#19

Photography in an Expanded Field

Christopher Pinney

Friday 17 April 1992:
I was returning from the *kumbh mela* at Ujjain by Sabarmati Express. On the train (where I was lucky enough to acquire a breezy window seat), I found myself facing Dr Jagdeesh Bhartya from Tonk, Rajasthan, who was on his way to Ratlam and then a train up to Udaipur. He had not spoken for a year (a common renunciatory vow) and we communicated by writing in an exercise book that he had with him. He first represented this to me with the (English) inscription '10.33pm. 17. 4. 92 – FOR YOU'. We then chatted via written messages in Hindi and quickly got round to his philosophy of *atman* and *sharir* ('soul' and 'body') and then his views on *kasmat* ('destiny') which he said was a *rīl* ('reel'). The burden of *kasmat* was like the narrative in a film and he then illustrated this in a drawing of which I subsequently produced my own imitative sketch in my notebook:
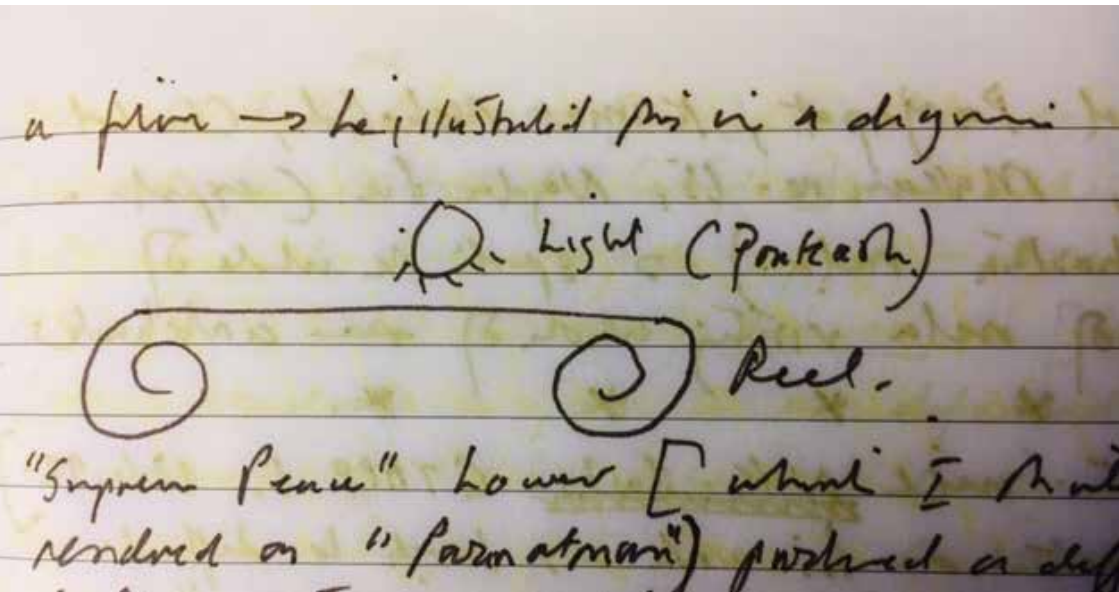
The diagram was intended to illustrate how *paramatman* (the 'eternal soul') produced a light (*prakash*) that stopped the narrative of the film. Knowledge would generate light that released one from the onward rush of destiny. Just before I alighted at Nagda he wrote (in English) 'I want to come to England'.

But the camera in an expanded field can also be approached through considering photography in relation to a set of deeper semiotic understandings. In November 2012, a Jain guru, Rishab Chandra Suriji, who spurned motorized transport, visited Bhatisuda, pushed all the way from Nagda in an elaborate handcart by enthusiastic devotees. He was feted on his arrival, blessed a warehouse owned by one of the Jains, took tea and read a newspaper in the center of the village, and then evaluated the dynamics of a village *puja* room using a *vastu* ('sacred space') app on his mobile phone.

Towards the end of his visit ten *pagliyaji* or *panv ke nishan* were made. These were footprints permanently recorded on small sheets of cotton after the guru's feet had been dipped in a bowl of saffron water. Following this, the images were dusted with *vashkhhep*, a sandalwood powder that had been blessed by the guru. These *pagliya* were imprints

of the guru, indexes of his presence and were treated with profound reverence as they were distributed as holy relics. Throughout, many of the devotees took photographs of the prints with small, digital cameras as though these modern devices could pay homage to this foundational moment of mimesis. At the close of proceedings, the Jain host soaked the guru's feet in the water and then pressed them to his head in a gesture of subordination (*charan raj*). The whole encounter, laying bare as it did the mechanics of transmission, seemed to present, in almost mythic form, a parable of representation and authority.

The Watery Archive

WJT Mitchell recalls asking University of Chicago students to stab the eyes out of photographs of their mothers. Not surprisingly, they declined to do so, demonstrating, as he had hoped, that animism endured and that (to reprise Latour), 'we have never been modern'. In central India, the stigmata of the 'personhood of pictures' (Mitchell 1996:72) is always very visible, but comes into a particular focus when their habitual relation to everyday human life comes to an end. This happens through a process of immersion in water (*visarjan*), which is pre-conceptualized as a process of 'cooling' (*thanda karna*). The necessity of doing this, for paper images including photographs, is to preserve an ideal corporeal hierarchy that prevents the images' bodies from being degraded, insulted, and polluted.

Thursday October 22nd, 2015: Five tractors pulling trolleys threaded through the village collecting *murtis* and images to take for 'cooling' in the River Chambal. Their main cargo were large plaster *Durga murtis* picked up from their temporary *autlas* in caste-specific *mohallas*. But along the way there was much *khandit* collected. This is a category of sacred material and detritus marked out from everyday objects as what can no longer be properly worshipped, and what 'shouldn't come under anyone's feet' (*per ke niche nahin ana chahie*). There is a taboo against worshipping damaged images and objects. Not only is the image likely to be ineffective (the god's *vas*, or fragrance, will not reside in such an image), there is also the danger of angering any god who is approached through a damaged representation. Inadvertently having worshipped a damaged image is commonly adduced to rationalize misfortune and it is often said that families will become ill and argue among themselves if they do *puja* of a *khandit* image. In the early 1980s, I was repeatedly told that the declining fortunes of the GRASIM factory in Nagda was due to the unknowing worship of a cracked *murti* in the nearby Birla Temple.

The tractor trolleys are carefully cleaned so that they are in a fit state to receive the *khandit*. *Khandit* includes the remains of *Sanja* (cow dung decorative figures which are attached to house walls), old almanacs, old, printed images of deities, small three-dimensional *murtis*, old garlands, and photographs. The collection of *khandit* was the prelude to the most spectacular *Durga* procession of recent years – spectacular in terms of the number of participants and the number of people who thrashed. I was later told that the explanation for this resurgence lay in the Goddess' declaration that if she was not accompanied by other gods (i.e. by villagers who thrashed), then this would be the last time she would appear in the village. She had delivered an ultimatum and villagers had responded. The procession proper started when the tractors converged on the south side of the village, near the Bihari Mata *autla*, and met up with the Bhangi drummers whose alcohol driven rhythms were a pre-requisite for the making manifest of the various forces, which would soon start to thrash in numerous bodies.

Those who manifested included Kali Ma and Bheru who thrashed in the body of Khuman Singh, Mataji who thrashed in Mangilal Banjara, and two *paris* (the spirits of persons who had drowned in wells) in a pair of Banjara sisters, among many others. The girls moved forward extremely slowly, their heads tilted backward, and their palms outstretched and there was a dramatic intensity to this slow-moving ensemble (taking over an hour to travel about 100 yards). As soon as it reached the Nag Maharaj *autla*, where S. thrashed spectacularly, all the male members of the procession mounted the tractors and trailers and headed towards the river Chambal, taking great care not to damage any of the fragile plaster *Durga murtis*.

Along the route to the river everyone was vastly entertained by the performance of Prem Banjara. He gathered old sandals that he encountered along the route, found an old basket, and impersonated a mad old hag eating rupees notes before finally setting up a roadside stall from where he started to throw his wares at the passing procession. Upon arrival at the riverside, the *murtis* were removed from the trailers with the greatest of care and lined up in a row facing the river triggering more ecstatic thrashing by S., Mangilal Banjara, and Nathu Patidar, the latter then proceeding to made various predictions (*bhavisvani*) about the coming year (mostly very date-specific ones concerning weather conditions likely to affect that coming winter's wheat crop). The predictions, mumbled by a distracted Nathu Patidar were carefully recorded in a notebook by one of the party.

Then the main *murtis* were very carefully immersed, shepherded by attentive bearers who all took the greatest care to avoid the *murtis* touching their feet as they slithered down the riverbank and into the expansive river waters. This was followed by the casual tossing of all the accumulated *khandit* into the water. Within half an hour, a verdant and clean stretch of river was transformed into a dumping ground of decaying plaster, chemical paints and hundreds and hundreds of small plastic bags containing prints, photographs, and other contributions to this vast watery archive.

An Accelerating Aura

The observation that the proliferation of photography in India has encouraged the production of more (rather than less) aura has to be the starting point (rather than the conclusion) of any account of media history in the subcontinent. Walter Benjamin, in his optimistic Marxist incarnation, had predicted that photography's 'exhibition' value would erode the image's 'cultic value'.

  Benjamin's account is understandably monotheistic. Its entire causative and explanatory logic is grounded in an assumption of singular origins in which the cultic, the authentic, and the hierarchical find their ground zero. Consider, for instance, this claim from the Work of Art essay:

> In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art […] The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day (2008:21, italics added).

This leads Benjamin to consider the connection between media and aura noting that the authority of an object reflects the 'weight it derives from tradition'. An original 'aura' points back to a singularity grounded in tradition and ritual, for 'The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition' (2008:24). By contrast, the central feature of reproduction is that 'By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence' (2008:22) and in the process, utopically, promises to 'emancipate […] the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual' (2008:24).

  Within a monotheistic frame this seems obvious, banal almost. First, there is one object (a painting in a church or chapel to recall John Berger's Benjamin-inspired example); then there are many (through photography, 'its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings' [Berger 1972:19]). In the process of reproduction, a 'unique existence' is dispossessed and relocated, subject to the stresses of a new massified existence. This indeed is one of the defining trajectories of modernity: the decay of aura, Benjamin claims is the result of the 'present-day masses […] passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness […] by assimilating it as a reproduction' (2008:23). For Benjamin, these new stresses were the cause for optimism: he celebrates what he terms the 'destructive cathartic side' and approvingly cites the film director Abel Gance's 1927 prediction that 'all the founders of religions, all religions … await their celluloid resurrection' presaging a 'comprehensive liquidation' (2008:22).

THE HINDOO IDOL SHOP.
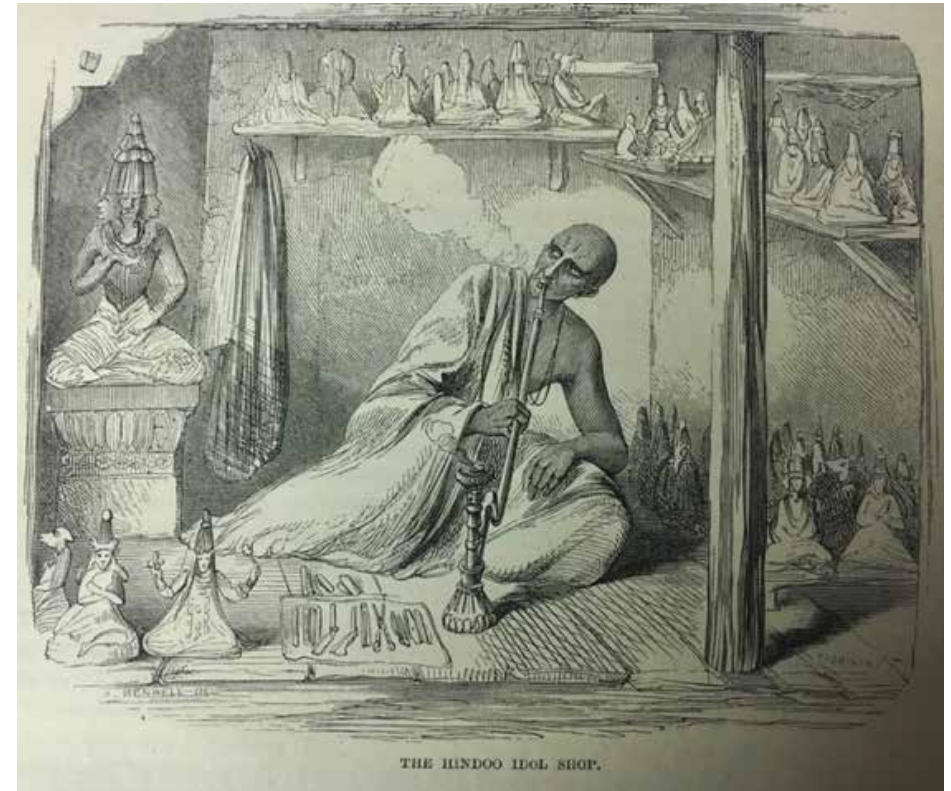
Why has this liquidation not occurred in India? (The question of why it has not happened elsewhere is a separate problem). It is difficult to think of a Hindu equivalent to the 'unique existence' that Benjamin takes for granted. As Diane Eck writes, 'At virtually every level of life and thought, India is polycentric and pluralistic' (1998:24), and to this we might add James J. Preston's observation that 'The Hindu sacred image […] is extraordinarily polymorphic and ubiquitous' (1996:9). While there are 'root' (*sthul*) images and techniques of indexical authorisation (see above, 'Photography in a Wider Field'), the broader framework that presumes the destruction of the singular by multiplicity makes no sense for there is no originary singularity.

The early missionary fear of proliferating Hindu images was not driven by a simple mis-representation. Despite attempts by Hindu reformists such as Rammohun Roy to monotheize their religion, most Hindu practice continues to affirm an originary multiplicity, which technological reproduction mirrors rather than subverts.

An early complex montage print produced by Suresh Punjabi of Suhag Studio in the late 1970s features multiple appearances of his brother Mahesh. At one level, it is a demonstration of virtuoso printing techniques achieved in very basic conditions by a new studio keen to make its name. But it is also illuminated by the Indologist Betty Heimann's use of the metaphor of a crystal to describe the Hindu worldview: 'Whatever Man sees, has seen or will see, is just one facet only of a crystal. Each of these facets from its due angle provides a correct viewpoint, but none of them alone gives a true all-comprehensive picture' (cited by Eck 1998:25).

Benjamin's fundamental assumptions about images, origins, and authenticity arise from what the Egyptologist Jan Assmann describes as the 'mosaic distinction'. It was Akhenaten, the pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty (about 2700 years ago), who tried to end 'cosmotheism',

a world of endless over-lapping images. Akhenaten attempted (unsuccessfully) to overthrow polytheism, to put a stop to a proliferation of gods and images through the imposition of monotheism. He was the inventor of what Assman calls the world's first 'counter-religion', the source of the idea that images were a betrayal of something purer and less visible. What he attempted to destroy was a world of promiscuous images, of a respect for the visible, where it was assumed that different communities had arrived at their own (different) visions that were all ultimately exchangeable. What Assmann called 'techniques of translation' created an 'ecumene of interconnected nations'. Indeed, Benjamin's utopian yearning for a 'comprehensive liquidation' of the privileging of the original might be seen as both embodying the legacy of the 'mosaic distinction', and also as a deep aspiration to transcend it and participate in a similar ecumene.

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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.

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