Typecasting

Photographing the Peoples of India 1855–1920

Edited by Sudeshna Guha

Typecasting

Photographing the Peoples of India 1855–1920

Edited by Sudeshna Guha

DAG

DAG

22A, Windsor Place, Janpath
New Delhi 110001
Email: delhi@dagworld.com

Gallery 1 and 2
The Taj Mahal Palace
Apollo Bunder Road, Colaba
Mumbai 400001
Email: mumbai@dagworld.com

1325 Avenue of the Americas
28th Floor
New York, NY 10019
Email: newyork@dagworld.com

Website: www.dagworld.com

PROJECT COORDINATOR: Dipanvita Yadav and Ganga Singh
PUBLICATION MANAGER: Upama Biswas
DESIGN: Supriya Mahajan
PRINT: Archana Advertising Pvt Ltd., New Delhi

ISBN: 978-81-994960-8-8

Contents

An Aesthetic of Pattern: The Colonial Camera and the People of India

RANU ROYCHOUDHURI

These sketches do not profess to be more than mere rough notes, suggestive rather than exhaustive, and they make no claim to scientific research or philosophic investigation. But although the work does not aspire to scientific eminence, it is hoped that, in an ethnological point of view, it will not be without interest and value.[1]

The British colonial administration in India considered the Revolt of 1857 as an anthropological failure of the Empire—a failure to comprehend India and its people, and consequently to govern them effectively, despite almost a century of collecting, recording and classifying information about them. Indeed, historians, anthropologists and literary scholars have variously marked 1857 as an originating moment for much of the later colonial anxiety, even up to 1947, prompting thorough enumeration and surveillance of the subcontinent.[2] The continued assumption remained that 'the society… [the British] were governing, could be known and represented as a series of facts.'[3] Meticulous collection of these 'facts' began soon after the Revolt was suppressed, and the Indian administration was transferred from the English East India Company to the Crown in 1858. While various 'investigative modalities' spanning across two centuries characterised the colonial domination, the post-1857 period witnessed a significant shift in how these modalities manifested.[4] The dominant classificatory order in the pre-1857 period followed an 'aesthetic of randomness' of the wonder cabinets, most famously displayed during the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London, where Indian objects occupied the central position and the largest space.[5] In contrast, post-1857 colonial power/knowledge must be understood as, what I would phrase, an 'aesthetic of pattern', relying on the principle of the 'realistic' and backed up by 'tools of Empire', including surveys of myriad forms whose genealogy dates back to 1765, scientific cartography and the newly deployed enumeration technic of the census.[6] The archive of these materials in public and private

collections spread across continents demonstrates that a range of purposes shaped these modes of colonial knowledge production and its systemisation—from explicitly administrative to more academic, artistic, commercial and what was often deemed as individual-personal endeavour. The already burgeoning practice of photography with its unique claims to transparency, accuracy and, most importantly, indubitability contributed to the 'investigative modalities' in unprecedented ways, enabling historically specific ways of framing India in the service of colonial governmentality. Photography's indexical character—the indisputable evidence of having been there—and its assurance to freeze time promised a window into an unmediated and unambiguous reality that no other representational medium could offer. The photographic medium lends itself to 'invisibility', like the clean surface of a mirror, for the sake of the indexical image. This fragility and malleability of the medium meant that the image could stand in for the referent and, in the process, could displace it—the photographic image remains not simply as a trace of the real but becomes the reality itself 'of the topography, architecture, and ethnology of [India].'[7] Informed by the colonial power hierarchy, the colonial camera was presumed to deliver the reality of the governed—the reality of a 'type'. As anthropologist Deborah Poole argued, 'The classificatory conceit of type allowed images of individual bodies to be read not in reference to the place, time, context, or individual human being portrayed in each photograph, but rather as self-contained exemplars of idealized racial categories with no single referent in the world.'[8]

The two major efforts in photographically producing this 'type' towards visual ethnology, an emerging 'science' in mid-nineteenth century India, are the issues of *The Indian Amateur's Photographic Album* (1856–59) and *The Oriental Races and Tribes: Residents and Visitors of Bombay* in two volumes (1863 and 1866).[9] Visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney argued that 'Early photographic projects in India took form within a much broader museological discourse which created parallel registers of images, artifacts and records of behaviour.'[10] These forms of photographic albums proliferated rapidly in the subsequent years, documenting people, spaces and imperial affairs until the 1940s. Yet, in the vast colonial archive replete with images and texts to comprehend India, the eight volumes of *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations with Descriptive Letterpress*, *The Races and Tribes of India* (1868–75 ; hereafter *POI*) exist as one of the most ambitious photographic surveys the Raj ever witnessed. Published by the India Museum (estd. 1801) in London, the volumes were co-edited by John Forbes Watson (1827–92), assistant surgeon in the Bombay Medical Services from 1850 to 1853, reporter on the Products of India and director of the India Museum from 1858 to 1879, and John William Kaye (1814–76), a former officer of the Royal (Bengal) Artillery, secretary in the Political and Secret Department of the Office of the Secretary of State for India from 1858 to 1874 and a historian who wrote the much-debated *The History of the Sepoy War in India 1857-58* in three volumes.[11]

At face value, the *POI* created typologies and a classificatory order from an inherently diverse subcontinental population based on an 'objective' visual documentation—completed with elaborate verbal descriptions and interpretations of the diverse habitus in the subcontinent and what they revealed about the Indian people, including their moral characters, how they negotiated colonial rule and the potential threat they could pose to the security of the Empire. In one of the first scholarly analyses of the volumes, historian James R. Ryan concluded that 'The significance of *The People of India* lies in the ways it constructs knowledge of racial "types" relative to their political co-operation within the administrative frameworks of colonial authority.'[12] Likewise, Pinney argued that '*The People of India* is a major contribution to [the] ongoing project of documentation, but more than any other element it had a pragmatic political edge that attempted to directly relate these registers [of documentation] to the pressing question of the sustainability of British rule in India.'[13] Simultaneously, these photographs embody fissures and slippages in categorisation endemic to any documentation and classification project, foregrounding the fluidity and historically contingent nature of photography's truth claim, the layered relationship between images and words, and the limits of cultural translation. In its enormous scope, the *People of India* is part of a long genealogy of British Orientalism and its changing contours in India, and demonstrates how the camera conditioned colonialism's 'epidermal thinking'.[14]

No wonder that the two-page preface in the first *POI* volume situates the project in its immediate political context, underscoring how the Revolt informed it while subtly indicating how individuals and groups of people were made into subjects/objects of photography to be studied before they could be governed—the shooting by camera was to replace the gun in taming the population while also to map and deter future potential rebels:

> The great convulsion of 1857-58, while it necessarily retarded for a time all scientific and artistic operations, imparted a new interest to the country which had been the scene of, and to the people who had been the actors in, these remarkable events. When, therefore, the pacification of India had been accomplished, the officers of the Indian Services, who had made themselves acquainted with the principles and practice of photography, encouraged and patronized by the Governor-General, went forth, and traversed the land in search of interesting subjects.[15]

The eight volumes have a total of 480 silver albumen prints developed primarily from glass plate negatives (with a few from paper negatives) and pasted on the paper with a short letterpress caption underneath, indicating the serial number, a short descriptor and the location. These captions were mostly printed directly on the same page, with occasional irregularities when they were printed on a separate paper-strip and then pasted beneath the print.[16] Alongside the short-form captions, each photograph or set of photographs was accompanied by detailed letterpress description, the length of which varied, ranging from a paragraph with only a few sentences to text running over several pages. This disparity in length and detail was based on the logistics of information collection during the project, as explained in the preface and the footnotes, and existing knowledge about a particular person, a people or a place. The 'aesthetic of pattern' crafted after 1857, nevertheless, thrived on the information and perspectives generated over the previous century. These elaborations eliminated any ambiguity and possibility of 'free floating contemplation' that the short-form captions might afford to the human subjects depicted in the photographs.[17] 'Linguistic anchor', in forms of captions and elaborations, was meant to narrow down a singular meaning out of a thousand possible meanings that each of these photographs, as fluid visual forms, offered.[18]

The photographs depict 'types' of people, from unnamed faces as individuals and in groups to generic representative couples, and from craftspeople practising their trade to named princes and chieftains of select regions of the subcontinent. With the capital of British India in Calcutta, predictably the volumes began with the visual documentation of the Bengal Presidency. As the volumes progressed, they gradually moved westwards to the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Punjab, the Cis-Sutlej states, Baluchistan and Sind (Volume Six was devoted entirely to Sind); it then moved to Rajputana and the Central Provinces; and finally to the southern section of peninsular India, including Mysore, Travancore and Coorg. The last eleven photographs in Volume Eight, the last volume, are of individuals and groups from the Malay

peninsula, Singapore, Chittagong, Lower Burma and Arracan. The above pattern of organisation broadly followed the already established travel pattern of the colonial administrators, foreign travellers and visiting artists, who would begin their inland journey in the port of Calcutta, then travel along the Ganges westwards, and then southwards in the peninsula.[19] Presumably, Forbes Watson and Kaye perceived the recently concluded William Johnson's *Oriental Races and Tribes* as a complementary project, allowing them to exclude the Bombay Presidency altogether, while also modifying how Johnson organised the religious and caste groups. More than caste and class hierarchy across religions, Forbes Watson and Kaye emphasised regional variations and indigeneity—the 'remarkable tribes to be found in India'[20]—absent in Johnson's work that, nonetheless, focused on the skin colour and emphasised how it was of importance to 'students of Geography and Ethnography.'[21]

This emphasis on indigeneity is most prominent in Volume One and the beginning of Volume Two that record the regions of the Bengal Presidency, variously demarcated over the years, including the entirety or parts of the present states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim, clubbed together with contemporary Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. People are categorised under 'low caste Hindoo', 'Hindoo (outcast)', 'aboriginal', 'Rajpoot Christian', 'Wild Frontier Tribe', 'Frontier Tribe', 'Hill Tribe', 'Mixed Race', 'Marauding Tribe', 'Robber Tribe', 'Tibetan Origin', 'Tibetan', 'Buddhists', 'Trans-Himalayan Origin', 'Sub-Himalayan Origin', 'Military Tribe', 'Goorkhas', and 'Slave population, supposed aboriginal'. While the absence of other ethnic, linguistic and caste groups, such as Bangla-speaking upper-class, upper-caste Hindus, lower-class Muslims (except the Mulliks of Bihar) and Persian-Hindustani-speaking aristocratic Muslims of the region is glaring, it is not entirely surprising. Many of these communities supported the British during the Revolt of 1857 and were somewhat a known constituency requiring less emphasis than others—yet not as regal as the Nawab Begum of Bhopal, who is depicted elaborately as a major supporter of the English.

Well into the People of India project, Forbes Watson also authored *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India* (1866).[22] Based on the Indian textile specimens from the India Museum, this volume was published by the India Office first in 1866 (and republished in 1867) as an introduction to the eighteen-volume set on textiles. In many ways, *Textile Manufactures* also appears to be a supplementary volume to the already planned eight volumes of the *POI*, especially given that multiple monochrome photographs from the *POI* were reproduced here, often with opaque watercolour embellishment to tease out the colours and patterns of the costumes.[23] The 1866 edition of the publication in DAG's collection, with the inscription 'J. Forbes Watson', likely in his own hand, is accompanied by an unpaginated four-page printed pamphlet on him accompanied by his portrait, written almost ten years after he gave up his position as director of the India Museum when that institution was dissolved. The pamphlet turns out to be the pages from the *Journal of Indian Art* that published it as the 'Portrait and Biography of Dr. John Forbes Watson'.[24] The insertion of these four pages in *Textile Manufactures* testifies to its importance to a late-nineteenth-century owner of the volume and to its successive owners. The text invites a close reading of how contemporary public discourse perceived Forbes Watson and how his personal reputation was brought to bear on the epistemic character of the *People of India*.[25]

The biography compares Forbes Watson explicitly with early administrators turned philologists and textual scholars of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, like William Jones (1746–94), Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) and James Prinsep (1799–1840), and situates him in their lineage. It points to *POI* as a new beginning of late nineteenth-century literary, artistic and archaeological interpretation of India, as pioneering and scholarly significant as Jones's English translation of *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, the fourth-century Sanskrit play by Kalidasa, and as a contribution in developing 'comparative philology' as a 'scientific' model for other fields of colonial knowledge production. The biography read: '[the *People of India*] was only the first of a long series of important works so brought out by, such as Prof. Goldstucker's edition of the great Sanskrit Grammar, "Mahabhasya", Dr. James Fergusson's "Tree and Serpent Worship", Lieut. Cole's "Kashmir", Breek's "Nilgiri Tribes", Carter's "Leprosy", Dr. Burgess' "Archaeological Survey of Western India", and others.'

The language of the text established Forbes Watson as one of the first generation of orientalist scholars and not as a practitioner of the new orientalism of his contemporaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. In other words, Forbes Watson was projected to have a goal to bridge the West and the East, and not as invested in the 'Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.'[27] The text reads, 'His whole life has been one great struggle towards rendering the Institutions under his charge an intermediary between the East and the West, a living bond between England and India, and it exemplifies in a striking manner both the advantages and the disadvantages of that comprehensive spirit which was his principal characteristic.'[28] Yet, the text highlights Forbes Watson's most celebrated work as the beginning of a new period in orientalist scholarship that was way more interpretative and judgmental than the spirit of discovery that characterised the works of Jones and Prinsep. Forbes Watson was projected as an individual who intellectually bridged the two moments. The biography seems to be a desperate attempt to isolate Forbes Watson and the *POI* from the general administrative thrust after 1857, regardless of how every entry across the eight volumes is drenched in the colonial anxiety of an anthropological failure that would have been unknown to someone like William Jones.

II

The preface further describes how the inception of the project was at the personal initiative of the first viceroy of India, Charles John Canning and his wife Charlotte Canning, patron of the Bengal and Madras photographic societies, who wanted to take back visual souvenirs 'which might recall to their memory the peculiarities of Indian life.'[29] Apparently, the Revolt catalysed the project to become official, but without any definitive plan. Contrary to this claim, John Falconer, photo-historian and former Jerwood Curator of Photography at the British Library, carefully documented the publication history of the volumes to argue that, even if it was 'poorly managed', there was nothing quite unplanned about it, and elaborated how the preface 'glosses over a number of conflicting accounts relating to the transition of a semi-private collection into a published work.'[30] By discussing in detail the Officiating Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Clive Bayley's circular of June 1861, Falconer implied that these photographs were intended to be displayed at the London International Exhibition of 1862, but very few of them reached London in time. Regardless of the circumstances of their making, the specificity of the purpose, and the unevenness in details and documentation, the editors appear modest in making 'no claim to scientific research or philosophic investigation,' but confident in their hope 'that, in an ethnological point of view, [the *People of India*] will not be without interest and value.'[31] Reading through the lens of critical anthropology 150 years after they were published, one wonders if Forbes Watson and Kaye's series of disclaimers created a space to question the nineteenth-century positivism, scientism and 'optical empiricism', on which the truth claims of ethnology and photography thrived.[32] Did the

editors merely cover up all the logistical problems and financial issues of production, reproduction and circulation that Falconer unearthed by 2002, or were the editors sceptical of their methods and claims to begin with? Either way, the eight volumes testify to a deep commitment to colonial knowledge production, even if that knowledge depended on the 'regime of truth' that was often empirically flawed and, in hindsight, culturally offensive.

Thus, it is worth reiterating the long list of officers of the Indian Services who contributed photographs and textual information, because tracking their individual trajectories often helps identify their specific contributions in the absence of any obvious direct correspondence between the photographs and their makers, and the text and their authors, anywhere in the volumes. The page following the preface is the only place where these names allow a glimpse into the processes of the making. The photographers were J.C.A. Dannenberg, Lieutenant R.H. De Montmorency, Reverend E. Godfrey, Lieutenant W.W. Hooper, Major Houghton, Captain H.C. McDonald, J. Mulheran, Captain Oakes, Reverend G. Richter, Dr B. Simpson, Dr B.W. Switzer, Captain H.C.B. Tanner, Captain C.C. Taylor and Lieutenant J. Waterhouse. Among these, the only contributing commercial studio was Shepherd & Robertson (c. 1862–64), the precursor to Bourne & Shepherd (c. 1864–2016), considered to be the longest-running studio in the global history of photography. 'Names of the authors of the descriptive notices which were sent with the photographs from India' to England included Captain W.H. Beynon, B. Cunliffe, Lieutenant-Colonel E.T. Dalton, Colonel J.B. Dennys, Captain A.C. Gordon, Colonel C.R.W. Hervey, W.S. Hooper, S.B. Krishnasawmy, R. Manderson, J. Mulheran, Captain F. Nelson, Colonel Sir A.P. Phayre, J. Power, Reverend G. Richter, A. Swinton, E.B. Thomas, Captain Thomson, Captain C.K.M. Walter and Lieutenant J. Waterhouse. A note at the end of these two sets of names in the first volume reads: 'It is to be regretted that, in some instances, neither the names of the Photographers, nor of the Authors of the Descriptive Notices, have been forwarded from India.'[33]

The list of photographers offers some readily identifiable names like Lieutenant James Waterhouse (1842–1922), subsequently the head of the photographic department at the Survey of India and a significant contributor to the development of photomechanical reproduction, who is described by Falconer as 'one of the most prolific contributors to *The People of India*.'[34] Falconer's work on Waterhouse and the publication history of the *POI* has been decisive in identifying Waterhouse's specific photographs of central India, including the princely state of Bhopal, along with letterpress descriptions that constitute a major part of Volume Seven.[35] Falconer matched many other photographs with their makers, like those of Dr Benjamin Simpson (1831–1923), surgeon general in the Indian Medical Service, Bengal, from 1853 until 1890, and some by the studio of Shepherd & Robertson. Similarly, it is not difficult to conclude that the descriptive sections on eastern India, and especially Burma, was likely provided by Colonel Sir Arthur Purves Phayre (1812–85) who served in India from 1828 to 1867, was a British commissioner in Burma from 1862 to 1865, and a scholar who wrote the comprehensive *History of Burma* (1883).[36]

All the contributing photographers were amateurs in the sense that they pursued photography's creative, artistic potential as a hobby and not as a means of livelihood—amateur in terms of ideology and not in terms of their technical expertise or aesthetic skill. And amateur photographers in the 1860s and the 1870s often shared the aesthetic of formal portraiture popularised by the commercial studios when photographing their human subjects. Thus, the shape of the prints of the *POI* generally followed the framing conventions of studio photography. The photographs of individuals and groups were either oval or had arches on the top, and three sides in straight lines to resemble an architectural facade, regardless of the subjects' location in the social hierarchy. Likewise, the photographs followed the dominant nineteenth-century studio styles of cartes-de-visite—with often homogeneous and blurred background. In other words, individuals were abstracted from their social context apart from what was signalled from their appearance, attire and the props to indicate their social position, cultural location and occupational domain. 'The photographs were a mixture of full-face quarter-length portraits, full-length formal portraits with studio paraphernalia and group shots in varying degrees of formality.'[37]

In mimicking the conventions of studio portraiture, these photographs remain unique in the vast array of anthropological photographs produced across the subcontinent, which usually depicted racial groups either as objects of 'scientific' measurement or photographed them in their cultural surroundings or without a studio backdrop. The framing strategies of the *POI* in particular are generally not seen in other endeavours. Cases in point are the photographs in the *Oriental Races and Tribes* and the famous and much-reproduced 1864 photographs by Samuel Bourne variously identified as *Srinuggur: A Group of Kashmir Female*s and *Nautch Girls of Cashmere* or that of the Toda village in Ootacamund in the Nilgiris (1869). The techniques seen here involve either creating the space in postproduction or shooting them in their culturally specific and stereotypical surroundings in a rectangular image format, without any additional framing. However, the location of the *POI* photographs in the Victorian 'visual economy' sealed their fate to the interpretive domain of ethnology rather than in the genre of portraiture—signalling, yet again, the 'type' over individuality, thereby denying any agency to the referents who are reduced to mere objects of study.[38]

Perhaps, this objectifying gaze presumed that print qualities won't matter as much when it came to the visuals created to illustrate what was already known about an individual or a people as an observed 'scientific reality' of ethnology and articulated in the 'language of command'. The quality of individual prints differs owing to the diversity of photographers and their processes, including residual chemicals on the print surface causing them to fade and turn yellow, resulting in the loss of details. Over time, many prints have developed silver mirroring, depending on their handling and storage, causing further challenges in seeing photographic details that often encode visual excesses that may not get verbalised in the letterpress descriptions. This, in turn, allows the possibility to see the photographs in ways unintended by their makers—like the historical specificity of a fabric or its pattern, or perhaps the expression of the human referent when faced with the objectifying lens of the colonial camera, or even the minute details of the props that may not conform to the lens.

III

Pinney's analysis of nineteenth-century anthropological photographs provide us a shorthand for the two dominant paradigms of representation:

> a 'salvage' paradigm, which was applied to what were perceived to be fragile tribal communities, and a 'detective' paradigm, which was more commonly manifested when faced with a more vital caste society. In the 'salvage' paradigm a scientific and curatorial imperative was dominant… The 'detective' paradigm, by contrast, presumed the continuing vitality of sections of Indian society and stressed the value of anthropological depictions and physiognomic observations as future identificatory guides.[39]

While this insight is instructive in thinking about how the 'salvage paradigm' fostered an 'aesthetic of primitivism',

Figure 2.1

Attributed to Benjamin Simpson, *77. Moormi Group. Tibetans. Nipal*(Nepal), silver albumen print mounted on paper with letterpress caption, folio from *The People of India. A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1868 (Volume Two)

creating a photographic reality that may or may not exist beyond the frame, it also alerts us to how the *POI* blurred these discursive boundaries and how surveillance, administrative control and trade were key operative grids making the eight volumes somewhat distinct. Often the identities of people were stretched beyond the territorial boundaries of British India by virtue of their racial origin or affinities with people beyond, thereby creating a shared aspirational space that needed to be nurtured, classified, comprehended, and ultimately governed and used for imperial purposes.

Volume Two affords three photographs (numbers 75, 76, 77) to the Moormis—'a very numerous tribe, found in all parts of the Nipal mountains…smaller number in the Sikkim country…They are altogether a pastoral and agricultural people, rearing flocks of sheep and goats near the snow…settle on mountain tops at elevations of 4000 to 6000 feet…[they] are Buddhists decidedly a Mongolian tribe.'[40] The letterpress description concludes that 'Of all the Tibetan tribes on the South Side of the Himalaya, they are understood to be those whose habits have undergone the least change.'[41] This description points to multiple layers of British interest: first, the Moormis demonstrate cultural continuity and are unlikely to go extinct; second, they are widespread across the sub-Himalayan region and culturally connected to Tibet and racially connected to Mongolia—all regions that the British were interested in but remained outside their formal administrative control; third, they produce a particular kind of wool that could be of interest. The third point becomes clearer when compared to how their wool was positioned in *Textile Manufactures* volumes, explicitly described by Forbes Watson in the introduction as 'industrial museums…promoting trade operations between the East and West, in so far as these are concerned.'[42] Photograph 77 (fig. 2.1) of Volume Two of the *POI* was reproduced, with its oval frame, in the *Textile Manufactures* as Figure 49 on Plate VII facing page 140 (figs 2.2a and 2.2b). The text explains it is included to 'illustrate the

Figure 2.2a

J. Forbes Watson, India Office (publisher), *Male Attire. Woollens and Skins.*, silver albumen print on paper, folio from *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*, 1866

Figure 2.2b

J. Forbes Watson, India Office (publisher), *Male Attire. Woollens and Skins.*, handtinted silver albumen print on paper, folio from *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*, 1866

wearing of a large wrapper and thick hooded cloak of felt, a material in common use in many parts of High Asia, to which reference has now to be made.'[43] *Textile Manufactures* doesn't specify the name of the community, which in case of trade won't matter. So we have the 'detective paradigm', aspiration for territorial control and trade interest operating simultaneously as the colonial camera zooms on to the Moormis.

Expanding British possession in India and affirming the

legitimacy of their rule were central in documenting a titular leader like the Maharaja of Benares in Volume Two (fig. 2.3). We have an elaborately dressed middle-aged man seated in a studio, against a painted backdrop, looking directly at the camera—a photograph that could well have been commissioned by the individual, except in this case the possibility of any self-fashioning is occluded by the intentionality of an 'objective' ethnological study. The accompanying letterpress description identifies him as Deo Narain Sing who 'has recently been invested by the Viceroy of India with the second class (K.C.S.I) of the Most Excellent Order of the Star of India, conferred on him by Her Majesty the Queen.'[44] He seems important enough to find a space in the *POI* because the family has 'lately shown themselves fully alive to the advantages of European civilization…[by] contributing….to the schools and other institutions of the city,' despite their previous history of rebellion, led by Raja Cheyt Sing against the British in the 1780s. Cheyt Sing was mentioned in the context of British history to foreground the legitimacy of British colonial rule. Citing James Mill's *History of India*, the letterpress notes in parenthesis that 'the transactions which led to the rebellion of Cheyt Sing formed the first article of the charges in the famous impeachment of Warren Hastings, of which article he was acquitted by 13 against 6.'[45]

Given how specific ideological dispensations informed the ethnological approach of the *POI*, the exact physical state of the photograph of Cheyt Sing's distant descendent would likely have mattered little, as long as it conveyed the sense of British subjugation of pre-colonial India's landed aristocracy. Indeed, this is explicit when the prints of the unnamed 'Pathan—Mahomedan of Afghan Decent' from Bareilly in Volume Three (fig. 2.4) is compared across copies. The specific print in the Harvard University library copy of the *POI* is rectangular in shape, depicting a bearded man dressed in silk, augmented by a paisley pattern shawl and a multicolour turban, standing on a

Figure 2.3
Unidentified Photographer, *90. Maharajah of Benares. Hindoo. Benares*, silver albumen print mounted on paper with letterpress captions, folio from *The People of India. A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1868 (Volume Two)

patterned rug, next to a Corinthian column, looking away from the camera, against a dark uniform backdrop. However, the photograph in DAG's collection is an oval print of the Pathan—a shape that crops all details of the rug, his footwear and the base of the column, making the white column merge in the same flat plane of the dark backdrop. Despite the co-constitution of the images

Figure 2.4
Unidentified Photographer, *121. Pathan. Mahomedan of Afghan Descent. Bareilly* (Uttar Pradesh), silver albumen print mounted on paper with letterpress captions, folio from *The People of India. A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1868 (Volume Three)

and texts, the prints were often taken for granted because in the colonial imagination, the material specificity of the print was secondary to the indexicality of the photographic medium that promised *the truth*. The visual truth corroborated the two-page letterpress description informing the reader of the social position of the Pathans within India: 'The Mahomedans of India are divided into four general classes without distinction by creed; namely, Syud, Sheikh, Moghul, and Pathan….Pathans belong to the races of Afghans who, the original Mahomedan invaders of India, founded many dynasties….'[46] The description continues on a brief political history of the Pathans across India highlighting how they never 'attained any permanent power' and what purpose they could or could not serve in the Raj administration.[47] It concluded with a comment on architecture: 'Wherever Pathan dynasties have existed [in north, central, and south India], their architectural remains are of a magnificent character…it is their noble fortification, as well as in their scientific strength of construction, as in the picturesque character of their architectural embellishments, that they are perhaps most prominently distinguished throughout India.'[48] Thus, the image of the Pathan was crucial because seeing was believing, but it was still secondary to the information to be collected about a people.

Print number 370 in Volume Seven (fig. 2.5) is yet another example of variation across copies where the materiality of the image was secondary. It depicts seven men, with downcast eyes, identified as *Bhorahs*, *Mussulman Traders*, *Indore*, all in plain cotton white attire, five seated on the floor and two standing in the back, against a dark background.[49] DAG's copy of the print is square in shape, shows damaged emulsion and signs of cracks and damages on the glass-plate negative, while the photograph in the Harvard volume has an arched top and no visible damage. This print is one of the very few that appear without any letterpress description and hence is open to interpretation within the ethnological context and in relation to other images and texts of all volumes.

IV

'We are seeking facts, and not inferences; what is observed, and not what is thought,' proclaimed the anonymous

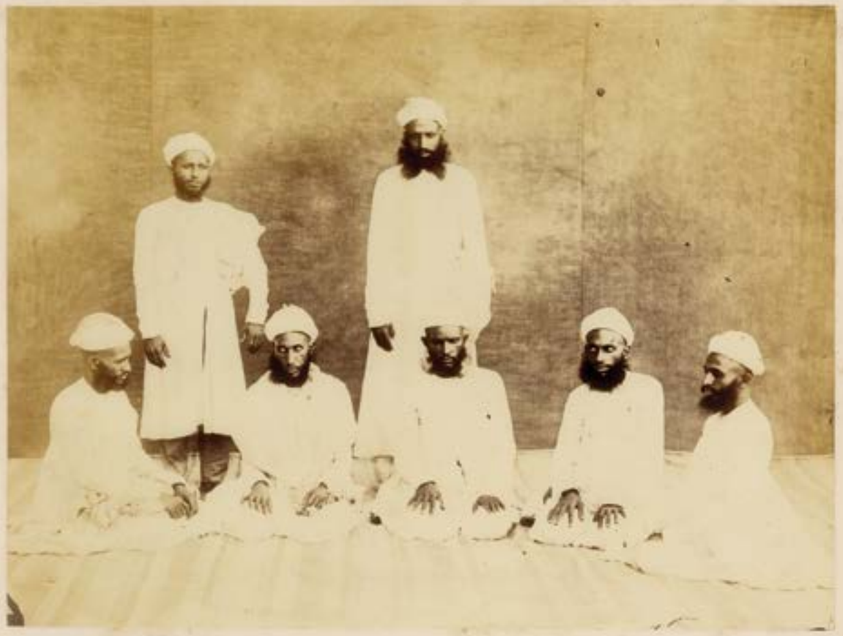

Figure 2.5
James Waterhouse, *370. Bhorahs. Mussulman Traders. Indore* (Madhya Pradesh), silver albumen print mounted on paper with letterpress captions, July–October 1862, folio from *The People of India. A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan*, 1874 (Volume Seven)

writer in *A Manual of Ethnological Inquiry* (1854).[50] Yet, flipping through the eight volumes of the *POI* any reader in the second decade of the twenty-first century is alerted to how 'inferences and thoughts' informed what counted as 'facts' and was deemed to be 'observed'. All observation and fact collection was steered by specific purposes crafted through particular ideologies and priorities of British rule in the subcontinent. The production of the *POI*, begun after the Revolt and very much in dialogue with it, offers one example of an ostensibly coherent collection of images of India. The eight volumes, whose images were widely drawn from professional and amateur photographers, always fell short of their goal to present a coherent picture of India's 'people'. Words and images together promised the truth value of these photographs, and both abstract titles and elaborate descriptions with specific information were used to claim visual verifiability of the photographs. In this 'visual economy', the photographs gained a rhetorical charge and appeared to 'prove' the reality of what the text conveys, even as the text lends the image a specificity of meaning that it could not have had on its own. Photographs always had a visual excess that words could never encode; they always revolted against the written texts that sought to fix the meanings of an inherently malleable and fluid form, whose meaning ultimately could never be fixed. Needless to say, the circulation of the *POI* prints inside the volumes and as standalone images through subsequent exhibitions, as documented by Ryan, thrived on a suspended disbelief of the fluidity of the photographic image.[51]

One of the most famous stories on the contemporary reception of the *POI* cited by scholars like Bernard Cohn, Christopher Pinney and John Falconer tells us how Western-educated Indians reacted after seeing the photographs. We are told that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98), the renowned educationist and reformer who first articulated the two-nation theory, was visiting London in 1869 with his two sons when he encountered the volumes in the India Office. As his younger son, Syed Mahmood, was flipping through the pages, an Englishman came up to the group and asked if the young boy was Hindustani, to which the son answered in the affirmative, while also specifying that he was not one of the aboriginals depicted in the albums and that his ancestors came from outside India. Reading this anecdote repeatedly, across scholarly contexts, one wonders why Syed Mahmood had to position himself vis-à-vis an aboriginal and why not the Pathans and the Syuds of Oudh, who appeared in Volume Two? Was it because Syed Mahmood himself had internalised the 'salvage paradigm', crafted by his 'intimate enemy' who had hybridised him irreversibly? We will never know.

Endnotes

1. John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye, *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations with Descriptive Letterpress, The Races and Tribes of India*, vol.1 (London: W.H. Allen and Co. for the India Museum, 1868), Preface, n.p.

2. See Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Zahid Chaudhary, 'Phantasmagoric Aesthetics: Colonial Violence and the Management of Perception,' *Cultural Critique* 59, no. 1 (2005): pp. 63–119; Kim A. Wagner, '"Treading Upon Fires": The "Mutiny"-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India,' *Past & Present*, no. 218 (2013): pp. 159–97.

3. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, p. 4.

4. For 'investigative modalities' see ibid., pp. 5–11.

5. See Carol A. Breckenridge, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting: India at World Fairs,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2 (1989): pp. 195–216.

6. For 'tools of Empire' see Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (UK: Oxford University Press, 1981). Robert Clive (1725–1774), the first governor general of Bengal, appointed James Rennell (1742–1830) as the surveyor general to survey the land of which the English East India Company became the revenue collector after receiving the Grant of Diwani in 1765. See Mathew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, 1997.

7. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of Indi*a, preface, n.p

8. Deborah Poole, 'An Excess of Description: Ethnography, Race, and Visual Technologies,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): p. 163.

9. Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 28 and John Falconer, '"A Pure Labor of Love": A Publishing History of *The People of India*,' in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)Ing Race and Place*, eds. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 58. Certainly, they were not the first-ever European-led on-site visual documentation of the subcontinent, which has a longer history going back at least to the seventeenth century. The preface to the first volume of *Oriental Races and Tribes* declared the project to have three volumes, but the third volume doesn't seem to have finally appeared, at least as part of the series. None of the public repositories that hold the two volumes list any third volume in their catalogue till the writing of this essay. Previously, Pinney, too, had mentioned that only the first two of the proposed three volumes had appeared. See Pinney, *Camera Indica*, p. 218, en.36.

10. Ibid., p. 35.

11. John William Kaye, *The History of the Sepoy War in India 1857-58*, 3 vols. (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1870).

12. James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 156.

13. Pinney, *Camera Indica*, p. 35.

14. See Paul Gilroy, *Against Race : Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 46.

15. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, preface, n.p.

16. The eighth volume from the Harvard Fine Arts Library, with the publication date 1875 and purchase date 1877, that I consulted, lists the last image with the serial number 468, and so do the other sets of the publication. However, the serial numbers 37, 104, 105, 289, 321, 323, 326, 327, 331, 335, 337, and 338 had two separate prints under a single serial number—the second print listed as 37A,104A, 105A through vols. 5 and 6 onwards listed as 289-2, 321-2, 323-2, 326-2, 327-2, 331-2, 335-2, 337-2, 338-2. Most scholars who worked on the volumes, including James R. Ryan and Christopher Pinney, mention the total number of images to be 468, while John Falconer counted a total of 480 images because he went by the total number of actual prints included in the volumes rather than the serial numbers—Falconer has accounted for the extra 12 prints. It is unclear, though, why the catalogue of the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art mentions 470 prints in the eight volumes held at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. See John Falconer, '"A Pure Labor of Love"'; https://tinyurl.com/3k2c95ud, accessed August 14, 2025.

17. Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin argued that titles of photographs often suggest 'free-floating contemplation', while long-form captions, like those in the illustrated magazines, come as 'directives'. See the second version of Benjamin's art work essay in Walter Benjamin et al., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 27.

18. For 'linguistic anchor' see Stuart Hall et al., *Writings on Media: History of the Present*, Stuart Hall: Selected Writings (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 62.

19. For example, see the itinerary of William Hodges and Thomas & William Daniell in the late eighteenth century. See William Hodges, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 & 1783* (London: J. Edwards, Pall-Mall, 1793); Thomas Daniell, *Oriental Scenery: Aquatints and Drawings Illustrative of the Journeys of Thomas and William Daniell* (1786-1794), 3 Parts (London: 1813).

20. See Officiating Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Clive Bayley's circular of June 1861 soliciting contributions from provincial administration and quoted by Falconer in '"A Pure Labor of Love,"' p. 58.

21. William Johnson, *The Oriental Races and Tribes: Residents and Visitors of Bombay* (London: W. J. Johnson; and Bolton and Barnitt, 1863), p. 9.

22. See J. Forbes Watson, *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India* (London: India Office, 1866).

23. Comparing different copies from multiple collections demonstrate a lack of uniformity across copies.

24. See 'Portrait and Biography of Dr. John Forbes Watson,' *Journal of Indian Art* III, nos. 25-32 (October 1890).

25. Falconer reproduced Forbes Watson's portrait published in the *Journal of Indian Art* in his essay, '"A Pure Labor of Love,"' 2002, p. 53, where he mentioned this as an obituary notice. He subsequently published the photograph in his essay on James Waterhouse in his edited volume on *The Waterhouse Album* (2009), where he rectified the mistake and mentioned this reproduced in 'a biographical notice in *The Journal of Indian Art* (cf. p. 79). Falconer has, however, not studied the biography. Other scholars critically analysing the historical context and the content of the *People of India* remain silent on this biographical note.

26. *Abhijnanashakuntalam* was the first Sanskrit play to be translated in any Western language.

27. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 3.

28. 'Portrait and Biography of Dr. John Forbes Watson,' n.p.

29. See Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, preface and Pinney, *Camera Indica*., p. 34.

30. Falconer, ''A Pure Labor of Love,'' pp. 56, 74–75.

31. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, Preface, n.p.

32. For 'optical empiricism' See Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive,' *October* 39 (1986): p. 16.

33. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, n.p.

34. Falconer, '"A Pure Labor of Love,"' p. 70.

35. John Falconer, 'James Waterhouse: A Career in Photography,' in *The Waterhouse Albums: Central Indian Provinces*, ed. John Falconer (New Delhi/Ahmedabad: Alkazi Collection of Photography and Mapin Publications, 2009).

36. See Arthur Purves Phayre, *History of Burma: Including Burma Proper, Pegu, Taungu, Tenasserim, and Arakan. From the Earliest Time to the End of the First War with British India*, Trübner's Oriental Series (Trübner & Co., 1883).

37. Pinney, *Camera Indica*, p. 35.

38. Deborah Poole argued for 'visual economy' to analyse inequality of representation, flow and exchange beyond the 'local', over 'visual culture' that often shields this heterogeneity, power hierarchy, and fails to account sufficiently for the global flow. See Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997).

39. Pinney, *Camera Indica*, p.45.

40. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, vol. 2, n.p.

41. Ibid.

42. Forbes Watson, *The Textile Manufactures and the Costumes of the People of India*, p. 1.

43. Ibid., p. 139.

44. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, vol. 2, n.p.

45. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, vol. 2, n.p.; On the competition claims of the legitimacy of colonialism during the impeachment see Mithi Mukherjee, 'Justice, War, and the Imperium: India and Britain in Edmund Burke's Prosecutorial Speeches in the Impeachment Trial of Warren Hastings,' *Law and History Review* 23, no. 3 (2005): pp. 589–630.

46. Forbes Watson and Kaye, *The People of India*, vol. 2, n.p.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Falconer, 'James Waterhouse,' p. 162. Editor's comment.

50. 'A Manual of Ethnological Inquiry,' *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* 3 (1854): p. 194.

51. Ryan, *Picturing Empire*, p. 156.