

Between Objectivity and Illusion: Architectural Photography in the Colonial Frame

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Following the rebellion of 1857, the English government decided to disband the East India Company and to make India into a dominion of the British Empire. Under the Crown, the new British policy stressed the importance of creating and maintaining a friendly native aristocracy of landlords and princely chiefs that could administer and act as a buffer between the populace and the Colonial government. As long as the unannexed Princely states remained friendly and loyal the official policy was that they would not be annexed. At the micro-political level, however, the colonial policy was not only to maintain loyal ally, but try and make a client of the maharajas through manipulation of their political system. Thus, between the stated policy of conditional non-interference and the de-facto one of "interference" and under the cover of friendly and loyalty, there was a lot of room for interpretation and accommodation that enabled both colonizers and colonized to negotiate with one another in various ways.

In this paper, I compare the use of photography by Sawai Ram Singh, the maharaja of the Princely State of Jaipur, and by James Fergusson, the earliest colonial historiographer of Indian architecture. Contrasting the ethnological and putatively "objective" studies of the colonist, with the maharaja's hybridized and illusionistic images, I will argue that the camera was two edged sword that could be used both to familiarize "India" into stereotypical brackets as well as to disorient and transform its subject's identities in more playful and potentially threatening ways. Photography in the colonial frame, in other words, was both a hegemonic technology of subjectification as well as a potential conduit of resistant agential praxis.

SELF REPRESENTATION: SAWAI RAM SINGH'S CAMERA

Sawai Ram Singh, who ruled Jaipur from 1852 to 1880, is often referred to as the "architect of modern Jaipur." This usually refers to his introduction of a series new practices in Jaipur that were derived from those of the English. Amongst other things, he invited numerous Englishmen to Jaipur and, with their active support and expertise, built European-style public facilities like a free lending library, a proscenium stage theater, a huge public garden, a modern hospital and a museum.

At an early age S. Ram Singh developed a passionate interest in the new craft of photography and acquired his own camera from London. Nearly 2000, 12 X 10 inch, glass negatives from his collection are still preserved in the City Palace Museum in Jaipur. (Thomas, 1986, 184) S. Ram Singh's self portraits found in this mammoth collection are a curious study in contradictions. A small man, in one he is standing in a suit with sash sporting an elaborate Rajasthani royal turban and moustache. In another he is sitting in what seems like a traditional court dress, ceremonial shield at hand,

with a solar-halo in the background that in the photograph seems to emanate naturally from the back of his head. In a third he is standing in traditional robes, right hand on hip and left leaning on a book placed on the table — a position suggestive of paintings of English lords of the manor.

S. Ram Singh obviously enjoyed playing around with trick-photography and producing illusions like his "haloed" self-portrait. In his collection one also finds numerous stereoscopic photographs that produce the illusion of twins. Similarly, he took numerous staged photographs with painted backgrounds. In one he has a man in a western hunting dress, shot-gun in hand, posed against a painted scene of tropical vegetation, with a few real plants in front making a feeble attempt at lending real depth to the image.

When he was not experimenting with trick-photography, S. Ram Singh was busy documenting visitors to and members of his durbar or court (including, what must have been unusual for the times, the women of the royal zenana or women's quarters.) In many of these photographs, S. Ram Singh made his traditionally attired subjects sit in strikingly European poses — for instance the woman sitting on a chair with the man standing with his hand placed casually on the backrest. Like his self-portraits, these curious hybrids in hindsight create unusual and bizarre images that invite interpretation.

There is something voyeuristic and scopophilic about the camera; as there is an expression of power sensed in the images it captures. The camera is indissolubly linked to the eye - to the visibility of the seen. In less easily visible ways, the eye is connected to the constitution of the ego-ideal or the "I." The camera was obviously a toy in S. Ram Singh's hands; as he himself was a puppet of the colonial government. How might one negotiate and weave a thread between these "facts?" How is power played out in these curious images and who is doing the watching; and to what effect?

NEGOTIATING "LOYALTY" AND "FRIENDSHIP"

S. Ram Singh took every opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty and friendship to the Imperial government. He attended every Imperial durbar and when the Viceroy visited Jaipur in 1876, S. Ram Singh had triumphal arches, flags and banners erected in the streets. In an exaggerated display of affiliation he even had "WELCOME HERE" painted with letters fifty feet high with strokes eight feet thick on the hillside above the city. (Jaipur Public Works Department Report, 1876, 1)

In this context S. Ram Singh's photographs can be interpreted as symptomatic of his European pretensions and testimony to the tremendous impression that the foreign rulers and their technology might have had on him. Enthralled by camera's strange and curious possibilities, this subservient maharaja, like others who collected Rolls-Royces, may have simply been amusing himself with this new imported toy.

S. Ram Singh, however, was not simply a passive cog in the colonial hegemonic project. Through his exaggerated displays of loyalty and European manners, S. Ram Singh exploited his protection by the Residency to reduce the powers of the nobility and to centralize power in his own hands.¹ He ensured that no other chieftain or nobleman was able to garner enough power to challenge him or act as a check on his activities, as the British might have desired. On occasion, he even exploited his favor with the Imperial authorities to check the powers of the Resident to interfere in his court. To be able to do this, all he had to ensure was that the Imperial government was firmly behind him.

Sawai Ram Singh thus was able to exploit the micro-politics of Empire to circumvent, to a certain extent, the macro-ideology of Empire. He did this by exploiting the middle space between the colonizers and colonized, reconstructing for himself a hybrid identity, that let him exploit both, without really belonging to either.

In this context one can review the camera's "eye/I," from the perspective of colonial production of identity. The camera was not a toy to be played with in the hands of the colonists. For the colonial ethnographers and historians especially, photography was a serious and useful science. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the formalists were writing their comparative histories of Indian art and architecture, accurate reproductions were considered necessary to establish the "objectivity" of their work. Contrasted with the highly subjective drawings that had been reaching Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, photographs carried the stamp of authority as authentic reproductions.

The first European to write a comprehensive history of Indian art and architecture, James Fergusson could not praise enough the "advantages" of photography that enabled him to study buildings accurately, to analyze them comparatively and to present them to his audience so that they could judge his analysis "for themselves."² Fergusson's most important work on architecture was *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876). An expansion of the Indian section in his earlier *History of the Architecture of All Countries*, in the later book Fergusson claimed to bear out conclusions he felt he had left unsubstantiated in the older. In this effort, Fergusson noted, "precision of...knowledge" was imperative. While the earlier was "based upon examination of the actual buildings," the later by the use of photographs painted a much wider canvas, with surer strokes.

The camera is what made this possible. Its virtue lay in its methodology - in its ability to capture an image, at an immediate level, "accurately." For, and this is the only moment he notes this ñ

For detecting similarities, or distinguishing differences between specimens situated at distances from one another, ...photographs are almost equal to actual personal inspection. (Fergusson, 1876, iv)

Almost, but not quite. Photographs in no way are equal to personal experience; they are in excess to, and they re-present, the real. This is the fact that is both marked and masked by the uneasy "almost equal" of Fergusson's claim.

The only perspective in which this "almost equal" can pass off as an equivalence is that which locates in the visual the privileged center of human experience — what you see is what there is. The special quality of the visual is that the eye's lens organizes the entire width and depth of its field of perception around a single vanishing point. Through the distortions of perspective it reduces the three dimensions of space, into the two dimensional plane of an image. By "cohering" reality into an image that is focused within the human subject, the eye produces in the latter the sense, or illusion, of control over a reality that is centered on him-self. The visual, in a word, is eye/I-centric.

In the changing time and space of human experience, the transient images of the mind's eye constantly re-form in response to changes both in the subject as well as the objects; and inevitably so for no two moments can be the same. It is only through the complex

system of recall and erasure, differentiation, identification and synthesis — that is called memory - that one coheres these images into a negotiable map.

The camera, by intervening between subject and object and by arresting their constantly altering inter-relationship to a single image, reifies and fetishizes the "eye/I-centric" economy of the visual. It exploits and exaggerates the desire for a sense of control over reality that is produced by visual perception. This is why in any metaphysical system that unquestionable privileges control and order, photographs, more than say words, will enjoy the questionable privilege of being "almost equal" to personal experience. They do so on account of being more than equal.

Faced with the seemingly insurmountable and dangerous task of administering and cohering "India" (especially in the wake of rebellion,) the colonial ethnographers and historians found an invaluable aid in the camera. The "more than 3000 photographs of Indian buildings" (Fergusson, 1876, vii) that Fergusson boasted he had, enabled him to

master all the geographical and historical details necessary to unravel so tangled a web as [Indian architecture], and then...to become so familiar with their ever-varying forms as not only to be able to discriminate between the different styles, but also to follow them through all their ceaseless changes. (Fergusson, 1876, 5)

More than just "familiarize" him with architecture, the camera gave Fergusson access to Indian civilization itself. Like other formalist ethnographers of his kilt, Fergusson believed that the history of the arts, drawn up by the ethnographic method, could serve as a template for mapping civilizations. The nexuses between the arts, methodology, and civilization and are articulated in the following passage by Fergusson:

In one other respect India affords a singularly favorable field to the student of architecture. In no other country of same extent are there so many distinct nationalities, each retaining its old faith and its old feelings, and impressing these on its art. There is consequently no country where the outlines of ethnology as applied to art can be so easily perceived, or their application to the elucidation of the various problems so pre-eminently important. (Fergusson, 1876, 6)

In this passage Fergusson first cleanly classifies India into "distinct nationalities" specifying their "oldness" with respect, presumably, to the "newness" of the West. He then asserts that its old "faith" and "feelings" are neatly and unproblematically "impressed" in the art. Given that this is the contention of "ethnology as applied to art", it is not surprising that he would find India to be an ideal case for a student of architecture using this methodology; which is what the long last sentence attempts to articulate. This sentence, however, is more ambivalent. Formulated in the form of a chiasmus, it leaves unclear whether it is the characteristics of the country that enable the functioning of the methodology to be "perceived," or, conversely, is it precisely the "importance" of the methodology that enables it to be easily applied to the "elucidation of the various problems" of the country.

At play in this chiasmus are the inter-relationships between the architectural object and its broader social context, and between a methodology and the object of study. It could independently be read as articulating an ambivalent and mutually constitutive relationship between the terms. In the context of Fergusson's passage, however, this ambivalence is suppressed by the momentum carried over from the previous sentence which has already constructed art as a simple mirror of India's "faith" and "feelings." The passage continues:

The mode in which the art [of ornamental building] has been practiced in Europe for the last three centuries has been very confusing. In India it is clear and intelligible. No one can look

at the subject without seeing its importance, and no one can study the art as practiced there without recognizing what the principles of the science really are. (Fergusson, 1876, 6, emphasis mine)

The reduction of the architectural object to a simple mirror of social identity is an act of epistemic violence and homogenization. Such homogenizations are produced by methodological imperatives that place the author in a position of overlordship or total control over their discourse and objects of study. Authorized by the "Eye/I-centric" economy of the visual, this what enables Fergusson's text to produce India in a "clear and intelligible" manner.

The general "feeling" of "even the best educated Europeans," as Fergusson observed, was that India's "history is a puzzle; its literature a mythic dream; its arts a quaint perplexity...[and] the names of its heroes and great men...unfamiliar and...unpronounceable." (Fergusson, 1876, 2) Through the synthetic lens of the camera, Fergusson's text claims to solve the puzzle, explain the dream, dispel the perplexity and render its great (and not so great) men familiar — without even the need to pronounce their names. It familiarizes and produces the great unfamiliar and unknown — "India." Photography thus served the all-important function of visibly legitimizing colonial authority by "actually" representing the "true natives" — at their best as at their worst. With its distinctive quality of voyeuristic distance, it enabled the colonists to "unselfconsciously" fix the native into a coherent and controllable frame.

By its ability to disavow its own presence, it also enabled them to disavow their own interested importation and production of this frame, at the precise moment when they were doing that. By the same act photography also helped mask the inevitability of the colonizers' internalization of and complicit identification with the colonial hegemonic project.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE COLONIAL FRAME

In this context S. Ram Singh's self-consciously illusionistic and hybridized photographs can be interpreted as a "native's" attempt to break open and transform, according to his own desires, the colonial frame in which he was cast as an feudal native maharaja. Like his manipulation of the gap between the macro-and micro ideologies of Empire, these photographs represent the desire and efforts of a colonized subject, who, in whatever way and to whatever extent possible, is trying to wrest control of and assert his own identity and agency.

If Fergusson's photographs construct a coherent, stable and unified, world view; S. Ram Singh's posit one that is multivalent, shifting and hybridized. While the former capitalizes on the camera's frozen frame to produce the illusion of a world under a central control; the latter through the parody of double exposure transforms a reality that he has little control over into an image that is visibly fictional, but ironically closer to the real world.

Both are products of their respective conditions and represent the desire and forms of coming to terms with it. One is symptomatic of the imperatives and fears of governance and the internalization of and identification with the hegemonic structure; and the other of frustrations and possibilities of subservience and of the attempt to transform and negotiate the future.

In the common event of a senior colonial officers's departure, like that of the Viceroy, a photograph would be taken with all the liveried khaki-clad servants of the household organized around the handful of members of the family of the white man who were usually dressed in distinguishing light colors. As self-consciously hybrid-

ized representations, S. Ram Singh's photographs straddle and contest the separating boundary - between colonizer and colonized, English and native - the preservation and reaffirmation of which was crucial for colonial discourse. As deliberate illusions they contradict and undermine the self-certainty of the representations that are predicated on the photographs privileged claim to reality, that was necessary for the construction of the colonial edifice.

Perhaps the colonist simply tolerated S. Ram Singh's photographic excesses, or were gently amused, but they could not have been pleased with or, I suspect, encouraged them. Taking a page out of that chapter of nineteenth century European history that they systematically suppressed, I would interpret S. Ram Singh's photographic antics as carnivalesque gestures, that in their playful parodies (and gentle amusement) belie more serious and potentially threatening possibilities.

NOTES

- ¹ He selectively supported only those colonial policies that served his *personal* interests. For instance he actively supported the establishment of Mayo College, Ajmer where in 1858 the agent reported, with obvious satisfaction, that yearly the proportion of the college's students who were studying in English and "thinking in English" was increasing. S. Ram Singh himself, however, was less interested in these institutions as a preparatory place for his underage thakurs to form a noble class, than as a place where he might safely park the durbar's wards while it exercised regental authority over their estates. (Stern, 1988, 155-60)
- ² The breadth of scope, self assured claims to "truth," and obsession with visual presentation of his treatises, can be illustrated by a selective list of their titles: *Illustrations of the Rock-Cut Temples of India* (1845), *Picturesque Illustrations of Ancient Architecture in Hindostan* (1847), *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art* (1849) *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture* (1859) and *History of the Architecture of All Countries* (1867).

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