

PHOTOGRAPHY IN INDIA

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Abstract. Photography arrived in India soon after its invention in the 1840s, due to the colonial occupation. As with everywhere else it was used to photograph temples and monuments, archeological and architectural sites, customs and tribes, but in India it was primarily employed to unravel the mystic and mysterious attractions of India and to document its vastness. Photography impacted the social and aesthetic life of the country in many ways. India had an age-old tradition, dating back to thousands of years, in miniature painting. Court life, religious themes, battles and social activities were meticulously painted with fine haired brushes and mineral ground paints. Photography presented a dilemma to this exquisite art of recording. The article traces the history of photography in India, offering insights into its integration into the milieu as well as the impact on the miniaturists with charming images.

Keywords: early Indian photography, 19th century images, Raja Deen Dayal.

The arrival of photography into India was through both pragmatic and poetic concerns. Contrary to popular belief, the arrival of the camera was not only as a tool to validate colonial rule documenting dilapidated archeological sites or to record races and tribes, but for more heuristic purposes. It was the making of art that first brought the camera into the country. The beginnings of photography in the sub-continent can be traced to the closing years of the 18th century when the British artists Thomas and William Daniels spent 9 years in India making accurate and rapid sketches, watercolors and acquaints of the landscape and architecture. During this time the Camera Obscura was indispensable to them. Preceding this the Camera Lucida, though not a real camera, was used to produce sketches of ancient temples, which abounded in India.

Undoubtedly photography played a vital role in the colonial occupation. The advent of photography, as we know it, in India closely follows the introduction of the Daguerreotype and was soon borne along the robust trade flows linking the country to Europe and England. The first Daguerreotype studio opened in India in Bombay (present day Mumbai) in 1840s. Soon within 2 years a Daguerreotype gallery was set up in Calcutta (present day Kolkata). The galleries were advertising likenesses on paper. By mid 1850s photography in India had attained a high level of technical and aesthetic assurance. By early 1860s photography had established itself commercially with a large dedicated and talented enthusiastic amateur following.

In the early years, photography formed a part of a material culture in India that spread across a double circuit of local trade: the European trading firms supplying imported goods and foreign services and the market economies catering to the needs of the Indian Public. Cameras were plied along with sundry other wares as part of colonial commodity culture, sold in general stores, stationers and even in the drug stores. In a land characterised by the variety and splendour of its architecture and landscapes, and the diversity of its peoples and customs, India offered the photographer or photographic artist an unsurpassed range of subject matter. A condition that remained for many decades.

Camera clubs were set up as outposts of the Royal Photographic Society and spread to all the major cities of India. These clubs laid down a set of photographic aesthetics and guidelines for the serious amateurs about suitable subject matter, and rules of composition. At the meetings, tools, mechanisms & materials were discussed, and it is reported that there were heated exchanges among the practitioners on issues of composition and content and what would largely comprise the overall aesthetic, that may have been purely dictated by European norms. Photography became a popular pastime not just in cities but also in smaller towns.

As studios mushroomed albums were in demand. Books with photographs pasted were popular. It was the plurality of the medium that saw this rush for albums. These albums became emissaries of the exotic land. They belied earlier misgivings of a heathen nation replaced with a new pride in India as a treasured possession. Queen Victoria famously never visited India and must have relied on these images to convey to her a sense of the land from whence came the 'jewel in her crown'.

In addition to the artistic achievements of several photographers, official encouragement of the medium as a documentary tool came from the East India Company. A remarkable visual store-house had been created, which charted the architectural heritage and cultural composition of the subcontinent.

For the Indian artists in the 19th century photography challenged their ways of seeing and the visual languages familiar to them. More heuristic than definitive, it proposed ways of approaching the practice and business of image making and viewing. New optic trajectories had been created. The popularization of photography was such that Indian artists trained in the strict discipline of miniature painting were drawn to its influence and were soon referencing the photograph in their craft.

In a short span of time an irrevocable displacement had occurred across age-old traditions of image making. The artists had begun the rigorous examination of the politics behind the capture and presentation of this new medium. By the end of the 19th century in the country, there was an unbelievable reversal when art began to imitate the photograph. Hand-painted photographic portraits gained popularity. In 1860 *A Guide to the Indian Photographer* was one of the earliest photographic manuals to be published in India.

The Indian Royalty was not to be left behind. They had the wealth and enthusiasm to collect not just the cameras and photographs but also itinerant photographers and artists. Rapidly court painters were replaced with court photographers.

As elsewhere the arrival of the Box Camera Family snapshots became increasingly popular. People dressed in their best clothes and projected their real and imaginary wealth against myriad backdrops, in studios. The snapshot like everywhere else led in a kind of voyeurism. Soon the subcontinent was at par with the rest of the world. The Indian photographers continuously sought to interpret the world about them, as did their counterparts abroad. At the same time photography of archaeological sites, topography and commercial views, reportage and documentary photography, portraiture and ethnology were expanding the use of the medium in the country.

The turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of the amateur and self-taught photographers and the first phase of photo-journalism. Publications were now commissioning professional photographers to cover all major events. Newspapers became disseminators of the photographic image; issues like the non-cooperation movement and the political situations became their primary subjects. The advent of popular cinema in 1913 created a distinct genre of photo-based publicity material for lobby cards and posters.

The years that mark India's struggle for Independence and the crossover to a Republic was captured to convey an emotional nation from politicians and policymakers to the people. The largest exodus of humankind then and the colossal sadness of a grieving nation were all captured and defined in pictures. Images were commissioned by the Press Bureaus abroad to document everything. Suddenly there were more International photographers photographing wildlife in the wilderness of the peninsular, the country's exotic in the rural areas and the poor in the streets.

In the next two decades photographers were confronted by rapid changes, expected of a nation building itself with large state-run factories, rural and water management systems. They documented the conflicts with China and Pakistan that followed; the ravages of food shortages and famines and a looming poverty were all subjects. This phase also necessitated the creation of photo-editors for newspapers. Images to be placed in public domain had to be monitored to some extent.

Finally, at the turn of the last century a whole generation of photojournalists emerged whose work critically documented events in India's rapidly evolving space. Art Galleries opened their doors to photographers as artist. Digital photography and photo-shop reared a medusa-head leading to a new set of image-making and the use of photographs in installation and video art. The arrival of foreign curators led to international exhibitions. There was a surge in the publication of photography magazines, journals and books. At the same time a new word 'vernacular' emerged to describe the local photographer working in studios and the amateurs in smaller towns.

Over the decades though the narrative in India was in sync with photographers worldwide and despite having a rich record in the field, India or the subcontinent has little mention in all the scholarly chronicling of the historiographies of the history of photography. The historical narrative anxiously and somewhat insecurely, focussed on originality, innovation, and individualism.



Fig. 1. Zorawar Singh, Kanota and members of the Jaipur council 1900s albumen, opaque watercolor. Photographer and Painter unknown



Fig. 2. Prince Mormukut Singh at the time of his formal adoption, 1921 oil on canvas, probably after a photograph by Madho Lal.



Fig. 3. Guardian of a young prince of Mysore, 1860 albumen, opaque watercolor with 22kt gold. Photographer and Painter unknown.



Fig. 4. Parsee/Gujarati woman from Mumbai, 1860 wet plate negative, opaque watercolor. Photographer and Painter unknown.



Fig. 5. A rich merchant's son, 1912 pop, gelatin/chloride, opaque watercolor and 22kt gold.
Photographer: Sareje Lall, Bikaner



Fig. 6. A landowner who loves music, 1885 albumen, opaque watercolor with 22kt gold.

Photographer and Painter unknown. Pioneer Photographer: Raja Deen Dayal Raja Deen Dayal (1844–1905) was inarguably one of the most well-known and prolific photographers in 19th-century India. He was born in Sardhana, North India and attended the Engineering College in Roorkee. He began his career as a low-ranking engineer but was passionate about photography. It was the British directive for all engineers to learn the camera as a tool in their trade that brought photography into his life. A chance portrait of the then British agent Sir Henry Daly catapulted him to fame. By 1886 he was appointed court photographer to the Nizam of Hyderabad one of the richest men in the world then, when he presented the Hyderabad ruler with striking portraits he had made. Deen Dayal, honored with the title of 'Raja' by the Nizam, went on to create an impressive cache of images of the Nizam, his guests, his dominions, his sports, his courtly life and his social activities that all celebrated the man. Over the course of his remarkable career he set up 3 very successful & flourishing studios in Indore, Hyderabad and Bombay, employing then staff of 50 photographers and assistants. He is acknowledged as the country's first photographic entrepreneur and a pioneer in the field.



Fig. 7. Portrait of the Nizam, Mahbub Ali Khan 1880s. Photographer: Deen Dayal No princely court was equal to the magnificence of the Nizam's lavish and exotic court. He was the owner of the Golconda Diamond mines that reportedly disgorged 12 million carats of diamonds into the world market. His territories were as large as England and Scotland combined. As sovereign and religious leader he was the head of a vast feudal pyramid over which he had the power of death and life.



Fig. 8. Drawing room at the Chowmahalla Palace, where the Nizam received his special guests, 1880s. The Nizam had several palaces that were all lavishly furnished. Photographer: Deen Dayal



Fig. 9. Distant view of the Falaknuma Palace with surrounding lands, 1880s.
Photographer: Deen Dayal



Fig. 10. The Nizam Mahbub Ali Khan with the Duke Alexander of Russia after a hunt on the steps of the Falaknuma Palace, 1891. Hunting, especially tiger shoots, was the Nizam's favorite sport. Photographer: Deen Dayal.



Fig. 11. The Nizam Mahbub Ali Khan with his guest after a tiger shoot, 1880s.
Photographer: Deen Dayal.

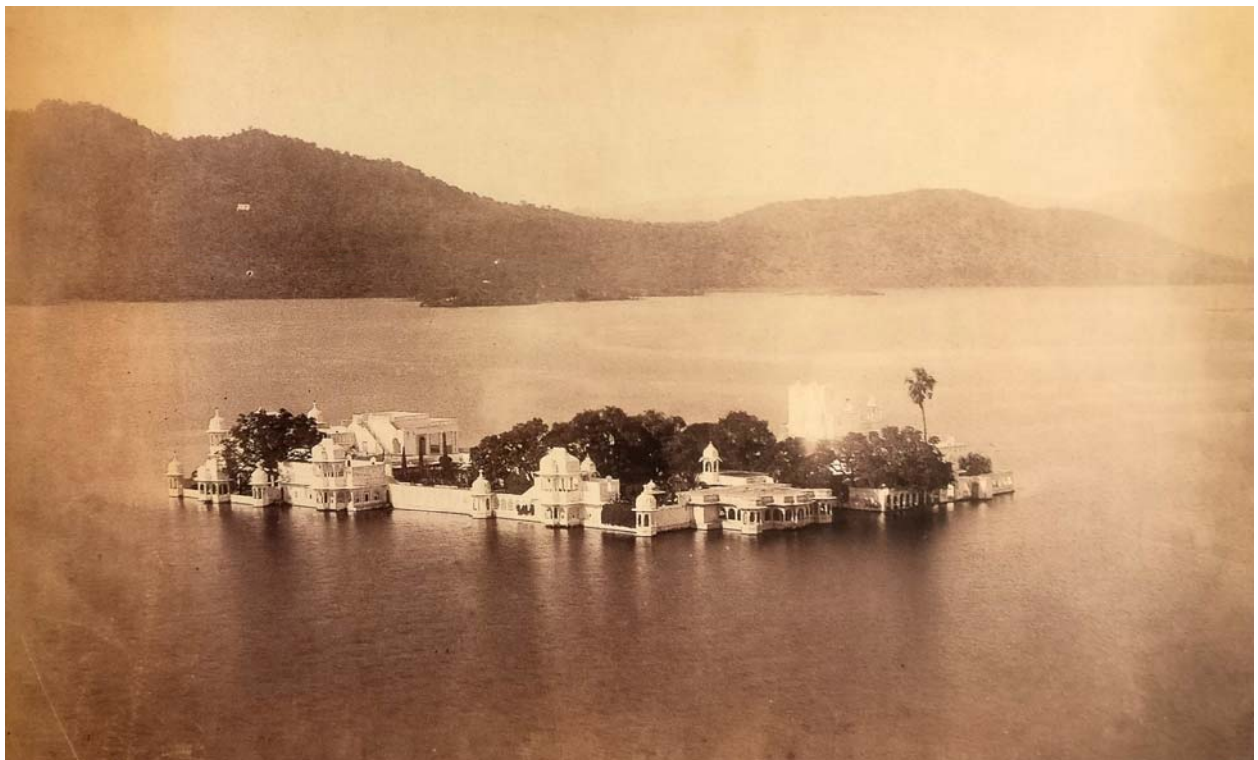


Fig. 12. The Udaipur Lake palace. 1890s. Photographer: Deen Dayal.



Fig. 13. Maharaja of Dhar Anand Rao III with his Courtiers, 1890 albumen.
Photographer: Deen Dayal.



Fig. 14. A chieftain from Central India with his coterie, emulating the British, they are seated on chairs, holding court. 1880s.
Photographer: Deen Dayal.



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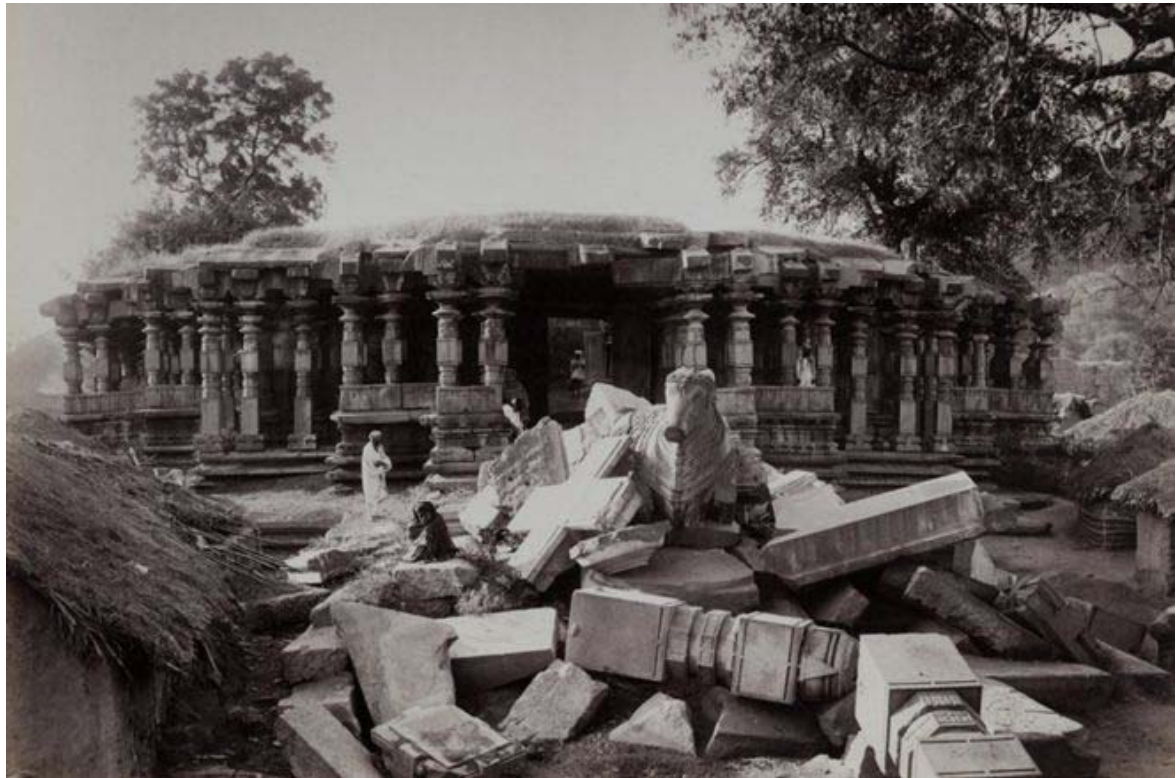


Fig. 16. Hanumkonda Temple of a thousand pillars, 1878 albumen. Photographer: Deen Dayal Deen Dayal travelled extensively documenting the temples and archeological sites.

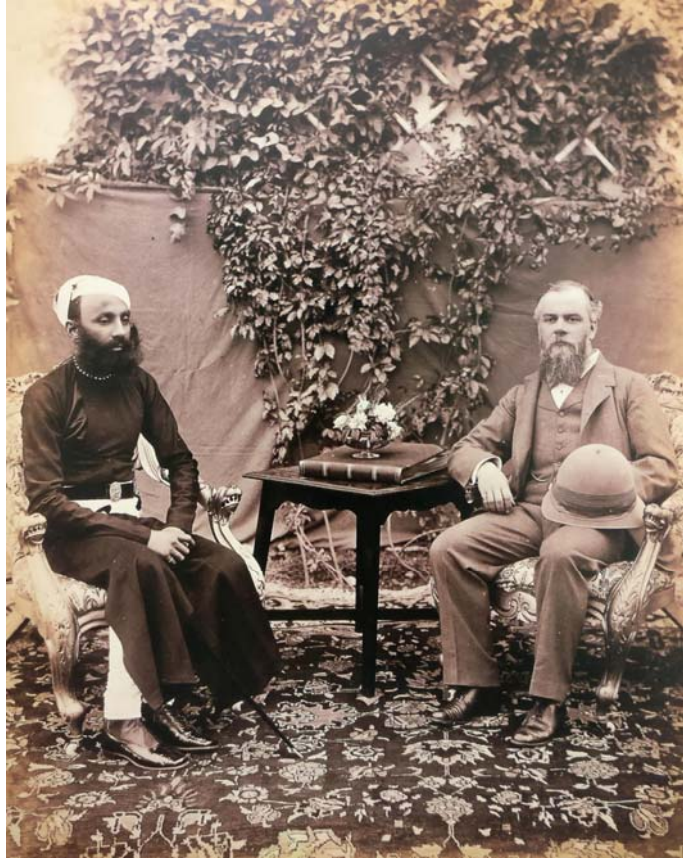


Fig. 17. Maharana Fateh Singh of Udaipur with the Victor Alexander Bruce, Viceroy of India (1894–1899).
Photographer: attributed to Johnston and Hoffman.



Fig. 18. Maharana Fateh Singh of Udaipur with the Victor Alexander Bruce, Viceroy of India (1894–1899).
Painting after a photograph attributed to Johnston and Hoffman.



Fig. 19. A young prince from Jodhpur, 1885 carbon transfer on ivory, opaque watercolor and 22kt gold.
Photographer and Painter unknown.

The recording of world history of photography has always been a linear, abridged and palatable summary. Such survey histories rarely identify their exclusions or justify their inclusions.

To end a happier note: Over the past few years, academic interest in nineteenth-century photography from India has been growing at a rapid pace. Significant books, as well as numerous important articles, have been produced during this period and many more photographers and photo-installation artists are invited to international photo festivals.