

BOOK REVIEW

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Computerizing Cultures

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There is a need to explore new concepts and appropriate techniques capable of comprehending the multi-dimensional configuration of cultures and traditions as comparative method is criticised for its subjective judgement based on European standard.

The book under review is the first volume of the proceedings of a UNESCO workshop, "Cross-Cultural Lifestyle Studies with Multi-media Computerizable Documentation", held at the IGNCIA in New Delhi on January 9-13, 1989. The comparative method, the concept of culture and the computerization of cultural materials were the major ingredients debated around cross-cultural lifestyle study.

Highlighting the importance of computer technology Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan in her foreword has pointed out that in terms of the general concepts and theories of cross-cultural comparison, the existing paradigms are inadequate on a number of grounds.

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In the first part of the book, S.C. Malik and B.N. Saraswati demand adoption of a reflective approach on indigenous categories and taking multiplicity of viewpoints. Malik's paper on 'Holism and Lifestyle Studies' points out that present paradoxical situation in civilization studies are outdated colonial concepts and the indigenous models which could have provided better understanding are rapidly being lost. He emphasized that there is a need to correct certain ideological notions that have crept into research, and more significantly a holistic perspective-viewing cultural phenomena as interrelated whole. Saraswati's paper on 'Lifestyles in Traditional Cultures: a Conceptual Framework' reflects on the biospiritual theory of need, incorporating anthropological and indigenous categories. There, the spirit is considered as a unifying principle or the overall coherent character that sustains traditional culture and society in India. In his opinion, anthropological theory of binary opposites as primary human perception has no vision to comprehend it. Closely related to the concept of culture is the idea of form and its relationship with human lifestyles. A perfect form of culture is self organizing, self generating and self perpetuating. Forms integrate into a system of thought only when they open towards transcendence. This approach is appropriate to cross-cultural comparison of the various forms of human lifestyles.

The second part of the book deals with papers underlining ideological and methodological problems. I Lan Hodder draws attention to the problem of linking contextuels (at different scales) to general (cross-cultural) types of knowledge. In his paper on 'Multi-Media Data Management in the Context of Contemporary Cultural Theory', he offers a solution. R. Narasimhan's paper on 'Articulation as a Conceptual and Methodological Tool for Studying The Relationship between Culture and Cognition' tried to explain difference between the Western and the non-Western societies in terms of polarized concepts

on the assumption that writing by itself opens up to cognitive possibilities that are unavailable to that oral culture. J. Brouwer's paper 'Contemporary Social Scientists, Culture and Computer' suggests a holistic approach which takes the oral traditions of a group as its starting point. G.P. Chapman's paper on 'Capturing and Analyzing Holistic Lifestyle Data', stresses for a paradigm shift in the social sciences by defining new goals which can be done by making use of the power of computers to new methodology.

Again the question of paradigm shift to deal with large data recording through the use of modern hardware was raised by Jean-Claude Gardin in his paper 'Mind-Machine Relationship for Cross-Cultural Research in Large-Scale Information Systems'. He suggests a middle path between analytical and reductionist approaches. Boudhayan Chattopadhyay's paper on 'Modelling Community Lifestyle Studies' discusses the problems of documentation in the changing value system due to modern goods and technology. Peter J. Claus in his paper on "Designing Regional Folklife Documentation Centre" illustrates the potential problems and limitations of technologically sophisticated documentation from the point of view of an ethnographer and folklorist. also suggests a programme for documentation which may eliminate or minimize these problems.

The third part of the book on documentation contains Utpal Banerjee's paper on 'Strategy for Information Technology and Management System for Multi-Media Computerizable Documentation', B.C. Kailay's paper on 'Computerization at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts', S. Sugita's paper on 'Multi-Media Database at the National Museum of Ethnology (Osaka)', Jean Pierre Pascal's paper on 'Storage, Processing and Retrieval of Data on Environment at the French Institute (Pondicherry)', S. Sivarakasa's paper on 'Religious and Cultural Data Centre for Education and Development', I.S. Purawijaya's paper on 'Integrated Cultural Information System in Indonesia', B.C. Aggarwal's presentation on 'The Need for Cross Cultural Visual Documentation of Lifestyles in the Asian Pacific Region', Uxi Mufti's paper on 'Documentation of Performing Arts and Crafts in Asia', and John F. Mosteller's paper 'Beyond the Database: Computer-Aided Analysis of 'Form' in Indian and Asian Art'. These papers discussed the potentials of computerising information. It needless to say, the book is a pathfinder to comprehend ideological and methodological problems in man-computer interface. It speaks of many new things and moves forward to suggest the new avenues of interdisciplinary understanding of the subject. The editing of the book is commensurate in presenting the subject matter.

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Computerizing Cultures B.N. Saraswati, Editor IGNC, New Age International (P) Limited pp. 240; Rs. 300/-