

# INDIA

THROUGH THE LENS

*Photography 1840-1911*

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

VIDYÀ DEHEJIA

*with contributions by*

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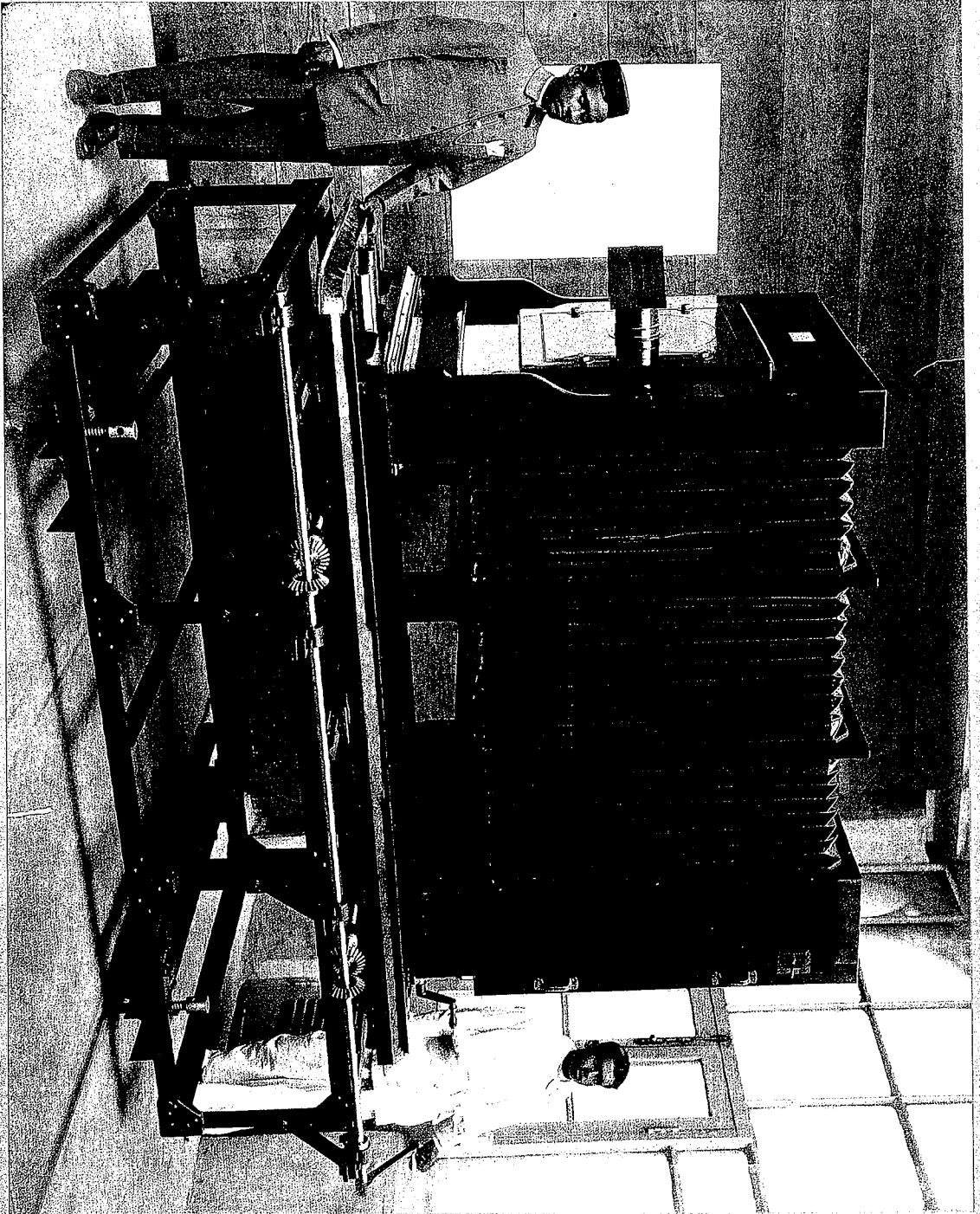
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10 c India through the Lens

AT THE TURN of the millennium, it appears a self-evident truth that silver salts darken upon exposure to light so that shaded areas remain white while the rest blackens. The current generation, accustomed to the marvels of modern technology, treats the “light-box” named a camera as a commonplace acquisition and photography as a routine activity. In this context a special effort of imagination is required to recapture the early days of photography when “the art of fixing a shadow”<sup>1</sup> was a wondrous achievement. Today we scrutinize the aims of photography, pronouncing that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing being photographed,” that “photographic recording is always, potentially, a matter of control,” or that contemporary photography’s favored subjects are the offbeat and the trivial.<sup>2</sup> A century and a half ago, however, the simple ability to produce a photograph was in itself a marvel. The awestruck response to this achievement is evident in a remark published in an 1864 issue of the *Quarterly Review*, which declared that photography “forced the sun . . . to write down his record in enduring characters, so that those who are far away or those who are yet unborn may read it.”<sup>3</sup>

The early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the pursuit of a dream, an obsession with cajoling nature into a miraculous reflection upon a surface where it could be captured and retained for all time. Many believed that such faithful reproduction would be superior to anything created by man with pencil, ink, or paintbrush. Enterprising individuals experimented with a variety of chemicals—nitrates of silver, iodine, mercury, sodium sulphates—on a range of surfaces that included metal plates, glass, and paper. As early as 1826, Frenchman Nicéphore Niépce (1765–1833) produced what amounted to a paper negative, although it did not occur to him that he could print a positive image from it. In 1835,

Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877) used sensitized paper to capture hazy pictures of his English country house, proclaiming dramatically that this building was “the first that was ever yet known to have drawn its own picture.”<sup>4</sup> But he, too, failed to capitalize on these early steps so that the formal announcement of the new invention was made in 1839 by Frenchman Louis Daguerre (1787–1851), who produced sharp and precise “sun pictures” on the mirrorlike surface of a silvered copperplate. By 1850 this miraculous invention came to be known as a photograph, a word coined by the eminent British astronomer Sir John Herschel from Greek *photos* (light) and *graphos* (drawing).

Several problems were inherent in the very nature of Daguerre’s eponymous daguerreotype. The silvered plate had to be tilted to discover an appropriate viewing angle, its fragility required it to be kept in a protective case, its laterally inverted mirror-image was disconcerting, its pictures could not be duplicated, and it was expensive to produce. In addition, exposure times could extend to as long as half an hour—an extraordinary length of time for sitters to remain stationary. Several photographers turned instead to Talbot’s paper process, which he publicized in a book entitled *Pencil of Nature*, produced between 1844 and 1846, with twenty-four original photographs, making it the first book thus illustrated. The Talbotype, from the name of its inventor, more often known as the calotype (from the Greek root meaning beautiful), used paper for both its negative and its positive print, with exposure times reduced to between four and seven minutes.

By the mid-1850s, Frederick Scott Archer’s (1813–1857) newly introduced wet-collodion process, with its accompanying glass plates, became more standard and would dominate the photographic scene for the next thirty years. So named because the plates had to be coated, exposed, and developed while the chemical solution of collodion was still wet, the wet-collodion process yielded images of a sharpness that has not been bettered by today’s “film.” Prints from glass plates were made on paper coated with albumen (egg white) and salts. Skillful manipulation of the proportions in the bath of albumen salts, as also in the fixing bath of gold toning, led to the varying and subtle shades of coloration seen in the prints produced during the nineteenth century. The rich sepia tones of these albumen prints made from collodion negatives rapidly became the preferred look, and their exposure time of one to three minutes was a further improvement on the time required by the paper negative process.

Page 10: Unknown photographer, copy camera in the photographic department of the Archaeological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1910, silver printing out-paper, 23.3 x 33.4. The British Library, Oriental & India Office Collection photo 527/1 (132)

The year 1871 marked the introduction of the new silver gelatin dry plate. Photographers were now freed from having to be in close proximity to a developing tent because the presensitized plate could be processed a considerable length of time after exposure. An anonymous jingle heralded the new technique:

Onward still, and onward still  
it runs its sticky way  
And Gelatine you're bound to use  
if you mean to make things pay;  
Colloction—slow old fogey!—  
your palmy days have been  
You must give place in future  
to plates of Gelatine!<sup>5</sup>

Finally, in 1888, when George Eastman (1854–1932) introduced his hand-held camera, a box three inches square, which he named the Kodak, accompanied by gelatin-coated paper “film” to be sent back to the manufacturer for processing, he revolutionized the entire process of taking photographs. The camera, sometimes described in the media of the 1880s as the “witch machine,” lost its early mystique and became a gadget available to all.

The advent of photography created a crisis in the European world of art. While French painter Paul Delaroche (1797–1856) declared with some alarm, “From today, painting is dead,”<sup>6</sup> most critics refused to give photography the status of an art form. Writer and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), for instance, labeled it “a refuge for failed painters,”<sup>7</sup> while painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) raged, “We do not want this industry!”<sup>8</sup> Heated debate ensued over whether photography could be considered an art; after all, was it not nature, albeit with mechanical assistance from man, that created the image? Conversely, in India, British photographer Samuel Bourne (1834–1912) felt that the painter often had an edge over the photographer. When confronted with the vast expanses of Himalayan mountain scenery, Bourne observed: “If the immensity and impressiveness of such scenes could be trans-



ferred to canvas, what would such a picture not be worth! How often have I lamented that the camera was powerless to cope with these almost ideal scenes."<sup>9</sup>

In a thoughtful essay on the art of photography, contemporary American writer Susan Sontag points out that photography is not, in essence, an art form at all. Rather, like language, it has the capacity to produce both mundane and artistic forms. Language not only produces works of literary art, but also grocery lists and bureaucratic memos; so, too, photography produces works of artistic beauty, but also passport photographs, X-rays, or satellite pictures. It is curious that the vocabulary of photographic criticism remains as meager as it is. When it moves away from language close to that used to evaluate painting—composition, lighting, focus, and clarity—it uses inexact terms such as subtle, powerful, complex, or simple. Sontag sees contemporary photography's adoption by museums of modern art as having resulted in its being "firmly associated with those important modernist conceits: the 'nominal subject' and the 'profoundly banal'"<sup>10</sup> Nineteenth-century photographs, too, have taken their place in museum collections, but a degree of ambiguity regarding their status continues to persist into the year 2000. Current discussion among museum professionals centers around whether the rightful place for such works is in collections storage (where art objects reside) or in archives (home to documentary material).

Barely a year after photography was introduced in Europe, the Calcutta firm of Thacker & Company advertised the availability of the daguerreotype camera in a January 1840 issue of the daily paper, *Friend of India*. The very first photographs created on the subcontinent were probably produced in Calcutta, though it is unlikely that we will ever be able to pinpoint them. Artists who had thus far created aquatints and lithographs—printing processes that made use of metal and stone respectively—switched professions and turned to photography. One such was Frederick Fiebig, called an "obstinately mysterious figure," whose 1847 hand-colored lithographic panorama of Calcutta in six parts is reproduced in this volume (no. 1). In 1856, he approached the East India Company with a comprehensive portfolio of small hand-colored calotypes, from which the directors purchased over four hundred views of varying parts of India including Calcutta, Madras, and the Coromandel coast.<sup>11</sup> While the title of "father of photography in India"<sup>12</sup> was given by some to Calcutta surveyor Josiah Rowe (dates not known, but described in 1857 as the oldest photographer in Calcutta), his earliest surviving pictures,

including the eight-part Calcutta panorama reproduced in this volume (no. 5), belong to the late 1850s. A few small albums with photographs taken during the mid-1840s still exist, but the corpus of the earliest existing Indian photographs belongs to the 1850s, when photography became the rage.

Groups of enthusiasts came together early on to form photographic societies. The first such society in India was established in Bombay in 1854, lagging behind London by just one year, while two years later photographic societies were formed also in Calcutta and Madras. The Bombay photographic society was ambitious enough to attempt publication of a monthly journal entitled *Indian Amateurs' Photographic Album*. Twenty-four issues were published between December 1856 and October 1858, after which the project was abandoned. From the start, Indians from all walks of life joined the British as members of these societies; for instance, three Indians were elected founding members of the Council of the Photographic Society of Bombay.<sup>13</sup> At the Bengal Photographic Society, the renowned Indologist Rajendralal Mitra (1824–1891) was appointed secretary and treasurer. Unfortunately, Mitra's 1857 public speech denouncing British maltreatment of Indian indigo workers resulted in his expulsion, whereupon the remaining thirty Indian members of the society resigned in protest.<sup>14</sup>

One of the earliest Indian photographers whose work has survived is Ahmed Ali Khan, who was active in Lucknow before the uprising that the British termed "The Indian Mutiny of 1857." He photographed the British officers who became involved in the uprising as well as future Indian rebel leaders, so that his Lucknow albums of salt-print portraits constitute a fascinating historical record. Ahmed Ali Khan had problems with the colloidion that was required to coat glass plates, and it was reported at the October 1856 meeting of the Bengal Photographic Society that he "was obliged to doctor it after some plan of his own to make it serviceable."<sup>15</sup>

The status and reliability of photography grew so quickly that in 1855 the East India Company decided to replace its draftsmen with photographers, stating in a letter from London: "We have recently desired the Government of Bombay to discontinue the employment of draughtsmen in the delineation of the antiquities of Western India and to employ photography instead, and it is our desire that this method be generally substituted throughout India."<sup>16</sup> By 1863 photography had become so popular on the subcontinent that it was possible for the visiting British photographer Samuel Bourne to write:

"From the untrodden snows of the Himalayas to the burning shores of Madras the camera is now a familiar sight."<sup>17</sup> Bourne attended a meeting of the Bengal Photographic Society in Calcutta and was surprised to find an attendance of fifty enthusiasts from a total membership of 243. The society had a balance in hand of 1,500 rupees, a respectable sum in those days, and it published a quarterly journal with each issue featuring a photograph taken by one of its members. Bourne also remarked that it was not uncommon in Calcutta to see portrait studios run by Indians. However, the only Indian photographic establishment that competed on equal terms with European-owned studios was the firm of Deen Dayal and Sons, founded in the mid-1870s. The year 1899 marked the publication of the first Indian book on photography—H. M. Ibrahim's *Urdu Rahno-ma-I-Photography-ya-Ustil-Musawwari*, or *A guide to photography or Rules for taking photographs*. A favorable review in *The Journal of the Photographic Society of India* explained that "every year increasing numbers of the more advanced natives of this country . . . are anxious to learn the art of photography, either as a profession, or for their own pleasure and this has induced him [H. M. Ibrahim] to compile a work which should find him a very large circulation."<sup>18</sup>

In the artistic milieu of India, the European debate on the status of photography as an art was irrelevant. Samuel Bourne declared himself pleasantly surprised to find photographs displayed in an 1864 exhibition of the arts in Lahore (today Pakistan), "Unlike the treatment which photography received last year at the hands of the Commissioners in London," he wrote, "it is here classified as one of the fine arts. Are we then more enlightened, or simply more just and unprejudiced in this land of rising British enterprise than the would-be patrons of art in professedly free but somewhat clique-ridden England?"<sup>19</sup> Several nineteenth-century artists used photographs as aids to painting. Indian miniature painters, however, added an intriguing twist to the relationship between photography and painting by tracing photographs onto sheets of ivory and applying strong opaque watercolors and gold leaf to completely conceal the traced image. The practice was criticized by visiting British artist Val Prinsep (1838–1904), who had been commissioned to paint the 1877 imperial assembly at Delhi for presentation to Queen Victoria on her proclamation as empress of India. He deplored local artists for working "from photographs, and never by any chance from nature."<sup>20</sup> Such painted portraits are distinct from the unique genre of painted photographs in which the photographic image below remains clearly visible and color is judiciously added for extra

effect. In India, daguerreotypes, too, were delicately hand-tinted by Indian miniature painters, who added colored powder with a brush and fixed the color to the copperplate with gum arabic. An 1850s daguerreotype portrait of Jaswant Rao Ponwar, the raja of the small principality of Dhar, reveals blue tints added to the robe, maroon to the turban, and gold and silver accents to his many items of decorative jewelry (fig 1).

One of the challenges faced by early photographers in India was to ensure regular supplies of collodion, which was an essential ingredient in the wet-plate process, but which also happened to be the explosive ingredient used in the manufacture of gunpowder. The Peninsular and Orient Steamship Line (P&O), the only commercial line that plied the waters between England and India, refused to transport it, resulting in either the smuggling of collodion or its local manufacture. Glass plates also presented problems in that they were both bulky and heavy to carry on photographic trips across the Indian subcontinent. Proposed alternatives for glass, such as inexpensive sheets of calc, a soft whitish material much like mica, found to be “portable, easily worked with and the collodion film adheres very firmly to it,”<sup>21</sup> did not prove practical. Because glass plates had to be exposed and developed while they were still wet—postponement was not possible—photographic travel equipment routinely comprised a developing tent, chests full of solutions, and an entire array of accompanying paraphernalia. Samuel Bourne records that thirty porters accompanied him on his travels in the Himalayas in order to carry his ten-foot-high tent; 650 glass plates; two cameras and several lenses; numerous bottles of chemical solutions for coating, sensitizing, developing, and fixing the glass plates; funnels, pails, and baths in which the plates had to be immersed; and of course, his personal baggage.<sup>22</sup>

Photographers in India encountered difficulties particular to the tropics. During the months of torrential monsoon rain, exceedingly damp conditions led to the equipment and materials being subjected to fungus, rust, and mildew. The summer months were too hot for the stability of the chemicals, while rising dust settled on the plates and spotted the resultant work. One English photographer wrote back home in despair about the heat “which dries up the plate, rendering it more and more insensitive every moment, and also communicates to the operator a lassitude which almost wholly unfits him for the duties of the day.”<sup>23</sup> Water was frequently in short supply and often impure. Papers presented by members at the regular meetings of the various photographic societies quite often focused on experimental

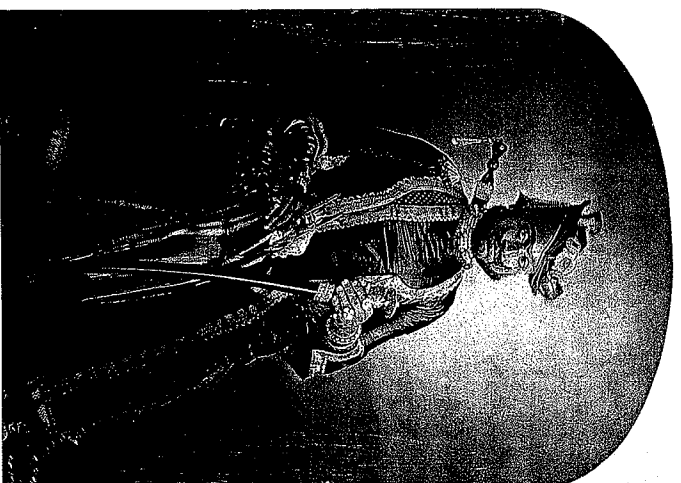


FIGURE 1 Unknown photographer, *Jaswant Rao Ponwar, Raja of Dhar*, ca. 1850, hand-tinted daguerreotype, 18 x 13. The British Library Oriental & India Office Collection photo 67/1

methods to overcome local problems. For instance, in March 1858, W. E. Underwood told members of the Madras photographic society the secret of how "to make an iodizing mixture for collodion suited to the climate of Madras."<sup>24</sup>

Early cameras were made of wood and were cumbersome appliances. Dr. John McCosh (1805-1885), a pioneer photographer and a surgeon with the Bengal group of the East India Company, cautioned against flimsy portable cameras, which, though initially seductive, soon became useless. He stipulated that the camera "be made of substantial mahogany, clamped with brass, to stand extremes of heat."<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, photographer John Blees (dates not known) spoke of the need to use well-seasoned wood in the construction of cameras. In 1859, the inimitable Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) wrote a long tongue-in-cheek poem on the trials and tribulations of the early photographer. Titled "Hiawatha's Photographing," it begins:

From his shoulder Hiawatha  
Took the camera of rosewood,  
Made of sliding, folding rosewood;  
Nearly put it all together.  
In its case it lay compactly,  
Folded into nearly nothing;  
But he opened out the hinges,  
Till it looked all squares and oblongs,  
Like a complicated figure  
In the Second Book of Euclid.

    This he perched upon a tripod—  
Crouched beneath its dusky cover—  
Stretched his hand, enforcing silence—  
Said, "Be motionless, I beg you!"  
Mystic, awful was the process.

The poem narrates how each portrait was a failure because sitters moved, talked, or squinted, and how the final group picture, thought to be perfect by the photographer, was denounced:

Giving one such strange expressions —  
Sullen, stupid, pert expressions.  
Really anyone would take us  
(Anyone that did not know us)  
For the most unpleasant people!<sup>26</sup>

Even today, this continues to be a common experience, often laughable, often frustrating. So many of us regret the angle or lighting when a photograph does not match up to our somewhat idealized visions of ourselves.

By 1895, as evidenced in the Calcutta publication of George Ewing's substantial technical volume, *Handbook of Photography for Amateurs in India*, advances in technology made camera equipment more reliable and usable in local climatic conditions. And yet, from our vantage point in the year 2000, when cameras decrease in size as rapidly as they increase in power (even in the 1960s, the film *Roman Holiday* had one concealed in a cigarette lighter), it is intriguing to consider the monumental copy camera, over eight feet in length, in use in the Calcutta offices of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1910 (see page 10).

A unique feature of early photography in India was the establishment of *zenana*, or women's, studios to accommodate the prevailing Indian custom that required women to be protected from the gaze of an unknown male photographer. Because Indian families desired photographs of their wives, daughters, and mothers, zenana studios run by British female photographers were introduced. Indian photographer Deen Dayal added one such to his establishment in Hyderabad. The *Journal of the Photographic Society of India* reported: "As this studio is for photographing native ladies only, special arrangements had to be made to protect them from the gaze of the profane and the stern. So the place is surrounded by high walls, and all day long within this charmed enclosure, Mrs. Kenny-Lewick, aided by three native female assistants, takes the photographs of the high-born native ladies of the Deccan."<sup>27</sup> By 1885, Indian women had taken to photography, though perhaps as no more than a pleasant diversion.