

PHOTOGRAPHY'S METHODOLOGICAL ABSENCE IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN SOUTH ASIA

Some Preliminary Thoughts for Consideration

Sasanka Perera

APPROACH

I spend considerable time with the camera, not so much to capture reality as it exists, but often to capture images out of context so that reality itself becomes at best blurred or something to be interpreted. As a practice, this is not too dissimilar to the 'partial truths' many of us are in the business of constructing. At the same time, I have also thought about the potential and politics of the camera in image-making and capturing moments of the present for reference in the future. Over time, this interest nudged me to think of the photograph's potential as a method of research. When leisurely interest in photography moves to thoughts on photography for purposes of research, it necessitates a conscious shift from framing in the idiom of art or leisure to that of recording 'facts'. When locating this shift within visual anthropology, Wright notes that 'the status of the visual in much contemporary visual anthropological practice is often achieved largely through a denial of any aesthetics, constructed through a distancing from any potentially polluting "artistic" concerns' (1998: 17).

To contextualise my main objective in this chapter, let me refer to a specific moment and the resultant thoughts I experienced in 2009

when practising my craft as an anthropologist, which at one level also had to do with photography. In May 2009, the Tamil insurgent group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam was defeated by the Sri Lankan armed forces after thirty years of civil war, culminating in a horrific end where thousands of civilians were killed and many of the survivors were incarcerated in camps under the most unenviable circumstances. In Colombo, after the President officially declared the end of war, people were jubilant; they lit fire crackers, cooked milk-rice (often cooked for auspicious events) in the streets; and played music in the streets until late in the night; families gathered in street corners and conversed with each other into the night, and walked around shouting '*jayaweva*' (victory). In many ways, all this resembled religious celebrations like Vesak undertaken in the same month to celebrate the birth, the enlightenment and the attainment of *nirvana* of the Buddha. But, on this occasion, Buddhist wisdom was clearly absent from the collective conscience of most citizens in the streets. None seemed to be thinking of the mass of death which ushered in the moment they were celebrating. Talking to some of them in the streets, the usual conceptual categories of violence, nationalism, ethno-cultural identity formation, politics of identity, and so on, flowed through my mind in wondering how all this might be contextualised and explained. As trained, I was diligently collecting information through interviews and 'participant observation' and facilitating the bases for case studies that would be compiled later.

Over the next few days, I clipped newspaper articles, downloaded images from the Internet and talked to other scholars as well. But, particularly amidst the wild celebrations in Colombo after the President's declaration of victory, I wondered, as I had done many times before, whether the methods in which I was trained to collect information on the events that were unfolding were adequate in attempting to understand a moment such as this. If a method such as photography was utilised cautiously, would that allow us to understand the emergent contexts in a more nuanced manner? I was not even thinking about the adequacy of conceptual categories at the time. When pouring over some of the images I had captured myself of the events that unfolded and while going through the extensive collection of images of these moments that the Internet had become an archive for, I wondered if it was possible to capture with relative accuracy the structure of the moment, the

'madness' of victory, the inglorious marginalisation of defeat that was unfolding all around benumbing people from the pains of death and destruction, and whether this would allow me to journey towards formulating a structure of feeling that nationalism, ethnic politics and institutionalised political violence had encapsulated Sri Lanka over the last three decades. Similarly, in my recent work on visual art and the politics of violence, it became even more apparent that without photography as an essential method helping to create a parallel narrative to that of my written text, it was extremely difficult to achieve much of what I was hoping to achieve, to see how visual arts in Sri Lanka had become a repository for memories of political violence that had become part of mainstream politics in the country since the late 1970s.

My thoughts in the situations outlined above constitute my point of departure in this chapter. Imagery, from the earliest cave paintings to more contemporary photographs, and digital images have been an integral textual category of expression in human society. They constitute structures of narrative about fantasies of individuals and also records of anxieties, personal accounts, local events, mundane moments, important historical junctures, and so on. But, first, one needs to be sure what is expected of photographs. Pink (2003: 186) has noted that any research project that uses images should focus not only on their internal 'meanings', but also on why a specific image was produced and the manner in which it becomes meaningful to its viewers. Similarly, Marcus Banks, in his book *Visual Methods in Social Research* (2001), makes the following points about making methodological sense out of photographs:

In broad terms social research about pictures involves three sets of questions: (i) what is the image of, what is its content? (ii) who took it or made it, when and why? and (iii) how do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it? (quoted in Pink 2003: 186).

I consider these questions to be of relevance to any project in any discipline (not just in anthropology) that opts to use photographs as one of its major sources of information.

In this context, by focusing on photography, the chapter ponders over the following basic fact: given the importance of the 'captured' image of the camera as a possible freezing of history and time, why is it that photography has not been taken very seriously

as a possible source for information in a methodological sense in South Asia by practitioners of social anthropology?¹ Even in other parts of the world, despite the emergence of sub-disciplines such as visual anthropology, the focus on photography as a methodological approach remains relatively marginal or occulted in the larger scheme of methodological concerns in mainstream anthropology. It is in this context that Taylor (1998: 534) has observed that visual anthropology was at once both highly visible and quite marginal within mainstream anthropology.

More specifically, the chapter also attempts to assess issues such as the following: what is the ‘authenticity’ or the ‘truth’ value of images captured in photographs, and why have sociologists and anthropologists in the region, by and large, remained sceptical or disinterested in using photographs in their readings of society and culture beyond the marginal use as a means of contextualisation or decoration? Is it because they are concerned that photos only narrate ‘partial truths’? If so, how would that kind of ‘partial truth’ be any different from other ‘partial truths’ that have become a ‘naturalised’ part of the ethnographic enterprise as scholars have debated since the 1980s? Or, is it the case that social anthropology in the region continues to be located in a relatively conservative mode of practice which discourages practitioners from venturing into somewhat uncharted methodological domains such as photography as well as research objects such as visual arts?

WIDER CONTEXT

It is clear that the kind of preliminary questions I have posed need to be located in a wider intellectual domain. One cannot argue that anthropology has not conventionally had an interest in the visual. But the problem has always been what appears to be institutionalised anthropology’s seeming inability to decide clearly what to do with it (MacDougal 1997: 276, 283). Many influential books dealing with the subject—such as *Anthropology and Photography* edited by Edwards (1992), *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* edited by Banks and Morphy (1997), *Principles of Visual Anthropology* edited by Hockings (2003), and *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography* (1995) edited by Devereaux and Hilmann—had emerged by the early years of the new millennium.

These books indicated an increased interest in the place of the visual in anthropology, in general, and photography's role in anthropology, in particular.

However, even by the mid-1990s, the domain of visual anthropology was not clearly understood or in the very least was very widely defined. This lack of clarity was evident in the kind of fundamental questions about the nature of visual anthropology such as the following that were posed in debates at the time: is it a kind of anthropology that was primarily articulated through 'visual media, as distinct from anthropology articulated through the expository prose' (Taylor 1998: 534) or 'is it anthropology that attends to visual aspects of material culture, or even to the visual dimensions of sensory experience as a whole?' (ibid.).

In the present context, the defining of the borders or methods of visual anthropology is not my main concern. In any event, by now, there is sufficient agreement on such matters as the emergence of some crucial works, such as the above and many more since then, would indicate. Besides, irrespective of mainstream anthropology's continued lack of interest in photography as a reliable method, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, visual anthropology and visual sociology have emerged as independent academic sub-disciplines. Now, they are being offered as university-level courses in many countries and are also represented by professional organisations (Pink 2003: 179). On the other hand, numerous other fields of inquiry such as cultural studies, queer studies, cultural geography and consumer research make wide use of visual methods of research and formulate approaches that are 'discipline specific', on the one hand, and 'borrow from existing examples in visual anthropology', on the other (ibid.).

In this context, the issue is not that visual anthropology has not globally evolved. My question in the context of the region's multifaceted practice of social anthropology is far more fundamental: can't we use images or photos as a method of research just the same way we would use historical documents, interviews and case studies? This is not a practice that is commonly seen in mainstream sociology or anthropology in the region. At the same time, one also cannot see a dynamic visual anthropological discourse in the region, an issue I will revisit in the conclusion. Wolbert notes that an "anthropologist as photographer" is both an amateur and professional: as a rule, anthropologists are not trained photographers, but even when they

photograph without training ... they do make photos in a professional context' (2000: 321).

However, my interest here is not simply focused on photos taken by researchers in the course of their research. I am also interested in images captured by others in specific locations that may vary from press photographers to travellers. The issue is not simply about whose photos are valid in a research context, but to think about the nature and contexts of that validity, the contexts from which such images might, in fact, receive authority to narrate a story that can become part of a scholarly discourse. But, even in situations when anthropologists themselves author photos in the 'field', they become 'delicate documents of the anthropologist's transgression of intimate boundaries and temporary participation in the lives of others' (ibid.: 321–22). In this sense, photographs become central components in the constellation of 'facts' recorded by researchers that range from field notes to audio recordings. In this context, though they ideally occupy the same legitimate position as field notes, audio recordings or even memory, which itself is quite fallible at best, that legitimacy certainly is not widely accepted in the academic discourse. Of course, we already know that field notes and snippets of information collected from the 'field' become the end product in the craft of ethnography.

What prohibits photography from occupying the same position as a source of information that would become part of the central narrative in the written text? As we know from the debates in the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, the concerns raised over objectivity in the process of social research were not really resolved in the sense of removing the existence of realms of subjectivity both in the process and methods of research. But that issue can be addressed by taking into account the contexts of research as well as interpretation. The same applies for photographs. They 'represent subjectivities embedded in framing, exposure and other technical considerations' which, Harper suggests, are typical of photographs emanating from anthropological field studies (2002: 13). Not only technicalities, images also tell stories from the angles they have been framed and are silent about events that are exterior to the frames, which nevertheless took place and may also be absent in other photographs of the same moment. Perhaps, this is what Shell had in mind when she observed that 'a photograph captures everything in that it reveals nothing' (2012: 9). This is why photos should not be

expected to narrate an independent story by themselves; they need to be situated in context: in the context of other information and interpretations derived from other means and sources.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Even though the debates on the potential methodological usefulness of photography in social anthropology have not really taken the centre stage in academic discourses in South Asia and photos are still only used marginally in the craft of global mainstream social anthropology, photos have been present historically almost from the initial stages of anthropology. This is evident in its textual tradition.

At this point, it would be useful to survey this initial presence as what it served then and what it should ideally serve now would be significantly different. The use of photos in early anthropology is a direct simulation of the extensive use of images (mostly engravings, drawings and paintings) in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel literature. For instance, the second edition of Tennent's two-volume work, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island*, published in London in 1859, contained illustrations of thirty-one wood engravings in the first volume and fifty-nine engravings in the second volume. Similarly, Knox's *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies*, published initially in London 1681, was also well illustrated with wood engravings. In both cases and many other texts belonging to related genres, this practice of illustration was meant to take readers on a pictorial tour to a distant and 'exotic' land already 'experienced' by the writers. This was necessitated by the limited European imagination of the time coupled with that imagination's demand for exotic visual objects as well as stories. The images in these cases heightened the sense of orientalist anxieties, bewilderment, adventure and 'enlightenment' that the written text was already articulating. The images were essentially companions to the written text. Early anthropological tradition was very much located within the same tradition. As such, when E. E. Evans-Pritchard published his celebrated ethnography, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, in 1940, it contained forty-one photographs (all cited in Wolbert 2000: 325), taking readers visually to those parts of

Sudan where Evans-Pritchard conducted his fieldwork. As pointed out by MacDougal, photographs remained a prominent feature of ethnographies until the 1930s and became less obvious in latter times: Charles W. Hatterseley's *The Baganda at Home* (1908) presented eighty photos; Henri A. Junod's *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1912) presented 112 illustrations of which most were photographs; Robert Sutherland Rattray's *Ashanti* (1923) contained 143 photos (cited in MacDougal 1997: 281).

In general, this practice was part of the strategy of enhancing the ethnographic authority of professional anthropologists just as much as it did the same for the travellers, colonial officers, missionaries and traders in the previous two centuries. Nevertheless, photographs which had entered the discourses of formal social sciences, mostly through colonial anthropology, were often not used as a self-conscious and carefully designed methodological tool to further the goals of research. Referring to the same period, Pinney suggests that the 'anthropological potentiality of photography was defined' partly in the context of early anthropologists' anxieties about the truth value of the verbal communications of 'natives' (2011: 14). Often without the required language skills to comprehend local contexts and suspicious of the ability or the interest of natives to describe their circumstances accurately, many early anthropologists assumed information gathered from such contexts would be irrelevant or false (ibid.). In this scheme of things, photography offered a kind of irrefutable record of 'facts' whose authority was seemingly established; they were bound by time and place and were captured in real time by someone who was 'right there' as opposed to paintings or engravings that might have been done after an event or on the basis of hearsay. This was particularly the case at a time when digital transformation of imagery was not yet a reality.

However, 'posed' photographs were already a norm as compared to pictures of individuals or events as part of a process that was unfolding at a particular time and place. The work of Edward Curtis has become legendary due to his extensive attempts to 'stage manage' a romantic representation of 'dying native American culture' (cited in Pinney 2011: 90–92). It is in this context that we can understand the many stoic photos of hunters, farmers, warriors and the like who peak out of the pages of both colonial travel literature as well as early ethnographies that today retards more nuanced attempts of understanding the past when utilised uncritically. Even

in the early years of social anthropology, criticisms did emerge over photography's inability to capture movement and process of cultural moments. But photographic authority precisely emanates from this sense of immobility and silence, which has also created a somewhat obvious relationship between photography and death (Metz 1985: 81).

Within this larger context, visual imagery appeared 'disquieting' in the sense 'they appeared to show everything and yet, like the physical body, remained annoyingly mute' (MacDougal 1997: 276). As such, for many, 'the stasis upon which acuity depended was itself increasingly seen as a betrayal of the anthropological study of cultural praxis in motion' (Pinney 2011: 154). It is in this context that Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1994 dismissed his extensive collection of photographs taken during fieldwork sixty years before in Sao Paulo and among Amerindian groups such as the Caduvevo, the Bororo and the Namikawara as useless, and viewed them simply as suggestive of 'a void, a lack of something that the lens is inherently unable to capture' (cited in *ibid.*: 104–05). For him, they were merely 'silent images' lacking in a sense of 'perfume' of the time and the place, which, he thought, his field notes still contained, albeit faintly all these years later (*ibid.*: 104). Yet, for others like Carl Knappet photos are not lifeless images but captured moments that 'come alive' (quoted in Edwards 2012: 223).

Another source of anxiety over photos in social sciences stems from the fact that photographs are not always about capturing an incident as it happened. Often, photographs are taken after an event very much similar to crime scene photos which capture the 'residual' by professionals who arrive 'too late' after an incident has actually happened (Bond 2009: 1). Images captured by anthropologists or others who arrive at a ceremony, a ritual or any other event after it has taken place also fall into this category. Nevertheless, this residuality itself should not become an issue. In such moments also, photographs are taken of a situation which will be 'read' and situated in that specific context to make sense. In many ways, this is not very different from interviewing a person about an incident that has already taken place and making notes of that conversation. In fact, unlike such an interview, a photograph might capture much more information such as the residue of war and destruction, as in the series of photographs I took in northern Sri Lanka in December 2012 in the midst of the former war zone three years after the war

ended and while in many places the presence of war and destruction was being actively erased by the state.

No wonder, photography's romance with professional anthropology was so doomed given the nature of sustained criticisms, such as those mentioned earlier, from influential sections of the community. Compared to early anthropology's affinity with photography in its ethnographic production, by 1965, when Paul Spencer's *The Samburu* was published, it only contained four photos, while his *Maasai of Matapato*, published in 1988, contained no images at all (MacDougal 1997: 281). It seems to me, however, that all these criticisms miss certain crucial elements of photography's possible methodological role in anthropology. Staged photography apart, it almost seems that these criticisms assumed that photography somehow had to narrate a story so authentic which had to be the ultimate truth, and that it had to be done through images alone. Today, in an era after the 'writing culture' and 'partial truths' debates initiated by Clifford and Marcus (1986) in the 1980s, such a sense of privilege is not even offered to the written text in the practice of ethnography. It is self-evident today that the 'perfume' of presence of place and moment, that Lévi-Strauss refers to in the context of his field notes, are not simple 'facts', but snippets of partial truths. It is quite interesting that seminal ethnographies written on the basis of memory and recollection in contexts where field notes were destroyed—such as M. N. Srinivas' *The Remembered Village* (1980) and Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954)—have been so well received as sound ethnographic accounts, which status has never been accorded to photography in mainstream anthropology. It would appear that, in the received wisdom of conventional South Asian as well as global mainstream anthropology, memory and recollection are far more reliable in methodological terms despite their countless fallibilities than the apparent silence and stasis of photography. However, the reality is that photographs are no less or more partial than field notes or recollections of memory if carefully situated in context.

This does not mean that, in the history of anthropology, the discipline did not have ardent supporters of photography. One of the most influential among these was Margaret Mead who promoted the visual in social science research using both photography and film. She called for the enhanced use of images in anthropology, which she defined as a 'discipline of words' (quoted in Pink 2003: 182). Her

approach, developed with Gregory Bateson in their work in Bali, had significant impact on the latter development of visual anthropology and sociology (Pink 2003: 182). Nevertheless, Mead's use of the 'observational method' in social research during her time, influenced by 'ways of seeing' in anthropology makes little sense in today's contexts where the craft of anthropology is employed (ibid.). The observational method assumed a photograph to be an objective fact emerging from scientific research. But, today, many anthropologists as well as other social researchers would agree that ethnographic research is the outcome of a 'relationship and negotiations between the researcher and informants rather than of the former's objective observation of the latter' (ibid.). As such, photographs cannot be simply used as objective scientific fact today, but need to be situated in the larger context of discourse.

POSSIBILITIES OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN SOUTH ASIA AND NOTES FROM TWO CASE STUDIES

In the context of the preceding discussion, I would like to offer some thoughts on the methodological possibilities of photography for anthropology in South Asia, drawing from two recent projects I was involved in.

Visual anthropology is not offered as a degree programme in any university in South Asia despite its global establishment as an independent sub-discipline. It is, however, offered as one of the many subjects at the MA level in University of Rajasthan in India and Chittagong and Jahangirnagar universities in Bangladesh. Interestingly, none of the main Delhi-based universities seem to be interested in the visual in sociology and anthropology even as an optional subject on the basis of their course structures. Similarly, no methodology course in anthropology or sociology offered by any university in South Asia seems to discuss the possibility of photography in conducting social research in the region's countries. As a result, the kind of debates in visual anthropology outlined earlier have never really made an impact in the discourses of mainstream anthropology in India or any other South Asian country. Even Sahay's 1991 essay, 'The History of Visual Anthropology in India and the Task Ahead', and his 1993 book, *Visual Anthropology in India and Its Development*, focus on the historical documentation

of attempts at making ‘anthropological’ and documentary films in India. In this rather obvious absence, Pinney’s important book, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997), offers a rare indication of the narrative possibilities of photographs in anthropology in the region. Similarly, Onta’s essay, ‘A Suggestive History of First Century of Photographic Consumption in Kathmandu’ (1998), presents a narrative on the historical uses of photographs in Kathmandu. Moreover, it offers a glimpse at the methodological possibilities of photography not just in Nepal, but in the region in general. *Regeneration: A Reappraisal of Photography in Ceylon 1850–1900* (2000) published by the British Council offers a brief insight into photography’s narrative possibilities in colonial Sri Lanka. In addition to a handful of academic efforts such as these in understanding the use or the possible usefulness of photography in anthropology as well as other social sciences, all countries in the region offer numerous coffee-table books of photography of both contemporary and historical relevance without a larger contextualisation and reading.

As a result of this absence, the ‘visual’ has hardly been a dominant research object in the region’s anthropological enterprise despite the possibilities. In this context, it is not surprising that a focus on painting, sculpture, installation, photography, drama (excluding cinema), and the like, has only marginally entered the field of interest in the region’s anthropological discourse. Any discussion on photography’s methodological potential in the region necessarily has to be undertaken in this somewhat obvious intellectual vacuum.

In August 2008, as part of a research-cum-outreach programme initiated by the Colombo Institute for the Advanced Study of Society and Culture (CIASSC), a project was launched to produce two documentary films on youth in two locations in rural Sri Lanka. One of the locations was Dambana, an area known for the presence of the so-called *adivasi* or Vedda community. The idea was to harness the talents of the youth in the area to write a collaborative script for the film that was expected to contextualise their understandings of ‘multi-culturalism’ in the community through an exploration of the world around them. Towards that end, about twenty cameras were distributed along with film among the youth who took part in the project after an initial training on how to use a camera was imparted to them by a group of experts. They were requested to photograph anything that would, in their perception, describe the social and

cultural world around them. After the lapse of about one month, CIASSC printed over 400 photographs of various events, scenes and people captured by the youth, and attempted to put selected images together in preparation for writing the script. The idea was that the relationships between the images that the youth might see would become the basis of the script. In the context of the present essay, the film that was made or the script that was written are not important. What is important are the photographs that the young people in the area took of the world around them focusing on what that they thought best illustrated their own realities; equally important are the themes that are absent in their photographs.

The Veddas are among the most marginalised ethno-cultural minorities in Sri Lanka in terms of social status as well as economic and living conditions; they are also facing the risk of cultural erasure through assimilation into the surrounding dominant Sinhala Buddhist ethnic group. The younger generation no longer speaks their own language. In this sense, life in Dambana was difficult where the education level is also significantly lower than the national average, mostly due to lack of schools and the absence of facilities and teachers. Only two members of the community have ever gone all the way to university. Despite these difficulties on ground, the outer society's perception of the Veddas was very much modelled on the typical orientalist notions of the 'exotic' tribes from exotic lands as handed down by early European travellers as well as the first generation of anthropologists who undertook 'fieldwork': carefree, practising traditional hunting and gathering, engaged in ancient systems of medicine, and in general living close to nature and shunning the cultural influences of the exterior world. Much of the historical material available, the way it is interpreted today and the thrust of popular literature and film also perpetuate these mythological assumptions. All these dynamics were in place in and around the community and were well entrenched at the time the exercise mentioned earlier was initiated. This scheme of affairs also needs to be placed in context when reading the photographs taken by the youth which included both young boys and girls, some of whom were going to school while many others had dropped out.

Interestingly, the dominant themes or imagery that emerged from the photos could be identified as follows: smiling children in schools; Buddhist religious ceremonies; sunset over the nearby irrigation reservoirs and scenes from the surrounding forests; old

Vedda men carrying bows, arrows with a short axe slung over the left shoulder; young people bathing in the reservoir, smiling long-haired young Vedda men in the forest; the community leader providing herbal medicines to people with ailments, and so on. In essence, these images very self-consciously narrated an idealised story of ‘happy’ and ‘self-contained’ group of ‘tribal’ people living an uncomplicated life in beautiful natural surroundings. The routine difficulties, poverty, drunkenness, despair, global cultural influences seeping into the community transforming it, which are also part of the essential circumstances of the community, were not simply absent from these images, but were very consciously expelled. All these realities were also well-known to serious researchers and were part of the lived reality of community members. In fact, some of these were narrated to those of us who were talking with community members for a period exceeding two months prior to the beginning of the photography project. Quite interestingly, the photographs that were produced were attempting to narrate the same story and the typical imagery of the community that were imposed on them and expected of them by the larger Sinhala society. Many Sinhala also regularly visit Dambanato pose for pictures with ‘typical Veddas’, to purchase ‘genuine’ bee’s honey and to buy various ‘ethnic’ craft available for sale. The hamlet and the outlying areas had become a kind of ethnic tourist destination as a result of these tendencies, and, in fact, was a major source of income for many members of the community. The photos did not even contain images of those ‘regular’ features of modernity and contemporary living that include buses, motorcycles, mobile phones, television, and so on, that were very much part of life in the community. In fact, the community leader had instructed young people that they should not show images of motorcycles and computers in the photos or the film. Though some of these images did make it into the film in the end, that was accidental and going against the instructions of the elder on the part of some of the youth.

Besides, during the warmer months, the young males were used to bathing in the village reservoir in the evening, having a few drinks, singing Sinhala pop songs and ‘break-dancing’ prior to sleeping on the nearby bed of rocks. This natural phenomenon turned into a staged event when the film was made, not too unlike Robert Flaherty’s silent documentary film *Nanook of the North*, when the entire scene was edited out of its actual contemporary practices and infused with what was considered ‘typical’: Vedda songs, bonfire,

no Sinhala pop songs, no dancing considered contemporary and no alcohol. In the same vein, the photos taken by the young 'natives' were representing the fantasy of their community which was harboured by outsiders. The Veddas were not hostile to that image, but they knew by experience that this idealised image was far from the reality. They also aspired for some attributes of what was depicted in the photos such as to succeed in education even though the means to accomplish that were not yet in place.

Methodologically speaking, what do these images narrate and what do they not narrate? Insofar as using images for information and generating and interpretation in research, what is present in the frame is as important as what is consistently not present. I have already noted this issue with regard to the photographs referred to earlier. In this context, taking into account these photos taken not by an anthropologist, but by young members of a community as part of a specific project, which nevertheless offered considerable freedom in the act of photography, is it not possible to use these photos as a major source of information and interpretation in a study on identity politics and cultural representation among contemporary Veddas? These photos indicate the manner in which the Veddas themselves readily consume the idealised image of them constructed by the dominant society and how, in that process, their routine predicaments and realities are expelled into oblivion. On the other hand, research among the community would clearly contradict this image as well as show how both tendencies of the dominant Sinhala culture and global influences, including Hindi cinema and numerous technologies, have made significant inroads into Vedda society which are not narrated by the photos. They were also keener to present the 'Buddhist' scheme of things in their lives through the images rather than the numerous non-Buddhist local practices that were still known but increasingly under-emphasised. As I noted at the very outset, what I am suggesting is not that images such as these should or even could narrate an independent story by themselves, but rather that they would enhance the narrative that is being constructed in the overall scheme of research and writing, which naturally includes other sources of information.

Let me now focus on the second project I was involved in between 2002 and 2012 (Perera 2012a), which also used photography as a primary method of research, albeit in a fundamentally different way than the first example. In this case, my focus was on certain kinds

of visual culture that includes painting, sculpture and installations, which, in the Sri Lankan context, were collectively called 'The Art of the 90s'. In simple terms, these constituted political art. Here, not only the process but the object of research itself was in the realm of the visual. My interest was to see how these forms of art narrated stories of political violence as personal and collective experiences as memories of these events while contextualising issues such as ethnicity, nationalism and religion. Mine was not the gaze of an art historian but that of an anthropologist who was interested in the issues noted earlier and was keen to see how these issues were embedded in works of art in a situation where both popular literature and academic discourse were not active sources of debate on these matters despite the possibilities. This absence was particularly true of sources published in the local languages, which in this case happen to be Sinhala and Tamil. The focus on visual culture was part of a larger focus on how memory as well as erasure works in a post-war situation.

We already know that the focus on visual culture, excluding cinema, is not a major preoccupation in South Asia's mainstream anthropology and sociology. It seems to be assumed that this is something that falls within the ambit of art history. But my interest was not in the history of art over a particular period of time, but to explore how certain works of art captured and narrated stories of political violence over a period of time. One can argue that this kind of study can be undertaken via a reading of art historical material on the subject as well as by utilising other methods used in mainstream anthropology for collection of information, which includes interviews, participation in specific events, case studies, and so on. In fact, the last three techniques were also used extensively in this project, while art historical material as such, which dealt with this genre of art, did not exist in Sri Lanka given the country's almost non-existent tradition of art history.

In this context, photography became a very crucial and, in fact, a central source of information in addition to notes of interviews, press clippings, exhibition catalogues, and so on. Field notes and interview material necessarily had to be accompanied by photographs as an essential source of reference to be consulted in the process of analysing and writing. At the same time, in a situation where a series of visual objects were the primary source of focus, while many of them were unfamiliar to potential readers, photos of these objects

had to be accompanied by written text. Here, photography was not merely a method of recording 'field' situations, contexts and objects, but a crucial co-narrative that had to accompany the written words if the overall narrative was to make better sense and to be more nuanced. There was no other way I could 'show' a particular reader what I had 'seen' which, in this context, was of paramount importance.

While this work has since been published (*ibid.*), the publication process was also hampered significantly by the issue of photography, which, as already noted, was not familiar in the region beyond art history texts and coffee-table books. In the final analysis, the extensive inclusion of images tended to be viewed as too expensive by publishers. So, despite the central importance of photography for this project in the research stage as well as the stages of analysing, writing and the publishing, it had to be curtailed due to considerations of cost, thereby reducing the narrative potential of the book.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

At this point we can ask of ourselves the simple question, where does photography stand in relation to social anthropology in South Asia? Both examples mentioned earlier, grounded in two very specific situations, make a case for the potential centrality of photography in certain kinds of anthropological readings in South Asia. We also know from the preceding discussion that the issue of the methodological usefulness or validity of photography in anthropology in the region is imprisoned in a domain of intellectual vacuum. Earlier in the chapter, I also outlined the nature of the methodological presence of photography in global anthropology and the debates that have taken place surrounding this issue.

It is in this discursive space that we have to ponder over the place of photography in anthropology in the region, think about its marginalisation and dream about its future. In this context, a question I recently posed with regard to regional social anthropology's and sociology's reluctance to consider art a legitimate object of research can be re-posed with special reference to its reluctance to both the visual as a research object in general and to photography as a method of research: 'Why is it that sociology in our times is so manifestly fearful of research categories such as visual culture which by and

large remains with practitioners, in commerce, in the discourses of art historians or simply as a means for aesthetic pleasure?’ (Perera 2012b). If, as MacDougal (1997: 282) notes, early interest in global visual anthropology began with enthusiasm and later faded into perplexity, in South Asian social anthropology and sociology such an interest has not been evident in any serious fashion despite its rather long history of practice in the region. It is not that a handful of sociologists and anthropologists have not focused on visual objects such as calendar art and paintings in a limited number of studies. Historically, it may also be noted that anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin (1959, 2016) in the Indian context also used photographs in some of their published works. This was in the tradition of earlier ethnographic work already referred to in the initial part of this chapter. As such, much of these worked as ‘illustrations’ for the accompanying text as opposed to central points of departure for posing specific questions. The issue has to do with the lack of a clear and long-term institutional and practice-based interest in the possibilities of the visual which has ensured that it has not evolved into a serious domain of research. As a result, it has also not extended into incorporating photography as a mainstream method of research.

This absence is rooted in the nature of training and research in the twin domains of sociology and social anthropology in the region. Despite regional practitioners’ insistent flirtations with theoretical constructs from the global north—that vary from Marxism to postmodernism—and the very long-term practice of both sociology and social anthropology in the region, it does not seem to have benefitted from some of the crucial debates from the same region which include the debates on photography’s place in social sciences as well as the discussions focused on visual anthropology itself. On the other hand, regional social anthropology’s research objects have not, by and large, changed beyond a point. Of course, depending on societal changes, new interests such as masculinities, gender relations, ethnicity and nationalism have emerged, whose robustness also vary from country to country, while the older and more established interests such as class relations, religion and caste remain in place. This state of affairs is also quite evident if one surveys the course structures of the major universities in the region. In an overall academic climate governed by a sense of institutional conservatism, what is prevalent is only to be expected.

However, in real terms what is needed is not a radical departure from the traditions of social research presently in place or to reinvent the methodological wheel as such. Instead, what is needed is the inculcation of a particular kind of imagination and the loosening of institutional conservatism that would allow methods such as photography a fair chance to access the domain of social research and see how it might work. It is only in such a context that some of the methodological and ethical issues of photography that have emerged in global debates might be addressed in the specificities of local situations. In the same context, it is also necessary to promote new categories of research to emerge which should ideally include different manifestations of the visual. As MacDougal notes, the difficulty in communicating a sense of issues such as emotion, the body, time senses, gender and individual identity in anthropology 'has been in finding a language metaphorically and experientially close to them' and 'the historical primacy of the visual has been its capacity for metaphor and synaesthesia', which means that 'much of that can be "said" about these matters may be best said in the visual media' (1997: 287). Naturally, this includes the use of photography. More importantly, to make use of visual media in this manner does not necessarily require 'the development of a specialised visual media' (ibid.). As noted earlier, what is needed is a frame of mind and a frame of reference that would make this possible.

However, the question is: when the world at large, which has produced increasingly creative anthropology over the years, has nevertheless been quite reluctant in the use of photography in mainstream anthropology beyond the boundaries of 'official' visual anthropology, will social anthropology in South Asia be open to methods of research that go beyond the written text and what is already familiar? It does not appear that the entrenched conservatism of South Asian social anthropology and sociology would be adequately open to the idea of changing its research methods any time soon unless conscious efforts are made to exorcise the resident poltergeist of conservatism that continues to haunt these disciplines.

NOTE

1. The questions I pose are equally valid for other disciplines within social sciences and humanities even though I am framing my questions with a focus on social anthropology in the region. Moreover, I also do not find

it particularly useful in contemporary practice to maintain a conceptual difference between sociology and social anthropology in terms of research objects or methodological concerns, and I agree with Bourdieu's observation that 'the distinction between ethnology [meaning social anthropology] and sociology is a perfect example of a spurious frontier' (1995: 8). As such, in this chapter when I refer to social anthropology, I also mean sociology and vice versa.

REFERENCES

- Banks, Marcus and Howard Morphy, eds. 1997. *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bond, Henry. 2009. *Lacan at the Scene*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1995. 'A Science that Makes Trouble' in *Sociology in Question*, by Pierre Bourdieu, 8–19. London: Sage Publications.
- British Council. 2000. *Regeneration: A Reappraisal of Photography in Ceylon 1850–1900*. London: British Council.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Devereaux, Leslie and Roger Hilmann, eds. 1995. *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Edwards, Elizabeth, ed. 1992. *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Edwards, Elizabeth. 2012. 'Objects and Affect: Photography beyond the Image'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 221–34.
- Elwin, Verrier. 1959. *The Art of the North-east Frontier of India, Volume 1*. Shillong: North-East Frontier Agency.
- . 2016. *The Baiga*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Harper, Douglas. 2002. 'Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation'. *Visual Studies* 17 (1): 13–26.
- Hockings, Paul, ed. 2003. *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Knox, Robert. 1681. *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon in the East Indies*. London: Robert Chiswell, Printer to the Royal Society. (Project Gutenberg e-book released, 13 December 2014. Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14346/14346-h/14346-h.htm> [accessed on 6 June 2017]).
- Leach, Edmund. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: G. Bell and Son.

- MacDougal, David. 1997. 'The Visual in Anthropology' in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, edited by Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, 276–95. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Metz, Christian. 1985. 'Photography and Fetish'. *October* 34 (Autumn): 81–90.
- Onta, Pratyoush. 1998. 'A Suggestive History of First Century of Photographic Consumption in Kathmandu'. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 3 (1): 181–212.
- Perera, Sasanka. 2012a. *Artists Remember; Artists Narrate: Memory and Representation in Sri Lankan Visual Arts*. Colombo: CIASSC and Theertha International Artists' Collective.
- . 2012b. 'Beyond History; Against the Present: Preliminary Thoughts on Re-imagining "South Asia"'. Keynote address delivered at the conference, 'Connecting South Asia', organised by the Theertha International Artists' Collective and CIASSC at the Post-graduate Institute of Archaeology, Colombo, 28 September.
- Pink, Sarah. 2003. 'Interdisciplinary Agendas in Visual Research: Re-situating Visual Anthropology'. *Visual Studies* 18 (2): 179–92.
- Pinney, Christopher. 1997. *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. London: Reaktion.
- . 2011. *Photography and Anthropology*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sahay, K. N. 1991. 'The History of Visual Anthropology in India and the Task Ahead'. *Visual Anthropology* 4 (1): 25–41.
- . 1993. *Visual Anthropology in India and Its Development*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Shell, Hanna Rose. 2012. *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography and the Media of Reconnaissance*. New York: Zone Books.
- Srinivas, M. N. 1980. *The Remembered Village*. Berkeley, CA: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies.
- Taylor, Lucien. 1998. 'Visual Anthropology is Dead, Long Live Visual Anthropology'. *American Anthropologist* 100 (2): 534–37.
- Tennent, James Emerson. 1859. *Ceylon: An Account of the Island—Physical, Historical, and Topographical*. Second edition. Volumes I and II. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts.
- Wolbert, Barbara. 2000. 'The Anthropologist as Photographer: The Visual Construction of Ethnographic Authority'. *Visual Anthropology* 13 (4): 321–43.
- Wright, Chris. 1998. 'The Third Subject: Perspectives on Visual Anthropology'. *Anthropology Today* 14 (4): 16–22.

