

Transformations

ISSN 1444-3775

2016 Issue No. 27 — Thing Theory, Material Culture, and Object-Oriented Ontology

Territory of the Visual: Photographic Materialities and the Persistence of Indo-Muslim Architecture*

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Photography's genealogy is problematised within the trajectory of India's visual modernity. Not only because the advent of modernity was so synonymous with technology, but also owing to the fact that its introduction to India was complicated by European contact and the hegemony of imperial modes of knowledge production. Imported to India alongside philosophies of the European Enlightenment and colonial ideologies, the potential of nineteenth century photography lay in its capacity for veracity. In colonial practice, photographs represented a totalising knowledge, depicting what Martin Heidegger has called the "the age of the world picture" (119– 120). Indian film scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha has suggested that Indian artists in the nineteenth century, presented with the challenge of representing the Renaissance still-frame by the introduction of various European optical technologies, faced "massive formal, really ethical problems" (53). This ethical dilemma may be seen in light of what Partha Chatterjee terms the "calculating analytic" of the colonial "prison house of reason" (55, 65). The adoption of the Renaissance frame by Indian artists came to indicate the acceptance of colonial epistemological infrastructures (Pinney 265–66).

Drawing on Jane Bennett's theories that uphold the distributive agency of assemblages as a confederation of human and non-human elements, I probe the capacity of photographic albums to work alongside adjacent forms of visual and textual persuasion to form "larger networks of knowledge and power" (23). Exploring how the "thinking" photo-album engenders meaning enabled by the collated "whole" of its individual parts, I argue that meaning in a photo-album derives as much from its overlapping spheres of circulation and reception as its visual features. The body's visceral and emotional centers respond to the concrete and tactile, qualifying albums as the most popular presentation format for the circulation of visual narratives of commemoration. Considered together the global commodity culture of books and albums articulated the primary epistemologies of the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart in their edited anthology of essays entitled *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, foreground the raw materiality of photographs, which they attest plays a major role in their reception rather than as mere vehicles to transport a seemingly immaterial image. "Mutiny" memorial photo-albums acted as visual precedent for films on Indian "mutiny" sites. On the other hand, Geoffrey Batchen comments intuitively on the "thingness of the visual – its thickness, the tooth of its grain – even as we simultaneously encounter the viscosity of the tactile – its look, the piercing force of its perception" (*Burning with Desire* 61).

Utilising theoretical debates on the photograph's aesthetic structuring as point of departure, this essay shifts its critical focus onto the very materiality of photographs, considering the interpretive problem of photo-albums in the context of the 1857 Indian Uprising. It debates their transformative power as productive assemblages of "vibrant matter" (Bennett), as spaces for debating identity politics, and as

* This is a corrected version of the article "Territory of the Visual: Photographic Materialities and the Persistence of Indo-Muslim Architecture" issued November 2019 due to issues of academic integrity.

instruments of creativity and agency employed by Indian intellectuals Darogha Abbas Alli (active 1870s–80s) and Rajendralal Mitra (1823–91). Following three case studies of the “photo as thing” (with a nod to Julia Breitbach) this article explores the physical materiality of early photographs in the form of albums and as illustrations for text (Breitbach 32). Extending the critique to understudied Indian Muslim photographer Darogha Abba Alli’s *Lucknow Album* (1874), this essay interrogates his creative responses in photographic texts on Lucknow’s post-1857 rebellion sites. It examines the ethics of representation in Briton James Fergusson’s (1808–1886) award-winning text on *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 1876, and how Indian intellectual Rajendralal Mitra’s particular brand of indigenous scholarship in *The Antiquities of Orissa*, 1875, countered western canonical studies of Indian architecture.

Defined by their blankness, from the Latin *albus*, which stands for “white,” nineteenth century albums belong to a broad category of containers of miscellaneous items, such as repositories, cabinets, *wunderkamera*, and magazines, defined by what is placed within them (Di Bello). With the advent of photography, the status of album production shifted in its role as aristocratic women’s hobby and developed as a middle-class domestic preoccupation, becoming associated more with consumption rather than production (Di Bello). The Indian rebellion of 1857 provides early indication of the centrality of photography (Jaikumar, 50) in the re-envisioning of local sites of rebellion violence. Photographs represented *lieux de mémoires*, consciously reproducing geographically distant sites of rebellion as subjects for consumption through a compendium of texts and narratives (Jaikumar, 50). The desire for the consumption of photographic imagery grew correspondingly with the increasing curiosity in this mechanical medium. Victorian era audiences seized upon its evidentiary capacity, and “realist” imagery came to be swiftly embedded within imperial discourse. As James Ryan attests, audiences invested faraway lands with meaning, articulating ownership of the built environment through photographs of the constructed landscape (35). The colonial gaze became entangled in the ambivalence of scientifically deduced realism and formulations of the picturesque aesthetic. Photographic albums started to preoccupy Victorian audiences, functioning as transitional and transnational “things of desire.”

The British predilection for “Mutiny” accounts revealed an audience for images of rebellion violence, “mutiny” hysteria would consume British literary and visual agendas until the first decade of the twentieth century. Post-rebellion photographic albums produced by British Italian photographer Felice Beato in 1858, and the photographic firm Bourne and Shepherd depicted mutiny sites representing iconic renditions of Indian cities whose architecture and urban spaces had been forcefully reshaped by the insurgency and its suppression (Jaikumar, 52). Lucknow emerged as a global performative arena (Jaikumar, 50) of violence on the world stage, enacting the visualisation of rebellion trauma and post-rebellion redemption in the British imaginary. Perceived in British minds primarily as a rebellion city, photographic historian Brij Bhushan Sharma traces shifts in popular perceptions of pre and post-rebellion Lucknow: “Lucknow and its buildings were looked upon by the British, not as examples of “decadent” and “hybrid” architecture but as buildings nearly all of which in some way were associated with the trauma of the bloody upheaval” (67).

Appropriating the British antiquarian book format for his version of the “mutiny” album, Darogha Abbas Ali constructed a narratively desirable yet unsettling sequence of photographs in what is possibly the first indigenous self-published visual commemoration of Lucknow’s revolt (Sharma 63). The *Lucknow Album* proposes “a proto-cinematic text by binding together fifty albumen prints of Lucknow’s architectural landmarks” (Jaikumar, 54), accompanied by a preface and descriptions outlining each monument’s history; some editions also include a large size plan of the city (63). Printed by the Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta, the tone and semantic structure of the text appeal to British sentiment. Directly petitioning British relatives and survivors of the “Mutiny,” the preface acknowledges “sacrifices” by the beleaguered garrison at the Lucknow residency (67). It foreshadows the aesthetic structure of early documentary film, appealing to its viewer by the use of a kinetic sense of movement (Jaikumar, 54) across buildings scarred with accretive marks of the rebellion. It begins with these words:

Ruins, ancient and modern, bearing marks of oriental splendour and extravagance . . .

shattered and shot-battered walls, scathed monuments, telling of the horrors of war, rebellion and siege ... dismantled palaces, fast falling into decay, are all objects of interest and curiosity to the tourist, the antiquary, the historian, the archaeologist and the lover of art. The City of Lucknow ... abounds with objects of this description in all the intense sublimity of ruin ... that, but for the present volume, would have ruthlessly consigned them to everlasting oblivion. (*Lucknow Album*, 1)

The album's use of the trope of the "ruin" can be read as a strategy of self-legitimation, and increases its commercial appeal by responding to the western picturesque pictorial tradition. Abbas Ali puts us in the space and time of the 1857 rebellion by retracing the east-to-west path taken by British troops in November 1857 led by Sir Colin Campbell in the recapture of Lucknow, infusing the Album with phenomenological "reality." Visual arts curator Sophie Gordon points to the unusual positioning of the final three images of Islamic buildings *Dargah Hazrat Abbass*, the *Kazmain Karbala*, and the *Talkatora Karbala* (87). (See Figures 1–3, below.) She proposes that this gesture of inclusion of the three Shi'a mosques in Abbas Ali's album repurposes Lucknow as a Shi'a city. The sites of the three mosques act as points of culminations for processions that commemorate the martyrdom of Ali and the grandsons of the Prophet Mohammed – Husain and Hasan (Brown 205–7). In this role, Lucknow's architectural sites attract Shi'ite mourners from all over India, to participate in the religious rites of Muharram (Brown 203–217). Gordon suggests that the "heightened emotional and pseudo-religious tone" of Ali's album, allowed him to draw comparisons between the Christian martyrs of the 1857 "mutiny" and the Shi'a martyrs from the Battle of Karbala in Iraq in 680 AD (90). I argue that the selective positioning of sacred sites by Abbas Ali within the broader narrative of secular commemoration advances notions of universal suffering of Christian and Shia martyrs, advocating a position of moral universalism.



Figure 1. Darogha Abbas Ali, *Lucknow Album*, *Talkatora Karbala*, (1874), The British Library Collection, London. www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/k/zoomify58148.html



Figure 2. Darogha Abbas Ali, *Lucknow Album, Kazmain Karbala*, (1874), The British Library Collection, London. www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/k/zoomify58147.html



Figure 3. Darogha Abbas Ali, *Lucknow Album, Dargah Hazrat Abbass*, (1874), The British Library Collection, London. www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/d/zoomify58146.html

Critiquing limitations in Gordon’s narrow perspective, I argue that the *Lucknow Album*, 1874, strategically signifies the persistence of Indo-Muslim cultural legacy by situating the “colonial disaster tourism” (Jaikumar, 54) route within the broader narrative of the city’s anticipated posterity. It showcases the unique cosmopolitan architectural heritage of Lucknow’s palaces, gardens and mosques by foregrounding the triumphant and redemptive “liberation” of the city in descriptive text and imagery. The title page pledges a dedication to “The City of Lucknow,” and as the album unfolds, a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of Lucknow’s religious and secular urban

spaces emerges. I propose that Abbas Ali's album is also influenced by established Mughal miniature painting conventions, wherein architecture is utilised as a stage to illustrate performance by the major players in a narrative, with scenes unfolding in distinctly organised, easily annotated sequences (Figure 5). As exemplified in the album's text on Najuf Ashraf or Shah Najaf, View N. 15:

Or the mausoleum of King Ghazee Ood-deen Hyder, built by himself for the internment of his own remains. It is surrounded by a high wall, and like Kudum Rasool, afforded the mutineers an excellent position for defence. It was here that poor Sir William Peel, Commander of the Naval brigade, earned an imperishable renown. This brave sailor covered by the fire of two heavy guns, and supported by a small body of Infantry, literally scaled the high wall and jumped down into the midst of the enemy in the enclosure. (Abbas Ali, *Lucknow Album* 18)



Figure 4. Darogha Abbas Ali, Lucknow Album, Najuf Ashraf or Shah Najaf, (1874), The British Library Collection, London. <www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/n/019pho00000988u00015000.html>

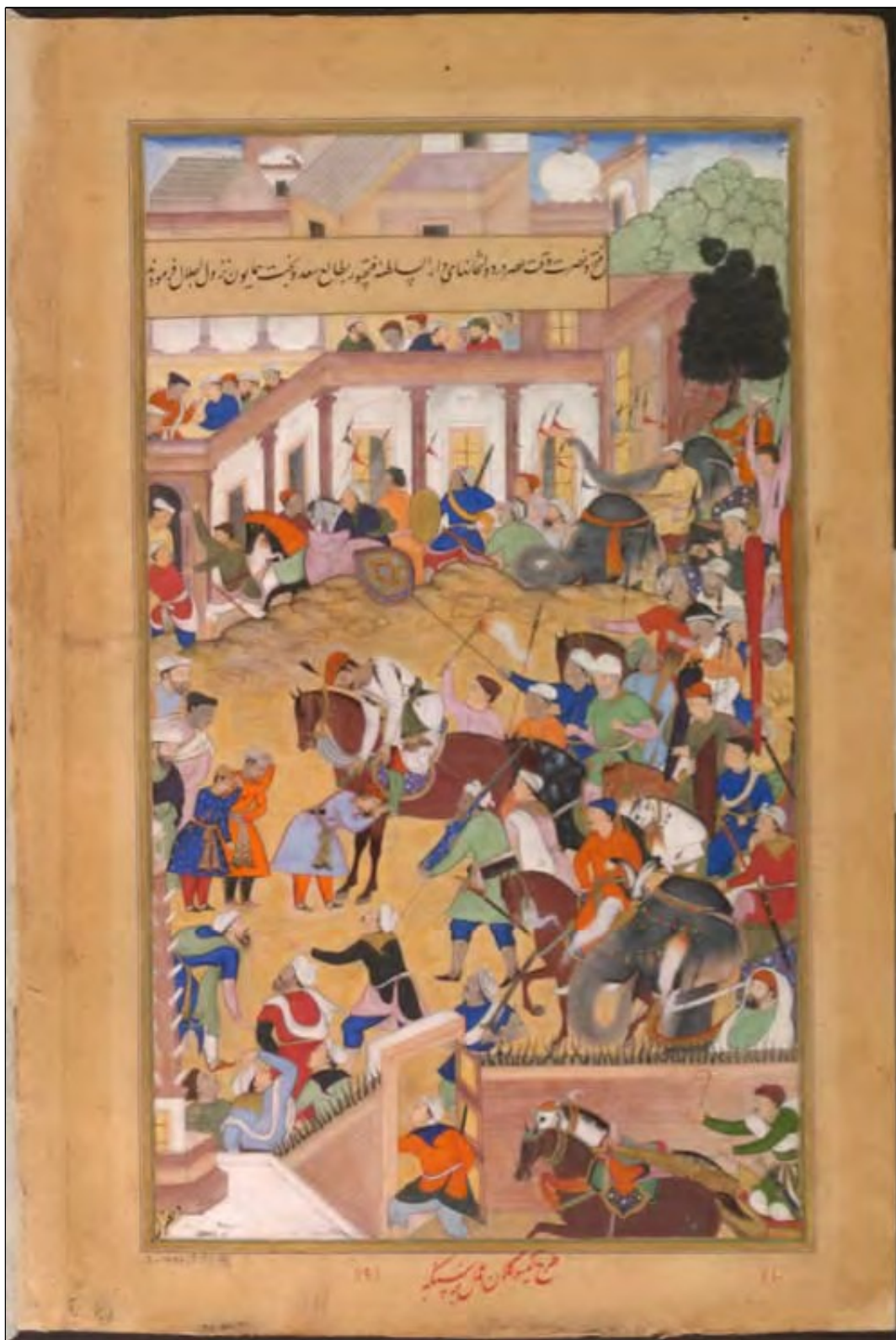


Figure 5. Kesav the elder and Nar Singh, Akbar receiving his sons at Fathpur, 1573, after the victorious campaign from Gujarat, Akbarnama, c. 1590–95, watercolour on paper, 31.5 x 18.4 cm, Victorian and Albert Museum Collection, London. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1573-Akbar_receiving_his_sons_at_FathpurAkbarnama.jpg

Abbas Ali's approach also combines the historical and the documentary, drawing parallels with Mughal manuscript traditions, as demonstrated in Akbari texts such as the *A'in-i Akbari* or *Institutes of Akbar*. Emperor Akbar's (r. 1556–1605) prime vizier Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak compiled the *A'in-i Akbari*, a multi-volume text with statistical and narrative descriptions of India under Akbar's reign (Jarrett 1948). [1] In the example of Saadat Ali Khan's Tomb and Moorshed Zadi's

Tomb, Views No.25 and 26, Abbas Ali describes at length the site of the tombs of the *Nawab* and his *begum* (queen) Moorshed Zadi before situating the nearby Hazrat Bagh (gardens) within the narrative of the mutiny.

Close by the square is Hazrut Bagh. This contained a *tykhana*, or underground apartment, from which, a few days before the disastrous expedition to Chinhutt, an immense quantity of jewels, plate and gold and silver ornaments set with precious stones, were secured, by Major Banks, the Commissioner, and conveyed in safety to the Residency... In respect to these jewels, the action of Major Banks was most praiseworthy and determined: the Major, armed with orders from Sir Henry Lawrence, who had positive information of the existence of the treasure, requested a certain functionary named Miftah-ood-dowlah, who was the actual custodian, to allow him to see the treasure: the man positively denied all knowledge of the existence of such a treasure; but on the Major drawing his revolver and threatening to shoot the fellow, he became nervous, and calling for lights, led the way, in a faltering manner, down a flight of steps into the underground room, where the treasure was found packed in a number of antique looking boxes. (*Lucknow Album* 28)

The *Lucknow Album* undergoes constant shifts in its nuanced articulations and modes of making meaning and can be read in differing contexts, or narrative sequences by viewers from differing ideological standpoints. It constructs an arc of connections and associations in its tying together of its author, the photographs within, and the viewer. Similarly, Bennett engages with the philosophical concepts of Spinoza's "affective" bodies (preface to *Ethics*, 102–3) and Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "assemblage" to weave together a cogent thesis on the conative power of assemblages. Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari comment on complex or "mosaicised" modes, they denote every mode of knowledge production as an assemblage of many simple bodies. Deleuze and Guattari refer to it as "parts that come to it from elsewhere" (351–423). Bennett redefines the concept of what it means to be a mode for a complex body, commenting on alliances and assemblages that allow a mode to "mod(e)ify and be modified by others" (23). Modes oscillate and shift in the process of modification; no mode can be fixed in the hierarchical sense. Explicating constantly changing modifications, Bennett comments on the underlying tension in the process, as each mode vies with and against the (changing) affections of (a changing set of) other modes, all the while being subject to the element of chance, or contingency intrinsic to any encounter (22).

Shortly after the production of the *Lucknow Album* in 1874, Abbas Ali produced two more albums, entitled *Beauties of Lucknow* (Calcutta, 1874) and *An Illustrated Historical Album of the Rajas and Taluqdars of Oudh* (1880). The photographs range from portraits of Lucknow's courtesans or "nautch" girls, (etymology of "nautch" from *naccha* or dance in Hindi/Urdu) to the owners of land holdings in Lucknow. Art historian Alka Patel evaluates Darogha Abbas Ali's albums in light of the aesthetic lineage of the Mughal imperial albums or *muraqqa* tradition. The Persian word *muraqqa* means patchwork or patched garment, similar to those worn by Sufi mystics (an Islamic sect with metaphysical beliefs) to demonstrate humility and poverty (Patel 35). The term *muraqqa* came to be applied to imperial albums due to the integration of elements of figuration, calligraphy, motifs, and ornamental borders (Figure 6). The visual-textual composition determining each page of Abbas Ali's album, and its overall import, closely aligns with the theme of the Mughal *muraqqa*. Patel proposes that the overall configuration of Ali's *Lucknow Album* copies the "patchwork" narrative of imperial *muraqqa* by tracing a "secular and sacred" pilgrimage route (48).



Figure 6. *Muraqqa* (Album) of Portraits and Calligraphy, 19th Century CE, Qajar, Aga Khan Museum Collection, Toronto.

Connections between Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari's "mosaicised" assemblages can be made to the intrinsic patchwork nature of Mughal *muraqqa*. Yet in my reading of the album, the sliding architectural scale of the buildings depicted along with the inclusion of their descriptive histories also draws parallels with the "mosaicised" make-up of *muraqqa*. For example, the positioning of the modest and austere Shi'a mosque, the *Talkatora Karbala*, introduces "difference" to the sequence of elaborate monumental buildings included in the album, further testimony to this "patchwork" quality (Patel 48). The fact that the three Shi'a mosques are easily separated from the overarching narrative of the album, yet contribute significantly to its epistemology, allows the overall structure of the photographic album to be better understood as *muraqqa*, despite the mimesis of the British antiquarian book format.

This critique of "photographic texts as things" engages with the ambient theme of thingness and photographic materiality in differing cultural contexts, extending to the assessment of photographs as textual illustration. Photographs take on new meaning when represented with accompanying text and captions placed in different contexts of art and architectural history (Flusser 15–17). Certain questions arise from the corresponding interactions of text and image. Do texts take the lead in constructing meaning from visual imagery or do photographs confirm texts? Does the presence of captions signal a wider interaction? Photographs as illustrations signaled the authority of this newly emergent technology, fulfilling the same function as Allan Sekula calls "a generalized sign of science, an emblem of the power of science to understand and dominate nature" ("Reading" 450). Although photographs, as alternative to photoengraving, had been matted directly into books in the 1850s, the wider incorporation of photographic prints into publications of archaeological texts started to occur around the 1870s in India (Guha-Thakurta 59). This procedure gained popularity as it circumvented the intermediate step of transforming the photograph through the processes of etching, engraving and lithography.

Self-taught British architectural historian James Fergusson amassed more than three thousand photographs to produce the award winning volume *The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, 1876 (Guha-Thakurta 57). Fergusson's collection drew extensively on commissioned photographic prints by a range of photographers to generate "factual" accounts of Indian architecture (Guha-Thakurta 57). Confirming how much he had been able to glean from photographic views, at a meeting of the Society of Arts Fergusson affirmed, "I have seen as much, if not more, of Indian architecture during the last two or three years than I did during my residence in India, and now I see that the whole subject may be

made intelligible, and I see how it can be done” (17). In keeping with nineteenth century disciplinary modes of anthropology and Social Darwinism, he categorised all Indian monuments within a hierarchical archaeology:

It cannot, of course, for one moment be contended that India ever reached the intellectual supremacy of the Greeks, or the moral greatness of Rome; but, though on a lower step of the ladder, her arts are more original and more varied. What however really renders India interesting as an object of study is that it is now a living entity.

(*History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, Vol. 1, 4, 1876)

In Fergusson’s opinion, concerns about the unfavourable reception of India’s architecture by British audiences were predicated on its unfamiliarity, “Notwithstanding these drawbacks, it may still be possible to present the subject of Indian architecture in a form as to be interesting, even if not as attractive” (4). Here, Fergusson is alluding to the visual conventions of the picturesque trope. The accepted visual methods of envisioning the British Empire seemed to be firmly enmeshed in neo-romantic visual strategies of European landscape painting. Drawing on Fergusson’s rhetoric of a favourable “familiar landscape,” I argue that neo-romantic views of a nostalgic past rendered India more acceptable to the post-1857 mutiny British mind through a reconstruction of neo-classical and picturesque tropes of Greek and Roman antiquity. Turning to Humphry Repton (1752–1818), Uvedale Price (1747–1829), and John Ruskin’s (1819–1900) theories on the aesthetics of the picturesque trope, architectural historian John Macarthur proposes that the “strong concept of style as moral choice was founded on archaeological study, that dominated the mid- and later nineteenth century” (12). He attests that influenced by Marxist theory, the picturesque has generated a largely repressive political meaning, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the English countryside, colonialism and the origin of the modern practices of tourism (17).

By the 1850s, the use of the picturesque was the universal aesthetic mode for rendering landscape and architectural compositions by European artists across the world (Phillips 58). The cultural translation of India’s “unfamiliar” architectural landscape into a familiar visual idiom draws parallels with photographic projects in colonies in parts of the world such as Cairo, China and other parts of Asia. As an emergent and proliferating visual mode of communication, it functioned within “the larger context of a developing capitalist world order” (Sekula, “Traffic” 16). In the seminal essay “The Traffic in Photographs,” Allan Sekula comments on photography’s hybrid construction from iconic, graphic and narrative conventions depending on broader discursive conditions, including that of language systems (16).

To curb and challenge what we now recognise in Edward Said’s terms as “Orientalist” discourse, Indian intellectuals such as Rajendralal Mitra, the first Indian-born president of the Indian-based Royal Asiatic Society, responded with a singular form of hybrid scholarship, based on crosshatchings of European Enlightenment ideals with ancient Hindu philosophies of *Vedanta*. Indian elites were seeking to counter the hegemony of abstracted western modernity by reconciling Enlightenment values of rationalism and logic with Indian traditions from ancient Hindu texts of the *Upanishads* and the *Puranas*. British attitudes to social reform had toughened in the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion, rather than regarding western-educated Indians as future leaders, they started to be considered a threat to British presence, and came to be viewed as a cultural anomaly (Gunderson 11). In response Indian intellectuals began to seek new forms of cultural and political expression; Mitra subtly advocated the study of antique forms of Indian architecture in every publication. Produced “under the Orders of the (Colonial) Government of India” and entitled *The Antiquities of Orissa*, the subtitle of Volume One of his text engages with the Orientalist *zeitgeist* in its use of the trope of “the ruin.” It proclaims, “There are some of the relics of the past, weeping over a lost civilization and an extinguished grandeur.” Yet Mitra’s text and photographic captions clearly advance a distinct indigenous cultural autonomy, “(Having) enjoyed

the blessings of English rule for over a century and yet they (the people of Hindustan) have not produced a single temple built in the Saxon, or any other European style" (9).

Mitra's operative strategy was to reconcile anachronistic readings of Indian architecture as culturally inferior to western forms. He reaffirmed Indian architecture by referring to its "glorious ancient" history while showcasing the singularity of its architectural styles. Situated at the intersection of two contested discourses, Mitra's publication output was particularly robust: he produced editions of fifteen major Sanskrit texts, several annotated catalogues of Sanskrit manuscripts, fifty scholarly articles and two significant volumes on archaeology (Gunderson 7). Utilising photographic plates (plate XXXIV) and captions to underscore the grandeur of the temple complex at *Bhuvaneśwara*, Orissa, Mitra challenges Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) director Alexander Cunningham's faulty periodisation:

According to General Cunningham, "the ancient metropolis of the country was Katak on the Mahānadi river," whence it was removed by Yajāti Keśari to Yajātipur in the early part of the sixth century, and Bhuvaneśwara was founded by Lalātendra Keśari.

There is nothing however to show that Katak was the ancient capital or that Bhuvaneśwara was founded by Lalātendra Keśari. On the contrary, the Temple Records distinctly state that Katak, the oldest of the three towns which have borne that name was founded by Nrpati Keśri in 940, nearly three centuries after the death of Lalātendra, and as the Records in question for that period are authentic and most probably contemporary, there is no reason to doubt them; and I shall presently show on evidence which I think is quite impeachable that Bhuvaneśwara existed many centuries before the age of that king. (*Antiquities of Orissa* Vol. 2 105).

Mitra evaluates demographics from the 1872 census, and compares this data against historical temple records in his documentation of Bhuvaneśwara's past glories. His interdisciplinary methodology weaves together social history accounts, religious practice, and archaeological analyses with ancient Hindu texts, the *Brahma Purāna*, *Śiva Purāna*, *Ekāmra Purāna*, and *Kapila Samhitā*. He outlines temple architectural elements in detail, using photographic captions to signpost fragmented views, as exemplified in Plate XXXIV as "the annexed photograph of a part of the southern faade of the building," rather than providing a "detailed view" (Vol. 2. 127). As historian Gyan Prakash affirms, "For to locate the origin of reason centuries before the European Enlightenment in Vedantic Monism was to question Western claims" (84). Emphasising the productive agency of Indian intellectuals such as Mitra, Prakash confirms, "Themselves a product of the translation that gave them agency and intelligibility as subjects, the elite gave ideological direction and force to the emergence of an Indian modernity, and defined it in a predominantly Hindu and Sanskrit idiom" (85).

Reading Abbas Ali's photo albums simply as narratives of "colonial disaster tourism" (Jaikumar, 54) tends to impose limitations on their critical and ethical readings. Mitra's texts also deserve close examinations of their nuanced oppositions to British cultural hegemony. In *Ferocious Alphabets*, Denis Donoghue offers a schematic approach to understanding how any act of criticism functions. A reading is one of two sorts, he attests, either "epi-reading" or "graphi-reading" (Donoghue 146). Epi-reading is predicated on the desire to hear "the absent person" (146). He contrasts this with graphi-reading, which prioritises texts, and reading over nostalgia for the human and seeks to engage with texts in their "virtuality" (200). For example Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Paul de Man can be considered graphi-readers while philosophers Paul Ricoeur and Martha Nussbaum would epitomise epi-readers (186). Donoghue clarifies that neither epi-reading or graphi-reading can be considered a critical practice as such; rather they represent an orientation or mode of criticism, and not a methodological framework as such (146, 199). Photographs as "things" can be situated in a wider cultural context and Indian nationalist discourse can be traced in critical commentary on art and architecture.

Taken together, Abbas Ali and Mitra's critiques point to the incontrovertible significance of the

“photo as thing” to indigenous scholarship, to autonomous analyses of the history Indian literature and culture. In *Photography's Objects*, Geoffrey Batchen attests that a photograph has volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world, in keeping with its nineteenth century material existence, which takes many forms: the carte-des-visite, the non-reproducible daguerreotype, the ambrotype, the calotype, the cabinet card, mounts and frames, all carry the physical traces of usage and time (1–15). Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things* proposes that from the perspective of social biography, the photograph as commodity cannot be understood in any single point in its existence, but should be comprehended as belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning (49). This model of the “photograph as thing” moves this piece of writing beyond extant theoretical and polemical debates in (what Allan Sekula terms) photography’s inherent “aestheticism” (subjectivism) and “scientism” (objectivism) (“Traffic” 15, 25).

As sites of memory, Indian architectural monuments were irretrievably tied to discourses of colonialism and power. Both discourses imbricated to normalise and legalise the British presence in India, reflecting and reinforcing frameworks of meaning that influenced British views of Indian history in general. The cultural critique by Abbas Ali and Mitra reconceptualised Indian agency and subjectivity enhancing the emancipatory power of indigeneity. Photographs in albums, and as illustrations, operate in transitional and translational spaces of knowledge production and cultural meaning, beyond the ambiguous dynamics of evidentiary inscriptions and refracted realities. The operative mechanisms of albums and illustrations are too diverse, nuanced and complex, to be considered merely as signifiers of social forces and relations, premised solely on models of alterity, or of spectacle within a socio-political matrix (Edwards 3). Photographs as material objects are undeniably active and potent and with affective and incisive clarity intertwine discourses of aesthetics, nationalism, and commemoration.

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Endnotes

1. Henry Sullivan Jarrett is the translator of Abu'l Fazl's text, in the Works Cited listed as: Fazl-I-Allami, Abu'l. “Ain-i-Ākbari.”

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