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From the Editorial Team of Indian Journal of Anthropological Research

Visual Anthropology, as an approach to storytelling from ethnographic fieldwork experiences, is still at its niche stage in India. It was only in the millennium era that the first workshop on Visual Anthropology was organized by an Indian University, a time when only a few offered it as an optional course. In the last ten years with access to smart phones and digital technologies, we have been able to experience and move from the visuals in anthropology to visual anthropology in our ethnographic fieldwork. The introduction of Choice Based Credit System across Indian Universities, which saw a revision of the existing syllabi, provided an opportunity for Visual Anthropology to be introduced as a course in the under graduate and graduate level. In terms of research we still lack fellowships in visual anthropology. The question remains as to how many of us engaging in visual anthropology have actually been trained in the methods, tools and techniques. It has been a skill that we have picked up while on the job. Thus, to encourage our enthusiastic researchers to take up projects in visual anthropology, *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research* (IJAR) ventured out to have the first special edition on Visual Anthropology. For the benefit of the contributing authors to guide and help them with the methodological concerns the members of the editorial board invited Dr. Alison Kahn, Senior Research and Tutorial Fellow, Material, Visual and Digital Anthropology, Stanford University Overseas Programs, also a visiting fellow in Digital Learning Systems at Loughborough University as the guest editor. The initial enthusiasm was much among the readers and contributing authors of IJAR, however, many were not well versed in the methodological aspects. Thus, we encouraged the authors to pen their photoessays as they envisaged them. Therefore, in this special edition some authors created their visual stories using photographs they had collected during their empirical fieldwork, while some had used the visuals that they found engaging in everyday life and contextualised them as photo essays. To fill the methodological void, once the papers were submitted Dr Kahn guided them with the methodological aspects and how as anthropologists they could situate themselves within the stories they are trying to tell. We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt gratitude to Dr Alison Kahn for accepting our invitation and taking time out of her busy schedule to be a part of IJAR as Guest Editor for the special edition on Visual Anthropology.

*Editorial Team
Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*

Guest Editor's Corner



Dr Alison Kahn

It is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to Guest Edit this special Edition on visual anthropological fieldwork studies for the *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research* (IJAR). It has long been a wish to encourage a more creative output of fieldwork studies from anthropological research, one that goes beyond the production of text alone and more detailed than a photojournalistic account, demonstrating methodologies and approaches that have been considered from a visual anthropological perspective and influenced by the canon of academic visual and material culture studies. I have proposed an 'undisciplined publication'¹ not to dismiss the text, but to build on the original intention of the visual anthropological project as an emerging sub discipline in the 1970s², to go beyond the text into areas of the human experience that investigate the physical and spiritual worlds of the communities we study. I believe that ethnographic fieldwork should engender the spirit of the enterprise; to capture the reflexive nature of searching for clues in an unfamiliar environment, and the development of interpersonal relationships that are built between people and places during and after research has been completed. A critical history of the integration of visual anthropology into mainstream academic anthropology asserts a position of prominence to areas such as artistic practice, dance, music, body art, photography, digital and visual forms of media, and indigenous media, and recognizes the experimental nature of the capturing of audio-visual data.³

Reading many accounts of fieldwork studies, the imagination wanders into other worlds and other systems of human behaviour that enrich our understanding of the world, but often there are far too many gaps in our knowledge as we cannot quite picture the people the author is describing, or the data is stuck in a time-period that defies historical context. The strength of visual anthropology as a method of investigation is that it can be accompanied by other types of data that include song, dance, artistic expression, all of which can be incorporated in an audio-visual record. The possibilities for a more creative form of data collection has been established in anthropological circles but we need more peer-reviewed journals to include audio-visual material as part of researchers' outputs.⁴

The acts of filming and taking photographs are artistic endeavours by the researcher and form a creative response to the fieldwork experience as well as a multifaceted form of ethnographic documentation.

“Employing both material and processual approaches to still photography as a springboard, my own work engages photographs as a means of constructing knowledge, which may or may not dovetail with text but is certainly not a “bonus” to it; indeed, the images can often be seen as a challenge or subversion of it.”⁵

Discussions of the senses go beyond the corporeal experiences⁶ of being in the world, into the intangible realms of spiritual and emotional.⁷ Ethnography has always been a visual experience, but it was not until the 1980s that anthropologists began questioning issues of written representation that challenged ethnographies as texts,⁸ critically engaging the reader with the conventions of the, by then, still-dominant genre of ethnographic realism and heralding a new trend toward experimentation in ethnographic writing.⁹ We might even go so far as to say that recording audio-visual information alongside traditional forms of data collection are an essential tool of doing research¹⁰ and its presentation.

“In this sense, repercussions of *Writing Culture* can be traced in important redefinitions of anthropology regarding issues such as who should do fieldwork (e.g., people “at home” in the field or “native” anthropologists); how it should be done (e.g., collaboratively, including “informants”; in a reflexive way, problematizing “culture” and being sensitive to issues of gender, race, and class; or tracing the translocal in multiple localities); what topics should be studied (e.g., the “home” countries of anthropology, Western knowledge and science, or literary practices); and how the results should be ethnographically represented (e.g., experimentally).”¹¹

Today, high-quality digital devices are available to the fieldworker; it is of optimum value to create a multi-dimensional set of recordings that can enhance the communication of the fieldwork experience to others and commit to a longer-term connection to the communities upon whom, we have chosen to focus our attention.¹² Digital platforms have propelled us into new spaces of connection, something that we should embrace as academics and use creatively for the benefit of all stakeholders in the building of new kinds of relationships.¹³ It is also imperative that a diverse set of voices are raised in visual anthropological studies, to go beyond the western hemisphere and create an inclusive canon that breaks through the class, gender, race and ethnic barriers that have historically disenfranchised so many scholars in the power-knowledge frameworks of academic discourse.¹⁴ We must always be aware of the privilege we have been accorded, when accepted as an outsider to study and record other people’s lives; those people who have no obligation to us yet host and feed us as we go about our work. Let us try to ensure that our productions are always equal to the trust that we have been awarded to give back and be of service to the communities we represent, wherever appropriate, and use our experiences to make a better world.

Here I am delighted to present the work of contributors who have embarked on mental and physical journeys into the lives of diverse communities across India, U.S.A and the UK.

We begin our journey of fieldwork experiences in this Visual Anthropology Edition, with a memoir written by Hashmat Habib, about the Hanji Fishers of the

Kashmir Valley between 2019 and 2021. This is a narrative monologue based on observation of the main tradition of fishing in Kashmir, which has had little to no research done about them. Habib collected ethnographic data, and even a native of the region he felt an outsider. He found it difficult to initiate research objectives in a familiar setting, experiencing mistrust from the people who asked why he was spending so much time with them. He realized the need for a go-between, and with the aid of a classmate, Mr Bilal Ahmad, he was able to penetrate the inner workings of the community. Embodying the role of participant-observer, he learned to fish and cast nets while conducting open-ended interviews. He recognized the incredible care for his safety as he became part of the team and was respected for having participated in the fishing. The images he uses highlight his physical proximity to his subject moving from the outer edges of the community towards the inner most circles of the lives of the community.

Ubaid Ahmad Dhar's visual portrait involves the Bakarwals from the Himalayan ranges. They are a pastoral group of people, rearing sheep, and goats, and migrating nomadically with their livestock and households from the plains of the lower Himalayas to high altitude meadows on a seasonal basis. Their trek takes two months to complete and covers over 300 km. Once installed in camps that are, for many, in inaccessible areas, they spend four months before embarking once again on their return; this is a journey that has been occurring since time immemorial. Ahmed Dhar joined as a participant-observer in 2019 and has come to the realization that this is a process that might not last forever. Many of the younger members of the community have abandoned this way of life; this photo essay contains images of daily activity in evocative images that represent moments of a cycle of life that has been in existence since time immemorial, and are even more valuable, as he points to an uncertain future.

The Bodos are an ancient people based mainly in the state of Assam, sometimes thought to be the oldest peoples of the region. This photo essay by Choudhury and Basumatary delves into the material culture of the tribe, mainly through textiles that the women wear, but also including fascinating photos of earrings and a bamboo comb that enhance our understanding of the subject matter. The emphasis is mainly on the weaving expertise of the Bodo women and how the old practices are still used today.

Pankaj Upadhyay explores the need for tattooing in an urban context and bases his approach on Shastra (2004) and Kuwahura (2005). This research demonstrates that tattoos, just as any other adornment, will have numerous meanings. They are viewed as a symbol of strength and as a sign of a free spirit. We see euphoria after depression, freedom from self and expression of life, and gratitude. Types of tattoos and their designs depend often on the cultural meaning placed on them by individual ethnic groups and their belief systems. What are displayed are a variety of colours and designs that can tell us about the individual and where they come from.

Rughoobur's essay on the presence of digital technologies in museums discusses how implementing AR and VR, for example, helps expand our understanding of the space and its exhibitions. She demonstrates that using new technology advantages

museum visitors, in terms of immersing them in the sensorial experience, increasing accessibility of exhibitions beyond traditional boundaries of class, language or other forms of identity, and, finally, in the conservation of objects and their meanings.

The ceremony of marriage is an ancient rite that spans cultures and continents, and in this photo essay Kiranmayi Bhushi discusses the massive industry around weddings in India. The act of shopping for a saree is the specific focus here, but it is only one part of the industry worth billions. Going beyond simply consuming the goods, we see how the shops themselves have become visual spectacles, often being shaped architecturally to resemble the religious temples where the wedding might take place. The saree shops in Hyderabad have incorporated into the secular act of buying clothing a sacred space for bride and her family.

Set in Sikkim, this essay examines the importance of monasteries in India and how they attract tourists and followers of Buddhism. From a religious and historical point of view, Tsuklakhang is one of the most important monasteries with its royal connections; since 2011, it has been restored by the Tibet Heritage Fund. Included is a photo of the Peepal Tree, symbolizing the Bodhi Tree. The life and vitality played out by the young devotees reminds us how we shape our landscape through movement juxtaposing the human mutability with an architecture that reminds us of tradition and heritage.

Nitya Andrew examines the process of shooting a video-taped conversation with theatre director Prasanna Heggodu, documenting the connection between local connections to theatre in a personal account. Using audio-visual methods to interview, the director speaks frankly about his life's work in the town of Heggodu, being far more than the stage. Andrew reveals the person behind the theatre who has turned his hand to creating a cooperative to enhance the community and bring together art, theatre and traditional methods of work that offer employment to the local population. Beautiful photographs document the process of the traditional hand-block printing on fabrics is another decade-old art that's being preserved in Charaka, to create value through 'made by hand', in a market that's flooded with quick machine-made garments.

Assumi's essay accompanies a video of the Sumi Naga people engaging in collective song while working in the field. The video is an extract taken during Assumi's fieldwork in 2020 and demonstrates the ancient tradition of singing forming an integral part of the Sumi working life. The songs in the video tell the stories of the atrocities faced by the Naga people after Indian independence in 1947, and are representative of how Sumi songs tell stories of the past. Handed down orally from generation to generation, they preserve the history of the people.

Rukshana Zaman takes us on a virtual tour of Belfast in a black cab, an iconic symbol in itself, illustrating the artistic representations of the effects of the Troubles, the years of political turmoil and violence surrounding Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom. Visualizing the people's representation of their moral cause, together with the physical barriers of gates separating Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods, this photo essay captures the vibrant, colourful images that reflect the dark, grey past and present of the Northern Irish capital.

In my photo essay *We went to film: An Account of the Making of the film We, The Zeme* (2021) I try to capture the spirit of collaboration of the Zeme filmmakers and the wider organising committee that contributed to the success of the event. The photographs I chose illustrate participatory approaches to ethnographic filmmaking where we see different configurations of teamwork and acts of community building such as preparing food and eating together. After the filming I considered the images I took during the event and began to consider the theoretical concept of Victor Turner's *liminality* in relation to the First Zeme Olympics and to the process of filming, as being entwined in the spectacle.

Notes

1. See Troiani, I and Kahn, A. (2016). "Beyond the Academic Book: New "Undisciplined" Corporeal Publication", in *Architecture and Culture*. Taylor and Francis: 4:1, 51-71.
2. See Douglas, Mary (1975). "Visual anthropology in a discipline of words". In *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
3. See Banks, M and Ruby, J. (2013). *Made to be Seen: Historical Perspectives on Visual Anthropology*. University of Chicago.
4. See Loizos, Peter. (1992). Admissible evidence? Film in anthropology. In *Film as ethnography*. ed. Peter Crawford and David Turton. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
—(1993). *Innovations in ethnographic film: From innocence to self-consciousness, 1955-1985*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
5. Marc Henri Pault, Sydney M. Silverstein & Aubrey P. Graham (2015). "Where Indeed Is the Theory in Visual Anthropology?" in *Visual Anthropology: Published in cooperation with the Commission on Visual Anthropology*, 28:2: 177
6. See MacDougall, David (2005). *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
7. See Kahn, A. (2022). "Imagining Children's Realities in Films: visual anthropological approaches and representations of emotions in childhood" in the *Oxford Handbook of Mental Health and Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press (forthcoming).
8. See Hastrup, Kirsten. (1992). "Anthropological visions: Some notes on visual and textual authority." In *Film as Ethnography*, ed. Peter Crawford and David Turton. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
9. See Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. (1986). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
10. See Pink, Sarah (2001). *Doing Visual Ethnography*. Sage Publications. http://isaacleung.com/culs/5412/readings/R7_Pink_doing_visua_ethnography.pdf [use permitted for educational purposes only]
11. See Zenker, O. (2014). Writing an overview of Writing Culture: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0030.xml>

12. See Grimshaw, Anna. (2001). *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology*. Cambridge University Press.
— and Ravetz, Amanda. (2005). *Introduction to Visualizing Anthropology: Experimenting with Image Based Ethnography*, ed. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz. Bristol: Intellect Ltd.
13. See Pink, Sarah. (2006). *The Future of Visual Anthropology: Engaging the Senses*. New York: Routledge.
14. See Harjant, G (2021). "Decolonizing Visual Anthropology: Locating Transnational Diasporic Queers-of-Color Voices in Ethnographic Cinema" Barnard Centre for Research on Women: Reprinted with permission from *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 123, No. 1.