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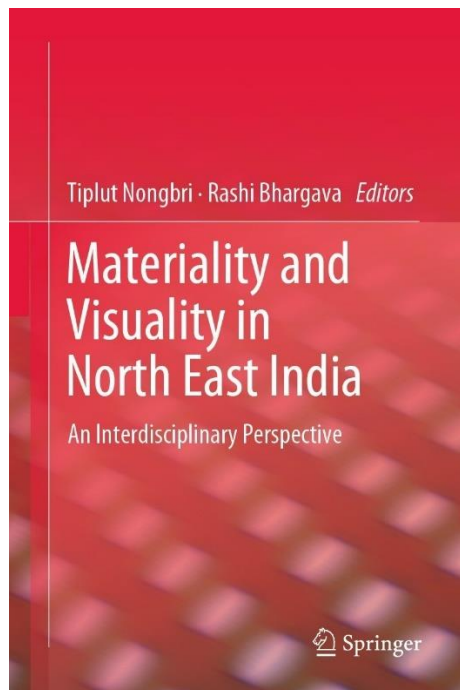
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Book Review

***Materiality and Visuality in North-East India: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* by Tiplut Nongbri and Rashi Bhargava**

Publisher: Springer, Singapore. Date of publication: 2021. Language: English. ISBN 978-981-16-1969-4 ISBN 978-981-16-1970-0 (eBook) Price of the book- INR 10,152 (pages 217)



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Materiality and Visuality in North-East India (2021), is a valuable addition to the field of material and visual studies, bridging the gap between fields that are seen as belonging to two different discursive domains. While material studies engages with the link between people and things that are deployed to signify or question identity, visual studies grapples with the production and distribution of visual images. The foreword penned by Patricia Uberoi underlines the importance of this bridge as it recognises the agency of the subject in their representation, contesting the dominant colonial and neo-colonial narratives and the ubiquitous 'culture industry.' The foreword also narrates the journey of 'Uberoi Collection of Indian Calendar Art' which emerged at a time when Indian art historians were solely interested in antiquated pieces while those working within

the domain of folk narratives and crafts bemoaned the loss/disappearance of artefacts or made them marketable to be used as home décor. Film critics premised their judgement by making a distinction between what qualifies as art and what is 'popular', while social science considered the idea of interpreting images as frivolous when juxtaposed with 'real' social, cultural, and political problems. It was much later that a serious engagement with visual studies began in humanities and social sciences.

This volume was a consequence of the discussions and deliberations at the International Conference by the same name organised by the Centre for North-East Studies and Policy Research (CNESPR), Jamia Millia Islamia in 2019. It looks at photography, advertisements, clothing, textile production, indie comics, foodscapes, musical forms, tea gardens, and digital media by tremendously expanding the range of visual and material signs. The book focuses on the cognitive dimension of images by looking at how their construction, representation, and circulation enable a certain kind of construction of the self and its other.

Although North-East has diverse and various sub-regional cultures, it is often seen as a monolithic, homogenous category by 'mainstream' India. The editors and authors do not succumb to the temptation of offering an alternative definition or understanding of the category of North-East but make a strong case for agency in defining and representing their selves instead of being the object of material and visual studies. Although it is set in the North-East of India the authors do not attempt a sociological reading of the term, instead, they build their argument by taking it as a geopolitical space to unravel the issues it encounters. The focus on material and visual culture offers a window to unravel the changes that have happened in the region and discusses how and why certain images and discourses are produced and disseminated and how can we better understand the lived and discursive realities of the present. The contributors to the volume use the available analytical tools of humanities and social sciences but also intervene methodologically by not reducing materiality and visuality to aesthetic delights and insist on their ability to construct, contest and disseminate meanings.

The linguistic turn in the social sciences iterated the significance of text and textuality but the last three decades have witnessed a material and visual turn with a focus on objects and images which constitute culture. Instead of looking at methodological approaches and analytical tools within social sciences in a linear way, it is imperative that we draw upon all of these to sharpen our understanding of the complexities and ambiguities of our times while also being self-reflective of our approaches. Instead of a mere structural and semiotic analysis, the material and visual turn are revelatory of the functioning of power and systems of knowledge production and distribution. The authors and editors argue how material and visual are "powerful agents in not only ways of seeing but also ways of knowing and, consequently, of being" (p. xi). This shift in approach also makes us alert to why certain forms of knowledge appear and disappear at certain moments of time in history and why some images are circulated more than others. This shift of lens also shows how communities in the North-East are defining themselves and their cultural identity, although it remains to be seen how these definitions are repetitions or contestations of existing ideas about the North-East.

The material culture of North-East India has been a subject of discussion in fields as diverse as history, museology, anthropology, geography, ethnography, etc. but they have largely been seen

as artefacts or objects of a social structure or organization. In both colonial and post-colonial research, they have been reproduced in written texts to complement the argument, thus indicating the logophilia and iconophobia of disciplines like anthropology. The choice of images is solely contingent on the whims and fancies of the ethnographer with those who are being photographed being completely robbed of a voice and agency. Avitoli Zimo argues in her chapter how early anthropologists used photographs to prove their presence and their 'scientific approach' with a complete absence of self-reflexivity while depicting the 'exotic' other in the form of Naga tribes. The exoticization of North-East India has continued since colonial times, an approach that is theoretically unsound and dangerous since policy-making is often governed by stereotypes about the North-East.

A deeper focus on material and spiritual as "communicative agents (non-human actors) and objects of knowledge production" also helps us understand the sites where these objects are produced and circulated. Objects exist in relation to each other and materiality is linked to immateriality, thus the absence of something is as significant as its presence in terms of its contribution to meaning. The volume draws upon W. J. T Mitchell's understanding of visuality as a dialectical relationship between images and society and Ramaswamy's "regimes of seeing and being seen" (2003, xiv). Nicholas Mirzoeff's visuality (how dominant regimes separate, classify and create a hierarchy of images) and counter-visuality (how the dominated assert their subjectivity) is also enabling to look at the structures and processes of North-East India and the thorny relationship between the dominant and the dominated. Chapters such as that of Alban von Stockhausen look at photography and clothing to understand how colonial modernity is embodied and the way the lens created by the colonial gaze determines one's perception of one's self. Through its methodological approach, the chapter challenges the binary of observer and observed to indicate the fluid nature of the relationship between the two.

The book is divided into three sections — "Objects, Images and Meanings: Methodological Interventions", "Material and Visual as Vehicles of Power and Hegemony: Adaptations and Negotiations" and "Imagination, Imagery and Identity: Representations and Subversions." The three chapters in the first section contribute to the ever-expanding field of Naga studies, for instance, the chapter by Alison Kahn and Catriona Child attempts to unravel the history of museums containing Naga artefacts in Europe, imagining them as biographical entities undertaking a journey from the museum to Nagaland and back, collecting new voices or commentary on the museums by the source communities. The chapters in the second section with a focus on tea estates in Assam, photographs were taken during official events in Arunachal Pradesh between 1950 and 1970, musical practices of the Hau-Tangkhul community in Mizoram, sartorial practices of the Mizos, and images of tea in print advertisements such as that of *Times of India* in the 1940s engage with how objects are embedded in power relations and how communities respond to these objects. For instance, the chapter by Prithiraj Borah and Rowena Robinson discusses the gendered space of the *cha-bagan* of Assam by focusing on material structures such as the *Bungalow*, and the dissemination of images of *minis* (women plantation workers) on social media. The hierarchical and deeply entrenched power dynamics are glossed over by the idyllic and exotic images of plantations in advertisements, billboards etc. The third section while looking at food and foodscapes, the metaphorical use of momo in C. Sailo's graphic novel *Momo Sapiens*, the ways in which Assam has been imagined over the years, and the textile

practices of the Tangkhul Nagas sdddd a cautionary note on the dangers of romanticising or glamourising any and every act of resistance/subversion.

All the chapters in the volume with their close scrutiny of materiality and visuality indicate the intermeshing of what we see, how we derive meaning from, "seeing, knowing and being" (p. xxv), and processes that change with the change in social, cultural, economic and political contexts. This volume is crucial in terms of its ethnographic focus on the North-East, the methodological interventions in the sustained focus on materiality and visuality, and its thematic link, i.e., the dialectic between ways of seeing, epistemology and ontology. Although the book focuses on North-East India, the broader focus on materiality and visuality lends it a universal appeal, especially with regard to the erstwhile colonised communities.

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