Photography in Colonial and Postcolonial India as an Agent of Cultural Dominance

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Bio:

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the use of photography in colonial India. The thesis of the paper is that British photographers, through their choice of subjects and editing of their works, created a romanticized image of India as the British wished to see it. More recent photography has focused on the reality of the lives of the Indian people. Thus photography has moved from functioning as an agent of colonial domination and political propaganda to a tool used to bring aid and compassion to those in need.
Introduction

Photography has been propagated as a tool that conveys reality. It represents the signified – the thing that has been photographed. In order for the subject to be represented in a photograph, it must have physically been in front of the lens. That very quality attributed to photography led to its use as a tool by colonial Britain to exert control over its established colonies. This paper discusses the use of photography in India as an agent of cultural domination. It will explore the British use of photography to forge an Indian identity that established the Raj’s control over the subcontinent and the use of photography by Indians themselves in an attempt to subvert the pictorial precedent established by the British colonists.

The invention of photography was a significant moment in the ability to record people and events. It is a medium which seemingly conveys truth, while at the same time, its meaning is constructed and manipulated. It is with these issues in mind that one can examine the impact of photography in India. Photography first came to India in the nineteenth century with the European interest in the subcontinent.¹ The scenic panoramas were ideal for creating subliminal landscapes, while the identity of India’s people was manipulated by the cultural bias of the British. The Middle East was losing its broad appeal, and the focus on India rekindled the Western obsession with the mysterious East.²

There is no specific date associated with the beginning of photography in India, but there are records of photographers working in India as early as the 1840s, not long after photography’s invention.³ Among the many early photographs taken in India, some were of British officials or early colonists. However, as the popularity of the photographic medium escalated, the interest in photography as a means of capturing and revealing “truth” turned quickly from photographing British subjects to capturing the landscape, architecture, and people of India.
Many of the first images that were available and widely disseminated were images of the landscape and the architectural monuments of both Mughal and Hindu ruins. This style of photography operates within the pictorial themes of the picturesque, which represent images of vast, sprawling landscapes that highlighted the variations in the subcontinent’s topography. The concept of the picturesque was influenced by the emerging literate bourgeoisie, landscape painting, literature, and nature’s emerging role as commodity. Its aesthetic presupposes the beauty of nature and places the viewer in the role of voyeur within a protected frame that looks out onto the natural world.\textsuperscript{4} The frame of the image it there to, “guarantee that it is only a picture, only \textit{picturesque}, and the observer is safe in another place—outside the frame,”\textsuperscript{5} thus allowing the Victorian gaze to objectify the represented landscape of the colonized Indian “other” through this established pictorial tradition. A stylistic subset of the picturesque is the sublime, which emphasized the awesome, raw, and horrible power of nature. The subject matter and imagery often focuses on the sublime peaks of the Himalayas or views of abandoned, crumbling architecture. The pictorial conventions of the picturesque and the sublime underscore the ideology and aesthetic tastes of mid-nineteenth century painting which were readily adapted to photography. One of the most noted photographers of the picturesque and sublime was Samuel Bourne.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Samuel Bourne}

Bourne was an English photographer whose primary introduction to the Indian landscape was during an 1863 trip to the Himalayas.\textsuperscript{7} As a photographer he wanted to, “. . . attain such rarefied spectacles and conceive of them as pictorially compelling photographs.”\textsuperscript{8} Part of his desire was a deep seated regard for the beauty of nature, and part of it was financially driven. According to Gary Sampson, the ideals of the picturesque were ingrained in the Victorian
mindset; so much so, that, as a pictorial type, it was hard to move away from it. It was through the vein of landscape painting, and photography’s desire to be taken seriously as an art form, that the picturesque came to be used widely in the medium. It was through this explicit and intentional style of image-making that Bourne contributed to the continuing objectification of India and its people, and aided — intentionally or unintentionally — in the British domination of the subcontinent.⁹

Victorian society had an intense fascination with the natural world. This fascination stemmed from the desire to escape the trauma of modern life and experience the peace and tranquility of nature. This fascination and appreciation was shared by Bourne, which he conveyed through his photographs. The photograph, *Panoramic View at Chini*,¹⁰ is a perfect example of the sublime in Bourne’s photography. The photograph shows the mountain ranges of Chini, a small village in Northern India. In the foreground is a village perched on the precipice of a jagged mountain range that encompasses the entire background of the photograph. The juxtaposition between the village and the imposing mountains creates an air of awe and majesty. Bourne would have encountered this location on his travels through India and used the natural setting as a framing element for the image as a way of communicating a pictorial type that would appeal to his intended audience: British nationals and tourists. The truthful, or real, quality of photography belies factors such as the manipulation of the landscape and the selection of a specific frame through which the image is shaped. This led to the acceptance of photographs of India as being representative of the place and its people. In reality, Bourne’s images were shaped through a British way of seeing; through the pictorial type of landscape painting which was adapted to the medium of photography. He has objectified and commodified nature, the village,
and India itself. Thus, Bourne’s images are representing and representing the Indian landscape for British consumption that conveys not India as it is but how the colonial other wants to see it.

Despite the contemporary perception of the medium, these photographs convey little truth. The images, their representation, and meaning, are entirely constructed by Bourne. Take, for example, his photograph *The Taj, from corner of Quadrangle* at Agra. Photographs of the Taj Mahal were popular, and Bourne capitalized on their marketability by taking many photographs of the famous structure. Architecture was perfectly suited for early photography due to the long amount of time needed to attain an accurate exposure. Photographing architecture at first appears to be an ideal way to convey the aura of a place and its people, but these photographs conveyed a false sense of India and shaped a strictly European view of the subcontinent. Bourne’s photography, while using an appealing aesthetic type, did little to convey the realities of Indian life. His images revealed an exoticism that was appealing to European tastes, but he abstracted India from its people. In addition, the focus of photography during this period on Mughal monuments demonstrated Britain’s role as the “new emperors” of the subcontinent.

**Felice Beato**

Felice Beato was another photographer who is often associated with India. He was an Italian who made his living as a war photographer. He gained his experience during the Crimean War between 1855 and 1856. Beato travelled to India to take photographs of the First War of Independence, also known as the Sepoy Rebellion. Beato was a commercial photographer, and the marketability of his images was a serious concern. Moreover, his primary audience was comprised of British officers and colonists who wanted commemorative images of the triumph of Britain over the insurgent uprising. However, Beato arrived in Calcutta in 1858 five months
after the rebellion and had to stage the photographs he took.\textsuperscript{14} This is exemplified in his photograph \textit{Secundra Bagh, Lucknow, India}.\textsuperscript{15} The interior pavilion of the King’s palace at Secunderbagh was the site of the massacre of two thousand of the Indian soldiers who had taken control of the city from the British. The fact that Beato was not present in India during the rebellion meant that he would have to restage the events which occurred. His arrangement of the Indians and horses in the background draw the viewers’ attention to the decimated architecture; however, it is the arrangement of disinterred bones in the foreground which add the most striking element to this photograph.\textsuperscript{16} This is indicative of the contrived nature of photographic images of India. These photographs presented, “seemingly objective views. . .,” and found an eager audience amongst the British who followed news of the rebellion with great interest. Such images acted as an authoritative form of communication showing the horrors of the mutiny and the triumph of British imperialism despite the deliberate manufacture behind the image.

Locations associated with the Sepoy Rebellion were not the only pictures he took during his travels. Beato also employed the visual aesthetic of the picturesque just as other photographers had. His photograph, \textit{The Taj with Fountains},\textsuperscript{17} is another example of a European constructing an image of India. The photograph represents another view of the structure, but here it is framed by a manicured European-style garden. \textit{The Taj with Fountains} demonstrates the representation of Indian culture through a European lens. In this photograph, India and its realities are completely obscured by Beato’s composition. Its people are absent, and instead the viewer is left with a beautiful building and an enchanting garden that appeals to a Westerner’s world-view and has little to do with an appreciation for India and its people.
Raja Deen Dayal

Europeans were not the only photographers in nineteenth century India, and many nationals also took up the practice. One of the most notable Indian photographers was Raja Deen Dayal. Dayal was initially trained as a draughtsman and took an interest in photography through the employment of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a British institution that commissioned several large scale renovations of historical monuments in India. Dayal’s photograph, The Great Buddhist Stupa, is an example of his early work which reflects his training as a draughtsman through his topographical handling of the landscape. Dayal was commissioned by the ASI to create before and after shots of the reconstruction efforts on various buildings. Photographs such as The Great Buddhist Stupa convey not an Indian aesthetic, but an adaptation of European pictorialism intended for a British audience that continued to construct a view of India as “other.” The juxtaposition between before images of the decaying stupa and the after photographs of the monument’s reconstruction accentuate the public ideology of an India that was in need of British intervention and preservation.

Dayal also worked as the official photographer for the Nizam of the princely state of Hyderabad. Dayal was commissioned for various photographic projects, from portraits of the Nizam and the royal family to capturing visiting European diplomats. Dayal was a court favorite for his ability to create appealing images that could be read on multiple levels. Due to the fact that Dayal was trained by the British, but was still ethnically Indian, he operated between British and Indian visual tropes. Take, for example, his famine relief photographs, which were commissioned by the Nizam during the famine of 1899. The famine relief photographs functioned as political propaganda for the Nizam. Instead of utilizing the standard pictorial type for famine imagery – isolated images of victims, often near death – they represented the efforts
of the Nizam’s government to help solve the problem of starvation that was a direct result of the famine.\textsuperscript{22} Dayal’s photographs of the relief efforts were ordered and compositionally arranged in such a way as to convey the power and control of the Indian government, as seen in the photograph \textit{Famine Orphans in Aurungabad}.\textsuperscript{23} These images were primarily intended for the colonial presence in India and conveyed the ability of India’s rulers to care for its own people. This is a statement in direct opposition to imagery motivated by British pictorial politics that displayed India as a struggling nation in need of salvation, and instead presented the subcontinent as a nation capable of political autonomy.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Forging a new photographic and visual identity has been a difficult undertaking for India and its photographers. This is largely due in part to the prejudices that were established through images like those of artists such as Bourne and Beato.\textsuperscript{24} Today, contemporary photographers, Western and Eastern alike, are continuing to struggle with the best way to represent India through the photographic medium. One particular photographer, Fazal Sheikh, attempts to subvert established visual tropes and represent India through a more truthful vantage point. His photographic exhibit, \textit{Moksha} is a series of photographs that depicts the inhabitants of Vrindavan. Many of his subjects are women who have been cast out of their homes and have surrendered to lives of poverty and hardship. The term \textit{Moksha} refers to a state of ultimate release by Hindus. It is the release from \textit{samsara}, the continual cycle of rebirth.\textsuperscript{25} While Sheikh is a New York-born photographer and comes from a Westernized perspective, he attempts to give a face to the impoverished women who live in Vrindavan.

Many of the pictures in his exhibition catalog have accompanying text in which the women depicted in the photographs describe their experiences. Sheikh thus gives a sense of
agency not only to the women featured in his work, but also to India as a place where suffering and poverty are often experienced on a daily basis. The image, *Seva Dasi*, is a portrait in which the woman who is depicted recounts the loss of her own husband and rejection of her daughter’s husband who cast her out of his home. Seva Dasi directly engages the viewer. Indeed, it is through her haunting gaze and the accompanying text that she tells the viewer of her experience. According to her personal narrative, her only desire is to serve the Hindu god, Krishna, and to find peace from this life through death. She, like the hundreds of other women represented in Sheikh’s work, is at the mercy of the male-dominated society she lives in. The unification of image and text is central to Sheikh’s representation of these women. Through it, he allows them to recount their individual suffering as he captures them through the lens of the camera – giving the women of Vrindavan agency to tell their stories of suffering and hardship. Sheikh’s work is not totally devoid of his own bias, and the intent behind his photography is to further the cause of human rights. He illustrates the ways in which photography, as practiced in India, has evolved over the centuries.

Photography has been put to many uses in India. India’s identity has been shaped by the discourse of photography through its use as a means of political control: from functioning as an agent of colonial domination and political propaganda to a tool used to bring aid and compassion to those in need. Photography is an intriguing medium because it presents a multiplicity of meaning; it is at the same time reality and fantasy, truth and lies.
Bibliography


Notes

3. Dehejia, India through the Lens, 14-5; Gadebusch, Picturesque Views, 19.
5. Ibid., 16.
7. Ibid., 163.
8. Ibid., 163.
10. Samuel Bourne Panoramic View at Chini, black and white photography, 19th century, University of California San Diego. See http://www.artstor.org
15. Felice Beato, Secundra Bagh, Lucknow, India, wetplate, 1858, University of California, San Diego. As seen in Vidya Dehejia, India Through the Lens, 146.
16. Harris.
17. Beato, The Taj with the Fountains, 1859, albumen print, The Olivier Degeorges Collection. As seen in Gadebusch, Picturesque Views, 42.