

Visual Sociology

The visual has acquired significance in the contemporary world and any understanding of the social has to consider the importance of the visual. Sociology has a rich body of work in the area and is an established discipline in the international academia. Visual Sociology has so far not been an agenda of Indian Sociological Society. The theoretical and methodological potential of Visual Sociology or Sociology of Visual Expressions are embodied in the very nature of Visuals constituting a 'Text' and 'Method'. To elaborate, this Group will look at:

- **Text** in visuals, as reflected in the objective culture depicted in works of art, artifacts such as machines, tools and books that are products of subjective efforts and culture.
- Examine how they reflect human needs, intentions, purpose, and
- Look at how desires undergo refinement and
- The construction of self image.

The question what constitute visual sociology and expressions is important to raise here. There are varying forms reflexive of visuals, broadly classified into two: Visual expressions, and Visual arts further classifiable into two, Fine arts and Performing arts. Visual expressions include literary reflections through dance, drama, poetry, narratives, semiotics (aesthetics expressions *raga* and *rasa*, and symbolism), folk songs and tales, mythologies, and linguistic materials. Visual arts including fine arts represent ethnographic artifacts, inscriptions, paintings, drawings, architecture, designs, sculptures, and monuments. Both the components- visual expressions and performing arts are based on scientific principles, and provide sufficient methodological tools of understanding culture and social structure of a society, cross-cultural influences across nation-states boundaries, institutional evolution, and social, economic and political change. In this way, visuals constitute a source of knowledge thereby reflect upon their linkages with existing sources and practices thereby add to development and growth of sociology of knowledge.

The linkages with knowledge are visible from the historical focus on as well as the sociological connotations attached to visuals in social philosophy, history and civilization of western and Indian subcontinent since antiquity. Briefly, one can refer here to Greek art, architecture, and sculptures of the ancient times besides their aesthetic sensibilities and scientific skills also had

significant role, in manifest and latent terms, in creating a structure of consciousness and nationalist sentiments. In the Indian context, *Shrimadbhagwat Gita*, a Hindu sacred Text since long bridged past, present and the future, instilling a consciousness of being optimist in the long drawn process of life and death, a process depicting continuity of human existence and change in the actors. A number of notable works of western social philosophers (e.g. Plato's *Theory of Art and Aesthetics*; Paolo Euron's *Art, Beauty and Imitation in Plato's Philosophy*; Aristotle's *The Poetics of Aesthetics*; Victoria D. Alexander's *Sociology of the Arts: Exploring Fine and Popular Forms*; George Simmel & others *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics; Theory of Culture and Society*; and many other such works), provide a great deal on academic properties. Among the Indian thinkers (namely Bharata Muni's classical work (composed between 1500-1400 BC) *Natya Shastra*; Abhinavagupt's almost 1000 years ago written *Abhinavabharati* and 9th century commentary *Dhavanyalokalocana* of *Anandavardhana*; Radhakamal Mukherjee's *Social Functions of Art*; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's *The Dance of Shiva*; "The Aims of Indian Art", *Studies in Comparative Religion*; *The Gods of Asia- Image, Text, and Meaning*; and many others) suggest visuals havng functional significance in the perpetuation of culture and traditions of a society. Somehow, even with given vast literature and visual resources in India very limited attention has been paid to the study of visual expressions, culture and structure of Indian society.

The western scholarship given their limited philosophical resource materials capitalized the study of visual culture and formalized this field into distinct discipline of sociology way back in 1800. Although it took more than one and a half century for it to become a recognized discipline of sociological research and analysis, American Sociological Association, for the first time, organized a session on sociology of art in 1954. Subsequently, an international congress on art and society was organized in Sweden in 1968. In the mid-1980s, International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) set up to expand the discipline but could not become an independent entity. The reason was more political and not lack of academic depth. IVSA failed to garner couple of more votes. Nonetheless, in view of its potential to be a discipline with theoretical and methodological values it became a section of American Sociological Association. In the meanwhile it also gained importance in 'UK and Europe continental, Middle East, Russia, Asia and South America, thus acquiring a disciplinary status in many universities and departments of sociology in the United States. Finally, the International Sociological Association formally organized a Thematic Group on Visual Sociology in 2009. After the success of the event, the group

was elevated to Working Group in 2013. Now it is a recognized research committee in the international sociological forums, and a regular feature of ISA conferences world under the title Research Committee (RC 57).

Significance and scope of Visual Sociology in India. With the given rich culture and civilization of India, has a great potential to contribute to sociology of knowledge through teaching, learning and analysis of visual expressions and thereby enrich Indian sociological theory and methodology. A project *Visual Expressions: Culture and Social Structure* carried out by me under the aegis of Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (2011-2013), significant revelations emerged *vis-à-vis* the significance of visuals not only in the development of aesthetic sensibilities of a society but also the meaning signs, symbols, and icons had in the culture and structure of society but also in discovering Indian modernity during the ancient times, evolution, growth and development of religion, religion and materialism, formulation of myths and mythologies using visuals, and their contribution in the national freedom struggle. In addition, visual expressions and market nexus indicates two very important socio-economic dimensions: First, visual art as a source of revenue mobilization and commercial activity; and second, use of visuals in market activation by generating demand for specific products. The vivid accounts available in the history call for restoration of repository of visual languages reflexive of collective sentiments of civil societies that provides a sense of place, a sense of history, and culture, and perhaps constitute the most precious asset that defines us and give direction for future.

The above brief proposal highlighting the potential of visual expressions in the understanding of culture and social structure **I, along with Prof. Vaishali Diwakar, who has also submitted separately a joint proposal elaborating the important areas and objectives of Visual Sociology along with my name,** we submit this to the President and the Members of managing Committee for their favourable consideration to incorporate Visual Sociology in the ISS conferences and programmes in accordance with its rules and regulations.

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