

## Auteurship and Image-Making: A (Gentle) Critique of the Photovoice Method

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*This article critiques digital photovoice, a method deployed by social activists, developmentalists, and anthropological researchers. I argue that the uncritical use of photovoice methods (1) has allowed a reinvigoration of a positivist orientation toward image authenticity and (2) inadvertently supports hegemonic regimes of value. To revitalize photovoice as a method, I argue that practitioners must view their project as an aesthetic one, in which image-makers are considered auteurs producing realities. I provide an example from my fieldwork in Adavisandra village near Bangalore, using one of my students' photographs to consider how representations of her life change when we take her aesthetic-autorial sensibility seriously. [affect, development, participation, photovoice, South Asia, value, visual ethnography]*

Since the reflexive turn of the early 1990s, the anthropological imagination has been continuously, almost obsessively, gazing back upon itself, seeking to understand the ethical and representational possibilities of the discipline by excavating and re-excavating the projects of our forefathers and mothers. We return to their fieldsites and participants to work out exactly how they developed their anthropological insights and propelled forth the kind of imaginings of people and places that we continue to explore today.

Recently, I came across an instance of this kind of re-excavation in Anand Pandian's "The Remembering Village" (2009). Pandian explores the work of Louis Dumont, who conducted fieldwork in rural Tamil Nadu with the Piramallai kallar caste northwest of Madurai, and MN Srinivas, who did his fieldwork in a village in South Karnataka sixty kilometers southwest of Bangalore.

Pandian writes specifically about the intersection of his own fieldwork with Dumont's earlier work, undertaking a reflexive ex post facto excavation of villagers' memories of Dumont over sixty years after his fieldwork ended. For me, the most fascinating aspect of Pandian's discussion is a single, all too brief paragraph in which he remarks on Dumont's use of a photo camera during his fieldwork and villagers' recollection of this camera. He writes vividly:

Dumont was known for having travelled through the countryside recording such deeds with a 'hand camera,' and those who remember him today find him most memorable for this reason. 'I'm there too!' several people said to me with a laugh, describing their place in his collection of photographs. Recollections of these images suggest that Dumont had not merely recorded cultural tradition as he found it, but also sought to stage its persistence in particular ways. 'He would put *thanthatti* in the ears [of women] and take photos,' Amsu Thevar said, for example, describing the heavy earrings that women in the region had once worn to lengthen their ear-lobes. And it appears too that people here began to turn their own lives toward the frame of his camera. When an old person had died, for example, Amsu Thevar suggested that some would pose themselves excitedly for its lens: 'He is going to take a photo, he is going to take a photo, stand, man!' (Pandian 2009, 126)

That Dumont's informants, even sixty years later, remember his camera demonstrates just how central the camera must have been in shaping relationships, mediating both how Dumont interacted with the Piramallai kallar community and what kinds of insights he could

discover. And yet, the camera remained hidden from view in Dumont's entire opus, its impact revealed by Pandian many years later.

Pandian calls his short text "The Remembering Village," whose title is a not so subtle reference to MN Srinivas's *The Remembered Village* (1976), a book Srinivas wrote entirely from memory after his notes and photographs were lost in a fire while he was working at Oxford. However, unlike the invisibility of the audiovisual method in Dumont's work, I was surprised to find a transparent reference—a single paragraph in a book of over 300 pages—to the camera and its effects on his fieldwork. Srinivas writes:

My camera also contributed to my popularity. I was a poor photographer but I made up for my lack of skill by my enthusiasm and willingness to 'snap' everything I saw. A small percentage of my photographs were, however, successful, and I proudly showed them around. Generally, the villagers loved being photographed, and the examination of the prints provoked much laughter and comment. Somebody had spread the myth that the photographs would be shown abroad, and this added to the pleasure of being photographed. In short, the camera became a passport in every place. Men and women digging the bed of an irrigation canal or repairing a road at the height of summer, or transplanting rice seedlings in the wind and rain of July, all enthusiastically posed for me. (The photography also broke the monotony of their work.) The camera enabled me even to cross barriers imposed by my bachelorhood. Some months after I moved into the village, wealthy landowners invited me home to take pictures of their wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law. The fact that I did not accept money for taking pictures and that I was taking them all the time added to my reputation for prodigality. Many a villager knew me as the camera man—only they transformed 'camera' into 'chamara' which in Kannada means the fly whisk made from the long hair of yak tails. (Srinivas 1976, 26)

For me, the major takeaway as I reread these passages is that these early ethnographers were already negotiating some of the fundamental aspects of the image and their representational consequences: first, that image-making was always a collaborative process, founded upon and reforming the relationships between

those in front of and those behind the camera, and second, that an image's potential for circulation beyond any localized context was something researchers and participants were aware of and negotiated. In other words, whether Dumont or Srinivas were themselves aware of it, these early photographic negotiations and the critiques that were made of their methods presaged some of the dilemmas that have reemerged in the era of participatory photography and film in South Asia, one example of which is the photovoice method.

As digital cameras have become easier and cheaper to access, photovoice has become one of the most widespread applied visual methods for researchers and developmentalists,<sup>1</sup> especially those working in educational contexts with youth (Shah 2015). In photovoice methods, marginalized communities are given cameras to take photographs of their choosing, after which they discuss what the images mean or tell stories that they associate with these images.<sup>2</sup> Photovoice is thus a community-based action research method that is intended to empower those who have traditionally been excluded from the use of or expression through audiovisual modalities and have therefore been subject to harmful representations (Johnson 2011; Delgado 2015). In its idealized form, photovoice is a method by which "to unsettle, fragment, or dislodge other's gazes—if only for moments in time where young people were able to see themselves and be seen by others in alternative ways" (Luttrell 2010, 234). The method is lauded because "the participants can use their 'voice' to engage in critical discussions and help challenge dominant and hegemonic discourses, even if only in certain contexts, and at certain times" (Shah 2015, 71; Tacchi 2012).

The problem with the photovoice method has been twofold: first, the uncritical use of photovoice has allowed a kind of reinvigoration of a positivist orientation toward authenticity, in the idea that the "true story" comes through a community's images and words. This is not dissimilar to the logic espoused by ethnographers like Dumont and Srinivas, who were eager to use their photographs as an unmediated look into the lives of a cultural Other (Ginsburg 1991). Second, and equally important, the uncritical use of photovoice can lead "practitioners to unknowingly support the neoliberal empowerment rhetoric of the day" (Lacson 2014). For Lacson, this problem of photovoice results not from the methods employed during fieldwork, but from the uncritical understanding of circulation and its effects, including a lack of attention to how images are

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consumed and understood by ever-expanding global publics. This uncritical understanding of circulation and its effects harkens back to Srinivas's discussion of his village participants, who also did not reflect on what their images might be used for and instead the idea of being seen abroad only "added to the pleasure of being photographed" (1976, 26).

However, the photovoice method is also easily co-opted by neoliberal empowerment and global development regimes for an additional reason: namely, that *the attention to "voice" can actually obfuscate the regime of value emplaced in the images themselves*. Without the ability to critically analyze the visual, the very purpose of the method is undermined (Shankar 2014). Those who advocate for photovoice tend to take for granted that the digital era, with its perceived democratization of representation, allows the possibility for the marginal "to speak" directly to a broader audience, an assumption that disregards earlier feminist critiques questioning whether the marginal voice could *ever* be recovered by the well-meaning activist given the extent to which structures of power inequality continue to shape how a voice can be heard (e.g., Spivak 1994). Extending this critique, Tacchi argues that "a redistribution of material resources for speaking or voice is inadequate unless there is also a shift in the hierarchies of value and attention accorded different actors and communities" (2012, 228). I argue that a lack of attention to the image, even when voice is considered, does little to shift hierarchies of value. In other words, those using photovoice tend not to reflect upon image aesthetics and questions of form, both of which carry with them particular ideological positionings which, when left unaddressed, only serve to reinforce stereotypic notions of marginalized peoples held by those who view these images when they circulate globally (Lutz and Collins 1993; Stasch 2014).<sup>3</sup>

What could make these particular photovoice projects more productive would be a consideration of the artistry and aesthetics inherent to images, in how images not only describe reality, but also produce it. Brecht writes, "Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it" (1964, 425). This hammer is *always* a tool for political and counterhegemonic change.<sup>4</sup> And in attempting to counter hegemonic discourses that circulate within development space, the challenge is to provide images that function as a form of countervisuality, to destabilize the visual expectations of viewers. Specifically, this entails taking the images produced by photovoice participants seriously as works of art, created by auteurs who are not merely capable of documenting reality, but are always consciously constructing realities at the same time. This, in and of itself, is a political move, changing how we

relate to these images and those who are taking them. Participants should not be perceived as merely "native informants" documenting life so that we can get a more authentic glimpse into a reality that is not our own, but as creative producers capable of making arguments about life through their aesthetic choices.

These ideas emerged out of my engagements with photovoice as part of my fieldwork in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, during a sixteen-month period between 2012 and 2013. I initiated a photovoice project and discovered that the photographs my students took reflected their unique subjectivity within the context of Adavisandra village, population 1,072 in 2011, located approximately forty kilometers outside of Bangalore. Unlike the cosmopolitanism associated with Bangalore, Adavisandra remains almost exclusively Hindu. Residents are considered "Kannadiga," a term used to describe those who speak Kannada and which is also associated with a shared set of cultural practices, and come from the Vokkaliga caste, categorized as an Other Backwards Caste (OBC) by the Indian government.<sup>5</sup> I conducted fieldwork in Adavisandra's school for over a year beginning in March 2013 and ran the participatory photovoice project with the eighth- and ninth-grade students.

As I worked with these students, I found that they were constantly experimenting—changing settings, zooming in and out, shooting at different angles, altering lighting—to create photographs that better reflected their own aesthetic sensibilities and allowed them to construct their homes, school, and lives in creative and atypical ways. Sometimes these creative choices seemed illegible to those, like me, without an intimate knowledge of who they were and where they were from.

When infused with these aesthetic considerations, photovoice, I argue, creates some of the conditions for marginalized groups to claim the "right to look," which requires, following Mirzoeff, "the recognition of the other to have a place from which to claim a right and to determine what is right. It is the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable" (2011, 1). This right to look is opposed to a regime of value that dictates how the world can and should be imagined, categorized, defined, and seen. In my case study, there are two dominant regimes of value at work. First, there is a regime of value defined within the school, in how students are perceived by their peers and teachers, *especially* within government school contexts, based on their performance on standardized assessments linked to the rote memorization of information (Sarangapani 2003; Kumar and Sarangapani 2005). Second, there is a regime of value linked to what I have termed the "development gaze" (Shankar

2014), in which marginalized communities, and rural children specifically, are depicted as deficient, impoverished, helpless, and in need of development as a means by which to justify the interventions of developmentalists of all sorts (supranational organizations, NGOs, and, in some cases, anthropologists). While admittedly these are only two of the regimes of value that presented themselves during my fieldwork, I use these particular regimes to illustrate some of the possibilities of photovoice when the methodology acknowledges an aesthetic subjectivity that can rearrange how the world is made visible.

The rest of this article tells the story of Chandrika. I use her digital photograph to provide a partial portrait based on her affective-aesthetic sensibility and that is framed within the aforementioned regimes of value and reframes how she was perceived by those within Adavisandra school and beyond it.

## The Aesthetics of “Surya” by Chandrika

*Look at this photograph. What do you see?*

This is the guiding question I used throughout my fieldwork, eliciting responses from those within and outside of Adavisandra about photographs like this one, taken by Chandrika, one of my eighth standard students, and which was included in the project’s final exhibition at the school (Figure 1).

This photograph emerged from a photovoice project in Adavisandra school, for which I purchased five digital cameras and had eighth and ninth standard students take photographs. The purpose was partially scholarly,

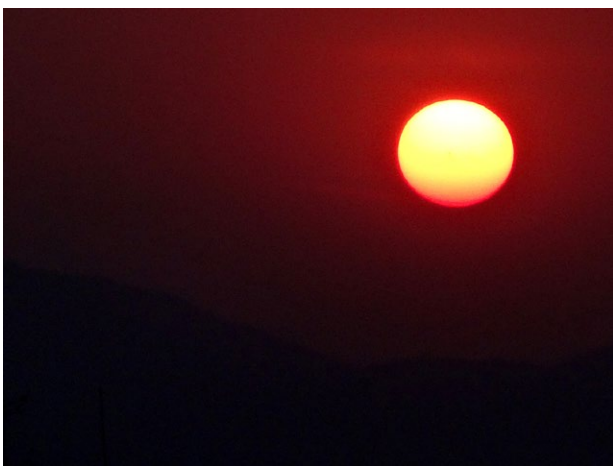


FIGURE 1. “Surya” by Chandrika. Image courtesy of photographer.

to learn what types of curiosities the students had about their own community, and partially pedagogical, to teach students the skills to express themselves using digital tools. It culminated in an exhibition in which the students decided upon the top twenty photographs they had taken over the course of six months and showcased them in the school’s small auditorium. Students chose photographs that resonated with their aesthetic sensibilities, an important component of giving them “voice” beyond the act of speaking. Therefore, even as the exhibit allowed for open consumption and interpretation by the teachers and parents who viewed the images, *who* had selected the images was an important starting point for discussions about *why* these photographs had been chosen and *what* the aesthetic criteria might have been.

To return to earlier critiques of photovoice, a photograph like Chandrika’s would be unlikely to be selected for exhibition if the primary determiner of value was someone other than the participants themselves, mainly because images like Figure 1 are typically glossed in terms that are merely descriptive, such as “shot of the sun taken by a student,” and therefore are assumed to reveal very little of epistemic significance about a community or person. This tendency is why I argue for an attention to the aesthetic qualities of photographs, which necessarily takes as a given the intentionality of artistic choice and therefore assumes images to be valuable and worthy of excavation, whether they are of the sun, of village homes, or of any of the other objects of photographic affection.

When I asked students why they had chosen Chandrika’s photograph, they continuously commented on the photograph’s unique beauty, trying to articulate how deeply the photograph struck them. Students commented on Chandrika’s decision to shoot at dawn, just before the sun’s full force of light took hold of the sky, producing a range in the color spectrum from shiny white light to deep reds into a steady black. The slight haziness of the photograph only furthers the blending of these colors, twenty-four hours of the day transmuted into a single “still life” (Stewart 2007, 21).<sup>6</sup>

But the comment that really spurred on my own curiosity about “The Sun” photograph came when I was carrying it to the students’ school with Venu, the son of my housekeeper. Venu stared at the photograph, admiring it before stacking it on top of three others, and said in Tamil, “No one can say that they don’t like this.” In other words, the photograph’s beauty, its character, and its value lie in its irreducibility to any one sentiment *except* the negation of any negative sentiment and the kind of affective entanglement that this negation produces.<sup>7</sup> This universalizing sentiment, expressed in

the negative, harkens back to Barthes's idea that the image's "power of authentication exceeds the power of representation" (2000, 88–89).

However, beyond the debates regarding Chandrika's aesthetic, the more important point was that those who viewed the photograph assumed an *a priori* intentionality to Chandrika's aesthetic choices that also allowed her "autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable" (Mirzoeff 2011, 1). These assumptions, in turn, shaped the debates about the photograph, and became the foundation from which the regimes of value discussed below could be challenged. *In other words, how did her image not only describe reality, but also produce it?*

### Regime of Value: The School

Chandrika got hold of a camera as much by circumstance as by any conscious decision on my part. It was one of the rare weeks during which she, or any of the other eighth standard students, got to use the cameras, as my ninth standard students were loathe to give up their opportunity to control the equipment. On this particular week, she and ten other students were forced to stay in Adavisandra because they could not afford to go on a five-day school trip to Tamil Nadu to visit its famous sites—its beaches and Hindu temples—in Chennai and Tiruchirapalli. So, while the majority of the students were immersing themselves in a new (Hinduized) "world" in South Indian places still different from their own (linguistically and culturally), the rest of the students were expected to stay home, taking a vacation from learning entirely.

It was in this context that I agreed to volunteer to teach these students, having them come to school to learn about topics outside of their curriculum. This was not my normal role in the school, as I had been careful to remain a "researcher" and *not* a "teacher." Yet, at moments like this, the roles slowly blurred until by the end of my fieldwork most of those in Adavisandra village saw me as part of the school community despite their knowledge that I was there to conduct my own research.

I gave Chandrika an easy-to-use Sony digital camera for the week, with the instruction to take pictures that reflected her own characterization of her village and her place in it. "Surya" was one of her shots, taken along with many other photographs of her family, her home, and her neighborhood. Of course, Chandrika was not the only one who took a photograph of the sun. Nearly every student took at least a few, if not dozens, of shots of the sun: the sun in the morning, at night,

through trees, setting, rising, orange, yellow, red, hidden from view, or peeking above mountaintops. There were so many, in fact, that I had to create a separate "Sun Series" just to accommodate the many shots of the sun that my students created and/or selected to be part of their photo exhibition. The sun was the first object of ethnographic interest for my students, that which structured life in agricultural areas, in the marking of the day, the seasons, and the possibility of growth. But the camera is what reawakened the sun as an object of curiosity. As they took photograph after photograph, they experienced the inexhaustibility of *surya* as an object of study, and my students were compelled to pursue this inexhaustible source of knowledge through ever-changing aesthetic choices. As such, the photovoice method began to give "voice" to something else: the inexhaustibility of knowledge itself.

And yet, Chandrika's photograph stood out, captivating everyone who saw it and sparking conversations. The most profound dialogues started during the aforementioned photo exhibition, when parents and teachers had a chance to comment on what they saw. During the dialogue, two teachers, Murali Sir and Prakash Sir, stood staring at "*Surya*," consuming it and commenting, wondering exactly who had taken such a gorgeous photograph.

I walked up and listened for a while as they remarked on the beauty of the image. I then asked them to guess who had taken the picture. At first, the two teachers guessed boys from the ninth standard: "Naveen? Umesh?" No, I told them, it was a girl who took the pictures. "Pallavi?" Again wrong, and I whittled down the pool of students, hinting that it was a girl in the eighth standard, making the total number of possible choices eight. Murali Sir and Prakash Sir stared at me for a while, thinking out loud, trying harder now to figure out who exactly could have created the photograph. "Swati? Supriya? Asha?" They trailed off, unable to generate any more names and giving up, prodded me to tell them who. "It was Chandrika," I said, and they stared back, eyes wide with incredulity. "Chandrika??? No. Not her." Then after a few more seconds of reflection, when the full weight of the implications dawned on them, "Chandrika? Really. Chandrika. Hmm..."

Chandrika was one of the lowest-performing students in the eighth standard; she struggled to read and write Kannada and was one of the few students at risk of not passing out of the tenth standard. Her in-class performance had already largely overdetermined how she was perceived by faculty, so much so that they were unable to generate her name in most situations in which achievement was a primary consideration. She was characterized as a "dull" student, "dull" being one of the

methods of labeling students in India, a “social fact of the school system ... constructed in the practical work of educators in their person-to-person and person-to-text interaction” (Mehan 1996).

The label was pervasive across school contexts and educational spaces, and within this framework, “dull” constitutes the social identity of the student in question, through which his or her future activities and actions can be understood. Any of Chandrika’s struggles could become examples of her dullness, even if her struggles were based upon the preconfigured regime of value associated with the classroom, such as passing tests, reading comprehension ability, and math, which did not necessarily meet her learning styles or needs.

The camera and the image dealt with a different set of modalities and learning processes—the visual and kinesthetic—from what students experienced in class, namely, listening, writing, memorizing, and so on. Ultimately, students who were successful in the classroom were not necessarily the ones who would be best at using cameras, thus destabilizing what constituted the regime of value in the classroom context. For Chandrika and others, the camera was a form of expression unencumbered by the dictates of formal educational aims, and given this openness, students could capture whatever they deemed interesting. This form of exploration promoted a visual-spatial intelligence otherwise left unexpressed (Gardner 2011). The image and the photo-voice project thus did the work of destabilizing both the categories of dull/sharp, and reconfigured how Chandrika was perceived. The photograph’s aesthetic and affective resonance forced a recognition of her ability and possibility, which, in turn, complicated the categories defining the relation between the visible and the sayable for students in Adavisandra.

However, to teachers, Chandrika’s photograph also was seen as more than mere description not just because of its inherent beauty but also because of the framework in which it was produced and chosen. While they had seen many photographs of the sun before and may have seen this photograph as another generic representation of the sun, their consumption of Chandrika’s image changed because they were already open to seeing these photographs as works of art. This was in large part because they knew that these photographs had been selected for their artistry, *even* if they did not know the criteria by which they were selected. In other words, it was the *a priori* assumption that these photographs were works of art that forced the teachers in Adavisandra to do the work of see(k)ing meaning in them. It also subverted a way of seeing that otherwise would have reduced the value of the photograph to mere description and left their assumptions about its producer unchanged.

## Regime of Value: The Developmentalist

In this section, I turn to how Chandrika’s image-making ability challenges simplistic characterizations of her as a child in need of development based on perceptions of her life as impoverished, destitute, and marked by suffering.

Chandrika had a round face, huge cheeks, and eyes that were always slightly closed, even more when she smiled, one eye shutting more than the other. She had short hair, most times hastily put into two small pony-tails. She came to school with her brother, two years her junior, in clothes that were slightly less clean and more disheveled than her classmates. It was true that one could tell a lot about students’ class position based on the color of their school pants and skirts: the whiter they were, the more likely that they had multiple uniforms and time to wash them frequently. The more yellow meant that they had only one, possibly two, sets of uniforms to wear, many times reused from a previous year.

She had been in the village since the fourth grade and previously had studied at another school. Her father’s family migrated from Uddarahalli, a village on the Karnataka-Andhra border, and she, like the rest of her family, spoke Telugu as well as Kannada. When asked about her family’s educational past, she first said her father had only passed fifth standard, but then stopped and changed her story mid-sentence to say he passed tenth standard. Over the course of our conversations it became clear her father had only passed fifth standard, but Chandrika’s initial hesitance in admitting this fact revealed what she thought she *should* say, which in turn reflected the values she expected her interlocutors had regarding education level and her feeling of shame at her family’s “under-development” in this regard.

She struggled trying to explain why she could not read Kannada, despite the fact that she has gone to Kannada medium schools her whole life:

Chandrika: I am writing but I am not able to read.

Sri:<sup>8</sup> Not able to read? Why?

Chandrika: Headache. From three days.

Sri: What?

Chandrika: Headache since a week ... It’s aching all over.

Sri: Did you consult a doctor?

Chandrika: Yes we did consult.

Sri: And what did the doctor say?

Chandrika: We should go to a hospital in Bangalore it seems.

Sri: Didn’t you go? Why?

Chandrika: No money...

Chandrika perceived her physical ailment—an ailment that worsened during the few seconds of dialogue itself, lengthening from three to seven days—as the primary reason why she was unable to read and which could be solved if her family had the economic freedom to access medical treatments available in Bangalore.

Later, during a conversation after school, Chandrika talked about her family, focusing on the death of her father a year earlier, which she described in vivid detail. She said at first that he died of jaundice, but then elaborated until it was clear he died due to liver cirrhosis:

My grandfather died...my grandmother also died ... my father's parents both died ... even my father died ... He died of jaundice.... It will be a year now.... An ambulance was called. There was too much vomiting. My father said 'I am leaving you all now. Who shall look after you?' He was breathing very heavily ... (Pointing to the liver) A *durmaamsa* had formed. ['Durmaamsa' could mean a cyst or cancer. *Dur*-bad, *maamsa*-flesh] ... He was taken to a hospital when he was asleep.... The cyst had grown. When he died, my mother became unconscious. My grandmother was staring and sitting.... My father said he wouldn't eat until his wife would come ... he said his wife should feed him. Then my mother came and fed him and both of them ate. Then she went to phone my uncle. By the time he would come my father fell on my grandmother ... and died. Then my mother came and saw. Then my uncle came. My grandmother scolded everyone 'you all come after he died' ... We have land, my uncle buried him there ... my father would drink too much alcohol and eat pig-meat ... Don't drink so much ... there is no one to look after us if something happens to you. We would cry at nights even when our father was alive. His face had swollen up.

Near the end of her story, Chandrika began to cry, thinking about her father:

Father would go to work. First he was a driver, then lifting stones ... My father would give me money every day. He would be with me. He would get me snacks to eat. He would get me clothes. All that I miss.... I remember everything ... my father and his younger brother lived together ... they were happy ... now this happened ... and the house we live is rented ... there are women who are of age ... why do you keep them in the rented house ... gather some money and build a new house they said. ... There is money in the bank it seems, [my uncle] will take it out and build a

house it seems.... [My mother] keeps remembering [my father] and crying. My uncle helped a lot during that time. She remembers all that and cries.

Chandrika's story ended hopefully, with her uncle's dream that they will finally buy a house by taking out the money they saved in the bank. It is an instantiation of Das's (2007) reframing of suffering; with each memory of suffering, there is a new instantiation of life. These instantiations of life are never backwards looking. They cannot, for example, entail moving back to a native place left behind, especially as neoliberal economics curtail opportunities for any but the highest-performing agricultural lands. Chandrika herself admits that there is no work in Uddarahalli, that even her older uncle struggled to make enough to survive, getting only about thirty rupees per day from working the fields. "That is why," she explained, "we'll work here and build our house ... when we get the loan money." The difference between a loan and savings is, I know, quite significant, one meaning ownership, the other meaning higher levels of family debt, but I never found out exactly which of the two it was for her.

Without Chandrika's photographs, it would be easy to oversimplify her life into a conflict between suffering and structural dispossession, using a narrative founded on her helplessness to ultimately justify intervention due to her dire "need for development." Instead, Chandrika's image-making ability forecloses simplistic understanding of who she is, what her situation is, and what her capacity to aspire might be in the future (Appadurai 2014). As Nouvet writes, "Agency cannot be found, or lamented as absent, in particular social actors ... persons and opportunities, events and weather conditions, food prices, neighbors' luck, and illnesses. The sensing of these particularities qualifies these as 'micro-agencies' (Grosz 2005, 6), and in turn impact/form capacities to act" (Nouvet 2014, 85). Chandrika's photography is just such an example of micro-agency, part of a broader "sensing" of the particularities of her life that will impact her capacity to act in the future. This shift in how one perceives Chandrika can then take conversations about her in a different direction, one in which her aspirations are not dismissed as inconsequential given the structural inequities she faces, but become constitutive of how to interact with her and/or intervene in the future. This shift necessarily changes "the relations of the visible and the sayable" (Mirzoeff 2011, 1).

For example, after seeing Chandrika's photograph, I became far more curious about her, how she thought, what I might learn from her. And so, in the week after Chandrika took the *surya* photograph, I asked her to write a short story of her career aspiration, including a photograph of her posing in her imagined occupation (Figure 2).

She wants to be a doctor, she explained, and began to brainstorm her script that culminated with the following:

I wish to become a doctor. I want to provide treatment to everyone. If poor people get typhoid I should provide injection. I will tell them to keep their surroundings clean to prevent mosquitoes and dengue. If there are mosquitoes then there are dirty dogs there. I will tell them to clean that garbage. Surroundings of the house should be kept clean. I will admit them if they get dengue and treat them. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to talk.

She explained her desire to become a doctor later on, remembering that she had seen a Telugu serial by the name of *Chinnari Pellikuthuru* (Little Girl's Marriage) that was originally a Hindi-language show, but had since been dubbed in several other languages, including Telugu and Kannada, and is the longest-running daily drama in India. The show is set in a village and interrogates the practices of child marriage and widowhood in village India. Chandrika described how in the show, in one of the child marriages, the husband goes on to become a doctor while his wife is not allowed to study. She identified this plot point as one of the reasons why she wants to become a doctor.

Importantly, Chandrika did not foreclose her own possibility of becoming a doctor because of the gendered roles presented in the serial. Instead, she immediately connected to it, a text-to-self connection that those within education are always striving to have their students make, explaining that she had suffered from typhoid when she was younger and so she wanted to treat typhoid patients by "putting them on glucose and giving them injections



FIGURE 2. "Chandrika as Doctor" by Ranjita. Image courtesy of photographer.

on their hands" and that she would help poor people get free medical checkups, all a part of what she imagined is a doctor's daily work. This idea of becoming a doctor, while connected to her own experience, is *never* left there, but spirals outward in Chandrika's ambition to help others, an outward-looking orientation that underpins her potential to act and create change.

In sum, the inversion of gendered roles and the imagining of a future of possibility based upon but still very much troping on what she had viewed in her serial are, like her photograph, Chandrika's micro-agencies. These micro-agencies may not lead to her becoming a doctor, but they will lead her down a different path opened by these small, yet significant, actions.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for a critical reconsideration of the photovoice method, one in which practitioners prioritize the auteurial sensibilities of their participants. Without considering issues of image aesthetics and questions of form, the photovoice method will only serve to reinforce stereotypic imaginings of marginalized peoples facilitated by the positivist trap of an image as "mere description." To allow our participants to reclaim their "right to look" is itself a political project worth undertaking as they develop aesthetic sensibilities that may or may not be legible to a broader public whose privilege has demanded particular depictions of them.

For students who participate in photovoice projects, this means the ability to not just depict but to rearrange the relations between themselves, the camera, that which they represent, and the viewer. This requires the ability to imagine their lives in a way that can "reclaim, rediscover, and retheorize the practices and spaces of everyday life in the context of permanent counterinsurgency" (Mirzoeff 2011, 309). This is the kind of new understanding of everyday life that photovoice might make possible. It is a radical break from the hegemonic imaginaries of the marginal circulating among a global digital public—imaginaries that serve to further disempower those who already face great challenges as social inequality continues to increase.

A stronger consideration of image-making and auteurship also changes how we, as anthropologists with cameras, conduct ethnographic fieldwork and productively reinvigorates the photographic practices of our anthropological past. By meditating on and excavating Chandrika's image of *surya*, I have shown how differently we consider her life, her ability, and her future possibility when we begin with an assumption that she is a creative producer, a notion that is impossible to deny



given her image-making practice. Her teachers themselves were shocked by the dissonance between their image of Chandrika as a student and the photograph she created, a dissonance that may change for the better how they view her in academic settings. Moreover, my retelling of Chandrika's story as one of agential possibility rather than monochromatic suffering is predicated on her photography, making it impossible to brush aside or disregard her aspirations and capabilities in relation to the ever-present economic hardships that she faces.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is some ambiguity regarding the terms "development" and "developmentalist," as they have taken on varying meanings in various disciplinary contexts. One usage refers to those who subscribe to theories of linear progress (evolutionism, modernization theory, etc.) as part of a global ideology of capitalist world economy. Another refers to the term used by psychologists working within an evolutionary scheme of child development. However, I use the term here to refer specifically to the global apparatus of NGOs and supranational organizations that function outside of the formal state apparatus and work primarily in education and health (though they may not be limited to these two domains) to facilitate social change through their interventions.
- <sup>2</sup> Previous uses of photography were primarily based on the technique of photo elicitation, in which the researcher would take and include photographs along with their texts to provide another type of insight into a community under study. In Harper's work on photo elicitation, he summarizes the primary theoretical bases and strategies that have been deployed: "The photographs used in photo elicitation research extend along a continuum. At one extreme are what might be considered the most scientific, that is, visual inventories of objects, people and artifacts. Like all photographs these represent the subjectivities embodied in framing, exposure and other technical considerations. Photographs of this type are typical of anthropological field studies. In the middle of the continuum are images that depict events that were part of collective or institutional pasts. These might be photos of work, schools, or other institutional experiences, or images

depicting events that occurred earlier in the lifetimes of the subjects. These images may connect an individual to experiences or eras even if the images do not reflect the research subject's actual lives. At the other extreme of our continuum photographs portray the intimate dimensions of the social—family or other intimate social group, or one's own body. Elicitation interviews connect 'core definitions of the self' to society, culture and history" (2002, 14).

- <sup>3</sup> In Lutz and Collins's (1993) now canonical study of *National Geographic*, they investigate the magazine's incredible influence on representations of Third World cultures. They interview *National Geographic's* readership, to assess how these images are received and interpreted. In doing so, they show how image consumption serves to reinforce and legitimize middle-class American values even as these consumers learn about another part of the world. My own work here builds upon their insights regarding reception and value formation.
- <sup>4</sup> My thanks to digital artist and activist Betty Yu for this reminder. (See [www.bettyyu.net](http://www.bettyyu.net).)
- <sup>5</sup> Vokkaliga is the second largest agricultural caste group in all of Karnataka behind Lingayats, who are concentrated in North Karnataka.
- <sup>6</sup> Stewart writes, "Hitchcock was a master of the still in film production. A simple pause of the moving camera to focus on a door or a telephone could produce a powerful suspense. ... Ordinary life, too, draws its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest. Still lifes punctuate its significance ... A still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion or resonance. ... When a still life pops up out of the ordinary, it can come as a shock or as some kind of wake up call" (2007, 21).
- <sup>7</sup> In other words, the sentiment that can be named is not the photograph's eternal sentiment.
- <sup>8</sup> Many of these conversations with Chandrika were conducted by me and by Sripriya (Sri), my research assistant in the field, whose Kannada was far superior to mine. Beyond Sripriya's language skills, many female students were far more comfortable speaking with Sripriya given some cultural discomfort regarding interaction between the sexes. On many occasions, Sri worked closely with the female students while I worked with the male students.

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