

Taking Pictures

The Early Days of Photography in Bengal

SIDDHARTHA GHOSH



The areas around Radhabazaar, Chinabazaar were once full of photographers' agents roaming the streets, a small photograph in hand, luring prospective customers from the country. "Sir, want a mug-shot? Four *annas* for a wonderful likeness". This is a description from the second edition of Adishwar Ghatak's book *Learning Photography* (1903). Well known, upper-class studios were by then advertising their photos as "an absolute match in every detail" for as little as "a hundred rupees", much less than an oil painting that would have cost a thousand. Ordinary photographers sold their glass photos for eight *annas* or less. Educated professionals like Adishwar Ghatak looked down on them, and Adishwar has not left any explanations of how these garden-variety photographers made a living by selling photos at such low prices.

After 1852, the advent of 'Ambrotype', 'Tintype', 'Ferrotype', or 'Glass Positive' made photography affordable. Instead of paper, the print was made on glass. Till 1880, these glass positives were very popular among the working classes in America. If some examples from the oeuvre of these street photographers had survived, we could have added a few less illustrious names in the gallery of portraits of the *babus* of 19th-century Bengal.

We learn from Adishwar Ghatak's book that by 1910, street photographers had become a rarity. "When still in school, we had once been to Chinabazaar to buy books and had also bought a glass positive. The photographer was a young man. We had noticed the sheen of his fashionable clothes. Nearly twenty-five years later I suddenly noticed, by a corner of a staircase in Radhabazaar, a grey-haired lean old man, clutching a glass positive and hoarsely crying 'Photograph! Photograph!'... Earlier it cost four to eight *annas*, now it was two. We climbed on to the terrace where he worked and I took a couple of glass positives

myself. I never let on to the old man that I knew something of photography or I earned my livelihood from it."

Buendia was the leader of the men who cleared the dense South American jungles to found a village named Macondo. This is Marquez's Noble Prize winning novel. When Buendia saw a photograph on daguerreotype – a silver-covered metal plate used for printing – he was alarmed. It was the first time he had seen a photograph. He thought people whose portraits came into metal plates left some of their life force behind. Photographs hastened their deaths. Buendia became an expert in daguerreotype himself and began an innovative experiment. To prove the existence of God, he took a series of complex 'superimposed exposures' in various corners of his house to capture His presence.

Buendia was unable to take a photograph of God. That was in South America. In India, the Gods came to earth to be photographed. Durgacharan Roy's *Debganer Martey Agamon* ("The Gods Come to Earth"), published in 1886 but written much earlier, describes how Brahma, Vishnu, Indra and other gods decide to go on a Bharat *darshan*. While roaming the streets of Kolkata, they come upon a "Photographical Establishment". Indra is tempted by the studio's claim to produce a remarkable likeness for only two rupees. "It would be wonderful if we can take back a few pictures to Heaven to show off our disguises", he states. Brahma agrees. After their snaps are taken, the gods are ready to depart when a couple enter the shop. Brahma says, *sotto voce*, to Narayana, "If the woman wants her photo, that's alright, but the man must not... if his likeness turns out to be more ugly than he actually is, the woman may abandon him in the English fashion".

Brahma must have been ignorant of photography to voice such apprehensions. By the end of the 19th century, Bengali photographers were veritable experts in the art of taking a good likeness. Adishwar Ghatak, who can claim to be the first Bengali writing on photography, has a detailed chapter titled "Likeness in Photographs" that supports this view. He states that a photograph can be called a likeness only when it is artistically executed. One must be acquainted with the works of famous photographers to realise the difference. In any appearance, the face is the most important feature to focus on. Next comes light. In those days photographs were taken in sunlight. Good studios boasted of a glass room. Light from the North was favoured. The face was lit from one side and a "play of light and shade" created. In the age of slow-speed films, the 'victim' had to sit still without even batting an eyelid. To stop the head moving, a 'head-rest' machine was in vogue. When photographed standing, its use was inevitable. Then came the decorations in the background and foreground. Like a theatre scene, a single hued pictorial backdrop was used. Sometimes it was folded up and the scene changed when required. The foreground "was a shrub, or a stone, or a wooden fence, sometimes picturesque weapons, even books. These made the photograph look good. There were numerous ways it was done".

Adishwar Ghatak's best advice concerns seating. Instead of an ordinary chair an upholstered dark-coloured chair looked better, but "a photograph must be taken in accordance with the seating habits of a race. If a white man were seated on the floor and a lower caste on a chair it would look absurd. Similarly if a Bengali woman, living under *purdah*, was made to sit on a chair, it would look unnatural".

Probably no lower caste had ever paid to have his photo taken and caused anxiety to

Adishwar Ghatak. But looking at several old family albums, one is struck by the fact that leaving aside the Brahma Samaj, many conservative Hindu women agreed to be photographed seated while their husbands remained standing. But the opposite is also true. The old and infirm husband in a chair while near his feet sits his shy young bride. It is futile to judge the status of women from these photographs of conjugal togetherness. Instead the patterns on the saris, their intricate folds, the jewellery, and the eloquent eyes tell a more complex story.

Europeans had shot portraits of famous Indians on commission. Individually, however, they had thought infamous, dangerous, superstitious natives and Oriental Maharajas to be fitter commercial subjects. Let me give an example. Vincent Brown, the Kolkata manager of the photographic studio John Blitz's (2, Hare Street), once gave an advertisement in 1899. In only one rupee, Tania Bhil's photographs – the famous dacoit, Indian Robin Hood – were available in three different poses. In the first, he was dressed as a fisherman, with handcuffs and accompanied by two policemen. The second photo was the actual moment of capture with an accomplice; and the last one alone. The advertisement gave details of Tania's career, his humanitarian impulses and why customers ought to buy the frames. A postscript to this advertisement stated that, as a suitable Christmas or New Year card for friends back 'home', the studio boasted of seventy rare photographs of "INDIAN CHARACTERS" in their collection.

Two old catalogues of Bourne and Shepherd, India's much discussed and oldest studio, also testify to this attitude. There are no publishing dates on the catalogues. One of them simply mentions a hundred years of experience, starting 1840. The claim to be founded in 1840 is, however, untrue. The Kolkata branch of Bourne and Shepherd was opened in 1864. If the studio in Simla, with another name, is taken as the original, it came twenty-two years after 1840. These two catalogues, one of 1840 and the other even earlier, have 167 pages with a list of thousands of photographs. Among the portraits are a negligible number of Viceroy's, Mughal Emperors, Lieutenant-Governors, Governors of Bengal, Commanders-in-Chief and their supporters. In the section "Native Characters" we can see an Acrobat, a Salt-maker, a Gold-lace Maker, a Hackney Driver, a Cultivator, a Snake Charmer, an Embroiderer, a Goldsmith, etc. In the section "Prominent Personality" we see portraits of only five Maharajas – Gobindlal Roy, R.B. Krishna, Padma Bahadur, Sir Narendrakrishna and Syed Asan Riza.

Yet Rabindranath Tagore had come to Bourne and Shepherd a number of times. So had many other members of the Tagore family, alone or accompanied. The studio had photographed Ramkrishnadev, Upendrakishore, and later Saratchandra. These are well known facts. It is unspecified how many famous Bengali men and women had come within their portals. If Bourne and Shepherd had sold the pictures of Rabindranath and Ramkrishna alone, they could have made a killing. This is also true for other European studios. They did not take Bengali portraits for Bengalis. While their cameras captured a remarkable likeness, they lost touch with the pulse of the people. Copies of photographs they had once taken, of Rabindranath, Bankim and Madhusudan, nicely framed, continue to sustain many Bengalis in business to this day.

Translated by Debjani Sengupta.

Image courtesy Ananda Publishers.