

## **'DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY' AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL DOCUMENTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

*by*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper looks into the varied advances in digital photography and how it has become a boon for anthropological activity. Photography is a significant alternative for documenting the happenings in and around the society. Alongside, it is also used for observing and understanding cultures, by documenting its visual components, such as human physiognomy, culture, experiences, gestures, artefact, rituals, etc. Furthermore, it is seen as a dynamic option for purging the pensiveness and contingency that some believe characterises the anthropological accounts of the world. With reference to northeast India the specialized techniques of photography can be used rather innovatively to make momentous contributions to various facets of anthropology namely, environmental anthropology, ethno history anthropology, forensic anthropology, etc. It is also suggested that as photographic technique advances, numerous possibilities of its use in the field of anthropology emerges.*

*Key Words: Digital photography, photography, technology, anthropology, documentation, North-east India, tribesmen.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*“Photographs are both images and physical objects which exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience. They have “volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in*

*the worldenmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions with them”* (Elizabeth Edwards, 2002, p. 67).

The need to document life events, day to day activities, complex information, ideas and concepts has always been a necessity, from the very start of civilization. A classic example dating back to 25,000-30,000 years B.C, when humans first painted descriptive pictures on cave walls, such evidences have been found across the globe from Europe to Asia.

These have over a period of time helped historians, anthropologists, and archaeologist to learn about the first dwellings of men in a particular area, what type of community the cavemen existed in, what animals they tamed and many times have opened new chapters in the understanding of their religion, rituals and customs.

Anthropologist were able to decode and reconstruct the information with regard to man and his environment, with the help of paintings that have been etched in the caves or carved on rock surfaces even though many of the civilizations have been wiped out. Visual representation be it painted, the ones that emanate out of the camera, those that are suspended on gallery walls, which are printed in newspapers, photo albums, and in monographs, become an integral part of knowledge production and documentation, and it helps in the transmission of complex pieces of information.

A study of humans past, present and even future most certainly needs visual aids to get complete understanding of the multifaceted character of the human civilization. Anthropologists from the very start have used visual aids like maps, inscriptions and symbol systems to decipher meanings, interpret, analyse and comment about the past.

Photographs as evidence began to be used in anthropology in the 1990's, but ethnologists started using photography as a tool of research much earlier. However, the anthropologists till then did not take photographs themselves and relied on old archival images. Anthropologists returned to the photographic archive and focused on finding some sort of order, or logic, within the sometimes enormous and richly diverse collections they would encounter (Poole, 2005).

Herein it is imperative to refer to the works of Edmund Carpenter, who from 1940's onwards campaigned in favour of humanistic, prosaic, and imaginative methods of documenting cultures and cultural memory using multiple media and also contested the positivist model of value-free systematic anthropological research.

### **The pre-eminence of images**

Over a period of time from 1830 onwards photography began to be established as a specific field of art and expression and it simultaneously gained mass popularity. From the bulky Camera Obscura to the modern day digital cameras, photography has made momentous advances both in terms of technique and style. It came to be recognized that visual histories based on photographic evidence might reveal for the first time, quite different stories, incidents, memories, attitudes and cross-cultural relationships (Quanchi, 2006).

Photography transformed the way we recall things and photographs are looked at as confirmation of memory. It offers a sense of immediacy and has the capacity to record actual events, a slice of truth along with the scope of interpreting the entire event in a different way by revisiting the images from varied perspectives. Photography has played a huge role in the manner in which history is understood and conceived. Traditionally, photographs presented an impartial record of actual events. They were significant, for example, in endorsing for the public the consequences of the Civil War and revulsions of the Holocaust.

From the 1890s, when cameras became less bulky and outdoor photography became comparatively easier, most anthropological fieldworkers began to capture images of the people they studied.

“The advent of lightweight portable 16mm film equipment and new low-light film stocks in the 60's is frequently identified as signalling the advent of visual anthropology, or at least of heralding a 'golden era' of anthropological filmmaking. This new technology was seen as less “intrusive”, and allowed an ‘intimacy’ with the subjects that was previously not thought to be possible. A large-scale technological presence, large cameras, tripods, lights signalled an excessive intervention, an overt sense of construction. The new technology also allowed the

anthropologist to work on her or his own, or with a minimal number of others”(Wright, 1998, p. 17).

The main purpose of images taken in the field is similar to that of written field notes, which helps in rebuilding events in the mind of the fieldworker.

Timothy Asch, a renowned anthropologist, did contrast the utility of the movie camera in anthropology, to that of microscope in biology, and the telescope in astronomy. “This scientific aura of a detached and neutral vision still continues to guarantee much of the veracity and indexical quality of contemporary visual anthropology” (ibid. 1998, p. 19).

Furthermore, the importance of images in anthropology is reinstated by the fact that “photographs may provide “I was there” documentation to support an argument, or they may be used as records, features or artefacts. They are “immutable mobiles” that stand in for something that is absent. Photographs also can juxtapose the present with the remembered past, evoking emotions of nostalgia and romanticism. More than maps, photographs provide an impression of objectivity and accuracy”(Dyke,2006, p.372).

The evidentiary power of the photograph gives it additional impetus for use in anthropological documentation for it captures and freezes a precise moment in time. Example can be drawn from the work of an ethnologist and photographer Edward Curtis who skilfully used aesthetic conventions like soft focus and vignette to convert the irrevocability of elimination into the tragic amorousness of nostalgia. His photographs are also of interest for what they reveal about the distinctive temporality of the "racializing gaze". Though his photographs have met with criticisms as imitation for their use of costume and tribal attribution their power and massive popular appeal had much to do with the ways in which he was able to distil contemporary fascination for a technology that allows one to gaze forever on that which is about to disappear(Poole, 2005, p. 165).

Photographs therefore, stay as “raw material” or “facts” whose significance lies not in the detailed elements they unveil of specific incidents, but instead in the descriptive messages they convey about the structure of several diverse happenings and encounters (ibid. 2005, p.169).

Interestingly, photographs relocate time and space, frame the view and bridge boundaries that are exclusive to a specific situation. The defined moment becomes symbolic of the whole event and stays on for the future as a piece of fact.

Photography a universally accessible medium has dramatically altered the sense of history and oneself, and has created an optical paradigm for the twenty-first century (Goin, 2001). It facilitates the process of storytelling and in several cases; a single photo can express a momentous amount of the evidence without using a single word that is the power of pictures.

### **Photography Made Easy with Digitalisation**

Digital technology has radically transformed the role of photography in society in numerous ways. In the initial stages when photography had started to gain prominence, those who possessed cameras were either the affluent or trained photographers. This was the situation as cameras were extremely expensive and supplementary work after photographs were taken was a must. In the present times with the help of substantial technological advancements, photographs can be taken digitally in their entirety and stored expediently onto memory cards or internal/external hard drives. Though there are possibilities of images being lost after being corrupt by virus but the plus side being once it is on the World Wide Web there are numerous methods to retrieve it.

A BBC report stated that as of the year 2011 approximately 2.5 billion people internationally owned a digital camera and the numbers are only growing exponentially. Besides, with the availability of phones and tablets having camera functions has modernized photography in society. Apart from having industry leading specifications, these cameras also have the facility to crop, edit and transform photographs right on the device itself.

A reference point which reinstates the importance of digital photography is the year 2011 when ground-breaking news stories - from the killing of Colonel Gaddafi to outburst of serious looting in England's summer riots were recorded on camera phones.

Digital photography is a combination of advanced technology, easy to use camera functions, enables to capture events much precisely without any professional help and therefore has started

to have a multifarious impact on anthropological work. Furthermore, this has unlocked the lines of communication, giving people the opportunity to share their photographs worldwide, thus making photographs available to one and all, who wish to seek them. All in all, digital technology has made capturing photographs much simpler, inexpensive and implementable by all.

From the crude form of Camera Obscura wherein images could be stored temporarily to the invention of gelatine dry plate silver bromide process by Richard Leach Maddox, wherein negatives did not have to be developed instantaneously, developments in the field of photography has been taken place by leaps and bounds. And the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks the arrival of digital technology which revolutionised the experience of photography holistically. The development of digital camera technology is interconnected to the growth of Television and Video technology. The recording and broadcast codes of audio-visual images via digital electrical impulses began to be used in camera imaging also. Also, the camera, computer, software industry along with the Worldwide Web is irrevocably interwoven making it possible for the user in experiencing the profits of camera usage to its wide-ranging possibilities.

The invention that ignited many a development in the camera industry took place in the year 2001, when the Kodak and Microsoft partnership assured that digital camera manufacturers could utilise the power of Picture Transfer Protocol (PTP) standard through Windows.

A number of digital camera models comes with the easy share functionalities which are compatible with Windows XP, thus it is possible to transfer digital camera pictures straight from the camera to the computers and then either print them or share them over email.

A look through the pages old photo albums always shows images that have turned yellow, scratched and just plain old. Storing printed film photographs or even negatives results in quality corrosion, digital photos on the other hand never lose their excellence. It is an established fact, that a digital photo will remain same many years after it has been taken, and it can be duplicated over and over again without losing their quality.

One of the most significant amenities of the digital camera is instantaneous feedback as all digital cameras include a small Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) screen, which is used for viewing

pictures immediately after capturing it. The availability of feedback helps in taking accurate pictures since the image can be reshot. This gives untrained photographers the option to retake pictures and get the best image, which implies that anthropologists can take pictures in their field visit without any professional help. This feature of digital cameras eliminates out the likelihood that one may go back to the darkroom and find out that they overlooked something essential. Water-resistant, dust proof, freeze proof, shock proof is what makes the rugged cameras unique. They are fashioned to endure a beating in all kinds of rudiments and become excellent documentation equipment for researchers who travel harsh locales.

As the higher-end digital development continues, the costs of the standard cameras have dropped down to such a point that even teenagers and young adults are owners of digital cameras. If this is the current trend then it is only right that the immense scope digital photography presents for documentation be exploited in the best possible way, particularly in fields like anthropology, ethnology and so on.

### **Anthropological Documentation in Northeast India Via Digital Photography**

The contemporary world has become almost entirely digitalised. A large number of people are adopting digital technologies to aid them in their daily lives. Then possibly the academia and research domains too cannot be left untouched by the advances of digital technology more specifically digital photography.

One of the pre-eminent advantages of using digital photography for anthropological documentation is that the prospective of missing an event or moment is eliminated, because by using different techniques an anthropologist can monitor the shoot, capture more varied pictures without having to worry about storage or film.

Digital photography opens the possibility of selecting which images to print and the autonomy to manipulate images, instead of going to traditional photo studios where out of 36 only few good photographs may come.

Digital images can be stored in different file formats which imply that the photographs exist as multiple originals, differently sized images that can be reused, edited, enlarged for various

studies without losing its original quality. Therefore, a photograph can continue to make diverse kinds of history in different places and reveal extraordinary truths about the human civilization. The North East India, is home to over 160 scheduled tribe communities and over 400 other sub-tribal communities scattered across eight states. Nearly 420 languages and dialects of diverse language families are used in a multifaceted and extensive ethno and socio-linguistic structure in this region. Around 70 percent of the population is primarily tribal, having similarities with other Mongolian, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic cultures. This geographical diversity by itself posits the spectacular multiplicity this region has in terms of ethnicity, language, food habits, customs and more, needless to say a spectacular breeding ground for anthropological work.

With the dawn of modern science, the past decade has witnessed rapid urbanization which has had an influence even on the lives of those who stay away from cities. The native people of the region, who dwell in the distant frontiers, have been witnessing a change in their cultures and customs owing to modernization. A look through vintage photographs gives a clear indication of the changes that have taken place in the lifestyles of the people; a trip down memory lane to a time which once existed was but will never again be. Modernization and the introduction of Christianity in the region has ushered in gigantic changes in the diverse social practices, traditions, beliefs and lifestyle of the tribal population, who form an essential element of the Indian polity. In the given circumstances wherein the tribal life and culture is rapidly changing, images are vital tool for documenting the ever evolving tribal society for one may not get to see what is today in the coming future.

Herein reference can be drawn of the works done on Pacific Islanders in early 20<sup>th</sup> century whereby photographs were extensively used to document their material culture, rituals, social arrangements, technology and environment, initially as native peoples of the South Seas, then as subjects under colonial rule. Such attempts unveiled “a historical methodology that relies on multiple trajectories, parallel and conflicting discourses, and approaches that look beyond the photograph, to find relationships between subjects and photographers and between photographers and universal narrative” (Quanchi, 2006, p. 165). In case of northeast India as well images as visual evidences can aid in uncovering an array of stories, incidents and cultural relationships not ignoring the fact that there are layers of truth rooted in a photograph. .



For instance, the practice of headhunting in Nagaland practically has been nullified with the last case being reported in the year 1970. The steady process of converting the tribes to Christianity began somewhere in the early 1900s. Today most of the Naga's have converted, left their headhunting customs and are followers of Christianity. The last head-hunters are in their old age, fading fast and will take to grave stories of headhunting. Like the Konyaks are known as the tattooed head-hunters of Nagaland, it would be indeed interesting to document their story photographically and create permanent evidence for use in the future.

Again, the largest river islands of the world Majuli, located midway in the Brahmaputra River, also home to a population of 1.5 lakh spread across 20 villages, is on the verge of extinction. Not only is the river island posited for annihilation, danger lingers on the 22 Satras in Majuli, which is the seat of Vaishnavite faith, culture and practice.

Yet, another place of interest is the Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in India, also the only Floating lake in the world, situated near Moirang in Manipur. An entire population survives on this lake, but faces many problems owing to environmental concerns.

The aforementioned are only illustrations or glimpses of the array of anthropological explorations that can be carried out in this region. Since the use of photography in anthropological research is relatively new, it is evident that for studying multifaceted socio-cultural life in the North-eastern region photography can be a vital documentation tool. Change cannot be bunged, but images can be used to create a visual document reminding the generations to come, of the beauty of the lives of the tribespeople in this region.

Already the tribesmen have transformed to a large extent and can be seen wearing suits and living in town houses, anthropological documentation via images enables 1) the process of analysing the multi-faceted life, culture, traditions of the tribes 2) also helps in understanding the similarities or differences between the tribes residing in different parts of the globe 3) using the images the complexities of tribal culture can be deciphered 4) historical periods, change and continuity can be examined juxtaposing archival images along with the contemporary ones. It is pertinent to note that "photographic representations is not merely a question of visual recognition or semiotic but that visual experiences are mediated through the material nature and material

performances in the formats and presentations of visual images. Photography is not merely the instrument of indexical inscription, it is a technology for visual display experienced as meaningful” (Edwards, 2002, p. 67).

A debate that cannot be over-ridden is that of subjectivity in taking images by the anthropologists. It is evident that in anthropology words reign supreme as Margaret Mead once said that anthropology is a “discipline of words”. Images are often not considered imperative, for many anthropologists regard photographs and other visual matter as less objective, compared to field notes. Many will argue that it even images can be manipulated with the help of software’s like Photoshop, Picasa and others. The dispute involving words and images persists even today given the fact that the process of capturing of images is extremely selective. But on the flip side never-ending editorial selections are also made while taking field notes. The resolution to focus on one specific incident or dealing increases the likelihood of leaving out other potentialities. Thus, there is always the need to make choices in any observational method whether it involves taking notes, photographs, recording audio or filming.

It is difficult to incarcerate the whole of any human interaction. What is significance is that images can be used as a part of the larger anthropological process. Photography has been used in anthropological study from its nascent stage and acts as an additional document, an object to improve other data, as an instrument for re-joining to pasts or retrieval of lost processes and practices, and digital photography can only enhance his process.

In the current sphere of academic research, photography and the use of images have unlocked the option for a wealthier and comprehensive level of engagement with spaces and people, and digital photography is emerging as a primary tool.

“Anthropological studies are expanding into virtual as well as geographical image dominated contexts that determine what is important in media making. This expansion involves cross-cultural study of three dimensional visual data, including the settings, objects, and traces of material culture, and critical ethnography as an act of taking risks, building trust, understanding context, eliciting multiple views, confessing one's sins, and searching for meaning” (Stokrocki, 2006, p.50).As a research apparatus more so in the case of Northeast India, photography’s

apparent credibility makes it a distinct class of document, which can be utilized as a visual counterpart to written comment, assimilating direct observation with realistic illustration.

An example can be drawn from the works of Switzerland based anthropologist Alban von Stockhausen, who used over 400 historical images to reconstruct with meticulousness the happenstances between the Nagas, the colonial rulers and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf and Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann who travelled among the Naga during the 1930's. His work was a part of his dissertation project and was titled “IMAG(IN)ING THE NAGAS The Pictorial Ethnography of Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf”.

Digital photography thus provides a steady, tangible manuscript for investigation and documentation in a detached and ordinarily understood visual language. It is also a dependable means of storing, assembling, and understanding visual information.

More precisely, the main utility of anthropological photography validates patterns in cultural multiplicity and its integration, religious behaviour, marriage customs, societal control, festivals, etc., and also documents the outcome of these patterns on both the culture and the location of interest.

Photography is particularly beneficial in this respect, because it allows the completeness of each behavioural pattern to be fundamentally conserved while preserving the spatial and circumstantial departure imperative for investigative cross-referencing and methodical study. And anthropologist can make use of photographs to its maximum advantage with the aid of digital photography.

With the advent of digital photography the issues of hefty expenditure on photo printing and film is eliminated, storing and archiving images does not require physical space for its digital format and can be shared by all, and most importantly taking images has become less complex. Then, one can only wonder why the benefits of digitization and digital photography should not be used for anthropological documentation, in this case more so for North-eastern part of India. Having understood the importance and usefulness of digital photography as a research tool, one cannot override the fact that each technology has its own shortcomings and that it has to be used

cautiously such that it does not come in the way of objectivity in research. For many have argued that technological advances are not absolute benedictions.

## **Conclusion**

Words often need paraphrasing, be it from English into any regional language, or from informal conversation into formal official language. Conversely, images can often communicate for themselves, as the saying goes 'A picture is worth a thousand words'. Photographs can go a long way in creating a non-verbal shared point to initiate or develop communication cutting across all barriers. With the aid of sophisticated technology the importance of visual communication and records is being felt and also being used in numerous domains, why then leave anthropology behind. In simple words it can be said images assist to conjure up the experience of a time, place, event, etc. through reminiscence or imagination.

The ability of the camera to document events as it is, has made it an irreplaceable instrument for carrying out research. In the early days, the camera was used to document evidence on field visits, demonstrate representations of tribesmen living in remote areas or even record the discovery of new animal species. Technological advances in the domain of photography have most certainly given it the necessary push, to become easy for mass use in almost all domains of research and development. Contemporary predictions about the prospect of using photography in anthropology have suggested that with the increasing availability of low cost digital technology, the use of images is on the edge of a great leap forward.

Modern digital cameras are far more avant-garde than cameras that were manufactured previously. Digital images unlock the leeway of exploring the humans as a subject and provide anthropologists the opportunity to document events as it occurs. The exactitude, clarity, sharpness, neutrality and believable credibility of the digital images assists in edifying newer insights about the civilization as a whole, insight which might else be lost. Here, it can be indicated that digital photography aids in better documentation, based on the elementary proposition that photographs are visual testimony of reality, which contains facts, corroboration and legitimacy. Digital photography in the present milieu is merely a supplementary equipment to discover the nuances of photography in anthropological work. It is worthy of mention that as a

practical research apparatus, photography is outstandingly handy in numerous aspects of anthropological research like physical anthropology, a natural science related to the natural aspects of human beings such as human origins, cultural differences and evolution; cultural anthropology which explores human behaviour; archaeology which labels and dates the remnants of ancient buildings, artefacts, eco-facts and applied anthropology which uses the research of cultural and physical anthropologists to formulate educational, social and economic stratagem.

North-eastern region has so much to be uncovered in terms of understanding the lives of its inhabitants from anthropological point of view. What better then to use the lens and document every aspect possible, not only for present day anthropological work but also make it accessible for re-examination and reference for the future. Ultimately, the aim of using photographs in anthropology is to explicateevidently the developmental stages of the varied civilization in its entirety, for without photographs the written description is often too sparse to be valuable.

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