in this region as a teaching faculty member, researcher, and planner in settlement studies in 2016. Since then the collaborations have taken place mainly in these modes:

1. Public pedagogy: ways and methods of co-learning from and with residents and communities embedded in Dakkhani region.
2. Collaborative projects: concerted efforts to find possibilities of collaborations through negotiating different modes of knowledge practices.
3. Experimental collaborations: exploring possibilities to collaborate where no apparent possibilities are recognized or realized.
4. Nonprojects: finding or creating in-between moments for deliberate conversations and maintaining relationships.

The beginnings of Living Labs Network and Forum (LL-NaF) was quite simple, even before it existed, with a few of us connecting and collaborating: me, students, Team YU-VAA, a few journalists, local historians, linguists, and local residents in Bidar and Gulbarga, all of whom were fiercely proud and appreciative of these locales, possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of the cities they lived in. The discomfort of knowing little of the place to guide a bunch of design



**Figure 8.** Our journey began in the fall of 2016 through a project studio for Public Space Design students of Srishti Institute called *Inherited Urbanism*, which led to formation of a research organization and a learning platform after ten studios and more than one hundred student projects of varied scales, depth of engagement, and microcontexts.

students, of being an outsider, of being a touch-and-go academic and practitioner became the drive to find ways to recognize and build a complex understanding of the everyday lives and histories of many communities that are left out. It raised questions such as these: Would we understand the place the same way if these mundane and ordinary histories were foregrounded? How plural would the histories be? Whom should we look up to? Do all places retain histories in the same way, or are they as diverse as the cultures and the communities in this region? When did we forget the ordinary histories of this region, or did we ever value them? Plurality is something that we wish to embrace; we wish to take time to gain a deep understanding of the ways in which the region is constantly evolving.

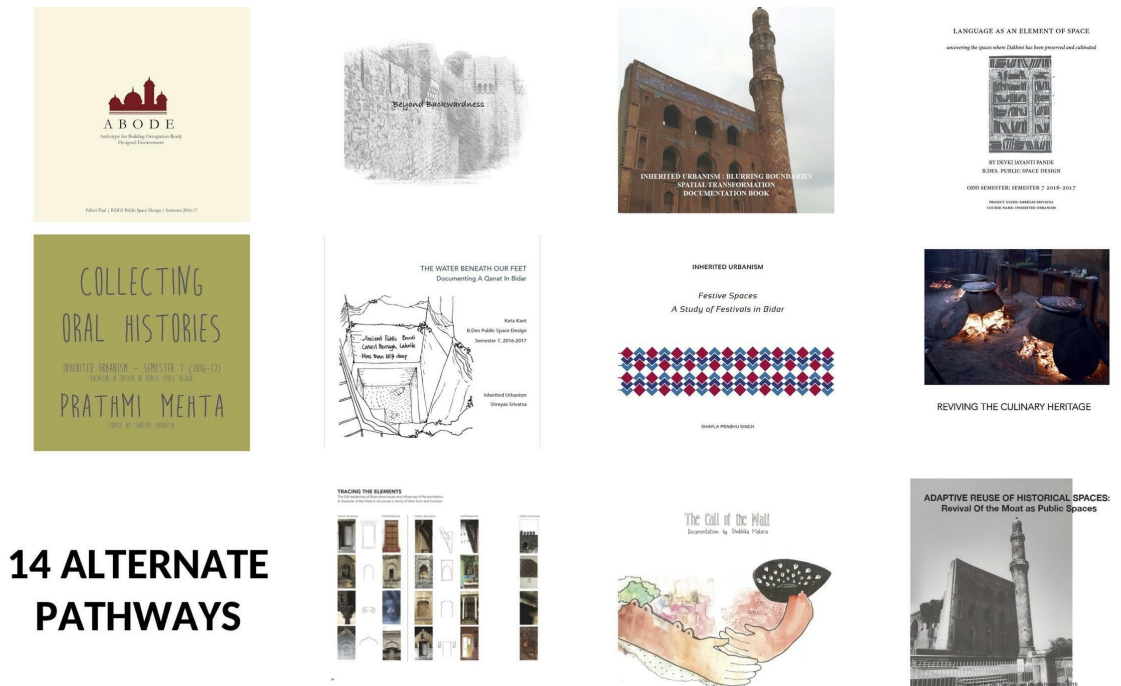
LLNaF is now imagined as a network of fragile connections with more than three hundred individuals and organizations. We choose to see the network in this way because the collaborations are underpinned by the notion of “care” that is brought by individuals or organizations. This choice is to deliberately find ways to have less control over the manner in which collaborations take shape. And “non-projects” are key to LLNaF, which gives rise to the notion of “situated” practice.

We have an in-joke when somebody asks us about LLNaF: we say, “Be there in Bidar!” For us it is the region that is at the center. Let this article be a prelude to our practice and an opening to have a conversation on some of the ideas shared here.

#### LOCATEDNESS OF “SITUATED” PRACTICE

Team YUVAA is an active group of volunteers, all residents of Bidar, who took the initiative to help in monitoring public projects related to health-care and groundwater issues undertaken by the Bidar District Administration. In addition, they organize several citizen engagement activities such as cleaning drives, heritage walks, marathons, and so on. Their compassion for the hilltop city of Bidar is infectious. Our meetings with members of Team YUVAA were conversational, about their hometown, their passion for development of the region, and cultural reading of local practices, accompanied by visits to different places within and around Bidar where one could see these cultural practices in everyday life. We (I, Vinay Malge, Supriya Nandgouli, and Dilip Patil from Team YUVAA) took the role of anchoring relationships, essential to build and maintain the network. Team YUVAA actively engaged in the fieldwork in our first studio in Bidar (for the students of Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, under the umbrella of the UNESCO Chair for Culture, Habitat and Sustainability) and shared their local knowledge and social network by helping to co-facilitate the introductions and meetings with communities in the old city. They became the translators and moderators of the conceptual inquiry and the intent of the fieldwork in a language that the communities could understand.

By the end of the four-month studio in 2016, we had connected with more than twenty people from different walks of life in Bidar, such as members of Team YUVAA, members of occupation-based communities, local historians, linguistic experts in Dakkhani Urdu, multigenerational



## 14 ALTERNATE PATHWAYS

**Figure 9. Alternate pathways to understanding the cultural heritage of Bidar—outcome of Inherited Urbanism studio, 2016.**

families, senior journalists, artists and art researchers, and government officials, as well as (in brief encounters) many residents of the city. Their involvement and contribution shifted the focus of the studio from urbanization to the act of learning from the locale. We recognized that such adjustments are crucial in an academic setting, especially when the intent is more to learn from the context than to do research that is self-serving or an opportunity to find ways to impose our problem-solving tendency on the locale. The outcome of the studio was a compendium (see [figure 9](#)) that could lead to a collective reconstruction and an alternative narrative of Bidar’s history. The studio revealed the less-well-known cultural practices of the region, which have not found their way into the annals of scholarly works or into mainstream development work. This was possible because of the local collaborations that emerged during the studio.

We continued to keep the conversations going. The shared experience had made it apparent that the connections made had to be continued, and it was a no-brainer that for this continuity, locatedness of my practice would help. We were not the first ones to do a studio or to study some of the local practices. Soon after the studio, the question I was asked by some of the journalists was, What will happen to the work that was produced by the students? Will we continue developing the concepts to take them to implementation? Another comment, from one of the Dakkhani poets, I paraphrase here as “Scholars, students, and teachers from institutions in bigger cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad come to our region, study our culture, and either publish or do a project. Then they forget about us and many times do not acknowledge our support and contribution to their work.” I saw this statement as an ethical concern that emerges from such situations and that happens many

times, whether intentionally or unintentionally. That was the moment when I realized that sustained locatedness is important to build trust, and only over time and repeated engagement could we build a relationship that is based on trust and not on exchange.

In 2020 I am writing with my kinship of care, unper-turbed as a practitioner with an ineffable field of study or disciplinary background but with the notion of “situated” practice. Locatedness is necessary to anchor relationships. What does it take to maintain the relationships? How does one continue to situate practice while the basis of building relationships is constantly changing as life happens? I realized that my privilege offered a choice to distance or to move on to other places to work in as a researcher. But the struggle was internal as I am conditioned to find a purpose, objective, reason, and resources, all that encapsulates a “project,” to work in/with a context. This also meant I could choose to continue to locate my research practice in the Bidar and Dakkhani region ([figure 10](#) shows a glimpse of another studio in Gulbarga, a neighboring district in the Dakkhani region).

### NONPROJECT MODE AND IN-BETWEENNESS IN SITUATING “CARE”

A nonproject mode—being present, with no set agenda, apart from the agenda of knowing what a “situated” practice means—created “in-between” moments. The concerted effort is apparent when co-facilitating a studio or a project. The intent of engagement is in some ways established or negotiated. The in-between time is the most enriching, where an open-ended conversation can take place that leads to new ways of thinking and framing our engagement.

One such idea is BHC (Bidar Heritage Centre) Archives.

During the in-between times, we encountered several communities, artisan groups, families and individuals, and particularly amateur collectors. These amateur collectors are the connoisseurs and patrons of a rich culture of art and history witnessed by the quaint city of “whispering monuments.” Most of these collectors have spent more than fifty years amassing relics, memorabilia, photographs, and many kinds of objects that do not have a conceivable use. One has to ask: why do these people collect items, and what is their motivation for spending almost a lifetime doing it? Often their collections are seen merely as “amateur,” which could have a negative connotation of unverified, noncredible, inaccurate, and the like. We viewed such individuals who could contribute to research in art and history as “citizen curators.” It is important to pay attention to what came our way during the in-between times, a practice of fifty years not finding a place or a voice; we had to find ways to acknowledge this practice. In my experience, collective planning and collaborating with communities to frame the project, its intent and approach, has yielded intended outcomes. Many a time the uncertainty in the contexts we work in requires different bodies of knowledge to readjust and move ahead. This has been the strategy. This builds reassurance and keeps communities engaged as they co-own the space for engagement.

However, I find the in-betweenness valuable for the kind of accidental discoveries and chance encounters that it may have to offer. It is like the way, in crime thrillers, an investigation starts with a hint of a clue that could lead to another clue. In a city or a settlement that is living and constantly evolving, there’s always something to discover. Over three years, several accidental discoveries, along with the micro-contexts we had already engaged with, were used to create a matrix of microcontexts (figure 11). The matrix helped to prepare the ground for collaborations to take place, as a result of co-learning.

From a situated practice point of view, the in-between is where we need to invest and share our resources. Our intent is to stop measuring the success of research or its impact in a nonproject mode and also to move away from a beneficiary mode of thinking. It is in this in-betweenness that we learned to care for the ordinary and mundane practices that generate lived knowledge. Hence we call this space a living lab. When we need to change our focus to support rather than to constantly be in problem-solving mode, being in the in-betweenness gives us a better understanding of the micro-context. We term this shift of attitude “Support over Solve,” an SOS call for practitioners who are interested in decolonizing their own practice by taking on a care-based approach that is not limited to showing sensibility but recognizes and accounts for the different mental models of our collaborators and the models we carry ourselves.



**Figure 10. In 2018 Shreyas and eleven other colleagues of Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore, co-facilitated an interdisciplinary studio in Gulbarga called Culture of Resilience in collaboration with Team YUVAA.**

#### CO-LEARNING AND LEARNING FROM BELOW

In the fall of 2019, LLNaF collaborated with Servalots, a Bangalore-based social tech organization, in Co-create Local Knowledge Network (CLKN), a catalytic intervention project funded by Association for Progressive Communications. The focus of this project was to use community-owned WiFi Mesh as decentralized and locative network infrastructure. We connected with women and nonbinary people from fifteen communities who have diverse knowledge practices in the form of stories, songs, and other performative practices. We worked closely with four groups: (1) The women Khidmatgars who offer prayer services at the Multani Pasha Dargah. (figure 12); (2) Bhooteru and Aradhi (nonbinary gendered community); (3) Shayaras (women writers and poets in Urdu); and (4) Kumbara women (Kumbara is an occupation-based community of potters).

At one of the workshops, we got the groups to hear each other’s songs and writings, and to annotate the audio with any memory or any experience that emerged in their mind. The Shayaras were interested in the pictures taken during the fieldwork instead of the audio. The activity was changed, and insights on the syncretic cultures emerged (see figure 13). This is co-learning for us, where we facilitate and accommodate inputs from the communities to tweak our methods.

During this time, we encountered several living practices in the form of songs, folklore, and myths retold by women from these communities. The process of co-learning and co-creating continues to explore possibilities of conducting research on voice-based interfaces, decentralized networks, and services to find relevance for communities and with communities.

Livelihoods & Overall Wellbeing	Sensitive Ecologies	Syncretic Cultures & Practices	Narratives of Reforms	Social Entrepreneurship	Well-being of Art/Craft Practices	Unveiling the Lesser Known
Thandas (Aurad)	Lake ecology at Bagh-E-Shahi (near Paapnash temple)	Badi Khanqah	Basava Movement (Rebel + Reforms)	Ayurvedic medicinal plants??	Cot weavers/makers community	Masnavi Kadam Rao Padam Rao
Soyabean cultivation+Value added products	Jahaz-Ki-Bawdi and the settlements	Khanqah and Dargah culture (Ahmad shah Wali Tomb, Multani Pasha Dargah, and Abul Faiz Dargah)	Restoration and conservation of Karez	Bidri Craft	Bidri Colony Housing Scheme	Mitakshara
Cultivation of Ratansagar rice variety also known as Bidar Ka Basmati	Karez (water system or ecology)	Osman Gunj market	Sakala (e-governance)	Local Cusines – Everyday Culinary practices	Bamboo Weavers	Abhangs
Cultivation of Benishan Mangoes	Bellur/Jamistampur	Budhiwar Angadi	Teacher training + extra classes for Govt Schools+Student Training programmes on local heritage	Linguistic works – Dhakkhani urdu writings	Gondala Community	Ancient Stone Inscriptions of Bidar
Diary and livestock (Home based industry) Gadgi, Dhupatmahagaon, Sirsi, Gowli galli	Karanaja Backwaters	Dakkhani Urdu & literature	Wells and lake rejuvenation in Bidar (Frugal design / model)	Crafts – Zardosi	Wood Carving	Ancient Buddhist Settlements
Fig variety in Bidar	Monuments within city limits	Local games – Atta chamma (5x5 grid), Kunte pille,	Slum Development Schemes	Progressive farmers		Names of Places
Ali Barid Tomb complex (Underutilised Public Spaces)	Blackbuck habitat around Dhupatmahagaon in Aurad Taluk	Mohram Padagalu	Reforms during Mahmud Gawan (Minister of Bahamani Sultanate in 14th Century)	Home stays (Old residences in Bidar)		Ceramic Tile works (Local influence)
Barid Shahi Gardens (Limited Use)	Shembelli Tank	Helavaru Community – preserve ancestral blood line of one family at a time	Legal reforms during the Colonial period using Mitakshara			
Bagh-E-Hamam also known as Shikargaah (forgotten sites)		Musical practices at Tajalapur, Manik Nagar Samsthan and Janapada academy				
Home-Based work/industry for Women (Participation of Women in workforce)		Datta Parampara				
Self-help Groups DCC bank		Khatati/Calligraphy				
Chitguppa Saree weavers						
Asha workers						
Kasaivada/Kusum Galli						
Waddar Community						
Rajagonda Community						
Mangalwadi Community (Rag pickers)						

**Figure 11. Currently LLNaF has a matrix with sixty-four different microcontexts that one can engage and that we can use to facilitate the collaborations.**

Source: LLNaF.

The larger idea of locatedness, care, and building the network is linked to this overarching question we have: how can creative collaborations act as a catalyst and a mediator to sense, shape, and shift developmental paradigms? This question is also relevant in the Global South, where the dialogue is about real-world experiments for the development of cities that can happen through “learning from below.” LLNaF is imagined as a co-learning platform for real-world collaborations and experimentation. For us, the collaboration in a way determines how co-learning can take place.

### PAUL: READING BETWEEN THE LINES (OFF AND ON): LURKING, MEMES, AND CARE IN DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Part of my doctoral research aims to study spreadable media and spreadable behaviors, which manifest in different forms, satire being one crucial aspect, colloquially taking the form of and referred to as (internet) memes. Though research has been done on online behavior—along the lines of obscenity and free speech—what is often missing is a linked approach of interpretation. My intent is to look at the relationship between made objects, the maker, and through them the behavior of making, and finally the infrastructure and its interfaces that allow for making and the spread of these made objects. My ongoing work focuses on studying this phenomenon within the Indian context in three ways: working in and with meme pages (followers, admins, moderators, and lurkers); looking at the entanglement of internet memes and spreadable behaviors with the infrastructures that allow for remix cultures; and looking at ambivalent and ambiguous content and making behaviors to reconfigure platform design principles, design research, and ethnographic research methods.

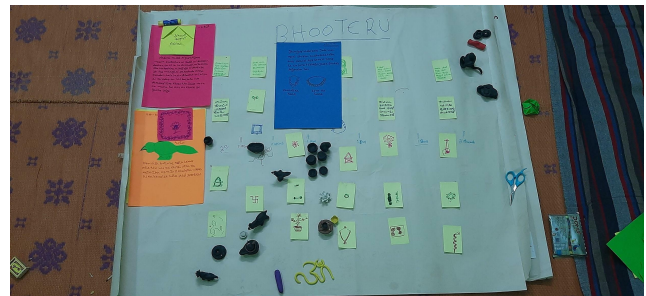
In this account, I translate the behind-the-scenes aspects of hanging around/lurking on various platforms by briefly unpacking a conversation that occurred while I was doing digital ethnography to study participatory behavior. This research is informed by a mix of grounded theory, design research, and ethnographic fieldwork with ethnomethodological analysis (Boellstorff et al. 2012) as well as a multimodal one (Pink et al. 2016). The conversation and /lurking ethnography is intended to unpack within this specific meme page/community qualities such as kinship structures, in-jokes, misogyny, and regional and linguistic peculiarities, along with class and caste dynamics, within a heterogeneous Indian communication ecology (Slater, Tacchi, and Lewis 2002).

As a researcher, lurking ethnography helps me understand and archive instances of mass trolling, expressions of satire against political figureheads/celebrities (sometimes they are the same). This involves scouring through various digital (and nondigital) communities to get a glimpse of existing practices, artifacts, relationships, social worlds, and localities (Pink et al. 2016), which helps in sampling and reflecting over similarities and differences constituted by each of these elements—which manifests simultaneously as (or resulting in) an event in a digital and multimodal environment.



**Figure 12. Our team explains the ad hoc network and how to use the recorder to the seven-year-old granddaughter of senior Khadim Multani Pasha Dargah during the CLKN project.**

Source: Vinay Malge.



**Figure 13. Visual annotations to the songs by Bhooteru and Kumbara women produced by Kumbara women and Shayaras as part of the CLKN project.**

### LABORS OF CARE: MOVING BETWEEN ETIC AND EMIC AND OTHER BINARY ANXIETIES

As an example of using ethnography to study memes and meme making, I unpack my discussions with an admin of a popular Malayali meme page (Dank Memes Malayalam, or DMM) and how the page has been valuable in *figuring, configuring, and reconfiguring* (Suchman 2012) my own practice. Part of the lurking ethnography and ongoing conversations, which are being conducted online, uses a multi-sited approach, through Instagram and WhatsApp conversations and through an exchange of questionnaires via mail and scroll-throughs of content and decision-making in Facebook and Instagram groups. As respondent N is located outside the country for work reasons, it is difficult to have face-to-face and synchronous conversations or interviews. The conversations and interpretation involve unpacking the creation and dissemination of internet memes, and voting processes with other admins and with core members on their public and private Facebook groups.

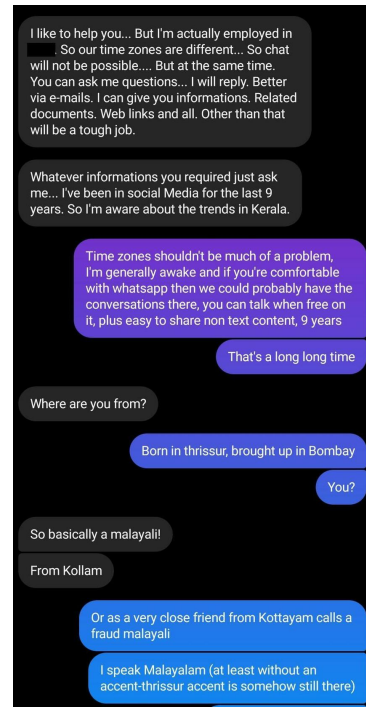
At the beginning of the conversation, it was imperative that the respondent N set the terms of dialogue, the pace

of communication, and sites of interaction. They were more open to collaborating with a semistructured interview, which eventually expanded into a scroll through different conversations, content, and activities across platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. One recurring theme of conversation became the inclusion of different identities as admins, as the followers and engagement, according to N, seemed to have positive gender and identity dynamics. While I was lurking, the group's transformation and mobilization during the 2018 Kerala floods as spaces for relief work and care became a strong aspect of the overall discourse across the different sites the group was present on. Along with progressive caste, class, and gender narratives discussed within the group, the ambivalence in some of the posts showed a keen intent to critique tropes and narratives (class, caste, wokeness, feminist discourse, race politics, and technology access).

In hindsight, these conversations became a point in the ongoing research to understand how quickly online mobilization works (figure 15); the conversations also served as an early stepping-stone to understand the old correlations between digital and analog technologies and other infrastructures. During the floods, the response of participatory communities around memes resulted in relief work networks either forming from scratch at a local level or becoming conduits that plugged into the state-sanctioned networks. While I study participation on online platforms, it is very humbling to see different variations of what Stuart Pertz (1990) refers to as *incidental architecture* as the moderators, admins, and community members interpret the different affordances of multisited platforms while using them for purposes not entirely designed or planned. Within this architecture, there is a curious mirroring in terms of how space is further conceived by admins/moderator and by researchers like me. Crystal Abidin, a sociocultural anthropologist, documents how digital ethnographers treat DMs as *second places* or spaces for field notes, confessions, regrouping, and rabbit-holing (Abidin and de Seta 2020). Abidin's use of Ray Oldenburg's categorization of physical social spaces in a digital context for digital ethnographers conducting research, where these spaces become second or third places of a kind, felt very similar to how N performed and perceived his duties as admin while moving across comments, posts, and DMS and between multiple platforms.

One of the major anxieties of doing any ethnography took the form of shifting between perceived in-groups. With N, there was always (as seen in figure 14) an apprehension of multiple labels for roles that I'd be performing, ranging from the *inside* or *emic* (with choice, follower, commenter, poster, participant; without choice, blurry cis-het, lapsed Syro-Malabar Christian Malayali, diasporic reference carrier) to the *outside* or *etic* (researcher, academic, not Malayali enough).

There was a shared anxiety whether these conversations would reveal anything personal or crucial that could jeopardize our own positions in the group. The anxiety was compounded by my inherent apprehension about doing digital ethnography, which feels often like looking through many fractured lenses to see and then show multiple distortions curated algorithmically for different people in different ways—thereby making it that much harder but also



**Figure 14. The earliest interactions, which moved from those of a follower and a commenter toward those of a researcher, communicating what it meant to be a researcher from within the community.**

that much more exciting to figure out how “the site” is to be defined, what frameworks are to be co-created while doing emic research—so that there is a conversation between different respondents and stakeholders in this research, and they’re acutely aware of what boundaries and binaries are being blurred and by whom, as even this recognition sometimes requires more unpacking. As a lot of the conversations are discussions around the seemingly mundane, funny, and antagonistic, it becomes difficult to move between experiencing these discussions and then having to perform the strange ritual of “unpacking” these conversations in ways that are academically acceptable. This exercise often leaves behind a distinct feeling that most academics seem to miss out on what most meme makers and communities that engage with satire usually understand quite well: one does not simply conflate *being serious* with *being sober (academically)* and leave out *humor*.

So far, in the presentations made while doing this research (as shown in figure 16), the tensions of presenting to an academic audience feel very familiar to how meme makers and stand-up comics articulate their anxieties by presenting serious topics dressed in humor—which further solidifies the notions that younger researchers who are students, moderators, and community members on these platforms voice out: research around internet memes, to acquire legitimacy in Indian academia, needs to fit into preconstructed domains/shoes, often in the form of culture-studies interpretations and through the lenses of whether this participation actually solves anything. I fit precariously with those who are looking at newer ways that are already emic as modes of articulation and that are recognizable to

community members as a mode of exploring and unpacking. This is in contrast with those ways that are perceived conventionally as academic or field research tools, which can be jarring to those who do not want to participate in what is often perceived as clinical modes of engaging with what they/we/ I otherwise treat as mundane and funny. For me, it is useful while researching spaces, behaviors, technologies, and the notion of reform in design research to in turn be critical of the dominant forms of creating research artifacts that move beyond word-heavy theses and descriptors for image/video/spreadable media and behavior in India.

### SITING, SITUATING, IMMERSING

Practicing ethnography as a mode of research to understand online behavior brings in a sharp contrast in conventional perceptions of division and binaries. This form of duality also manifests itself in conventional research framing of the ethnographer and the site of research and what it means to be immersed in it. Within the context of studying internet memes, meme makers, and consequences of spreadable media, dualities are often challenged by entanglement and embodied unseen labor; this is as true for the respondents as it is for the ethnographer.

Conventional research modes to study artifacts would have the researcher engage with where the artifact is situated/excavated/curated. In this study, for example, the researcher is more likely to come across an internet meme, made by admins who are diasporic, living outside Kerala/India, that has been decontextualized by makers or followers, in other geographical/linguistic-cultural contexts. This makes it tricky for a researcher to articulate contexts, as identities are often vague and not tied down to conventional markers, which means the risk of specificity and “clarity” is at the cost of pigeonholing emerging and inter-sectional artifacts and identities.

The boundaries are further blurred in terms of dominant dualities in online subculture and language—IRL versus online, which researchers like Boelstorff and others (2012) studying virtual worlds and gaming platforms have articulated in great detail. In the ongoing COVID-19 scenario and in various manifestations of lockdown, it feels like there has been a shift in how I rely on news and other pieces of information that come largely from open (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) or closed digital social media platforms and computer-mediated conversation spaces (WhatsApp, WeChat). As a researcher navigating the space between spreadable media and the physical consequences of creating and sharing this content, there is a sense of tables turning when your perception of the outside, during lockdown, is intensely mediated by platform behavior and not the other way around. The cost of immersion in ambiguous content and engaging with ambivalent identities and their rhetoric online is the sense of being gaslit and constantly second-guessing, which does not work well, as mentioned before, once the tables have been turned, as the sense of being gaslit in physical spaces seems more visceral and immediate to some—which is a more recent articulation of how *embodied* online experiences can be when the bleed-through is felt more strongly than the binaries of online and IRL.

What's the group dynamic like?

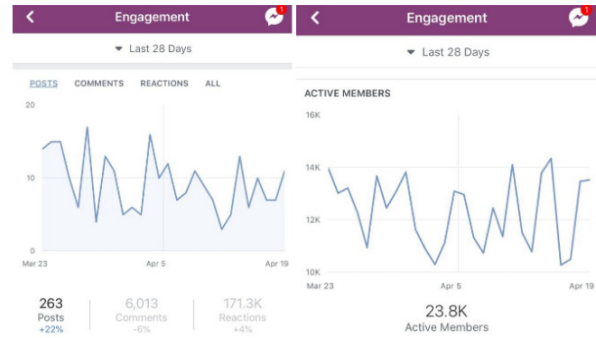
Dank Memes Malayalam group is a platform for sharing Malayalam based memes. For us it functions a crowdsourcing for the Facebook page and Instagram page.

Group has admins, contributors, active members and passive members

All the admins are connected to most of the active members via Messenger Groups. It helps us to make any content trending in the group and it will eventually end up in our page

Facebook Group is like a meme sharing platform and a discussion forum

Adding few of the group insights for your reference:



**Figure 15. With N's help, what was made visible were decision-making processes that need to be in place while handling content; the energy and time taken behind every post, along with the constraints that certain interfaces bring because of their affordances and that were a part of early discussions; and the attitudes and moderating principles, which are constantly changing so as to stay aligned with shifts in social-cultural-political moorings of the followers, platform governance principles, and the overall mood of the country.**

### EVOLVING CONVERSATIONS

Our range of experiences and encounters constantly raise the question of who gets to imagine what technology could/should be. Lucy Suchman (2019) talks about the importance of questioning who gets to innovate and what contexts enable “innovation.” What gets termed as centers of innovation and what is left as periphery is a question of who has the privilege to imagine, and innovate, and advocate. A core part of such categorization of innovation is the rather implicit and colonial understanding of who gets not just to design but to imagine the technology (Silicon Valley), and who is rendered the manufacturer (China), and who is the consumer (the whole world), something that was poignantly captured by Greenspan et al. (2016). In her excellent ethnographic work on Ideo's pivot from product to strategy, as defined by their most famous innovation, design thinking, Lilly Irani (2018, 6) relates an anecdote from a conversation with a machine shop operator at the company who pithily responds, “there's been a shift to less mechanical and to more mystical.” Irani deftly sketches the anxieties that precipitate this shift, that of Chinese manufacturing capturing the market, and how American exceptionalism is framed as that “mystique,” the ability to curate and cultivate innovation: in short, design thinking as skill.

As the next billion users come online, we see analogous

## PhD Research: Meme in India



**Figure 16.** A slide from an internal review a few days after the August 5, 2019, abrogation of Article 370, which revoked the limited autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir.

The “Is this a pigeon?” meme template works with juxtaposition of flawed perception, allowing the entire series to become a spiral into the edgy question of what we recognize as a joke—and when is it too soon, compounded by the anxiety of will anyone get it, and exacerbated by the question of will/should they laugh? The conversations and reflections problematize the aspect of defining the field or the site of research as one defined by physical geography. The juxtaposition of different play frames that manifests as a mix of sociocultural and political themes gives the conversation a strong diasporic tangent, which, when further juxtaposed with conversations from local, national, and international memetic themes, brings to light the requirement for newer framing of the “field” and “sites” of research in networked digital and physical spaces. This framing is pertinent while adopting design and digital ethnographic research practices, to better engage with memes in and/or from India.

scenarios unfolding within India, and these anxieties make themselves manifest in the government’s insistence on data localization (Basu 2020)—again to curb potential international incursions that might divert spending abroad, especially as the Indian economy goes into free fall. The “centers of innovation” are now design firms, technology parks, and start-up hubs in Indian metropolitan cities keen to target “India 2 and 3” markets: the peri-urban and semirural phone users with some disposable income. This space is particularly saturated, unsurprisingly by players in the fintech space, and there is a land grab for user data, often arrived at by profiling users at increasingly granular levels. This raises serious concerns about privacy and consent in a country where prevailing mental models around these concepts are imagined very differently from the context (that of the digital product in the global marketplace) they originate in. Consequently, at Design Beku we have been strongly advocating for a code of ethics for user research to benchmark industry practices, to protect against these extractive practices (Bagalkot and Ray Murray 2020).

Design Beku emerged from and continues to push back on, through creative endeavors, the patriarchal limitations imposed on design by the structures of academia as well as professional design practice. Our individual practices are exploring ways to push back on solutionist-oriented design education by operating within, at the margins, and outside a design institute. Collectively, our practices are driven by a desire to explore an alternative, feminist practice that centers ethics of care rather than empathy (Bennett and Rosner

2019), which has become a buzzword in the mainstream design profession (Wendt 2017).

This desire has meant that all our assumptions, which are rooted in our own education and practice predating our individual paths into Design Beku, are being constantly challenged. Assumptions about design thinking and methods, design education and the role of practice, the role of technology and notions of participation in the design of projects, funding and the academic pressures of needing to publish, and more have been considerably challenged, and our accounts detail how.

Ultimately, what is emerging for us is a rich, heterogeneous understanding of who the “critical technological citizen” is, and could be. On the one hand are the students and early practitioners of design who have worked with us on the studios and projects, and are with us in the nonprojects and in-betweens. What we have experienced in turning design education into a sited practice is an opening of a space of questions and possibilities for early practitioners toward ethical design action grounded in feminist ideals. On the other hand, we have been fortunate to continue to engage with individuals and collectives over time, each with their own distinct identities and practices. This engagement has brought forward how a critical technological citizen already exists: in the HN’s daily practices of caring for their communities, in the way the individuals in Bidar cared for the material and intangible heritage of the place, and in the way the admins of meme pages foster an environment of critical

questioning of majoritarian politics through humor.

We have learned that individuals and collectives act with agency and capabilities that they hold before we “designers” even began our engagement. In many ways, we have learned from them about criticality and creativity. We have learned how to challenge and question mainstream ideas and imaginations of technology and development, while being rooted in the everyday practices of care. “Subjective standards” as part of an everyday conversation between a household and an HN push back on the imported visions of quantified calories, and elsewhere, oral forms of knowledge open up spaces for visual and oral annotations by other knowledge communities, fostering an idea of a living archive.

Our practices of engaging with the critical technological citizens brings us to pose tough questions to ourselves as part of the academic and professional communities we are members of. Accounts by Naveen and Shreyas bring forward challenges to the ideas of “time-bound” projects for development and extractive forms of research, indicating a richer space for a longer-term consistent engagement without a project agenda: of nonprojects in the in-betweens. Paul’s account further expands the notion of nonprojects and being in-between by questioning our notion of “sitedness.” Digitally sited conversations and lurking unfold, which further question the limitations of academic publication formats (ironically including the current article) that call for a somber note while discussing humorous and satirical actions of dissent.

What our experiences demonstrate is that, while contemplating relocating the imagination to the very sites where digital technologies are supposed to be used, such a relocation is not only a moving of designing to the specific sites of use (Ehn 2008) but also a moving of “imagining.” However, it is essential to acknowledge that each of the communities we work with is unique, and though some may be similar in their claims to marginality, their experiences and authority of lived experience cannot and should not be considered as homogenous. We see our roles, then, as ensuring that the worlds forged in the imaginations of the communities we work with continue to be realized and made manifest to subvert assumptions and transform more expansively how we design and use technology.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT

All the authors are members of the Design Beku collective. Apart from this, Padmini Ray Murray and Paulanthony George have no competing interests in the work they describe in this article. Naveen Bagalkot is also a member of the board for MAYA for the year 2021–22.

Shreyas Srivatsa is a cofounder of Living Lab Network and Forum (LLNaF). The studio projects mentioned in Shreyas’s account are a part of the work for the UNESCO Chair in Culture, Habitat and Sustainable Development at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design & Technology.

Bidar Heritage Centre Archives is an ongoing initiative in Bidar. In 2018 it received funding support from Hyderabad-Karnataka Region Development Board for a period of four months.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Padmini Ray Murray** (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is the founder of Design Beku. Ray Murray established the first degree-level digital humanities program in India at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, where she was course director from 2016 to 2018. She was the recipient of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Unbox Fellowship (2012–13) and the co-investigator with Claire Squires on the Book Unbound, also funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. She is currently co-investigator on Gendering the Smart City with Professor Ayona Dutta and the digital lead on Two Centuries of Indian Print, a project in collaboration with the British Library and Jadavpur University. Her recent publications explore the implications of the digital for the feminist archive and protest in India. She served as a trustee for Wikimedia UK from 2013 to 2014 and led a research project on platform governance and design for the Nilekhani Foundation in 2018. As a creative practitioner, Ray Murray creates new media work that reflects her research and interests, such as Darshan Diversion (with KV Ketan and Joel Johnson), a feminist video game about the Sabarimala temple controversy (2016); and Halt the Hate (with Pratyush Raman), an interactive database of crimes against minorities, for Amnesty India (2017); she is currently working on “Visualising Cybersecurity,” a Hewlett-funded project that aims to alter how cybersecurity is depicted and discussed in the media (with the Centre for Internet and Society and Paulanthony George).

**Naveen Bagalkot** is a design researcher, educator, and

facilitator broadly working at the intersections of human-computer interaction (HCI) design, participatory design, and community-based care. He is trained as an architect and an industrial designer, and holds a PhD in interaction design from the IT University of Copenhagen. His work explores alternative possibilities for localized, decolonized, and participatory design of data-driven digital-physical infrastructures for community care and well-being. As a part of the Design Beku collective, Bagalkot focuses on facilitating collaborative design and critical making for and with grassroots community organizations such as MAYA Health, IT for Change, and Jatan Sansthan. Since 2016 he has been working with MAYA Health on “Infrastructuring for Community Care,” and since 2018 he has been a co-investigator on a series of projects with Nervo Verdezoto (the first project, titled “Healthy Crossroads in Pregnancy Care,” was funded by the MRC-AHRC Global Public Health: Partnership Awards scheme). As an educator at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bagalkot works toward creating an environment of learning that expands the horizon of emerging design practice through a critical and situated engagement with technological ideas and real-world complexities. He has designed (along with Padmini Ray Murray, Sreeparna Chattopadhyay, Riyaj Shaikh, and others) and manages four postgraduate degree programs, which lie at the intersection of design, humanities, and technology.

**Shreyas Srivatsa** is a researcher and practitioner with an enduring interest in the transdisciplinary approach. Qualified as an architect and with advanced training in areas related to human settlements, he has an affinity toward the idea of “situated” research and practice to explore generative responses to wicked problems in a complex human-nature setting through “creative” responses. This has translated into co-creation of a platform for collaborations known as Deccan Living Labs in the Dakkhani region. DLL has facilitated more than 120 projects, programs, and initiatives. Being associated with the UNESCO Chair at Srishti, he frequently engages with a diverse set of (creative) practitioners from the Dakkhani region to generate new modes of thinking and making through collaboration with students and faculty at Srishti Institute of Art, Design & Technology. As a faculty member at Srishti, he contributes to curriculum development of postgraduate programs and has developed place-based methods to learn from complex settings.

**Paulanthy George:** My research focuses on the relationships between made objects, the maker and the behaviour of making, in the context of spreadable digital media (and behaviours stemming from it). A study of internet memes in India and phenomenon such as dissent, satire, free expression and ambivalent behaviour fostered by them, the research is at the intersection of digital ethnography, culture studies, human-computer interaction, humour studies and critical theory. I spend my time watching people. I draw them, the way they are, the way some people want to be and sometimes I have interesting conversations with them. Some of these conversations lead into projects, which through sweat and patience lead into products or platforms for more concepts. And I also spend time understanding how systems might sustain more conversations and contraptions that might make life a little easier. I love animals, travel, poetry and humour, not always in that or-

der.

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