**VISUAL EXPRESSION
OF CULTURAL EXPERIENCES
THROUGH FILM**

# VISUAL EXPRESSION
# OF CULTURAL EXPERIENCES
# THROUGH FILM

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Project 3

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Guided by Prof. Sudesh Balan

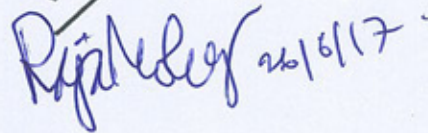M.Des 2015-2017 Communication Design
IDC, IIT Bombay

# APPROVAL SHEET

The Visual Communication Project III entitled 'Vistual expression of
cultural experiences through film' by Adersh Sreedharan of M.Des. Visual
Communication 2015-17
is approved as a partial fulfillment of requirements of a post graduate
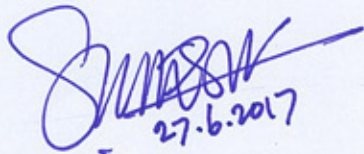degree in Visual Communication at IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay.
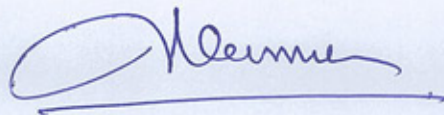
External Examiner:

Internal Examiner: _26/6/17_

Guide: _27.6.2017_

Chairperson:

# DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this written document submitted to IDC, IIT Bombay, is a record of an original work done by me. This written submission represents my idea in my words, I have adequately cited and referenced the original source. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misprinted or falsified any idea/ fact/ source in my submission.

I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout this project.

Prof. Sudesh Balan, my project guide for his immense guidance and support.

Uday Singh and his family from dronagiri who helped me out throughout my travel and shoot in uttarakhand, Azif Ismail who accompanied me during the trip for the project.
My fellow batchmates at IDC who patiently listened to me and shared their thoughts on this project.
I would also like to thank my friends and family who encouraged me in every decisions I took. That took me here.

Thank you.

*India, one of the most populated countries in the world has an endless diversity starting from geographical features to languages, religions, art and crafts, customs and traditions, flora and fauna, demographic structure and so on. Indian culture, which is a fusion of several cultures from all the indian subcontinents, has been influenced and shaped by a history that is several thousand years old. The diversity of India is unique, giving us reasons to think of India as a 'mini world'.
In order to understand a culture one has to experience it. This project was undertaken to experience a particular culture, understand it and then express it visually.
Dronagiri village in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand was chosen, as a place with untouched culture, to experience and understand a lifestyle that is not known to outside world.
In this village situated at 11,800 ft. altitude, a mountain worshipped by locals is believed to be the one that Hanuman disfigured during his search for the life saving herb, Sanjivani.*

*This report describes the experience of getting exposed to a new cultural environment, the culture shock one may face because of the unfamiliar way of life and how we adapt to it. And the process through which the culture experienced is translated in a visual form.*

# INDEX

India is a diverse country with numerous cultures, but most of the people of India are only familier with their own culture. There are people who are born and brought up in cities, who are not used to the rural environment and vise versa. It's the similar situation when it comes to different parts of India, they all speak different languages and goes through a very unique lifestyle from one another.

India is the second most populated country in the world's population with around 1.326 billion people according to UN in july 2016. Among that around 80 percent is Hindus, 14 percent is Muslims, 2 percent is Christians and the rest 4 percent includes Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and others according to census 2011. All these people are spreaded across the diverse topography of India, people living in 20 urban cities, 11 of them metropolitan areas, and rural India. There are also people living in remote villages away from all the modern messy world, but soon enough every corner get touched by urbanisation. Development is taking place at a faster rate in India, urbanisation began to accelarate in India after independence, due to the country's adoption of a mixed economy.

There used to be an old saying that urban people are running behind money, but now rural people are also driven by the concept of migrating to cities for better jobs and ultimately money. If you look at mumbai- one of the most populous urban regions in the world and the second most populous metropolitan area in India, with a population of 20.7 million as of 2011, there you can see people from all parts of India, every one are in a hurry to get somewhere. A lot of people from rural India migrate to places like mumbai, delhi  and bangalore for better education and jobs. They would feel disoriented with the new cultural environment but they will adapt with the surrounding in no time - a transition to another type of life. The situation when you feel uncomfortable being in an unfamilier way of life, that experience is called a 'culture shock', one may experience it as an information overload, language barrier, generation gap, technology gap, skill interdependence, formulation dependency, homesickness. But you may overcome this and start adjusting with the scenario.

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Contrast between rural and urban, the differences starts from lifestyle and mentality. When the urban world is equipped with all modern amenities, there are rural areas with no electricity or telephone communication. The simple lives in such rural areas are not networked with shopping complexes, multiplex theatres, restaurants, housing complexes and skyscrapers. But it is spreading, reaching every corner of India with time, and soon development will come in every not so developed parts of India. But is it a good thing or a bad thing?
People won't realise the change if it is for the better or not, until it's too late.
Everyone wants better education and a better job, and no one want to work in a field or climb coconut trees or carry goods on their head for a living, everyone want to become a doctor or an engineer. Hence people migrate to the urban looking for a 'better life'.
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But there are still people in villages who love what they do, whether it is farming or weaving or being a shepherd. They would know more about life than any of the city boys. Maybe its all because of the culture they live in, that shapes one's character, and how they look into the world.

I am originally from Kerala- southern part of India, who migrated to Andhra pradesh- southeastern part and then I migrated to Northern side- New Delhi and then to Mumbai which lies in the western coast of India. I have visited almost all corners of India, coming from southern part experiencing the same culture for 18 years I've faced problems like language barrier and cultural shock in the beginning. But with time I adapted to the rest of the parts of India, but then I got curious about the lifestyle in the remote places in india, which are villages not easily accessible to the rest of the world. People who lives in villages situated on top of hills and inside the lush green forests far from motorable roads.
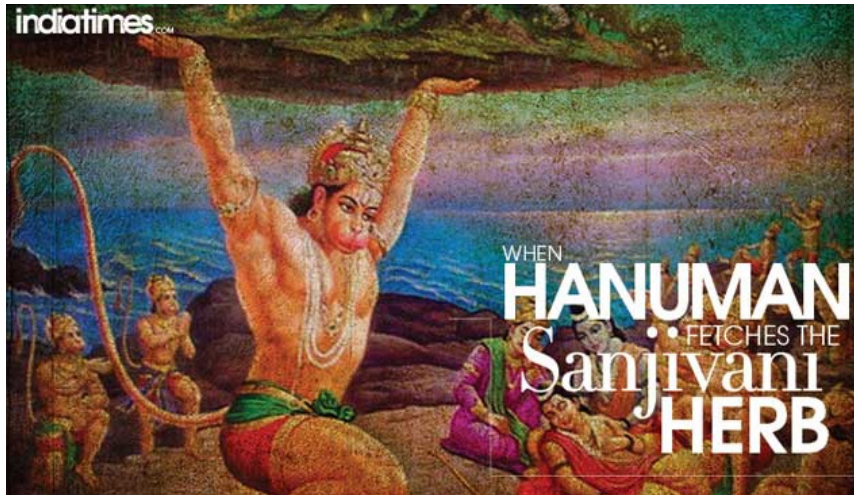
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In order to experience a particular culture I chose a remote village in Almore district of Uttarakhand called Dronagiri, which is located at a height of 11,800 ft. (3,600 meters) above sea level.

The area has severe glaciers like the Bagini, Changbang and Neeti. and attracts tourists during the summer. People visit the place looking for rare herbs and to hunt musk deer and humalayan bear, illegally.

Around 400 Bhotiya families live in the village of Dronagiri. Uttarakhand Bhotiya are an ethno-linguistic group of people residing in the upper himalayan valleys, Bhotiya name derives from the word 'Bod' which is the classical Tibetan name for Tibet.

"People of dronagiri migrate to lower altitudes during the severe winters."

In the epic Ramayana,
When Ram was battling Ravan in order to rescue his wife, Sita, his brother Lakshman was seriously injured. Ram sent his physician Sushena Vaidya to help Lakshman, and he asked Hanuman, to fly to the *Nag Sreshta Himavant* (Himalayas), and bring him the *mrit sanjivani* plant so that the young warrior Lakshman can be revived.
Hanuman was told that the herb grows in the Dronagiri range of the Himalayas, and gives off a strange light, enabling it to be spotted in the dark. But Hanuman failed to identify the required herb, so he lifted an entire hillside that was said to contain the plant, and flew back to Lanka. Vaidya found the herb and Lakshman was revived.

Reference: 'the sanjivani quest'- an article in scroll.in
Image: indiatimes

In the present day, above the Dronagiri village there is a mountain worshipped by locals that is believed to be the one that Hanuman disfigured during his quest.
It is believed that Hanuman is bad charecter according to the people of Dronagiri.



The people in the Dronagiri village have not forgiven Hanuman, for stealing a part of the mountain that they worship.
There is also a back story the locals believe, it is said that during the Treta Yug- the second of the world's four epochs according to Hinduism- when Hanuman visited the village in search of mrit sanjivani to revive Lakshman, the villagers of Dronagiri did not allow him passage.
Since Lakshmana was near death Hanuman was in a hurry, so he disguised himself as a bedraggled sadhu and begged an elderly woman in the village to help him locate the place where he can find the herb. The old woman who was moved by the plea ended up helping Hanuman. And after Hanuman disfigured the mountain the woman who helped was subsequently banished from the village and all women were then barred from the ritual worship of the mountain.
Ever since the hillside was destroyed, temples in that area even today refuse to house an idol of the monkey god.

Reference: 'the sanjivani quest'- an article in scroll.in
Image: Ravi Varma Press/ Courtesy British Museum

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In order to reach the destination- Dronagiri village, I travelled to Dehradun in Uttarakhand, which is 250 km from Delhi. And from there I went to Joshimat which is 250 km from Dehradun. From there I went to Jumma(45 km) , till where the motor road access is available, starting from there I had to treck 8km to reach Dronagiri village.

Since I was focusing on the people of Dronagiri and their migration to a lower altitude during extreme winters, It was the perfect time to visit in March, becasue at that time all the villagers shifted to lower altitude and Dronagiri village was abandoned becasue of extreme cold and snowfall. It was an adventurous trip which was difficult indeed, but the experience was worth the trouble. I visited a small village called Maithana, situated in the lower altitude (110 km to Dronagiri). Around 30 families from Dronagiri was living in that small village, waiting their time to go back to their home in the spring.

Maithana, Chamoli, Uttarakhand

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Elderly people where the ones who would go back to their houses in Dronagiri while their children remains in the lower altitude. These old people still have a unique attachment with the place that make them travel to and fro with season shift, while their kids where sent to the town below the hills for better education, and remain there seeking better jobs.
Living among the people of Dronagiri, interacting with them throughout made me realise how simple they all are, untouched by the 'outside dirt'.

Everyday early in the morning, people starts with their daily activities like: cooking, weaving, breaking rocks for making catalyst, feeding the cattle etc.
Weaving was one thing they enjoyed doing all day long, it was much more than a hobby for them, most of the people wears clothes weaved by themselves.

First day in Maithana, I was very lucky because it was the same day monthly pooja takes place in the temple of the village vicinity. One family hosted a dinner get-together after the pooja, a different family every month.

I had the privilage to be part of the small community, only to realise the unity they had wherever they go, they where all very welcoming. Everything about them was so simple, just like the food they served.

After experiencing the village scene and people, I started moving further in search of the abandoned Dronagiri village. On the way, I had the privilage to experience two local weddings of people from the village, where all woman was wearing their traditional clothes, singing folk songs and dancing to it. The marriage rituals were also very different from the marriages I attended before, starting from the fact that their marriages happen in the night.

Everyone in the wedding scene was so happy and bright, being themselves. They where celebrating the wedding like how it was meant to be.
Since it was a cold region, alcohol was part of their life, which helps to keep the body warm. And alcohol was an important part at the marriage ceremony too, which I found very differnent from my culture.

Marriage happened in the night, with the dramatic march of the groom from his house to the event hall, along with all the people from his side, dancing and singing and burning crackers. After the marriage, everyone had food and went back to their home. Next day, everyone meets again to see the bride and groom while woman wearing traditional clothes dance infront of them.

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It was time to go to the village up in the mountain, Dronagiri.
By the time I heard numerous stories about the place, from the
locals. The fact that no one visits the place during the winters and
I wouldn't find anything other than an empty village haunted by
snow, frightened me. But I was determined to find the soul of the
place, filled with their memories.

I packed my bag with necessary things that would help me survive
the cold, and left to Jumma, which is the last checkpoint with
motor access, 45 km from Joshimat.

Now the challenge was to climb the mountain, 10km to the village.
Once I start climbing there is no going back. Walking through
the path the villagers take from ages, made me think about the
solitude of the hills, without the people in it. Away from the rest
of the world, away from the chaos, traffic and pollusion and the
struggle, all I could listen to was the subtle sound of the wind, the
trees moving with it and the flowing water from the lake far away.

After 6hrs of trecking, walking up the hill through one meter wide pathways, cliff on one side, I found snow. Fighting my way up, walking on snow and it was getting colder each step.
I can only imagine how easier it would be for the villagers to walk the long endless path their whole life, it is a part of them, the air and the trees around, the culture.

After around 8 hrs of walking and climbing and crawling, I reached on top- the village asleep. It was already 9 p.m by the time I found shelter. I took a deep breath.

The journey taught me a lot of things, and on top of the white mountain I thought about all the lives, the people back in the city of mumbai where I was coming from, the timeless rush, the struggle for running their lives. And I realised the contrast, how peaceful and silent dronagiri was.

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# - 17 ° in the night

In the night the temperature went down till minus 17 degrees, kept me awake the whole night.
The village had no electricity, nor drinking water available and it was completely cut off from the outside world- no communication networks.
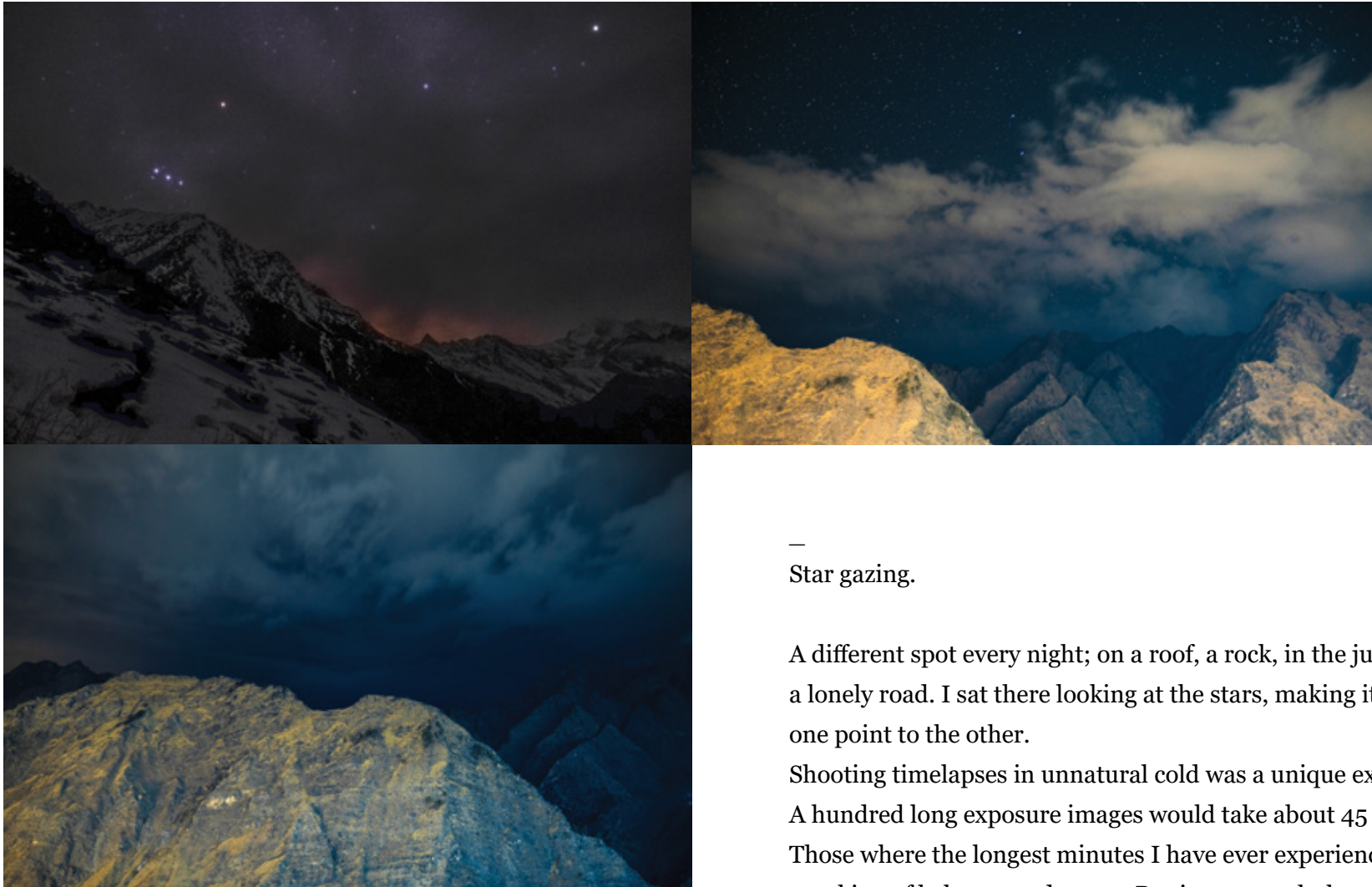
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Star gazing.

A different spot every night; on a roof, a rock, in the jungle or just a lonely road. I sat there looking at the stars, making its way from one point to the other.
Shooting timelapses in unnatural cold was a unique experience.
A hundred long exposure images would take about 45 minutes.
Those where the longest minutes I have ever experienced, speaking of below zero degrees. But it was worth the wait.

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My project was entitled, 'visual expression of cultural experiences' and I chose film as the medium for translating it.
I wanted to do a non-narrative documentary film, experimenting on how an idea can be presented just using visuals and sound.

Before going for experiencing a particular culture, I decided the style of the film I will be shooting. I had a clear idea on the pace of the film I should shoot, and what all kind of shots I have to take; slow motion, time lapses, steady shots, close ups for details, pan shots etc., according to what context I shoot.
In order to derive the style and the grammer, I referred to documentary films similar to what I was looking for.
I analysed the grammar of the film, how it was shot, what was the techniques used and how they edited the film.



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Camera used:
Fujifilm X-Pro2 (WR)

Lenses used:
35mm F1.4
16mm F1.4

Film simulation used: Classic Chrome

# Baraka (1992 film)
directed by Ron Fricke

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Non-narrative documentary film.

It explores themes through a kaleidoscopic compilation of natural events, life, human activities and technological phenomena shot in 24 countries on six continents over a 14-month period.

The film features a number of long tracking shots, slow motion and time-lapses.
And I tried to understand how the film was stitched together with a complex pattern through visuals.
It is not an easy thing to find patterns as it will take a lot of time to shoot them, as my project was supposed to be done in a limited 3 month period, I had to drop certain ideas of mine, because it was not practically possible to execute in a small period of time.

Reference: Wikipedia

# Samsara (2011 film)

directed by Ron Fricke

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Non-narrative documentary film.

Samsara was filmed in 25 countries all around the world. It took them 5 years to shoot the film.
It explores the wonders of our world from the broing to the inexplicable, looking into the enigmatic reaches of the human experience and humanity's spirituality.

This film was created similar to Baraka, infact Samsara is the continuation of Baraka. The film had similar technique used, and visual patterns.

Reference: Wikipedia

Other films referred:

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# Sikkim (1971 film)
Directed by Satyajit Ray

# Manhatta (1921 film)
By Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand

# Chronos (1985 film)
Directed by Ron Fricke

My references on movies like Baraka and Samsara created a benchmark for me, which I could never attain in a short period of time (4 month academic project), in terms of content/narration as well as the technicality. Such movies where created with a huge budget, shot in custom cameras and high-end equipments, and they comprised of narrations from different parts of the world and was completed in over a year.

Initially I wanted to create patterns out of each sequences-narrating an idea. I wanted to show the contrast between rural and urban lifestyle. But when I visited the village of Dronagiri in Uttarakhand, I convinced myself that I should capture the culture as it is, and let the audience experience it exactly the way it is. Otherwise I would be doing injustice to the unique culture I experienced.

If I would have made a verbally narrative film, it would have been some other film and not the film I wanted to do.
For me the visuals I captured speaks as it is, and words may influence our thought.
So I wanted to do my independent film, as an audio visual experience of the culture I experienced, of a village in the upper himalayan valley.

## REFERENCES

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Book reference:
Documentary film by Paul Rotha

Films reference:
Baraka(1992), Samsara(2011) and Chronos(1985) by Ron Fricke,
Sikkim (1971) by Satyajit Ray,, Manhatta (1921) by Charles
Sheeler and Paul Strand, Chronos (1985) by Ron Fricke.

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Wikipedia

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