Objectives of the course

Photography has emerged as a versatile form of expression today aided substantially by recent technological developments. At one level, it occupies the same kind of power as the written text in domains of discourse; yet at another level, it has not been able to move beyond a set of seemingly occulted and taken-for-granted practices into larger domains of discourse such as its multiple possibilities as a method of research in the sociology and social anthropology like any others ranging from interviews to content analysis. This relative absence manifests itself particularly clearly in South Asian sociology and anthropology even though the global scenario is not much different. This has happened despite the emergence of sub-disciplines such as visual anthropology since the 1980s which claim to have a focus on the visual, which includes photography. This course, designed as a reading seminar will survey a selection of existing literature to better understand a number of interrelated considerations: first, it will look at the historical contextualization of images in general and photography in particular in social sciences with an emphasis on sociology and social anthropology. Second, within this context, it will explore the emergence of visual anthropology and sociology and attempt to understand the limitations of these approaches. Third and finally, the course will attempt to explore why photography in particular has not emerged as a viable method of research in mainstream sociology and social anthropology like any other method with a focus on global as well as South Asian practice of sociology and social anthropology.

Unit I: ‘Images’ in different genres of non-fictional writing

This section will focus on the ways in which images have been used to construct narratives of representation in non-fictional writings of the colonial period and in the early to mid-20th century. The discussion will focus on these narratives as a context within which the use of images in general and photographs in particular emerged in latter ethnographic writings. The themes that will be covered include the following: A. Images in the politics of representation in travel literature; B. Politics of images in early ‘ethnographies’ as secondary narratives accompanying the written text; C. The place of photos in mid 20th century ethnographies.
Unit 2: Emergence of visual anthropology and its location of imagery and photography

This section will deal with the emergence of visual anthropology in particular and visual sociology to a lesser extent within the mainstream discourses of sociology and anthropology and the transformation of the position and location of the visual. It will probe in particular the focus on photography within these sub-disciplines and their limitations. It will also attempt to answer the question why the use of photographs in a methodological sense has not moved beyond these specific approaches into mainstream sociology and anthropology. The themes that will be covered include the following: A. The domains of visual anthropology and sociology; B. Limitations of the visual in visual anthropology; C. ‘Partial truths’, privacy and the ethics of using photographs in ethnography; D. Potentials for the visual in sociology and anthropology.


Unit 3: Photography in sociology and social anthropology and social sciences in South Asia

After exploring the practice of sociology and social anthropology in different national locations in South Asia, this section will focus on photography’s methodological location in the region by focusing on regional anthropology’s focus on photographs. The themes that will be covered include the following: A. Sociology and social anthropology in South Asia: history and current practice; B. Objects of research and methods of research in South Asia: history and current practice; C. Position of photographs in anthropology in the region: history and current practice.

**Unit 4: Transcending the methodological limitations**

In the context of the overall discussions in the three pervious sections, the final part of the course will attempt to answer a number of interrelated questions to ascertain the relative absence of photography as a method of research in South Asian sociology and anthropology and explore the possibility of using it in new areas of research. These questions would include the following: A. Is the practice of sociology and anthropology in the region adequately robust and responsive to specific situations in order to transcend pre-existing thematic and methodological innovations?; B. Is it possible to transcend the dominance of the written text in regional ethnography?; C. Are there ethical considerations particular to the region that does not allow something like photography to be perceived and used as a method of social research?