

The Home and Beyond

Domestic and Amateur Photography by Women in India (1930-1960)

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"I used to dream that I am going to London or somewhere, and then after going to the airport, on the plane, I discover I haven't got my camera. I begin to cry. What will I do without my camera? I had that sort of an attachment with it. Somebody once told me that the eye is better than the camera. I said, that is all fine, but I would like to go over memories. Things as I saw them then."

(Debalina Mazumdar, July 2000)



Photos courtesy: Debalina Mazumdar

This essay discusses the curious vision of women who photographed within the family from the thirties. Many of them had acquired the camera as an object of leisure. Confined at home and with restricted mobility, what would they have photographed? Would the camera have allowed them to view the world outside? How would they have used photography to think and imagine? More importantly what would have been the effect of their being able to look through the lens on their own lives? This is a segment of a larger project mapping a history of the woman photographer and photographic practices associated with women in India. Within a historiography of early Indian photography, women have hardly figured except as subjects of photography. Perhaps one reason for this invisibility is the way in which notions of the professional have been defined, which made it impossible

for them to be part of this history. Most women in the past would have photographed in spaces that were not as visible as those in which male photographers might work. They also probably catered to needs within photography that were different. It is for these reasons that dichotomies between professional, amateur and domestic photography need to be challenged in order to reconstruct a history of the woman photographer.

It is important to revisit some of these practices for other reasons too. Most scholarship on photography in India has been restricted to the colonial period.¹ These often canonised images focussed on 'grand narratives' of great personalities, important events or landscape, and therefore determined a particular visual discourse of the public.² Other more subaltern practices of photography such as amateur and domestic photography or certain traditions of studio portraiture have not received the same attention.³ These practices need to be recuperated in order to construct a history of the 'ordinary' and the 'everyday'.

While there are some references to professional women photographers in Calcutta and Hyderabad at the turn of the 19th century, photography became more popular among women in the home with the introduction of the Brownie camera. Encouraged by the proliferation of amateur photography all over the world, Kodak largely targeted women in its marketing strategy for the camera in 1888: "You push the button, We'll do the rest". Photography with the Brownie was so simple, that 'even women' could do it! This essay describes the experiences of five women who photographed from within the home from the nineteen-thirties onward.⁴ For some of them, the humble Brownie may have been a stepping stone to other more 'sophisticated' cameras or to amateur photography. For all of them however it was the means for a passion that extended far beyond a hobby.

Referring to the family album, Patricia Holland notes that while men often took domestic pictures, it was women who were largely the historians and guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive.⁵ In doing so, they were performing an important function as chroniclers of everyday histories. One example of this is the personal photo archive created by Mira Chaudhuri (1905-1994). Both she and her sister Indira Dey (1912-1992) learnt photography with a Brownie camera from their father D.N. Maitro, a surgeon at Mayo Hospital in 1915. Coming from a well-known Brahmo family, Mira married relatively young and travelled extensively. She was socially very active. Among other activities she had edited *Sreemoti*, a women's journal, written articles, been a member of various clubs and charities and run an embroidery centre for women. She also photographed extensively throughout her life.

In a unique photo-autobiography, Mira created five volumes of family albums with self-taken as well as older photographs tracing genealogies of two generations before her. In 1978 she sustained a fracture of the femur bone from which she never recovered. Bedridden, she started to rearrange her albums. Detailed narratives were written around her photographs, reconstructing her entire life and of those before her. These handwritten accounts were pasted along with accompanying photographs. Their arrangement in albums was much like her memory, fragmented and non-chronological. Rather than being a structured autobiography, these jottings were like diary or journal entries. For instance, an entry (always with photographs) would describe a trip to Amarnath with a friend. The same page would carry another entry to mark his current status: "Telegram, Tej Nath no more". The fol-



lowing page would describe the marriage of her sister Indira (with Mira's photographs of the couple) and jump in time to portraits of their children describing their current status and respective families. This bricolage was expanded to twelve volumes, copies of which were then bound and sent to every family member.

Mira Chaudhuri's photo archive describes not just events but feelings and emotions as well. One of the album pages has a photograph of her father and sister Indira looking at a portrait of her mother. Both images taken by her, the caption on this page reads "Ma's last days" and documents in detail the life of her mother and her subsequent death a month after the photograph was taken. This image, like others, stands out among the other fami-



Photos courtesy: Mira Chaudhuri

ly pictures for its deliberate attention to the function of photography. Mira's archive was however different from the standard family album in one major respect: it gave space to those outside the fold of the immediate and extended family. In documenting her own journey, Mira was not only speaking about herself, but about a larger world outside. There are innumerable people here, both known and unknown, and their histories too.⁶ In some senses the notion of the family seemed to be extended to a larger universe that she was acquainted with. In doing so, her images though based on private memories, negotiated a wider terrain of public history. Looking through her albums, one gets a sense not just of her personal history but also of a wider historical context and her own tensions within this context. There were significant changes occurring in the world outside. Gandhi was encouraging women like Mira to come out of the home and be part of a larger struggle. These changes and her conflicts with them are evident in her descriptions around the photographs. Her first meeting with Mira Behn, her first photograph of Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore, her encounter with Gandhi or with Wali Mohammed Khan where she was the only woman at a *dawat* (feast) of two hundred chieftains of the North West Frontier Province are some of the events documented in the albums.⁷

Photography allowed women to do things that they normally did not do. It allowed them to wander, to look and to stare. While the camera gave them some legitimacy to be in the public domain, it also made them far more visible on the streets. The urban street scene therefore remained largely the preserve of men.⁸ This situation however changed when they



Photos courtesy: Manobina Roy

travelled, especially for holidays. In early 1932, Mira travelled to Europe by ship accompanied only by her mother and children, and took numerous photographs on this trip. While vacations and holidays legitimised the presence of women like her outside the home, the camera may also have contributed to this legitimacy. This was true for another set of sisters, Manobina Roy (1919-2001) and Debalina Mazumadar (b. 1919). They were twins and grew up in Ramnagar, Benaras where they learnt photography from their father with a Brownie in 1935. He was the principal of the local High School patronised by the ruler of Benaras and their mother had to observe *purdah* in Ramnagar. The camera, however, allowed the twins to travel around the city, in the thirties, where they would photograph nature or practice their photography by taking pictures of each other.

Manobina married early to Bimal Roy, then a young cameraperson employed by New Theatres in Calcutta. Being married to Roy was both an advantage as well as a disadvantage for her. Her husband was a still photographer and was associated with a studio in Calcutta. However after his move to Bombay in 1951, Bimal Roy was also becoming famous in the film industry.⁹ His home had a constant stream of guests and there was a lot of entertaining to be done. The actress Devika Rani once asked her how she passed her time. When Manobina described her day that consisted of looking after her children, running a house which always had Bimal *da's* guests staying over and helping him with his work, besides her photography, Devika became thoughtful and said, "Now I can see why Bimal is so successful". Her sister Debalina married into a family in Calcutta where her husband did not really care about photography. However, among those delighted with this skill were her in-laws, and soon she found herself shooting all the old people at home, the "*jethus, kakis* and *mashimas*". Some of them would probably never have been photographed had it not been for the fact that a family member was a photographer. Debalina enjoyed taking portraits but there were some unpleasant tasks too. Each time there was a death in the family, she was called to take pictures for the *shraddho*. In spite of this both sisters were known as 'auspicious' photographers. It probably began as a joke, but the cousin whose portrait they took actually did get married and many young women wanted the same. Debalina's own portrait for marriage was taken by her sister. What was interesting in their narratives is that they were prompted to take these portraits because of their own subjective experiences as women and the humiliating terms upon which traditional marriages were arranged. Debalina, who married relatively late, talked about her early and disastrous experience of being shot in a studio. She also recalled an anecdote where she refused to go with her husband to the studio after their marriage because she didn't want to be photographed like a "*jatra rani* with her legs swinging from the chair". In recalling this image, Debalina was critiquing a certain kind of representation of women in older studio traditions. These were images that she rebelled against and it reflected in her portraits of women.

Photography's greatest advantage was that it could be adjusted to one's individual schedule. It also served as a temporary escape from a situation that left women with no time for themselves or for a fantasy world.¹⁰ Among the standard family album pictures of their children growing up were also some striking portraits of their daughters. These highly stylised photographs are taken with deliberate emphasis on light and composition.¹¹ In 1959, Debalina and Manobina were in London where they also photographed British women

and documented the isolation of the elderly in Hyde Park. Manobina described how older women would dress up just to buy a loaf of bread or to exchange a few words with strangers. Some of these insights were captured in her images of women window shopping, sitting in the park and on the streets. Both shot street corners and hospitals, the tabloid press and the suffragettes in Britain. Debalina also photographed rallies against the Soviet presence in Hungary. In doing so they were able to engage with the street and with experiences not limited to their own lives. Both sisters expressed a strong desire to document their experiences outside the home. While some of these were written and published, it was photography more than anything else that allowed them this space for self-expression. They both said that perhaps in another time they would have chosen to be photojournalists.

For most of these women, photography co-existed with the domestic responsibilities that compelled them to work late into the night, when they found the time and space to develop, print and enlarge. It is important to remember that, being women, their links and access to even the most rudimentary supports that amateur men had were limited. Indira would sometimes discuss her photographs with the maid.¹² She also spent long hours at Santiniketan discussing photography with her young nephew Mukul Dey, who later made a profession as an industrial photographer.¹³ While they did not receive much encouragement either, Manobina and Debalina created their own links with photographic salons and societies. Despite being restricted to the home, both sisters made efforts to keep in touch with other amateur photographers. In Benaras they were members of the U.P. Photographic association and won prizes when their photographs travelled to competitions. Problems of mobility were solved by the "postal portfolio", which was like a travelling exhibition.¹⁴ This 'community' helped to sustain their photography and is evident in the technical quality of their photographs. The importance of their home-based photography however cannot be underestimated as it provided them with practical experience. After all, they would not have been good amateur photographers unless they had shot hundreds of photographs at home. Of course, many of these activities had to stop once they got married. When she came to Calcutta, Debalina had to turn down an offer to join the Photographic Association of Bengal (PAB). She returned to the organisation only at the age of sixty, when her children were grown up. This time she became their President for three years. Meanwhile some of her contemporaries, like Oonawalla, Stanley Jepson, T. Kashinath, Dr. Thomas, Sunil Janaah and Shambhu Saha went on to become significant names in the field of early Indian photography.

Most media technologies in India have been linked with issues of privilege and class and the still camera was no exception to this. These are stories of women from mostly middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. However, for all of them, the camera provided a significant space for self-expression. Of all the narratives presented in this essay, a sense of isolation was most marked in the case of Rajendra Kunverba (1920-2000), the late Rajmata of Kutch who was totally limited to the home for a major part of her life. However it is in her life that the camera played a vital role in the act of visibility. Born in 1920, Kunverba, the princess of Kishengarh, was married at the age of thirteen to the prince of Kutch. Her family could not afford to pay any dowry but the royal family of Kutch wanted a young and obedient daughter-in-law. Going to Kutch in those days was considered *kala paani* (a punishment), because the state was cut off for a major part of the year due to the

monsoon. The isolation that Kunverba had to undergo was doubly reinforced because she had to suddenly be in *pardah*. This was a new experience for her as, like many Rajput princesses, she had been brought up like a boy till she was eleven, learning how to ride and shoot. Her husband would stay away for long periods of time, during which she would have to live in the old palace in Bhuj constantly guarded by *Mian saheb*, a eunuch who appears on the fringes of many of her photographs. It is from within this isolation that Kunverba began her photography. Her only contact with the outside world was through acquaintances who crossed over into the *zenana*. Two of them were significant for their relationship to her photography: the family physician, Dr. Tasker, who would give her tips on taking pictures with her Brownie camera, and a Parsi tutor/companion, Ms. Aloo Driver, who once secretly took a photograph of Rajendra Kunverba's grandmother-in-law. This was a particularly subversive act, because photographs of women in the *zenana* were strictly forbidden.

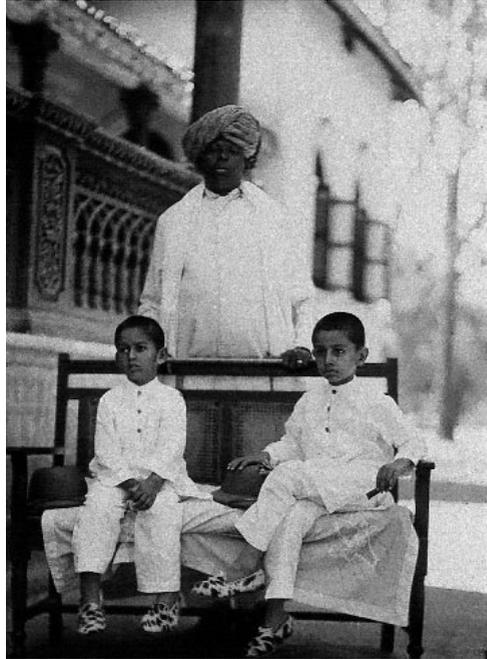
Against this background of confinement, photography became an escape for Kunverba. She would take photographs of mostly her children, but also the family pets, the beach at Kutch, her attendants and the women of the *zenana*. Her photographs are private. She never made enlargements and her films had to be sent outside Kutch for processing for fear that others would see them. These photographs intersect interestingly with a larger public history of a princely state and a world that was closed, at least for her and other women of the royal family, in terms of representation. Women in *pardah* were not photographed, unless by their husbands or by the state photographer. In Kutch even a court photographer was not allowed into the *zenana*. By photographing within, therefore, Kunverba was facilitating a visibility that was taken for granted by less elite women outside the royal family. She spoke in her interviews of how she would be begged by other women in the *zenana* to take their pictures and their excitement at seeing their own images. These photographs are also important because, being casual family snapshots, they would have been different from the scores of orientalist images of women in the *zenana* that had been taken in colonial India. Sadly none of these images remained with her in Bombay when I met her shortly before her death. Bhuj of course has since witnessed the earthquake and perhaps these images are lost forever.

The camera gave Kunverba access to a world that she was otherwise not able to be part of. She would often shoot her husband's hunting expeditions, but always accompanied by *Mian saheb* and through a car with blackened windows creating an interesting dichotomy: Kunverba could see through the camera, but without being looked at. Ironically, she stopped photographing in the fifties once she came out of *pardah*. Perhaps her need for photography was over by then. She was now free to step out into the world and look at things unfettered by the veil. As she said, "there was no need for me now to carry my camera". The camera had been her window to the world while she was in *pardah*.

Domestic photographs cannot be separate from their context. In looking at the images taken by these women, this essay attempts to understand the space that the camera gave them and the role of photography in their lives. The above stories cannot be used to generalise a larger narrative of domestic and amateur women photographers. However they can provide some insights about recovering photographic practices that have been marginalised because they have flourished within the private realms of the home. To recuper-



Photos courtesy: Rajendra Kunverba



ate a women's history of photography, the historian has to move into realms of domestic and amateur photography, spaces that have hitherto been overlooked, even rejected. The still camera was a significant tool of representation because of its potential to be used in both the public domain as well as at home, as a profession as well as for leisure and as a hobby. In trying to recover a history of women's participation with this technology, perhaps we need to look more closely at some of these spaces and functions. These may have been personal histories but amateur and domestic photographic practices are significant precisely because of their ability to represent the experience of the 'everyday' and the 'unspectacular'. As pointed out earlier, these practices have the potential to stand in opposition to the generalities of other more canonised narratives of photography. Perhaps it is time to look at all these practices anew and to examine the work not just of women but also of other amateur photographers whose work has been invisibilised so far.

NOTES

1. Among these books are Dayal, Raja Deen *Princely India: Photographs 1884-1910* (Hamish Hamilton, 1980); Worswick, C. and A. Embree *The Last Empire: Photography in British India: 1855-1911* (Gorden Fraser Aperture Inc., 1976, London); and Gutman, Judith Mara *Through Indian Eyes* (Oxford University Press, 1982, New York).

This scholarship is either too general or deals with specific (and often elite) male photographers.

Publications of the India Office Library such as Desmond, Ray *Victorian India in Focus* (Her Majesty's Stationary

Office, 1982, London) and Faulkner, John A *Shifting Focus: Photography in India 1850-1900* (The British Council Visual Arts Publication, 1995, London) are restricted to particular collections and time periods, as is the more recent Dehejia, Vidya (ed.) *India: Through the Lens: 1840-1911* (Mapin, 2001) where photography by women is described as "no more than a pleasant diversion".

All these books focus on colonial photography. The only exceptions are Ghosh, Siddharth *Chhobi Tola: Bangalir Photographic Charcha* ("Taking Pictures") (Ananda Publishers, 1988) and Pinney, Christopher *Camera Indica* (University of Chicago Press, 1997) that provide much needed insights into local photographic practices and the social history of photography in India.

2. With the birth of the new nation state, photojournalism became the preferred form of archiving public history.
3. See Christopher Pinney's work on Bazaar photography in the small studio (1997).
4. I am grateful to the late Siddharth Ghosh for drawing my attention to some of these women who were first written about in his chapter on Women Photographers in Ghosh, Siddharth *Chhobi Tola: Bangalir Photographic Charcha* ("Taking Pictures") (Ananda Publishers, 1988). All subsequent research is based on interviews conducted with them by me during 1999-2001.
5. See "History, Memory and the Family Album" (in Spence, Jo and Patricia Holland (eds.) *Family Snapshots: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* Virago Press, 1991). Men also took family pictures and the camera was often their domain if they photographed at home. However domestic photography as a practice always remained feminised because it dealt with the family and children, considered a woman's arena.
6. While there are entire sections devoted to Aruna Asaf Ali, Pupul Jayakar, Satyajit Ray, Anna Pavlova and many others, there are also paragraphs about unknown acquaintances such as "the man in Jakimov who looked like a fair *jethamoshar*" or other friends all over the world.
7. Mira also took 16 mm footage of Rabindranath Tagore that was subsequently used by Satyajit Ray in his documentary on Tagore.
8. Shambhu Shaha and Sunil Janaah photographed extensively on the streets of Calcutta. There are very few instances of street photography in the work of these women except in some pictures taken by Manobina Roy and Debalina Mazumdar.
9. Bimal Roy started his career as a cinematographer and shot P.C. Barua's *Devdas* in 1935 among others. His first film was *Udayar Pathey* (Bengali, 1944) and he continued to make films till 1963 (*Madhumati*, Hindi), making 18 films in 19 years. He is famous for films like *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), *Sujata* (1959) and *Bandhini* (1963). His films were known for their strong social concerns. Roy was deeply influenced by the Left and was a member of IPTA.
10. Spence, Jo and Patricia Holland (eds.) *Family Snapshots: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (Virago Press, 1991).
11. Debalina has many such photographs of her daughter Komolini, and Indira Dey has an entire set of images of her daughter Anuradha in Italy.
12. G.Thomas in his *History of Photography* (1981) notes how the urge to extend the benefits of club membership to people who were scattered throughout the country took the form of an "out reach" in the shape of the postal portfolio movement. This was first started by the U.P. Amateur Photographic Association under S.H.H. Rizvi in 1940. It was soon taken up by other amateur photographic societies and clubs who went on to hold All India Salons.