



#16

The Demon King of Lanka: A Visual Archive from Central India

Christopher Pinney

Ravan, at least according to both the Valmiki and Tulsidas *Ramayan*, was the demon king of Lanka who abducted Sita during her exile. His ally Maricha, disguised as a golden deer, enticed Sita to cross the Lakshman *rekha*, the protective line that Ram's younger brother had drawn around Sita's forest dwelling. Then there follows the great battle in Lanka in which Sita is rescued and taken back to Ayodhya.

This sacred narrative is reanimated every year across many parts of India. In the centre and north, Vijaydashami (victory tenth lunar day, usually falling in September-October) aka Dussehra or Dasara, marks the triumph of Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman over Ravan. In small towns and large cities huge bamboo figures (*murti*) of Ravan are erected and incinerated before large, excited crowds. In Nagda, Madhya Pradesh, a massive *murti* is designed and built each year by Sohan Joshi and his assistants. The hollow structure is built in parts, before being assembled on a large empty space near the central police station. On Vijaydashami tens of

PhotoDemos Pamphlet Series
University College London
June 2022

thousands of city residents, as well as many local villagers, assemble at dusk and await the arrival of Ram, Lakshman, and Hanuman (played by local schoolchildren). The trio then fire arrows along a guide wire which ignite the *murti*. As flames lick around the towering statue, the firework display starts. As the fire engulfs more and more of Ravan, fireworks inside the *murti* start to explode and the figure starts to collapse. At this point, the effervesced surging crowd breaks out from the single rope barrier patrolled by a few *lathi* bearing police, and surges towards the burning embers, desperate to retrieve some relic of the event that will guarantee good fortune once installed in their house.

Sohan Joshi ensures that each year his artwork is photographed by someone from a Nagda studio (often, but not always, it is Studio Suhag). He then carefully archives the resulting images in a photo album which, when I rephotographed them in October 2018 covered about thirty-five years of *murti* construction. The images record what gets lost in the crowd's forgetful yearly encounter with these statues: the sheer degree of variability. This variability is itself partly a function of the maintenance of the photographic archive for it provokes this artisan craftsman to innovate from year to year. Yet these are minor modulations on the basic ritual constraints of the genre which demand scale, frontality, and the possession of a weapon and multiple heads. One is put in mind of the demand, often heard in India's commercial picture industry in relation to devotional images, 'Make it new, but not too new!' There is also a helpful musical analogy: *ragalap* in the genre known as *dhrupad*, which involves repetition and modulation, a kind of aural pastiche and bricolage.

Bernd and Hilla Becher called their typological assemblage of pitheads, furnaces, water towers, and other industrial architecture, 'anonymous sculptures' or *Grundformen* ('Basic forms'). This archive has the name of the maker of the sculptures attached to it if not the studios who photographed them. Joshi's archive, like the Bechers' makes possible the study of 'families of motifs' and establishes through seriality new forms and rhythms which would be inaccessible in the absence of the camera. It also, like the Bechers' work '...offer[s] the audience a point of view, or rather a grammar, to understand and



compare the different structures'.¹ This seriality and rhythm, which is denied to the Vijaydashami crowd who only ever see each year's new sculpture, one at a time, reveals itself to be 'declensional' to recall the term that Roland Barthes uses to describe Bataille's *Story of the Eye*. Roland Barthes asked 'How can an object have a story?' concluding that whatever else it was, Bataille's narrative was indeed the 'story of an object'.² He noted how the 'Eye' is 'varied' or 'declined' through a number of 'globular' objects (tears, yolk, a circular stain), 'recited like flexional forms of the one word; revealed like states of the one identity; offered like propositions none of which can hold more meaning than another'.³ Photography of the Ravan *murtis*, and Sohan Joshi's archive, make possible a similar declension.

¹ Blake Stimson, 'The Photographic Compartment of Bernd and Hilla Becher', in *Tate Papers no. 1*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/01/photographic-compartment-of-bernd-and-hilla-becher>

² Roland Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye' trans. J. A. Underwood (in Bataille, *Story of the Eye*), Penguin p. 119.

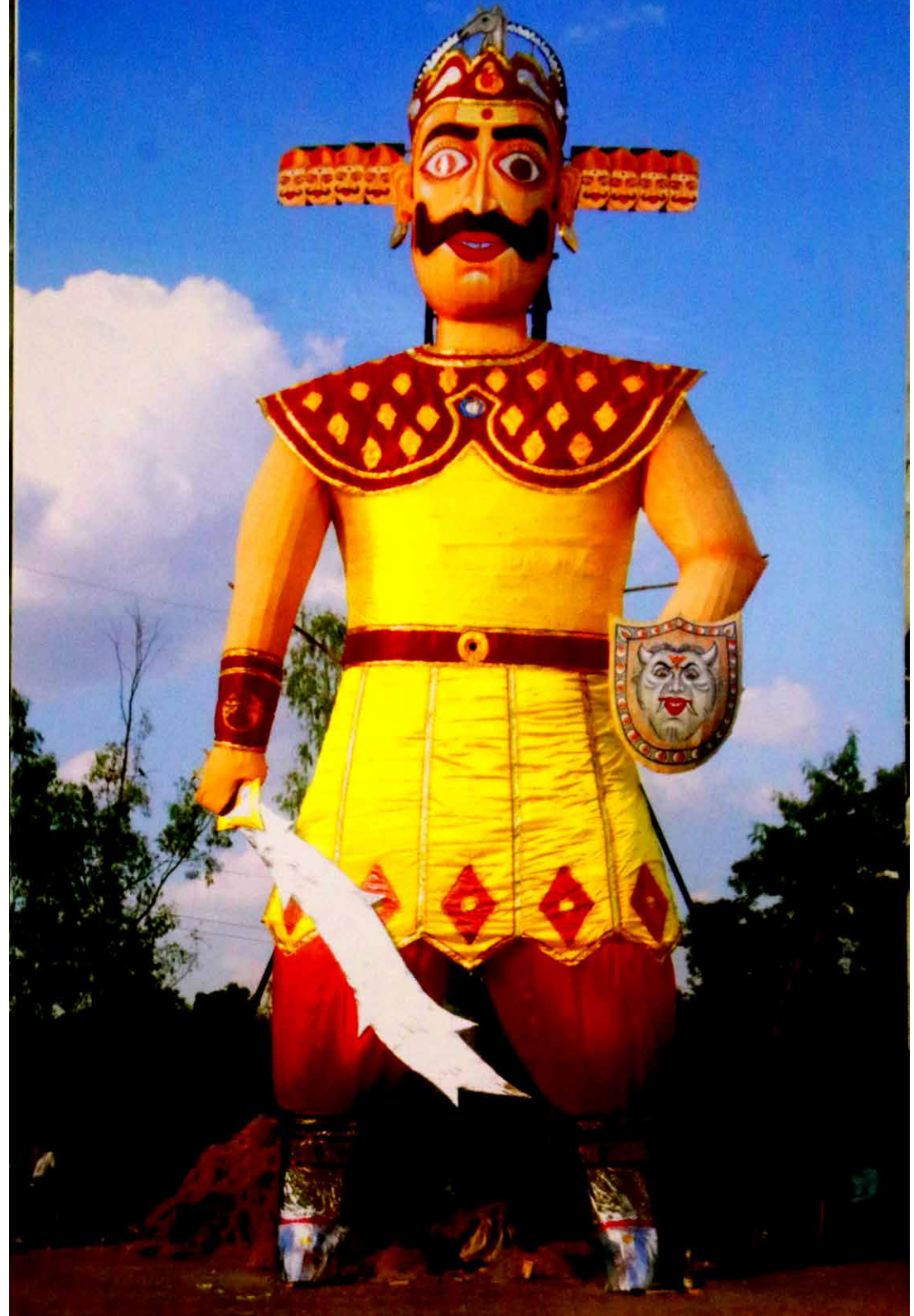
³ Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', pp. 120-21











17.10.2010



17.10.2010







Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:

Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on
<https://citizensofphotography.org>

Text and photos by PhotoDemos
Layout by Dominik Hoehn