



# THE ARTFUL POSE

EARLY STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY IN MUMBAI

— C. 1855–1940 —

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With a Foreword by  
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The Alkazi Collection of Photography  
NEW DELHI • LONDON • NEW YORK



DR. BHAI LADD  
MUMBAI CITY MUSEUM

Mapin Publishing  
AHMEDABAD

This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition  
*The Artful Pose: Early Studio Photography in Mumbai (c. 1855–1940)*  
held from 28 February–21 March 2010 at  
Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, Mumbai

First published in India in 2010 by  
Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd  
in association with  
Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum  
and  
The Alkazi Collection of Photography

Simultaneously published in the  
United States of America in 2010 by  
Grantha Corporation  
77 Daniele Drive, Hidden Meadows  
Ocean Township, NJ 07712  
E: mapin@mapinpub.com  
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ISBN: 978-81-89995-40-9 (Mapin)  
ISBN: 978-1-935677-00-0 (Grantha)  
LCCN: 2010923060

Editor: Vinutha Mallya | Mapin Editorial  
Design: Paulomi Shah | Mapin Design Studio  
Processed at Reproscan, Mumbai  
Printed at Thomson Press, Mumbai

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## FOREWORD

*The Artful Pose: Early Studio Photography in Mumbai (c. 1855–1940)* is the first important exhibition to be held at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum since its opening in January 2008. It is an honour for the Museum to collaborate with the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts to showcase this important collection in Mumbai for the first time. The exhibition evolved from the exciting idea of holding a show of early studio photographs in the precinct of the Museum, whose unique collection of models and dioramas speaks precisely to the tradition that these photographs embody.

The exhibition takes a commanding art-historical view of developments in photography, which had closely mirrored developments in painting, taught at colonial art schools at the time. Like the Museum's collection, which was the direct result of art school teaching and production, early studio photography borrowed much in composition, from both painting and theatre. The early-twentieth century was an exciting period of technological advances and the changes it wrought on peoples lives were dramatic. The camera and printing processes comprehensively changed the way images were produced and consumed. The ordinary man who could never have afforded a painted portrait previously, could, with the advent of the camera, present nuanced portraits of himself to the world. Photographs were tableaux of everyday lives, and they became powerful tools for acquisition of knowledge about people and places and a means of controlling and manipulating perceptions.

The exhibition is a first for many more reasons. It presents the work of Narayan Daji, the brother of the Museum's founding father, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad, for the first time. His portrayals of ordinary people are deeply evocative even though they conform to colonial requirements. There is a regal dignity in these portraits of the local people. It is the first time, as well, that the work of Shapoor N. Bhedwar is being presented in Mumbai. An accomplished photographer, he aspired to elevate the art of photography to that of painting. Each image has a lyrical, poetic quality that enshrines a moment. Light and composition are used for dramatic effect.

The exhibition also showcases some of the earliest photo-montages from the two-volume *The Oriental Races and Tribes, Residents and Visitors of Bombay* by William Johnson. In addition, there are cartes-de-viste and portraits of Parsi school girls and gentlemen that recall the paintings of early artists of J.J. School of Art, like M.F. Pithawala and M.V. Durandhar, who are represented in the Museum's collection.

In the Museum's "Origins of Mumbai Gallery", we have presented a small collection of photographs of the city rarely seen before. Mumbai's early architectural history forms a compelling narrative aside to the main focus of the exhibition. Many of the studios were located in the streets and by-lanes presented in the photographs here. It becomes almost impossible to recognise the city then from the clutter and chaos of the city now. But a few vignettes of the past remain, like some of the studios mentioned in the essays.

The exhibition retells history both as reality and as fantasy, drawing the viewer into another world. The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition has fascinating insights by eminent scholars on this world, its motivations, its references and its compulsions. It presents the history of not only early photography, but also of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

**Tasneem Zakaria Mehta**  
Managing Trustee and Honorary Director  
Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum

## A CURATORIAL NOTE

Mumbai, at the water's edge, is a metaphor for hard-earned opportunities, looking towards the horizon at the future of an entire nation. Lining India's vast mid-western shoreline lies a heaving metropolis, entranced by prospects of trade and commerce, yet equally dwelling on the nuanced infusions of religion, industry and the vision of Indian cinema. Mumbai is one of India's most distinct frontiers, where people from across the shores have come to share their cultures and often found a home. And so, in this racially diverse, shimmering harbour city, where grand gothic buildings shelter the incredible humanity, lies the core of the exhibition, namely, the extraordinary people and photographers of Mumbai [erstwhile Bombay].

The earliest images in the exhibition are by Narayan Daji, from 1855, whose poignant contribution finds its way to his brother Dr. Bhau Daji Lad's namesake institution, earlier, the Victoria and Albert Museum. The fascinating ethnography of Mumbai unfurls through the rich contours of society, its residents, labourers, castes and communities, enduring through the resilient eye of the lens, creating layered biographies through time and tempting buried memories to the fore. These silver testimonials were taken by a succession of photographers who travelled extensively in Asia and abroad, pointing their powerful lens across continents, allowing them to transgress the bounds of their own regional or national identity. Hence, the exhibition is as much about an encounter with time as about transcending the contexts it presents; as much about engaging with reality on the ground, as about ideologically breaking norms; about those dividing lines that may define place and race, as it is about crossing those thresholds to embrace a renewed identity.

Mumbai took to photography as early as 1840. The more artistic and theatrical elements found a convivial space here, revealed through a barrage of early studio photographs by local and Parsi practitioners. Early endeavours of the camera in India were directed at capturing ceremonial aspects of courtly life, the landscape and ethnography. Having viewed many such images, perhaps the outward effect was to provoke the human desire to be elsewhere and to be

transported through a photographic format. Images enabled a twin identity, creating an imaginary space that could be circulated—privately, publicly and conceptually—while feeding and sustaining that illusory entity called the "self".

Mumbai became one of the largest centres of photography's patronage and dispersal in India between the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The exhibition begins with a keen recording of native castes and tribes, that in time gradually expands to the experimentation with portraiture, performance and popular art in numerous photo studios such as S. Hormusji, Shapoor N. Bhedwar, Bombay Photo Company and EOS Photographic Co. among others. By the late-nineteenth century, professionals and independent firms, such as Bourne & Shepherd and Lala Deen Dayal & Sons, would enlarge the ambit of photography's influence as a widespread democratic medium, with enduring images of families, official and personal leather-bound souvenir albums, carte-de-visite portraits and even the city, exposed as a rising industrial metropolis.

The core themes in this exhibition therefore address the mixtures, fusions and collaborations that were developed during the late-nineteenth century, and how they were re-divided into new categories in the twentieth century. It happened to objects like photographs, which when displaced or dispersed were put under new headings in new hands. It happened to the people in photographs, who when they changed countries, took on new identities; that when dressed, as we see in the exhibition, in the graceful vestiges of a yogi, a courtier, or a woman in a bedchamber, found solace and freedom in photography's refreshingly liberal and experimental tendency.

And so, it is indeed through these photographs that we may be drawn to express our own fragile, latent yet conscious and intimate connections with the past.

**Rahaab Allana**  
Curator  
Alkazi Foundation for the Arts



FIG. 1 | UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER  
*Moghuls, Mussulmans, of Royal Family of Delhi*  
albumen silver print, 135 x 153 mm, c. 1864–1869,  
from *People of India* series, Vol. 4 (1869), text by  
Col. Meadows Taylor  
[ACP: D2005.88.0004 (24)]

## THE DAWN OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN INDIA A Complex Legacy of the Photographic Studio

Prof. Partha Mitter

Early photography in India, practiced both inside and outside the studio, offers us a fascinating social history of its patronage and usage, underscoring the need for a deeper investigation of the challenges the new medium faced and changes it wrought in visual culture. While the thrust of my paper is an investigation into the pictorial conventions adapted by the early photographers, I will pay particular attention to one aspect of its history: the rise of the posed studio photograph.

I propose a bold hypothesis here that there is a connection between photography—a product of modern technology—and the courtly art of the great Mughals who belonged to the pre-industrial era. This may seem somewhat surprising at first but, as I hope to show, there are indeed some unexpected connections between these two seemingly disparate subjects.<sup>1</sup>

By the nineteenth century, even as modern technology and other accoutrements of the British Empire had virtually obliterated Mughal courtly culture, traces of that culture survived through the modern device of photography (Fig. 1). The failure of the Great Uprising of 1857 dealt a deathblow to Mughal culture as the last Mughal emperor was banished to distant Burma. The industrial revolution transformed the East India Company from a trading outpost to a vast modern territory, held together by a wide network of railways and fast communication system, such as the telegraph. The new contraption called the “camera” seemed to epitomise the unshaken faith in technology that marked the Victorian Era.<sup>2</sup> With the arrival of the camera in the subcontinent in the 1840s, photographic societies sprang up in the presidency towns of India, namely Bombay, Madras and Calcutta [now Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata respectively], mostly dominated by Europeans. But, as the visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney points out, of the 100 members of the Photographic Society of Bengal, some 30 were Indian.<sup>3</sup>

### Photography's Early Encounters with India

The period was one of lively experiments but early on there was a growing cleavage between amateurs and professionals. Today only a few works can be identified with certainty from that period. The leading Bengali historian Rajendralal Mitra was a member of the first photographic society of India and one of the earliest Indian amateurs to take up photography but we do not know what kind of photographs he took.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, we have the works of Narayan Daji,



Kolis, Hindu Fishermen Caste.  
Bombay.

## EARLY PRECEDENTS Ethnographic Photography in Bombay, 1855–1870

Akshaya Tankha

*“Objects arise as figures in the landscape of empire;  
narratives and actions put them in motion”*

W.J.T. Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Mitchell’s telling remark on the nature of colonialism and collecting practices of that time finds an enchanting visual echo in the pages of photographic albums from the turn of the nineteenth century. Here we find several instances where the photographic image encompasses a journey as much as it does an illustration, reconfiguring objects as figures in the landscape of colonial photography.

When we take an image like Figure 11, shot against a uniformly covered backdrop, and juxtapose it with Figure 12, we see that the latter is subjected to a creative manipulation, in which the original photograph is reanimated as a composite print with an endless, montage landscape. Figure 11 appears unpolished, less than certain about how the people in the frame may be read. In comparison, the anonymous figures from the same community, fore-grounded against a faux depth of field in Figure 12, are now co-opted into the still emerging arena of ethnographic photography, coaxing the viewer to imbibe the visual association that the composite print enables between the sitters and the circumscribed world behind them. The concise caption and a lengthy descriptive account of the community in question, accompanying the image in Figure 12, may be read as the narrative that mobilizes these figures, putting them in motion within the realm of early anthropological photography—a genre actively nurtured under the gaze of the Raj.

While the particular subjects in the two images might have been different, the history of the two photographers and the lives of their images were intertwined in an intricate web of early photographic practice that flourished in Bombay [now Mumbai] in the 1860s. Brought together as part of this exhibition at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, the vintage photographs showcase some of the earliest examples of ethnographic photography as practiced in India from the turn of the nineteenth century. Although somewhat nebulous as a genre, these early precedents are critically important to study the seeds of what became integral aspects of the field in later years. At the same time, it is pertinent to recognize the creative freedom that these pioneering experiments are characterized by, a freedom that gradually waned in the later repertoire of ethnographic imagery.

FIG. 11 | NARAYAN DAJI  
*Kolis, Hindu Fishermen Caste, Bombay*  
albumen silver print, c. 1855–1870  
[ACP: 2005.01.0001 (09)]



## FACING THE LENS

### Women in Bombay's Photographic Studios

Suryanandini Sinha

Gendered identities in photographic studios capture the essence of this exhibition, by drawing attention to the intricacies of portraiture in India. Women as particular subjects in studios throughout the subcontinent and even in Bombay [now Mumbai] have had a perceptible relationship with the photographic visual; the processes and internal dynamics of image taking are specific to their social and sexual identities. While each photographic studio may have its own history of technology, aesthetics, expertise and clientele, a large sample of images such as these merits a thematic examination of the conventional tropes used to position women as subjects of the lens and incarnations of larger sociological concerns.

Women have been the subjects of studio photography ever since the medium's inception, embodying many complexities of representation through a century-and-a-half of photographic history in India. Questions and revelations abound in these images, and hence I seek to analyze some of the first samples of studio photos that foreground women, in order to diagnose how gender also conditions the dynamics of visibility. While studio photography, since the early-twentieth century, has undergone much technological change, it traces its roots to the initial aesthetics that emerged at the inception of the medium, while it was still used outside the precincts and purposes of the studio. I seek to elaborate here, some part of the wider history pertinent to studio photography in India, together with significant theoretical possibilities presented by the portrait photos of women.

The year 1840 saw India's first camera in the city of Calcutta [now Kolkata]. With the headquarters of the English East India Company located here, the city became the site from where the British commissioned professionals to take daguerreotype images surveying the Indian landscape and architecture. This was followed by country-wide anthropometric portraits of the various Indian native "types" that featured in projects such as the eight-volume the *People of India* series (1868–1875) containing more than 400 mounted prints. The camera was hence used to document different castes and tribes of the Indian populace, either for fear of their extinction or rebellion against the Empire. Photography thus developed a vocabulary that aided the discipline in both academic and, more strongly, political ways to seek order and gain control in an unfamiliar cultural and social fabric. Ethnographic photography emerged as the precedent to studio-based photography, and carried over some of its technical and aesthetic vocabulary as well.

FIG. 24 | BOMBAY PHOTOTYPE CO.  
*Bombay Beauties*  
postcard, 139 x 87mm, c. 1910,  
printed in Luxemburg [ACP: 2001.15.1197]



## PERFORMANCE FOR CAMERA

### Shapoor N. Bhedwar and the Dimensions of Studio Photography in Bombay

Rahaab Allana

Light and expression are perhaps the two principal elements infused in the creation of a strong portrait. To aesthetically manage the luminosity upon the sitter, and thereby accentuate his/her character, were central components for the production of sepia-toned depictions in the nineteenth century. Though, just as these artistic means were essential requisites for proclaiming a handsome likeness, so too was the space in which the cameraman endeavoured to coax his clientele to their fullest, photogenic potential. Interestingly, in the mid-nineteenth century, photographic studios appeared as portable galleries and improvised quarters, ranging from pushcarts, horse-drawn vans to flatboats and railroad cars. They contained a minimal area to pose the sitter, a camera, which in late-nineteenth century would have been the revolutionary Eastman Kodak No.1, a darkroom to sensitize the plates and another adjoining space to prepare and mount finished prints.<sup>1</sup> One of the most important elements here was the need for natural illumination, which was more often provided by a skylight. Studios located in buildings, therefore, had to be placed on the top floor. In order to minimise the effect of the intensity and quality of changing light from morning to noon and then dusk, mirrors and reflectors were used to focus the glow upon the subject (Fig. 35).

The expansion of such studios in India began with the arrival of equipment to the ports, the most active of which were the cities of Bombay and Calcutta [now Mumbai and Kolkata respectively]. As is the case today, Bombay was a commercially driven metropolis, and photography became a means of bridging the linked fields of patronage and industry, displaying a vast cultural tapestry of its people. With rising commerce and trade, the need for sophisticated studios steadily increased in order to pander to the shifting tastes of those who wished to be celebrated by the lens. A vast canvas of society from all walks saw themselves magically imprinted on paper, and with time, photography was no longer treated as an isolated form of documentation or surveillance, but rather a means for articulating a palpable correlation between the arts. The following essay is therefore an attempt to value the studio as a liberating and convivial space, wherein the union of conjecture and culture allowed for an evolving visual vocabulary at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In this context, the exhibition presents the work of a provocative wielder of the medium, Shapoor N. (Nusserwanji?) Bhedwar, through his unique album now in the Alkazi Collection



Fig. i | S. HORMUSJI, BOMBAY  
 Verso of Cabinet Card, 164 x 106 mm,  
 c. 1880–1890s  
 Photographer's Ref. 15806  
 [ACP: D2003.05.0048]

## FROM BOMBAY TO MUMBAI Studios of the City

Rahaab Allana

A cursory glance at the mounts and versos of innumerable photographs from the late-nineteenth century in Mumbai reveal exciting aesthetic and sociological traces of the city's cultural history. A majority of the studios were located in the Fort area, Merewether Street or on Kalbadevi Road—locales that catered to a growing middle class at the time. Among the popular studios were: P. Gomes & Co., P. Vuccino & Co., S. Hormusji, National Photo Co. (fig. i), Fred a Lair and innumerable others. These studios expedited their sales by advertising along artistic lines with a clear connection to a pictorial tradition, more so of the Victorian era, rather than merely being studios patronised for straightforward documentation.

One of the early studios that still exists is Indian Art Studio (fig. ii), or Premiere Palace, founded in 1917, located on Princess Street, as it was once known, now functioning under proprietor

Fig. ii | The exterior of **Indian Art Studio**, founded in 1917. Photo: Manoj Pandey, 2009

Fig. iii | **Vanguard Studio** established in 1927, allegedly the oldest studio in Girgaum. Photo: Manoj Pandey, 2009

