# Giving Tele-Sketching Testimonies a Chance
## Feminist Storytelling, Emotional Infrastructure, and Everyday Humanitarianism in the Sundarbans, India



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# Foreword

*In my Aronson Fellowship project (2024-2025), I developed an evocative and sensitive methodological approach that is both ethnographic and collaborative—grounded in care, reciprocity, and deep attentiveness to the lives of climate-affected women in the Sundarbans. Though the physical constraints of fieldwork—particularly the inability to be present in-person—posed significant limitations, my creative pivot to telestories and telesketching ideas allowed the project's human heart to flourish despite distance though telephone calls. This paper wonders - How can telesketching—a visual-narrative method— help surface emotional and social infrastructures of resilience in climate-affected communities where fieldwork is constrained? I argue that telesketching enables a collaborative, non-extractive practice of storytelling that reveals how everyday humanitarianism operates through improvised, affective, and decentralized shelter-making, explained by memories from disasters.*

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# 1. Telesketching Testimonies?

This applied research emerges from an urgent ecological and social reality: the intensifying patterns of climate-induced mobilities in coastal regions like the Sundarbans, India. My work seeks to understand how women—especially those engaged in Self-Help Groups (SHGs)—navigate, interpret, and respond to climate stress, and how their informal networks can inform more just and anticipatory protection pathways[1]. While rooted in policy and systems design, my inquiry is equally methodological - How do we listen, collaborate, and co-create with communities that are not only vulnerable to displacement but also deeply embedded in place-based knowledge and ecological rhythms?

This paper ideates telesketching as a novel method for feminist storytelling, designed specifically to witness experiences during sudden-onset disasters—not displacement events per se, but the critical, disorienting hours during and immediately following a cyclone or flood. Early in the research process, I committed to a slow, intimate ethnographic approach—one grounded in dialogic engagement, companionship, and mutual making. The initial plan was to conduct in-person storytelling sessions with women across SHG networks in the Sundarbans, using Patachitra[2] (Fig. 01)—a traditional narrative art form of Bengal—as a medium of collaborative expression. The idea was to co-create a large canvas scroll, physically carried from one household to

another, that would grow in visual and narrative density with each participant. Each woman would paint a portion of her story—of disaster, migration, caregiving, or adaptation—while singing *Pater Gaan* (Fig. 02), blending oral and visual traditions into a living archive. This process resulting into a visual collective memory (Fig. 03), honored the specificity of local memory while building a shared canvas of ecological vulnerability, resilience, and everyday labor.



Fig 01: Woman doing *Patachitra* art

However, the unfolding limitations of travel and field access necessitated a shift in how this method could unfold. Rather than halt the project, I adapted—transforming the process into one I call telesketching. I began gathering testimonies over phone calls and voice messages, speaking with resource persons remotely through local contacts or mutual networks. These conversations retained the spirit of the earlier canvas sessions: slow, unstructured, and deeply personal. In each case, I listened closely—not just for content but for affect, for pauses, for the emotional undercurrents shaping their decisions and recollections. Stories surfaced around cyclone shelters, caregiving dilemmas, livestock, broken roofs, neighborly aid, and shared meals during a crisis.

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1  In this context, "protection pathways" refer to anticipatory, community-informed strategies and systems that reduce vulnerability to climate risks and enable safer mobility or in-place resilience. These differ from institutional "Protection Pathways" as used in migration policy—which often refer to legal routes for asylum or resettlement. Here, the term signals informal, embedded responses—social, spatial, and ecological—that communities themselves craft before, during, or instead of displacement.

2  Patachitra is a traditional scroll painting practiced predominantly in West Bengal and Odisha, serving as both a visual storytelling medium and a form of intangible cultural heritage. Each painted scroll is typically accompanied by Pater Gaan—a narrative song performed by the Patua (folk artist) while unrolling the scroll panel by panel. These songs are integral to the form, transforming the artwork into a performative, multisensory experience. Socially, the practice fosters intergenerational knowledge transfer and community identity among Patuas. Economically, it supports artisan livelihoods through sales, cultural tourism, and government-backed fairs. Culturally, Patachitra encapsulates local mythologies, environmental wisdom, and contemporary concerns, demonstrating its evolving relevance while sustaining a distinct regional aesthetic.

What I realized is that telesketching is distinct from other remote qualitative methods such as phone interviews, surveys, or even visual diaries. Unlike these more extractive or individually focused methods, telesketching emphasizes co-creation, symbol interpretation, and shared narrative authorship. It does not simply collect data—it collaboratively builds a visual vocabulary of disaster, one rooted in the everyday materiality and emotional register of participants' lives.

Telesketching these testimonies involved translating spoken memory into symbolic motifs—fishnets, storm clouds, mangrove roots, books, clay stoves, temple gatherings—that could be visually represented in the shared canvas. Even from a distance, this process allowed for the weaving of a visual collective memory: a textured, gendered, and culturally resonant archive of survival and foresight. It shifted the project from being extractive to co-creative, from data gathering to narrative witnessing. While the idea of a feedback loop—where sketched memories would be shared back with respondents for validation and interpretation—was central to the method's design, in practice this step remained mostly a conceptual aspiration rather than an implemented process.

Fig 02: Woman singing *Paater Gaan*

Illustrates women reinforcing thatched homes, planting mangroves, or raising platforms—symbolizing resilience and community-led adaptation to floods and cyclones. It reflects collective memory of recurring crises and coping strategies.

Women squatting over clay stoves, stirring pots—this centers the care labor they perform daily. In times of scarcity or recovery, cooking symbolizes endurance, shared nourishment, and emotional anchoring.

Women seated together under a tree or beside a waterbody, chatting—it represents informal networks of solidarity, emotional processing, and the oral transmission of knowledge.

Children with slates or books, under a tree or beside a dim lamp—depicts aspiration, disruption of schooling due to migration or disaster, and the hope embedded in education.

Banbibi seated on a tiger or boat, being worshipped—she is the syncretic forest goddess who protects from tigers and hardship. This is a direct invocation of spiritual ecology and collective belonging.

Small stalls with fish, bangles, rice—everyday economy scenes that reflect informal labor and precarity but also economic agency.
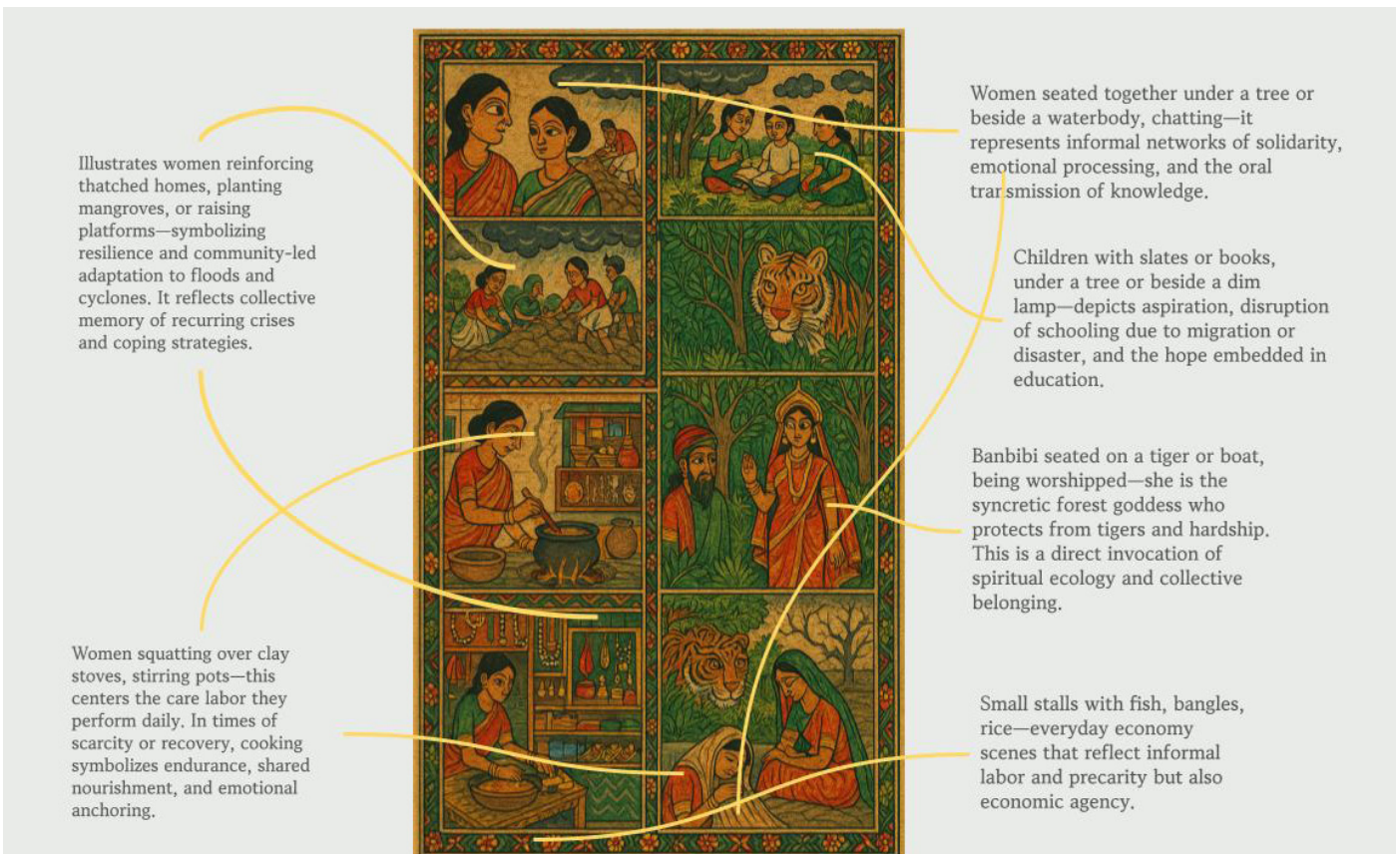
Fig 03: A prototype of a collaborative storytelling canvas using *Patachitra*

This methodological journey—beginning with embodied, co-present storytelling and adapting into remote, mediated forms—has reinforced that climate adaptation is not merely a technical or infrastructural process. It is a narrative practice, a feminist practice, and a collective one. Through these methods, I aim to reframe protection pathways as emergent from within community practices, not imposed upon them—rooted in care, designed in dialogue, and held together by memory.

# 2. Theoretical Framing - Collaborative Storytelling and Situated Resilience

This sorytelling exercise grounds its methodological and epistemological orientation in the overlapping frameworks of *collaborative storytelling* and *situated resilience*, drawing on interdisciplinary insights from feminist disaster studies, visual ethnography, migration storytelling, and everyday humanitarianism. These lenses allow for a richer understanding of how resilience is not merely a set of outcomes or metrics, but an emergent, collective, and narratively constituted capacity—particularly in contexts of environmental precarity, such as the Sundarbans region of India.

Rather than treating storytelling as a peripheral tool for gathering qualitative data, this research adopts it as the central epistemology through which experiences of disaster and recovery are interpreted, shared, and reshaped. Goldstein, Wessells, and Lejano (2013) conceptualize resilience as a socially situated process, narratively produced and constantly negotiated within communities. This framing challenges technocratic models that isolate resilience from its relational, political, and historical contexts. In alignment with this view, telesketching emerges not as a data collection method, but as an act of *narrative witnessing*—a feminist and co-creative approach to documenting the ways communities make sense of, and respond to, sudden-onset disasters.

Through telesketching, narrative practices extend into the visual realm. Spoken memories are translated into symbolic motifs—mud stoves, clay idols, mangrove roots—coalescing into a shared canvas that resists singular interpretation. This process is dialogic and iterative: it creates space for affect, silence, contradiction, and relational memory.

In this way, **storytelling becomes worldmaking**, not simply recounting.

Collaborative storytelling, as practiced through telesketching, disrupts extractive research norms by redistributing authorship and inviting co-construction of meaning. Drawing on feminist disaster studies, this work positions women not as passive subjects of inquiry but as knowledge producers whose embodied experiences and emotional labor anchor the archive. Since the 1990s, feminist scholars have challenged androcentric perspectives in disaster research, emphasizing the need to center lived experiences, recognize the operation of power, and pursue transformative change in gender relations (Enarson & Morrow, 1998). Feminist methodologies in disaster studies incorporate participatory action research, visual methods, and alternative mapping to construct more inclusive accounts of disaster experiences. These approaches reveal neglected issues such as gendered violence, lack of representation, and the gendering of institutional processes. Critically, feminist disaster research insists on reflexivity, intersectionality, and the pursuit of equitable, ethical research practices, challenging depoliticized or essentialist notions of gender and vulnerability (Alburo-Cañete, 2024; Shipton, 2025).

Visual ethnography deepens this participatory turn. Unlike conventional ethnographic methods that rely on the written word and researcher interpretation, visual approaches enable participants to represent themselves, their spaces, and their experiences in culturally legible ways. Inspired by Krupa's (2017) work in Kenya, in this telesketching exercise, visuals become *interfaces of negotiation*—where memories are interpreted, not imposed; where authorship is shared, not owned. The resulting canvas, composed of layered fragments, offers not a singular truth but a *polyvocal, textured record* of resilience as it is lived and narrated.

The idea of situated resilience foregrounds the contextual, relational, and often non-linear nature of how individuals and communities withstand, adapt to, or resist environmental disruption. Unlike dominant policy frameworks that treat resilience as a universal metric—often privileging infrastructure, speed, or institutional reach—situated resilience, as theorized by Goldstein et al., arises from lived experience, cultural memory, and social proximity.

In the Sundarbans, where formal protections are often absent or insufficient, resilience emerges through informal kinship networks, interspecies relations, and localized rituals of survival. The telesketched stories reflect this complexity: for one woman, resilience meant protecting her livestock during a cyclone; for another, it meant cooking rice on a mud stove after floodwaters receded. These moments, though small in scale, challenge dominant discourses that prioritize material reconstruction over emotional recovery, or mobility over rootedness.

Situated resilience finds resonance with the concept of *everyday humanitarianism* (Richey, 2018), which emphasizes grassroots responses to crisis—often enacted by those who are themselves affected. This framework, as advanced by feminist humanitarian scholars, recasts women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals as **agents of care and coordination**, not simply recipients of aid (Chang, 2024). In the context of telesketching, everyday humanitarian acts—sharing food, rebuilding homes, hosting neighbors—surface not as background details but as central acts of resilience. These stories reframe humanitarianism as relational and local, rather than technocratic or externally imposed.

Butressing the notion, **migration storytelling** offers narrative tools for articulating displacement and immobility outside formal policy categories. Even though this project focuses on the night of disaster rather than migration itself, the storytelling practices intersect with the migration storytelling tradition by capturing **threshold moments:** when decisions about movement, caregiving, and survival unfold in real time. These stories foreground agency, hesitation, and sacrifice, emphasizing not only what happened, but what was at stake.

The intersection of these fields—feminist disaster studies, visual ethnography, everyday humanitarianism, and migration storytelling—offers a robust theoretical grounding for telesketching as both method and epistemology. Together, they support an understanding of collaborative storytelling as an ethical and political intervention: a means to decenter institutional narratives, challenge extractive knowledge systems, and honor the diverse, situated ways communities articulate resilience.

# 3. Implementing Telesketching: What the Narratives Reveal

As mentioned before, originally envisioned as an in-person, community-driven art-making process, the method was reimagined to accommodate remote engagement without compromising its feminist and participatory ethos. Participants—primarily women involved in Self-Help Groups—were identified through mutual contacts, local facilitators, and existing community networks. While direct conversations played a limited role, their experiences during sudden-onset disasters such as cyclones were pieced together through a careful review of documented testimonies, local articles, and secondary accounts. As they spoke, attention was to be paid not only to narrative content but also to affect, symbolism, and sensory detail, so that highly sensitive, interpretive sketches could be produced in real time. These visual motifs—ranging from broken roofs and clay stoves to storm clouds and family gatherings—were to be shared back with participants, allowing space for reflection, modification, or reframing of their representations. Through this envisioned iterative exchange, informed consent and ethical authorship were to be upheld, reinforcing the method's co-creative foundation. Rather than being positioned as a distant observer, the researcher was to be situated as both translator and collaborator, holding space for memory, care, and representation across distance.

## 3.1 Weaving reponses

Rather than a single linear chronicle of disaster, what emerged was a braided narrative ecology—multiple strands of survival, loss, adaptation, and care. Each story contributed to a larger map of meaning that challenged simplistic readings of vulnerability or resilience. Six women—Jharna, Shyamoli, Geeta, Sabitri, Gouri, Jhumpa, and Binapani—shared stories that reflected not only their personal experiences but also the social, ethical, and material infrastructures through which they navigate crises.

The topics discussed over the telesketching calls centered around deeply personal and place-based experiences during the night of Cyclone Amphan. Cyclone Amphan, which struck on May 10, 2020, was one of the most powerful storms to hit the Bay of Bengal in over a decade, devastating large parts of coastal West Bengal and the Sundarbans.

With wind speeds reaching up to 185 km/h (115 mph), it caused widespread destruction to homes, farmlands, embankments, and critical infrastructure, displacing millions during a time already burdened by the COVID-19 lockdown. For many in the Sundarbans, especially women in precarious housing and caregiving roles, that night crystallized the overlapping vulnerabilities of climate change, poverty, and gendered labor.

The memories of that night, as shared through telesketches shown below, serve as a living archive of resilience, solidarity, and adaptive care.



Fig 04: Sketch 01 - Sabitri's shelter stories

Sketch 1 (Fig. 04)- Sabitri recalls how the block office in their village was used as a shelter during the cyclone. They spent the night there, with around 500 people packed into a small area. There were only two rooms and one toilet, but the block office was "pucca," sturdy with proper sanitation. Cyclones are so common in the area that Sabitri remembers how the children found it exciting to spend the night with

others, listening to stories, even amid the chaos.

*"We were not alone—we stayed together with other families. My husband and brothers-in-law made it home just in time, before the cyclone hit. Having everyone safe by my side gave me strength."*
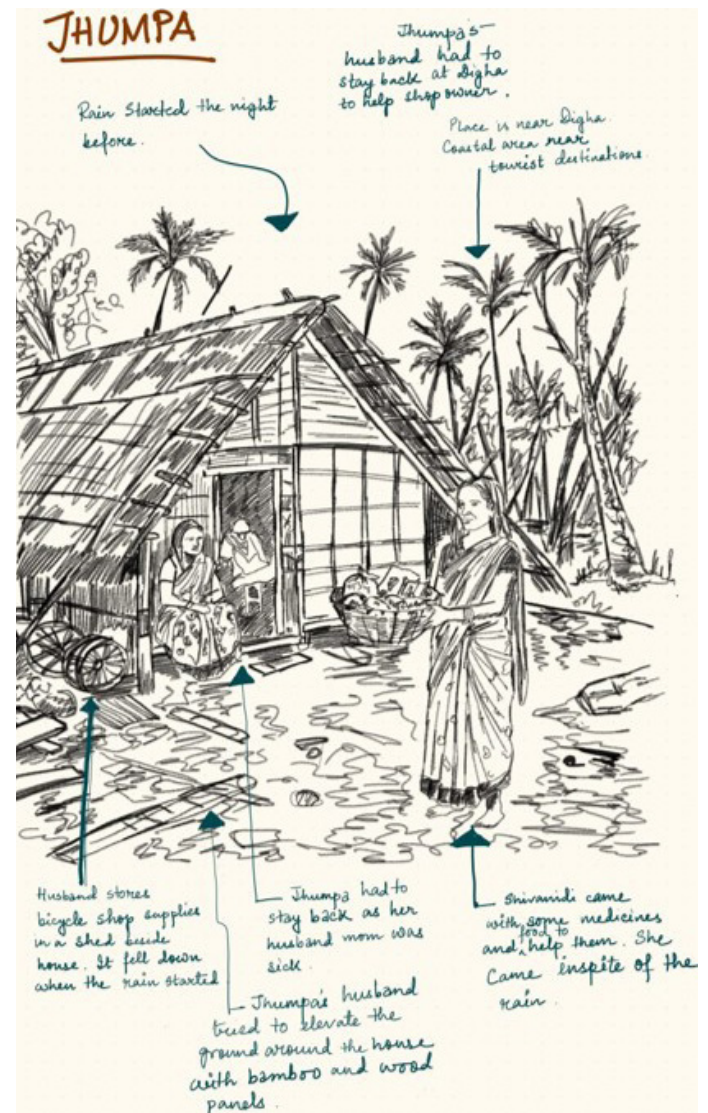


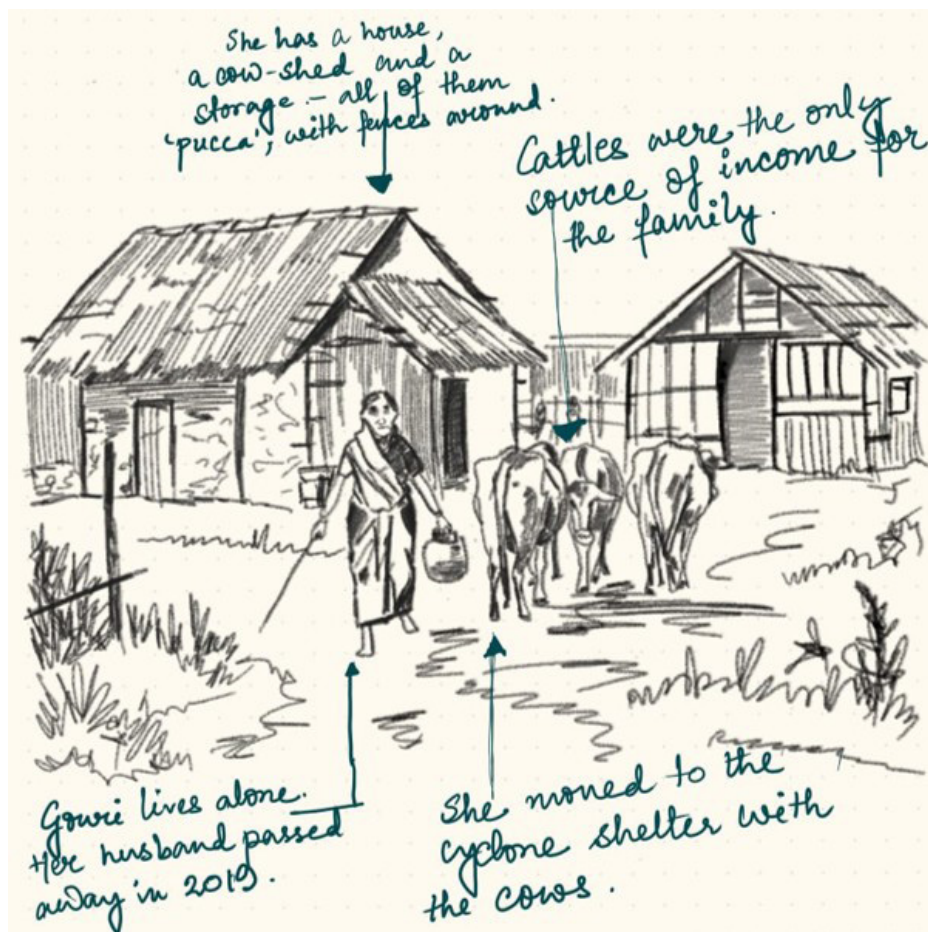Fig 05: Sketch 02 - Jhumpa remembers neighbor's care

Sketch 02 (Fig. 05)- The light rain began the night before. Jhumpa's husband, who works at a hotel in Digha, had to stay back to help the hotel owner. He also runs a small bicycle accessories shop in their village and stores parts in a shed next to their home—but the shed tore down in the rain. At home, Jhumpa's mother-in-law was sick.

*"I still don't know how Shibanidi found out about my mother-in-law, but she came with everything I needed. I couldn't leave for the cyclone shelter because I had to stay with her—but she got better the next day. Shibanidi moved to Kolkata the following month, but I will never forget how she came to help me when I needed it most."*

Sketch 03 (Fig. 06)- Geeta's family returned home the next day, after spending the night in their shop. Her husband, Shambhu, runs a small grocery store in the main market—stronger and safer than their house. So when the cyclone came, they took shelter there, along with their children and Geeta's mother. Geeta recalls the comfort of being together through the storm. Her three children even brought along another child from the neighborhood, making sure no one was left behind.

*"Thankfully, we got the shop the year before. My mother, for reasons only she knows, chose to stay behind. That night, we cooked, ate, and slept in the shop—we made it through. The next day, we returned to a broken roof and shattered toilet at home. But we had survived the night, and that was what mattered."*

Fig 06: Sketch 03 (right) - Geeta's Family Shelter - Safe Together



Geeta's family returned to their home the next day. She stayed in the shop over night.

Geeta's husband, Shambhu has a grocery shop in the main market. The shop is comparatively stronger than their house. So they took refuge in the shop during the cyclone with their kids, and Geeta's mom.

Geeta reemembers how they were together. Her kids (3) brought another kid from their neighbor along with them.

The market platform is a bit elevated.



She has a house, a cow-shed and a storage – all of them 'pucca'; with fences around.

Cattles were the only source of income for the family.

Gouri lives alone. Her husband passed away in 2019.

She moved to the cyclone shelter with the cows.

Sketch 04 (Fig. 07)- Gouri, 65, has a house, a cow shed, and a storage shed—all "pucca," surrounded by fences. Her cattle are her only source of income. Since her husband passed away in 2019, she has lived alone. When the cyclone warning came, she moved to the shelter, bringing her cows along.

*"I had no one with me—only my three cows, Gonu, Shibu, and Bhombol. I heard about the cyclone and the shelter much later; but how could I leave them behind? Even when the rain started, I took them with me."*

Fig 07: Sketch 04 (Left) - Gouri's Shelter: Home and Herd

The medieval temple stood strong.

A temporary shed was built to distribute food and other supplies. This was organized by the Panchayat

Fig 08: Sketch 05 - Binapani's Refuge

Sketch 05 (Fig. 08)- Binapani, often unwell, stayed back at home during the cyclone with her son, daughter-in-law, and four grandchildren. She works quietly from home with her sewing machine, supporting her family in small but steady ways. She recalls,

*"Our Pradhan was very active the next day. Though he is a Muslim, he didn't hesitate to use the temple space to help everyone. We received food, clothes, quilts, and medicines—everything we needed, just when we needed it."*

Sketch 06 (Fig. 09)- Jharna and Shyamoli, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, recall their experience together.

*"We got the news the day before, but the school was far from our home. We packed everything we could. Without a phone, we sent a message through a neighbor to bring my son home. He returned the next day, and we stayed at the school for three days. The school became a temporary shelter for the cyclone, with some beds and food arranged. Around 250 villagers came. The prayer hall, the biggest space, was divided into sections for women, men, cattle, and chickens."*

The school was used as a temporary cyclone shelter. Some beds and food were arranged. Around 250 villagers came.
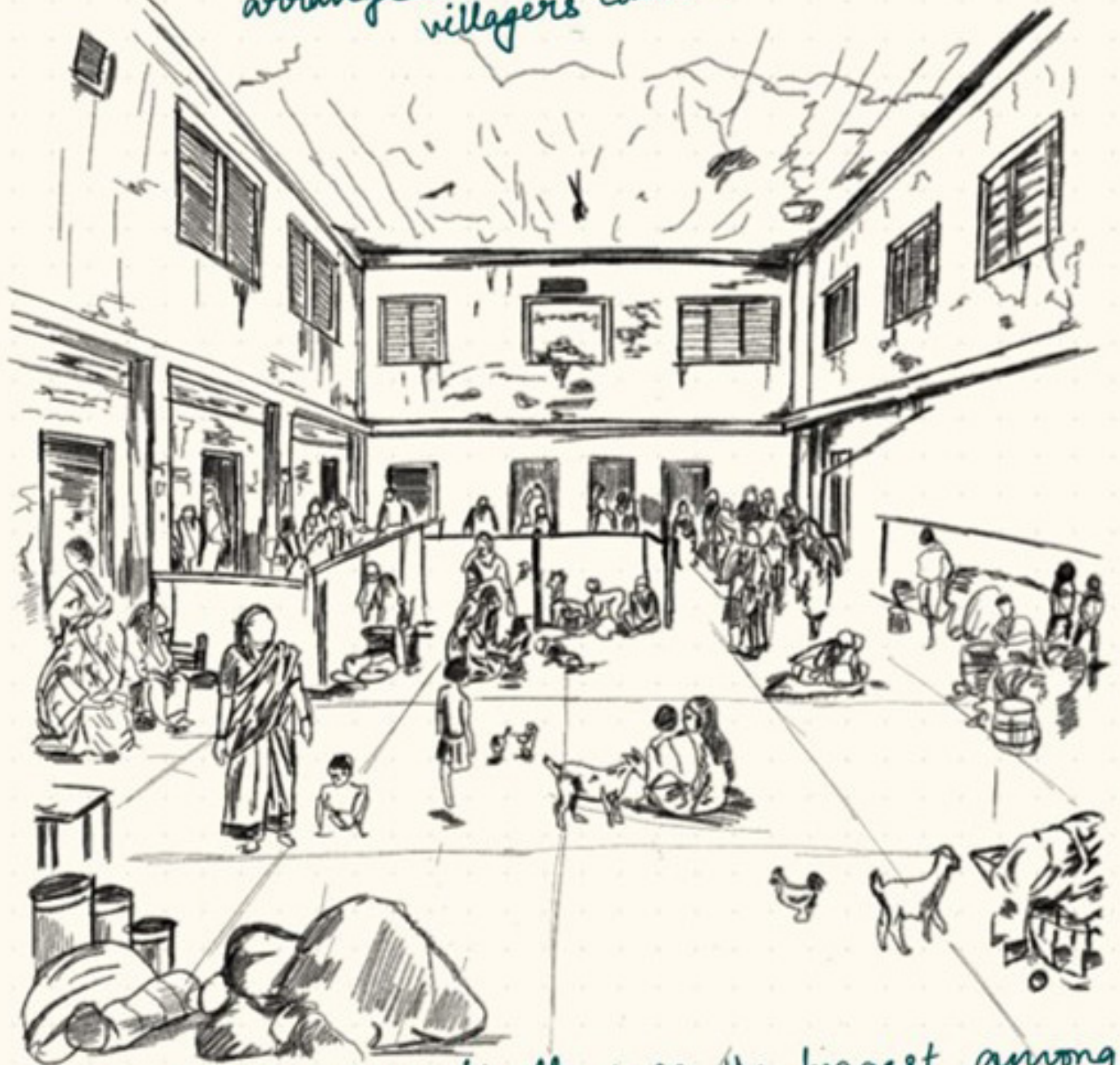
The prayer room/hall was the biggest among the rooms. It had partitions for men and women, and cattles, chickens.

Fig 09: Sketch 06 - Jharna & Shyamoli's Shared Shelter

## 3.2 From Physical Shelter to Shelters of Belonging

What these stories revealed, perhaps most strikingly, is that the notion of "shelter" in disaster contexts cannot be confined to physical spaces alone (Fig 10). Instead, what emerged was a framework I refer to as shelters of belonging—a conceptual reimagining of refuge as emotional, social, and spatially dispersed (Fig. 11).

Jharna and Shyamoli, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, demonstrate the improvisational care required in a context with no phone connectivity, minimal early warning infrastructure, and limited mobility. Their coordination across generations, including sending messages through neighbors, highlights how kinship improvises preparedness. Geeta's family transformed their grocery shop into a cyclone shelter—not only for themselves but also for a neighboring child. This moment reveals how private commercial infrastructure is reimagined as community refuge, activated by collective ethics and children's initiative. Sabitri's experience in the overcrowded block office speaks to a kind of adaptive familiarity. The children's excitement amid chaos underscores how repetitive exposure to disaster generates a form of emotional adaptation, creating new routines of resilience even in disarray. Gouri, a 65-year-old widow, insisted on taking her cows—her only companions and economic anchors—to the shelter. Her story speaks to non-human kinship, underscoring that resilience, for her, was impossible to imagine without the presence of her animals. Jhumpa, who stayed behind to care for her ailing mother-in-law, was supported by a neighbor, Shibanidi, who brought her supplies without being asked. This illustrates the strength of feminized mutual aid—a deep, place-based ethic of care that operates independently of institutional aid structures. Binapani, quietly sewing at home, remembers how the Pradhan—a Muslim leader—mobilized the temple space for everyone's care. This act of inclusive, interfaith leadership—often overlooked in formal evaluations of disaster governance—reveals the quiet architecture of everyday humanitarianism.

Taken together, the telesketched stories chart a **multi-scalar ecology of response**—where shelter is not a singular, state-sanctioned site, but a distributed network of spaces and solidarities. These include:

**Emotional infrastructures,** such as trust among neighbors, intergenerational solidarity, and bonds with animals.

**Social infrastructures,** including informal caregiving networks, interfaith cooperation, and the resourcefulness of youth.



**Geeta**

Family resilience and informal infrastructure as shelter.

Grocery store as safe haven, collective action by children, affective comfort.

Highlights private commercial spaces doubling as protective infrastructure, and the agency of children.

**Binapani**

Quiet labor, intersectional leadership, and inclusive relief.

Home-based work, inclusive leadership by the Pradhan, bridging religious divides.

Captures inclusive secular humanitarianism.

**Gouri**

Solitude, non-human kinship, and late response.

Livestock as family, delayed response due to isolation, pucca self-built infrastructure.

Emphasizes non-human attachments as vital, and shows the marginal position of the elderly living alone.

**Sabitri**

Normalization of crisis and adaptive familiarity.

Overcrowded but sturdy block office, children entertained despite chaos.

Reveals how cyclical disasters create emotional and logistical familiarity, influencing how communities perceive and adapt to crisis.

**Jharna & Shyamoli (Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law)**

Intergenerational coordination and improvisation under pressure.

Communication without phones, gendered spatial division in shelter, communal response.

Demonstrates the role of family bonds and improvisation in a context of low-resource preparedness.

**Jhumpa**

Feminine mutual aid and place-based caregiving.

In-home caregiving, neighbor intervention, immobility due to eldercare.

Underscores informal women's networks, and how caregiving responsibilities shift shelter behavior.
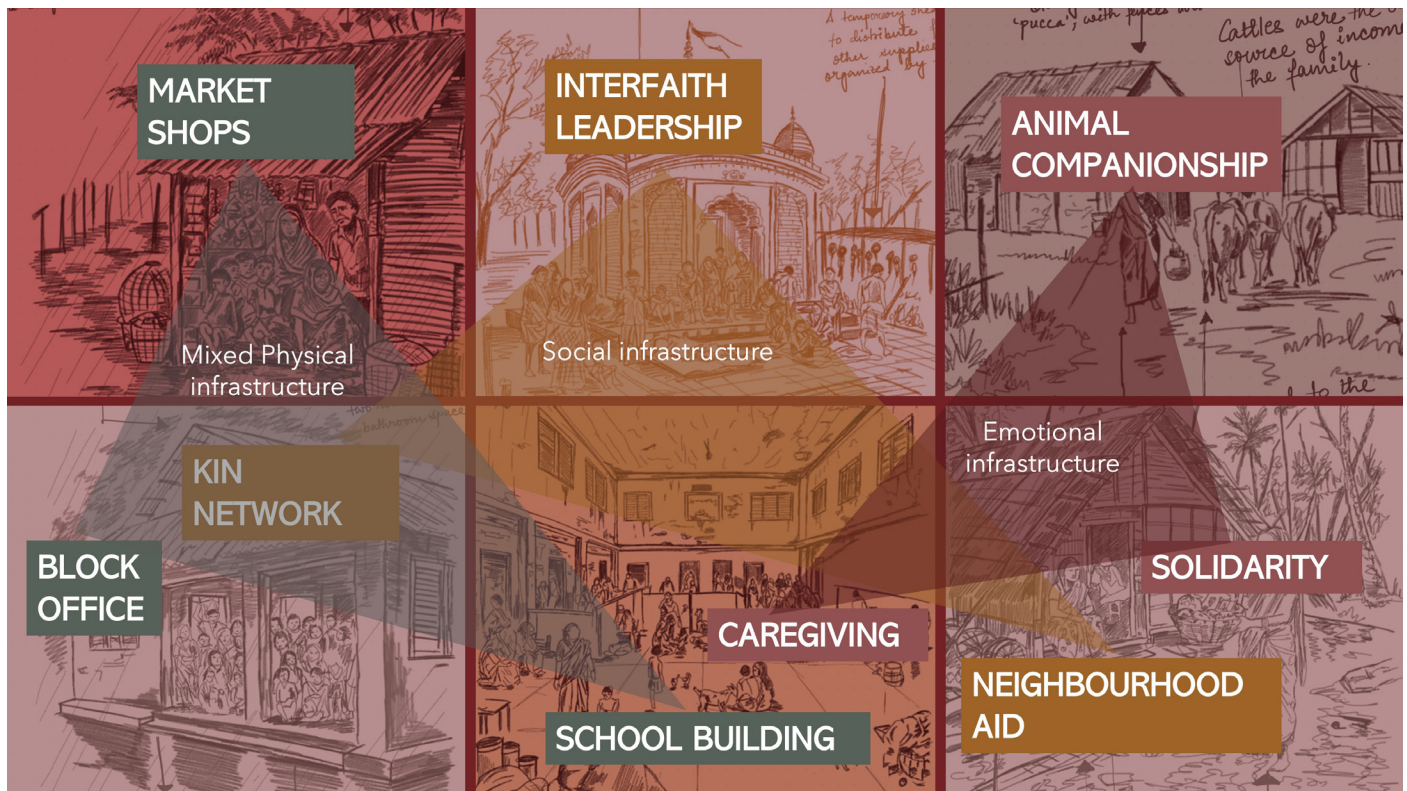
Fig 10: Learning from sketches

Fig 11: Redefining protection and refuge

*Mixed physical infrastructures*, where market shops, block offices, school prayer halls, and home extensions become ad-hoc refuges.

Through this lens, the "cyclone shelter" is not the only spatial unit of protection. It is simply one node in a larger, community-led system of refuge-making. And crucially, women are often at the center of this system—not as passive recipients of aid, but as coordinators of survival, improvisers of care, and stewards of continuity.

These insights reframe disaster response not as a discrete event but as part of an ongoing, gendered, and relational practice of survival—what I view as *everyday humanitarianism (Fig. 12)*. Unlike formal humanitarianism, which operates through frameworks of relief and intervention, everyday humanitarianism is iterative, embedded, and affective. It does not wait for crisis to intervene; it builds slowly through shared meals, repaired roofs, protected animals, and whispered alerts passed from one home to another.

The telesketching method, though constrained by the absence of field presence, became a way of surfacing this logic. By allowing stories to be told and visualized in participants' own rhythms, it affirmed their authority not only as storytellers but as theorists of resilience. Each narrative was not only a

recounting—it was a proposition. A theory of care. A map of possibility.

In this way, telesketching became more than a research workaround. It became a political method—one that foregrounds distributed agency, decenters expert-led disaster paradigms, and insists that resilience is not built on concrete alone. It is built on belonging.

# 4. Concluding thoughts

Telesketching offers a methodological, theoretical, and practical rethinking of how we engage with communities experiencing sudden-onset disasters, especially in contexts where physical fieldwork is constrained. As a method, it demonstrates that ethical, affective, and co-creative data collection is not only possible from a distance but can be deeply meaningful when grounded in mutual interpretation and narrative witnessing. Theoretically, telesketching reframes resilience not as a linear path to recovery, but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by memory, emotion, care, and collective meaning-making. It surfaces the micro-practices of survival and connection—often overlooked in policy discourse—and elevates them as vital forms of adaptive agency. For resettlement planners and disaster policymakers, this method expands the terrain of concern: from shelter and infrastructure
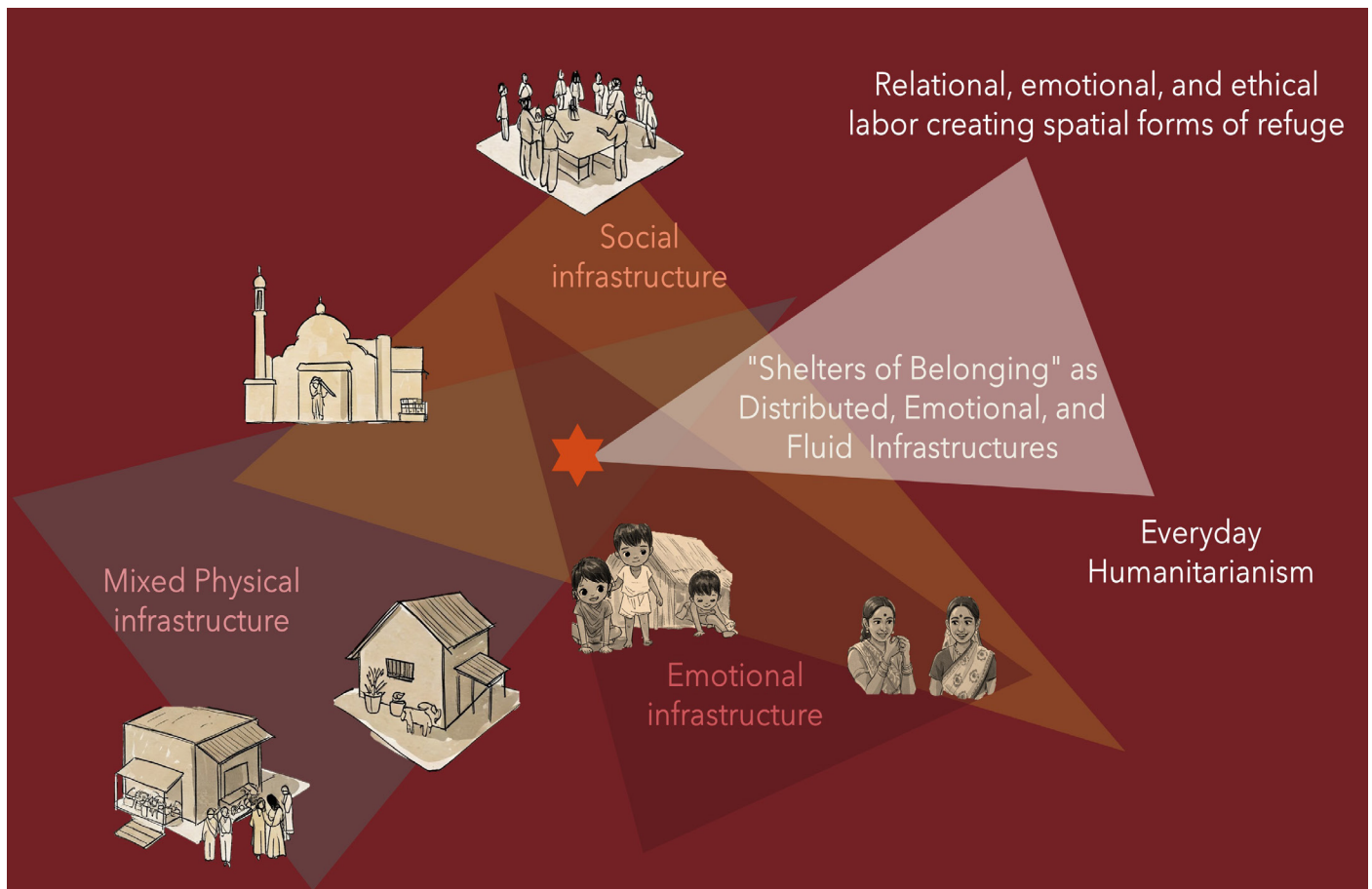
Fig 12: Shelter of Belonging

to the emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of recovery. It asks us to recognize storytelling not just as evidence, but as infrastructure. Looking ahead, telesketching holds potential for broader application—not only in research but in participatory planning, policy communication, and post-disaster community rebuilding. As a hybrid method grounded in feminist ethics and visual co-authorship, it invites us to reimagine who gets to narrate resilience—and how those narratives might shape more just and attentive futures.

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