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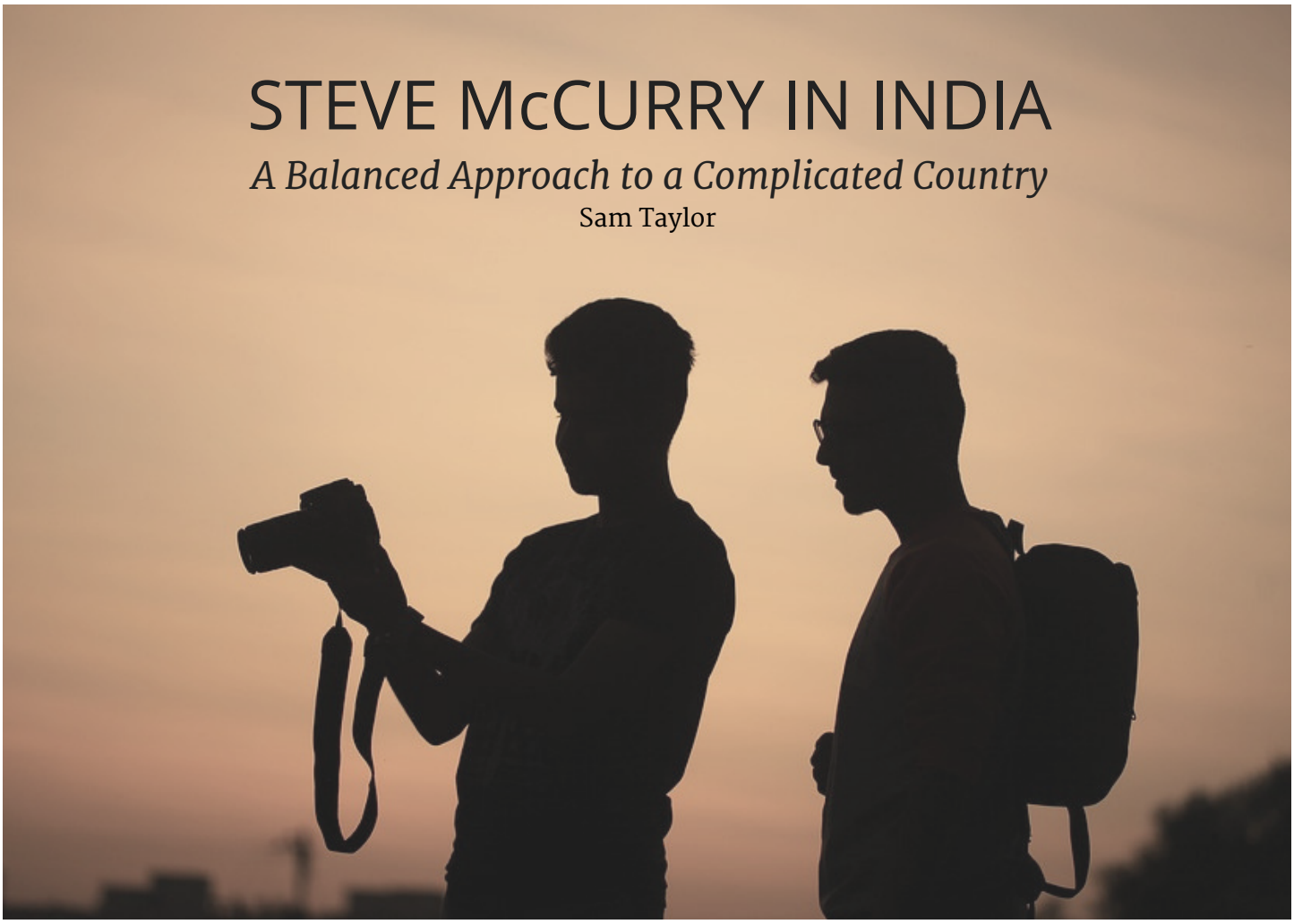

STEVE McCURRY IN INDIA

A Balanced Approach to a Complicated Country

Sam Taylor

ABSTRACT

Steve McCurry has worked as a *National Geographic* photographer for over thirty years and has captured some of his most important images in India. These two photographic narratives—*National Geographic*, often criticized for its exotic portrayals of other countries, and India, long subject to Eurocentric perspectives and historicizing—frame McCurry's effort to present the human condition in the far corners of the world. McCurry exploits these tensions as he seeks a more truthful, accurate, and ultimately complex representation of India and its people. This paper analyzes two of McCurry's most well-known photographs—*Dust Storm* (1983) and *Holi Man* (1996)—arguing that his aesthetic purpose and technical skill enable him to engage Western viewers in an "empathetic probing of different lifeways, experiences and interests" that resists exploiting India as an exotic other.

Steve McCurry was working for a newspaper in Pennsylvania when he decided to drop everything and travel to India as a freelance photographer. McCurry's fascination with the monsoon season and his admiration for two photographers, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Margaret Bourke-White, who had done remarkable work in India, led him to the country. After arriving, McCurry found himself presented with a unique opportunity: the chance to cross the border into Afghanistan to document the Soviet invasion. McCurry was the first to photograph this conflict, and the images he captured launched his career as an international photojournalist, landing him assignments with *Time* and *National Geographic*. McCurry found a home at *National Geographic* where he has remained for over thirty years. Not long after this excursion, McCurry began producing some of his most iconic photos, including *Afghan Girl*, which was the June 1985 cover of *National Geographic* (Bannon and McCurry).

McCurry's distinct progression in the ranks of international photojournalism has influenced his personal photographic approach, one that seeks to frame the human condition in the far corners of the world. He has also created an extensive

FIG. 1. Steve McCurry, *Dust Storm*

FIG. 2. Steve McCurry, *Holi Man*

relationship with South Asia, in particular India, a country he has visited over eighty times. As a photographer for *National Geographic*, and someone who frequently chooses India as the subject of his work, McCurry has found himself placed between two narratives rich with photographic history: that of India and *National Geographic*. What makes Steve McCurry's work in India iconic is his ability to transcend early twentieth-century colonial attitudes and to circumvent *National Geographic*'s history of exploiting non-Western countries as an exotic other. In doing so, McCurry seeks to find commonality in the human condition and focus on the complex story the photographs possess.

To analyze how McCurry achieves these qualities, I will examine two of his many iconic photographs. The first, *Dust Storm* (see fig. 1), was taken in Rajasthan, India, in 1983. The second photo, *Holi Man* (see fig. 2), was taken 13 years later in 1996, also in Rajasthan, India. The similar use of color and careful consideration of composition in the two photos displays McCurry's consistent visual style as it reveals guiding principles that have endured over his career as a photographer. Before I analyze these two images, I will provide the brief, problematic history of the two photographic narratives that McCurry functions within.

Like many other countries that endured long periods of colonial occupation, India has two separate histories marked either by autonomy or control. This remains true for India's photographic history as well. Gita Rajan, Professor of English and Senior Research Fellow at Fairfield University, observes, "academic discussions about India . . . have been located in the nexus of a colonial/postcolonial theoretical divide" (64). Due to this perspective, most evaluations of India's history of photography have focused on the colonial period, when Europeans had direct influence over the country. This split view of India centering either on its occupation under or its freedom from British rule proves how the country has commonly been viewed in Eurocentric terms. However, India gained its independence nearly 70

years ago, in 1947, after being an official British colony only since 1858. Christopher Pinney, Professor of Anthropology and Visual Culture at University College London, describes how under "the European placement . . . India is underlined [in photography] as a location, a 'belated' case study of what has already happened elsewhere in a purer form." Pinney explains how India has failed to fall under the global history of photography, which is a history as seen through a Eurocentric perspective, but has instead remained on its own, not given proper attention or placement (141).

Much of the study currently being done on India's photography is similar to how many other topics within the country are approached: with a focus on modernity and development. Even though the discussion is moving toward India's future, the subject of modernity is still "read as a dictate of the enlightened West" (Rajan 64). Not only is the particular attention to modernity harmful because it frames India in Western terms, it fails to acknowledge the region's rich and long-standing culture. Pinney notes that the "'core' photographic history (by which I mean that which describes Euro-American practices) erases 'culture'" (142). When these peripheral and third-world countries have their cultures erased, they tend to pale in comparison to the highly developed Western countries viewing them. This erasure encourages a sort of backwards colonial empowerment that Western countries believe they hold over the rest of the world. To combat this process, Radhika Parameswaran, the Chair of Journalism at Indiana University Bloomington, calls for an implementation "of postcolonial theories to challenge the colonialist assumptions that underwrite the neocolonial discursive regimes of globalization" (288).

National Geographic *tended to rely on portrayals of non-Westerners as exotic, defining their otherness through a focus on their numerous differences,visually and culturally.*

National Geographic participated in creating this harmful vision of India. Founded in 1888 as a journal specifically for American geographers, *National Geographic* was soon repurposed as a monthly publication with a heavy reliance on visual images (Hawkins 33). The magazine quickly became popular for the exposure it gave to places and people outside of the Western world. Its growing popularity led to a large readership and gave the magazine a certain cultural authority for exposing the Western world to locations abroad. However, as Stephanie Hawkins, a literary theory researcher at the University of North Texas, notes, "*National Geographic*'s genre of ethnographic photographs reinforced popular late nineteenth-century racial stereotypes" (34). *National Geographic* tended to rely on portrayals of non-Westerners as exotic, defining their otherness through a focus on their numerous differences, visually and culturally. This sensationalizing of differences raised red flags for anthropologists who "have been far ahead of media scholars in scrutinizing the magazine's pivotal role in producing representations of the non-Western world for Euro-American readers" (Parameswaran 289). The problem was not only with the representations themselves, but how these representations were used to form self-identities. These "Euro-American readers" utilized the authority granted to *National Geographic* as a cultural media outlet to construct their general views on non-Western subjects, and, therefore, to determine their own placement in the world.

After 1970, *National Geographic* shifted toward portraying India in terms of its modern developments. However, as I mentioned earlier, this shift portrayed India through the lens of the already-developed West (Rajan 64). The framing remained relative to a Western vantage point incessantly measuring third world development. The basis for this vantage point is the West's level of modernity, so one could argue that viewing less developed countries through this lens is an attempt to subjugate their culture.

Maybe now, after over a hundred years of publication, *National Geographic* has become too large of an institution to meet the monumental demands imposed on it. What complicates the *National Geographic* narrative even further is its inability to achieve a balance between representing a culture's history and its current state. The magazine's photographs can either portray foreign places as culturally exotic or in a stage of developmental "catch-up," which has left the magazine vulnerable to scholarly criticism. *National Geographic* has experienced backlash regarding its representations of India as existing in a state of modern progression. The magazine replicates a trend Dr. Rajan saw in an 1893 exhibit of photography in India. Rajan states that the

> photography recorded cultural and ethnographic practices, new forms of life and life-experiences in cities, and the innovations in technology of Europe and America along a time–space continuum of modernity, [and] sealed India off as a mere colony, even as India was the historical object of these very queries through photography in the exhibition. (69)

India has always been a complicated and complex country and can be expected to remain so in the future. Representations of India need to reflect these dense complexities in order to achieve a more balanced viewpoint. Such a depiction would fully consider India's place in history as a colony and

independent country and also strive to capture an internal accuracy, instead of an external perception.

Dust Storm *and* Holi Man *are part of two historical narratives, India and* National Geographic, *both rife with contradiction.*

These problematic histories explain how photography in or of India presents a complex pattern of pitfalls with which McCurry struggled as a photographer for *National Geographic*. *Dust Storm* and *Holi Man* are part of two historical narratives, India and *National Geographic*, both rife with contradiction. Each seems stuck in a constant fluctuation between cultural praise worthy of study and scholarly attack denouncing each subject's place in the global history of photography. *National Geographic* is often criticized for its place as an authority on ethnography through its "masterful management of textual and visual signifiers of cultural difference" (Hawkins 34). And although India's place in the history of photography is criticized more for having been remarkably overlooked, it is seen as a mere "counterpoint [of] a core Photographic History" (Pinney 142). As a white Westerner working for a hierarchical media outlet claiming cultural authority on distant locations, Steve McCurry easily falls into these negative categories of reinforcement. Not only are his photos seen through the troubled ethnographic medium of *National Geographic*, but he also physically exemplifies a Western-dominated perspective of India. McCurry's position between these two complicated narratives is only worsened by the interplay between them: a *National Geographic* photographer with a focus—almost fascination—in depicting India and its people.

Steve McCurry intends for his photos to communicate through narratives of certain experiences, places, or particular people. On his website, McCurry states, "I photograph stories on assignment, and of course they have to be put together coherently. But what matters most is that each picture stands on its own, with its own place and feeling." In this way, McCurry's photographic approach resembles a metaphorical element found in many of his photos, individuality defined within the collective. Even as he navigates through space and time, creating a story with his collection of photographs, he takes the time to meditate on each frame, carefully composing each as an individual element of the narrative.

For Christopher Pinney, "photography delivers the event . . . and this cannot legitimately be fused with the broader narrative of the corpus" (143-44). He proposes that the individual image remains simply that: a momentary, unavoidably subjective capturing of a particular scene. Pinney believes that this is one of the ultimate impediments of photography: it "is not able to say anything about the wider social/cultural constructions" of the objects placed before the frame (143). Here, Pinney seems more concerned with how the photo is decoded rather than encoded, granting privilege to the reader's capability over the professional's, and this concern is often valid, as *National Geographic* tends to allow audiences to define the images through their own lens and to decide what makes the societies presented in the images different from their own Western culture.

However, I argue that McCurry is able to say meaningful things about the "wider social/cultural construction" of the objects he photographs in India. An evaluation of *Dust Storm* and *Holi Man* will help establish how McCurry seeks to create understanding through his photographs, rather than subjective definition, while also navigating a careful depiction of a commonly misrepresented country, its culture, and its people.

By encouraging a personal discussion with the elements in the photo, McCurry purposely avoids giving the audience the meaning.

One way McCurry accomplishes this understanding is through an invitation for a more in-depth study of his photos, crafted by the aesthetic influence he has on each exposure. This thoughtful encoding of the photograph allows space for the viewer to participate in rendering an interpretation and ultimately an understanding of the image. In a sense, McCurry acknowledges that our reading will be subjective and allows subjectivity under the condition that he is visually guiding our understanding. However, by encouraging a personal discussion with the elements in the photo, McCurry purposely avoids giving the audience the meaning, which allows them to "possess the visual knowledge of the subject of the photo . . . to assert power over the subject and thus objectify it/her/him" (Neuhaus 6).

National Geographic photographers and imagery of India had commonly afforded this neocolonialist power through the human gaze. In her critique of Austrian photographer Alice Schalek, Katharina Manojlovic comments how "the urban flâneur appropriated the space of the city with his gaze, with his slow, careless and almost accidental observations" (199). In fact, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins devote a

whole chapter in *Reading National Geographic* to the gaze, or eye contact, and its many points of intersection. As they describe it, "Non-Westerners draw a look, rather than inattention or interaction, to the extent that their difference or foreignness defines them as noteworthy yet distant" (188). Similar to Pinney, Lutz and Collins are more concerned with how the photo is read: they believe the aesthetic properties of *National Geographic* photos almost hypnotize the viewer into settling for a surface reading.

Dust Storm and *Holi Man* both have properties that reject the gaze, and supplement the momentary direction of the gaze with a more inquisitive display of aesthetics. At first glance, *Dust Storm* rejects a quick view of approval by the way the group of women are turned away from us, huddled towards one another as if they are sharing a secret. McCurry utilizes color—the stark ruby red saris, rather than greeting eyes—to draw our attention to the subjects within the frame. By composing the subjects in the center of the frame with highly contrasting colors, McCurry guides our eye, comparable to how the gaze does, only to then refuse the ephemeral glance of consent. This refusal leads to engagement and the sort of interaction Lutz and Collins claim that the gaze fails to accomplish. The common pitfall is that "The photographs of *NG* . . . seek to reassure their readers that knowing the Other is no more difficult than gazing upon a smiling face" (Neuhaus 6). McCurry's decision to expose subjects in states of interpersonal (*Dust Storm*) and intrapersonal (*Holi Man)* interaction denies us the reassurance of when our gaze is acknowledged. The denial also functions in preventing the reader's objectifying of the photographs' subject(s).

McCurry guides our eye, comparable to how the gaze does, only to then refuse the ephemeral glance of consent.

Even though at first glance *Holi Man* represents a specific moment in time with a religious and historical significance of its own, deriving meaning from the very event it captures, the photograph transcends the journalistic trend to simply document an event, which might render a shallow reading, and captures the emotional atmosphere present in that space and time. O. Michael Watson's review of *Reading National Geographic* references a section where photographers go about "describing their work . . . as 'multi-dimensional'—containing not only 'facts,' but also emotional and aesthetic dimensions that imbue their photos with 'timeliness, inherence, [and] enduring human values'" (195). One of those values is spirituality, a feeling expressed through the sort of mind space we occupy as viewers when looking at *Holi Man*. As he does in *Dust Storm*, McCurry uses color to focus and greet our eye like the gaze would. The first element to stand out in the photo is the man who is covered in green paint afloat a mass of other men all dressed in red. Even still, Carlos Tatel, Jr., argues, "the camera . . . exudes objectivity, while the photographer and his historical milieu connote subjectivity" (63). The "historical milieu" are the exact, treacherous narratives, discussed previously, that McCurry has found himself situated within. As a photojournalist, McCurry must consider such consequences of the technical act of taking a photo.

It is not just a visual spectacle, which would suggest the image serves as an exhibition, a simple display of these people caught in time. Dust Storm *is indicative of McCurry's focus on the human condition.*

Steve McCurry's role, defined in the most general sense, is to tell a story through photographs. Naturally, there is a gap between photo and journalist, which McCurry attempts to bridge. The aesthetic characteristics of photography do not always match with the objective demands a journalist tries to meet, which Hawkins defines as "the aesthetic and ideological tensions between realism and romance" (42). It is in the connection between these tensions that McCurry is able to transcend some of the same pitfalls to which other photographers have fallen victim, either in photographing for *National Geographic* or portraying India as the subject. Lutz and Collins, when evaluating *National Geographic*'s portrayals of the exotic other, mention how this "distance is a product of making the pictured person a kind of spectacle . . . [and] one of the effects of the emphasis on spectacle is to discredit the significance of the foreign" (90). When we look at a McCurry photo such as *Dust Storm*, it is hard not to be mesmerized by his careful crafting of color. With the red garment centered in this atmosphere of beige dust, it is a spectacle of aesthetic photography. However, it is not just a visual spectacle, which would suggest the image serves as an exhibition, a simple display of these people caught in time. *Dust Storm* is indicative of McCurry's focus on the human condition, showing the women as they huddle together to shield themselves from the storm passing through. In this way, the image reads as a narrative, telling a colorful story rather than a simple posing of subjects. The photo tells a tale of struggle and perseverance through teamwork. Even though it is a still image, the whipping of the women's

saris and swirling cloud of dust beginning to consume them emphasize active motion, a narrative that requires examination to piece the scene together.

McCurry composes his photos to express these deeper human emotions and feelings. In "Savage Visions: Ethnography, Photography, and Local-Color Fiction in *National Geographic*," Hawkins notes that *National Geographic* seeks images that "bespeak a deeply aesthetic romanticism, in which permanent, universal truths are prized above superficial differences" (38). In *Holi Man*, it is the value of spirituality that manifests in an inner collective of individuals, two aspects physically represented in the photograph McCurry took. Not only does *Holi Man* represent the effect spirituality has on one man, it also reveals the way spirituality connects a group of people. Besides exemplifying the effort McCurry went to in capturing this photo, the higher vantage point allows him to evoke the enlightened essence you can see on the face of the man painted green. The perspective of looking down on this man, who is being physically and spiritually lifted up, provides the viewer with a similar spiritual sensation. By choosing to shoot the photograph from above, McCurry contrasts this "holy man" with the swarm of red below him, illuminating the green paint enveloping his body and thrusting the subject into focus.

McCurry attempts in both Dust Storm *and* Holi Man *to provide us with human feelings and emotions, common to any personal narrative.*

Hawkins emphasizes in "Savage Visions" how *National Geographic*'s favoring of photos that contained a "universal language" was used to unite America with other countries under a shared vision (39). In this interpretation, what seemed to be a positive aspect of *National Geographic* was still a way of promoting a subjective view of non-Westerners—the same one that portrayed them as an exotic other, subordinate to the highly developed West.

After close examination, though, McCurry's two photos heighten cultural understanding through their aesthetics. In *Dust Storm,* we see a human narrative playing out, as people find strength in numbers. For Westerners, it is impossible not to notice the cultural differences evident in the visual composition: the clothing, the clay pots, and the unique terrain. However, McCurry attempts in both *Dust Storm* and *Holi Man* to provide us with human feelings and emotions, common to any personal narrative, that can connect the audience with the distancing photos of far flung places. This is not meant as a tool to be used to identify with the subjects of the photo, or even sensationalize. Critical engagement through understanding is meant as an "empathetic probing of different lifeways, experiences, and interests," one that Lutz and Collins, and many other cultural or media scholars, believe *National Geographic* fails to offer (283).

In evaluating Steve McCurry's position within the convoluted history of *National Geographic*, my intention is not to argue that the entire media institution has been misunderstood. Rather, the purpose is to highlight how one photographer in particular has worked to create a more truthful, accurate, and ultimately complex representation of an "exotic" locale such as India. In framing this discussion of McCurry's role as a *National Geographic* photographer with a specific focus on India, my objective has been to portray how his personal stakes are even further raised by a country with a complex historical narrative of its own.

Summarizing what is needed for accurately representing India, Gita Rajan explains, "It now falls upon the 'polytechnic engineer' in the age of technological reproduction to query this homage to the past, in order to reveal the constructed nature of an authentic India" (69). As a polytechnic engineer, Steve McCurry portrays the rich culture of India that serves as tribute to its long, intricate history by refining both his technical skills and aesthetic purpose. In order to do this without portraying India as retained in a repressed past, his photographs acknowledge the technological capabilities of his own photography and utilize them to engage the viewer in a deep, conscious discussion with the image he has exposed. *Dust Storm* and *Holi Man* serve not only as evidence of McCurry's iconic status, but also as examples of the sort of thoughtful work he undertakes in photographing India, its people, and its landscapes.

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