

Applications of Anthropology

Documenting India's Cultural Heritage for Posterity: The Use of Communication Anthropology

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CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Anthropology and Communication](#)

[Beyond Anthropology](#)

[Audience Profile](#)

[Implications](#)

[Visual Anthropology](#)

[An Approach to Visual Documentation](#)

[Units of Visual Documentation](#)

[Professional Cooperation for Visual Documentation](#)

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is three-fold: (i) to discuss the concept and meaning of the term “communication anthropology” and “visual anthropology” in the cultural context of India (ii) to discuss its evolution, growth and expansion in the wake of the communication technology revolution for mass dissemination of diverse and multiple continuing civilisational heritage of India, and (iii) to discuss ways and means of its audio and visual documentation and preservation for future generations of the world to appreciate, admire and assimilate the uniqueness of the Indian civilisation in its multiplicity of colours and shades- from stone age living to jet set satellite based communication age.

The first time that the term “communication anthropology” was used, to the best of my remembrance, was during the first Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society Annual Conference, 1975. During this conference, a special session on communication anthropology was organised, in which a band of young anthropologists belonging to six different universities of India presented their preliminary findings of communication study of rural India (For details see Agrawal ed. 1985). In more than one way, this was an interesting period in the history of Indian Anthropology, where a great deal of emphasis was laid on applications of anthropology for rural and tribal development. Communication was seen as an essential ingredient to reach out to remote and isolated tribal and rural communities. The aim was to accept new ways of living and adopting technologies that would help the rural and tribal population produce more food and be part of those who live in better material comfort. In other words, economic development was at the core of the national ethos for the betterment of remote rural and tribal areas identified for change, in agriculture, nutrition and family planning. Education was seen as a precondition for adoption of innovation. The entire national climate was charged with centralised planning to bring about desired change.

It was a time when India had reaped the fruits of the green revolution in large parts of the country, in which communication had played a significant role. More than anthropologists, technologists were greatly enthused about the prospect of using satellite communication for better living conditions and elevating lives of the miserable millions. Many young anthropologists joined hands in the applications of anthropology for communication that would eventually lead to development. Due to lack of appropriate professional growth within the field of anthropology, several anthropologists migrated to mass media organisations like All India Radio and Doordarshan in search of jobs where opportunities existed. A few, who were interested in music, art and dance, also became part and parcel of the growing number of anthropologists interested in communication.

In the last three decades, there has been no looking back for the students of communication anthropology in India. The story is somewhat narrated in an article entitled “Anthropological Applications in Communication Research and Evaluation of SITE in India” (Agrawal 1981). Vidyarthi (1978), in his two-volume book “Rise of Anthropology in India”, devoted a small section on “space anthropology” instead of “communication anthropology” and indicated the work carried out by all those anthropologists who were involved in the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) (Vidyarthi 1978). Since then, communication anthropology has moved into the areas of Information and Communication Technology, broadening its scope of research and teaching. Agrawal, assisted by Joshi, in collaboration with a number of anthropologists, carried out the first study in the field of Information Technology (See Agrawal 1996). Anthropologists in India have continued their efforts in this direction. (See Anonymous 2004).

Another significant development in the last three decades relate to the emergence of visual anthropology, particularly after *The Xth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*, New Delhi, 1978. It may not be out of place to mention that the first Indian to serve on the commission of Visual Anthropology (1973-78) during the conference was Professor K.N. Sahay of Ranchi University. The Anthropological Survey of India has been contributing in visual anthropology in a significant way, but with little dissemination of their efforts in the country.

Historically, an organised effort to discuss and document achievements of visual anthropology in the country was jointly organised by Anthropological Survey of India and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) at Jodhpur, India, December 15-19, 1987. The author had assisted the organisers in planning and scheduling of the seminar and later on collated the entire proceedings, on the request of INTACH. *Visual Anthropology and India* (Singh ed. 1992) was the outcome of this effort.

At present, visual anthropology has moved into the commercial arena of television, and has even been monopolised by 24-hour news channels. News channels are keen to depict the cultural uniqueness and diversity of India in its vivid colours and manifestations. Digital technology has further helped television channels to produce and transmit the many facets and cultural dimensions of the Indian civilisation. In the international arena, key interests in visual and communication anthropology remained an important preoccupation of American anthropologists, who made tireless efforts to document and preserve the vanishing tribal cultures of North America and elsewhere.

The *Visual Anthropology Journal*, published in cooperation with the Commission on Visual Anthropology, remained one of the major sources of reporting, as well as theoretical and methodological discussions in the field. After the completion of the conference, I was

nominated as Chairman of Visual Anthropology Commission, which was never ratified due to a number of geo-political problems; the only meeting that was ever held of Indian anthropologists was at Space Application Centre, Indian Space Research Organisation, Ahmedabad. A number of anthropologists presented their work of visual documentation of tribal and rural life. After that, not much happened, except that Mr. K.N. Sahay continued his interest and wrote some articles.¹

On the communication anthropology front, a whole lot of work has been carried out in the last 30 years, having direct applications in development communication and education. These are based on five basic premises of anthropology- a holistic view, process analysis, 'emic' approach, comparative perspective and methods of participant observation (Agrawal 1981: 136-146).

Anthropology and Communication²

More than 70 years ago, in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Edward Sapir wrote the first article on "communication". He observed, "every cultural pattern and every single act of social behaviour involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense" (Sapir 1931:4). It still remains a classic writing on communication by an anthropologist that marked the beginning of a new discipline called communication. The author took inspiration from Sapir, who was one of the greatest anthropologists, who brought in linguistic dimension to the analysis of culture.

Levi-Strauss (1953) thought of multiple layers of interactions between culture and communication. Three different levels of communication were thought to operate in any society. These included women, goods and services and messages. Hence, it is believed that culture does not consist exclusively of communication through language, since there is a dynamic and integral relationship between kinship and communication. These thoughts helped in expanding the scope of anthropological applications in communication for development.

The first time a large number of anthropologists were recruited was to help conduct Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) communication research. It is here that the notion of communication anthropology was advanced, for which a reference has already been made.

Three aspects of SITE that helped in setting the research agenda for the anthropologists were:

1. Preparation of audience profile
2. Needs assessment study
3. Holistic or ethnographic study to evaluate the effects of SITE on the first generation television viewers.

All three researches were supposed to be based on intensive anthropological field studies. Over a dozen anthropologists participated in SITE. These efforts led to starting of teaching "communication anthropology" in several university departments of anthropology in India.

The inspiration came from several anthropological writings and began to formulate means to answer pre-production and evaluation questions while designing SITE research, such as-

¹ Two Indian Anthropologists who serve on the Editorial Board are Dr. Binod Agrawal and Dr. Jayasingh Jhala.

² This portion of the chapter has been largely drawn from a recent book of Agrawal, 2003, *Ethnography of Communication*, North –Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong, as part of the Thirteenth Verrier Elwin Endowment Lectures.

1. Given the cultural diversity of India, is it possible to construct a typical rural human being, family and village on TV screen acceptable to a large audience linguistically different from each other?
2. How to describe and analyse rural life in “non-technical language” for the purpose of television production and its socio-cultural implications for development? and
3. How to evaluate socio-cultural impact of television on the first generation rural television viewers?

Beyond Anthropology

The pioneering work of Karve (1953) on kinship, and Bose’s (1961) study on material culture in India came handy while preparing audience profile. Within Indian “cultural mosaic”, according to them, there are ecological, agro-climatic, and linguistic regions. Within each such region there are a number of sub-regions in terms of linguistic zones. The principles of categorisation were adopted in the communication research.

In the process, the task became more difficult due to two contradictory needs: (a) a generalised audience profile acceptable to all the regions of India, and (b) non-existence of such a generalised profile in real life. The anthropological team stopped searching for a generalised farmer and village in the Indian civilisation. Instead, the team thought of region-specific audience profile. But even for this, there was no data or theoretical framework for writing the audience profile. So it was decided to take Benedict’s (1934) configuration approach. The basic idea was that a culture could artfully be described without analysing various aspects of its configuration. Around this configuration, the total culture can be described giving a psycho-cultural portrayal, which was needed for television programme production.

Audience Profile

An anthropologist’s role, could well beyond Anthropology. A view could be taken that an Indian village and an Indian family must be conceived as a cultural microcosm of the macrocosm of the Indian civilisation. The concept of “whole” was thought of as a basis for developing audience profile for television production. Since the aim of the audience profile was to provide useful socio-cultural material for TV production, generalised ethnographic descriptions of the village culture for each of the seven states were attempted. The audience profile briefly provided, among others:

- (1) Social structure
- (2) Occupational pattern and development issues
- (3) Rural material culture
- (4) Language and exposure to mass media
- (5) Special cultural uniqueness

Keeping in mind the objectives of SITE, the following development issues were also discussed and highlighted.

- (1) Agricultural activity
- (2) Health and hygiene
- (3) Family planning
- (4) Education, especially primary education, and
- (5) Problems related to rural development

Here is an illustration on how the configuration approach was used for describing rural cultural regions of the country. In Chhattisgarh, for example, a paddy growing state, the status of women was observed to be higher than that of men. After careful analysis of existing data and

fieldwork, the author developed a “woman-dominated rice-eating configuration”. Keeping this configuration in mind, the audience profile of Chhattisgarh having a number of interesting implications for those who were involved in television production. Later discussions with a number of anthropologists who had not worked there also confirmed the author’s observations, although their data had not been analysed in this framework.

Implications

Anthropologists’ involvement in the field of communication is relatively new in India. Yet, they were able to provide authentic material culture and depiction of the Indian cultural traditions. The team was also more in a position to influence ideas and views of those creative persons, who were responsible for changing the lives of millions through television. The ideological justification of such an involvement lay in providing realism in the depiction of true cultural visual images for meaningful communication. It also provided credibility to the medium and helped in preserving those traditions that would have died out in the wake of communication revolution.

Similar descriptions could be provided for other researches that were carried out during SITE. But this serves as an illustration of how anthropology went beyond the confines of traditional teaching and research.

Visual Anthropology³

According to Mead (1978:278), “ How to cultivate and cherish the conditions under which very small and fragile cultures could at least be properly recorded and preserved for their own sake, and possibly cultivated to the point of some enrichment and new spontaneity, came out, for example, in the emphasis on what could be done today with TV. If anthropologists could be present to guide the TV cameramen when they go out to pick up all sorts of ‘folk’ materials, these materials could be both enriched and refined into genuine materials and preserved as archives to be studied, and in some cases, when they were fed back to the people, stimulate what they did also.”

Visual documentation allows a broader and holistic comprehension of cultural reality, and to a large extent, breaks the language barrier. While visuals give accurate depiction, the selection of a sequence of events, its juxtaposition with other events and the very selection of live events creates a composite visual mosaic that could create an illusionary or distorted comprehension of culture. What we have is a mediated understanding between the technology, the person documenting it and the people whose cultures are being documented. Without going into discussion of how these mediated images cannot truly reflect culture, it could be said that even with this limitation, visual documentation provides an understanding far superior than does written description help in preservation of culture.

An Approach to Visual Documentation

The visual documentation of culture for posterity essentially means describing culture on celluloid or on videotape or digitally, while keeping a holistic view. A holistic view involves

³ This part of the chapter has been largely drawn from Agrawal, 1995, *Computerising Cultures*. Kapila Vatsyayan and Baidyanath Saraswati (eds.), New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited.

describing not only different aspects of a culture in its totality but also the interrelationships and interdependence among aspects of culture as a dynamic phenomenon. Translating such a conception of culture into visuals raises a basic issue of identifying salient categories or elements that should be recognised for the purpose of description and for demonstrating the relationships. As it is well established that each culture has its own categories and classification systems, which may or may not have comparable categories in other cultures, there arises the issue of whose categories should be utilised in visual documentation.

While reviewing the efforts at documenting cultures of some of the administratively and socially identifiable groups referred to as 'caste' and 'tribe' in India, one finds an impressive list of nearly a hundred documentaries. But when compared with the total number of such groups, the size of the country, and the time duration, it is a miniscule effort. The leadership for producing such 'ethnographic films' came from the Anthropological Survey of India over more than a quarter of a century. Sinha (1987) feels that these films produced "complementary ethnographic data for the purpose of research and not for making less known people known to the wider national society and the world" (Sinha 1987:xv).

Units of Visual Documentation

At any given time, even with unlimited resources, it would be extremely difficult to document every part of the civilisation, cultural or linguistic groups. This problem is further compounded in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic India, with built-in historical continuities and multi-layered social formations. Therefore it would be most desirable to have visual documentation of cultures that could be referred to as broad patterns, or themes and aspirations of life, as Benedict mentioned in the thirties (Benedict 1934).

At the second level, within a linguistic region, linguistically distinct social groups or units should have their special characteristics separately documented. At the third level, the unit of visual documentation should be groups identified as distinct and special by the people, like a caste or tribe. At this level, visual documentation should be as exhaustive as possible, to incorporate almost all aspects of culture, which could be referred to as a total way of life.

No matter how open-ended or eclectic the approach to visual communication, some ordering is inevitable, either by conscious effort of the filmmaker or through the sequence of events and the selection of certain parts. It is essential that efforts be made to follow a logical sequence, and that logic should emerge from the people. In addition, still photographs must be taken and natural sound should be recorded. Supplementary written documents providing technical details like kind of film used, aperture, shutter speed, time of day, and so on should be documented. An ethnographic note on the event should be recorded and transferred to the computer. This holds true both for still photographs and movies.

More than visual documentation, appropriate techniques for the preservation and retrieval of visual material are of great importance. Appropriate computer software and hardware are available and ought to be procured for this purpose. Given the cost dimension of such a system, a centralised facility at the regional level is recommended, with proper arrangement for acquisition, duplication and distribution. Given its technological complexity and interdisciplinary nature, a critical input in the creation of such a facility will be the training of personnel and the continuous updating of their knowledge. Also, all efforts should be made to evolve a common technical specification for the recording, storage and retrieval of documents to minimise incompatibilities in the future. In practical terms, it means a continuous information

flow among the participating institutions and individuals to indicate the adoption of any new communication technology, which may facilitate or hinder the transfer of visual data.

Professional Cooperation for Visual Documentation

A brief mention has been made of the technical cooperation required for such an effort. But a more important form of cooperation will be required for capturing cultures on celluloid. Given the cost and complexity of filmmaking, any effort to visually document cultures in the way that filmmakers usually work will lead nowhere. It will also permit the documentation of cultural realities in their 'emic' categories. If we go along the classical ethnographic filmmaking path, we will end up producing films on a few specialised topics of great interest to anthropologists (Hockings ed. 1975). What is required is a professional, multi-disciplinary team. The authenticity of cultural data should be identified by cultural anthropologists who have a holistic view and an 'emic' approach, which then should be documented *in situ* without altering any sequence of events. The team should also include an expert if the aim is to document a particular aspect of art. Such a visual documentation also promotes understanding, besides being a resource, where every frame ought to be preserved.

There are several tribal groups living all along the international boundaries of many South Asian countries. Countries need to cooperate on initiating joint country-specific documentation projects. Cooperation in specialised training in visual documentation requires attention as well and institutions for such skill development identified. Also crucial is the theoretical and conceptual training of professionals involved. National, regional and international support and financial allocations will be required for reaching a meaningful goal.

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