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Looking through the Portal: Photographs, Lives, Histories

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Ranu Roychoudhuri

20 Nov 2021

Review of *Portal: The Curious Case of Achintya Bose*, New Delhi: Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation and Tulika, 2020.

Portal: The Curious Case of Achintya Bose is a genre-bending archiving of twentieth-century Indian studio photography, and of histories of visuality and materiality, within the structure of a compelling mystery thriller. On the surface, it is the story of the fictional studio owner Achintya Bose's elusive quest for a woman who seemingly doesn't age over six decades and across multiple photographs diversely sourced. Beneath the surface, it tells the everyday stories of material objects and images that shape Bose's obsessive pursuit. Narrator Shan Bhattacharya's chance encounter around 2017 with Bose's journal-cum-scrapbook becomes the window into photography's techno-material, stylistic, social and affective lives in a pre-digital world. Weaving a bilingual and intermedial maze of objects, images and experiences, *Portal* addresses the truth claim and evidentiary value of photographs by reflecting on their interpretive fluidity.

The book is a culmination of Bhattacharya's winning proposal for the inaugural Umrao Singh Sher-Gil Grant for Photography in 2015, and embodies his twin persona as narrator and artist. However, the second persona only hovers over the first, which emerges as the more prominent voice. The book is crafted as a collaborative project as detailed in the credit page that reads 'conceptualized, compiled and reproduced' by Bhattacharya. Consequently, the book doesn't have a definitive author, and multiple authorial voices shape it. Indeed, the apparent indeterminacy of authorship is part of the project's conceptual investment in indefiniteness. Simultaneously, Bhattacharya straddles between what in the 1990s Hal Foster phrased as 'artist as ethnographer' and what in the 2000s Mark Godfrey called 'artist as historian'. Indeed, as an artist, Bhattacharya's practice in *Portal* traverses three significant moments in contemporary art: the ethnographic turn, the curatorial turn, and the archival turn.

Divided into four parts, *Portal* begins with a short introductory note in English on Bhattacharya's journey on an autumn morning to the modest rented premises of Bose Colour Studio, Artists and Photographers, in a serpentine bylane near B.K. Pal Park in the Ahiritola-Sovabazar-Baghbazar area of north Calcutta (now Kolkata). This takes place years after Bose presumably went missing in early 1998, prompting the landlord to finally clear the space for repurposing. Established in the late 1970s, Bose inherited the neighbourhood photography studio in the early 1990s from his father. Thus, generations of vintage photographic prints, advertisements and equipment, including manual and automatic still and video cameras, lens, celluloid films and obsolete computer peripherals, feature in Bhattacharya's description of the unremarkable studio space, which decidedly belongs to a bygone era when analog-chemical was gradually transitioning towards digital photography. This encounter, however, is remarkable in creating a gateway to everyday histories of photography that often remain unaddressed.

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The book's second part is the facsimile of the fictitious diary written in Bose's Bangla longhand, interspersed with English words and phrases. Besides, it integrates reproduction of photographic prints ranging from silver bromide to polaroid, accompanied by newspaper clippings with news and advertisements, personal correspondence in Bangla and English, covers and pages from specific books and magazines. Bose put all these together as parts of the puzzle to solve the mystery of a missing woman's identity; all texts and images revolve around one face with different names. The mystery, however, began rather simply on a lazy afternoon when a couple from Nonachandanoukur (near Barrackpore, one of the northern suburbs) reached Bose's studio for a couple photograph, never to return to pick up the colour print. After that, Bose started seeing the woman's verisimilitude in every other photograph and reproduction, prompting him to trace the lives of those image-objects and their referents to determine her identity. Bose found behind those images women named Kanika, Rita, Lalita, Kaberi and Minati, all of whose faces matched the one of the woman Bose had photographed in his studio.

Why did Bose chase the woman? Did he intend to hand her over the print he made of the couple? Any answer to this would lead to the ontology of photography. Bose did not chase the woman *per se*. He chased her image. Is it possible to separate the image from the referent? The answer is both yes and no. The indexical relationship between the photograph and its referent attests to a semiotic truth. But indexicality is no guarantee of a stable meeting. All photographs remain indubitable and meaningless between what Roland Barthes has called the techno-material 'core' and the extra-photographic 'corpus' within which meanings are discursively produced. The disjuncture between the core and the corpus creates fluid meanings that allowed Bose to interpret images of unknown women as the woman who visited his studio. In essence, Bose's urge to reduce these unknown women to one 'true' identity is the quest for a singular meaning—a fixed relationship between the photograph and the referent. Bose himself acknowledged the difficulty of determining the woman's identity despite looking through numerous photographic images and extra-photographic information. Bose's diary, and thereby *Portal*, elucidates the impossibility of reducing photographs to any singular interpretation.

The separation between the core and the corpus leads *Portal* to delve into studio photography's material and spatial histories. Alongside histories of a practice and a profession, it archives visual genres and their production processes. Artist Bhattacharya created all the vintage photographs in the book using old-school methods, including cameras, film and chemicals. His reproduction of period-specific visual styles is impressive and attests to his archival commitments. Besides, a third archival layering in *Portal* delves into the historiography of photography. Professor Gautam Rudra's character in Bose's narrative is based on the multitalented real-life personality of Siddhartha Ghosh, who wrote the first and the only encyclopedic history of photography in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengal. The page from Rudra's book in Bose's diary could well have been a page from Ghosh's 1988 seminal work, *Chobi Tola: Bangaleer Photography Charcha* (Taking Photographs: The Photographic Practices of Bengalis).

Narrator Bhattacharya returns in the third section to flag that despite Bose's claim towards the end of his journal of abandoning the search for the female photographic referent, he nevertheless had other photographs and correspondence related to his search kept separately in his studio. These traces never made their way into the diary but fuel further speculation on the woman's identity and possible reasons for Bose's sudden disappearance. The last section of the book is the reflections of a fictitious neuroscientist, Dr Makise Yumeno from the University of San Palermo, who applies 'scientific methods' only to conclude the same as the one reached through humanistic methods—the indeterminacy of images.

Any discussion of *Portal* would remain inadequate without thinking through Bose's use of the Bangla language and how that locates him and his profession within late twentieth-century Calcutta and certain distinct gender and class markers. Specific slang usages and the

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habitation they create allude to an explicitly middle-class male world. Histories of the profession tell us how studio ownership in Hindu Bengali neighbourhoods and the management and development of studio photography as a genre and practice in the late twentieth century was the prerogative of somewhat educated middle-class men, with hardly any exception. Bose and his studio belong to this male social space. Simultaneously, the language used by Bose in his diary highlights *Portal's* intermedial engagement with literature and cinema. Two of the most prominent linguistic examples relate to the auteur Satyajit Ray's famous detective series centred on the protagonist Feluda: phrases like 'cultivate *korte hochhe*' (the need to cultivate an individual, i.e., knowing someone thoroughly) and '*smriti-gorae jol dhala*' (watering memory, i.e., treating someone with alcohol) comes directly from Feluda's '*buddhir gorae dhnoya deoya*' (to provide smoke to the roots of intelligence, i.e., smoking a cigarette). Both of these are direct quotations from Ray. Likewise, two photographs on pages 25 and 96 of *Portal* are explicit references to photographer Pablo Bartholomew's works from the 1970s. It would have been intriguing to investigate the caste question vis-a-vis studio photography, but *Portal* hardly leaves behind any clues to explore this subject.

As the book title suggests, *Portal* functions as a mediation across temporalities, practices and image-objects-a versatile and eclectic range of human and non-human agents that craft histories of photography, linking memory and oblivion. It tells the story of a popular practice and a widely used medium that today has been almost obscured and exists only as niche hobby for vintage lovers. The book begins in north Calcutta and spatially remains grounded in Bengal. Yet, the story is not Bengal specific. It emphasizes how histories of photography in Bengal, and in this case, studio photography, are visually and materially part of a global and cosmopolitical ethos. In other words, Bhattacharya's Bengal-oriented archive is a gateway through which to critically reflect on the circulation of photographs in a cosmopolitan space where images, people and ideas travel, both physically and metaphorically. Knowledge of modern Bangla would help in decoding Bose's linguistic twists that are entirely lost in the translation provided in the form of a supplementary booklet. Nevertheless, the book transcends linguistic barriers through its visual language and becomes accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike. *Portal* is a slick publication but requires patient reading; it encourages one to enjoy the journey rather than reach for a closure hastily. Books and photographs with engaging storylines and curious referents are susceptible to be reduced to their narratives at the expense of their material, visual and linguistic facades. *Portal* alerts us to historically specific locations of print publications, chemically developed photographs, visual genres, ephemera, linguistic choices, and their intermedial relationships in appreciating camera cultures. Meant to appear as a curatorial approach to Bose's 'found archive', the book offers a conceptual and visual feast.

To read the full essay Click Here (Pdf/Ranu%20Roychoudhuri-Portal%20Review%20Final_1589.pdf)