

Book Review: Photography in India: from archives to contemporary practice

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Photography in India: from archives to contemporary practice

Chinar Shah, Aileen Blaney (Eds.), Bloomsbury, 2018

India's visual culture has been replete with photographic material since the camera's arrival nearly two centuries ago. Photographic productions and repositories have included the richly illustrated book, the curated exhibition, the photography gallery, archive and museum collections, evolving in their own capacities as institutions with engaged publics. What unfortunately remains in short supply is penetrative writing on the still camera's practice in India, writing which can speak of the photographic condition and its networks with potential for theoretical formulations. *Photography in India: from archives to contemporary practice*, edited by Chinar Shah and Aileen Blaney (2018) is a bid towards addressing this lacuna, bringing together writers from fields as diverse as art history and computer science to dwell on the infinite possibilities of photography. The book positions itself with an awareness of the multiple ways in which the aesthetics of photography, its technological adaptations and its very operations have unfolded, while also taking a bold stand on the camera's political engagements at major thresholds in Indian history. However, all through this, the book does not try to construct the chronology of an 'Indian photography'. The attempt is to compile between its covers, what 16 varied contributing authors think of as photography's contributions to the real and imagined visual context in India, impacting the social, cultural, economic and political behaviours of its public.

The two sections of the book are temporally sensitive without an attempt to cover swathes of time or to chronicle the decades for their contributions to photography, in other words, there is no attempt to build another timeline of Indian photography. The first section is titled 'Photographic Time and Memory' and the second is called 'Photographies in Contemporary India'. There is thus an acknowledgement of the fixity in the perception of older histories of photography, and its comparative pluralisms in contemporary times. Yet, the approach of the book, as Anna Fox in her Foreword says, is not colonial or nostalgic but engaged in "an expansive critical investigation into both historical and contemporary photography in India... This book will inspire a new generation of scholars and photographers to rethink the discourses of the past, which have largely emerged out of Europe and North America, and consider how the Indian context is affecting new dialogue, meaning and production in photography." For one, by including both Euro-American authors and Indian ones, the book positions itself as a step towards intellectual decolonization, with a shared, polyphonous discursive space between its covers.

In this suite of essays, the editors Aileen Blaney and Chinar Shah invite authors to freely explore the camera's sureties and ambiguities – from the worlds of analogue to digital, black and white to colour. Most essays take a deep dive into subjects as niche as a single family's albums of marriages and deaths (Sagar), a white woman's personal album of amateur photography (Wilson), an Indian state's self visualisation in a bid to promote tourism (Bhatnagar), and the true meaning and impact of the ubiquitous selfie (Shah). The avoidance of chronicling the meta story of Indian photography releases each writer to focus investigations along other parameters, even though they seem randomised in their subject matter. These subjects include the personal, the virtual and the public roles of photography that have grown beyond the colonial, the historical and the archival. As the editors state in their introduction, "Photography in India: From Archives to Contemporary Practice serves to neither comprehensively survey photography's historical development in India nor demarcate the elusive ground of its contemporary realities. Rather, it is geared towards galvanizing existing debates while starting new ones at a moment in contemporary India when photography is more ubiquitous than ever". (2) Photography is hereby interrogated for its well-known roles, say of typifying populations, memorialising rites of passage, and drawing the gaze to the female subject, but it is also positioned to invite theoretical ruminations from some new fields.

In fact, the thought behind the two sections of the book seems to not establish binaries in photographic typologies, but to draw contemporary practice into dialogue with what are regarded as historical categories and references in photography. As such, in his essay on Imran Channa's artistic interventions with photographic meaning, Zahid Chaudhary points to the "highly elastic and flexible" nature of photography, even in its analogue form. He explores an interpretation of the sub-continent's visual history in Channa's replication of photographs, mainly, of architectural subjects by the well-known colonial photographer, Linnaeus Tripe. In graphite drawings, with lines smudged, erased and redrawn, Channa "reorients our understanding of photography's place as a vehicle of the past's transmission and as a placeholder for ever-changing collective memory." (50) An acknowledgement of the limits to one's reading of historical moments, such as Partition, is clearly laid in the obliterations in Channa's drawings. Chaudhary's essay speaks directly to the final two contributions in the book, which dwell on the shifts in photographic meaning in the digital realm through interventional allowances of the medium. Fabien Charreau's (separate) studies of sexuality and spirituality in India through the plethora of available digital imagery reveals the nebulousness of meanings that were once specifically read into photographs. His own practice looks at Galtonesque superimpositions of pornographic images and the interruptions in the transmission of live darshans, revealing the paradox of "simultaneous visibility and invisibility, tangibility and intangibility" of the visual in the digital domain. Joan Fontcuberta's essay on visual excess in the digital world is a concluding rumination on the loss of meaning amidst the "mega diarrhoea of images" (212). At the birth of 'homo photographicus', for whom the image pertains to the "universal language that each of us now come to use naturally in the many chapters of our daily lives" we enter a decidedly post photographic world, embodying "a precarious 'goldfish' memory, which it is thought only lasts a few seconds." (213) The authors do attempt to suggest a way out, as a strategy for resistance where the photograph is once more well-defined. This is when the vernacular, the marginalised and the popular use of the camera takes centre stage. There is the

hope that the repetitive image, such as in the artist Penelope Umbrico's *Suns* from Flickr cited by Fontcuberta as an example of 'vemodalen' will give way to the infrequent, carefully selected and rarer image that steps away from the post photographic visual chaos.

The image that is treasured by its makers and receivers is the subject of essays by Sagar and Wilson. Wilson examines the category of the 'amateur' photographer who specifically lasted the phase of colonialism, through the figure of the Vicerene of India, Lady Dufferin. Dufferin's album in its title *My First Efforts in Photography, India 1886* reflects her tentativeness at a time when women photographers were rare, as Wilson mentions her exclusion from the larger canon of colonial photography. Her images were explanatory notes to her mother, meant as proof of her high living standards and philanthropic work, but become deeper messages in Victorian propriety and expected feminine behaviour. Stories of family and femininity are narratives from the margins within the dominant discourse and Pooja Sagar's work on Syrian Christian family albums from Kerala is a case in point. Sagar works hard at explaining the gravity of family photos, their obvious mnemonic and affective functions by drawing on mainstream aesthetic theory by Barthes and Deleuze, and while these tropes work well for photographs at large, they do not necessarily relate to Sagar's specific material. This attempt is worth evaluating for the inadequacies of established theory in fully explaining the nature and impact of photography in its myriad specific contexts, where a universalising approach to understanding photography must be avoided. Nishant Shah, however, inverts this attempt at generalisation in his essay on the selfie's promiscuousness "as it moves and travels between databases and networks, circulating without any discernment, producing clicks and likes." (176) He posits the selfie as a concealing, selfish object, that ironically makes the self within it invisible, writing to challenge accepted understanding about this digital self-portrait. Shah's work potentially bears tremendous theoretical possibilities, and is at the core of the type of writing on photography that needs to emerge from the sub-continent. This speaks directly to the essays authored by Raqs Media Collective and Christopher Pinney, which also look toward new paradigms of the archival and the temporal in India's photographs. Pinney looks at the possible 'de-synchronization' as an aesthetic strategy by contemporary photographer artists in dealing with archival subjects in colonial photographic visuals. He identifies doubling, repetition and citation as visual devices by the artists Pushpamala N, Waswo X. Waswo, Olivier Cullman, Gauri Gill, Suresh Punjabi, Naresh Bhatia and Cop Shiva, who by turning to these older forms of replantation eschew the modern project of photography. The essay by Raqs is a deeper examination of visual tools ranging from the staging of the massacre at Sikunderbagh (1858) by Felice Beato to the composites of Francis Galton as being predecessors to the strategies that Pinney's artists adopt, once again, enlivening the argument of the malleability of the photograph and the shifting meaning of the archival image.

If Sagar and Wilson's essays are about culling lost narratives amidst family and amateur photographs, the essays by Gadihoke, Wyma and Scott look at how the photographic record attests to the mainstream presence of the marginalized, in the domains of fashion, political action, and rural life. The photographed subject in these essays is the woman, the rural dweller and the fraught 'folk' or vernacular sartorial identity. Gadihoke opens the doors for an important yet ignored history of fashion photography in India through the images of Homai

Vyarawala, better known as the country's first woman journalist. She dwells on how binaries between 'foreign' and 'native' came to be negotiated during fashion shows in a modernizing nation, keen on crafting a visual self-identity that was documented on Vyarawala's lens. The female body bears the weight of political meaning in Scott's essay on the Emergency years (1975-77), for which she analyses photographs that were published in the Congress Party's bulletin *Socialist India*. By focusing the lens on Indira Gandhi amidst groups of women, these images served to 'make power visible' while most counter-images were censored. The visual connect between Gandhi and women in her audiences confirmed feminine support for a woman leader, without any overt effort to activate or textualism women's politics. As Scott observes "they highlight a political strategy whereby the Congress government specifically sought to mobilize women in support of Emergency rule, projecting visually striking representations of that support." (98)

Photography's utilisation for science and commerce are reflected in the essays by Bhatnagar and Ramanathan. The former writes on the state employment of the visual mechanism in creating the idea of "a credible state within an incredible India" (136). The visuals of a glossy, beautified and sanitised Chhatisgarh are meant to attract tourism, repressing the truth of the conflict-ridden state from public view. In direct contrast is Chinar Shah's essay on her own dealings with photographs of the Gujarat riots, most prominently the well-known portrait of a tearful Qutubiddin Ansari, as she refuses to bury the past under the veneer of a right-wing projection of social development in the state. Ramanathan's essay interrogates the effective use of satellite imagery in agrarian development, and as such, cracks open the fault lines in state policy on India's primary economic resource. He critiques extreme views regarding "satellite technology in India as a reductive technology that serves to entrench the instrumentality of powerful actors such as the state who often are the only ones to have access to these visual planning tools" (172) as well as the overconfidence of science in the precision of such imaging, seeking instead to establish a balance between these positions.

Photography in India; from archives to contemporary practice is thus a book that surprises with diversity and depth of subject matter, stoking future research interests in various areas. It is by no means a comprehensive compendium on Indian photography, but each essay is a thorough investigation of a niche terrain. If anything, the book reflects the unevenness of photography in India, even though one can only feel its ubiquity in contemporary times. Shah and Blaney could possibly imagine editing multiple future volumes of such a book, as serious writings on Indian photography are just beginning to emerge from various quarters.

Disclosure:

Pooja Sagar, whose essay appears in the book is on the faculty of Srishti Manipal Institute and Aileen Blaney and Chinar Shah were on the faculty of Srishti. None of them have been involved in soliciting or reading the review before publication.

Notes

¹ Fontcuberta borrows John Koenig's term from the latter's Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows, defining the term as "vemödaalen - n. the frustration of photographing something amazing when thousands of identical photos already exist - the same sunset, the same waterfall, the same curve of a hip, the same close-up of an eye - which can turn a unique subject into something hollow and pulpy and cheap, like a mass-produced piece of furniture you happen to have assembled yourself." 200-221.

