

# Visual Turn of North-East As An Argumentative Necessity for The Need of New Disciplinary Trajectories

## Abstract

This paper attempts to map a range of issues that have emerged in the discipline of North-East studies and how the focus of culture, society and history has taken a 'visual turn'. The main argument of this paper is to trace and locate the archival information pertaining to North-East India be it – political sociology, folklore, history, anthropology and literary studies and to argue for their shared interest in visual evidence. This visual archives of the past as well as the everyday life aided by the technologies is crucial to understand how the discipline of Visual culture studies in a North-East context poses a pedagogic challenge to the larger domain of the discipline which is rooted thoroughly in the main stream 'Indian' sensibilities and aesthetics. This paper examines both the larger disciplinary understanding of 'visual culture' and the potential for Visual Culture Studies in North-East to trace interconnections as well as fissures to point towards new trajectories for the emerging discipline.

**Keywords:** Visual Culture Studies, Culture Studies, Media Pedagogy, North-East Studies, North-East, Media Studies, New Media.

## Introduction

This paper is largely an attempt to locate the discipline of Visual Cultures in the geographical context of North-East India. To contextualize the concerns of such a disciplinary premise, I chart out few issues that have emerged in North-East studies and how the focus of culture, society and history has taken a 'visual turn'.

The main argument of this paper is mostly centred on locating the archival information pertaining to North-East India. Be it – Political Sociology, Media Studies, Folklore, History, Anthropology or literary studies, I argue that the new shared interest of these disciplines is in its visual evidence. This visual archives of the past as well as the everyday life aided by the technologies is crucial to understand how the discipline of Visual culture studies in a North-East context poses a pedagogic challenge to the larger domain of visual culture studies which is rooted thoroughly in the main stream 'Indian' sensibilities and aesthetics.

## Aims of the Study

This paper on its trail would also examine both the larger disciplinary understanding of 'visual culture' and the potential for Visual Culture Studies in North-East to trace interconnections as well as fissures to point towards new trajectories for the emerging discipline.

The first section of the paper is on the advent of digital media technologies as an aid and intervention in pedagogical practises of visual anthropology. The second section would focus on the two recent scholarships that explore the practice of visual anthropology in the largely established ethnographical idea of North-East studies. The last section of the paper would highlight the main challenges of visual studies as a media discipline in the context of North-East India.

## Advent of digital media technologies as an extension of visual media

The advent of digital media technologies marks a prominent shift towards the visual turn of North-East and thereby it also announces the arrival of new modes of inquiry in the domain of North-East studies. This is also a clarion call to think about new challenges that have come to the forefront in the anthropological study of media and allied disciplines. For visual media anthropology scholars and enthusiasts alike, it is of peculiar interest, how people engage with digital media and technologies; how different digital modes of communication are integrated and embedded in



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day to day life; and how the visual element is entangled with different media and cultural processes. The visual turn of North-East aided by digital media technologies also signals the growing significance for the need of newer disciplinary modes of understanding embodied media cultural practices.

I emphasize here, that the visual turn of North-East could be seen/read as a paradigm shift in the arena of visual culture studies that might indicate towards the much needed newer trajectories for North-East studies.

#### **Digital Visualities**

Internet, mobile network devices and digital media have become most common means of visual production, consumption, communication and representation. Moreover the internet platform provide spaces such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp to share, use and consume a vast array of visual artefacts. This paves way for the change in the very mode of communicative and cultural practices. This may be similar to how the shift from the print to the digital/visual happened. This seemingly simpler process of transition presents a set of new challenges and possibilities for the discipline of media ethnography and media anthropology alike, when it comes to the very inquiry into the visual modes/elements.

Digital Visuality as a concept has explored in depth, the increasing interconnections between 'the digital' and 'the visual'. The Nordic Network for Digital Visuality (2018), defines the term Digital Visuality as "the production and consumption of digitally mediated expressions of selfhood and society through visual and audio-visual interfaces" focusing in particular on "the role of digital mediation and multimodality in contemporary social life, the ubiquity of visual recording devices, and the convergence between computer-based and mobile platforms for communication and interaction".

The very process of fixing digital visuality as quintessential aspect of many recent studies in the discipline of new media is to merely succumb to a simpler stance of essentializing the triviality of a technological determinism. It is a marked departure from the very critical thought that implores the very idea of what it is to be social/political/ in a digital/visual age. It is imperative to delve into different conceptual approaches to the digital that can contribute to the newer modes of inquiry into what constitutes the visual and Visual-turn of North-East.

A mere look into the online content of social media pages of North-East, be it the Facebook pages for memes or community pages or even lighter vein news content would point out to how cultural identities are constructed online and how these in turn serve as cultural agencies. These formations of 'digital cultural identities' are similar to the previously existing pre-digital (read print) forms of identity construction and visual representation. The construction of a digital self or a digital virtual identity is not merely about the individual or individual aspirations, but it is inclusive of the larger visual representation of the region/ community.

#### **Visual Anthropology of North-East India**

The second section of paper moves into the idea of social representation as a possible theoretical framework. This illustration employs visual archives of the colonial and missionary officials to consider whether visual archive can provide a historical narrative of everyday life of people. Also this section would demonstrate how the visual turn of North-East India has also tapered into an "affective turn"<sup>1</sup>.

To illustrate how the social history of a region can come alive when recreated through visual forms, I would analyse two recent scholarships in the visual anthropology of North-East, 1. "*The Camera as Witness: A social History of Mizoram, Northeast India*" by Joy KL Pachua and Willen Van Schendel and 2. *Modern Mizoram History, Culture, Poetics* by P Thirumal, Laldinpui and C Lalozami. The choice of these books is also because of its attempt to engage as well as disengage with colonial archives and few constitutive cultural moments from the lived memory of Mizo past.

Most existing scholarship on North-East region concentrates on historic formation of states through cohesive ideologies of nation. Few studies highlight the ethnic tension amidst different communities of the region. Some works have engaged with the idea of Christianity as an important colonial- modern intervention in the region that has solely aimed at producing counter subjectivities against the larger nation-state. Such scholarly approaches have vastly produced extensive knowledge on North-East region and its myriad representations of culture and community. Yet these approaches restrict to a mere representational mode and do not allow an experiential mode of knowing and being in the culture.

These two works could be possibly read as a departure from disciplinary modes of understanding embodied cultural practices. These works also mark a departure into the possibilities of employing affective archives, which is representative of the intensity of lived life unlike the limited textual colonial archives which records mostly the power structures.

#### **Review of Literature**

*The Camera as Witness*(2015) is located within the visual realm between history and anthropology that finely portrays the shift in the time and the modes of institution be it the arrival of colonialism, missionary practices, nationalism and modernity. It attempts to use the extensive available visual archives and employs a vast resource of about seventeen thousand photos to convey a possibility of a history rather 'their' story. It functions as a visual testament to "provide a corrective to many received ideas about the history of this region, both among the historians of India and among Mizo historians (pg.9). The finesse of this work is read when one conceives the ideas of the authors' stance of an alternative gaze and the assortment of these photographs not as mere artefacts of any ethnic culture but as an employment of "discursive formation" towards constructing colonial and post-colonial structures of power and knowledge.

The concerns of visual anthropologists are highlighted in the books through

"Photographs that act as carriers of historical evidence but they come alive only in our gaze... In this nook, we have tried to be explicit about the political and emotional intentions of those who produced (and reproduced) the photographs as well as about our own intentions in presenting the photographs in particular configurations" (pg.16)

The visual documents from the colonial archive is an historical assessment of how the distinctive Mizo identity is arrived by the mid-twentieth century that was aided by the exposure of the hill people, through the transformation of religion and culture, an adaptation into the process of modernity through the invention of written word for an oral language, and education. The photographs from this section are largely indicative of the adoption of new institutions and practices within the new social order. The images of people in the western attire and the presence of schools and churches and local women as nurses in candid moments not merely present as simplistic argument of westernization taking over the local hill communities. Rather the authors repeatedly go on about asserting the agential role of Mizo in constant conscious negotiation of different aspects of modernity to shape a distinct form of Mizo modernity.

The photographs in the book also highlights the moments of separation and integration through the juxtaposition of the images. The Mizo sensibilities are at work when the authors put on display the diversified influences of western influences on music and sense of fashion. This seems to be at tense and in contradiction with the very way the state chooses to portray an ornamental tribal image to stand in tandem with unity in diversity to claim a space in the larger national imagination. The book for its part is also replete with images of popular culture such as music and dress, portraying the idea of cool musicians and fashionable dressers who in some ways are also iconic to the very idea of transnational modernity within India.

The photographs don't necessarily operate from limited frames of colonial/missionary/post-colonial/secessionist state, but also is complete with the inner realm of domestic and intimate life worlds of Mizo communities. The visual elements rooted along with textual narrative of history and chronicles of making of a distinct Mizo identity makes a compelling possibility of alternate history of the region. A question that starkly appears from the onset of such narrative can possibly be theoretical ambit to understand or to interrogate the limitedness of the visual aid as an important marker. The visual anthropology of such work would not merely reduce or limit the scope of camera as a mere witness. One cannot wonder but only think of McLuhan in this context. What implication do visual art forms bring into the realm of history or the making of a region/community/identity? The manuscript form of religious scriptures offer a more legally sanctioned divinity and divinely sanctioned legitimacy to the different modes of religious power. Can one argue? or do we need to reduce the possibility of camera to a mere document or witness to understand life-worlds, that provides a chronology

of negotiations of Mizo-ness within the new social order in Independent India?

How does one place/understand the significance of visual records of the separatist movement documented here with photos of destruction caused by Indian Air force?, as the authors writes here, as the only instance of the state conducting air raids on its own subjects. This work presented as a possible investment into art and visual cultures of North-East could have possibly surpassed its interrogation of the visual records beyond its limited archival nature and its worth as evidence. This work may have a lacuna of its shortcomings in theoretical arguments and augmentations, but nevertheless it succeeds in reconfiguring the confines of colonial archives in a much warranted creative manner by aptly employing the tactic of looking back at visual in a different manner.

#### **Visual artefacts as archives**

The other work in discussion as part of the paper is the book *Modern Mizoram* (2018), a recent work on Mizoram encourages a possibility to think about new ways of engaging as well as disengaging with modernity. This dual mode of engagement and disengagement forms the basis for interpretative study of colonial archives and few constitutive cultural moments from the lived memory of Mizo past.

The authors start out with conceptualizing the idea of 'Embodied Mizo rationality' where the idea of Mizo self is characterised by an awareness of 'their being'. It is rooted beyond a historically constituted social entity, in other words being soulfully manifested in one's realm of senses, rather than being merely in a given space and time. This important formulation by the authors also mark their departure from the time tested disciplinary modes of studying a culture in its limited historical and anthropological methods and gaze. These potentially highlight the idea of aural and visual as an important advent in the realm of affect studies which also extends certain legitimacy towards performances in everyday life as a possible site of critical enquiry.

The Mizo cultural practices taken up for study in this book are text- *Mizo Chanchin Laishuih*, the first handwritten *Lushai* Newspaper (1898), performance- *Puma Zai* a festival (1907-11) to commemorate the composition of a new lyric and image- *Pheichham*, (2012) a sculpture created by a young Mizo artist, James Khamliansawta. The inherent performative modes of these texts are interpreted in detail with a contextual reading located within junctures of early colonial period of Mizo history (1890-1910) and across temporalities. The authors argue this period as a distinct historic moment when the traditional *Lushai* practices were prevalent along with the newly emerging Christian practices. This authorial intervention is important to understand how a Mizo way of life incorporated with Christian faith is on its arrival.

The *Mizo Chanchin Laishuih* is an important artefact of this period. The handwritten newspaper is an evidence of the growth of literacy among the Mizos as well the *Lushai* language acquiring a script. The history that the authors trace from the limited colonial

archives depart from the traditional media history that has painted histories of newspaper elsewhere in mainland India as anti-colonial history. The authors have taken up four blocks of stories from the second issue of *Mizo ChanchinLaishui* dated 2th August 1989 for a constitutive reading of the content itself alongside the cultural and historical circumstance. Such an exercise demonstrates the very way in which the cosmic world of Mizos is transformed to a reductive taxonomic ways of knowing and living. It also informs how the stress of acculturation following colonial modernity had its blow on the very organic integrity of Mizo ways of life. The fact that MCL as a newspaper had its content filled with objects and subjects, humans and animals, modern medicine and old healing practices also went onto become the familiar other. This as the authors argue brought in a marked distinction between the native modes of understanding the world and the evolving colonial modes of knowledge.

#### **Event as a Visual Archive**

The book also explores an interpretative reading of a festival, *Puma Zai* which went on as a performance, a ritual for about four years (1907-11). The authors attempt a reading of this performance as an instance through which they highlight the subtle differences that the Lushais initially had with the colonial modernity. This gives a scope to look at *Puma Zai* predominantly as a response to colonial administration and Christianity. The primary argument of this section is the speculation that *Puma Zai* festival could be a way of the Lushai's remembrance of a time before their life worlds were immersed into symbolic and social activities of the colonial and Christian machineries. A hermeneutic reading of this play/performance, evoked alongside with Gadamer stance locates music as possibly a central performativity form native to Mizo life. The interpretative reading of authors point out towards the reluctance of this art form to be merely reduced to a recorded historical event.

The reception to such a festival was that some chose to completely embrace into the new ways of singing and dancing, while some felt the need to move away with such an influence. The huge popularity of *Puma Zai*, also being irruptive, prompted the missionaries to sanitise the Lushai senses with a more secular and divine modes of performances. This section on *Puma Zai* is evidential to the arguments that the authors make throughout the book – the art form be it singing along with listening created and nourished by the Mizo sensibility in turn nurtures the being of a Mizo.

An important study of this work entails the sculpture *Pheichham*, created by a young Mizo artist James. *Pheichham* is one of the many characters from Mizo folklore, which is deformed and has only one leg and needs some human being to carry it anywhere. The interpretative reading of the art as a fusion of pre-colonial animistic past and Christian present posits a possibility for the foundation of Mizo self in its poetics, politics and aesthetics that are wholly constituted in different expressions. The choice of the authors to study this sculpture also points out to the absence of

the entities of visual cultures, be it art galleries or cinema halls. They argue that the Mizo sensibility has responded well to different media technologies especially the music videos and Television programs. *Pheichham* seems to be a point of inauguration for a novel experience in modern conception of art and representations. The authors read this coming of *Pheichham* as an art as a context for Mizos to coming into a time of representation.

The sculpture, *Pheichham*<sup>2</sup>, which combines a pre-Christian cosmological figure with a Christian religious symbol I(Wings), belongs to this younger generation. The image gives an impression of a syncretic creation. However, this sculpture is symptomatic of an effort to produce an authentic Mizo experience through an aesthetic consciousness ingrained in the art schools located in mainland Indian metropolises like Kolkata and Hyderabad. How does Mizo sensibility, which refuses to reduce entities to objective properties, work with both Christian literacy and an Indic-centred aesthetic consciousness?

Further, the sculptural image draws on a pre-literate Lushai cosmic world alongside recognizable Christian imagery. The ability to make visible the image of a folkloric Lushai spirit that was originally circulated only in aural imaginary, and to establish a bond with the Christian God by inserting wings on the body of the spirit, is read as a break from the earlier Protestant disregard for pre-Christian Lushai cosmic imagery. However, such a representational reading does not allow the scope to address the sense generativity of the Mizo sensibility. The presentation of this sculpture focuses on its capacity to unfreeze itself and reveal the movement between sense and meaning, logos and its disruption, presentation, and representation.

The authors through their conceptualization of the category Mizo sensibility work towards not merely a re-creation of poetic past that is closely embedded in early colonial period, but they also strive to present its continuity in the contemporary. To an extent, this idea of locating Mizo sensibility to comprehend the poetics and history of a north-eastern state is also a radical departure from disciplinary modes of understanding embodied cultural practices.

This brings us back to questions regarding representation and what constitutes the elements of representation within the context of North-East; the possibilities of employing affective archives, which is representative of the intensity of lived life unlike the limited textual colonial archives which records mostly the power structures. This also raises serious pedagogical challenges when one considers Visual turn as an important intervention in the realm of North-East studies. The last section of the paper would proceed onto formulate few arguments where these interventions are considered as a paradigm shift in the arena of media studies.

#### **Visual Studies as Academic Discipline**

The past two decades have witnessed a vast expanse in the curriculum of media studies across all institutes which offer Media and Communication as a major subject of graduation and post-graduation. This entails different forms of visual content more

precisely. The digitality of all visual phenomena, in its pervasive form including those strictly visual – from painting and film to experimental video or music videos and performances theatre, music concert and all the forms of applied arts: graphic and industrial design, fashion and advertising. This interest in visual practice is mostly accompanied by the interest in visual theories, primarily in the new discipline of visual culture studies that keep acquiring academic legitimacy at universities across the country.

Few concerns that I want to raise here as a way to conclude this paper would be on the central notion of what are the aesthetics that we primarily agree upon as something that is intrinsic and unique to the North-East cultures. The different academic courses that falls under the garb of culture studies, media studies or visual studies usually subscribe to a certain set of standard texts that appeals to the notion of western universality of not precisely a form of artistic or visual aesthetics that is much more rooted in the ethos and pathos of a larger Indian albeit a restricted sense of limited imagination

The pervasiveness and the inclusivity ideal of digitally mediated technologies offer an opportunity where, the users of images became the producers of images, within an unrestrained circular process, wherein images yield new insights, while insights demand their instantaneous visual theoretical formulations. The development and expansion of digital media technologies have transformed the traditionally understood visual images into a new communication mode that is accessible to everyone. Such a visual turn of media and media embodied cultural practices would also warrant a new context where the sense of affect that these medium generates would also be an important intervention and act a scope for the newer trajectories of disciplinary knowledge to emerge.

### Conclusion

The arguments/instances/contexts charted in the paper are mostly an array of jumbled/juxtaposed methods that are situated in/within the digital spaces, academic scholarship and academic pedagogical practices of media disciplines. To an extent, I would like to emphasise the disciplinary crisis within the curriculum of Media and communication as to what

constitutes as knowledge and methodologies of media practices. In this larger background, the idea of communication as a discipline that is rooted in the social sciences to its flight across disciplines of art and humanities only makes it all the more challenging to contain the visual turn of a region to a mere singular mode of limited political investigation.

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### Endnotes

1. *Here affect not only refers to the concept in terms of human body alone, but also conceptualized in tandem with the technologies that enable us to 'see' 'feel', 'affect' and as well produce bodily and mental emotions beyond the body's biological, physiological and psychological constraints.*
2. *Pheichham is the name given to a creature that is most likely a djinn or a type of goblin. The exact definition isn't clear since there aren't many written accounts of these creatures. Instead of causing harm to humans, they do the opposite—bring them good fortune. These creatures are one-legged, so when they fall down it's extremely difficult for them to get back up. If anyone comes across a Pheichham that has fallen down and helps it up, they are granted a wish. Till date, the term Pheichham man or 'catching a Pheichham' is still used to describe having immense luck*