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Review Article

Decoding Criminal Symbolism: Integrating Forensic Semiotics, Linguistics and Behavioural Profiling in Investigation

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Abstract

Introduction: Crime scenes are commonly contaminated with symbolic artefacts, graffiti, inscriptions or ritualistic arrangements that reveal offender intention and behaviour. Classic forensic approaches focus on physical evidence, while the potential of semiotic and linguistic interpretations has been to date overlooked.

Objectives: This study integrates forensic linguistics and semiotics in crime scene analysis, focusing on how symbolic evidence can contribute to offender profiling, behaviour interpretation and investigative procedures. **Materials and Methods:** A systemic review of peer reviewed articles, cases report and forensic books published in last two decades were analysed. Research related to crime scene symbolism, forensic linguistics, and behavioural profiling was reviewed with respect to methodology, findings, and applied usefulness. **Results:** There are patterns suggesting an association between symbolic artefacts and offender's behaviour forms of communication and psychological characteristics. Incorporating semiotic and linguistic models facilitates contextualised comprehension of crime scenes and the making of investigative decisions while also pinpointing unmet needs in terms of standardisation, methodological robustness as well cross-jurisdictional bending. **Conclusions:** Forensic semiotic linguistic analysis is a promising interdisciplinary supplement to routine investigation. More attempts in the future should ideally concentrate on standardization, empirical validation and integration into forensic casework routine to enhance interpretation of evidence and judicial reliability.

1. Introduction

A crime scene is much more than a communicative space inscribed with traces of physical locale of violence or infraction; it is a human action, intention, and emotion. Crime scene

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investigation in India has been transformed slowly but surely from a primitive, knocking-at-doors traditional inspection of crime scenes to a more scientific forensic visitation and examination. Prior investigative methods were primarily based on testimony of eyewitnesses, circumstantial re-enactment and intuitive reasoning by detectives. However, in the wake of forensic science laboratories as institutions, digital forensics and behavioural profiling units, it has turned from a one-off practice to standardised evidence usage.

2. Historical Development of Crime Scene Investigation in India

India has moved away from intuitive policing and eyewitness accounts to a system that is more evidence-based and organized. Confessions and conjectural reasoning were key to pre-independence investigations. Evidentiary standards were set by the Indian Evidence Act, 1872, and 1957 saw the establishment of the Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL), which was the first sign that scientific crime-solving was on its way. The introduction of fingerprinting, toxicology, serology and subsequently DNA and digital forensics increased the reliability of investigations. But the Indian forensic approach remains predominantly materialist, fascinated by what occurred rather than why. This disparity between physical trace and psycho-social meaning is one indication of the necessity for a forensic semiotics/linguistics which decodes symbolic residues such as graffiti, ritual marking, and behavioural indicators. So the history of crime scene investigation in India must be seen in terms of a semiotic turn, where science approaches interpretation of criminal intent and significance.

Relevance of Symbolic and Semiotic Evidence

Contemporary forensic semiotics examines communication, psychology and criminology through the study of the signs by which context clues relay an offender's logic or motive. Such evidence whether in ritualistic patterns, verbal expressions or digital symbols offers a behavioural map that complements classical forensic results. Semiotic analyses of memes, emojis and digital discourse play a key role in bringing to light intent, ideology and emotional disposition of cyber and ideology-related crimes. Through the combination of semiotic, linguistic and behavioural analysis, it is possible not only to chart the order of acts but also gain insight into the meaning-system in which those acts were made. This movement from evidence conceived of as object to evidence

understood as sign complexifies the scientific and psychological understanding of criminal behaviour. The present review attempts to consolidate the recent literature and case study on the significance of forensic linguistics, semiotics and symbolic evidence in crime scene investigations in India. It considers the decoding of a symbolic communication that connects physical trace to psychological insight. The paper, in the end, highlights the importance of semiotic interpretation as an adjunct to traditional forensic processes and its role in developing more nuanced and evidentially credible knowledge of criminal behaviour and investigative truthfulness of Indian criminal justice system.

3. Signs, Symbols, and Speech: Forensic Semiotics and Linguistics in India

Crime scenes themselves are interpreted not only in terms of physical context, but also as a signifying process and language. Forensic semiotics, a relatively new cross-disciplinary field, uses the concepts of semiotic theory and especially the idea of the signifier and signified from Ferdinand de Saussure to decrypt crime as a mode of communication.¹ In the work of forensic investigation, each object, gesture or space is a sign that carries with it an intentional (or unconscious) message about the mentality of the criminal.² The semiotic method tries to discover the story behind the set, why certain objects are there as they are and how, for example, some symbols or markings could suggest dominance, revenge or even mental anguish or what culturally bound or subjective meanings might account for them. As a practical aid to investigation, semiotic analysis templates can be employed through which visual or spatial symbols (e.g., crosses; circles; religious motifs) may be logged under thematic indicators such as "control", "fear", "ritualism", or "ideology". Such templates assist in bridging the relationship between specific symbolic configurations and the offender's modus operandi or type.

As a counterpart to this, forensic linguistics considers language as evidence. It includes handwriting analysis, judicial screening of suicide notes and ransom demands, and vetting the authorship of digital messages. Language cues, including syntactic, lexical, and acoustic content as well as semantic anomalies would reflect deception, coercion or emotion. As much of the crimes committed in India include multilingual communication, forensic linguistics can thus be useful. Investigators often come across messages in

Hindi, English or regional scripts such as hybrid code-mixing commonly observed among texts exchanged in urban digital communication. While it makes analysis more difficult, there is also valuable information on where offenders are from based on the variety of language that has been recorded. The linguistic behaviour, such as the ratio of code mixing and script alternation to regional vocabulary and discourse style etc., is more frequently being deployed for establishing the socio-linguistic background, level of education or the region from where suspects belong. In this light, forensic linguistics serves to capture information about not only language authenticity but wearer behaviour as well.

Semiotics and linguistics in association with behaviour profiling that enhances the interpretational efficiency of forensic investigation. Behavioural science studies psychological motivations and personality traits, semiotic and linguistic cues can be context evidence concerning communication and symbolism.³ For instance, there might be a connection between usage of particular words or colours or religious symbols/references and certain offender types (e.g., narcissistic ritual-based ideological offenders). For example, repeated references to certain symbols such as trident (trishul) or specific colour schemes may reflect ideological or ritualistic motivations and help the investigator bridge symbolic expression and psychological predisposition.

The Indian scenario is fraught with cultural and linguistic diversity, which makes forensic interpretation challenging. Symbols can have multiple interpretations for various groups; colours, gods or objects of worship can represent either religious expression or criminal activity according to circumstances. Officers are rarely correctly trained in semiotic and linguistic analyses, they may interpret the inscriptions being analysed incorrectly. However, despite these constraints increasing academic interest and interdisciplinary collaboration is placing India's forensic perspective in wider picture. The creation of structured semiotic and linguistic assessment methods, as well as their inclusion in forensic teaching and police investigation manual, would lead to positive impact on the reliability of practical symbolic and linguistic interpretation in India.

4. Understanding Symbolic Evidence through Rituals, Graffiti and Digital Whispers

Symbolic evidence in forensic research sometimes extends beyond traditional material traces, to the place where culture and communication intersects with criminal intention. With its heterogeneous socio-religious and linguistics makeup, India makes decoding such symbols both crucial and complicated. The language of symbols is often the criminal vernacular, from ritualistic artefacts to coded graffiti and digital icons. Traditional Ritualistic and cultural symbols rank amongst the oldest types of symbolic evidence in Indian crimes. Offences relating to human sacrifice, tantric practices and caste retaliation often include ritual objects like ashes, vermilion, blood stains or consecrated items set out in deliberate patterns. This kind of relic is usually a composite of unreason, identity and mental deviancy. In some rural homicide cases, yantras or religious drawings have been found near the victim's body to invoke protection or claim ownership. The police make a lot more money from these and similar "superstitious vestiges." They rather consider their outreach side as atavistic.⁴ A significant lacuna remains between anthropological knowledge and forensic practice, highlighting the necessity for culturally attuned investigative models.⁵

Urban Graffiti and Coded Messages find a more recent technique for symbolic communication within the city based crime scene. Indian cities have seen the use of graffiti as territorial markers not just by street gangs and political agitators but also by cyber-vigilante groups. These inscriptions, which include numeric signs and symbolic emblems, function as nonverbal claims of power and membership. In some instances, graffiti has been deployed after-the-fact as performative acts, intended to mock police or bolster group solidarity. But in India, it is seldom that our policing and forensic agencies have databases to recall graffiti, unlike the western counterparts. This mirrors a more general institutional delay in the acceptance of urban semiotics as an appropriate forensic instrument.

Digital Symbolism has evolved to be our next generation's frontier of forensic reading. The signals are hidden in online discourse like hashtags, emojis, memes or symbols used on the dark web and have double significance: hate-connected hub at one end of a dialogue, mass violence plotting at the other. Such a semiotic landscape in India's cybercrime especially when found between encrypted transactions or social media exchanges demands interpreting. For instance, fanatical organisations

have been known to use seemingly benign emojis or modified memes to plant recruitment messages or send threats without any text. At the same time, Indian cyber-forensic infrastructure is overwhelmingly reactive and not interpretive when it comes to digital symbology but rather concerned with finding material evidence.

In traditional, urban and digital settings, recurring motifs in Indian crime demonstrate a timeless truth: symbols bridge intent with act, psyche with scene. It's not so much that they are missing but that the system does not see them as indications of something. Integrated institutionally, forensic semiotics can transpose those covert signs into narrative-reconstructive and behaviour-interpretative mechanisms thereby enhancing the epistemic ground of Indian criminal investigation.

5. Case Studies and Narratives from the Indian Crime Scene

The semiotic nature of forensic investigation is thus most vividly drawn in actual cases. Crime scenes of India steeped in cultural diversity and social conflict, exhibit patterns of symbolic communication which frequently evade traditional forensic analysis. In custodial deaths, ritualistic murders or serial killings too, what symbols do is that they are means of power and a mode of recording in the psychic planning.⁶ A close reading of couple of Indian cases proves the vacuum in interpretation that exists between behavioural science hypotheses to legal evidence.

Custodial Death as a category poses one of the most disturbing facets of forensic deduction. Autopsy reports often show evidence of injuries that are not in line with official accounts marks from ropes indicating restraint, abrasions in areas of pressure or positional asphyxia, which is a form of torture.⁷ Read semiotically, these physical indicators convey an institutional violence and an inequity of power reposing in state authority over subject. The aesthetic configuration of the scenes, e.g. victims in a kneeling or suspended position, can serve for both exercises of power as well as to silence witness. In the killing of P. Jeyaraj and J. Bennicks in Tamil Nadu (2020), forensic evidence, along with symbolic humiliations, was a reminder that violence doesn't work simply as act but as message.⁸ However, the Indian investigative spectroscopy features little such evidence-based crackling around spatial or corporeal symbolism; a reluctance at interpretation of crime-scenes as anything other than material.

Ritualistic Murders and Cult Crimes also reveal the conflicting tangle of belief, dread, and forensics. Several "tantric" murders, the bodies of victims bearing ritual signs or surrounded by sacrificial items or objects associated with religious ceremonies, have been reported from states such as Odisha, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. In these instances, the crime scene serves as a performative text as a signifying act of purification, placation, or control. Yet forensic authorities tend to treat the latter as irrational practices rather than as interpretive systems that stem from local cosmologies. Failing to consult an ethnologist will generally prevent the exposure of embodied patterns, especially ones that offenders interpret as divinely inspired. The inability to offer these is a direct reflection of the lack of forensic training that is contextualized by culture including sociology and religion and not just evidence.

Serial Crimes in India have unique symbolic and behaviour signatures but there is little research on this style of offending. Both the Tamil Nadu's Auto Shankar killings⁹ and Noida's Nithari child murders¹⁰ had ritualistic undertones, sexual compulsions and object-related fetishes surfacing. Repeating methods such as burial positions, sorts of tools employed or post-death handling serves as a symbolic script through which perpetrators dominate the dead and landscapes. But Indian forensics frequently shatters these into isolated bits and pieces of evidence, while failing to see them as part of a broader communicative system of compulsion or ritual. A comparative look across metropolitan and rural contexts also indicates a contrast between the semiotic interpretations of forensics. Urban crimes, too, tend to do their talking in coded vocabularies like verbal flares, digital graffiti tags, the writings on city walls and meme-like murals that prove both mysterious and rife with subcultural identity. And in rural crimes we have a mafia of meaning created out of ritual objects, community imperatives and caste diktats that prescribe not just the motive but also the method. Institutional blinders of procedural rigidity may be the same, even as the symbolic vocabulary changes with geography. An understanding of crime, as liberated from both solved and pending cases for India's forensic landscape, suggests an impatient wait for its forensic framework to evolve beyond procedural empiricism to a more fertile ground of interpretive empiricism of symbols, space and speech approaching the discourse as communicative

extensions of criminal conduct rather than sheer coincidence.

6. Methodological and Analytical Tools for Decoding Symbolic Evidence

Interpreting language on crime scenes necessitates an interdisciplinary tool to connect semiotics, linguistics and behaviourism. Global literature has succeeded to provide a theoretical framework but their application to the Indian perspective is not only scanty but also piecemeal and not uniform. Such methods are powerfully transformative but hampered by institutional inertia.¹¹

The Semiotic Frameworks acts as the theoretical structure on which to interpret crime scene symbolism. The triadic model, including syntax (structural), semantics (sense) and pragmatics (context) enable scientists to engage with meaning rather than method. The syntactic level is concerned with spatial organization: how objects, places, or inscriptions are configured structurally in a given tableau. It is what it interprets these signs to mean whether a colour, a gesture, a symbol amounts to anger, ritual or ideology. It is the business of pragmatic interpretation to place these nuances in sociocultural and psychological context. The Indian forensic process, however, rarely uses such layered analysis; most crime-scene documentation does not extend beyond the recording of physical evidence and does not engage with its communicative aspect.¹² The lack of semiotic protocols with which to interpret the evidence lends itself to both over and under interpretation, which has in turn created evidentiary lacunae for crimes involving embedded cultural behaviours.¹³

Forensic Linguistics Techniques take this interpretive skill and apply it to language. Sophisticated linguistic profiling comprises of authorship attribution, discourse analysis, and psycholinguistic assessment of texts like ransom notes, suicide messages, or digital messages. Some of the most common forensic linguistic tools currently used in Western contexts include computer-assisted authorship analysis tools like JGAAP, Signature Stylometric and corpus linguistic software. These facilitate pattern recognition, n-gram analysis and the comparison of lexical, syntactic and stylistic features in handwritten as well as digital texts thus enabling a more systematic examination of linguistic evidence. But India's multilingual texture complicates such analyses. Regional scripts, code-mixed language (a

blend of Hindi and English), dialect diversity require an understanding of these linguistic nuances that most forensic laboratories may not have. Even digital texts, WhatsApp chats or social media postings fall under their home, and even create new semiotic codes with tones, emoji use and meme culture. While the Western forensic systems are moving towards the AI-based linguistic patterning, there have been regular inclusions of such technological moves in India only a few places like cybercrime units and are not an everyday affair to be used for mainstream forensic detections. Linguistic profiling features like code-mixing ratios, script variation, regional vocabulary and discourse style have potential to be tied to the offender's identity and its tendency.

This integration of Behavioural Profiling provides the psychological connection that links symbols and offender characteristics. Part of the foundation in behavioural forensics is connecting symbolic expression to personality structure such as control, narcissism, and ritual compulsion.¹⁴ But in India, profiling is often anecdotal or police-led, without empirical basis. Structured instruments like the HCR-20 (Historical, Clinical, Risk Management), the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) and standardized behavioural coding systems can provide measurable and interpretable offender personality traits that are related to signs of crime scene symbolism. Unified semiotic, linguistic and behaviour integration platforms thus enable cross-disciplinary teams to integrate symbolic acts, linguistic signals and personality perceptions within a single framework which tightens up interpretative consistency while reducing subjective bias.

A semiotic approach to criminal behaviour would better complement traditional psychological profiling, but psychologists are unlikely to speak the same language as linguists or investigators. The deficiency of the existing methods in India is at system rather than ideational level. There is a critical limitation of interdisciplinary training, access to linguistic databases, and research on culturally specific signs. On the other hand, a large number of Indian FSLs (Forensic Science Laboratories) are functionally constrained with highly stringent procedural guidelines and over-reliance on hard science based quantifiable evidence that precludes subjective interpretations. As a result, symbolic and linguistic evidences although abundant in narrative potential but figuratively disappear under law.

7. The Indian Challenge and Future Horizons: Bridging Gaps through Innovation and Integration

The incorporation of semiotic and linguistic analysis into India's forensic and legal systems is obstructed by a tangle of structural, legal, and cultural impediments. Symbolic and linguistic proof may shed light on the intents and patterns of behaviour of offenders, India's investigative model remains grounded in a form of stultifying empiricism: it prefers hard, clanging pieces of evidence like DNA and skin or finger prints over interpretive insights. This constructionist perspective ignores the fields that focus on meaning, communication and cultural context elements central to contemporary crime interpretation.

One limitation is the lack of standardized methods to define and maintain symbolic or lexical evidentiary data. They are not equipped to record matters of object placement, graffiti, inscriptions, or ritual configuration. Such hints therefore, go unnoticed or are dismissed as mere chance. There are no standard procedures or manuals in Indian FSLs that guide in symbolic documentation resulting in non-uniformity and loss of information case-wise. Judicial admissibility poses another challenge. Despite admitting expert evidence the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023 does not provide for semiotic and linguistic interpretation per se. Courts that they appealed to and other courts generally seem to like numbers better, because anything interpretive or involving science seems subjective or secondary to them. Sparse case law adds to the distrust in symbolic evidence, and illustrates an institutional reluctance to embrace qualitative approaches. Cultural diversity also adds complexity. Symbols and nuances of language differ across India's regions and religions, to the effect that what indicates respect in one place may mark protest or criminal affiliation in another. Without cultural literacy, detectives are in danger of misunderstanding. This problem is compounded by training lacunae: few law enforcement and forensic professionals encounter semiotics, forensic linguistics or profiling behaviour, meaning that there are procedural blanks in their understanding.¹⁵ But regardless of those obstacles, innovation is a way forward. Various trace evidences may be collected from crime scene. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons are helpful in the different fields of forensic science such as forensic toxicology, environmental forensics, petroleum forensic and

food forensic.¹⁶ The integration of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and digital forensics has the potential to change how symbolic and linguistic patterns are evaluated. They can detect patterns, spotting similar language, or a pattern of behaviour across large data sets linking crimes that may otherwise have appeared unrelated. Comparatively, in other western nations such as the US, UK and Australia there are formal semiotic and linguistic analysis procedures that have been implemented in forensic practice. As an example, structured symbolic documentation and computational linguistics for analysing threat is in use by the UK's National Crime Agency, and AI-supported authorship and semantic analysis during profiling are used by the FBI. In Australia, it is the combination of behavioural profiling and semiotic interpretation in organised crime investigations. These comparative practices illustrate that there may be ways in which India can institutionalize the treatment of symbolic evidence.

However, AI-driven symbolic analysis along with several other technologies is conspicuously missing from India's forensic ecosystem. For progress to be institutionalized, India needs nationally standardized protocols for symbol evidence.^{17,18} A "Symbolic Evidence Documentation Manual" in the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) or the Directorate of Forensic Science Services could frame categories, procedures, scissoring techniques for analysis, bringing legal legitimacy to them in court.^{19,20} Capacity building is equally vital. Training of investigators, forensic scientists and judges should include forensics semiotics, linguistic analysis and behavioural profiling. These courses in law, psychology, and anthropology and data science could be included in the curricula at the National Forensic Sciences University; police training academies and judicial academies to encourage inter-disciplinary competency. Judicial recognition requires empirical support. Partnership between universities and forensic laboratories should look at how robust and useful symbolic analysis is. Slow introduction to evidence through expert testimony can assist courts in developing towards acceptance of interpretive evidence under the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam.

8. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the interpretability of semiotic, linguistic and behavioural profiling in decoding the untold crime stories from Indian crime scenes. From the reviewed literature and case files,

we become aware of that symbol (as ritual objects, graffiti, digital imprint) serve as not only periphery interview clues but also communicative tools,, into which offender intent, cultural backdrop or even psychological state are embedded. However, India's forensic and legal practices become restricted due to procedural empiricism not taking into account the value of evidentiary and investigative signification measures. The combination of forensic semiotics, linguistics analysis and behavioural science has a potential to contribute substantially to increasing the accuracy of investigation and justice. As taking into account symbolic evidence as part of a larger communicative context, it then permits to the investigators to have a more detailed reconstruction of motive and thinking. But the level of achievements can only be considerable through standardization, advanced trainings and empirical research at Indian forensic establishments. The future of Indian forensics is what lies beyond what's seen in learning to read the language of crime not only through what's seen, but through the meant.

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