

Visual Histories of South Asia

Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Marcus Banks
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The book under review has thirteen well-edited and compact chapters along with an *Introduction*, which are bound together with common themes of interpretation and representation of visuals like photographs, cartoons, and video compact discs (VCDs) through history. This book is in many ways a continuation of the themes and questions that Christopher Pinney's famous work *Camera Indica* had already raised.¹ Therefore Pinney's short preface to this volume is a befitting initiation in setting the tone of the volume.

Pinney in the *Preface* emphasizes that visual histories should engage with velocity and imagination of travel. He further questions the binary of seeing and un-seeing and considers such a binary fallacious because these two activities are not mutually exclusive. They interact and complementarily determine the nature of the visual text. Almost all the essays in the volume meticulously follow this line of argument and in the process help to make, what can be easily and in somewhat definitive ways be called a global history of visual representation.

The book covers an expansive domain. And to do justice to the rich discussion that subsequently unfolds, one needs to visit the nitty-gritties of the chapters separately, for each chapter is a separate window to the varied ideas that visual histories are capable of capturing. Marcus Bank explores the role of visual methodologies in long-term research on the basis of the rich visual archives. In addition, the article also explores the ways in which a photograph should be allowed to 'breathe', 'perform', and transform relationships or even converse with the changing relationships of power and governance. These ideas are important to comprehensively capture and incorporate its potential within the entire range of research. Bank also highlights the problems of implementing these ideas within a particular research, especially, after the

funding period of the research is over. This particular intervening and at times decisive role of the money and market is also the focal point of analysis in Denis Vidal's article where the effects of market commercialization are discussed with respect to tribal art forms. Through an engaging discussion about the life and works of Jangarh Singh Shyam, a talented tribal Indian artist, the chapter tries to understand the nature of incorporation of 'ethnic' art forms into the globalized art world.

Market and commerce is also the theme for Josephine Bark's chapter although with a slight difference. The chapter focuses upon the role of iconography in the Maratha Durbar at Thanjavur and important clues it provided about the roles of the European traders, in this case, the Danes on the Maratha ruler's jurisdiction. The chapter highlights the interesting point about multicultural visual diplomacy regarding the European traders in India who became visually prominent in both political and aesthetic contexts even before their economic success in Europe or their colonial enterprises.

The theme of iconography continues to be a part of the chapter by Imma Ramos. Ramos discusses iconography in the context of temple politics and its representation in the architecture of the Kamakhya temple in Assam. The article extensively explores the changing visual politics of menstruation, birth and devotion through the centuries ranging from the rule of the Pala, the Koch and finally the colonial rule. Ramos suggests that sculptures of the temple represent layers of relationship between the fertility and apotropaic. This combination provides power to the meanings of the temple sculptures, an aspect that has remained consistent through the ages.

But are representations bereft of inconsistencies and anxieties? Thomas Simpson in his essay through the analysis of the visual representation of the people of the

frontier provinces of India asserts that they are not. His work is a clear indication that the photographs about representing the various aspects of the people of frontier India were often without any definite plan and varied according to the local and personal circumstances of the reporting officers. The article, in this context, analyses Robert Woodthorpe's representation of the inhabitants of the frontier regions of the country between 1844 and 1898.

Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes also explores similar politics of representation in the following essay in the context of visual representation of the landscape of Ceylon. The focal point of her analysis is 'how the process of visual printing informed, impacted on, and inscribed the photographic representation of antiquity in Ceylon' within the framework of travel photography of the present times. (p.94). The answer lies, argues Motrescu-Mayes in the ways and consistent methods in which the photographs were taken, especially those of ruins, to ascribe a permanent idea of antiquity of Ceylon. But if photographs can impose the tone of static antiquity on a geographical location, they can also enhance the status of a king and help him to stand tall amongst his subjects in the domestic as well as the international arena. Teresa Segura-Garcia's chapter exhibits the process as to how the mechanically reproduced photographs of Maharaja Sayaji Rao III of Baroda from 1919 enhanced the Maharaja's image as a modern ruler suited to handle the exigencies of the colonial rule.

Such representations, however, were not limited to the royals. The common people were also represented likewise and that had deep political and cultural repercussions as is exhibited in the subsequent three essays. Xavier Guegan's chapter, the first one in this series, is also my personal favorite in the book and it is not possible to do justice to its extensive thematic coverage in this limited space. The chapter is about Samuel Bourne, a young British photographer who portrayed India in the 1860s with the help of his business partner, Charles Shepherd. It explores the ways in which the photographs of priests, soldiers, bankers, merchants and workers were taken, their contexts, interventions of ideas of caste and class in these photographs, the process of the creation of the ethnographical albums and so on. Similarly in the following essay, Adrian Peter Ruprecht illustrates the

way in which colonial India became tightly integrated into a new global humanitarian initiative of the Red Cross movement after the First World War, which was in fact aimed at preventing the occurrence of diseases and pandemics by educating the masses across the world. The chapter also discusses the ways in which the War itself helped in the almost 'spectacular ascent of photography and cinema as the prime propaganda media to reach and educate the masses'. (p. 172). Aaron Bryant's chapter, the third in this line-up, continues with the theme of masses and their politics with the focus on the tour of Martin Luther King, Jr. to India in 1959. Providing interesting glimpses of the tour details of Martin Luther King, Bryant discusses at length the gradual influence that Gandhi and Nehru's politics had on King. In fact, the chapter discusses the global context of mass resistance, in this case, the epistemological model that the politics of Gandhi provided to the civil rights movement in the United States of America.

The last three chapters by Souvik Naha, Siddharth Pandey, Ronie Parciack respectively explore themes of representation of politics through, sports cartoons, photographs and VCDs over a long historical span. While Naha's article navigates through the colonial and post-colonial times using the various sports cartoons metaphors to read through the various political developments, Pandey's analytical scape is Shimla and he talks about the politics of official representation underlining the many site points of this pristine hill station. Parciack uses the unusual and the interesting medium of Video Compact Discs or the VCDs to look into the subaltern politics amongst the Indian Muslims. Parciack's essay give us a peek in to the Indo-Islamic historiography of political representation which is constructed through these alternative mediums of representation vis-à-vis the dominant Hindutva narratives.

Overall, the book is a treat for readers not only interested in the history of visual studies but also for a larger reading community, an asset that is a rare quality of academic books.

NOTE

1. Christopher Pinny, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, London: Reaktion, 1997.