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# Beyond the Frame: Exploring Dimensions of Colonial Photography in India

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## Abstract

The paper "Beyond the Frame: Exploring Dimensions of Colonial Photography in India" delves into the multifaceted dimensions of photography's inception in India during the colonial era. Investigating photography as both an art form and a technological import by the British, it explores its role in representing and often misrepresenting India and its people. Focusing on early pioneers such as the Daniel brothers, Fox Talbot, Louis Daguerre, and Monsieur Montaino, the paper discusses the challenges of early photographic techniques and their evolution. It highlights figures like Linnaeus Tripe, John Murray, and Samuel Bourne, emphasizing their impact on documenting India's landscapes, monuments, and social narratives during moments of historical significance like the 1857 revolt. Furthermore, the paper examines the colonial gaze inherent in early ethnographic photography and discusses the emergence of Indian photographers like Raja Deen Dayal. Overall, it underscores photography's pivotal role in representing colonial power dynamics and cultural narratives in India, amalgamating art history, media theory, and postcolonial studies.

**Keywords:** Colonial Photography, British Colonialism and Photography, Evolution of Photography, Visual Representation in Colonial Photography, Photographic Societies in Colonial India, Ethnographic Photography in British India, Stereotyping in Colonial Photographs, Indigenous Perspectives in Early Indian Photography, Indian Photographers in the Nineteenth Century, Impact of Photography on Cultural Representation, Geopolitics and Photography in Colonial India, Ethnography and Visual Representation in Colonial India

The history of photography in India can be viewed from many dimensions. Photography can be studied as a visual art having its own artistic merits and distinctive history. It can also be viewed as a technology brought to India by the British which was later adopted and adapted by the Indians. Thirdly, it can be viewed as a medium in which the British "represented" the Indians and India of the nineteenth century. Later, the Indians gained the technical expertise to handle this medium, sometimes "representing" their land and peoples; sometimes "re-presenting" the colonial masters' view through a borrowed lens. Thus art history, media theory and postcolonial studies can offer valuable insights to the topic of colonial photography in India. History, Sociology and Anthropology can provide the larger context in which photography was developed in India.

The age of photography in India had started with the camera obscura. Basically, it was a box with a lens in it. There would be a mirror inside the box which would reflect the image on a paper. This paper would be used for further processing. The Daniel brothers, Thomas and William, were some of the earlier photographers in India. W. H. Fox Talbot was another pioneer figure in this area who introduced further innovations in the area. It has to be mentioned here that Fox Talbot's experiments finally led to the development of the negatives from which end number of positives could be developed.

He got patent for his technology which he called as “Calotype” meaning the “beautiful”. They used camera in the Indian context as early as the 1830s. The French photographer Louis Daguerre also used camera to capture a few images from India. There is clear evidence that Monsieur Montaino used this technology around 1840 in Calcutta. The Daguerreotype processing was prominent in Europe till 1868 when the calotype and collodion processing replaced it (Desmond 49).

The length of exposure time was a major problem in the early days of photography. The calotype processing made it necessary to have three minutes to seven minutes of exposure (49). Even then, the photos printed out with this technology could be seen in different collections today. The photo of the Fever Hospital at Calcuta captured in camera by F. Fiebig is an example (50). Fiebig had taken a number of photos of Calcutta and the surrounding districts. This is just one among them. This photo is available in the Fiebig collections and also made available online today. The limitations of calotype processing were resolved to a very large extent with the invention of the collodion camera. This technology reduced the exposure time considerably. The exposure time of the collodion camera was thirty seconds to one twenty seconds. But in many other ways, the collodion camera overburdened its user. The collodion photographer had to carry a large amount of peripherals. This included the, tripod, chemicals, glasses, etc. It is said that when Samuel Bourne first went to the Himalayas with this camera, he needed thirty porters to carry all the materials with him. This is the reason why some of the photographers in India still used the calotype camera instead of the collodion camera even after the collision was in use (51).

The binocular camera was the next mile stone in the history of the evolution of the earlier cameras. The London Stereoscopic Company which was found in the year of 1854 spread the usage of this camera. This technology did not take much time to reach India. As early as in 1857, the members of the Madras Photographic Society were introduced to the stereoscopic camera. Some of Linnaeus Tripe’s books had stereoscopic images of India (51-2).

The popularity of photography in India led to the formation of Photographic Societies and the emergence of photographic journals. The British rulers encouraged such initiatives. The Bombay

photographic society was the first group of enthusiasts. This was followed by the establishment of similar collectives in Calcutta and Madras. These photographic societies had their own patrons. They brought out their journals too. The membership in these societies kept on increasing steadily (52).

The officials of the British government were quick to understand the value of photography to them in the governance of the native population. They thought that the images of the natives can be captured in photo for the purpose of official records. Capturing the images of “thieves” and recording them was an example. The meaning of “thief” was something to be contested in the colonial context. This issue will be dealt with again in this chapter later. The beginnings of the geopolitics can be seen here. Photography was not only a tool for “governance”. The British officials saw more utility value for the photographs. For example, before new infrastructural schemes were developed, photographic images of the geographical area can be captured. This would give them a better idea about the geographical location. Photography could even play a role in the works of the Public Works Department. Before railway lines were laid, images of the geographical area were scrutinized by the British officials. Engineers in Madras and Calcutta used such images to assess the feasibility of their plans. The government liberally encouraged the study of the new medium in the educational institutions. It would turn out to be such that the students coming out of these institutions may eventually join the public works department or other governmental departments (53).

The military photography was also developing along similar lines. Photography was first employed in war by a military surgeon called John McCosh during the second Sikh war. This was around 1848-9. He was a forerunner in this area. He captured different scenes of the war which was the first of its kind and followed greatly by the future military photographers. The military interest of the British government in using photography is evident from the fact that they included it in the military curriculum of cadets in their military seminary at Addiscombe (53).

The first photographers in India deserve special focus while studying the history of colonial photography in India. They provide invaluable information regarding the emergence and evolution of colonial photography. As mentioned earlier,

Photography was becoming popular in India in the 1840s. The first available photos of India were captured by the British photographers and are from this era. The French daguerrotypist Jules Itier had also taken some images of India which are available today. These were mainly the images from South India. Yet there is a lack of materials from this age. The lack of materials, in any sense, does not mean that the photographic activity was minimal (Gordon 44).

After 1950, photography became more popular and common. Different themes were dealt with by the photographers. They are mainly the portraits taken in studios, the pictures representing specific ethnographic details, the pictures of landscapes, etc. It has to be specified here that a good amount of photographic activity was limited to the metropolitan cities. This is because of the fact that in the beginning, photographic studios emerged in India in the cities like Calcutta (Gordon 44).

The relation between the colonial state and its people had a great influence on the first photographers who were mainly British men. The empire could secure its position in India completely and take over the control of it by then. Its priority was on improving the governance. This was possible only by knowing the land and its citizen better. This urge to know the subject, their land, and their culture is visible in the photographic activity of the first photographers (Thapar 2/14).

Photography was introduced in India in the year of 1839. In the beginning, the technology was too primitive to match with the aspirations of the photographers. This was especially true when it comes to the outdoor photography. The bulky size of the camera, the complex methods of chemical processing of film and the Indian climate made the outdoor photography difficult for the photographers. It has been pointed by veterans on this field that Tripe, Murray, and Bourne are the greatest British photographers of the nineteenth century British India (Thapar 3/14).

Linnaus Tripe was the official photographer of the Empire from 1854-1860 (4/14). This was a period of unrest and chaos. The world witnessed India's First War of Independence during this period. Documenting the war was important in order

to devise strategies against similar future uprisings. It was also important for the Empire to stereotype the revolution in its own terms. Another intention of the Raj in appointing professionals like Tripe was to study and comprehend the civilization that they tried to bring under their control (4/14).

Tripe was a well trained photographer in the sense of those days. His expertise was combined with the financial aid of the British Raj. He traveled the length and breadth of India. More than just a photographer, he was a curious student and ardent learner. This curiosity about the society he is mapping led him to learn several Indian languages. He traveled different parts of India including Mysore, North East and Burma. He took photographs, edited them carefully and printed by himself (4/14). What attracted him was the "newness" of the subjects that he captured in his photos. His photography can be viewed as exploratory even though it can be viewed as "a means of imperial control" according from the view point of postcolonial scholars. (Jarvis 792).

Dr. John Murray was a doctor before he became a professional photographer. He was in Bengal for a long time. He developed interest in photography and traveled to North India. He captured scenes from North India between 1849 and 1865. He had developed a very strong love for the Mughal architecture. He experimented with different angles while capturing the Mughal architecture. It wouldn't be wrong to say that he was the first photographer to take a picture of the great Taj Mahal. Some of those photos survive even today (Thapar 5/14). The changing attitude of the Empire motivated the professional photographers like Murray. As noted above, after the revolt of 1857, the British Empire asked Murray to photograph the military sites of the Indians. Governor General Lord Canning asked Murray to photograph the major locations of the first war of independence. Capturing the historical monuments of India was also part of this programme (Silverman 2/3).

Samuel Bourne was a banker before he turned into photography. He established studios in some of the major cities like Calcutta and Bombay. He was both a photographer and a business man. He took the photos he captured in India to Europe and sold them all over Europe and US. The rich in the Europe

had a fascination for photos of the “other” lands. He made use of this (Thapar 6/14). In 1863, he set out a journey to Kashmir to see the beauty of the Himalayan Valley. The interest in the exotic beauty of India was a common thread among all these travelers, artists and photographers. Bourne was in no way exception to this. He was influenced by the painters who portrayed the same geographical areas on their canvas (7/14).

Apart from these three photographers, there were many other photographers who made active usage of the new media. It will be inappropriate to detail the biographical information of each and every one of the first British photographers. Instead, a close look at some of the earlier photos will be more appropriate here. The photos taken during the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion can be taken as samples. These photographs would give clues about the ideological role that such photos played in the Raj. Tankha and Allaana have compiled some of these photos which can be analyzed here.

The photo of Jwala Prasad, a commander-in-Chief of Nana Sahib in the first war of Indian independence can be the first one. His photo was taken by Johan Nicholas Tressider, when he was captured by the British soldiers. He was put to death soon. In fact he was hanged at the place where he led the battle. In the photo in consideration, Jwala Prasad was seen with a gloomy face. The photo shows the helplessness of the vanquished. Tressider and other photographers used to leave small notes along with the photos they take. These notes give us clues regarding identifying the personalities and location of the photograph (Tankha and Allana 9).

The selection of personalities, places, and incidents captured in the photo tell us a lot about the politics of colonial photography. The photos taken in the aftermath of the revolt convey strong messages about the power of the British Empire. Jwala Prasad’s image is just one telling example.

The photo of Mammun Khan, defeated and taken in the British custody, also serves a similar role. This photo is taken by Tressider. In the photo, Mammun Khan has been presented as a vanquished enemy. The image is not that of a warrior. Instead, Mammun Khan looks like a helpless prisoner. Mammun Khan was the councillor of Avadh and he is supposed to

be the father of Birjis Qadr. He became the Dewan Khanah with the latter’s crowning as the King of Avadh. But he could not remain in that position for long. Lucknow fell in the hands of the marching British troops and Mammun Khan had to surrender. The image of Mammun Khan in British custody is the image of the one who is defeated by the unassailable power of the colonial rule (10). The victorious British Empire’s presence can be felt in the photo. The photo conveys a strong message to the Indians that this will be the fate of them if they rise up against the British Empire.

The photo of Gangu Mehtar captured by Tressider conveys the same message. He is seen sitting in a similar position in a wooden chair. The photo gives the impression of a convict captured in war by the British (11). According to the legend, Mehtar was a brave warrior. He comes from a Dalit caste. He used to be a drum beater in his village. He left this job and engaged in the war against the British. He killed more than two hundred British enemies in the war before he was caught by them. This great image of a brave freedom fighter cannot be seen in the photo of Tressider. His photo is in direct line with the British discourse on him. The British officers unfairly leveled false charges against him. He was accused of killing women and children. Later on, he was hanged by them.

Gangu Mehtar has two images in history. One is the popular image he has in the writings of the Indian historians. The other image is the one constructed by the British officials. It is not surprising that the photo of Tressider reflects the image of the British officials. Tressider’s note on the photo reflects this view. It lays down the charges of attacking women and children and along with many other charges including mutilating people and throwing them in a well (11).

Thus the photos of the aftermath of the 1857 revolution were part of a larger discourse. The British historians, officials and others who reflected the official view of the British Empire formulated this discourse. The photographers were the links of this chain. They complimented the colonial discourse. They played their own role in formulating/ supplementing the British discourse about the Indians.

The pictures of historical monuments in the aftermath of the 1857 revolt are also presented in a similar way. The photo of Jama Masjid, taken by Samuel Bourne in the aftermath of the revolt is an example. Jama Masjid was a busy place, a centre of a lot of activities during the revolt. But in the photo, the desolated atmosphere of the same has been seen. The British troops had driven the Indian soldiers and crowd away from there by then. Jama Masjid, a Holy place, had been dishonored by the British soldiers who had lodged there. The building had largely been destroyed also (15). The image of the building is the image of something that has been conquered and brought under the British control. Again, the unassailable power of the British Empire is manifested in the photo.

The details of the ruins of Delhi, a distant panoramic view, as captured from the top of Humayun's Tomb, by Samuel Bourne, is another example. The city is almost seen like a graveyard in the aftermath of the revolt. No human beings are visible. It is a destroyed city that has been captured (16). The photo of Indragat and similar monuments by Bourne are also significant in this context.

The photo of Sikander Bagh by Felice Beato has a similar context. The building in consideration was built by Wajid Ali Shah for his wife. When the British troops invaded this place, three native regiments of Wajid Ali Shah defended it. Ultimately they had to give up their fighting. Total destruction followed and the chaos can be seen in the photo. Again the invincibility of the colonial power is noticeable in the photograph. In front of the partly destroyed building, some locals and a lot of odds and ends are visible. The note left in connection with the photo describes this situation. It says that the "sepoys" were wounded in the battle and hundreds of their dead bodies were already lying in the court yard. The note also explains their helplessness by saying that there was no exit way left for them (23).

Most of these photos taken in the aftermath of the revolt are a testimony to the unconquerable power of the British. Taking photos of the conquered was a means to state the unflinching power of the Empire. The photos leave out the indomitable courage of the Indian soldiers who rose up in rebellion against the British.

Another photo taken by Felice Beato shows this tendency more clearly than anything. The photo has the image of the two Indians executed at the gallows. The executors were also seen in the image. It was common in those days to kill the Indians by hanging them if they possessed unaccounted money (24). The morality or lack of it was not questioned when the dead bodies were captured on photo in this way. The eyewitness account explains it that Beato studied the hanging bodies before he captured them (Desmond 54). Such photos have a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are intended to instill fear in the minds of the Indians. On the other hand, they may create a feeling of pride in the minds of the British. This ideological role of the photograph was central to this medium for a very long time even after the coming of the first Indian photographers.

The British government had varied interests in introducing photography in India. Taking the photos of the monuments and keeping them in record was one of their curiosities. More than just a curiosity, it served as a major tool in representing the culture of the subjugated through the eyes of the conqueror. The British surveyors surveyed for the ancient monuments in India and the government actively supported them to record them through the new medium of camera. It was not very uncommon to see some military photographers taking interest in such historical monuments. The case of Captain Robert Gill is an example. Despite having his own duties in the military department, Gill's interest in recording the Ajanta caves was endorsed by the Company. He had captured photographs of the caves and the nearby places. It is also worth noting here that some of those photos were published or presented in some exhibitions soon. This interest led the Company to appointing photographers exclusively for capturing the monuments. For the West and especially for the British, they offered something romantic as well. The appointing of Linnaeus Trip had to be read in the background of this. He was commissioned not only to take the photographs of the Madras presidency, but to teach the students of the Madras School of Industrial Arts as well (Desmond 54).

Archaeology took active interest in using this medium more than by any other branch of learning. Alexander Cunningham who became the

archaeological surveyor in 1861 and Lord Canning were actively supporting the usage of this medium in capturing the sites of historical relevance. The name of James Ferguson is another important name that should be noted here (Desmond 54). The colonial archaeologists were interested in the places, monuments, religious places and ethnic diversity of India. They rigorously studied these aspects of Indian culture and camera became an important tool to them. The initiative to use the camera came not merely as a personal choice of some individuals but from the governmental level. So was the case with the interest behind introducing the camera in the discipline of archaeology. It is not that a few archaeologists started using this new medium on their own. Instead, the prospective of using the camera in the study of archaeological sites came from the part of the Company as well. Anyway, Cunningham and Ferguson had actively contributed to the Report on the Illustration of Archaic Architecture of India. This report identified the camera as a very useful medium in understanding the aspects of Indian architecture and representing them. Photography became an unavoidable tool for the archaeologists very soon. They ornamented their studies and reports with photographs. Their publications and reports had a good number of photos, both professional and amateur (55).

The interest of the British in knowing the “Indians” who can well be called as the “other” was at the root of all these. This interest was not only limited to the historical monuments and artifacts. They were also concerned about the people, flora and fauna and all other aspects of this subcontinent. Among all these, stereotyping was most visible when the British wrote and photographed the people of India. Books dealing with the people of this ancient country were numerous in number. With the coming of photography, these books were decorated with the photos of the subjects that they had been talking about. Ethnography was developed in India in close ally with anthropology. Ethnographical works were also getting more popular in the west.

One of the first ethnographical accounts of India to have used the new technology of photography was *The People of India*. This book was edited by J. Forbes Watson and J. K. Kaye. The India Museum

in London undertook the publication of this book. It had eight volumes which were published between 1868 and 1875. This book has a large collection of photos many of which are the prints taken from the India Museum. The efforts of fifteen photographers can be seen in it. It contains 468 photos of different aspects of the Indian culture (56).

The most popular trend of the western anthropologists in the nineteenth century was to find an “other” of the Westerners. They searched in the countries that they brought under their control for this “other”. India was not exempted from this colonial inquisitiveness. The more group of ethnographic population they found, the more they got interested in them. This was evident from the interest the British ethnographers took in theorizing the people of the Andaman Nicobar islands. Oscar Mallite, Edward Horace, M. V. Portman, etc. were some of the western photographers that photographed the island population. One of such photographers, named Portman, exclaims with a note of anger that these islanders were reluctant to be captured in a camera. They viewed this device with suspicion and it was practically difficult to persuade them to pose for a photo (56). This was not an isolated experience of a single photographer. All the early photographers who went to the Andaman and Nicobar islands were of the same opinion. The opinion of Samuel Bourne testifies this beyond doubt. He comments on the reluctance of the natives of this island to sit properly and pose for a photo. According to him, they never agreed to sit and pose for a photo. They always wanted to be captured in the camera in the standing posture (56). All these experiences led to the stereotyping of the natives which was the same thing the photographs were also doing. The image of the Andaman and Nicobar islanders served to be a very good source of theorization, romanticizing and exoticizing for the westerners.

The Indians were photographed by the westerners in order to strengthen their ideas about the “other”. This could not have been different considering the general intellectual atmosphere in Britain and Europe in the nineteenth century.

Three decades after photography came to India, there emerged a group of Indian photographers. The pioneer among them was Raja Deen Dayal. Praised by the experts as the “Bold Warrior of Photography”, Raja Deen Dayal made his entry to this field rather

meticulously. He was a surveyor at the Public Works Department in Indore. He got acquainted with the camera in the 1870s. Before starting his career as a photographer, he made it sure that he can handle the medium. But once he made the initial plunge, he never looked back. He travelled all over India and established studios in Indore, Secunderabad, and Bombay. His career spanned between 1878 and 1905. Within this period, he had printed more than 30,000 photographs. He was also a court photographer for the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad. It should be noted here that it was around this time that camera became a more popular device for portraiture than painting (Silverman 1/3).

The speed with which technology travelled to India was amazing. As mentioned earlier, the daguerrotype cameras were advertised in India immediately after it was invented in Europe. However, it was only in the 1880s that the photographic societies were firmly established in the major cities of India. These societies organized various programmes that cultivated interest in photography among the Indian audience. The name of the Nicholas Brothers is something that has to be mentioned in this context. John and James Nicholas together established a studio in Madras and produced so many photographs of the south Indian landscape (Silverman 2/3).

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