Ways of Seeing — And Being Seen

The camera was a tool of the privileged, in the same way that painting was for the European aristocrats.

India's relation to photography is a very intriguing one and certainly the most complex. Although a Western invention, much like cinema, photography has become a distinct art form and a practice for Indians with their own cultural and historical signature. There isn't a household or a community in India that does not have a unique disposition to photography. For a culture and religion that does not renounce the use of images (unlike Christianity and Islam), Indians have adapted to photography as if "it was already there." But photography was brought to India by the British and that encounter is merely beginning to make its ramifications felt. For a casually interested viewer as well as for a motivated scholar this encounter offers a lesson in colonial history and in how things have been shaped since then.

CAMERA INDICA
The Social Life of Indian Photographs
CHRISTOPHER PINNEY

Photography, like other modern inventions of technology, did not emerge out of a vacuum. It was not an abrupt invention that made someone get out of the bath tub screaming "Eureka" to the world. It was very much a part of the plan, a plan that included a development of the way of seeing that brought about a number of technologies of seeing, including cinema.

Photography developed in the 19th century when the fascination that the West had with the rest of the "exotic" world turned into an institution called colonialism. It also developed within Europe where it was very much a part of the modern State, along with its backbone — the technologies of surveillance and control. Thus, the development of the identity card, which stands as a testimony to the power of the State, and the evaluation of personal and collective characteristics of people through physical appearance (which gave rise to anti-Semitism) were part of the design that made the modern State possible. In other words, photography was not practiced as an art form. The dominant way in which it was used was to classify, mark and control the populations, which was the central purpose of the modern State.

But this State in Europe was also involved in colonial ventures, and the British officers took with them cameras to these exotic places and they were fascinated with taking pictures of the colorful natives. It happened in Africa and in India. James R. Ryan's *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* documents precisely this activity of photographing of one of the most accomplished colonizing State. Christopher Pinney's *Camera Indica: the Social Life of Indian Photographs* begins with the same argument. Both books are a welcome addition to the scholarship on India, colonialism and photography.

James R. Ryan approaches the subject as a scholar of geography. He believes that photography, like painting, was used to produce geographical and ethnological knowledge. The empire, of course, was interested in producing "pure" knowledge, knowledge that could be claimed to be "original" in its discovery and untainted by the presence of the "primitive natives." Thus, when the British officers or the "learned" friends they brought to Africa took photographs of geographical importance, these images lacked any presence of the natives. The perfection achieved thus could be claimed to exist for itself, with its own logic and without any history or location. David Livingston, when commenting on his expedition to Africa in 1865, declared he was not there to "gaze and to be gazed by the barbarians."

Samuel Bourne, the famous photographer, achieved the same feat in India from 1863-1870. Known for his landscape photography which was equally empty of people as that of his counterparts in Africa, Bourne captured women as objects to be looked at and enjoyed by his British clientele. The astonishing feature of these early photographs of Bourne emerges, in which the subjects appear "captives;" terrified or at least overawed in front of their White colonizers, lacking in confidence but beholden to please in the face of this unknown force called camera.

Christopher Pinney presents a detailed analysis of a monograph *called The Oriental Races and Tribes: Residents and Visitors of Bombay, 1863*. Meant to be a record of the exotic images for outsiders, the monograph depicts the compelling urge of the British to classify and categorize the

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Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, University of Chicago Press, 1997. paper $29.00

James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, Cloth, $38.00.

physical aspects of different people in India. Back home in England and for the history books, this must have served as an affirmation of the curiosity about the natives, and the emphasis on the physicality made the predetermined characterizations of natives that much more degrading. There is no doubt that photography served as an instrument of affirming the power of the colonizer.

While Pinney explores this direction only in the first chapter of the book, Ryan's book is devoted to the photographic expeditions of the British in the colonized geography. He documents the passion of British photographers and soldiers to take photographs in the lands they were occupying. What emerges in his book is an extensive catalog of knowledge that is now commonplace in the studies of colonialism. Ryan approaches the subject matter directly. The camera, it is known, advances a relationship of dominance-subservience between the photographer and the photographed. That relationship has to do with the power of photography in manipulating and reproducing the image infinitely, where the subject has less control and indeed much less dignity in the process. The fascination that the British had in "safaris," or more precisely the hunting trips, bears this out. Hunting was a favorite sport of the colonizers in these lands. It was a recreational activity but also an activity that enforced the power of those who had new instruments of killing exotic animals.

The consecutive chapters in Ryan's book, on hunting and on photographing the natives, illustrate how hunting took place because it could be photographed, where the hunter could make his victory immortal and display his trophy as an embodiment to his skills. The photographs that we see, including those of Raja Deen Dayal, in the exhibition in New York, in these books and in popular memory, affirm how photography made possible the idea that images have a longer life and hence are a proof of overcoming mortality.

But the photographs of the hunts always come *after* the moment of victory. They are not the documents of failure. They underline the defeat of the animal, and the permanent bondage of the subject photographed. In this sense, the photographs of the natives, whether they were meant to catalog the features of the races or the measurements of physical parts, were undoubtedly documents of the "hunted." Ryan brings these startling aspects together, but without a rigorous critical reflection on the topic.

SEATED MAHARAJA, 1870-1890s. THE ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

Ryan's book is a delight in itself and a commendable effort, but it leaves you hungry for more vigor and more extensive approach to the crimes of the colonizers. It is as if someone has come upon the evidence of the crime and we are still marveling at the skills of the criminal without examining what that means for our collective existence. This, however, is no discredit to Ryan's book. Indeed, it is a delightful addition to the discussion on colonialism. But in the plan to document the acts of the colonizers, and he does it very well, the book lacks the punch of taking it further to outline the alliances of photography with other means of control that the colonizers used in India, China and Africa.

Both authors point out early in their books that the impetus for writing these books came from their own pasts. Pinney's grandfather was in India as a soldier, and Ryan's great great grandmother was in South Africa in the early part of this century. Thus, the album of his grandfather triggers thoughts in Pinney, and the photograph of his great great grandmother shows Ryan the contours of the issue. But the specific critical force that is lacking in these two books, despite their commendable contribution to the areas of photography and colonialism, may be illustrated by a photograph that Ryan prints of his great grandmother in South Africa, taken in 1931.

In this photograph, his great great grandmother is sitting in a cycle-rickshaw, with the African rickshaw puller standing in front of the rickshaw. It is a black and white image, with clear and stark shades. The dark man is wearing extraordinarily ornamental and elaborate costume. Apart from the obvious positions of the woman and the dark man as the dominant and subservient participants in this spectacle, what is evident is the complete captivity of the dark man. He is servile, along with his tradition, his position and his labor. His submission is a given, but in the worst possible way, because he is even "celebrating" it with the rich costume.

The ease and the comfort with which a single woman could sit in the rickshaw and pose for the camera suggests that camera could not capture or hold in captivity the colonizer and the colonized. Ryan begins the book with the observation about the existence of the photograph but we never see a line of thinking that could situate for us the photograph in the strong critique of colonialism.

With Ryan's book as a backdrop,

Pinney's book serves as a specific study of photography in India. In this book as well, despite its impressive reach and very commendable effort, one gets the feeling that we are not "going all the way." Pinney observes, for example, that photographic encounter between the colonizers and the natives potentially created an intimacy of the event in which the "colonial distance" between the two may have diminished. That is to say, there must be some examples or practices where such distance between the two had disappeared or eased. Instead, what one observes is that the servile position of the native became more institutionalized; the master simply extended his reach on the natives by making the natives an object of anthropological amusement and a subject of control.

Pinney makes a different, more powerful observation in this regard. The British photographers picked the poor and the tribals as the generalized natives. They depicted in their images those Indians who were odd and unique in the most general sense of the term. The only individuality that emerged in Indian photography is that of the aristocrat or the princely families, as if nothing existed in between these two extremes. There was something specific in the way the camera was used by the British, or something inherent in that relationship between the camera and the sitter that elevated the individuality of the aristocrat while it obliterated the same for the native commoner. The less known aspect in this area is how much the Indian photographers, and there were many in the cities working in Photographic Societies of this or that kind, contributed to this different treatment of the aristocrats and the natives.

In Pinney's book, as much as in the Alkazi Collection's exhibits (sidebar), it is difficult to find the commoners. Since camera was such a tool of the privileged, it became an instrument of sustaining power and overcoming the mortality for the rich, in much the same way that painting worked for the European aristocrat. The photograph of Sardar Singh Bahadur, the Maharaja of Jodhpur, an image taken sometime in the 1900s, serves as a good example of how the particularities of the powerful became the icons of photography.

The Maharaja is obviously a young man, dressed in the appropriate attire of his kingship. The half-amused poise facing the camera, with his arm resting on a chair that would

Re-Orientations: Photography from South Asia 1845-1950, Photography Exhibition at Sepia International and the Alkazi Collection. 148 W 24th St., 11th Fl., New York. Tel 212-645-9444. April 24. 11 am-6 pm.

E. Alkazi with architect Nandinee Phookan.

Ebrahim Alkazi has been a familiar figure for over three decades for those involved in the arts in India. As director of the National School of Drama and the Asian Theater Institute, he has been a formidable presence in theater in India. He shaped, influenced and contributed to the training of artists, and made contemporary theater a much lauded institution in India.

Since 1977, Alkazi has been organizing exhibitions, publications and other activities to promote arts in their varied forms in India and abroad.

The current collection of some 40,000 images of photographs from India, which is partially housed (along with images in London and New Delhi) at the research and library facility at the Sepia International in New York, is a culmination of his efforts for the past two decades to collect 19th century images from the sub-continent. The images were collected through a sustained effort which still continues. The photographs are stored in albums, photographically illustrated books, and as single images.

The collection in New York, according to the director of the gallery, Esa Epstein, has its strength as an archive of the 19th century history of India. The exhibition holds its educational and informational value in three aspects: it shows the development of photography in India; it provides a documentary record of events in India; and it shows how the Indian response to photography was different. Epstein believes that this exhibition will generate interest from accredited scholars for whom the collection could serve as a resource for research. For immigrants from India, the exhibition will serve as "a connection to familial and spatial memory," Epstein said, and provide "a historical connection to India and its memory."

The exhibition is also intended to generate interest for contemporary Indian photography and therefore marks a major event for Indians, aficionados, and photography scholars in general.

— Shekhar Deshpande

make him look bigger if he sat in it, is more indicative of his attempt to force his presence into the indelible quality of the photographic print. He is facing his mortality, his specific mortality, and in doing so, his posture underscores his confidence in having acquired that privilege of passing his existence into a photograph.

The right that he enforces in putting on display his private existence is not available to a common person. But that is not surprising. What is surprising is the ease with which the local powers adopted the ethic of appearing in front of the camera. The relationship that the aristocracy developed to the camera is quite different from the relationship that the British did not allow the natives to develop. And what might be underlying all this is not simply a difference in power, but a different treatment of the two social groups and something inherent in camera that allowed such difference to develop.

The Alkazi collection offers the rich experience of some 100 photographs. At once, the photographs are varied and rooted in the same climate of colonial presence. It is hard to delineate the pompous exhibitionism of some of the subjects in these photographs and the aggressive admiration that the British photographers have for their native subjects. The exhibit is refreshing in its presentation, with a short and quite succinct narrative lacing the catalog and the photographs. It is educational and it offers immediate fodder for critical reflection.

The pictures are historically striking and rich in their aesthetic detail. One is left with an overwhelming feeling of how photography, that alien art form of the Europeans, was incorporated into an aesthetic of seeing and being seen. You can see a wide range of photography from India, from Samuel Bourne to Lala Deen Dayal. For anyone who can get to this exhibit, it is a lesson in hidden history and a trigger for further thought into the past.

Photography stayed in India and transformed the culture. Pinney's book then ventures into the contemporary uses of photography. With a rigor and passion of an anthropologist, he exposes us to the practices of photography in India. All of a sudden, we are in a world of images, intriguing and complex, strange and too common. This exposition is so fascinating that one gets the feeling of entering into an encyclopedic labyrinth of a culture.

In his meticulous study of photography in Nagda, a village in central India, Pinney has touched the iceberg that has begged exploration for a while. He does an impressive job in exploring how a small studio in a village, with an entrepreneurial artistry of a local photographer, can transform photography into an art of living in and with images. From composite images of single subjects to the combined images with film stars, there is a range that is baffling and amusing for any outsider. He goes from the worship of the photographs of the dead in a family to the photographs of weddings and photographs of adolescents when they are discovering their own identities. Pinney is intrigued, for good reason, by the proliferation of the chromolithographs, mostly of gods and goddesses, co-existing alongside the images of the dead in the family, wedding albums that look like Hindi film posters, and those living that are revered or that are at a distance from the inhabitants of the house.

This part of the book has more anthropological value. To an Indian reader, it gives less a feeling of a discovery and generates more a response of curiosity. Pinney is struggling around the philosophical questions of why Indians must do this. There is a belief in India, dominated by superstition, that taking a picture is conceding or even admitting the coming mortality because that photograph may well become the monument to one's existence after death. One could also say that photographs are the

most immediate expressions of identity, of a participation in a ritual that establishes one's creativity — hence montages, composites and images influenced by the heroes of Hindi films. The idea of "darshan," which is a revered gesture of approaching someone in full presence of one' senses, led by the eyes, offers the issue of photography being a more eternal and undying opportunity of a darshan. Nothing in Hinduism forbids images; in fact, later variations only encourage such a view. In a Hindu culture, images have a life of their own; they demand reverence, they command a strong presence, even a ubiquitous one.

Pinney is puzzled as a good cultural anthropologist should be. His attempts to find answers, however, are very specific to this region and very specific to certain practices. The complexity that Indian scene offers is beyond the scope of his book. But what a commendable effort his work is in the direction of thinking more about the issue.