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Vivan Sundaram, "Remembering the Past, Looking to the Future", 2001.

Courtesy of the Artist & SEPIA International.

# Photography in India

*Photography was first introduced to India in 1840, only a year after the announcements of the daguerreotype and calotype processes in France and England. The fragility of this early material, the uniqueness of the daguerreotype and the harshness of the Indian climate mean that photographs from this time are scarce, leaving us with a fragmented picture of the development of the medium.*

Sophie Gordon

Initially, commercial studios were established in cities such as Calcutta, where an ever-increasing clientele could be relied upon to keep up a demand for portraits. Some amateurs also brought cameras to India; some of the earliest surviving photographs from India are in a family album, now in the Getty Museum, containing views taken in Nainital, Bareilly and Kanpur during the mid-1840s (Fig.1). Around the same time, the French daguerreotypist Jules Itier (1802-77) passed through India, whilst engaged in a treaty negotiation with China. A handful of his views of South India still survive today in a number of collections. The extremely small amount of material that has survived from the 1840s must represent only a fraction of the photographic activity that took place.

## The Colonial Contribution

This lack of material from the 1840s makes the story relatively straightforward to tell in its early years. After 1850, with the use of the camera spreading across the subcontinent, things get a little more complicated. The number and

type of photographers at work increases dramatically within the space of a few years. Their output ranges from studio portraits to ethnographic documentation, from picturesque landscapes to documentary records of architecture, works of art and the natural history of India. The history of photography in India has, over the last quarter of a century, been told largely from the perspective of a handful of colonial collections, in particular the India Office Collection, now housed at the British Library in London. Publications by British Library curators, including Ray Desmond's *Victorian India in Focus* (London, 1982) and John Falconer's *A Shifting Focus: Photography in India 1850-1900* (London, 1995), have been influential in establishing significant photographers and events, while emphasising the importance of British documentary work. This colonial dominance is inevitable, for although the photographs in the India Office Collection combine to create an extraordinary collection of around 250,000 items containing the work of hundreds of photographers, it represents what successive colonial administrators believed to be worth collecting and preserving, rather than being truly

representative of photography in India. In particular the collection contains the photographs amassed by the Archaeological Survey of India, the official body set up by the British administration in 1870 to identify and preserve India's architectural and archaeological heritage. This collection alone consists of 37,781 prints, according to the online catalogue. (Fig.2)

The development of 'photography in India' as a field of research has taken place within the wider context of the growth of the history of photography as a subject of serious investigation. This is evident through the creation of separate photography departments in museums, libraries and archives (the Museum of Modern Art in New York established a photography department relatively early in 1940, but many departments in European institutions were not created until the late 1960s and early 1970s) and, hand-in-hand with this, the development of a commercial market for buying and selling photographs. With museums focusing on the aesthetic qualities of photography at the expense of its social history and meaning, the work of a handful of photographers was

identified and promoted at the expense of a greater understanding of the medium. From India, both Linnaeus Tripe (1822-1902) and Dr John Murray (1809-1898) are frequently cited as the most accomplished masters of the art, and to a lesser extent, Samuel Bourne (1834-1912). The work of these British photographers fits the European paradigm for successful, aesthetically-pleasing compositions and the landscapes of Bourne in particular are composed according to the demands of the Picturesque ideal. (Figs.3 & 4)

There is some tension within the field between scholars from South Asian departments who concentrate exclusively on Indian photography within an Indian context but who know little about the broader history of photography, and those who work regularly with a wider range of photographic images, such as curators and photography dealers, but who generally know little about India. This debate can be boiled down to 'context versus aesthetics' and at present it shows no signs of abating. Some, however, have successfully engaged with different approaches and aspects of the work. Maria Antonella Pelizzari's publi-

cation *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900* (Montreal, 2004) contains contributions from a variety of scholars of different backgrounds, discussing a range of meanings and interpretations for architectural photography.

## The Private Collector

The growth of the market and the role of the private collector have done much to stimulate the field into broadening and embracing new avenues for research. Each individual collector inevitably brings a unique set of criteria for making acquisitions. Indian collectors in particular come with ideas that differ greatly, in the most positive way, from those of Western museums. This usually ranges between a desire to preserve India's photographs because of the richness and beauty of the medium, to ensuring that the information contained within the images such as records of events and fast-disappearing buildings is not only saved but made available and used in the many conservation projects now establishing themselves in India. The Alkazi Collection, for example, has embraced many of these approaches. The collection acquires the acknowl-

edged masters of photography as well as attempting to expand this category through promoting the work of other accomplished artists such as John Edward Saché (1824-1882)<sup>1</sup>. It is also creating an archive of work that represents local traditions and practices, for example, painted photographs<sup>2</sup>, collage and montage work, and material from studios working for the independent princely states as well as for middle-class Indian families. Scholars such as Christopher Pinney and Malavika Karlekar have recently worked on this type of material, presenting new lines of thought and opening up new and unexplored collections in an academic field that has, since the 1990s, been in danger of stagnating under Foucauldian approaches to (colonial) discourse and power. (Fig.5)

Karlekar's work has also broken the artificial chronological boundaries that have arisen in the field, wherein early photography up to c. 1911 is considered the domain of the historian, early 20th century photography that of the anthropologist, and photography after 1947 belongs to the modern art world. These categories, coming from equally artificial timeframes imposed in Western art history and other humanities subjects, do not take into account local practices. This has resulted in large quantities of material, particularly from the early to mid-20th century, being ignored. For example, although photographic journals from the 19th century have been fully examined, the journals of the Photographic Society of India that were published in the 1920s are rarely referenced. Work that is typically reproduced and discussed in the journals was stylistically heavily influenced by Pictorialism - consciously drawing on the conventions of Western academic painting and emphasising the position of the photographer as Artist - at a time when Europe was rejecting the art photograph in favour of work that challenged existing conventions and traditional definitions. This 'soft pictorialism' that was practised in India was enormously popular for many years, yet it remains an unexplored avenue within the field.

These divisions and omissions have also lead to modern and contemporary photographic practice in India being divorced from its own history, as Indian artists look almost exclusively to Euro-American photographers for precedence. This has some parallels with past and current debates within the contemporary art field in India, leading in particular to questions over identity that have been raised by artists as well as by critics.

### Photographic Connections

The last few years have been remarkably fruitful with more publications and exhibitions tackling diverse aspects of this extraordinarily rich subject. The efforts of Sabeena Gadihoke to explore the work of Homai Vyarawalla (b.1913), which began in Gadihoke's documentary film *Three Women and a Camera* (1989), have culminated in a substantial publication that presents Vyarawalla's entire output, while focusing in depth on her work as a photojournalist. There has also been a publication dealing with



fig. 1: One of the earliest surviving images of India.

Unknown amateur, Street scene in a town in Uttar Pradesh. Salt print, c 1843-5.

(c) Christies Images Ltd. 2007



fig. 2: William Henry Pigou, Shiva Temple at Chaudanpur, in Karnataka. Albumen print, c. 1857. From the Archaeological Survey of India Collections.

(c) The British Library, Photo 1000/9 (1043)



fig. 3: Dr. John Murray, Agra, Taj Mahal. Salt print, c.1858.

The Royal Collection (c) 2007 HM Queen Elizabeth II. (RCIN 2701440)



fig. 4: Samuel Bourne. Kanpur, The Memorial Well. albumen print, 1865.

The Royal Collection (c) 2007 HM Queen Elizabeth II (RCIN 20701748).



fig. 5: Unknown Studio, "Raj Sri Kishore and Raj Sri Hari Singh, against a European backdrop", photomontage, gelatin silver print, watercolour, & gold, c. 1900.

Courtesy of The Alkazi Collection of Photography.



fig. 6: Unknown photographer, possibly Nicholas & Co. Kottayam, Syrian Church with the priest Mar Dionysius standing on the stone. From Lady Napier's Tour of Travancore Album. Albumen print, c. 1868.

The Royal Collection (c) 2007 HM Queen Elizabeth II (RCIN 2701525).

the Lafayette studio's portraits of Indian rulers, all of which were taken in Britain in the early 20th century. The collection of glass negatives from the Lafayette studio is now split between the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Portrait Gallery in London, the latter receiving the post-1925 material.

This work raises interesting questions not only over representation and identity when in the home of the *Raj*, but also over photographic links between India and Britain. Material was frequently sent from India to Britain, through diplomatic and official channels, in order to pass on information about the country. The Royal Collection in Britain contains several groups of photographs that were sent to Queen Victoria, Empress of India for just this purpose. Amongst these is a particularly unusual group of views of Travancore (modern-day south Kerala), sent to the Queen by Lady Napier, wife of the Governor of Madras, who toured the region in 1868. The photographs were accompanied by lengthy descriptions by Lady Napier, recounting everything that was encountered on tour. (Fig.6)

Some photographers sent their work for inclusion in exhibitions in Britain; for example, Murray exhibited a view of the Taj Mahal in the London Photographic Society exhibition in 1858, and Captain Henry Dixon showed views of Udayagiri (in Orissa) in the 1861 Architectural Photographic Association show, also in London. British families often purchased photographs and compiled albums as souvenirs; later they sent home postcards, showing monuments such as the Taj Mahal or the site of the Kanpur massacre.

The flow of information was not just one-way, however. Portraits taken in the Lafayette, Vandyk or Bassano studios in Britain frequently found their way to India. Even from the 1850s, photographs by leading British photographers were exhibited in exhibitions and were circulated at photographic society meetings. Extracts from several European photographic journals were published in India, where everything from reviews of the latest exhibitions to how to compose the best landscape views was discussed. The photographic societies - the first being established in 1854 in Bombay, followed by societies - in 1856 in Calcutta and Madras - were central in the early decades to establishing information networks through their meetings and journals and encouraging an exchange of queries and responses from the members.

Today in India, contemporary photographic practice faces the same dilemmas as it does anywhere else in the world. With the recent re-branding of photography as 'contemporary art', we are now in danger of establishing a two-tiered system in which anything not deemed worthy of the contemporary art description is regarded as second-class. Those photographers, or 'camera artists', promoted to an international level have their work displayed in major galleries and museums such as Tate Modern, and their prints are sold in contemporary art auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's (rather than in photography

auctions). It is interesting that one of the few Indian artists working with photography at this level is Vivan Sundaram (b.1943), yet he is not a photographer. He employs photographs by Umrao Sher-gil (1870-1954) and then manipulates them digitally to incorporate further images of Umrao's daughter, Amrita Sher-gil, one of India's foremost twentieth century painters. Sundaram is Amrita's nephew. (main image)

What is remarkable about Sundaram's series of photographs titled *Re-take of Amrita* (2001-2) is that, while sometimes beautiful and at other times deeply unsettling, it engages with photographers and artists, as well as with critics and the public, over issues concerning truth, identity and the nature of the medium. These concerns were central to debates over photography in the 1850s and remain so today. <

### Suggested further reading

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www.bl.uk  
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### Notes

- 1 Exhibition held at Sepia International Inc., New York, 22 November 2002 - 11 January 2003.
- 2 Exhibition held at Sepia International Inc., New York, 10 May - 12 July 2003.

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