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HERITAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS

Diachronic Lenses

New initiatives cast light on the lost worlds in old family photos

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Dressed in a gown and heels, her defined features framed by a chic hairdo, Chhobi Ghosh cuts a fine figure. And one frowned upon, too: in 1930s Calcutta, the daughter-in-law of a respectable family couldn't be seen on the terrace, forget playing muse to the camera there, clad in Western clothes. Standing on the same terrace some seventy years later, a nonagenarian Ghosh studies the photograph with fondness and delight. "My husband took these photos, which he kept hidden. They were for our eyes only. We'd go up to the terrace while the household was still asleep," she smiles, patting an album spilling over with similar secret shots, in Nishtha Jain's recently released documentary, *Family Album*.

The film weaves its way in and out of photographs (some of them a hundred years old) preserved by a handful of families in Calcutta. Anecdotes abound, revealing prevailing social mores and their often subtle but plucky divergences: a bobbed mop of hair stands out among a collection of conforming plaits in the '20s, a basketball-playing mother of two raises eyebrows in the '30s and a couple becomes one of the country's early family planners in the '50s. "My film shows the changing position of women in society," Jain says.



"Photos are the only visual evidence of how people lived. Before Photoshop, they depict subjects as they really were." Anusha S. Yadav, Indian Memory Project

That, as Mumbai-based photographer Anusha S. Yadav would agree, is only one of the rewarding revelations a yellowing family album has to offer.

Anusha's brainchild, the Indian Memory Project—an online archive that invites personal photographs shot before 1990, along with pithy insights into their protagonists—throws up a few pictorial surprises in its documentation of social history through snapshots. "Photos are the only visual evidence of how people lived. There wasn't any Photoshop; if there was manipulation, it was expensive. So these pictures depict their subjects as they really were," she reasons.

Begun as a Facebook group in 2009, the Indian Memory Project took off in February last year as more and more vintage photos, many of them quirky conversation-starters, came in. Entertaining narratives enlivened the montage. The 1938 wedding photo of Mr and Mrs Chowfin, for instance, showed that inter-racial marriages happened way before we thought they did. With an Afghan bride and a part-Indian part-Chinese groom, a minor comedy of errors followed, which the contributor, Madhupriya Choudhary Sinha, records: "When the Pathans from the bride's family went to the station to receive the groom, they returned claiming that the groom's family never arrived; that there were, however, many Chinese people at the station."

Another wedding photo spills the beans on an active dating scene in the '60s. The contributor of the photo—the bride herself—is Lata Bhasin. "My husband and I met at a blind date," says Lata, now in her sixties. "Calcutta was rocking back then," she gushes, recalling how a good time meant long drives, picnics and parties, swinging to Elvis and Cliff Richard. Others, like the Mad Hatters, India's first all-girl rock band, were making their own music in the '60s, scoring their biggest hit by landing seats at a Beatles evening (that trivia came from a



photograph too). And while ‘nightlife’ hadn’t yet made it to early ’80s parlance, halls booked for shindigs turned into makeshift discotheques on party nights.

“This archive went inside the realm of everyday life of families, a large part of which weren’t elite families.”Hardik Brata Biswas, *The Family Album*

One of Anusha’s favourites is a picture of a teenage couple holding hands. Nothing unusual there, except that this was taken in 1923, when any public token of romantic affection was taboo. The contributor, the couple’s grandson Sreenivasan Jain, reads in this an “indication of the unconventional direction their lives would take. They were both Gandhians and freedom fighters”. Anusha adds that since photography in its early decades was planned, body language and postures (like who was seated and who was not), clothes (khadi or well-cut suits), props (wristwatches, vanity bags) and locations (with airports and railway stations telling stories of migrations) worked as markers of deeper social, cultural, economic, familial and gender dynamics.

Similar indicators guided Hardik Brata Biswas in his recently concluded project, titled *Photos of Women/Women in Photos: The Photographic Worlds of Bengali Urban Middle-Class Women*. Supported by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, the project traced the evolution of Bengali womanhood through the “everyday life of families”. The 12,000-strong digital repository of “matchmaking photos”, shots of social gatherings, choreographed studio images and more relaxed travel pictures, will soon be available to the public as “The Family Album”.

Also in the pipeline is Kushal Ray’s *Family Matters*, a book of 8,000-odd photographs chronicling a decade in the trajectory of a single joint family, to be published by Delhi-based Niyogi Books.



“Four generations of my family have been visually documented through photographs by My Life Chronicles.”Madhavi Papineni, Got A Book Made On Her Family

Clearly, the Great Indian Family Album is adding new leaves. Now, families even have professional help to add to it, thanks to services like Archival Resources for Contemporary History (Arch) and My Life Chronicles. Doing exactly what its name suggests, the Bangalore-based My Life Chronicles, started in 2009 by former techie Sumit Chowdhury, documents personal histories of families and institutions in the form of coffee-table books, booklets or audio-video presentations. So far, Sumit has had 10 satisfied clients, who shared with him assorted family memorabilia, including photos, letters and even medical records. Among them is Madhavi Papineni, who has preserved images of four generations of her family—from her grandparents to her children—in a book which is undoubtedly one of her most cherished possessions. “Apart from organising the material we are given, we often travel to interview family members as part of our research,” Sumit says.

Historian and archivist Indira Chowdhury has been through the drill, having set up Arch, which offers similar services, back in 2002. “There has been a rise in interest in preserving legacies in the past couple of years, but it is very slow,” she says. One has only to consider the fact that even the innovative Indian Memory Project has received only 69 pictures over a whole year, to confirm that. And while a photo might yield information of great significance at first sight, Indira points out that they can fully serve their sociological function only if they are tagged and catalogued accurately. This awareness is growing too, going by the detailed information volunteered along with photo contributions to blogs and even social networking sites.

As Nishtha says, “Compared to the scale of personal history projects in the West, our efforts are just a drop in the ocean.” The good news is, school- and college-goers are enthused about it. So, for every pile of sepia photos still dumped into the kabadiwala’s sack, there is now a scanned snapshot being uploaded onto this national scrapbook somewhere, even if the caption simply exclaims, “Mah grandmom!!!”

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