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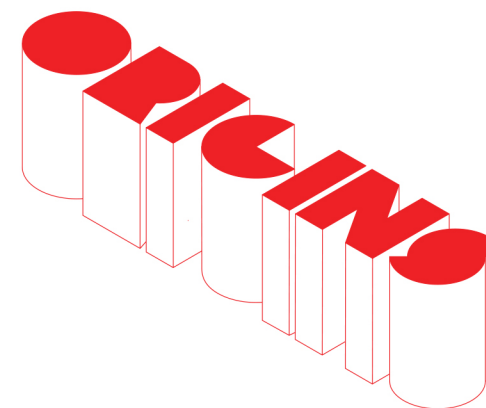
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We are delighted to introduce you to Origins, an exhibition of photographs that captures the rich diversity of the connections between the UK and India through the work of thirty-one emerging and established photographers from both nations. The call for entries for this unique initiative in collaboration with the Alkazi Foundation received an overwhelming response; and this careful selection is a reflection of the richness of the stories and perspectives that the project has uncovered.

The notion of Origins is a complex one. The connection between the UK and India is constantly evolving and the synthesis of cultures leads to fusions that need to be constantly reimagined. The narrative based photographs displayed in this exhibition depict the range of possible interpretations of the term 'origin'. From Islamic communities in the UK to Anglo Indian groups in India, their subjects are as diverse as their photographers, many of whom defy the homogeneity that the term implies.

We are delighted to showcase this exhibition at the British Council's exhibition space in New Delhi as the first manifestation of PhotoUKIndia, an exciting initiative that seeks to build relationships by creating international opportunities for photographers and fostering the mutual sharing of ideas through art. PhotoUKIndia is as much an opportunity for critical discussion as a platform to promote visual art.

We very much look forward to this being the first in a series of cross-cultural projects focussing on the reimagining of identities between the UK and India.

#### **Rob Lynes**

Director, British Council India

*What else is there now for me to view  
I have experienced being in love with you.*  
Faiz Ahmed Faiz

Familiarity, dissonance, passivity and distance are the shifting fault lines of a generation consumed by visualising memories or imagining them. In a lasting image of a nudist colony in the UK, its residents perform a social experiment – rather a return to their very nature – with a photographer in close quarters, posing them as specimens, an anomaly in a culture consumed by layers of convention. A return to nature is real, and in some cases, obscure.

In order to arrest the fragmentation of histories and time from complete abstraction, this initiative considers rooted connectivities between images and meaning that are overtly personal, deeply subjective and meticulously self-scrutinised. As the thematic, *Origins*, itself draws on the cerebral as much as sentimental, the harvest too is about a precise measurement of effects and equations one has with those closest to us, and at times their projections of us – individuals, communities and spaces that are as much an anchor, as a debility.

To pose questions of affiliation about *where* and *why* one is situated, either physically or by temperament, is a shifting scale that changes direction and balance, culturally, politically and in this case visually. By crossing the lines between countries that have a shared memory, this initiative takes a freewheeling form, wherein images are drivers of campaign to align the eye with a mutable world – a global contagion of manufactured images – but also a sieve for practices that likens self-expression with societal transformation. Only threads at a time, and a drive towards reconciliation, but never entirely integrated.

This is where the alignment of the language of photography and its propositions are most tenuous, if not uncharted. How do bracketed images from 2 nations express each other's impressions and limitations, or mobilize each other's tendencies and freedoms without mirroring their own ethics?

I take some recourse in William Blake, who speaks of cleaning, if not opening the doors of perception in order to see things as they are...infinite. And here too lies a nucleus – the subcutaneous matter of the mind that extracts and adds to its mass by offering something renewed from something past. Hence, the force filed around identity becomes even more porous. The contingency of memory, as of images is that the more we exert control over them, the more random they may seem...if not more reliant. On other images from others lands.

One never reaches home... But where paths that have an affinity for each other intersect, the whole world looks like home, for a time."

- Hermann Hesse, *Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth*

Every journey, metaphorical or otherwise has its moment of beginning. Nothing more clearly elucidates who we are, where we come from – our *origins* – than well-thumbed family albums – old photographs pored over, with a fascination for a time so different from now. They are visual chronicles of our personal histories – one we delight in, finding great grandparents, grandparents, sundry relatives, recognizable strangers staring back at us with a deep sense of the familiar. Many of their stories are lost with time, and forgotten over generations. Other histories find ways to be re born.

Origin – the point at which something begins. Historical, anthropological, religious and Darwinian in connotation. And yet, so open to (re)interpretation. The Origins project, the first event of PHOTOUKINDIA, aimed at starting a dialogue for a broader, trans-national understanding about where we come from and where we belong. The work in the catalogue includes a combination of texts written about personal engagements with the visual, as well as fiction and poetry, along with the artists statements of the thirty-one photographers featured in the exhibition. We approached six writers, all well established in their respective fields as academics, practitioners and novelists and asked them to respond to the idea of origins, keeping in mind their personal histories and engagements to the visual through their work or otherwise.

Of these texts, Divia Patel – who is a curator at the V&A Museum – has given us perhaps the most personal – a glimpse into her family albums. Photographs taken by her father, who she lost at a very young age, led to a journey of discovery. As she states, her essay is, therefore "... a subjective narrative of identity and origin, informed by the tools of my profession. It is assembled through the images, supplemented with the memories of other actors in the narrative and, inevitably, it is shaped by what I would like the photographs to tell me." This intervention of *what we would like the photograph to tell us* opens the imagination to a re telling of events as they happened.

Christopher Pinney, well known in the field of visual culture in South Asia, talks about his initial tryst with images that would become a life-long engagement. In the early years, he states "...I found myself more and more interested in what villagers did with images... Before I surrendered myself to local aesthetics I always had the sense (which was a cause of frustration) that there were two kinds of photographs: those I wanted and those villagers wanted." Over the course of thirty-five years, Pinney has spent a considerable amount of time in Nagda (Madhya Pradesh) observing, documenting and engaging with photography and seeing the transition in a small town from analogue, to digital and now to photographs taken on cell phones.



As a young adult, Clare Harris first came to Mussourie, India to volunteer at a Tibetan refugee community. The experience prompted a life-long association with the study of India and Tibet and a career as an academic and curator in Oxford that has included working with historic photographic material from both Tibet and India. Currently researching vernacular visual cultures of Imperial India, Clare shares with us picture postcards, a type of photographic object, from her personal archive. Postcards are perhaps the most intimate of photographic objects – these snapshots with brief handwritten notes have been circulating for at least two hundred years, and were disseminated in large quantities during colonial times.

The novelist Janice Pariat responds to an image from Rachel Cunningham's series *Spectres* with a poem, titled *Specimen*. The photographs explore the remnants of India's colonial past – in this particular case, the image is of a once resplendent lioness, now stuffed and in a glass case, gathering dust:

...Whose hand slayed you?  
Whose hand brought you back,  
wicked necromancer of the old  
days?...

Chandrabhas Choudhury's whimsical short story is about Abdullah, a migrant to Bombay working in a restaurant. Subtle in its telling, the story explores notions of the attraction of large cities, the frustration and dashed dreams of migrants in teeming cities and the power of imagery – in the case, a photograph the grand Victoria Terminus – glimpsed in a newspaper, fuelling the dreams of the young protagonist.

# Strangers on a Train Photography and Contingency

## Christopher Pinney

Although I had a plan before arriving in India in 1982 it was a series of accidents that determined what would eventually happen. The plan was to travel to central India to the site of Asia's largest viscose rayon factory where I would study the experiences of industrial workers living in a nearby village. That part did happen, and I eventually wrote a PhD on the subject.

The contingency entered when I took what was still officially called the *Frontier Mail* from Bombay (as it then was), overnight, to Malwa. I shared a coupe (that long since disappeared intimate two berth compartment) with an engineer who happened to know the area well. He recommended a lodging house in the town I was travelling to, one in which he had stayed in the past.

Kanniram, who I still see regularly, was the first person I met in Nagda (in Madhya Pradesh, about exactly halfway between Bombay and Delhi): then a youngish coolie (one of many) working at the busy train station. One of the two remaining coolies is Kanniram's son Bheru (the rest have been victims of the triumph of wheeled luggage). Kanniram, who still likes people to know that he was the first person I ever met in the town, took me and my luggage to the lodge that I had heard about from the stranger on the train.

There I would soon meet someone who had a crush on a girl on the other side of town. He wanted to introduce this strange trophy alien to the girl's father



with the hope of feasting his eyes on his love object. I was simply his alibi. I seemed to be the first visible “foreigner” to have visited Nagda and hordes of small children would follow me in the streets of the bazaar shouting “Apu!” (Apu was the elephant mascot of the then current Asiad games). The family with the beautiful girl would soon provide my access to a village, six kilometres away, for it was there that the girl's father had been born. It was there, in a multi-caste, overwhelmingly Hindu village, that I would conduct most of my research over 15 months and to which I would return many times over the next three decades.

During the course of my research I found myself more and more interested in what villagers did with images, rather than what they were doing in the factory (though I continued to investigate that so that I could complete the thesis). It was only much later, after reading lots of photographic theory, that I was able to see these accidents, this contingency, as echoing a key potential of the camera, a piece of apparatus that would soon come to interest me much more than the logistics of the viscose rayon factory.

Initially, however, what struck me when using a camera was how determined villagers were to eliminate or at least mitigate contingency. Before I surrendered myself to local aesthetics I always had the sense (which was a cause of frustration) that there were two kinds of photographs: those I wanted and those villagers wanted. The frustration was intense in an analogue age when colour

This response to the theme of the PhotoUKIndia exhibition project is an experiment in writing about the origins of my personal and professional interests in India and how they have intersected over more than thirty years. As a teenager growing up in the English countryside I had read Henrich Harrer's famous account of his *Seven Years in Tibet* and the autobiography of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, *My Land, My People*. Thus when a friend told me that the Dalai Lama's niece would be speaking in London in the spring of 1983, I took a train to the capital and listened with rapt attention as she described the hardships experienced by Tibetans when they sought to create a 'home away from home' in India on their departure from Tibet from the 1960s onwards. At the end of Khando Chazotsang's account of the refugee camp she oversaw in Mussoorie, I dared to ask her if I could volunteer there. As a result of her generosity I found myself, as an eighteen year old, making my first journey to India and venturing from Delhi to Mussoorie in an antiquated Ambassador and the amiable company of a Tibetan doctor. My companion and I were both due to work in the Tibetan refugee community at Happy Valley, a hamlet in the hills just outside Mussoorie. He was to tend to the sick and I would help children at the Tibetan Homes Foundation School with their English language skills. At this stage I did not know that the experience of ten months in the foothills of the Himalayas would instigate a life-long engagement with the study of India and Tibet and a career as an academic and curator in Oxford that has included working with historic photographic material from both countries.



Of course my own story constitutes just a thin trickle in the great flow of ideas and imaginings that have been communicated photographically between India and Britain since the mid-19th century. That transmission has been mediated through a variety of formats ranging from high quality prints worthy of display in international exhibitions to the humble picture postcard designed for more intimate modes of viewing. Since I am currently researching the vernacular visual cultures of Imperial India, I have chosen to focus here on the latter: a medium that was explicitly used to write within, about and around an image and to deliver a message between two locations. The picture postcard is also a type of photographic object that I, like many others, have personally sent or received but I am now also collecting them for the invaluable micro-historical details they present for scholarly purposes. I therefore present two exhibits from my personal archive referring to the place where it all began for me: Mussoorie.

#### Exhibit A: A Postcard from the 'Tibet' of British India (Fig.1)

Label text: On 29<sup>th</sup> March 1906 a British resident of India sent a picture postcard to Miss Florence Sexton of 146 Hynland Road, Glasgow, Scotland. It was inscribed with the briefest of missives "Hope you like this p.c. Please sent (sic) me a view" and signed by R. A. Robinson of 'Fair Oaks', Mussoorie, Uttar Pradesh. These words have been neatly hand-written around a portrait of a man who the card's publisher simply defines as 'A Tibetan'.





Wooden boats cluster in the harbour entrance, their sailing masts reaching into the sky. A cargo of bananas is carefully unloaded and stacked on the concrete ground. Bundles of sacking wait for men to carry them away on their backs. Along the horseshoe curve of the port stands a majestic colonial building towering over this bustling space, and in the distant horizon a palm-tree dotted landscape frames the view.

Encased within elegantly crimped edges and a matt finish, this scene is steeped with the instant nostalgia that a black and white photograph embodies. It is not a place that I have ever been nor does it include anyone I know. I remember enjoying its picturesque qualities long before I knew what the word meant; I enjoyed the detail of the activity occurring within and the idea of its historicity. It is an image and an object that has been with me since my childhood; it was one of a handful that I kept coming back to every time I looked through the family photographs.

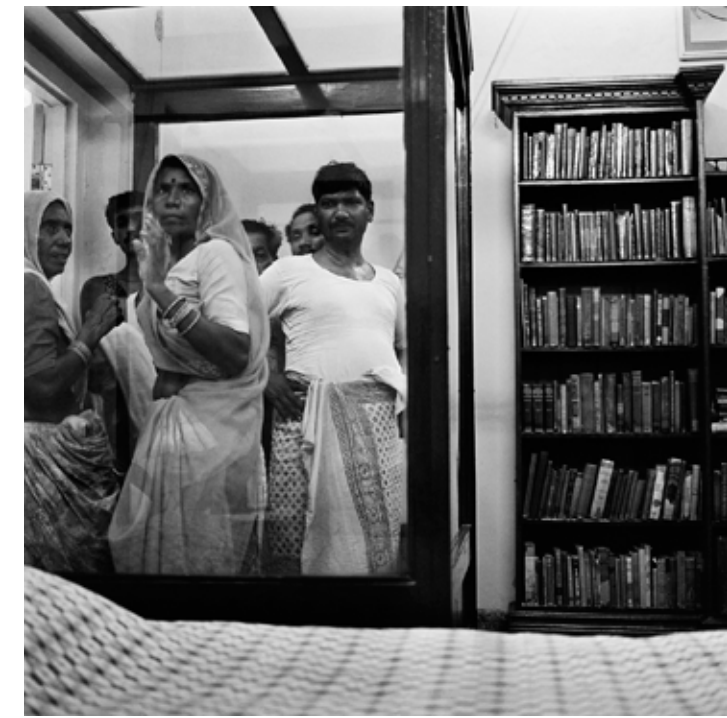
Our collection consists of three albums, two small boxes of different size photographs, a book of negatives and some 1950s Kodak wallets, all thrown into two bags and stuck in a bedroom cupboard high-up and out of the way. Stored with them is a 35mm Pentax SRL, a Rollicord camera with the instructions on how to use it, and a book of Velox transparent watercolour stamps used to tint black and white photographs. These survivors of an Indian migrant's journey from East Africa to Britain gently play on my memories and fantasies, drawing out my sense of my belonging and as well as my eagerness to unleash their histories.

The photograph, so my mother tells me, was taken by my father, Sivabhai S. Patel. Born in Kenya in 1932, he lived, worked, got married and started his family there. In 1972, like a lot of East African Asians, we migrated to London. It was a decision taken by my grandfather, the head of the family, and was based on the rising political unrest in the region which preceded Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians in Uganda. My father's untimely death in 1975 meant that my discovery of these photographs, as a pre-teen girl, and my reading of them has always been loaded with the desire to know more about him, and by extension, more of myself. I never had the opportunity to speak to him about them but I would try and piece together a sense of his character from them, view his life through them, and perhaps understand how he saw the world and what part of that I had inherited.

Now, as a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, I have the pleasure of working with photographs, particularly historic photographs of South and South East Asia. From the archive, Samuel Bourne's 1866 print of the snowy peaks of Manirang Pass in the Spiti valley of the Himalayas conveyed the spirit of endeavour and technical experimentation of the time. It became the first photograph to capture a scene from the highest altitude anywhere in the world at a height of 18,600 feet. Grainy unidentified images of Burma led to a thrilling curatorial search to discover that they were taken by the army surgeon Dr. John McCosh in 1852 and were probably the earliest images ever taken of the region and exceedingly rare. The convergence of my professional and public role with my early personal and private interest also has implications for how I might read my family photographs today.

## Introduction: Points of Departure

An origin is a point, or a series of points from which one departs. How do we measure the distance/s traveled, for instance in the case of an artist? For those with postcolonial origins, chances are no matter what your medium, you will be measured by national boundaries. Here is how Aweek Sen articulates the problem in relation to photography: “Why is it that, for instance, Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Eggleston, the Bechers, or Jeff Wall are simply “photography”, whereas Graciela Iturbide is “Mexican photography” and Dayanita Singh “Indian photography”? [...] Who is studying whom (and from where)? Who is writing about whom?”<sup>1</sup> Sen offers a helpful provocation, asking us to think besides (which is not necessarily “beyond”) national boundaries, and further, pointing out the persistence of at times implicit forms of Eurocentrism in the way “context” must be offered for artists from certain parts of the world but not for others. Sen’s argument is compelling, but the plot thickens if we consider, for instance, a relatively recent article like Paul Sternberger’s “Me, Myself and India: Contemporary Indian Photography and the Diasporic Experience”<sup>2</sup>, a charitable survey of the field. Here, it is not so much the Eurocentrism of critics that leaves us framed. Rather, we have artists too, draping themselves in flags, exploring their conflicted “identity” and national selves. So if artists and critics alike identify so strongly with their passports then who are we to protest? As Sen asks, in any case: “Who are “we” here?”<sup>3</sup>



Let us leave this question in abeyance, of who “we” are, since the answer to Eurocentrism is not nativism. It is not a question, any more, if it ever was, of liberating “Indian” photography from a western gaze. Rather, let’s ask if it may be possible to offer a thought that is global and yet local to particular trajectories of artistic exploration, that does not reject the question of how one might locate an image in the world, and yet is not framed only by national identity. The concepts we offer need not be tied only to particular artist *auteurs*. As many authors have shown, seemingly author-less “popular” visual culture can also be a realm of innovation and critical inquiry. For the moment though I want to discuss a particular author who is alive for me, in the sense that her work enlivens my own thought process.

In this essay, which is part of a larger work on the idea of “life force”<sup>4</sup>, I take my inspiration from the one, perhaps most notable absence from Sternberger’s review of contemporary Indian photography, Dayanita Singh. Those who are searching for “Camera Indica” often don’t write about Dayanita (and I’ll refer here to the artist by her first name, since her last name is so common that it overlaps even with my own). Maybe Dayanita doesn’t manage to be Indica enough, or even when she does she goes further. For instance in a visit to a national monument, she ends up thinking not, or not only, about Nehru, but about the idea of a museum itself, situated here, quite clearly, within the postcolony, although the pressure that a

On the very afternoon that Abdullah, a waiter at the Gulistan restaurant on Mohammad Ali Road, was about to give way under the massed weight of the miseries, stacked up one over the other like dirty dishes, of his aged parents in Mirzapur writing to him to ask, although very gently, for a little more by money order every month so as to keep up with rising costs, and his older sister in Faisalabad, who had been married three years to a dealer in copper vessels, writing at the same time – and some of the letters of her missive were smudged, no doubt from falling tears – that her husband was giving her trouble and was probably having an affair, all this over and above the dull ache in Abdullah's own heart as a consequence of his feelings, which he knew would bubble over in some unseemly manner any one of these days, for the restaurant owner Reza Ali's daughter Shehza – on the very afternoon that Abdullah was fretting over these matters and barking orders into the kitchen, glowering at his own face in the mirror above the wash basin every time he passed it, and whisking away plates from under the noses of the restaurant's patrons, sometimes before they had fully finished eating, an uproar suddenly broke out on the pavement, and the news arrived that the big white bad-tempered long-horned goat they had been fattening outside the restaurant for Ramzan had escaped.

"It's gone! It's gone!" roared Reza Ali, jumping up from behind the counter and leaning out as far as he could to keep within his sights the disappearing goat, till



he very nearly fell out into the street himself, onto the very spot where the goat had for two months been kept tethered to a post.

Looking around, he cried, "You – Abdullah! What're you staring at my face for? Get after that goat!"

Abdullah immediately threw down a stack of crispy tandoori rotis, the hand-towel on his shoulder, and the pencil behind his ear, and sped out of the restaurant, receiving for no good reason a cuff on the side of the head from Reza Ali as he departed. He saw at a distance the bobbing posterior of the goat, cleaving the throng of daytime pedestians into two with its galloping progress. Clenching his teeth and his fists, he set off at a fast clip after the truant animal.

It was actually a relief to be able to chase the goat. Abdullah's cares, which had been hanging about him all day like black clouds, were swiftly blown away by the gust of his goatward progress, and his mind, which had seemed to him full of shards of broken glass, now became instead an arrow trained at his target. Everything else in the world became a blur. There was just him and the goat.

Closely followed by Abdullah, the goat ran past rows of shops selling cheap clothes and shoes, the stacks of breads and sweetmeats heaped in baskets





This is not an invitation  
to breathe the air  
— of another century.  
Neither stale, nor musty,  
I imagine dust that has never

seen rain. That patch of scrubland  
dry as the month of June, withered  
and withering, taking on the air of  
'I really don't care' what becomes  
of me, or my paltry resident. Hideous

animal. Only for this insane death-  
life. Whose dream were you?  
Has it been hidden? The place  
from which you bled for nothing  
more than fancy and false pride.

Whose hand slayed you?  
Whose hand brought you back,  
wicked necromancer of the old  
days? That posture too chosen  
for its weird abrupt interruption

—sad mimesis of a hunt conducted  
now in abandoned places. (How may  
a box contain such excesses?) A slight  
baring, strange unshifting eye,  
heavy, delicate paw. Stalking history

through the corridors, waiting as times  
or masters change, as paint peels,  
and marble darkens. At the edge  
of this, will you spring to life?  
You will empty of emptiness.

Dust can turn to lead, heavy  
against your fur (your edges  
already crumbling). The glass fret  
with fault lines—no earthquakes  
here, but slow, silent undoings.

Though more alive than the dead  
behind you. Coaxed by dry grass,  
petty camouflage, to remain seen.  
If that constitutes living. This is how  
we learned to box life. Such care

has been taken to forget, yet  
you rear in our imaginings, wild  
nightmare, stretched across the  
darkness of a century. Lost  
guardian, you trail thick blood

into our homes and streets. Even then  
our gazes never meet. Across the rooms,  
in close quarters, they slide and sidle,  
wayward in hot embarrassment,  
and dull rage. What have they done

to shape-shifters? To those whose  
breath must mist in rain. This is how  
we learned to wrestle the world  
into a box. To set the clasps tight.  
And point light.

Empires are a taxidermist's dream.

**Janice Pariat** is the author of *Boats on Land: A Collection of Short Stories* and *Seahorse: A Novel*. She's the recipient of the Sahitya Academy Young Writer Award and the Crossword Award for Fiction. She lives in New Delhi.