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BOOK EXCERPT

The exotic, the respectable, and the vulnerable: How the coloniser's photographs saw Indian women

An excerpt from 'Framing Portraits, Binding Albums: Family Photographs in India', edited by Shilpi Goswami and Suryanandini Narain.

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An Indian nanny with white children and a pet dog. | Cabinet Photos

Photographic representations of colonised Indian women, segregated by the double burden of being colonised and of womanhood, faced further representational violence in the canons of colonial photography. Colonial photographic albums contained pictures of high-caste respectable ladies or rural, vulnerable, malnourished women from the famine years. The albums also had a distinctive liking for "nautch girls", "bazar women" and courtesans. The albums generally illustrated categories of Indian women divided into the exotic, the respectable and the vulnerable. Gradually, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century pictorial/photographic representations of the stereotypes of Indian womanhood began to be distributed through popular picture postcards.

Here, many more typified representations of women engaged in various kinds of work were published. Always, like the early representations in colonial albums, picture postcards relied on social differences. The more plebeian and unwelcome sisters of the Brahmin lady, such as the ayah and the sweeper, nautch girls and the "Hindoo" lady became subjects of picture postcards.

Early Indian photography became a dominant tool for representing regional identities in India, framing the "other". These were areas of target, where a justification for the imperial drive needed to be settled and the civilising drive of European colonisers needed to be argued. Indians, especially females in India, faced a process of double othering, while the Indian male was reproduced generally as effeminate, in finite sections of the workforce, as trader, criminal, lawbreaker, or member of a superstitious mass without the capacity of reason. As a consequence, women were deferred another step back vis-á-vis their already veiled representations inside Indian societies. Broadly speaking, early Indian photography attested to the stereotyping and gendering of women inherent in various Indian traditions of representation.

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another dimension to the experience of colonialism in Bengal. With the advent of colonial modernity and its institutions of education, professionalism and commerce, it led to a "controlled fuzzing of the limits of the racial divide". Photography studios emerged as one among the few shared public spaces after the 1860s. Karlekar argues that studios emerged as a democratic space where the "porousness" of colonialism was acted out.

From the 1870s to the early decades of the twentieth century, photography played a significant role in the construction of the social and family history of the region. The bhadra samaj in Bengal accepted photography as a useful innovation that fractured the public/private dichotomy without too much dislocation. The varied degree of exposure of the public in the private and the private in the public through photography also helped, to some extent, the project of the reformers, the English-educated middle class and babus to control the exposure of their women (mostly wives, relatives and in some cases, even mistresses). It was necessary to prove the teleological point of being a bhadralok, who shares a social space with the bhadramahila in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with some differences from the figure of the babu – the 19th-century figure of the Bengali dandy.

The evolution of the modern family, progress in girls' education, women's emergent socially visible roles and other similar/dissimilar discourses were, to a large extent, helped by the dynamics of the new visual space. The debut of photographs in Bengali middle-class homes from the 1870s onwards can be seen as proof of the affiliation between the coloniser and the colonised, as the technology of photography went inside Bengali homes in a spirit of assimilation. Sections of bhadra samaj which were increasingly moving away from land-based occupations to professions such as government service, law, medicine and teaching, were simultaneously redefining their lifestyles. The foregrounding of a rational outlook was important to such changes in the process of refiguring in which women emerged as primary exhibits.

From the 1870s to the early decades of 20th century, photography played a significant role in the construction of the social and familial history of the region. For Karlekar, a "reading" of images is to introduce another dimension to the experience of colonialism in Bengal. For the bhadra samaj, photography was useful in depicting family life and the professional roles that they had newly acquired.



Collecting bullock droppings. c. 1880s.

Structures like the evolution of the family, progress of girls' education and

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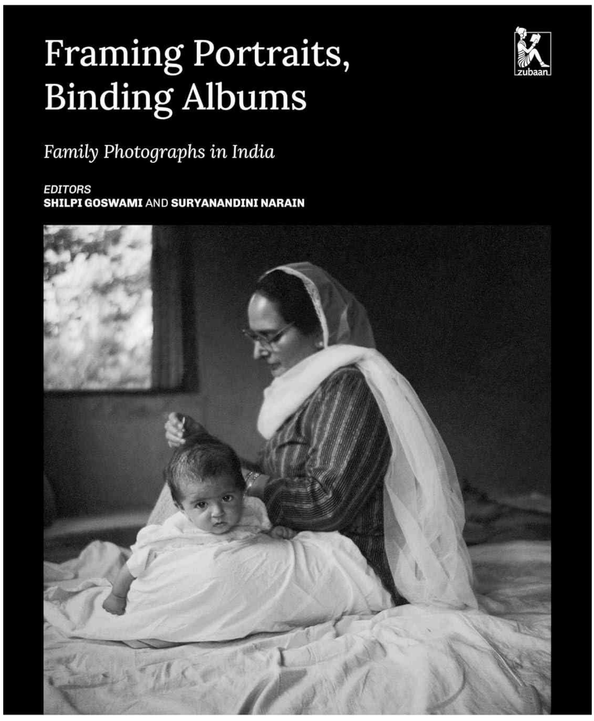
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formation of the undivided family structure. Newlywed couples made the best use of photography and the studio space “to create public and formal representations of the bourgeois couple from among themselves.” Performances of the self before the camera can make representation go beyond the grasp of a normative economy of visual framing. Representational spaces, studios and photographs opened up possibilities for identity formation and the performance of subjectivity in the changed historical context.

Re-figurations of women in dichotomised private and public spaces found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a change in their iconography. The unyielding look in formal wedding portraits and couple’s photography gave way to acknowledging the mundane. Facilitated by the fact that the camera was getting more mobile with the years and the growing number of amateur photographers among family members and friends, photographic representations of women began to take note of the profane moments of daily lives without leaving out formal occasions.



Excerpted with permission from ‘Women and Incongruous Impasses in Family Albums’ *by Hardik Brata Biswas in* Framing Portraits, Binding Albums: Family Photographs in India, *edited by Shilpi Goswami and Suryanandini Narain, Zubaan Books.*

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