

## ARTICLE

# Notes on historiography of photographs from India

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## Abstract

Despite its long and layered histories, critical analyses of photography in India began rather late and remain comparatively limited in number. However, the burgeoning scholarship in the field illuminates photography's role in conditioning modern South Asian experiences, while also highlighting the global character of the medium that complicate the unmarked history of photography. Three intertwined historiographical threads are influential in narrating the colonial Indian camera cultures. The first thread emphasized descriptive histories, the second thread debated cultural essentialism, while the third thread inquired into myriad photographic genres to rethink colonialism. An inquiry into these three threads helps reflect on the intellectual scope of photographs from colonial India, while also directing to future archival and analytical possibilities.

A close-up view of the Metropolitan Museum of Art gallery display featuring three Daguerreotypes in Figure 1 is an example of experiencing one of the earliest forms of publicly available photographic processes almost 180 years after its introduction.<sup>1</sup> The photographic referent and the viewer's reflection are seen simultaneously, providing a prism to think about the aesthetic and the materiality of Daguerreotypes and their implications for historically specific encounters. Introduced by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in 1839 in Paris, Daguerreotype was widely used in the 1840s and the 1850s across European metropolises and in their colonies. An advertisement in the Serampore-based weekly *The Friend of India* in early 1840 announced that Thacker & Co. imported Daguerreotype cameras in Calcutta, inaugurating photography's potentiality as a thriving techno-social practice in the subcontinent.<sup>2</sup> Daguerreotype is a direct-positive process to create singular images on photosensitive silver-coated copper surfaces that do not allow multiple copies like other photographic processes. The emulsion is fragile, sensitive, and prone to oxidation, turning the copper surface into a metal mirror over time, from which discerning the referent becomes challenging, unless appropriately preserved. India's tropical climate, with heat and humidity, adversely affects photographic emulsions and the survival of most photographs, including Daguerreotypes. These emulsion-compromised images could be challenging sources for writing histories of their referents. However, regardless of their legibility, photographs

made through a range of photographic wet plate and dry plate processes, including calotype, ambrotype, ferrotype, albumen-silver, and gelatin-silver, have their own techno-material, social, and political histories that illuminate specific human experiences.

Since its beginning in 1840, histories of photography across India are located in global conversations, while also remaining grounded in colonial and postcolonial particularities. With an increasing number of studios, visiting and resident photographers, camera clubs, dedicated journals, and diverse genres, photography became a quintessentially modern image-making practice in India, as it was elsewhere. Photographers throughout the nineteenth century came from the ranks of resourceful English and indigenous elites, often constituting exclusive groups affiliated with British-dominated photographic societies and camera clubs. They discussed and debated photography, and proceedings were regularly published in journals circulating among their members. Photography was also an indispensable part of colonial governmentality and knowledge production, and they were used for a wide range of purposes. Simultaneously, the medium was instrumental in elite self-fashioning. Although the non-elites—both middle class and the poor alike—were photographic subjects all along, they were neither photographers nor viewers until the first decade of the twentieth century, when the periodical and the daily press, especially the vernacular press, facilitated the democratization of the medium. The press disseminated photography as a practice and profession, making the medium available to the non-elite and also enabling mass viewership through halftone prints on non-photographic paper. These shifts in the early twentieth century conditioned photography's role in shaping public perceptions of events and the everyday.

Despite their long and layered histories of innovations and usage, photographs from India became subjects of critical attention only in the late-twentieth century. Sustained by the asymmetry of colonial power relations, the unmarked historiography of photography privileged the West assigning derivative status to photographs from India and other former colonies. Earlier oversight is being corrected by foregrounding the medium's global character and its simultaneity in the metropole and the colony. Further, the visual turn in South Asian studies toward analyzing specific media practices in the context of a given mediascape and a wider visual culture has brought long-overdue attention to how photography impacted colonial and postcolonial scopic regimes. This attention to visual culture



**FIGURE 1** Gallery display of three Daguerreotypes by Samuel Dwight Humphrey (top left dated 1849) and John Adams Whipple (top right dated 1852 and bottom dated 1851) featured in the exhibition *Apollo's Muse: The Moon in the Age of Photography*, The Met Fifth Avenue, July 03–September 22, 2019.

allowed questions generated by the interdisciplinary field of visual culture/visual studies (Alpers et al., 1996; Evans & Hall, 1999; Mirzoeff, 2013) and art historical methods to inform the historiography of photography in India. Even though a handful of scholars reflected from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s on Indian camera cultures, it was not until the pioneering works by Siddhartha Ghosh in the mid-1980s and Christopher Pinney from the late 1990s onwards that critical academic inquiry began to trace the Indian histories of photography. “[A]cademic interest in nineteenth-century photography from India has [grown] at a rapid pace” since 2000 (Gordon, 2004). Along with the vast number of shows, catalogs, and magazines, three major anthologies and one comprehensive curated volume emerged between 2018 and 2023, indicating the escalating interest in the field. Even though scholarly inquiries into Indian lens culture are still niche, existing scholarship has enriched Indian histories of the medium, dismantling the Eurocentric history of photography.

## 1 | LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS

The current essay identifies two contrasting and complementary methodologies of approaching historical photographs from India: first, the use of photographs as “primary sources” to write sociopolitical histories of the region, and second, to reflect on the techno-material and sociopolitical histories of the imaging practice and the image-objects to understand modern Indian experiences. In doing so, this article focuses on three intertwined historiographical threads within the second methodology and comments on their implications for the historiography of photography in India. Responding to the visual turn in historical studies, the first methodological engagement relies on photography’s indubitability and its evidentiary value as “sources” of history, emphasizing photographic referents. Indeed, the long and varied social uses of photographs across the subcontinent make them rich repositories of visual information about the past, and historians routinely use their truth claim and visual verifiability. The second methodological engagement delves into the histories of the medium and its ontology. It analyzes the histories of the imaging practice to reflect on colonial and postcolonial experiences and their broader implications. While the referent remains important in these analyses, the overarching emphasis is on delineating the multivalent character of the medium.

*The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India* (2015) exemplifies the method of using photographs to write sociopolitical histories beyond the frames. The authors Joy L.K. Pachuau and Willem van Schendel claim to “use visual sources...to uncover unknown themes and trends” of history (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2015, p. 4) from the 1860s through the 2010s. This method of using photographs as sources of reliable visual knowledge is akin to what the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes described as a preoccupation with the photographic referent: “a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see... the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it very difficult to focus on photography” (Barthes, 1981, p. 7). Consequently, Pachuau and van Schendel excluded the photographs that were “weathered, faded, or torn” (Pachuau and van Schendel, 2015, p. 16) because decayed emulsions do not provide much information about their referents. As the title suggests, the book’s intellectual exercise is not to write a history of photography in Mizoram but a history of Mizoram through photographs that bear witness to historians. This method of historical inquiry would consider a mirror-like Daguerreotype with faded emulsion inadequate as a valid source of historical knowledge.

On the contrary, the method focused on the medium and its ontology emphasizes the techno-material-social and political histories of photographic image-objects and deems even decayed emulsions as crucial as perfectly preserved photographs. Unlike the first, this second methodological engagement “focus[es] on photography” as a medium, which implies not only analyzing the surface of the images but also inquiring into histories of production, reproduction, circulation, reception, processes of image formation, material decay, and the politics of knowledge formation. To reflect on this growing body of critical scholarship on photography, the following three sections of this article chart three intertwined threads dealing with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs from India. The concluding section underscores the significant scholarly trends and their relationship to contemporary lens-based practices. Beginning in the 1970s and the early 1980s, the first historiographical thread attempted descriptive history

writing, rich with factual details and a Raj nostalgia. The second historiographical thread is marked by a debate on cultural essentialism generated by the subsequent characterization of many Indian photographs, especially painted Indian photo portraits as uniquely Indian. The third historiographical thread focused on a range of archives to analyze how photography mediated and conditioned India's colonial experiences, while also thinking about the character of the photographic medium.

Together these three threads unearthed a variety of archives elucidating the diversity of form, genre, and people that made the fabric of photography in India. Colonial-era public archives like the India Office collection at the British Library provided the initial archival base. Subsequently, other private and public archives and museum collections in India and elsewhere acquired a significant number of photographs from India. Colonial photographic genres dominating these repositories include pictorial landscapes made by British photographers (Figures 2 and 3), painted (Figure 4) and unpainted (Figure 5) elite portraits in different sizes and formats, colonial anthropological photographs of tribes and castes (Figure 6), photographs of archaeological sites and their excavations (Figure 7), and photographs of spectacular critical events like the Mutiny (Figure 8) and the Delhi Durbars (Figure 9). Additionally, family and individual private collections house portraits, travel photographs, and pictorial works by amateur photographers (Figure 10) from the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Scattered across these repositories, mass-circulated photographs from the twentieth century (Figure 11) are other traces of colonial Indian camera cultures.

## 2 | WRITING COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY

In the absence of any canon of photography in South Asia, early attempts by curators, archivists, amateur photographers, and amateur historians aimed at a fixed chronology, comprehensiveness, and descriptive histories of photography, drawing on colonial and elite Indian archives, with emphasis on administrative documentation and studio portraits. Indeed, "[c]hronicling, record-keeping, and listing: these were descriptive histories of photography's earliest years" (Mahadevan, 2013, p. na). Any discussion of these early attempts should begin with Ray Desmond's initiatives in the early 1970s as the Deputy Librarian and Deputy Keeper overseeing the India Office Library and Records at the British Library. He "discovered" the vast collection of photographs from India in their collection and wrote about photography in British India (Desmond, 1985, p. 48). Predictably, his archive determined his Euro-centric frame of description. In his narrative, England and France were the original sites where the history of photography began, reaching India only through the multifaceted journeys of British photographers. Indian photographers, including the British employed prominent individuals like Lala Deen Dayal, were located within this ripple effect. Clark Worswick followed Desmond in terms of framing and chronology, while also expanding his interest to photographs from the princely courts of India (Dayal & Worswick, 1980; Worswick & Embree, 1976).

Based primarily on Indian archives, Ganapathisundaram Thomas's account was the first deviation from Desmond's Euro-centric chronology firmly locating the beginning of photography in India in 1840 Calcutta (Thomas, 1981, p. 4). Thomas made a decisive move in claiming India's simultaneity with European practices, but the promise of this chronological departure remained unrealized in terms of archival research. A medical doctor by profession and photographer by "hobby," Thomas' identity as a camera club-based amateur photographer made him too selective. His "hobby" located him within the long lineage of nineteenth and early twentieth-century histories of camera clubs in India conditioning his emphasis on specific genres and narratives that privileged late-colonial and postcolonial salon photography. Nevertheless, Thomas indicated the breadth and diversity of photography in India. His descriptive survey with a broad sweep and a four-phase periodization functioned as a sourcebook for later scholars. Judith Mara Gutman (1982) further expanded the archival base and made the first move away from the descriptive toward serious analysis. Simultaneously, the reproduction of photographs in Desmond, Worswick, and Gutman's works made it possible for the broader public to see photographs beyond the confines of the institutional and personal archives. To this end, the physical format of their books often mimicked the size and format of colonial albums.



**FIGURE 2** Samuel Bourne, *View on the Dal Canal, Srinagar*, 1864, Albumen silver print, Shelf mark: Photo 883/(43) Item number: 88,343, The British Library; from Samuel Bourne's *Album of Indian Views* (1864); republished in James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (1997).

Despite its overall descriptive character, Siddhartha Ghosh's elaborate and ambitious work in Bangla was not simply a sourcebook. He pioneered nuanced histories of the medium by interrogating diverse archives, including popular periodicals, photography journals, newspapers, street directories, gazetteers, census, and ephemera (Ghosh, 1988). The subtitle specifies Ghosh's subject as the photographic practice of the Bengalis, while the scope of his research



**FIGURE 3** Philip Henry Egerton, *The Hamta Pass*, negative June–August 1863; print 1863–1864, Albumen silver print, 21.7 × 25.5 cm (8 9/16 × 10 1/16 in.), 84.XB.1337.13, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; published in Philip Henry Egerton, *Journal of a Tour Through Spiti, To The Frontier of Chinese Tibet, Photographic Illustrations* (1864); republished in James Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (1997).



FIGURE 4 Photographer and Painter Unknown, *Landowner Who Loves Music*, the 1880s; published in Judith Mara Gutman, *Through Indian Eyes: 19th and Early 20th-Century Photographs from India* (1982).

was not confined only to Bengal. He used Bengali photographic culture as an entry point to write an interconnected history of the medium and traced the traffic in ideas, aesthetics, and technologies between Bengali practitioners and their peers situated globally. Ghosh traced early histories of photography in Calcutta, histories of major photographic societies in the city, histories of major studios, scientific and popular writings by Bengali pioneers in English and Bangla and their publication histories in India and England. He was also the first author to have a substantial section on women photographers and inspired later research to trace women's participation as photographers and subjects.

Besides, Ghosh initiated discussions on the materiality of photographs by looking into their objecthood. His incorporation of facsimiles of ephemera in the book are examples of his commitment to a material history of photography. Ghosh's work was comprehensive in making his sources available and providing a detailed list of individuals and institutions in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal. His book also reproduced a wide range of photographs from private and family collections, thereby incorporating them within the archive of Indian photographs alongside the colonial official, princely Indian, and studio photographs. His work remains one of the most detailed and archivally rich histories of photography in India. Despite his pioneering efforts, Ghosh's work is still untranslated, except for one chapter, and accessible only to the Bangla reading publics.



FIGURE 5 Unpainted studio photograph; Obverse and reverse of a *carte de visite* by Calcutta Art Studio.

### 3 | DEBATING CULTURAL ESSENTIALISM

Along with their sweeping descriptive style of writing, early commentators, including Worswick and Gutman, advanced what photo-historian and anthropologist Christopher Pinney later described as a “culturally essentialist” view (Pinney, 1997, p. 93). According to Worswick, Indian photographers like Raja Deen Dayal's photography represented “a world view that was uniquely Eastern and permeated by traditions of classical India,” especially Indian painting traditions (Dayal & Worswick, 1980, p. 23). He elaborated on this argument by claiming that Deen Dayal's depiction of a kohl-eyed child in a studio portrait followed the iconography of the Hindu-Shakta Goddess Kali as if the child was an incarnation of the deity. However, the application of kohl on children is to ward off evil forces and make them look beautiful. Formal photographic portraits were to depict cultural conventions of beauty, making the child in question have kohl applied to the eye. Worswick's decidedly Orientalist project can be located within the late 1970s and early 1980s Raj nostalgia that also informed the 1980s international investment in organizing the Festival of India in the US and the UK.

Despite her departure from Worswick's Orientalism, Gutman nevertheless proclaimed that “Indian photographers used the camera to reflect and extend an Indian conception of reality” (Gutman, 1982, p. 5; quoted in Pinney, 1997, p. 95). To justify her position, Gutman cited Peter Galassi's argument about how early photographs from Western Europe, in their technicality and aesthetic, were a “legitimate child of Western pictorial tradition” and directly inherited the specific deployment of monocular linear perspective of seventeenth-century Flemish paintings (Galassi, 1981, p. 12 and *passim*). Analogously, Gutman traced the aesthetic origin of photographs by Indians to precolonial and pre-modern Indian artistic traditions, especially miniature and scroll painting traditions (Pinney, 1997, p. 95). She argued for a lack of linear perspective in Indian photographs, for example, in the flatness of Figure 2, that she thought fundamentally deviated from the photographs by Europeans like Figure 5 representing the depth of visual field. She claimed that photographs made by Indians had multiple entry points, preventing Western viewers from getting any familiar visual clues to guide their eyes to decode Indian photographs (Gutman, 1982). Apart



FIGURE 6 William Johnson, *Nagar Brahmin Women*, Albumen silver print, published in William Johnson, *Oriental Races and Tribes, Residents and Visitors of Bombay: a series of photographs with letter-press descriptions* (1863), reprinted in Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997).



FIGURE 7 Deen Dayal, *The Great Stupa from the north-west during repairs, Sanchi, Bhopal State, 1881*, Albumen silver print, 28.7 × 22.5 cm., Shelf mark: Photo 1003/(1341) Item number: 10031341, The British Library.





**FIGURE 8** Felice Beato, *Interior of the Secundra Bagh after the Slaughter of 2000 Rebels by the 93rd Highlanders and 4th Punjab Regiment. First Attack of Sir Colin Campbell in November 1857, Lucknow., 1858*, Albumen silver print, 26.2 × 29.8 cm.; The Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection: Beato, Brown University Library.



**FIGURE 9** James Ricalton, *Marvels of Richness and Grandeur—the Great Durbar Procession, Delhi, India, 1903*, Stereoscopic photograph, 8.9 × 17.8 cm, 181/(80): 80, The British Library; from *The Underwood Travel Library: Stereoscopic Views of India*.

from the monocular perspective, the debate about cultural essentialism is grounded in discussions about painted photographs (Figure 2). Gutman saw painted photographs as quintessentially Indian, an admixture of a Western technology and an Indian way of seeing.

Opposing such “hyperbolic essentialization of an Indian alterity,” Pinney emphasized historicizing photographs—a methodology that resists “any possibility of generalizing about ‘Indian-ness.’” According to Pinney, “[t]hey [works of Indian photographers] are highly complex, “modern” attempts to formulate visual identities under specific historical and political conditions” (Pinney, 1997, p. 96). However, Pinney’s early work accepted Gutman’s identification of opaquely painted photographs as distinctly Indian. But unlike Gutman’s general focus only on color, Pinney focused on the character of the color, that is, its opaqueness. Pinney observed that photographers and studios in Europe and North America used colors on photographic prints, where the objective was “to retouch negatives and to enhance color on the final print” (Pinney, 1997, p. 96). In contrast, Indian studios used paint not only to supplement the



**FIGURE 10** Debalina Majumdar, *Two Children, Mahabaleswar, 1964*, digital copy from Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal Memorial Collection, Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.

monochrome photographic image; photographic prints were almost completely covered and “overpowered” by opaque paints, leaving only human faces and hands recognizably photographic. Pinney located these painted photographs in the inter-ocular dialog between photography, chromolithography, oil painting, and early cinema.

Likewise, Partha Mitter did not see painted photographs as a result of “a special Indian perception of reality” and described Gutman’s analysis as “an ‘essentializing’ contrast between India and the West” (Mitter & Mehta, 2010, p. 17). Nevertheless, like Pinney, Mitter too argued for a unique Indian response to photographic technology that was premised on an inter-ocular relationship between “three related media, central to the rise of modernity in India...: Victorian academic painting [illusionism]; the process of mechanical reproduction [lithographs and oleographs]; and finally, the camera” (Mitter & Mehta, 2010, p. 20). Mitter traced the genealogy of “specific pictorial language of Indian photography” to the Indian miniature tradition and more precisely to what he called “post-Mughal” aesthetics, where “earlier non-naturalist traditions of Rajasthan reasserted themselves” (Mitter & Mehta, 2010, p. 23). Mitter’s observation about painted photographs embodying visual styles of Rajasthani miniature seems to contradict his criticism of Gutman’s cultural essentialism. But this seeming contradiction arises from different interpretations of the word “vision.” Mitter described “vision” as a physical-clinical faculty, while Gutman and Pinney used the word to describe socially trained practices of seeing. Thus, Gutman’s “Indian Eye” and Mitter’s “unique Indian response” seem to have a shared understanding of the uniqueness of Indian photographs, despite their different approaches to the word “vision.” However, the fundamental difference between the two is in how Gutman thought miniature was a premodern tradition, while for Mitter it was part of India’s colonial modernity and displayed formal and conceptual hybridity.

Refuting the understanding of heavily painted photographs as uniquely Indian, Deepali Dewan further emphasized historicization (Dewan & Zotova, 2012, p. 12) advancing a more nuanced analysis. She used painted photographs from the 1870s through the late twentieth century to trace various historically specific encounters between paints and photographs. She demonstrated how myriad customer demands determined the different painting styles and the amount of paint applied to the photographic prints. Citing multiple examples, including photographs and instruction manuals for applying paint on photographs, she elaborated various techniques of painting photographs, and that application of opaque paints was merely one of many embellishment strategies. Trained in miniature traditions, Indian painters drew heavily on globally circulating English instruction manuals for technical and stylistic advice and “painted photographs from India are part of a transcultural history of photography” (Dewan & Zotova, 2012, p. 12).

The style of painted photographs was dominated by portraiture, a genre that cultural theorist Walter Benjamin described as the last “refuge” of “aura” and the “cult value” of images (Benjamin et al., 2008, p. 27), and, indeed, paint on monochrome photographs had functional purposes to this end. One major reason for embellishment was

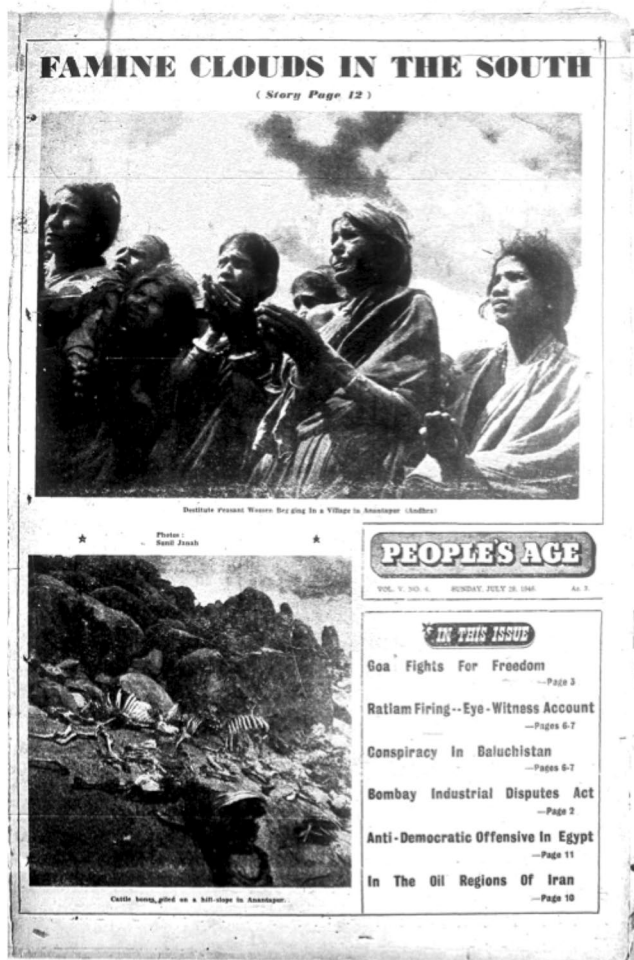


FIGURE 11 Sunil Janah's photographs of continuing famine in *People's Age*, July 28, 1946.

to emphasize individual attributes and social hierarchies that get homogenized in greyscale. The most important person in group photographs was painted in color to mark the subject's social prominence, while in solo portraits, the paint would pick out a specific part of the attire, such as a feather in the turban, to mark the persona or enhance aspects of individual identities, such as the vermilion on the forehead of married women (Dewan & Zotova, 2012; Pinney, 1997). However, both Pinney and Dewan agreed that painted photographs come across as aberrations—and therefore unique and often exotic—because the hegemony of greyscale naturalism shapes popular understanding of how photographs should look or what semiotic purpose they should serve (Dewan & Zotova, 2012; Pinney, 1997). Nevertheless, it remains a question if the application of paint compromised photography's fidelity to reality or if it brought black and white photographs closer to reality. Decades later, color photography replicated human perception of color, prompting one to wonder if the painted photographs were the precursors.

#### 4 | RETHINKING COLONIALISM

The debate about cultural essentialism is intertwined with rethinking colonialism. Critical histories from the 1990s onwards reflected on how photography conditioned colonialism, and what it revealed about the medium's fluid

character and its truth claims. Italian photographer Felice Beato's (in)famous 1858 post-facto reconstruction of the Secundra Bagh massacre (Figure 8) completed with human skeletal remains an example not only of colonial "intimidation" (Wilcock, 2015) and "authentic reportage" of the 1857 Revolt but also of fluid photographic truth. Photography was an essential "tool of Empire" (Headrick, 1981), creating myriad forms of truth and power/knowledge. James Ryan (1997) and Christopher Pinney (1997, 2008) first reflected on the role of photography in imperial surveillance and governmentality as well as European and native self-fashioning. Ryan was instrumental in drawing attention to how picturesque landscape photography in India was an instrument of visual domestication (Ryan, 1997) of exotic oriental territories (Figures 3 and 5) and how "[b]y imposing the aesthetic contours of 'English scenery' on to foreign environments [celebrated photographer Samule Bourne] was familiarizing and domesticating a potentially hostile landscape [of the Himalayas]." (Ryan, 1997, p. 51) Both Ryan and Pinney elaborately documented photography's contribution to colonial anthropology's urge to understand the people of India and the complexities of tribes and castes (Figure 6). They demonstrated how photography's truth claim was translated into the certainty of knowledge produced through photographic surveys such as the eight-volume *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan* by J. Forbes Watson John Willims Kaye.

Additionally, Pinney's genre-oriented analysis made the racial origin of the photographers secondary, underscoring the shared visual code of the English and the Indians. This allowed him to investigate how iconographies of European painting traditions spilled into Indian photographic portraiture made by British and Indian-owned studios and became central to the elite Indian self-fashioning. Julie Codell and others elaborated on the centrality of photography in colonial spectacles such as the three Delhi Durbars (Figure 9) (Codell, 2012). The Delhi Durbar photographs demonstrate how photography was not only central to the imperial propaganda but also how their close reading revealed competing understandings of colonialism in India. Simultaneously, they demonstrate the continuities and changes in how colonial era photographs addressed an Indian and an international audience in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

Concurrently, Pinney pointed out why photography in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was simultaneously a "cure" and a "curse" (Pinney, 2008). Invoking Jacques Derrida's notion of "pharmakon," he argued that photography was a "cure" for the inability of existing visual media such as paintings, woodcuts, lithographs, and oleographs to represent the "real" without calling attention to human intervention. However, the portability of cameras by the early twentieth century enabled Indians to use them to record visual evidence of British brutality, thereby making photography a "curse," that is, "politically dangerous" for the imperial authority (Pinney, 2008, p. 3 and *passim*). Pinney cited the photographs of post-massacre Jallianwallabagh by an Indian photographer who could freely move with his camera without the logistical support required for nineteenth-century large-format cameras. Likewise, during the Bihar earthquake of 1934, British and Indian newspapers used similar photographs to make different claims and the governmental report on the quake discussed the problem of how the Indians, specifically the Bangla press, threatened the government's reputation (Brett, 1935). These examples demonstrate how photography was a "curse," while also drawing attention to the fluidity of the photographic meaning.

Pinney theorized this dual character of photography by drawing on Rosalind Krauss's understanding of photographs as chemical imprints that are only loosely connected to the referent and Friedrich Kittler's emphasis on photography's inability to differentiate between "random visual data" and "meaningful picture sequence." (Pinney, 2008) Using Krauss and Kittler, Pinney foregrounded how photography's "techno-material" base influenced the medium's social function. By the early twentieth century, the portability of newer cameras changed the ratio between "random visual data" and "meaningful picture sequence" in a photograph or across set of photographs—thereby making photography a "curse." It is important to flag here that the history of technology had no place in Pinney's earlier position in *Camera Indica* (1997), while his later argument in *The Coming of Photography* (2008) acknowledged how photographic technology conditioned its social practice and truth claim. This acknowledgment allowed Pinney to separate the "corps" and the "corpus" (Pinney, 2012) foregrounding photography's indubitability

and meaninglessness, that is, how the truth of the photographic event does not guarantee any decisive meaning that is only produced discursively.

Photography's fluid character remained a central site of administrative anxiety throughout World War I and II. The British invested heavily in the effective use of photography in the newspapers, which played a central role in British war propaganda (Kaul, 2003). Governmental anxieties were palpable when photographs of the Bengal famine of 1943 emerged from the Communist Party of India newspapers (Figure 11), mobilizing international attention, despite British censorship to protect the British war effort during World War II. These moments of anxiety can be explained by Zahid Chowdhury's conceptualization of colonial photography in India as not simply an apparatus of imperial dominance but how it was an imaging practice that shaped colonial perceptions of reality (Chaudhary, 2012).

## 5 | THOUGHTS ON SCHOLASTIC TRENDS

The three historiographical threads discussed above are decisive moments in writing about photographs from colonial India, significantly impacting subsequent inquiry in the field. Publications based on individual photographers and specific collections and/or museum shows further enriched our understanding of photographic history in India. For example, nineteenth-century photographer Raja Deen Dayal is the subject of multiple biographical studies and exhibition catalogs (Dewan & Hutton, 2013; Jain et al., 2010). Likewise, architectural and archaeological photographs from the nineteenth century have attracted sustained attention (Gordon, 2010; Guha, 2010; Pelizzari, 2003). Simultaneously, numerous thematic surveys have contributed to the broader historiography (Allana & Pramod Kumar, 2008; Arya & Kamtekar, 2010; Dehejia, 2000; Falconer, 2009).

For the most extended period, scholars reflecting on the history of photography in India focused on the continuation of nineteenth-century photographic practices into the early twentieth century and beyond. However, more recent scholarship has highlighted profound changes, alongside continuity, in genres, technology, and photographers' and editors' beliefs about the medium and their publics. The focus on these changes helps reflect on photography's location in mass circulation, specific artistic movements like pictorialism (Roychoudhuri, 2015; Sinha, 2022), modernism (Brown, 2009; Gupta, 2019; Terracciano, 2018), and commercial practices like marriage photography (Narain, 2014). Discussions on the subject positions of photographers have become more nuanced, and regional history (Parayil, 2007), class (Roychoudhuri, 2015), caste, sexuality, and gender (Gadihoke, 2003 and, 2006; Karlekar, 2006; Leuzinger, 2020) have become essential categories through which to look at historical photographs.

Compared to the scholarship on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs, historiographical focus on late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century photographs and genres remains scant, especially histories of documentary photography and photojournalism. Research has emerged on amateur photography (Leuzinger, 2020), pictorialism, and how mass-circulated photographs (Roychoudhuri, 2015; Srivatsan, 2000) conditioned Indian visuality in the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The escalating interest in the field has made *Photography in India* a favored book title, despite the books varied intellectual scopes and temporal ambitions (Blaney and Shah, 2018; Gaskell & Gujral, 2018). The late-twentieth century and twenty-first-century lens-based contemporary art practices are gradually drawing scholarly attention.

Recent developments in scholarship on photography are informed by shifts in arts practices. Over the past 2 decades, visual artists from India and, more generally, from South Asia have turned to lens-based practices, either as their sole medium and/or as part of their multimedia practices, thereby integrating photography thoroughly into contemporary art showcased in photo festivals, art fairs, and biennales. This exhibitionary life of contemporary photography is in dialog with the interest of independent galleries, art collectors, and newly established privately owned art and photography museums's investment in contemporary and historical photographs. Regular gallery shows of photographers from the long-nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their accompanying catalogs have brought histories of photography to public purview and, in the process, have rediscovered "old masters" from the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> A wide range of commercial photographic studios, including the famous Bourne and Shephard, and a wide variety of travel albums and family albums have become quintessential sites to locate the long history of India's engagement with the medium.

This general upsurge in interest in histories of photography has been instrumental in the museumization of historical photographs, including mass media publications, considered for the longest period as ephemera devoid of enduring artistic value. This "revival" has been translated into several coffee table books, catalogs, niche art magazines, anthologies featuring scholarly articles, and scholarly monographs based on original research. These publications are routinely showcased by publishers targeting India's general and the specialized reading publics. However, by collapsing the historical and the contemporary practices and discussing the two in equal terms, these discussions often gloss over the complex history of the medium; it erases photography's intricate and competing relationship with other visual arts forms until the recent turn to lens-based contemporary art practices. Nevertheless, myriad forms of engagement with historical and contemporary photographs in recent years demonstrate that the historiography of photography in India has come a long way and is now a thriving scholarly field generating critical and popular discussions on various colonial and postcolonial archives from India.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 See <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/objects?exhibitionId=1db98082-524d-46fe-93ee-3ba6436c0acb&pkgids=578#!?perPage=100&offset=20>, accessed May 20, 2021.
- 2 For a reprint of the 1840 advertisement, see Ray Chaudhury, ed., 1978; For subsequent citations see Ghosh, 1988; Pinney, 1997; Karlekar, 2005.
- 3 Famous instances of rediscoveries of "old masters" include nineteenth-century photographers like Felice Beato, Lala Deen Dayal, Daroga Abbas Ali, Ram Singh II of Jaipur, Birchandra Manikya of Tripura, Samuel Bourne, and twentieth-century photographers like Sambhu Shaha, Sunil Janah, Homai Vyarawalla, Kulwant Roy, Ahmed Ali, Habib Rahman, Mitter Bedi, Manobina Roy, and Debalina Majumdar.

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