



MASTERING THE LENS

BEFORE AND AFTER CARTIER-BRESSON IN PONDICHERY

INTRODUCTIONS BY

H.E. Mr François Richier

THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR TO INDIA

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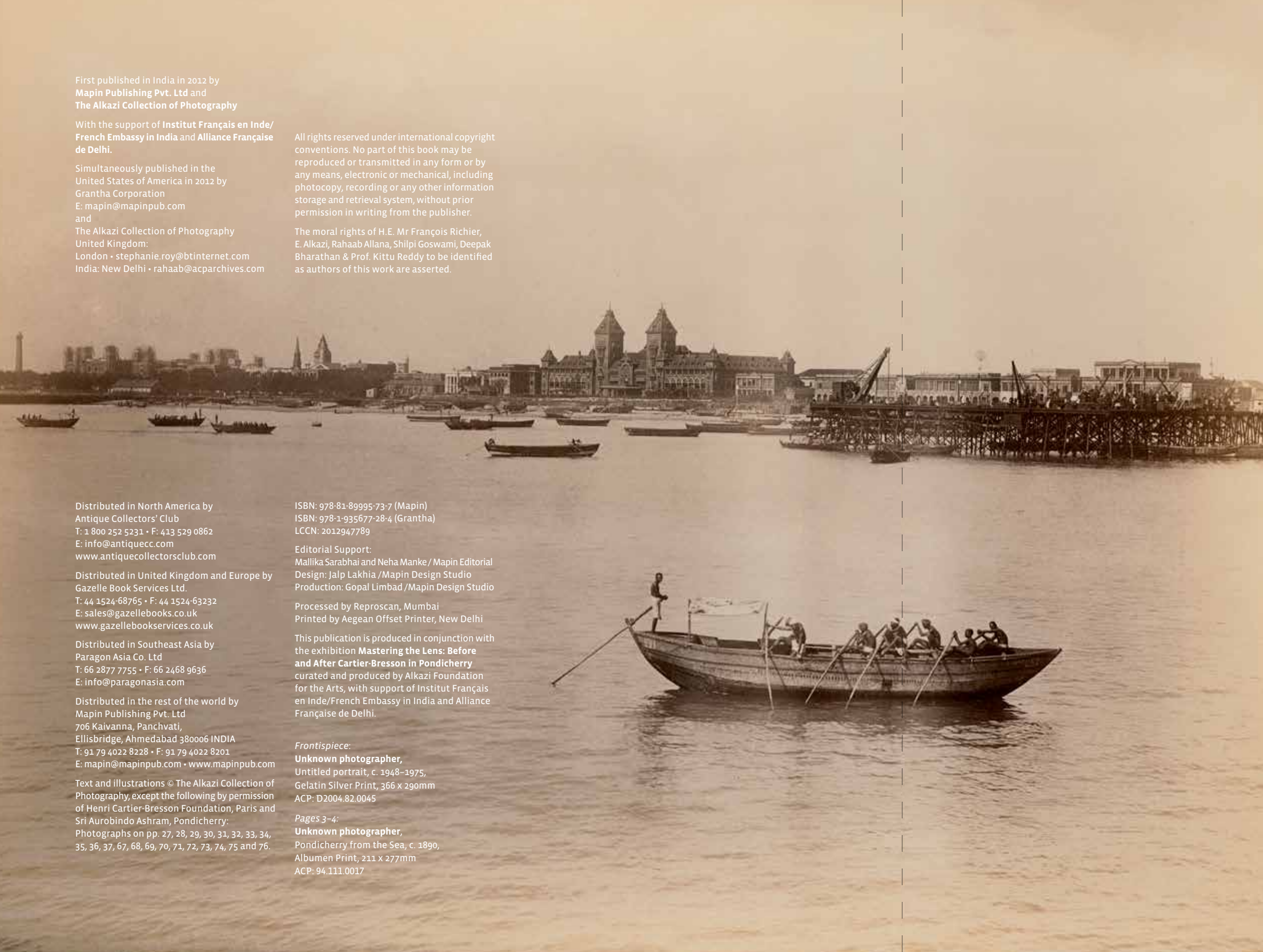
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Unknown photographer,
Untitled portrait, c. 1948–1975,
Gelatin Silver Print, 366 x 290mm
ACP: D2004.82.0045

Pages 3–4:
Unknown photographer,
Pondicherry from the Sea, c. 1890,
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ACP: 94.111.0017



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RENEWING TIES

LINKING INDIA AND FRANCE THROUGH THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY

H.E. Mr François Richier

THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR TO INDIA

India and France have a shared history of mutual fascination and reciprocal influences through commercial and cultural exchanges dating back to the 17th century. It started with the first meeting between French explorers and Indian maharajahs; and was to continue in the 20th century with the friendship forged between André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture, and Jawaharlal Nehru.

The exchange of ideas is most evident in Pondicherry, where the first French merchants had set foot, producing a unique cultural melting pot, which includes original architecture, a deep-rooted attachment to French language and many other legacies within the framework of arts. More than any other place, Pondicherry has always been a gateway to new perspectives of self-development, artistic fulfilment and intellectual enrichment, particularly for French people who are attracted to Indian culture, philosophy and spirituality.

An epitome of this tradition was the meeting of famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and one of India's most important philosophers of the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo together with his companion, Mirra Alfassa—"the Mother". Cartier-Bresson had just founded Magnum Photos agency, with other great French photographers such as Robert Capa and David Seymour, and soon achieved international recognition. In the aftermath of the World War II, he had become the leader of a photography movement that replaced the old tradition of over-sophisticated and over-posed images—by shooting vivid glimpses of real life, be they historical events or day-to-day occupations, transcending the boundaries between art and journalism.

His quest for new challenges and self-improvement led him to India several times, where he even met Mahatma Gandhi in 1947. In 1950, thanks to the Mother's intervention, he was able to visit Aurobindo Ashram, where he took some of the photographs presented in this publication, a few months before Sri Aurobindo's death.

For too long, these pictures had remained unheralded. But thanks to the work of the Alkazi Foundation, they are now available to an enlarging audience. Over the last 30 years, Mr E. Alkazi has privately gathered pictures from the 19th and 20th centuries, revealing lesser-known aspects of Indian socio-economic, political or cultural history, not only to scholars but also, through various exhibitions to a larger public. France is honoured and pleased to have now brought to light, through Cartier-Bresson's eye and earlier works from the archive, the ambivalent poetic spell of Pondicherry's old times.

At a time when the world is undergoing a major transformation, where globalisation through cultural exchanges is reaching an unprecedented level, these pictures of Cartier-Bresson are a beautiful meditation on what France and India, two different and ancient cultures, can learn from each other—primarily the universality of art and spirituality. That was certainly what Emperor Ashoka thought when he wrote, more than 2000 years ago: "I am proud of my humanity every time I appreciate poets and artists from other countries than mine".

THE ENDURING IMAGE

E. Alkazi

CHAIRMAN, ALKAZI FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

The history of photography in India is fundamentally linked to the French invention of the medium in the 19th century, and the pioneering discovery of Sir Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833) who simply produced a 'view' through his window in 1826 by use of a *camera obscura*. Less than two decades hence, the medium gradually establishes itself in India exposing the vast expanse of her territories and the diversity of its people as part of a continuing visual tradition. At an art historical level, the production of small format, easily portable photographs are also reminiscent of the Mughal miniature paintings that revealed the lyrical intensity of a patron's enduring image on paper. Both occurrences, painting and then photography, though separated by the continuum of time, manner and perhaps intent, mark a cultural collision that has evolved into the present state of photography as a cultural tool and an incisive form of expression.

Some of the early French photographers in India include Alex de la Grange (born 1825), and Oscar Reutemann (1829-1905) who captured not only architectural splendours but the humanity that steered India from a colony to an independent nation. It is with homage to them and their contemporaries that an archive of images from the 19th century becomes part of our collective legacy and heritage. At a more conceptual level, photography developed two adjacent lives: the first as a testament to reality, and the other as an abiding practice of the arts. Both lives were equally viable and deeply in tune with the modern demands of photography: to challenge reality and to explore the abstractions of human imagination.

Romanticism as an aesthetic position was introduced and then transgressed by some of the leading French photographers of their time: Henri le Sec and Jean Paul Gaude, the portraiture of Nadar and the urban modernism of Eugene Atget. This later evolves into the social documentary photograph, a leading practitioner of which is Henri Cartier Bresson (1908-2004). Though his time in India has been well documented, the events that transpired in Pondicherry, namely at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the 1950s remain an obscure part of photo-histories. Reproduced in this catalogue for the first time the images here were collaborative, as Bresson envisioned them with the guidance of the Mother, and the consent of Sri Aurobindo himself.

The 1960s mark the coming of age of modern photography in India with an unprecedented number of practitioners, often anonymous, who were near contemporaries of Bresson. Once again, the Aurobindo Ashram comes to the fore highlighting a forgotten period of experimentation and practice. Varied initiatives of photography begin to emerge, taking from pictorial traditions in fine art and re-examining them with the lens. The unique blend of French and Indian sensibilities allows for a more expanded understanding of the influence of photography at a practical and discursive level.

The world of photography thus enters an enlarged arena of artistic influences, forged as part of its global initiative: its ability, today, to draw in people and spaces from different cultures into a common purview and engender a creative response. This exhibition is then an exploration of lesser-known, but extremely illuminating works from the visual archives of the Alkazi Collection, with which we envisage new frontiers of research, and renewed ways of linking photographers and artists to their times, as well as to the present. We are therefore grateful to the Embassy of France, India, as well as the Alliance Française de Delhi for collaborating with us at an institutional level and consolidating alliances for the future of our two nations.



Venkatesh Shirodkar
 Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, c. 1948–1975,
 Illusion, Gelatin Silver Print, 245 x 291 mm,
 Rolleiflex Automat—Tessar F.3,5;1/2 Sec. at F.8. Dev. in D.K. 20;
 Enlarged on Bromesko
 ACP: D2004.82.0008

I really believe there are things nobody would see
 if I didn't photograph them.

Diane Arbus

SILENT AS AN APPARITION A HIDDEN LEGACY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Rahaab Allana

Bresson may have uttered the same words with reference to his rare, self-commissioned album featuring 119 images emerging from Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. Instead, his careful observations about the Ashram as well as the city, generously provided by the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Paris brings forth a hidden reserve of photo-history, untouched by the scholarly world or viewed by practitioners. Bresson meticulously pens his thoughts, occasionally jotting down segments of his conversations with the French-born leader of Auroville, commonly known as ‘The Mother’, who meanders in and out of his frames, ‘silent as an apparition’. Her ‘strong, kind and fascinating eyes’ prompt a personal, if not biographical, perspective on photography history.

At approximately the same time in India, photographers like Margaret Bourke White were traveling with (the late) Sunil Janah, while others like Shambu Saha were developing a form of Industrial photography. However, upon further investigation, we have discovered that Pondicherry too underwent a visual ‘worlding’ that marks a crucial moment in the development of photography here. The Ashram harboured young talent by providing state of the art equipment, and in the form of an annual Salon Festival for almost 25 years (c.1955-80). The kinds of photos that were submitted and selected explored a dialogue on

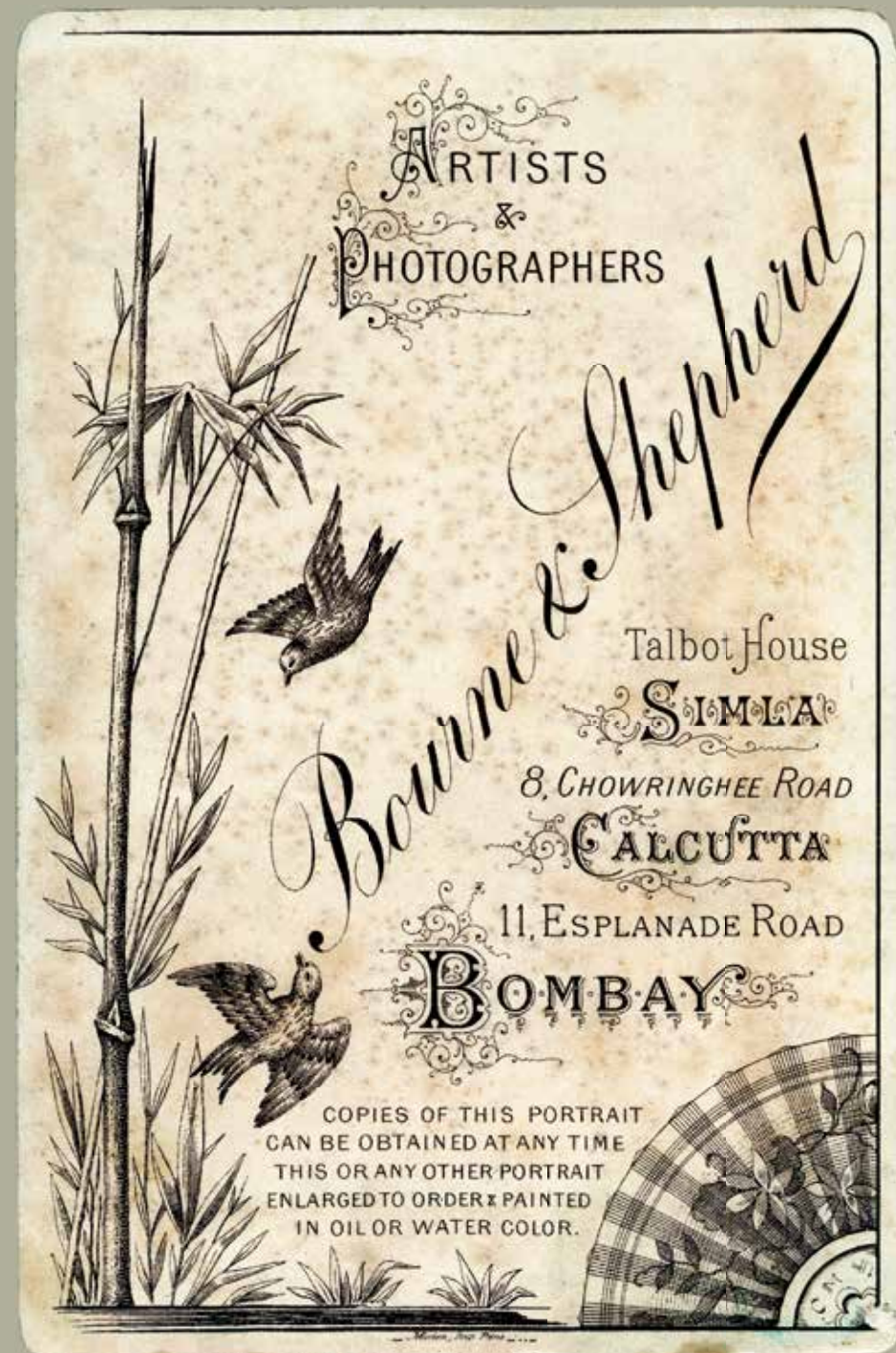
artistic intent and reception, with evidence of a continuing aesthetic of ‘pictorial’ photography—a predominant form tied to the formal aspects of fine art.

This was a curatorial route into the past, through ‘media’ and the conceptual linking of mannerisms and tropes. The geographical region itself had been visited by visual artists from the 17th century, who documented it’s serene vistas—brought to life as an amalgamation of Christian and local elements in architecture and urban sprawl. The use of antiquarian maps from the 18th and 19th century reveals an intricately Europeanised town, though structurally segregated, featuring a shared use of motifs and style. The arrival of commercial photographers Bourne and Shepherd, or indeed mysterious French photographer, Charles Moyne uncovers an expansive city of citadels and churches.

The unearthing of archival material is balanced by a few surviving photographers from the 1960s, some of whom have been recently interviewed. As with vintage photographs, modern landscape photographers in the Aurobindo Ashram carry on the legacy of image-making into the 20th century. The temporal jump from the 19th to the 20th century is exemplified through extraordinary images of Indian practitioners such as Tara Jauhar and Sri Venkatesh at Aurobindo Ashram. The photographers though distinct in their technique, express how personal

narratives were encouraged as part of project-based shoots. However the presentation of an album by Bresson in conjunction with this work can be considered a notional extension, showcasing his more ‘amateur’ experiments at a time when photographers were playfully tempering light and contrast; a form of ‘artistic darkness’ for instance that Bresson was asked to consider upon instruction from the Mother while shooting Sri Aurobindo during *darshan*.

This exhibition addresses how photographers changed the course of photography with stylistic ‘departures’ during the 1950s and 60s, whilst using images from the 19th century to examine a sense of lineage. The archive is positioned to support the coming of modernity, by way of an iconographic association. The forces at play at a compositional level as well as those of patronage and practice manage to fulfill the claims made on photography by amateur photographers trying relentlessly to infuse a subjective manner in their practices. Though such ventures stand in contrast to more mainstream journalistic forays, which Bresson is acclaimed for, we witness an intended ‘shift’ in temperament and focus from the 19th century: an abounding personal commentary, largely devoid of commercial intent—which inadvertently influences the known legacies of photography in India.



Bourne & Shepherd
 11, Esplanade Road, Bombay, c. 1880–1890
 Verso of Cabinet Card, 165 x 110 mm,
 ACP: 94.75.0004

MASTERING THE LENS

BEFORE AND AFTER CARTIER-BRESSON IN PONDICHERRY

Shilpi Goswami and Deepak Bharathan

“The power—and authority—of the visual in modern Indian public sphere emerges from the fact that it inhabits such an ‘interocular’ or ‘intervisual’ field, overlapping, intersecting, and interlocking with other images and in conjuncture with different media, triggering associations, catalyzing memories, rendering the unfamiliar recognizable, and frequently reconfiguring the recognizable, so that, as earlier images... [they] are forever waiting to erupt in the present as they continually migrate, moving in and out of new times and changing political contexts.”

Sumathi Ramaswamy¹

The intellectual charge of the statement above lies in its recognition of the complexities involved in the development of media strategies, especially at a nascent stage of intercultural relations occurring in the colonial period. Photography as a form of reportage, as well as individual perception undergoes a ‘worlding’ in India, based on its progressions, influences and manifestations across all spheres of socio-political activity.

Photography emerged in India shortly after the public announcement of the Calotype in London and Daguerreotype’s invention in 1839 in Paris. From 1840 onwards, the governments of imperial nations realised its potential for recording the antiquities of the ‘Orient’. Other European photographers in India at the time such as Samuel Bourne (1834–1912) or the French aristocrat-photographer Baron Alexis Aimé de La Grange (1825–1917) captured the essence of

photography’s nascent use: a form of reportage, documentation and inventory keeping. The story of early photography in India is hence deeply aligned to the influence of European culture eastwards, primarily as a technology that was introduced in Calcutta, one of the principal states of the British Presidency, as early as 1840.² The rise of photography in India, practiced both inside and outside the studio, offers not only a fascinating social history of its patronage, usage and circulation, but also its transition to an art form and practice, underscoring the need for a deeper investigation of the challenges it faced and developments it wrought on visual culture, then as well as now.³

Photography was taken up with alacrity by amateurs, aspirant professionals, commercial practitioners as well as by the apparatus of the colonial state.⁴ The 1860s witnessed many pioneers arriving in the subcontinent

and establishing long-standing firms during this time, and soon Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai) developed their own unique photographic societies. However, the lineage provided by the medium does not only present evidence of mainstream studios in larger metropolitan cities, but also of vernacular traditions and experiments that help to deconstruct its effect on the subcontinent as a whole. A reference to ateliers of artists, who later interacted with photography in Rajasthan, substantiates this notion, elucidated in another publication on *Painted Photographs*⁵ from the Alkazi Collection.

The function of a popular or emancipated tradition in India therefore arises out of the conversation between tradition and modernity, the past and the continuing present. Hence the notion of a ‘cannon’ in photography history here is fraught with ambivalences, bearing in mind the growing

BRIEF NOTE ON SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Prof. Kittu Reddy

*“Sarvam Khalu idam Brahman”
Verily, all this is Brahman.*

Sri Aurobindo Ashram is an institution dedicated to the practice of Yoga (*sadhana*). We believe that unlike a traditional ashram, the activities here are not engaged in for their own sake. Though there is an immense desire to encourage physical development for the enhancement of a spiritual life, there is also an aesthetic or conceptual thrust inculcated by the notion of *nishkama karma*, or desireless work.

At the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, the students are trained with an integrated bearing, one that considers all aspects of their development and maturing, including physical education in the form of athletics, gymnastics, combative techniques etc.; as well as intellectual training via art-based activities so that the aesthetic development of the student is also nurtured.¹

We feel that ‘Art’ must be used to refine and sensitize man’s nature. It helps to purify and respond more keenly to a sense of the present, as well as understand ‘reality’ as opposed to the external composure of things—in all forms of Nature.

In the words of Sri Aurobindo himself, in *The National Value of Art*
At a certain stage of human development, the aesthetic sense is of infinite value in

this direction. It raises and purifies conduct by instilling a distaste for the coarse desires and passions of the savage, for the rough, uncouth and excessive in action and manner, and restraining both feeling and action by a striving after the decent, the beautiful, the fit and seemly...

Plato in his Republic has dealt with extraordinary emphasis on the importance of music in education; as is the music to which a people is accustomed, so, he says in effect, is the character of that people.

So wonderfully has God made the world that a man using a simple combination of lines, an unpretentious harmony of colours, can raise this apparently insignificant medium to suggest absolute and profound truths with a perfection which language labours with difficulty to reach.

A nation surrounded daily by the beautiful, noble, fine and harmonious becomes that which it is habituated to contemplate and realises the fullness of the expanding Spirit in itself.²

Consequently, all forms of art flourish in the Ashram, encouraged by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo was a poet and nurtured any number of them in the Ashram. The Mother too was an accomplished artist herself, having studied art systematically at the *Ecole Des Beaux Arts*, Paris. She, in

turn, encouraged and trained many artists in the Ashram. “Photography is an art when the photographer is an artist.”³ As stated at the inauguration of *The Federation of Indian Photography*, by The Mother, these words highlight her keen interest in photography as art practice.

In the 1950s, when photography came to be accepted as an art form in India, The Mother initiated photographic activity to a large extent. Photography was organised into a body named “*Ashram Photography*”. This department, in turn, organised the *Pondicherry International Salon of Photography*, which received photographic entries from all over the world. Enthusiasts from more than 25 countries participated in the exhibition. From more than a 1000 entries received, about a 100 of the best were exhibited and a catalogue was printed.⁴

Though there were pioneering photographers such as Bresson who visited the Ashram, The Mother took a deep interest in maintaining her aesthetic sensibilities, often speaking with photographers about their images extensively. Special panels were often exhibited by invitation to famous internationally known photographers, such as portrait photographer Yusuf Karsh of Canada, and Cecil Beaton, the fashion photographer from the United Kingdom.⁵

As seen in the current exhibition, there were several Indian photographers of merit such as Venkatesh, whose artistic talents drew praise from The Mother herself; Robi Ganguli whose photographs were exhibited in International exhibitions, who also served as a member on the panel of judges in photographic exhibitions in the country. He also was responsible for many publications that were brought out by *The Federation of Indian Photography*. Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya and Tara Jauhar, because of their close proximity to The Mother had the opportunity to take innumerable pictures of her. Others included Chimanbhai Patel and Vidyavrata.⁶

Eventually, the Mother even had an art gallery built for the purpose in 1955. It was remodelled in 1980s as a modern exhibition hall.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.sriaurobidosociety.org.in/subnav/educentr.htm>
- 2 Ghosh, Aurobindo and Manoj Das, *The Hour of God: Selections from His Writings*. New Delhi: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust and Sahitya Akademi. 1995
- 3 The Mother, On Education (Volume 12, Collected Works of the Mother, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, Second Edition 2002), pg 241.
- 4 For further readings, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives can be contacted.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 As narrated by Robi Ganguli (b. 1932), a photographer residing in the Ashram.



Venkatesh Shirodkar
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry
[Untitled Portrait], c. 1948 - 1975
Gelatin Silver Print, 295 x 218 mm
ACP: D2004.82.0019

BIOGRAPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHERS

Compiled by Jennifer Chowdhry

BOURNE & SHEPHERD

The Bourne & Shepherd studio was initially founded in 1863 in Simla, by Samuel Bourne, a bank clerk and a keen and extremely competent amateur photographer, newly arrived from England, along with William Howard, already an established professional Calcutta-based studio photographer. The studio started trading under the name Howard and Bourne, but by 1864, they were joined in partnership by Charles Shepherd, a well-established photographer. Subsequently, Howard no longer appears in the partnership, and the firm becomes Bourne & Shepherd. Further branches of

the studios were established in Calcutta in 1867 and Bombay in 1870. The firm Bourne & Shepherd published a number of catalogues of *Photographic Views in India* along with a catalogue on studies of the racial types. At its peak, it was the most successful commercial firm in 19th and early 20th century India, with outlets in London and Paris, and also ran a mail order service. Bourne left India in 1870, followed by Shepherd who appears to have left the country by about 1878, leaving the firm active. The studio still continues to function in Kolkata under Indian ownership, making it one of the oldest running studios in the world.

C. (POSSIBLY CHARLES) MOYNE

Moyne was probably a French photographer who worked in South India. The exhibition catalogue *The Colonial Eye: Early Portrait Photography in India* (published by Koehler & Amelang, Leipzig 2012) cites that he ran a studio in Pondicherry in the 1860s. Some images from Calcutta have also been attributed to him in the auction catalogue *The East Indies: Rare Travel Photographs from the Nineteenth Century* (Bernard J. Shapero Rare Books, London).

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON (1908-2004)

Considered to be the father of photo-journalism, Cartier-Bresson was born in Chanteloup-en-Brie (France) of prosperous middle-class parents. Cartier-Bresson's early training in art (for two years, he

studied painting in a Paris studio) helped develop a subtle and sensitive eye for composition. This was seen as one of his greatest assets as a photographer. In 1947, along with Robert Capa, George Rodger and David "Chim" Seymour, Cartier-Bresson formed Magnum Photos. Assignments for major magazines took him across Europe, the United States, India, Russia and China. He visited India in 1947-48, 1950 and again in 1966. His images of the funeral of Mahatma Gandhi won him the Overseas Press Club Award. Many books devoted to his photographs were published in the 50s and 60s; the most famous being *The Decisive Moment* (1952). Cartier-Bresson died in Céreste (Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, France) at the age of 95.

Photographs by
HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON
APRIL, 1950

VENKATESH SHIRODKAR (1914-2010)

He joined the Aurobindo Ashram as a young man and gradually took up photography in the Ashram. He was a self-trained photographer, a painter along with being a good cricketer. He then left the Ashram for a few years to get married and later returned to pursue photography. He is survived by his two daughters, Sujata and Pratibha who live in the Ashram.

Venkatesh,
Sri Aurobindo Ashram,
PONDICHERRY.

Venkatesh
Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Pondicherry.

VENKATESH
PHOTOGRAPHIC DEPARTMENT
SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM
PONDICHERRY.

TARA JAUHAR (B. 1936-)

She joined the Ashram at Pondicherry in 1943 at the age of eight. Tara grew up and received her education at the Ashram's school. Her main interest in photography was to be able to assist in the documentation of the Ashram, its activities and its people. Being very close to the Mother, she photographed a majority of the surviving images of her.

TARA JAUHAR
SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM
PONDICHERRY-2.

SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM SALON
1973
PONDICHERRY

These pictures of the Mother were distributed to the followers. Furthermore, she had a particular fondness for shooting children. She left Pondicherry at the age of 41 and came to Delhi in 1976 to spearhead the work at the Delhi branch of the Ashram, along with her father, Shri Surendra Nath Jauhar. Tara Jauhar is also the author of *Growing Up With the Mother* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1999) and *The Mother: Selected Photos* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch Trust, New Delhi, 2009).

PRANAB KUMAR BHATTACHARYA (1923-2010)

He was born in Behrampore, a district town 116 miles north of Calcutta. From his early childhood, Pranab was interested in sports. Affectionately called Dada, he first came to

the Ashram in 1942 and settled there in 1945. A close confidant of the Mother, he learnt all about Sri Aurobindo's yoga and his teachings from her. When the Mother came to know of his interest in photography, she gifted him a camera. Along with Tara Jauhar, he clicked many images of the Mother. He headed the Department of Physical Education and Photography in the Ashram, helping in the selection of images for a bulletin published by the Ashram on physical education.

VIDYAVRATA (1919-1999)

He joined the Ashram at a young age and took up photography. He did a lot of experiments with his camera and used trick photography to capture some of his images, i.e. by incorporating the technique of superimposition, double exposure and collage. Many of his photographs were published in Indian magazines like the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Dharmyug* and *Saptahik Hindustan*, to name a few. He also participated in the Berlin International Photographic Exhibition held in 1960 and was awarded the Pondicherry State Award in 1997. He is survived by a son and a daughter, named Devanshu and Lys, respectively. His son lives in Madras (now Chennai) and has the repository of images shot by him.

