



MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS, SPEAKING AND SILENCE

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INTRODUCTION

'No matter how precautionary and punctilious the photographer... the lens's inability to discriminate will ensure a substrate or margin of excess. However hard the photographer tries to *exclude* the camera lens always *includes*...' (Pinney 2008, p.4).

My research engages with family history, photographs, and biography, to investigate domiciled European and Anglo-Indian life in railway communities up to the Partition of India in 1947. In 2012 I spent three months travelling through Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh interviewing Anglo-Indians in towns that were once part of the Great Indian Peninsula railway line where my own family lived and worked. This article offers a discussion of the role that my family photographs played in interviews with elderly Anglo-Indians still living in these towns. I will also briefly discuss the subject of the photographs themselves and what may have influenced their composition, for these influences on composition refer also to the way that subjects were represented and indeed how the community represented itself.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS



Fig 1 Bophal (sic) 1904.

The above fragment of a photograph of a house in Bhopal taken in 1904 remains mysterious. It reluctantly surrenders the barest of information, date and place, and yet its very existence is verification that someone had a camera and took this photo because it meant something to them. From what my father says, my great grandmother lived in Bhopal, but it was not until 1912 that the Punjab Mail Railway line connected Bhopal with Firozpor, another town associated with her. Perhaps it is her house but there is no one able to deny or confirm this, so the mystery remains.

My father was born in 1925, raised in railway colonies in central India, schooled in the mountains, and served in the military during the Partition in 1947. He was an enthusiastic amateur photographer with a keen eye for composition, and for some reason he inherited a large collection of photographs from his sister. These photographs have been passed on to me. It is these family photographs, spanning a period of time between 1910 and 1947, that I used in interviews of elderly Anglo Indians from railway communities in India. In this article I will discuss the unfolding potency of the use of my family photographs in the interplay that occurred between image, memory and narrative. This forms a part of my wider PhD research into life in railway colonies in pre-Partition India.

It is important to know that the photographs often included locations well known to interviewees but rarely included people known to the interviewees. Thus there were no direct relational constraints on these readings because the content was, in most cases, of people interviewees did not know. During interviews, the photographs were open to multiple readings, offering different entry and exit points depending on how the viewer responded to the images. Photographs, because of their unmanageable and contingent nature are capable of arousing a variety of memory-based responses. It is this function as a window into something else where the real value of the photographic image lies.

I use the words interviewee and participant interchangeably since the situations I was in often began as an attempt at more structured interviews but often (through interruptions and the flow in interviews) became less structured. This occurred because the participants in India were elderly and had carers and servants coming in and out of their houses all the time. I would often be invited to eat and the interview would become much more akin to a conversation, than a traditionally structured interview. Later, when I reflected on the interview situations I sometimes found myself in, the roles were sometimes reversed when I was responding to interviewees' queries about my own background. At times I was as much a participant as the people I had intended to interview; we became co-participants.

My railway family background from the communities in Jhansi and Jabalpur created a relationship of trust with interviewees. I was welcomed into the communities I visited in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bengal because of my ancestral relation to the railways and confirmation of my family's generational link to India and my father's status as an officer in the Gurkhas during Partition.

PHOTO ELICITATION IN INTERVIEWS

Photo elicitation as a methodology involves the 'simple idea of inserting a photograph into the research interview' (Harper 2002, p.13). I found that using this approach in interviews not only helped to develop a more trusting collaborative relationship with my participants but it stimulated a more expansive affective set of responses. My first use of photo elicitation was with my father. In his albums I discovered mini narratives from the schoolboy, the soldier-in-training, home on leave

in 1946, on *shikar*, travelling on trains and arriving in Perth in 1948. Memory is selective and so are the telling choices of which photographs to arrange in an album. Most strikingly, in my father's India album, a series of photographs is arranged in a linear narrative around the Hindu ceremony of *dussehra*. These pictures are remarkable, particularly figure 6, for its unintended visual reflexivity; the photographer is being photographed as he photographs his own *khukri* being 'blooded'. He positions himself as being neutral: 'you could only be a British officer to serve in the Gurkhas.' These *dussehra* photographs are informed by his experience of India influenced by his being male, identifying as British born in India (domiciled European), coming from a railway background, being in the army and of serving through Partition. After this revelatory experience I decided to use his photographs with interviewees for their mnemonic qualities and for the validity they would gain for me as being material evidence of being tangentially related to the railway communities.

During the interviews the photographs were re-animated, so viewing became a reflexive process operating between the object, the image and the viewer. The photographs I refer to are black and white for as Berger argues (cited in Harper 2002, p.13), when they are uncoupled from the familiarity of colour, photographs can stimulate a more intense memory, and hence are 'more evocative than colour photography'. Photographs, Rau argues (2006, p.297), do not act as completely reliable mnemonic devices or as authentic representations of the truth. Photo elicitation engages with both these effects and this can then release another fragment of a deeper repressed memory to the narrative.

'THE LEFT BEHINDS'

The elderly Anglo-Indians I interviewed in Jhansi and Jabalpur expressed an interest in my family photographs whether the images were of the army, the railways or the towns they lived in. When looking at photographs of my father as a handsome young man in uniform, Frances (i.v. Jabalpur 2 Feb, 2012), an Anglo-Indian interviewee in Jabalpur, asked to see more and more photos taken of him in his army uniform in 1946. More than the image of the handsome young soldier Frances saw something through the photograph. Even though she was not directly related to the subject, she clearly experienced some pleasure in remembering 'those days'

which for her were actually troubled and difficult. The photographs had opened up a space that included remembering the past in a pleasurable way. D'Costa (2006, p.1) argues that this kind of nostalgia is also located in a longing to be legitimately at home in India. This kind of nostalgia, not for an imagined British homeland but to '(re)claim India as homeland,' acts to connect people like Frances to her past. As Blunt points out, 'nostalgia invokes home in its very meaning' (2005, p.13) and it can also include 'a longing for an imagined and unattainable past' (2005, p.14). The pain associated with a desire to return to what is retrospectively perceived to be a more stable past was evident in photo elicitation sessions with some elderly single women who saw themselves as 'the left behinds' (Sheila i/v Kharagpur Jan 22, 2012). When I heard this phrase in the interview with Sheila I found it to be a poignant and rueful articulation of a sense of lost opportunity sometimes referring to both time and circumstance.

The telling of stories and the ability to glide over the more difficult, challenging, or traumatic events allowed participants to form a smoother overall narrative, transforming remembering into a pleasurable activity. In the case of some elderly Anglo-Indians still living in India, these more troubling pasts have included regret about not leaving India at an early age, or the limited opportunities they had under the British, the impact of Independence, isolation from family or the loss of a younger generation who have migrated. But the memories also include the happiness that people experienced in remembering earlier times when, for example, railway institutes were active sites for social activities such as dancing, and the community was numerically stronger in size. So remembering the past included many conflicted feelings.

Like most long-term research projects my original focus has morphed into something else under the spell and the presence of the photographs, which have enriched and informed my research in ways that I was not anticipating. For example, rather than taking a photograph to be an end in itself, as a snapshot record of an instant, and asking 'what was going on there and then?', I used the photographs to open up a much more temporally and spatially fluid, affectively rich, set of responses. I was employing their 'spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority' to enter the riches of the zone that creates the 'conjunction between the here and now and the there and then'

(Barthes 1977, p.44). The photographs triggered responses that took us through memories and sentiments, to times and places beyond those depicted in the image. For many elderly Anglo-Indian women whose lives have been difficult and who now often live alone in impoverished circumstances, the images took them back to a time, when they were younger, stronger and still dancing at the Railway Institutes.

If there were traces of nostalgia in some parts of life referred to by interviewees it was barely evident in my father's case. There was in his remembering a lack of nostalgia for many places connected to his life in India. This may be related to his traumatic experience of Partition, when his 'heroic' narrative is interrupted by the reality of the outcome of the Partition: of a failure to control, of fear and of death. His photographs of training camps and activities such as going on *shikar* whilst on leave dominate his photograph album. According to my observations his most enjoyable memories are connected to the time before Partition in training with the Gurkhas. On my return from India in 2012 the only photographs of India he was interested in seeing were of the Gurkha training centre at Subathu. He did not ask to see photographs of Jhansi or Jabalpur, places where his family had lived for longer periods of time. This reaction could be attributed to a desire to distance himself from India socially and emotionally. By migrating to Australia he certainly achieved a geographic isolation. However, India survives in his more corporeal memory, in food, language, accent and sometimes reminiscences.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN COLONIAL INDIA

In the following section I would like to look more closely at some of the photographs I selected to scan and take with me, what influenced their composition and how this may have allowed Anglo-Indians and domiciled Europeans to represent themselves in a way that was at variance with the more public discourses created by colonial authorities.

My father's family was drawn to use this new technology and, as a result, an archive of their family photographs survives from pre-Partition India. In all they capture the moments Strassler (2007) Bourdieu (1990) and Lalvani (1996) refer to as the private moment within the public context. In colonial India control of the photographic image as a mechanism for surveillance, creating official records, and making particular

representations of all peoples, was soon challenged by the new portability and mobility of photographic equipment. Pinney (2008, p.536) argues that the technology became 'increasingly miniaturised and increasingly mobile' which in turn changed the 'habitus' of the photograph to the street life capturing the increasing fragility of the 'colonial hegemony'. Thus the image was not as easily 'controlled only by the colonial state' (Pinney 2008, p.536) and as a result more people, outside the official domain, were recording the quotidian in a way that had not happened before the physical constraints of the technology had been reduced.



Fig 2 Jhansi



Fig 3 Bhusawal

The two photographs above show contrasting backdrops. Fig 2 is a studio shot taken in Jhansi and Fig 3 was taken some years later in the garden of a railway house in '40 Blocks' in Bhusawal, Maharashtra. Fig 2 is a *carte de visite*, a rigid little photograph set on a card board backing produced in a studio, complete with a bucolic European garden as a backdrop. The two photographs also indicate the way photography was evolving beyond the controlled confines of the studio setting. Not that there is anything more spontaneous in this example but the background does more closely reflect the reality of life, or at least of what it looked like.

Photography emerged as a new technological phenomenon in Europe in the late 1830s, and very soon afterwards it was being used in India 'with alacrity' and exhibiting the 'indexicality ... which gave it such importance in the colonial imagination' (Pinney 1997, p.20). Indexicality is the irrefutable fact of the chemical connection between the image and its referent. Photographs, so heavily dependent on context, are not necessarily recorders of reality (Rau 2006, p.36) they merely frame the view of the photographer. In India the function of photography could easily have been reduced to that of a colonial technology of surveillance. However, as photographic apparatus became more manageable and affordable, it enabled the production of a 'form of representation and memory practice characteristic of the bourgeoisie' (Strassler 2003, p.31). Situating family photographs or private photograph collections in a broader context, Strassler argues, includes them in the same analytical discourse that looks at 'broader social imaginaries' (Sekula cited in Strassler 2003, p.31). Bourdieu positions photography within a range of social functions, acknowledging that in Europe the technology was 'introduced early and established itself very quickly' (1990, p.20). As Lalvani also observes, photographs, 'affirm and celebrate particular discursive and ideological formations' (1996, p.43) and in India, as in Europe 'society was increasingly mediated by visual interaction' (1996, p.63). Of course in India there already was an existing culture of the visual, as noted by Pinney (1997, pp.17-18), but photography introduced new opportunities because of its indexicality, and the belief in its ability to record the truth. At the time when the photographs I used in my research were taken, photography was evolving into the bourgeois practice referred to above. As a result of its enthusiastic uptake there now exists a sizable archive of images of domestic and public life from the pre-Partition era. The size and mobility of equipment and the indexicality of photography expanded the field of vision being recorded by ordinary people and the way they their lives lived beyond the scrutiny of colonial officialdom.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DOMAINS

Photography had the effect of creating separate spheres for representations of the self. In the private sphere photographs constitute an archive constrained by a different set of social practices that reflect the contexts in which they are located, - for example: family, school, work and army (Lalvani 1996). In colonial India photography had evolved to become a useful tool not only for official records but also

for self-recording, particularly in and by communities who were sometimes marginalised and represented disparagingly by colonial authorities. In particular, photography gave the Domiciled European and Anglo-Indian communities an especially effective means for representing theirs as a coherent and distinct culture. My reading of family photographs articulates the difference between private, less authorised discourses and those of the official bureaucracy regarding colonial life in railway towns.



Fig 4 'George 1910 back left'

The photograph as artefact oscillates between the wider theoretical context of social practices it is embedded in, to the more particular private object that it is. The above photograph may be of a group of railway workers in a loco shed, but one of the men in the back row is my great uncle George. The marks on the photo do not seem to help in identifying exactly who 'George' is from the others. Trying to locate the photograph in its time also places it within a set of social conditions and constraints. There are traces in the above photograph of colonial codes in the dress of the young men and in particular the two sola topis. Sola topis were 'ubiquitous' and adopted by the, 'Eurasians ... in order to assert their racial affinity to the British' (Collingham 2001, p.90). Based on the identification of a fob chain, cloth caps of the kind that factory workers wore, and (cotton waste for cleaning), Peter Moore, an ex-policeman from India applied a forensic eye to the photo, suggested that the young men were

trainee mechanical engineers (2010, pers. comm., 28 October) The diacritic like marks hovering above one figure and below another are at variance with the writing on the back of the photo 'George 1910 back left'. In order to arrive at some kind of understanding of the photograph as an image-text, to make some sense of this constant interplay between moving into and out of the image, I employed Barthes' vocabulary. Initially, 'studium' (purpose and context) and 'punctum' (emotional entry point) (Barthes 1981, pp. 26-27) were enough but I then found more nuanced readings were occurring outside these two fields. Rau describes this more potent engagement, as, 'a subjective affect caused by something the image does not record' (2006, p.295). This added layer may include a sense of loss, traumatic memories or an intense longing for a time past.



Fig 5 On '*shikar*' Pagdhal 1946

The nostalgic image that is often conjured up, when people think of tiger hunting in India, is of sola topi wearing Europeans in safari suits standing in front of elephants, redolent of a traditional English fox hunt, (if you allow for elephants rather than horses and tigers instead of foxes). In the same way the orientalist view of India, as strange and exotic animals, people, and incomprehensible religions, is still resonant. In contrast to this familiar trope I found a photograph of my family on *shikar*, a hunt. In the background I noticed the empty elephant stable, seeming to make an unwittingly mocking reference to the absence of fine livery, mahouts and *burra* sahibs on the hunt.

In the photograph (fig 5) the empty stable provides part of the backdrop for the group left to right -- my grandfather, the shoffur (sic) Joseph (slightly behind) my uncle, my father's Australian friend Leslie, and sitting in front, a local *shikari*. It is Christmas 1946 and they are about to go on *shikar*. My father said they rarely went after big game; there weren't any left in this area. Instead they shot pigs, spotted deer, wild fowls, peacocks and black buck. Not quite the portrait of great white hunters in sola topis with elephants lined up behind them like horses on a foxhunt. My father and his friend are in training as Gurkha officers and they have their shirts off, perhaps to show their *kukhris*, in a gesture of macho bravado, yet these defenders of the empire look rather pale and thin. At the same time their uniforms remind me that in 1946 India was approaching Independence and with this the British Raj was an increasingly unstable construct.



Fig 6 Dusshera 1946

In fig 6 (as noted earlier) my father has been unsuspectingly snapped as he concentrates on photographing the blooding of his *kukhri* at the *dussehra* in Dharmasala. This was the most important part of the ten day ceremony for Gurkha officers and their men. The festivities bonded the men in a ritual space that allowed for role reversal and behaviour that did not occur outside the ritual, such as officers buying and killing goats to feed their men. There was also a belief in the power of the ritual to bring good luck on the brigade if the buffalo execution went well. To miss the event would have been regrettable on many levels and capturing it via photography meant the pleasure of this experience could be returned to particularly after the Partition.



Fig 7 Jubblepore 1946

There is a certain ungovernable quality about some of the photographs that I did not anticipate but which I think is evident, for example, in several photographs I noted the presence of 'intruders' who have included themselves in the background, such as a chauffeur in fronded shadows standing off centre, he is having his photo taken too (fig 7). As Pinney puts it, 'However hard the photographer tries to exclude, the camera lens always includes', (2008, p.4) in other words there is always an element that is unforeseen.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of these threads drawn from an analysis of photographs, trains, railway colonies and the Partition, offer a reconstituted picture of life in railway colonies along the Great Indian Peninsular railway line that includes people from the Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European communities who occupied upper subordinate positions in the railways. This convergence allows for a rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) account of the self in relation to a set of historical circumstances, rather than a linear investigation progressing from with a fixed location of the subject. The photographs offer multiple readings, entry and exit points. They can be arranged chronologically but their interrelated images and meanings defy a simple linear progression.

I have found myself assuming the role of a reflexive curator with my father's telling of his life, in particular maintaining the integrity of his voice. In effect I am recreating a narrative over a narrative, or multiple narratives, from different interviewees in relation to the central set of circumstances: railways, Partition and Independence, and migration. As Gergen and Gergen (1997, p.162) suggest, life events cannot be related as a haphazard patchwork of 'self relevant events' but rather they are rendered 'intelligible' by locating them in a sequence, or 'unfolding process'.

This essay is part of a larger work around the arrival of technologies (railways and photography) and the social sites and opportunities that arose around technologies. These became places for situating fragile identities in a milieu, at a time that valued appearance, ancestry and class. It is about the dynamism of memory and remembering. There is a level of subjectivity here that accommodates several 'voices': the people from Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European backgrounds, and my own experiences of travelling amongst them and locating myself in this less than interstitial space. I do not challenge so much as affirm and engage with this story 'before it is too late' while Anglo-Indians who describe themselves as a twilight community are subsumed into more dominant Indian or European identities depending on their locality.

Through the use of photographs (of my own family), in photo elicitation sessions and interviews with my father, I detected a response to the photographs that inspired the idea that there was a more complex, nuanced, and interesting story sitting within the photographs. The way my father talked about them inspired me to take a set of photos on tour back to the railway communities in Jhansi and Jabalpur in 2012.



Fig 8 Jahansi (sic) 1923

The moment the interviews and photographs came together occurred in Jhansi in 2012 when Roy Abbott, perhaps the only domiciled European left in Jhansi, recognised his relative sitting on the right next to my grandmother (fig 8). At that moment I felt my link to India confirmed. My tangential, once removed thread to the Anglo-Indian and Domiciled European communities allowed me to become a privileged outsider on the inside. The use of photographs validated my intimate connection to a shared, albeit once removed, past with the elderly people I met who lived in the same railway community that my family lived in.

Deborah Nixon is a lecturer at UTS she is currently working on a thesis that engages with photography, the railways and the lived experience of the Partition of India in 1947. These three interlocking research areas are connected through a personal narrative that exemplifies the way technologies of modernity found expression in family stories. In addition, a complex, nuanced and interesting story sat at the nexus of the photographs and the way her father talked about them that decided her to take a set of photos 'on tour' back to the sites of railway communities in Jhansi and Jabalpur in 2012.

GLOSSARY

Dussehra – Hindu festival involving animal sacrifice practiced by Gurkha soldiers and their officers to bless their kukhris

Kukhri – a large curved knife incorporated into the uniform of Gurkha soldiers

Shikar – a hunt

Shikari – a hunter

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