

“Arts of India” Term Paper  
Art History 362  
Professor Gautama Vajracharya

## **Capturing the Contemporary, Exposing the Traditional**

A search for “traditional Indian art” within contemporary Indian  
Photography

The tension between “traditional” and “sophisticated” Indian art (as typically studied in pre-modern of sculpture, architecture, and painting) is applied to contemporary photography. Using prints and commentary of native photographers in the second half of the twentieth century, this study finds many “traditional” elements exist independent of or in opposition to “sophisticated” European influences, including the portrayal of women, *darsana*, and spatiotemporal manipulation.

Andrew Huening  
November, 2003

## “Eternity”

Over the centuries, so much has melded into India, that it is not really one country; it’s not one culture...[yet] all that we have in India still lives—several centuries at a time. The eternity of it all, that is what finally matters.

- Raghu Rai (b. 1942), Pakistani photographer<sup>1</sup>

A hundredth of a second here, a hundredth of a second there—even if you put them end to end, they still only add up to one, two, perhaps three seconds, snatched from eternity.

-Robert Doisneau (b. 1912), French photographer<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, it seems that these quotes are only superficially related. There is a repetition of eternity, and both men are photographers by trade...is there anything else?

When viewed from the perspective of contemporary Indian art and culture, these simple phrases become much more meaningful. Rai is directly referring to the complex issues of national identity and independence, while Doisneau is making a statement about the unique selectiveness of photography. This selectiveness and its cultural implications are further explained by another Frenchman, Pierre Bourdieu:

...even when the production of the picture is entirely delivered over to the automatism of the camera, the taking of the picture is still a choice involving aesthetic and ethical values... from among the theoretically infinite number of photographs which are technically possible, each group chooses a finite and well-defined range of subjects, genres, and compositions,<sup>3</sup>

For an outsider studying Indian art and culture, these quotes would suggest a certain accessibility, a certain transparency in Indian photography. By carefully considering the seconds which are “snatched from eternity”, we should be able to

---

<sup>1</sup> India: A Celebration of Independence 116.

<sup>2</sup> Columbia Dictionary of Quotations “photography”.

<sup>3</sup> Camera Indica 11.

infer certain things about the "group" that is Indian artists. However, upon more careful inspection, there is an obvious problem. The European influence on photography is heavy, and the nationalities of the men quoted above already undermine the content of their words. Photography was invented in Europe by Europeans, and it was first introduced in India by the British rulers who controlled politics as well as the fine arts for well over a century. Given the decidedly European lineage of Indian photography, some might claim that any study of Indian photography can be simply resolved to a study of displaced European photography. The question that results is clear: is Indian photography a legitimate or reliable expression of Indian ideals and identity? This question is easy to answer when a common approach to pre-modern Indian art is applied. The distinction of "sophisticated" versus "traditional" can be utilized in a consideration of contemporary Indian art quite easily. Now, the question becomes: can we see "traditional" Indian art influencing the "sophisticated" medium of contemporary photography?

Despite European origins and "sophisticated" foreign influences, contemporary photography of the subcontinent contains many elements of "traditional" Indian art. This study focuses on three specific elements: women, *darsana*, and spatiotemporal manipulation.

### **Women**

Beyond the formally adopted symbols of state, there few images as fundamentally and traditionally Indian as the sensuously curved and action-posed woman. Unlike the still and statuesque norms of Western European art heritage,

Indian artists have traditionally emphasized the dynamic and fluid aspects of femininity. Are these traditional depictions and ideals of women present in contemporary photography?

The first work to consider is a striking black and white fine art piece: “Learning Dance” (fig. 1) has a fascinating composition that places nearly all the emphasis on the female dancing, despite the fact that she embodies a relatively small portion of the frame itself. The viewer’s eye is brought straight to the center by the shutters and drawn drapes, which act as powerful framing devices for the real subject: the female dancer. In terms of light, the glare and resulting sharp contrast direct the eye towards the dynamic curves of the dancer’s figure, while the soft and iridescent shine off the floor suggests reverence. The male figure is obscured by the excess light, and his body (especially his right leg) blends into the chair and shaded background, leaving only the dancer for consideration. Looking carefully, we also see light streaming through her clothing, reminiscent of the transparent sari technique which is omnipresent in traditional Indian works. The cumulative effect of the photograph is to emphasize the dancing woman and ascribe great aesthetic value to her movement.

Similar mechanisms achieve a nearly identical effect in “Housewife and cart pullers”, an interesting panorama shot taken in Bombay (fig. 2). A number of elements direct attention to the housewife: her central placement, the dark and obscured cart pullers, the visual barrier of wood crates, strongly converging storefront lines, and narrow depth of field which crisply captures only her. More than anything else, the striking color and iridescence of her sari capture the eye

and encourage closer consideration. A second glance at her figure reveals a body in motion, suggested by her hoisting of the fabric, her raised left knee, and the blurring below her waist. Last but not least, her penetrating gaze and fully frontal orientation separate her from the men around her, who are turned away and otherwise hidden behind props. Again, the cumulative effect is to idolize and transcend; the title “housewife” seems far too banal for the outstanding tribute to femininity embodied by the woman captured in this frame.

In the realm of “lower” art, we find the most strikingly traditional woman of all. Fig. 3 is a publicity photograph for an Indian color studio. In this photograph, the model’s “hands [are] emphasizing the homology between the curves of the pot and her own form in such a way that eroticism and fecundity are suggested.”<sup>1</sup> The volumes of traditional Indian art haunting this image are astounding: *varsa sthali* imagery and the associated monsoonal culture; the public eroticism of Sanchi’s *shalabanjika* figure (fig. 3a); and the *trebhanga* body positioning (fig. 3b), just to name a few.

Given the recent political history of India, these traditional artistic images of women are most certainly related to more idealistic post-colonial notions of women as a “repository of an interior, purer and more valuable tradition that [stands] opposed to moral compromises and degradation of rule by foreigners.”<sup>2</sup> Fig. 2 suggests this connection most explicitly, as the woman in yellow is set in stark contrast with her dark, predominantly male surroundings. The presence of

---

<sup>1</sup> Camera Indica 11.

<sup>2</sup> Camera Indica 11.

the modern mopeds in the opposite side of the frame creates additional visual tension that suggests a modern/traditional duality.

### **Spatiotemporal Manipulation**

When studying contemporary fine art photography in India, two names stand out: Raghubir Singh and Raghu Rai. Though their personal styles differ, they share a special fascination with a special type of spatiotemporal manipulation: reflections. The inherent duality and conflicting orientations or perspectives of reflections begin to warp the concept of "here and now" that usually accompanies photography. A good example is seen in fig. 4, where a shop door carries the double reflections of an old woman in red and a young woman in purple. The old woman is translated and duplicated so that although she exists in time and space singularly, she exists in the photograph doubly. Even more interesting is the young woman in purple, who is not physically present, yet she makes a very tangible appearance within the frame of the picture.

A similar effect is achieved by Raghubir Singh in fig. 5. With more reflecting surfaces at different angles, the photograph includes many diverse perspectives and scrambled spatial zones: street level is raised to eye level, roofs are lowered to head-height, and the man in the blue flannel jacket is duplicated and translated like the old woman in red. Even more evocative is the suggestion of temporal variation: some portions of Singh (wearing khaki) are blurred by motion, while others are crisp and still. How can the photographer be both moving and motionless in a single moment? Despite the mechanical limitations of a fixed

shutter speed and unidirectional perspective, Singh and Rai have captured images that contain many virtual perspectives and moments.

The predominance and popularity of these images within the circle of Indian fine art suggests a relation to more fundamental aesthetic values. In an interview regarding his photography, Singh discusses what he finds appealing in reflections: “inside to outside and vice versa...reflections give that element of ambiguity and a great sense of movement.”<sup>1</sup> These same ideas of movement, warped space, and warped time are easy to find in traditional Indian art, as far back as Sanchi (fig. 5a) and Mamallapuram (fig. 5b). A more “common art” manipulation of space and time is seen in the seemingly infinite manipulations of portraiture printing. Multiple presence (fig. 6a), multiple attire (fig. 6b), and multiple viewpoint (fig. 6c) all refute the concept of camera as a recorder of a single and discrete moment in time. “Double and triple portraits place a person beyond the space and identity which most forms of Western portraiture enforce. These trick techniques of montage...testify to the lack of any desire to ‘capture’ sitters within bound spatial or temporal frames.”<sup>2</sup> Far from being the work of avant-garde renegades, a run-of-the-mill portrait photographer attests that “the new generation (*nai pirhi*), those aged under 35, have a liking for trick techniques...‘trick photo, double exposing, and “design mixing” are in demand.’”<sup>3</sup> Given the popular support and explicit demand for such manipulations, it seems clear that traditional Indian concepts of time are in the process of replacing the “sophisticated” concepts of time that initially accompanied the technology and culture of photography. Looking at

---

<sup>1</sup> Bombay 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Camera Indica 194.

<sup>3</sup> Camera Indica 135.

photographs like fig. 6a and ancient works such as fig. 6d, it is easy to see modern connections to “India’s cyclical rather than linear sense of time, which was conceived as a vast revolving wheel.”<sup>1</sup>

Moving further from the fine art and delving deeper into popular art, some of the best contemporary examples of spatiotemporal manipulation are found in wedding photography. The remarkable photo compilation by wedding photographer Vijay Vyas (fig. 7) clearly uses narration techniques associated with pre-modern, typically Indian art. Like the Buddha stories depicted on Sanchi *torana* (fig. 7c), continuous narration is used to show the progression of the ceremony through time: bride and groom are pictured before, during, and after the garland placement. The size and position of the newlyweds versus the guests strongly resembles the hierarchical proportioning used throughout pre-modern India art to convey importance or cosmic relevance (fig. 7a). Finally, the spatially fractured and non-linear progression of time is similar to another Sanchi carving (fig. 7b), and it suggests the ever-present Indian theme of the knowing and involved viewer. These visual narrative techniques of the collage combine to create a “compacted and constructed dream world” where “at least several temporally discrete images come to coexist within the same fabulous space”<sup>2</sup>. Far from being a wild experiment, Vyas claims that “people really like this sort of work.”

### *Darsana*

---

<sup>1</sup> Indian Art 7.

<sup>2</sup> Camera Indica 134.

The concept of *darsana* is perhaps the dominating characteristic separating traditional and sophisticated Indian art. Simply put, *darsana* is a system of art and viewer interaction whereby "benefits of the viewing image are the outcome of physical visual 'contact' with the image."<sup>1</sup> Correspondingly, the traditional application of *darsana* yields artworks that are either created with a selective attitude towards reality, or created without any regard to what a work actually represents or what exists in the real world. At first glance, it would seem that photography and *darsana* are completely antithetical: how can one be selective or fanciful when working with a machine that dutifully records reality in its entirety?

Well before the modern period, Indians focused on the inauspiciousness of black and white photographs (fig. 8). At a time when Europe disdained any modification of "pure" photographs, Indians were compelled to paint in vibrant color and non-existent details so the photographs would become more auspicious and the effect of *darsana* would be heightened.<sup>2</sup> This tradition has continued until the present, despite the widespread use of color film and color paper, and the wedding composite (fig. 7) is simply one modern example.

Another more subtle exhibition of *darsana* makes an appearance in amusing anecdotes related between "low art" photographers:

I listened to professional studio photographers in the nearby town of Nagda joking that clients would refuse to pay the full fee for anything less than a full-length portrait. "I will give you a quarter of the fee...because only a quarter of me has come out" or, "I will only pay half, for half a pose"<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Camera Indica 106.

<sup>2</sup> River of Color 6.

<sup>3</sup> Camera Indica 9.

In traditional Indian art, any representation of less than a full human body is seen as inauspicious, for it’s asymmetry as well as the implication of incompleteness or deformity.<sup>1</sup> In these modern times, the inevitable and traditionally rooted dissatisfaction that accompanies a less than full length shot is converted into a matter of haggling, to great comedic effect.

One series of photographs especially drives home the modern connections to ancient and timeless concepts of *darsana* and auspiciousness. The juxtaposition of portraits with traditionally iconography is very common, and it achieves *darsana* doubly through a process of “proximal empowerment.” In addition to seeing an auspicious icon such as the lotus (fig. 9a) or *makara* (fig. 9b), the portrait contained in or in close proximity to the icon gains an increased ability to bestow good fortune (“empowered”) despite non-divine status.<sup>2</sup> The end result is an artistic vision that places great emphasis on the very traditional concept of *darsana*.

A more “modern” approach to this idea replaces ancient icons with modern ones, yet the underlying traditional concept of *darsana* remains the same. In fig. 10, “an Orissan tribal girl wears dark glasses and two wristwatches. These are signs of wealth and power.”<sup>3</sup> Explaining the inclusion of these props with “make believe” alone is a difficult task, since the girl maintains native dress and does not seek to thoroughly transform herself. This mixing of real and unreal to achieve an auspicious effect is unseen in European photography, which traditionally resides near the extreme of either realistic portraiture or complete transformation of person and/or personality.

---

<sup>1</sup> River of Color 63.

<sup>2</sup> Camera Indica 171.

<sup>3</sup> Camera Indica 176.

### **Again, "Eternity"**

In the vast continuum of fine and common art, there are clearly elements of traditional Indian art separate from the sophisticated European influences that accompanied the technology. Like the stoneworkers, bronze sculptors, and painters before them, contemporary Indian photographers have maintained a continuity of themes and ideas that are themselves capable of lasting an eternity.

What greater relevance does this hold for Indian art and Indian culture? The vision of an incorruptible artistic tradition must certainly be a relief for those yearning to distance India from her recent colonial past. At the same time, the broad appreciation and high reputation of photography amongst the international art community suggests that this artistic process of identity formation will take place on a global scale. As the people of India continue to select the moments from their many eternities, we can be sure that the world will wait with bated breath and expectant eyes.

## Bibliography

- Aperture Foundation. India: A Celebration of Independence 1947 to 1997.  
1<sup>st</sup> ed. Ontario: General Publishing, 1997.
- Columbia Dictionary of Quotations. 30<sup>th</sup> ed.  
New York: University of Columbia Press, 2001.
- Dehejia, Vidya. Indian Art. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2000.
- Gutman, Judith. Through Indian Eyes. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Kothary, Kantilal. Diamonds from Dust. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
Palapur: Prasanna Publications, 1971.
- Pinney, Christopher. Camera Indica. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Singh, Raghubir. Bombay: Gateway of India. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
Milan: Arti Grafiche Motta SpA, 1994.
- Singh, Raghubir. Rivers of Color. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1998.
- Srivatsan, Raghavachari. Conditions of Visibility. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
Calcutta: Popular Prakashan, 2000.
- Thomas, G. History of Photography, India, 1840-1980. 1<sup>st</sup> ed.  
Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh State Akademi of Photography, 1981.

## Figure Key

Sources are indicated with a superscript Roman numeral.

- I India: A Celebration of Independence
- II Indian Art
- III Camera Indica
- IV Bombay: Gateway to India
- V Rivers of Color