Stephen Putnam Hughes & Emily Stevenson

DRAMATIC MOMENTS IN THE LIVES OF INDIAN POSTCARD WOMEN

Dr Stephen Putnam Hughes is currently Film Officer and Film Festival Director at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London, UK. Previously based at SOAS, University of London, his research focuses on early 20th century history of media in Tamil-speaking south India. His publications cover the histories of film-going and cinema exhibition, silent film, early Tamil cinema, gramophones, radio, drama, and postcards.

Dr Emily Stevenson is a visual and historical anthropologist with a focus on south India. She is currently a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Her research interests include the history of photography in south India, picture postcards, material culture, heritage, and urban change.

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Portraits of women were some of the most widely published Indian postcards during the early 20th century. The vast majority were not identified by name but given generic captions as part of a commercial marketing strategy, such as 'dancing girls' and 'beauties' or according to broad categories of employment, religion, ethnicity, and caste. They were part of the wider visual genre of 'native types' that portrayed Indians according to typologies that were marketed primarily to foreign audiences. Often carefully staged in studios, the 'native type' was a dominant way the West visually represented the 'otherness' of non-Western people in popular visual culture, scientific studies, and colonial administration.

Despite cultural and colonial differences, picture postcards of Indian women speak directly to those of the Near and Middle East through discursive and representational parallels. These Postcard Women speak to the unequal power dynamics in colonial contexts and the broader 'visual economy'[2] of mass-reproduced photographic objects at the time. The production of postcard women in local settings cast them as racialised and gendered 'typologies' for a global audience. From our perspective over a century on, these representations suggest a clear pattern of what we might call postcard sexism expressed through stereotype, discrimination, and prejudice in the ways that these women were depicted. Whilst there were far fewer representations of nude women in the context of India than in parts of the Middle East, there are still many sexualised postcards in which 'a seductive pose or an exposed hand or foot of an otherwise

Figure 1. 'At Rest.' The Photoype Company, Bombay.[1]

heavily ornamented female body subtly stages an exotic sexuality'.[3] As historians of India have argued,[4] women in late 19th-century India (esp. from the middle classes) came to represent traditional cultural values in contrast to Indian men who were more likely to be influenced by Western education and habits introduced during British colonial rule. In this formulation, Indian women were seen as more authentically Indian and embodied the continuity of tradition that had not been corrupted by colonial rule. At the turn of the 20th century, when the popularity of picture postcards took off, we see similar ideas being worked out in the ways that women were made to perform their Indianness and embody gender through occupation, jewellery, fashion, and poses in photographic settings. More than the discursive and representational, there were significant material connections between postcards from South Asia, and the Near and Middle East. Firstly, the vast majority of early 20th-century global postcards would have been printed by the same specialist presses in Europe, especially in Germany. Secondly, the most heavily travelled routes between South Asia and Europe passed through the Middle East where postcards were purchased, written, and collected by travellers in transit. And finally, it would have been common to find postcards from cities such as Cairo, Aden, and Port Said sitting alongside those of Bombay and Calcutta in personal albums and collections.

Through this material trafficking, these Postcard Women were paraded on a global stage performing multiple roles for audiences who consumed them as visual stereotypes that threaten to completely overdetermine our sense of who these women were. We need to be careful not to be seduced by the false promise of photographic realism into thinking that these images give us authoritative access to these women's lives. In the vast majority of cases we will never know who these women were, let alone their life experiences or what they thought about being turned into a postcard. It is important to ask, how can we work beyond these stereotypes and be more attentive to the often-subtle ways in which these women expressed their own agency? In this essay, we compare series of related postcards that help us to better recognise the role of the women in the performance of the 'photographic event'.[5] Through this, we hope to highlight that these women were involved in complex performative acts rather than just being objects of representation.

Balamani Ammal was a famous performing artist during the early decades of the 20th century in south India. She was trained within an artistic guild of professional women performers, known as *devdasis,* who specialised in music, dance, and singing in both secular and religious contexts. However, Balamani made a name for herself on the stage as a professional actor at a time when there were not many women in Tamil theatre. She is credited with creating the first all-woman theatre company, the Balamani Drama Company, in south India.

These postcards depict Balamani in the typical fashion style of Malabar (now Kerala), even though she was from the neighbouring region (now Tamil Nadu). The first postcard (figure 2) has a generic caption that rendered her as a particular ethnic and caste type (high-ranking Nair) that was different to her own. Instead of the generic category, the second postcard (figure 3) made direct reference to Balamani in the caption and capitalised on her fame as a performing artist. Though both postcards use the same image, the representational work of their

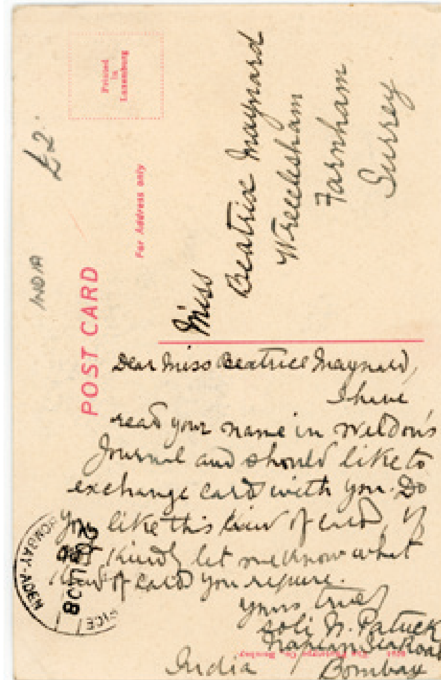
Figure 2. 'A Malabar Belle'.
Higginbotham & Co., Madras & Bangalore.

Figure 3. 'Balamoni in Malayali Dress'.
D.A. Ahuja, Rangoon.

captions is different – one fixes her as a 'native type' whilst the other promotes her professional stage name. The comparison between the two shows that Balamani's identity was not fixed in the way that the generic caption suggests. Beyond the representational logic of these postcard productions, Balamani also had agency as a performer in her own right. In this case, there is an obvious poetic convergence between Balamani's role as a professional stage actor and her role as a performer for the camera. But there is also a sense that all postcards of Indian women can be considered theatrical, and their photographic subjects performative enactments.

One of the most prolific categories of postcards of Indian women from the time were those of dance performers. These two postcards feature a specific class of 'dancing girl'; these were comparatively elite courtesan performers, known as *tawa'if*. Throughout northern India, these women were recognised for their talent and learning in poetry, literature, music, and dance. They provided prestigious entertainment and company for noble, wealthy patrons. At the same time, they were also stigmatised as a kind of outcaste community frequently accused of being prostitutes. However, these women used their profession to contest the hierarchies of their male-dominated society to make alternative lifestyles of wealth and independence.[6]

These postcards played into a specific imagining of Indian femininity and sexual objectification with a long history in colonial India. However, these women were also performers presenting a cultivated public persona. In wearing their full dance costumes and jewellery, these images suggest a kind of 'proud self-fashioning'[7] that exceeds simple stereotypes.



Figures 4 and 5. Front and back of 'Punjab Dancing Girl'. The Phototype Co., Bombay. Postmarked 20 June 1908, Bombay.

The majority of Indian women on postcards were anonymous, like the 'Punjab Dancing Girl' (figure 4), in a manner that reduced them to being a generic representative of a class of women performers. Courtesan women postcards were a notable exception for sometimes naming individuals. By naming Miss Rangili and her city, the postcard on the right (figure 6) serves as a recognition of her fame as a well-known performer. The unusual addition of a vernacular (Urdu) along with the English caption speaks to how the publisher was trying to tap into Indian forms of celebrity.

We might assume these postcards were intended to attract a male gaze, however, they also enabled women audiences. Postcard collecting was a hugely popular pastime that was largely considered a feminine pursuit.[8] Numerous journals and magazines of the time published lists of collectors who wished to exchange cards. The sender of the 'Punjab Dancing Girl' postcard found the details of Miss Beatrice Maynard in *Weldon's Ladies' Journal* and the handwritten message shows how a relationship of postcard exchange could be initiated: 'Dear Miss Beatrice Maynard, I have read your name in Weldon's Journal and should like to exchange cards with you. Do you like this kind of card [?] If not, kindly let me know what kind of cards you prefer'.

Figure 6. 'Miss Rangili Jan of Lucknow'. Publisher unknown.

Figure 7. 'Grinding Curry Stuff, Madras'. Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore.

Figure 9. 'Kitchen Damsels'. Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore.

Figure 8. 'Wifely Duties'. Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore.

Figure 10. 'Street Merchandise, Madras'. Higginbotham & Co., Madras and Bangalore. Postmarked 11 July 1907, Madras.

As we have seen in the previous examples, there is a direct connection between Indian women performing artists and their performative postcard enactments. However, even in postcards that attempt to depict candid scenes of everyday life in India, there was a clear element of play-acting with props and careful staging for postcard photo shoots.This series of postcards featuring Indian women at work are from the city of Madras (now Chennai) and were produced by the same publisher, a prominent bookseller in south India. When seen alone these images could well have been taken as convincing representations of women's daily work. However, viewing them side-by-side, it becomes apparent that these women were being carefully staged and choreographed to be rendered as multiple characters playing on a wider trope of Indian women's routine work.

Though differently coloured on the postcards, the seated woman grinding curry (figure 7) is the same woman shown picking lice (figure 8) and holding a winnowing pan in 'Kitchen Damsels' (figure 9). The standing woman pounding rice in 'Kitchen Damsels' has swapped roles to become a vendor in 'Street Merchandise' (figure 10). The woman's role was transformed by laying down a piece of cloth and displaying some common goods – cheroots, *bidis*, peanuts, mangoes, bananas and betel leaves. But the caption was deceptive in that this scene was not in a city street, which would not have had carefully placed potted plants ready for compositional effect. It is very likely all these photographs were from the same photo shoot in a domestic courtyard setting – the women are wearing the same sari and blouse combinations and are using the same winnowing pan and small stool as a prop in more than one postcard. What degree of agency did these women have in being photographed in these different roles and poses? Would they have known and consented to their images being reproduced as postcards that would be sent around the world with hand-written messages commenting upon them?

Figure 11. 'The Jewel of Asia'. Publisher unknown. Postmarked 12 March 1908.

Figure 13. 'Chums'. Publisher unknown.

Figure 12. 'Hindu Woman'. D. Macropolo & Co., Calcutta.

Figure 14. 'Hindu Chums'. D. Macropolo & Co., Calcutta.

In this series of postcards another woman enacts different characters as part of a postcard performance. Here we move into a photographic studio which had long been cultivated by photographers as a stage for creative expression with props, backdrops, costumes, and controlled lighting. As is usually the case in these postcards, this woman was not named and we know nothing about her beyond the visual clues in the images. By her costume and jewellery, she appears to be a rural Maharashtrian woman from the Marathwada region which borders present-day northern Karnataka. She is wearing a distinctive woven cotton *khun* blouse characteristic of the village women from this region, along with a *nauvari* sari, which was nine yards in length and worn high, almost pant-like for ease of movement for working.[9] Taken together, this series foregrounds the role of this one woman, using a range of photographic stagecraft.

The first images (figures 11 and 12) take the familiar head shot form of a photographic studio portrait with plain background and frontal pose. Though cropped and captioned differently, they both also have a distinctive sense of intimacy with an almost touching-distance proximity, and her broad smile is highly unusual for photographic portrait conventions of the time.

The second set of postcards highlights another form of intimacy. Unlike the previous set, the intimacy is not between the postcard viewer and photographic subject, but between the two women in the image who are performing a relationship of female friendship heightened by the different captions. The different poses, standing and sitting, suggest the work of choreographed restaging that was part of an extended photo shoot. We can see the careful work of stage design in the form of the painted backdrop, composition, and props. This *mise en scène* works as part of the visual storytelling about these women as friends within a romanticised rural idyll.

Figure 15. 'Characters. Hindu woman riding bicycle'. Nestor Giancalis, Ltd., Calcutta.

Figure 16. 'A Bombay Scorcher'. Publisher unknown.

In another postcard from this series (figure 15), the unknown photographer and woman took a more 'playful' tone. The woman was balanced precariously as if she were in motion riding through the countryside, though in other versions of this postcard the stick used to prop up the bicycle was visible. The image was designed for humorous effect, inviting its viewers to laugh at and offer their own joking commentary on the incongruity of a rural Indian woman riding the latest technology of the day. The image plays a clichéd juxtaposition of tradition and modernity that was a crucial part of colonial hierarchies the world over. But what was this woman's own agency? Given her easy smile across multiple images, was she also having fun? Or perhaps she was laughing at the photographer and the absurdity of the photo shoot? Over a century later, it is possible that she is still laughing at us.

[1] Figures 4, 5 and 9 are from the collection of Emily Stevenson. All other figures are from the collection of Stephen Hughes.

[2] Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[3] Saloni Mathur, *India by Design: Colonial History and Cultural Display* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California University Press, 2007), p. 121.

[4] For example, see Partha Chatterjee 'Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonised Women: The Contest in India', *American Ethnologist,* 16, 2 (1989) pp. 622–33.

[5] Christopher Pinney 'How the Other Half…', in *Photography's Other Histories*, ed. by C. Pinney and N. Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 10.

[6] Veena Talwar Oldenburgh, 'Lifestyle as Resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India', *Feminist Studies*, 16, 2 (1990), pp. 259–287.

[7] Clare Harris, 'Photography in the "contact zone": Identifying Copresence and Transcultural Agency in the Studios of Darjeeling', in *Transcultural Encounters in the Himalayan Borderlands*, ed. by M. Viehbeck (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing), 2017, p. 116.

[8] Saloni Mathur, p. 130.

[9] Deepthi Sasidharan via Instagram @lampglow. Personal communication.