



THROUGH THE COLONIAL LENS

Photographs of Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century India



SINCE THE ADVENT OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, MILLIONS OF TRAVELERS THROUGHOUT INDIA HAVE TAKEN IMAGES TO MARK THEIR JOURNEY AND TO RELATE IT TO THOSE WHO AWAIT THEM AT HOME. *THROUGH THE COLONIAL LENS* LOOKS AT A SET OF PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN IN INDIA BY A WIDER RANGE OF PHOTOGRAPHERS—AMATEURS, PROFESSIONALS, FOREIGNERS AND INDIANS ALIKE—WHICH WERE SERVING PURPOSES SUCH AS GOVERNMENTAL DIRECTIVES, ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL STUDIES, ETHNOGRAPHICAL SURVEYS, LANDSCAPES AND PORTRAITURE BOTH FOR COMMERCIAL AND PRIVATE PRESENTATION. VIEWING THESE IMAGES AS PRODUCTS OF THE COLONIAL STRUCTURE IN WHICH THEY WERE CREATED CAN ENHANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR IMPACT WHILE SITUATING THEM IN A HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK. THESE PHOTOGRAPHS EACH HAVE THEIR OWN UNIQUE HISTORIES FOR US TO DELVE INTO; THEY “ARE NO LONGER SEEN AS STATIC RELICS TO BE COLLECTED, CATALOGUED, AND PRESERVED, BUT AS REPOSITORIES OF MEANINGS WITHIN DYNAMIC CULTURES WHOSE OWN STORIES AND VALUES CHANGE OVER TIME.”¹

William Johnson and William Henderson, *Europeans inside the Elephanta Cave* (detail), Bombay (Mumbai), c. 1855, Albumen print, Loaned by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer





Samuel Bourne (1834-1912), *Tomb of Itimad al-Daula (detail)*, Agra, 1866, Albumen print, Loaned by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer

Photography was invented as a medium concurrent with the British intensification of their presence in India as a colonizing force. Having conducted trade there since the seventeenth century, the East India Company formalized its presence and control via three Presidencies, or geographical administrative units: Bombay (now Mumbai), Bengal and Madras (now Chennai). After the Indian Mutiny, or Uprising, of 1857,ⁱⁱ the British Crown superseded the East India Company and ruled directly until 1947 in an era known as the Raj. Throughout these eras, native princes and rulers continued to rule smaller areas in varying degrees of cooperation with the British. Scholars have emphasized the British affinity for the history of the Mughal emperors in India,ⁱⁱⁱ which resulted in a large number of photographs of Mughal sites in Delhi and Agra such as the Taj Mahal, Jama Masjid, Red Fort, Fatehpur Sikri and others. This self-comparison highlights the British wish to be seen as a 'civilizing' force, bringing new, and in their view much-needed, forms of government, trade and culture to India, as it was perceived that Mughal emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan had done centuries before.

Photography in this era was incredibly difficult to master due to its technical and practical requirements, including adjusting



Samuel Bourne (1834–1912), *View at the Top of Manirung Pass, Spiti Valley*, c.1866, Albumen print, Loaned by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer

large wooden box cameras and attempting to develop images while keeping their glass negative plates wet in searing temperatures. Photographic expeditions required numerous cases of these plates, “dark tents” or portable darkrooms, and quantities of chemicals for developing images, requiring pack trains and/or local assistants to transport the supplies, as well as to at times assist in the process. The further afield photographers traveled, the more difficult the undertaking became, so that trips to areas such as the Himalayas presented almost insurmountable obstacles.

Each photographer responded in varying degrees to the dual demands of their artistic eye and professional duties, whether as a British military officer tasked with documenting a historic site such as Captain E.D. Lyon (1825–1891) in south India, or a professional photographer with a studio in Mumbai such as Lala Deen Dayal (1844–1910). Samuel Bourne (1834–1912), along with others, brought his idea of the ‘picturesque’ with him from Britain to many of the images he took in India, a concept steeped in the Romanticism of eighteenth century Europe. “The realism that was made possible by the camera rarely emerges except in a certain limited category of news photographs. The photographer certainly saw the poverty and squalor of certain parts of India, but he chose not to record them; he was a photographer in search of the picturesque, much like the eighteenth century landscapists.”^{iv} With over 2,000 pictures taken over his seven years in India, one wonders whether Bourne’s stated belief that India offered no competition to the picturesque views found in England was disingenuous.

The Victorian era's emphasis on the role of science and technology, specifically natural history, led to a seeming mania for taxonomy. This urge to classify newly encountered phenomenon can be seen in the development of photography in the subcontinent as well. Military officers such as Captain Thomas Biggs, and Captain Linnaeus Tripe were given reassignments from their military duties in order to photo-document local architecture, which provided key information to the newly-formed Archaeological Survey of India. Photography was understood to be closely linked to other scientific pursuits, with doctors in the British military, such as Dr. John Murray and Dr. William Henry Pigou, as early enthusiasts. Efforts to provide comprehensive photography of a wide swath of the diverse population of India were closely tied to the nascent fields of anthropology and ethnography. The eight-volume *The People of India*, which was published 1868–1875 and paired over 450 images with commentary, demonstrates this essential link. "While the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake was

Unknown Photographer, *Indian Woman with Her Jewels*, South India, 1880s, Albumen print, Loaned by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer



the explicit motive for the surveys which had been instituted soon after the beginnings of British rule, they also came to form an integral part of an ideology to tabulate, systematize, and ultimately control the culture of a subcontinent...”^v

As this medium’s popularity grew and eclipsed painting and printmaking, the market expanded to include those wishing to create their own versions of India. Specific images could be ordered from photography studios, allowing both those in India as well as armchair travelers abroad to compile albums of their choosing. This market was not exclusively British: photographers such as Lala Deen Dayal enjoyed the patronage of the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad. Other native rulers both embraced and dabbled in photography themselves. As an example, the Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur (r. 1835–1880) eagerly adopted the new technology, using it to document his surroundings and capture images that would have been inaccessible to foreign photographers, such as portraits of the women in his household.

Through the Colonial Lens does not argue that each photographer consciously strove to solidify British rule in India, but rather, that each photographer was touched by the colonial structure in which he or she worked. These effects ranged widely and manifested as a concern for what would sell to the consumer (the British particularly desired images emphasizing the picturesque or exotic), what best documented the ‘good offices’ of British rule (industry, architectural cataloging and conservation) and what was

Lala Deen Dayal (Indian, 1844–1910), *Elephants Fighting, a Wall Separates Them* (detail), Udaipur?, c.1870, Albumen print, Loaned by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer





Felice Beato (Italian, 1832?–1909), *Interior of the Secundrabagh after the Slaughter of 2,000 Rebels—After the Mutiny, Lucknow, 1858*, Albumen print

considered a contribution to science (projects such as *The People of India* and other efforts to comprehensively document India's ethnic diversity). While certain images were clearly used for political aims in Great Britain (Felice Beato's images in the wake of the Indian Uprising are an example, see image above), the majority of photographs from this era inhabit a complicated landscape of competing purposes and cultural intersection. The classic colonial paradigm situates India as a possession of Great Britain up until independence in 1947. Contrarily, one must look to the impact of the colonized on the colonizer and understand the effect that India has had on Great Britain. The photographs featured in *Through the Colonial Lens* complicate those classic assumptions and give us a clearer visual record of India's hold on Great Britain.

ⁱ Mathur, Saloni, *India By Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p.163.

ⁱⁱ This series of battles between Indians and the British was referred to by the British as the Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, and as the Indian Uprising or First War of Independence by Indians. It began as native forces in British units fought against their officers, and centered in cities such as Lucknow, Kanpur and Delhi.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Mughal Dynasty was established in India in the early 16th century when its founder Babur drove the Delhi Sultanate from power after a series of military victories. The Dynasty lasted until 1858 when the British sent its last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, into exile in Rangoon, Burma.

^{iv} Pal, Pratapaditya and Vidya Dehejia, *From Merchants to Emperors: British Artists and India, 1757–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.186.

^v Falconer, John, "A Pure Labor of Love: A Publishing History of *The People of India*," in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 55.

Through the Colonial Lens is on view from February 3–September 4, 2011 and is generously sponsored by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission.

Pacific Asia Museum would like to thank the lenders to the exhibition, Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer, the Pal Family, and Stephen White, for their willingness to share their collections with our visitors.

We would like to recognize the staff at Pacific Asia Museum for their efforts on the exhibition, with special thanks to Yeonsoo Chee, Curatorial Assistant, John Cline, Exhibition Production Manager, and Annie Kuang, Assistant Registrar. We would also like to thank Jessica Farquhar, PhD student, Art History, UCLA, for her assistance.

COVER IMAGE

Samuel Bourne (British, 1834–1912), *Kutub Minar with the Great Arch, from the West, Delhi*, 1866, Albumen print, Loaned by Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Barbara Timmer



46 North Los Robles Avenue
Pasadena, CA 91101
626-449-2742
www.pacificasiamuseum.org