UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Intimate Durations:

Reimagining Contemporary Indian Photography

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Art History

by

Alice Sophia Powers

2018

© Copyright by

Alice Sophia Powers

2018

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Intimate Durations:

Reimagining Contemporary Indian Photography

by

Alice Sophia Powers

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Saloni Mathur, Chair

This dissertation examines a mode of photographic practice in contemporary India marked by intimate, long-term engagement between artist and subject. I argue that the aesthetic of intersubjectivity embodied in this work lays claim to a sophisticated, progressive politics of gender and alterity through attention to complex negotiations of social hierarchy within contemporary India. In exploring the under-examined role of photography in the development of recent South Asian art, I further argue that this work anticipates the participatory paradigm that came to prominence in South Asia in the early 2000s, and that the unique history of photographic practice in the subcontinent opened significant possibilities for more substantially relational engagement between artist and subject. Building on this history allowed the three photographers at the heart of my

project to develop a form of quiet activism, exemplary within the trajectory of contemporary art in South Asia.

My analysis is grounded in the work of three Delhi-based photographers: Sheba Chhachhi (b. 1958), Dayanita Singh (b. 1961), and Gauri Gill (b. 1970). Each embraces a mode of social outreach across boundaries of cultural difference over long periods of time, often more than a decade. Chhachhi began her work with women activists, and later explored the lives of female *sadhus* (Hindu religious renunciates). Singh photographed Mona Ahmed—a member of the highly insular *hijra* (transgender/eunuch) community in South Asia, and later focused on the equally insular communities of India's social and economic elite. Gill pursued relationships with several rural communities in Rajasthan, and spent more than eighteen years photographing girls and their families as they negotiated harsh conditions of survival often beyond the purview of the state. This dissertation proposes a framework for understanding the intersubjective aesthetic embodied in these works on the basis of three interrelated qualities: a long temporal duration that enables complex representations of time within the work; a struggle for personal and cultural recognition on the part of both photographer and subject within South Asia's complex social hierarchy; and ethical agency on the part of the photographer to represent her subjects responsibly and bear witness to the complexity of their lives.

The dissertation of Alice Sophia Powers is approved.

Miwon Kwon

Purnima Mankekar

Dell Upton

Saloni Mathur, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES……. ….…. vii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS…….....…...…. xvii

VITA…….……. xxi

INTRODUCTION: Framing an Intersubjective Aesthetic……. 1

Photography's Gendered Histories

Expanding Photographic Histories of South Asia

Beyond the Ethnographic Turn

Avant-Garde Formulations

CHAPTER ONE: The Curious Temporality of Performance in the Photographic Practice of Sheba Chhachhi……. 33

The Decisive Moment in Indian Journalism

Picturing Protest: The Women's Movement, 1980 – 1991

Seven Lives and a Dream: Staged Portraits, 1990 – 1991

Women of the Cloth: Ganga's Daughters, 1979 & 1994 – 2004

Toward a Conclusion

CHAPTER TWO. Recognition and Hierarchy in the Work of Dayanita Singh…….…….80

The Drive for Recognition

Myself Mona Ahmed

Privacy

Toward a Conclusion

CHAPTER THREE. Absence in the Desert: The Quiet Ethics of Gauri Gill…….……122

Jannat

The Significance of Text

Photographic Precedents in Rajasthan

Balika Mela

Toward a Conclusion

EPILOGUE: The Extended Practice of Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh, and Gauri Gill.....178

Sheba Chhachhi

Dayanita Singh

Gauri Gill

Looking Forward, Together

FIGURES…….192

WORKS CITED……..…249

List of Figures

Figure 0.1 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999-2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 192

Figure 0.2 Dayanita Singh, *I started to dislike humans so much that I started to adore animals and made my family of animals. I had one Doberman, one monkey, four rabbits, two dozen ducks. 1999.* Photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 115 192

Figure 0.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled.* Photograph reproduced from: Sheba Chhachhi, *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 193

Figure 1.1 Felice Beato, *Interior of the Secundrabagh After the Massacre*, 1958, albumen silver print, 9 7/16 x 11 5/16 in. (24 x 28.7 cm.). J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 194

Figure 1.2 Margaret Bourke-White, *Spindly but determined old Sikh, carrying ailing wife, sets out on the dangerous journey to India's border* (original caption from LIFE in 1947). The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images, 1947 194

Figure 1.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shardabehn – Public Testimony, Police Station, Delhi*, 1988, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 776 x 519 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 195

Figure 1.4 Sheba Chhachhi, *Sathyarani – Anti Dowry Demonstration, Delhi, 1980*, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 386 x 567 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 195

Figure 1.5 Sheba Chhachhi, *Urvashi—Staged Portrait, Gulmohar Park, Delhi*, 1980, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 522 x 783 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 196

Figure 1.6 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shanti—Staged Portrait, Dakshinpuri, Delhi, 1991*, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 777 x 517 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 196

Figure 1.7 Sheba Chhachhi, *Devikripa—Staged Portrait, Seemapuri, Delhi*, 1990, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 769 x 515 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 197

Figure 1.8 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shahjahan Apa—Staged Portrait, Nangloi, Delhi*, 1991, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 785 x 521 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 197

Figure 1.9 Sheba Chhachhi, *Sathyarani—Staged Portrait, Supreme Court, Delhi*, 1990, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 772 x 516 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 198

Figure 1.10 Sheba Chhachhi, *Sathyarani – Staged Portrait, Punjabi Bagh Residence*, Delhi, 1990, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 382 x 568 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 198

Figure 1.11 Top: *Lakshmi soon after marriage*, bottom: *Burned because her parents could not afford 'enough' dowry*. Photograph reproduced from: Mahila D. Samiti, "Burning of the Brides," *New Internationalist Magazine*, November 1979, Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Limited 199

Figure 1.12 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shahjahan Apa—Anti Dowry Public Testimonies, India Gate, Delhi*, 1986, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 381 x 568 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 199

Figure 1.13 Sheba Chhachhi, *Wild Mother I: The Wound is The Eye*, 1993, 3 terracotta sculptures; 9 terracotta tablets; hand-tinted silver gelatin prints; found images; turmeric; pigment; sand, 3.5 x 2.1 x 2.5 m 200

Figure 1.14 Sheba Chhachhi, *Subhadra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 200

Figure 1.15 Sheba Chhachhi, *Subhadra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 201

Figure 1.16 Sheba Chhachhi, *Subhadra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 201

Figure 1.17 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 202

Figure 1.18 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 202

Figure 1.19 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 203

Figure 1.20 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 203

Figure 1.21 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 204

Figure 1.22 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 204

Figure 1.23 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 205

Figure 1.24 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 205

Figure 1.25 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 206

Figure 1.26 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 206

Figure 1.27 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 207

Figure 1.28 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 207

Figure 1.29 Sheba Chhachhi, *Rouge's Gallery.* Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 208

Figure 1.30 Sheba Chhachhi, *Rouge's Gallery.* Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi) 208

Figure 2.1 Dayanita Singh, *I chose this cake for Ayesha because I love to sit on a ship, and water all around makes me feel good. 1991*, photograph reproduced

from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 31 209

Figure 2.2 Dayanita Singh, *My first year of happiness in my life was with Ayesha. Never before had I been so happy. 1990*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 20 209

Figure 2.3 Dayanita Singh, *My eunuch brothers overseeing feast arrangements. 1990*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001) 24 210

Figure 2.4 Dayanita Singh, *My disciple Baby came from Lahore for Ayesha's second birthday. 1991*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001) 33 210

Figure 2.5 Dayanita Singh, *Ayesha, a part of me, my heart, my life. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 54 211

Figure 2.6 Dayanita Singh, *Doll in my doll's lap. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 55 211

Figure 2.7 Dayanita Singh, *We lie around like a normal mother and daughter. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 56 212

Figure 2.8 Dayanita Singh, *Those few moments of happiness that came only for a little while. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 57 212

Figure 2.9 Dayanita Singh, *My love among her photos. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 58 213

Figure 2.10 Dayanita Singh, *Taking Ayesha to school. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 61 213

Figure 2.11 Dayanita Singh, *When I started to live in the graveyard, my own blood family thought I was crazy and admitted me to the mental asylum. I came here because I could not bear the false glamour of city life. I hated t*

he pretense that people put on. 1998, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 100 214

Figure 2.12 Dayanita Singh, *I look like a sad Muslim woman after fighting with my guru Chaman. We went on a visit to the graveyard to show Ayesha the ducks. 1996*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 87 214

Figure 2.13 Dayanita Singh, *Finally, I became so depressed that I had to eat food from cheap roadside hotels, something I had never done in my life. I lost all my glory. Meeting people who are not even of my standard, just to have moments of happiness. 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 154 215

Figure 2.14 Dayanita Singh, *I started to dislike humans so much that I started to adore animals and made my family of animals. I had one Doberman, one monkey, four rabbits, two dozen ducks. 1999*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 115 215

Figure 2.15 Dayanita Singh, *The half-minded women come and go, and I do not have much of a rapport with them. 1999*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 138 216

Figure 2.16 Dayanita Singh, *When I feel like dying because I cannot bear the world any longer, Dayanita arrives to give me love and encouragement. 1998*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 14 216

Figure 2.17 Dayanita Singh, *Dayanita helped me to make this room, but it is too hot on summer days and too cold on winter days. 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 143 217

Figure 2.18 Dayanita Singh, *When I went to meet Ayesha, the eunuchs had me tortured by the police. In my pain I ran to Dayanita's house to make a record of my pain. 1998*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 106 217

Figure 2.19 Dayanita Singh, *Looking at photos of myself. Sad memories, happy memories, but only memories. 2001*, photograph reproduced from:

Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 10 218

Figure 2.20 Ram Singh II, *Self-portrait I*, photograph reproduced from: Vikramaditya Prakash, "Between Objectivity and Illusion: Architectural Photography in the Colonial Frame," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 1, (September 2001): 14 218

Figure 2.21 Maharaja Ram Singh II, *Untitled portrait of a 'paswan' and her 'sakhi'*, modern print from collodion negative, ca 1860 – 80. City Palace Museum, Jaipur, Negative No. 1458. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, The City Palace, Jaipur, photograph reproduced from: Laura Weinstein, "Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah," *History of Photography* 34, no.1 (February 2010): 10 219

Figure 2.22 Unknown Photographer, *Seated Parsi Lady with a Pet Dog*, digitally reproduced positive from glass plate negative, c. 1900, photograph reproduced from: Christopher Pinney, "Stirred by Photography," in *Allegory and Illusion: Early Portrait Photography from South Asia*, eds., Christopher Pinney, Beth Citron, and Rahaab Allana (New Delhi: Mapin Publishing, 2013), 25 219

Figure 2.23 Dayanita Singh, *Mrs Menezes Braganza, Goa 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 220

Figure 2.24 Dayanita Singh, *Braganza House, Goa 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 220

Figure 2.25 Dayanita Singh, *Koshi Kids, Bangalore 1997*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 221

Figure 2.26 Dayanita Singh, *Sharbari Dutta, Calcutta 1999*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 221

Figure 2.27 Dayanita Singh, *Samra Chopra, Pooa Mudheree, Deen Dayal, New Delhi 1996*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 222

Figure 2.28 Dayanita Singh, *Minni Boga, New Delhi 1997*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 222

Figure 2.29 Dayanita Singh, *Gary and Anita Lawyer, Bombay 2002*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated 223

Figure 3.1 Gauri Gill, *Jannat*, from the series *Notes from the Desert*, 1999 – 2010, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 224

Figure 3.2 Titian, *Woman with a Mirror*, 1515, oil on canvas, 39 x 30 in. (99 x 76 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris 224

Figure 3.3 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 225

Figure 3.4 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 225

Figure 3.5 Dorothea Lang, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1935, silver gelatin print, 11 1/8 x 8 9/16 in. (28.3 x 21.8 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York 226

Figure 3.6 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 226

Figure 3.7 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 227

Figure 3.8 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 227

.

Figure 3.9 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 228

Figure 3.10 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 228

Figure 3.11 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 229

Figure 3.12 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 229

Figure 3.13 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 230

Figure 3.14 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 230

Figure 3.15 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 231

Figure 3.16 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 231

Figure 3.17 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 232

Figure 3.18 Gauri Gill, *Untitled text (Hooran's poem)*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 232

Figure 3.19 Gauri Gill, *Untitled (text 7- Izmat letter to Gauri)*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 233

Figure 3.20 Raghubir Singh, *A Village Well, Barmer District*. Photograph reproduced from: Raghubir Singh, *Rajasthan: India's Enchanted Land* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 75 233

Figure 3.21 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Untitled*. Photograph reproduced from: Henri Cartier-Bresson and Max J. Oliver, *Beautiful Jaipur* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1948), unpaginated 234

Figure 3.22 Jyoti Bhatt, *A Boy with a Bicycle in Dhordo, Gujarat*, 1973. Photograph reproduced from: *Domus* 40 (May 2015): 52 234

Figure 3.23 Jyoti Bhatt, *A Tiger and Calf, Rajasthan*, 1973. Photograph reproduced from: *Domus* 40 (May 2015): 53 235

Figure 3.24 Gauri Gill, *Santosh, Chhotri and Sakina*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 24 – 25. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 235

Figure 3.25 Gauri Gill, *Bimla, Ansi, Ropli and Chandra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 135. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 236

Figure 3.26 Photographer unknown. Photograph reproduced from: Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12 236

Figure 3.27 Gauri Gill, *Sundar*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 139. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 237

Figure 3.28 Youth Ki Awaaz, *Untitled*, accessed May June 5, 2017, https://www.scoopwhoop.com/Army-Navy-Air-Force-Different-Salutes/#.xkgof6czc 237

Figure 3.29 Gauri Gill, *Gomti*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 124. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 238

Figure 3.30 Gauri Gill, *Sita and Sharda*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 18. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 238

Figure 3.31 Gauri Gill, *Exhibition of the 2003 Images at Balika Mela in Urmal Setu*, 2010. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 164. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 239

Figure 3.32 Gauri Gill, *Gomti*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), unpaginated section. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 239

Figure 3.33 Gauri Gill, *Geeta and Mamta*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), unpaginated section. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 240

Figure 3.34 Gauri Gill, *Geeta and Mamta*. Digital scan of two photos placed one on top of the other, reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), unpaginated section. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 240

Figure 3.35 Installation view, Charles Correa Foundation, Goa Photo Festival, Goa, 2016. (Copyright Gauri Gill) 241

Figure 4.1 Shilpa Gupta, *Blame, 2002–04*, interactive installation with Blame bottles that contain simulated blood, posters, stickers, video, interactive performance, 1 min 49 sec loop, 300 x 130 x 340 cm (118 x 51 x 134 in) 242

Figure 4.2 Sheba Chhachhi, *Wild Mother I: The Wound is The Eye*, 1993, 3 terracotta sculptures; 9 terracotta tablets; hand-tinted silver gelatin prints; found images; turmeric; pigment; sand (3.5 x 2.1 x 2.5 m) 242

Figure 4.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia*, 2006/2008, installation with 8 animated duratrans lightboxes, two layers: 120 x 65 x 10 cm each; 2 animated duratrans lightboxes, three layers: 180 x 65 x 10 cm each; 5 silk-and-fiberglass objects; 5 motion lamps; sound: 4', looped/ Darkened room (6 x 9 x 2.5 m) 243

Figure 4.4 Chhachhi, *Black Waters Will Burn*, 2011, public art project: 'Project Y'; Yamuna riverbank, Delhi, site-specific installation with gunny bags; sand; text; video projection: 3', looped; termocol, iron-and-gauze object (9.75 x 4.6 x 3 m) 243

Figure 4.5 Dayanita Singh, *Sent a Letter*, 2008, 7 volumes, 126 pages, 9 cm x 15.5 cm, 7 softcovers, housed in a handmade cloth box (Göttingen: Steidl) 244

Figure 4.6 Dayanita Singh, *Untitled*, from *Museum of Chance*, 2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London). 244

Figure 4.7 Dayanita Singh, *Untitled*, from *Museum of Machines*, 2013. 245

Figure 4.8 Dayanita Singh, *File Museum*, 2012, 1 large and 3 small Burma teak structures, 140 archival pigment prints, 188 x 110 x 47.5 cm (large structure), 33.5 x 33.5 x 10.5 (each small structure), 31 x 31 cm (each print framed) 245

Figure 4.9 Gauri Gill, *Balika Mela*, 2003/2010, installation view, Charles Correa Foundation, Goa Photo Festival, Goa, 2016 246

Figure 4.10 Gauri Gill, *1984*, released on Kafila.org in April 2013, re-released in November 2014 (22.86 x 17.78 cms) 84 pages, 42 black and white reproductions; free to download, print out, staple and distribute 246

Figure 4.11 Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, *Memories Come to Rajesh*, from the series *Fields of Sight*, 2014, ink on archival pigment 247

Figure 4.12 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Mark on the Wall*, silver gelatin print, 11 in. x 14 in. 247

Figure 4.13 Gauri Gill, *Traces*, silver gelatin print, installation view at documenta 14, Epigraphic Museum, Athens, 2017 248

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like first to thank Saloni Mathur, without whose groundbreaking scholarship and unwavering support this project would never have come to fruition. Saloni was a remarkably generous advisor in every sense of the term. Her intellectual excitement was effervescent and contagious, matched only by a wisdom in how best to ground new ideas firmly within a theoretically rigorous and historically sound foundation. Thank you for always, patiently, pushing me to clarify concepts and connections while trusting me to explore my intellectual instincts and giving me the confidence to ask the questions that I really want answered.

Indeed, the entire community at UCLA shaped me fundamentally as a thinker and offered tremendous support from the start of my PhD. I would like in particular to thank Burglind Jungmann for introducing me to Korean art and encouraging my deepening engagement with East Asian painting. Dell Upton offered extremely thoughtful comments on the dissertation, as did Purnima Mankekar, who has encouraged me to think critically about issues of gender in South Asia since my time as an undergraduate at Stanford University. Finally, I would like to thank Miwon Kwon, whose sincerity and depth of perception have astounded me time and time again, and whose scholarship and personal guidance fundamentally shaped my understanding of what art historical inquiry could look like.

The intellectual foundations for this project were laid at several institutions before arriving at UCLA. At Columbia University, I would like to thank Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj for their personal generosity and for supporting my engagement with the Bengal School and my summer at the Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), where I also benefited from the insight and support of Tapati Guha-Thakurta. Both Fred Myers and Faye Ginsburg were pivotal mentors in my engagement with questions of visual anthropology at

NYU. At Stanford University, I would like especially to thank Liisa Malkki for her dedicated mentorship and encouragement to investigate art in India for the first time, as well as Pamela Lee, who gave the clearest answers to the hardest questions and first encouraged me to pursue a career in art history.

Finally, there are a number of mentors whom I have met through a range of conferences and professional events who have left their mark on this project and my growth as a scholar. I would like to thank Malvika Maheshwari for her generative interdisciplinary engagement, and Iftikhar Dadi for encouraging me to focus on the artistic practices I found most compelling. I am also grateful to Alka Patel for her guidance and friendship and especially Ajay Sinha for his unwavering support and generosity.

On a wholly different register, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh, and Gauri Gill for sharing their insights, time, and work. I have been moved to the core by each of these artists' practice, and I can only hope that, if nothing else, my analysis conveys this regard. I would equally like to thank the subjects of the images I discuss, who each offered a view into their lives with remarkable vulnerability and strength.

Many other friends and colleagues in India were pivotal to this project's success- more than I can name here. I would like to thank Aditya Pande for opening his home for so many late nights of conversation between artists and thinkers from across Delhi, indeed the world. Khoj has played a pivotal role in the South Asian art world, as is well known, but I would especially like to thank Pooja Sood and the Khoj staff and broader community for welcoming me as an intern in 2008 and continuing to provide a dynamic platform for artistic practice across India.

My dissertation received generous support from the Asia Institute Graduate Fellowship, the Lenard Travel Grant, the Summer Award for Research Travel at UCLA, the Dickson

Fellowship and the Mellon Fellowship of Distinction. I would also like to thank the Alkazi Foundation, Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, the Tate Research Center: Asia, and Asia Art Archive.

Although formal support is necessary for a dissertation, it is hardly sufficient. This project could never have been completed without a handful of peers who have served as instrumental interlocutors as well as close friends from the start. In particular, I want to thank Joanna Fiduccia for her exquisite curiosity (and way of putting it perfectly), and Rashmi Viswanathan for sharing a commitment to South Asian aesthetics with more passion, rigor, and delight than I could have thought possible. I am grateful to Nico Machida for always reminding me that art can be gravely serious as well as gleefully light, Dwaipayan Banerjee for healthy skepticism at the right junctures and unwavering support in the most critical moments, and of course, Bharat Venkat, whose intellectual companionship from the start was probably the seed of it all.

How can I meaningfully articulate the significance of my parents' contribution to this project? Both David and Sally Powers gave me foundational provocations that shifted the way I thought about the significance of an intersubjective aesthetic, and the impeccable sense of economy and style that each command in their own fashion fundamentally clarified my prose. I owe an investment in aesthetics to the countless hours of careful looking and hard arguing with my father, and a passion for scholarship to my mother, whose dedication to scientific inquiry, truly thoughtful ethical engagement, and delight in the potential of the imagination have shown me how full a life can be. She also makes me laugh.

Finally, thank you to Martin Lin. From Topanga Canyon to Defence Colony, your profound engagement with this project has left its mark on every page. Your sense of adventure, intellectual and otherwise, truly sustains me.

VITA
Alice Sophia Powers

EDUCATION:

2011 **Columbia University**, New York, NY
M.A., **Anthropology**. Thesis: *The Bengal School and its Discontents: New Perspectives on Art and Nationalism in Pre-Independence India* supervised by Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj.

2007 **Stanford University**, Stanford, CA
B.A., **Double Major with Honors** in Cultural and Social Anthropology and Art History. Honors thesis completed on contemporary Indian art.

EMPLOYMENT:

Spring 2018 **Washington University in St. Louis**, St. Louis, MO
Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Art History and Archeology

SELECTED ACADEMIC AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS:

7/14 National Museum of Seoul Fellowship
8/14 Asia Institute Graduate Fellowship Award, UCLA
5/13 Lenard Travel Grant, UCLA
7/12 – 9/12 Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Program Grant, UCLA
1/12 Summer Award for Research Travel, UCLA
9/11 – 6/15 Mellon Fellowship of Distinction, UCLA
9/11 – 6/15 Dickson Fellowship, UCLA

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:

Forthcoming "Journal of Art and Ideas: A Genealogy of Transition," *It Begins with a Story: Artists, Writers, and Periodicals in Asia*, Asia Art Archive Publications.
Forthcoming "In Focus: Seven Lives and a Dream," *Tate Research Publications*, online publication.
Forthcoming "*My Kingdom is the Right Size*: Spotlight Essay on Eleanor Antin," Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, online publication.
2015 "Vision and Revision: An Interview with Neha Kirpal." *TAKE on Art.*
2014 "The Unitary Man in the Age of Experimentalism: Mulk Raj Anand's 'Artist as Hero.'" *TAKE on Art.*
2014 "Flouting Convention One Finger at a Time: Finger-Painting as Performative Eccentricity." *National Museum of Korea 2014 Museum Network Fellowship Research Papers*.
2013 "The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India Since 1989." *TAKE on Art.*
2011 "Toss! Sheila Makhijani's New York Solo at Talwar Gallery." *ArtIndia Magazine.*
2007-2012 *ArtSlant.com*. Regularly contributed reviews of contemporary art exhibitions in New York City, New Delhi, Bogota, and Mumbai for art review publication found online at *ArtSlant.com.* Over 50 reviews, editorials and interview pieces published.

2010 "Woodcuts in Modern China, 1937 – 2008: Towards a Universal Pictorial Language, China Institute." (English and Chinese) *LEAP Magazine.*

SELECTED CONFENCE PRESENTATIONS:

2018 "Absence in the Desert: The Quiet Ethics of Gauri Gill." To be presented at the symposium *Art, Materiality and Representation,* jointly sponsored by the British Museum and SOAS in London. (Panel organizer).

2018 "Picturing Public Protest in the Works of Sheba Chhachhi." To be presented at the *European Conference on South Asian Studies* (ECSAS), Paris, France.

2018 "Icons of Defiance: Protest Imagery from the Indian Women's Movement through the Lens of Sheba Chhachhi." Presented at the *College Art Association's 106th Annual Conference*, Los Angeles, CA.

2018 "*The Journal of Art and Ideas*: A Genealogy of Transition." Presented at the symposium *It Begins with a Story: Artists, Writers, and Periodicals in Asia*, jointly sponsored by the Asia Art Archive and University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

2017 "The Curious Temporality of Sheba Chhachhi." Presented at the *Annual Conference on South Asia*, Madison, WI.

2016 "Singh and her Subjects." Presented at the *Annual Conference on South Asia*, Madison, WI. (Panel organizer).

2016 "Zarina: Another Kind of Homemaker." Presented at the *College Art Association's 104th Annual Conference*, Washington, DC.

2015 "Private Politics When the White Cube Goes Public." Presented at the *American Anthropological Association's 114th Annual Conference*, Denver, CO.

2015 "Private Politics When the White Cube Goes Public." Presented at the *Annual Conference on South Asia*, Madison, WI. (Panel organizer).

2015 "Private Politics When the White Cube Goes Public." Presented at the *American Council for Southern Asian Art (ACSAA) bi-annual Conferen*ce, Toronto, Canada. (Panel co-organizer).

2015 "Radical Privacy: Affect as Action in Oh Inhwan's Aesthetic of Intimacy." Presented at *The Affect Conference: Memory, Aesthetics and Ethics*, Winnipeg, Canada.

2014 "*Khirkee Yaan*: Love thy Neighbor?" Presented at *In/Visibility: Projects, Media, Politics: American Ethnological Society in collaboration with the Society for Visual Anthropology*, Boston, MA.

INVITED LECTURES:

2018 "Resistance and Renunciation in Indian Contemporary Photography." Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland.

2018 "*My Kingdom is the Right Size*: Spotlight Essay on Eleanor Antin." Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis.

2018 "Protest, Performance and Personhood in Contemporary Indian Photography." Queens University, Ontario, Canada.

2017 "Performance, Temporality, Feminism and Death: Contemporary Indian Photography through the Lens of Sheba Chhachhi." Hong Kong University, Hong Kong.

Introduction: Framing an Intersubjective Aesthetic

A group of children drag a cow's corpse across a desert (figure 0.1). A figure crouches in a graveyard with her arms entwined around the neck of a Doberman (figure 0.2). A group of women with shaved heads emerge from a sacred river as holy disciples of the Mother goddess (figure 0.3). Each of these moments emerged in the presence of a photographer who was well-known to her subjects—who was trusted to tell a story about their lives. These are striking individual images. Yet they are each part of more expansive photographic projects developed over the course of many years, often paired with text, that together evoke the intimate texture of their subjects' lives.

This dissertation examines a mode of photographic practice exemplified by such images that is marked by intimate, long-term engagement between artist and subject. I argue that the aesthetic of intersubjectivity embodied in this work lays claim to a sophisticated and progressive politics of gender and alterity through attention to the complex negotiations of social hierarchy within contemporary India. In exploring the under-examined role of photography in the development of recent South Asian art, I further argue that this work anticipates the participatory paradigm that came to prominence in South Asia in the early 2000s. Although much of Indian art throughout the 20th century is marked by themes of alterity and gestures of outreach, the unique history of photographic practice in the subcontinent opened complex and significant possibilities for more substantially relational engagement between artist and subject. Building on this history allowed the three photographers at the heart of my project to develop a form of quiet activism, exemplary within the trajectory of contemporary art in South Asia.

My analysis is grounded in close readings of the work of three Delhi-based photographers: Sheba Chhachhi (b. 1958), Dayanita Singh (b. 1961), and Gauri Gill (b. 1970). Each embraces a mode of social outreach across boundaries of cultural difference over long periods of time, often more than a decade. Born within twelve years of one another, each of these women came of age after Indian independence, but well before the economic liberalization that signaled a cultural paradigm shift for India in the early 1990s. Their lives were nonetheless marked by the extreme social and political upheaval of the Post-Nehruvian era, including the Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi (1975 – 1977), the destruction of the Babri Masjid (1992), and the riots of communal violence that followed.

These three artists share the distinction of having begun their photographic careers as documentarians rather than art photographers. Chhachhi began taking pictures as an activist in the women's movement in India in order to create an internal record of the group's public protest activity. Dayanita Singh was employed by a range of international news organizations; Gauri Gill was a photographer for the magazine *Outlook*. In all three cases, however, the artists grappled with the ethical limits of what the documentary genre within photography could express. Singh increasingly felt that her newspaper assignments preyed on the vulnerability and degradation of her subjects—exploiting the same narrative of desperation time and time again with no effect on the situation.[1] For Gill, the shift in approach was galvanized after she inadvertently witnessed a young rural schoolgirl being harshly beaten, and was told by her editor that she could

[1] Dayanita Singh, "Art Talk – Dayanita Singh (Photographer / Artist)," interview by Jujhar Singh, *Art Talk*, NewsX channel, October 13, 2014, video, 25.58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBCI5KvrFx4.

not undertake a story on the subject because there was no journalistic "hook." For Chhachhi, the shift away from the documentary format was prompted by the actions of other photojournalists who she felt were restaging the images she had taken, thus undermining their authentic connection to the original acts of protest her photographs had portrayed. All three artists chose to expand their practice beyond documentation and work closely with their subjects over time to create more complex bodies of work. As I suggest, these encounters with the limits of journalistic paradigms provided the ethical impetus from which these artists' later projects emerged.

In addition, Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill are frequently drawn to working with photographic subjects that live, in some sense, on the margins of society. Chhachhi began her work with women activists, which led her to a later project exploring the lives of female *sadhus*, or Hindu religious renunciates. For over a decade she lived intermittently with communities of such itinerant mendicants, who represented, for her, a mode of "indigenous feminism." Singh became close friends with Mona Ahmed—a member of the highly insular *hijra*, or transgender/eunuch community in South Asia—who she photographed for more than a decade beginning in the early 1990s. After the completion of a book related to this project, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001), Singh turned her attention to the equally insular communities of India's social and economic elite. These privileged subjects could not be considered 'marginal' in any conventional sense, yet, if *hijras* formed tight and secretive communities because of their status as cultural outcasts, India's elite formed close circles due to their isolation at the top of the societal hierarchy, and Singh's images highlight this resonance. Finally, Gill pursued a relationship with several rural communities in Rajasthan, prompted by the beating she had witnessed as a

photojournalist. She spent more than eighteen years photographing girls and their families as they negotiated extremely harsh conditions of survival that were often beyond the purview of the state.

Significantly, text—often contributed by the subjects themselves-- forms an important part of all three artists' oeuvres. The centrality of text is perhaps most evident in the book *Myself Mona Ahmed*, which combines Singh's photographs with Ahmed's own account of her life written in a series of lengthy emails. Singh explains in the book's introduction that initially she thought the entries would have to be edited, but she was surprised by the power and clarity of Ahmed's prose. Thus, the final project combines pictures and text on an equal footing. Similarly, in her *Jannat* series (1999-2007), Gill displays her photographs alongside letters written by her subject Izmat as well as an accompanying poem copied out by her younger daughter Hooran, once again pairing photography with prose in a relationship of equivalence. Gill's other project, *Balika Mela* (2003-2010), was published in book form and combined a gallery of images with the first-person narrative of one of the girls who posed for pictures and who later learned to manage a photography studio herself. Chhachhi also produced a book, *Women of the Cloth* (2007), that combined her images of the female *sadhus* in four sections organized by the women's own prose. These textual elements not only accentuated the narrative aspects of each project, but also allowed the subjects to reflect on their own images some time after they were initially made. The substantial inclusion of the subjects' own voices represents a collaborative gesture that departs in compelling ways from the conventional history of photography-based practice in India.

The nontraditional nature of these photographic projects was highlighted by the unusual modes of circulation and display chosen by each photographer. All three artists published photographic books: *Women of the Cloth* (2007) by Sheba Chhachhi, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (2001) by Dayanita Singh, and Gill's *Balika Mela* (2012) by Gauri Gill. This format ensured that the images would be viewed along with the text, rather than as potentially isolated aesthetic statements, as in the case of some fine art prints, and allow for greater circulation. In the case of Dayanita Singh, the potential of the photographic book as a distinct medium became a defining art form in its own right. As Singh's career progressed, she increasingly identified herself as "a bookmaker working with photography,"[2] rather than simply a photographer. In 2013, she began to make what she described as "portable museums," which displayed her photographic images in movable installations that allowed them to be shuffled and re-combined in a wide range of possible relationships to one another, thus opening the possibility for multiple narratives in the mind of the viewer based on the ever-shifting juxtaposition of the images. These 'museums' often included later images of Mona Ahmed, a testament to the persistent strength of the relationship between artist and subject even after their primary collaboration was complete. For Chhachhi, the book form also opened the possibility of more experimental modes of photographic display. In 1993 she began to create ambitious installations that combined her photographs with sculptural displays as three-dimensional

[2] "Dayanita Singh," Art Institute of Chicago, Accessed May 20, 2017: http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/dayanita-singh.

objects that could be explored through space. As she described, her intention was to "slow people down" as they took in her photographic oeuvre.[3]

The complexity, sophistication, and seriousness of collaborations between artist and subject in such projects lies at the heart of this dissertation. In his recent book *What We Made*, Tom Finkelpearl articulated a distinction between two poles of engagement present in much recent collaborative and participatory art.[4] Following the work of Grant Kester,[5] Finkelpearl identifies the first mode, "scripted encounter," as characterized by a situation of art-production in which the artist clearly specifies a role for the participant-collaborator, whereas the second mode, "dialogical collaboration," allows for a much greater degree of artistic agency on the part of the participant-collaborator.[6] There are decidedly scripted elements to the work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill such as the studio portrait frameworks each set up in their respective locations. While the subjects were encouraged to "perform themselves" as they liked within this framework, they certainly had less agency than the photographer in establishing the structure of the projects' designs. By inviting their subjects to contribute prose, however, the photographers expanded their projects in a more dialogical direction. While Finkelpearl's spectrum of participation allows some insight into the power dynamics between the photographers

[3] Sheba Chhachhi, interviewed by Vandana Shukla at Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademi. Published Jul 7, 2013 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSDIhbfpIGs.

[4] Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2013).

[5] Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[6] Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, 4.

and their subjects, it falls short of capturing the intimate texture and specificity of the engagement that animates the work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill.

This dissertation proposes, by contrast, a framework for understanding this intersubjective aesthetic on the basis of three interrelated qualities. The first centers around the significance of duration: each project is marked by a long temporal duration that enables complex representations of time within the work. The second is grounded in the drive for recognition: each project is marked by a struggle for personal and cultural comprehension on the part of both photographer and subject within South Asia's complex social hierarchy. The third involves the ethical stakes of the engagement: ethical agency on the part of the photographer to represent her subjects responsibly and bear witness to the complexity of their lives. Each of these features characterize the work of all three photographers and are intimately interrelated, I will suggest, as themes that define an aesthetic of intersubjectivity.

The question of duration and temporality is essential to these works, and is expressed in a variety of forms and registers. Most crucial is the long duration of the relationship between the photographer and her subjects, often sustained over a decade, which provides the foundation for the drive for recognition as well as ethical engagement. Moreover, the outcome is also characterized by complex and often recursive temporalities within the pictures themselves. As Saloni Mathur has pointed out, attention to such "strange temporality" also animates Geeta Kapur's "radical anti-foundational" art historical imagination.[7] Indeed, such modes of representation resonate strongly with

[7] Saloni Mathur, "Partition and the Visual Arts," *Third Text*, (October 2017): unpaginated, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1381409

recent debates in the historiography of South Asia. Post-colonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty have offered models for grappling with the alternative temporalities that evade the so-called "empty homogenous time" that Walter Benjamin identified as characteristic of modernity in the west.[8] As I will elaborate in my discussion of the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in India, such temporal orientations run against the grain of journalistic paradigms that fetishize the "decisive moment"; paradigms that each photographer brought to crisis and upturned in the development of their collaborative practice.

The drive for recognition on the part of the photographer and subject as well as the illustration of the social hierarchy through which recognition must be negotiated are both premised on the extended time frame of the artistic engagement. This is not to say that individuals cannot seek personal and cultural comprehension in the course of far briefer interactions. However, such validation is arguably more likely to lead to simplistic essentialism in comparison to the potential understanding achieved through protracted negotiation between the two parties. While recognition is an intimate process, it is not without tension. In the projects I examine in this dissertation, both the subjects and the photographers fight to be recognized by the other and assert their own agency in the artistic project through which they collaborate. This struggle to be understood appears not only in the dynamic between the photographer and her subjects, but also within the social worlds each photograph depicts. The complex hierarchy that characterizes Indian social life is visually manifest. Thus, the intersubjective aesthetic is fundamentally inflected by

[8] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

a struggle for cultural and personal recognition that opens up the complexity of the hierarchical relationships that constitute social life in South Asia.

Recognition gives way to ethical engagement, the third fundamental attribute of the intersubjective aesthetic that characterizes the work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill. Each of these photographers exemplify a form of quiet activism that emerges out of their close collaboration with their subjects and careful attention to the unique modes of alterity their subjects embody. Often, ethical engagement is equated with the "truth" of journalistic representation and the potential for political and material changes such visual "evidence" can provoke. In the case of these projects, however, recognition and collaboration gives way to representation that may have intrinsic ethical value that cannot be measured in terms of concrete social transformation. These photographs pose the questions: can artistic representation of those who lack political representation itself constitute an ethico-political act? If so, under what conditions? What possibilities and limitations does such representation expose in relation to an artistic practice? One goal of this dissertation is to pursue these questions through the framework of an intersubjective aesthetic defined by the issues of duration, recognition and ethical engagement.

The somehow unfinished and open-ended nature of these photographic projects should also be acknowledged, even as they are deeply embedded in a particular place and time. The relationships behind the images persist, and many continue to be documented through photographs. Mona Ahmed remained a powerful and enduring presence in Singh's oeuvre up until Ahmed's death in September 2017, just as Sheba Chhachhi continued to work through her commitment to feminism with the women whom she photographed in *Seven Lives and a Dream*. Gauri Gill described her series *Notes from the*

Desert as potentially without end,[9] as she plans to return indefinitely to photograph the rural Rajasthani communities she has grown to know. The seemingly inexhaustible nature of these projects attest to both the theoretical complexity of the problems of representation they embody as well as the personal depth of investment in the ongoing relationship between artist and subject that characterize them.

Photography's Gendered Histories

The issue of gender animates the projects of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill in a number of powerful ways. Not only are all three photographers female, but their subjects are predominantly women with the exception of Mona Ahmed who, as a *hijra*, prefers a feminine pronoun. Men do feature in a number of photographs within Dayanita Singh's *Privacy* project, and yet, when discussing the series, she has characterized this as a kind of absent presence:

> It's not as if the men are not there, they're there, but they become, sort of, shadows and they sort of leave the room, and if they're on my contact sheet, they're not the ones I print up. With the women, there's a certain connection. They're on the same level, and there's so much else happening, photography is just a part of it. I don't have that connection with the men. I like men, I love men, I enjoy men, but, somehow in the photography there's something else going on.[10]

This "certain connection" Singh describes allowed each of the photographers far greater intimate access to female (and *hijra*) subjects—subjects who are themselves figures of "alterity" insofar as such intimate portrayals are often outside the purview of their male photographer counterparts. Moreover, what ultimately emerges is a kind of

[9] Gauri Gill, interview with the author, April 22, 2015.

[10] Sabeena Gadihoke, *Three Women and a Camera,* Video. (1998, New Delhi: Doordarshan).

implicit politics that allies itself with gendered subaltern subjects within the context of South Asian patriarchy.

Each of the three photographers had different relationships to the rise of feminist consciousness in the subcontinent during the last decades of the 20th century. As a member of the women's movement, Chhachhi's photographic practice began explicitly as a means of advancing a politicized feminist agenda in India. For Gauri Gill, the issue of girl's education (and their traditional lack of access) was the initial motivation behind *Notes from the Desert*. For Dayanita Singh, the engagement with feminism was more personal. As she described in an interview, she didn't want to follow the conventional life trajectory that her middle-class Indian upbringing prescribed. She didn't want to go to school and college only in order to be married and have children. She viewed the profession of photography as her "ticket to freedom." As she explained: "You know, this was 1986. Girls went to school, college, married, had hobbies, had children. I didn't want to do that. So this was my way out."[11] Thus, in Chhachhi's case the feminist engagement was explicitly political, for Gill it was grounded in the gendered dynamics of a particular region, and for Singh it was predominantly a matter of personal agency.

In a similar vein, each artist embodies and reflects their own negotiation with the dual status of being a woman artist and an Indian artist on the international stage. Sheba Chhachhi's first major overseas show was titled *Four Women Photographers* (1988), at the Horizon Gallery in London. Given the fact that her artistic practice emerged explicitly out of a feminist-activist commitment, such a gendered grouping would have been

[11] Singh, interview.

perhaps logical to audiences at the time. Dayanita Singh, on the other hand, has been outspoken about not wanting to be shown in contexts that situate her explicitly in terms of her gender identity. As she explained to scholar and filmmaker Sabeena Gadihoke: "I'm still a little annoyed at being slotted as a woman photographer. Most times I get quite angry and irritated because I think it's coming as a handicap, like 'black photographer.' That is the way it's said, no?"[12]

In spite of such ambivalences, the portraits of femininity these photographers offer lay claim in subtle and sophisticated ways to a progressive politics of gender and alterity. Mona Ahmed and Jannat's family are minority Muslims, while the *sadhus* that Chhachhi works with are manifestly Hindu. *Sadhus* are itinerant subjects while Singh's subjects in *Privacy* are deeply invested in their homes as extensions of the self. Sexuality is also manifest in a panoply of diverse forms ranging, as I will show, from the nuclear families predominant in *Privacy* to *sadhu* celibacy, from Izmat's de facto widowhood to Mona Ahmed's transgender identity as a *hijra*.

Perhaps the most significant marker of difference, however, is economic. The significance of class is made explicit in Sheba Chhachhi's *Seven Lives and a Dream* as I show in Chapter 1, where the artist confronts the gulf between her middle-class and working-class subjects. According to Chhachhi, the upper-class women were less willing to "perform themselves," believing instead that the camera had a special ability to simply "reveal" them.[13] This attention to "performance" on the part of her subjects—which is

[12] Gadihoke, *Three Women and a Camera*.

[13] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

indeed central to all three photographic practices—is itself a complexly gendered construct, as Judith Butler has influentially argued.[14] One of the most powerful aspects of these photographs is the way in which they lay bear the politics and performance of selfhood at the intersection of class, caste, and gender.

While the majority of subjects are economically marginal, ranging from the impoverishment of Izmat's family to the humble if relatively stable circumstances of Mona Ahmed and the *sadhus*, there is a clear outlier on the spectrum of class identity: the subjects of *Privacy* are unambiguously elite. Singh's pictures emphasize how these individuals express their social status via the material possessions that make up their world. Yet the wealth of these subjects also appears, at times, to constrict them within the gilded cage of their class identity. This offers a very different perspective on the conundrum of gender in contemporary India. Following Partha Chatterjee,[15] feminist scholars Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid anchor these attitudes to shifts in the conceptions of colonial femininity, writing: "A new kind of segregation is imposed on women, whose identity is now to be defined in opposition to women from lower economic strata."[16] These photographs attest to the complexly gendered nature of the Indian public vs. private sphere with sensitivity and nuance.

---

[14] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[15] See Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and its Women," and "Women and the Nation" in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 116 – 157.

[16] Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 11.

If the set of circumstances facing women in India has deep historical roots, the perspectives that emerge from Chhachhi's, Singh's, and Gill's work are also fundamentally grounded in the unique conditions of the last few decades. The women's movement in which Chhachhi took part was a watershed moment for women's activism on the subcontinent, sparked by the dowry-related death of Tarvinder Kaur, who was murdered in 1979. Similarly strident protests erupted once again surrounding the illegal *sati* of Roop Kanwar in 1987, and in 1992 feminists again banded together to demonstrate against the Bhanwari Devi gang rape as well as the larger communalist massacres that occurred in the wake of the razing of the Babri Masjid.[17]

Women were also gaining increasing visibility in the realm of visual art since the 1980s, as Geeta Kapur has argued in her recent essay that addresses the work of five female artists with lens-based practices whose careers were established in the last decades of the 20th century.[18] She argues that these artists worked from a sense of socio-political urgency grounded in the crisis of representation unique to their historical conjuncture.[19] Kapur's investment in feminist art in India far predates this essay, however. In her now classic book *When Was Modernism* she writes:

> It would be true to say that women artists now identify with the emancipatory agenda of feminism personally and socially; they are taking recognizably contestatory positions within the mainstream discourse of art

[17] For an in-depth discussion of these events, see Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800 – 1990* (New Delhi: Zubann, 1993).

[18] Geeta Kapur, "Gender Mobility: Through the Lens of Five Women Artists in India" in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art,* eds. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (New York: Merrell, 2007).

[19] Ibid., 81.

> history…since the mid-1970s. The ideological underpinning of all pictorial representation hitherto taken as universally human (humane) have been revealed through new narratives that tell suppressed or marginalized stories of female otherness.[20]

Here, Kapur identifies something of profound significance for feminist art practice: the experience of female alterity. While taking care not to essentialize "female otherness," her prose highlights the "marked" nature of the female artists' experience against the "unmarked" practice of their male counterparts.

Building on Kapur's insight that feminist art is inextricably linked with the experience of marginality, this dissertation focuses on the diversity of subjects and subjectivities in the photographic projects of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill, who represent a broad spectrum of experience across lines of caste, class and religion in India. Taken together, these pictures work to counter a homogenous picture of Indian femininity. As I will show, these images destabilize gender binaries and open up the complexity of gendered identities in India around the turn of the millennium.

Expanding Photographic Histories of South Asia

In addition to contributing to debates on gender in India and feminist art practice, this dissertation also builds on the substantial scholarship on South Asian photographic history, which straddles the divide between art history and anthropology. Analysis of colonial photography has been largely the purview of art historians and curators such as

[20] Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 58.

Vidya Dehejia,[21] Deepali Dewan, and Deborah Hutton,[22] who have focused on genres that range from landscapes to portraits and images of "ethnographic types." Major post-independence figures such as Henri Cartier-Bresson[23] and Raghu Rai[24] have also garnered scholarly attention. The admittedly wide range of images addressed in this literature tend to celebrate the "spectacle" of India, eschewing intimate domestic moments in favor of the drama of public display. Colonial photography was largely about communicating power, and thus impressive public displays such as *durbars* were privileged subjects of the lens. [25] The most celebrated post-independence figures were similarly drawn to grand subjects, preferring to capture the "decisive moment" of sensational scenes or dramatic historical events. The intimate images of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill, offer an important counterpoint, even a counter aesthetic, to such practices in the history of South Asian photography.

Post-independence, vernacular photographic practices in South Asia have also been the subject of innovative research on the part of visual anthropologists such as Christopher Pinney and David MacDougall, both of whom have engaged in substantial

---

[21] Vidya Dehejia, *India Through the Lens* (Washington DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur Sackler Gallery, 2000).

[22] Deepali Dewan and Deborah Hutton, *Raja Deen Dayal: An Artist Photographer in 19th-Century India* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography, 2013). This is just one of the many substantial catalogues produced by the Alkazi Collection of Photography, based in New Delhi.

[23] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Henri Cartier-Bresson in India* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

[24] Raghu Rai, *Raghu Rai's India: Reflections in Colour* (London: Haus Publishing, 2008).

[25] See Julie F. Codell, ed., *Power and Resistance: The Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911* (New Delhi: Mapin Publishing Pvt. and The Alkazi Collection of Photography, 2012).

long-term fieldwork with studio photography practitioners and their clients. Christopher Pinney has been conducting fieldwork since the early 1980s in the village of Bhatisuda and the neighboring industrial town of Nagda in the state of Madhya Pradesh. His work has powerfully expanded discussions of global photography through a focus on the embodied experience of vernacular photographic practice in the South Asian context.[26] David MacDougall is a documentary filmmaker and scholar who worked for years in the north Indian hill station of Mussoorie. Alongside Judith MacDougall, David directed an acclaimed documentary that examined the range of vernacular and studio photography practices that flourished in the small city, once a celebrated summer residence for elite members of the British Raj. [27] Both Pinney and MacDougall maintained intimate and sustained contact with photographic professionals and their diverse clients in their respective field sites. While this literature offers a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant art-historical focus on photographers who emerge from the documentary tradition in both colonial and post-colonial India, they too largely fail to address the contributions of women to the evolution of photographic histories in South Asia.

This gap, however, has begun to be addressed by a bourgeoning literature that focuses specifically on female photographers in India, pioneered by scholars such as Geeta Kapur and Sabeena Gadihoke. Gadihoke's scholarship has been centered on the

---

[26] Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Christopher Pinney and Suresh Punjabi, *Artisan Camera: Studio Photography from Central India* (Chennai: Tara Books, 2016).

[27] David MacDougal, *Photo Wallahs: An Encounter with Photography in Mussoorie, a North Indian Hill Station* (1991, Oxnard Film Productions). The project was discussed in-depth by: David MacDougall, "'Photo Wallahs:' An Encounter with Photography," *Visual Anthropological Review* 8.2 (1999): 97.

career of India's first prominent female photojournalist, Homai Vyarawalla, the subject of her monograph, *India in Focus: Camera Chronicles of Homai Vyarawalla*.[28] She also explored Vyarawalla's legacy alongside the careers of Sheba Chhachhi and Dayanita Singh in the form of a documentary film, *Three Women and a Camera*, which has served as an important source for this dissertation. Finally, Gadihoke has initiated a scholarly conversation around largely forgotten histories of amateur women photographers working primarily within the family context. While such unsung genealogies have been largely absent from scholarly discourse, they play a significant role in the evolution of later photographic practice including that of Dayanita Singh, whose mother, Noni Singh's photographic archive represented an important influence on Dayanita's mature work. Singh not only discussed the significance of her mother's photography but went so far as to exhibit her mother's pictures alongside her own in professional contexts such as her *Book Museum* at the National Museum in New Delhi in 2014.

This dissertation builds upon this body of scholarship by both seeking to stake out a place in the history of South Asian photography for the contributions of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill, and aiming to demonstrate how this photographic history is itself central to the aesthetic innovations of these three artists. The ways in which each artist draws on the studio photography tradition in South Asia in order to elicit culturally-inscribed self-performance on the part of their subjects provides a dramatic example. This tradition stretches back to royal portraiture and "ethnographic" images in the colonial period, both of which were pursued in large part as an aid to maintaining political power of different

[28] Sabeena Gadihoke, *India in Focus: The Camera Chronicles of Homai Vyarawalla* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006).

kinds.[29] In the practices explored in this study, the aesthetic conventions of the studio portrait are turned to very different ends, namely, individual self-expression on the part of subjects who are often, in some sense, at the margins of society. In Chhachhi's work, subjects play on the ubiquity of vernacular icon-type images of ancestors to place themselves in positions of power and agency. For Singh's elite subjects, the staged photographs offered a chance to establish recognition for what is often a highly eccentric private sphere that is often hidden from view. The rural girls whom Gill photographs transform a genre that would be most familiar in the context of producing matrimonial portraits into a stage to express individualism and the intimacies of friendship.

Finally, while Chhachhi's, Singh's, and Gill's practice stand as exemplary within the framework of the intersubjective aesthetic this dissertation seeks to articulate, they are by no means the only photographers whose work could be characterized by these concerns. Sunil Gupta's engaged, collaborative photographic practice might well have been included in this dissertation, for instance. Among other projects, he has worked for decades to stage portraits of members of Delhi's queer and HIV+ community.[30] Nor, would I argue, that this aesthetic is wholly unique to South Asia, as there are rich photographic practices from around the globe that focus on long-term collaborative engagement with marginal subjects. As the chapters of this dissertation seek to make clear, however, the particular practices of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill remain exemplary within this tradition through their complex leveraging of colonial photographic

[29] See Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[30] Sunil Gupta, *Queer* (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 2011).

techniques and deeply embedded cultural and historical understanding of their subjects gained through committed and sustained societal engagement.

Beyond the Ethnographic Turn

The much discussed "ethnographic turn" in contemporary art describes the rise of largely research-based practices in the 1990s that bore striking resemblance to anthropological and ethnographic paradigms of inquiry. Artists were increasingly situating themselves in "exotic" situations, engaging in participant observation, and grounding their practice in the documentation of other people's lives. The growing interest in this confluence between art and anthropology has produced a robust intellectual discourse, the contours of which were recently sketched out by the 2013 essay *Revisiting the Ethnographic Turn*, which served as an introduction to two volumes of the *Critical Arts Journal* devoted to the topic.[31] While there have been many significant contributions to this debate, most scholars refer to Hal Foster's 1995 essay, *Artist as Ethnographer* as a foundational text for this discourse.[32]

Foster's essay describes the trend toward "ethnographic" art in Europe and American in the 1990's, and offers a set of interrelated critiques of this bourgeoning paradigm. Interrogating the subject-position of the artist vis-à-vis questions of center and periphery is crucial to Foster's account. He writes: "there is the assumption that if the invoked artist is not perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited

[31] Kris Rutten, An van. Dienderen and Ronald Soetaert, "Revisiting the Ethnographic Turn in Contemporary Art," *Critical Arts* 27, no. 5, 2013.

[32] Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer" in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 171 – 204.

access to this transformative alterity, and more, that if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it."[33] Despite the cogency of this critique in relation to identity politics debates, I would argue that it fails to address the complexities of the projects of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill. In each case, as I will show, the artists' own status as "socially and/or cultural other" is unstable and ambiguous. What's more, even when the case could be made that the subject is viewed as "other" from the perspective of the artist or the project, there is certainly not the assumption that the position allows "automatic access" to artistic authenticity or "the site of artistic transformation," to use Foster's words.[34]

Significantly, Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill each maintain a liminal position between what Foster would call the dominant culture and the alterity represented by their subjects. It is true that all three women come from relatively privileged middle-class backgrounds. However, the fact that they are Indian women means that they have each had to contend with not only the challenges presented by the patriarchal society in which they grew up, but the further difficulty of maintaining a professional standing in a global art world that remains largely white and male. Each of these projects explore and illuminate the complexity of this insider/outsider dichotomy and displace the terms of precisely such binaries. Foster's account presupposes a single, fixed center, rather than taking into account the co-existence of multiple centers and multiple peripheries. Thus, I suggest that his reductionist characterization of the dynamics at work in the "ethnographic turn" have limited application when it comes to the complexities of post-colonial subjectivity.

---

[33] Ibid., 173.

[34] Ibid., 171.

The multivalenced hierarchical relationship each photographer maintains vis-à-vis her subjects is significant in this regard. Chhachhi speaks explicitly about how all the women featured in her *Seven Lives and a Dream* project were personal friends, as well as "sisters in the movement." Some of these women came from middle-class backgrounds and others came from working-class backgrounds, a distinction that came to matter artistically in the women's different practices of "performing themselves" – an issue that is explored in-depth in Chapter 1. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it was the middle-class women who had the most difficulty "performing." Instead, Chhachhi described how they believed the camera would "reveal" them (automatically), while the working-class women readily understood Chhachhi's invitation to perform themselves for the camera's gaze. Running against the grain of Foster's critique, it is not the cultural outsider who has "automatic access" to the site of artistic transformation in Chhachhi's project.

The alterity of Chhachhi's *sadhu* subjects is equally complex. In an important sense, they represent the ultimate figures of alterity insofar as they have renounced the realm of the secular world. By this same logic, however, it would be misleading to think of them as figures on the "periphery" of society, as their renunciation has rendered them socially "dead" and therefore, perhaps, more accurately conceived as inhabiting a different cultural realm altogether. Yet as Chhachhi's photographs demonstrate, they are often quite willing to "perform" themselves for the camera, once again falling outside the scope of Foster's critique of art practices in which it is assumed that subjects of alterity have "automatic access" to some form of authenticity as *artistic* subjects. Finally, along a more concrete dimension, it is worth considering that before they renounced their worldly ties, Chhachhi's *sadhu* subjects came from a wide range of social backgrounds. Women

like Mira Puri, a powerful political leader within the *sadhu* community and one of Chhachhi's most compelling subjects, was middle-class and English-educated, much like Chhachhi herself.

Singh's relationship with her subjects is similarly complex. Her position of relative wealth and privilege compared with Mona Ahmed emerges as a significant theme in their collaboration—a fact that in itself demonstrates that such social realities were not invisible constraints on their relationship but rather a powerful aspect of their dynamic that the project itself allowed them to explore and interrogate. As with Chhachhi's subjects, performativity is central to Ahmed's self-conception. The photographs project with power and nuance the extent to which Ahmed's own sense of "alterity" as a *hijra* is grounded in her ability to act out her identity. Such demonstrative portraits are similarly characteristic of Singh's *Privacy* pictures, which take as their subject the country's elite. Such privileged subjects emerge, themselves, as "othered" figures of alterity in Singh's images despite the fact that they represent people at the very highest echelons of wealth and social status.

Perhaps the center-periphery dichotomy is rendered most literal in the case of Gauri Gill's relationship with her subjects—all rural Rajasthani girls and women who are among India's most disenfranchised citizens. As my analysis explores, Gill represents a clear position of social power. The fact that she comes from the "center" of Delhi, is also explicitly acknowledged by her subjects at the start of their association. Despite this power imbalance, however, Gill is clear that over time she developed a close personal relationship to her subjects. As in the projects of Chhachhi and Singh, the performance of identity was paramount, and something that Gill encouraged explicitly in the context of

the *Balika Mela* project. The artistic vitality of her subjects was not something inherent in their alterity, but rather something that emerged especially in conditions of self-fashioning that were enabled by the "zone of contact" established between the artist, subject, and camera.

Several additional criticisms developed in Foster's essay stem from a concern about the power imbalance between the artist and subject. One such anxiety is "the danger, for the artist as ethnographer, of 'ideological patronage.'"[35] In other words, Foster worries that the artist would problematically position herself as a sort of ambassador for her subjects, speaking on their behalf. This could hardly be claimed in the case of the three photographers this dissertation examines, in the first instance because it would be hard to even associate them with an ideological agenda or articulate what they were "saying" on behalf of their subjects. Rather, their projects aim for collaborative expression that highlights the highly personal and specific worldviews of their subjects, often by including their own written prose. Similarly, the specificity of the engagement on the part of each artist deflects Foster's anxiety that artistic projects would "detract from a politics of here and now."[36] Finally, Foster is concerned with a mode of superficial engagement on the part of the artist that can be co-opted on the part of institutional authorities or agendas. Yet the staunch independence and extended engagement of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill once again set them outside the framework of Foster's critiques.

---

[35] Ibid., 173.

[36] Ibid.

In an alternate account of the "ethnographic turn," Miwon Kwon has articulated a powerful distinction between the privileging of "experience" vs. "interpretation" in the ethnographically-inclined practices of artists Lan Tauzon and Nikki S. Lee.[37] Kwon identifies the ways in which Tauzon's project *The Anthropologist's Table* situates the viewer in a necessarily self-reflexive tension between objectifying the figure of the historical anthropologist and identifying with the objectifying processes that constitute their métier. While ultimately failing to offer fixed interpretive conclusions regarding the nature of anthropological practice, the critical thrust of Tauzon's work is nonetheless tethered to its ability to offer effective interpretive provocations about its subject matter. In other words, the nature of the piece invites critical interpretation on the part of the viewer.

Tauzon's practice is contrasted with the provocative performance-photography of Nikki S. Lee, which Kwon argues privileges a problematically uncritical emphasis on the artists' "experience." The work encourages viewers to naïvely accept the artists' imbrication into the social worlds of the strangers with whom she engages, effectively erasing the significance of their alterity by rendering cultural difference in service of Lee's own artistic self-expression. Ironically, the perception of her work's authenticity as experience is enhanced by her own position as a non-Western (Korean) artist. She is, as Kwon puts it: "collapsing herself into the other *as* an other, serving happily as a 'native' tour guide."[38] Kwon's reading offers a cautionary tale about the fetishization of

[37] Miwon Kwon, "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tauzon and Nikki S. Lee," in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Black Dog Press, 2000), 74 – 93.

[38] Ibid., 87.

"experience" in the work of ethnographically-inclined artists. Her critical evaluation of Tauzon's work is more positive, but does not leave the reader with the easy conclusion that works that call out for audience "interpretation" are necessarily more valuable simply by virtue of this effect. The value of Kwon's analysis for our purposes is the clarity with which it articulates two impulses prevalent within practices characterized by the so-called "ethnographic turn."

The work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill each combine elements of the interpretive as well as experiential approach in Kwon's terms. Like Tauzon's *Table*, the photographs examined in these pages invite interpretive engagement, if not easy conclusions. This is highlighted by the pairing of text and image (and the resultant destabilization of authorship) as well as the overall instability of the viewer's subject position. Who is the viewer meant to identify with? The subject? The photographer? Or is the most natural course of action to triangulate between the two from the viewers' own third position—now in some ways rendered a position of alterity beyond the visual (and written) narrative? The value of experience is perhaps more complex, but the artists studied in this dissertation evade, for the most part, the ethical pitfalls that Kwon identifies in Lee's practice. While I argue that they do strive for recognition (as artists and also as friends), viewers are not tempted to confuse these photographers for the primary subjects of the work. Indeed, they are rarely if ever in front of the lens. On the contrary, one gets the sense—especially as a function of the projects' duration, that the artist is exploring a constantly shifting perspective on their subject, rather than performing a "refusal" of their alterity as Kwon suggests in the case of Lee.[39] Furthermore, the photographers examined

[39] Ibid., 85.

in this dissertation do not rely on their "othered" subject position for legitimation. Rather, their work illustrates the hierarchical complexities that both unite and divide them from the social worlds of their subjects. Finally, the photographs are carefully chosen and consciously edited by both the photographer and subject, rather than offered up in the form of "evidence" through a candid-photo aesthetic. While such apparent self-consciousness about the artistic process does not aid in fixed "interpretation" per say, it certainly works against the impression of simply "having been there."

While there are undeniable parallels between art characterized by the so-called "ethnographic turn" and the photographs explored in this dissertation, I argue that the "ethnographic" paradigm that rose to prominence in the 1990s fails to characterize the more complex negotiations inherent in the embedded model of sustained engagement exemplified by the work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill. These photographers are neither "native informants" nor privileged mainstream artists whose projects reflect "disguised travelogues from the world art market."[40] Rather these artists' quiet gestures of social outreach reflect a representation of recognition that is otherwise absent from both photographic and ethnographic accounts.

Avant-Garde Formulations

A further aim of this project is to situate photographic practice at the heart of the broader trajectory of modern and contemporary artistic development in South Asia. Often, photography has been considered somewhat independently from mediums that have received relatively more emphasis such as painting, sculpture, and installation

[40] Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," 180.

within the discourse of the Indian avant-garde.[41] It was only in the late 1990s that fine art galleries such as New Delhi's Nature Morte began to focus on exhibiting photography. Yet this dissertation argues that the intersubjective aesthetic exemplified by the work of Singh, Chhachhi, and Gill transcends the often individualistic practices of 20th century art and anticipates the emergence of participatory artistic projects in the broader public sphere that came to prominence in 21st century South Asia. Attending to how artists have engaged with the representation of people at the periphery of society is key to understanding this transitional aesthetic.

Investment in figures and motifs of cultural alterity has been a dominant hallmark of Indian art since the beginning of the 20th century. Major figures such as Amrita Sher-Gil, Ramkinkar Baij, and Jamini Roy evinced a deep interest in folk traditions and subaltern subjects, while others associated with Santiniketan and the Bengal school turned to China and Japan for sustained influence in order to bypass the Anglo-European traditions of their colonizer. Interest in people on the margins of society persisted in the work of post-independence artists such as those included in the hallmark "Place for People" exhibition curated by Geeta Kapur in 1981. Yet throughout the 20th century, subaltern subjects have rarely been directly consulted about their own representation, for instance, and have had few opportunities to mold or even respond to their portrayal by mainstream artists. Hence, my objectives are, on the one hand, to elucidate the historical continuity that characterizes artistic interest in alterity in India, and on the other hand, to

[41] For instance, there was no photography included in Geeta Kapur's groundbreaking 1981 exhibition "Place for People," which "is generally known as the exhibition that signaled the transition from modernist to postmodernist art in India." Parvez Kabir, "'Place for People': An Introduction," *Take on Art* 5, Curation, (August 2011). https://takeonart.wordpress.com/2011/08/05/place-for-people-an-introduction-parvez-kabir/

explore how recent photographic practices depart from earlier modes of representing "the other."

The turn toward participatory art in South Asia in the early 2000s fundamentally expanded the scope of artists' efforts to take into account interaction with audience members as active participants. Artists such as Shilpa Gupta and Vivan Sundaram, and artists' collectives such as CAMP and Desire Machine Collective began developing projects in public spaces that were intended to engage segments of the population who would not generally frequent art galleries. In each case, the artist(s) was responsible for the initial design and execution, but without the active participation of the public, the project could not come to fruition. Hence, the final artistic product was bound up in this dialectical encounter.

Participatory projects of this kind have been understood through a complex theoretical debate that is often traced back to Nicolas Bourriaud's 1998 publication *Relational Aesthetics*,[42] His conceptual framework was soon countered by Claire Bishop[43] and Grant Kester[44], among others, and has spawned a broad set of discussions around what has been called "participatory art" and "collaborative practice." These conversations, however, have been largely constructed around European and American

[42] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* trans. Simon Pleassace and Fronza Woods (Dijon-Quetigny: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

[43] See in particular: Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79; Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012).

[44] See in particular: Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011).; Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.

examples, and have focused primarily on two related effects of participatory practice: the work's ability to shock the viewer out of complacency and the contingent effect of heightened civic engagement and democratic participation in the public sphere.

I suggest that these frameworks, which are almost exclusively grounded in the development of the Western avant-garde, are not sufficient to elucidate the development of participatory projects in South Asia. The meaning and status of the so-called "public sphere" is not consistent across these vastly disparate geographical and historical contexts. Yet neither does the current history of modern art in South Asia foreshadow the specific concerns of participatory artists in the 2000s. How then to understand the massive reorientation of artistic practice toward audience engagement in the form of public participatory projects? I argue that a key moment within this transformation in South Asia occurs within the medium of intimate, long-term photographic practice as exemplified by the work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill. Rather than focus in the first instance on the social values collaborative projects can promote, my concern is how these projects are operative in the formation of individual subjectivity. Thus, in considering these photographic practices within the theoretical framework of participation and collaboration, I intend to both contribute to our understanding of the transition from modern to contemporary artistic practice in South Asia, as well as expand the discussion of collaboration and participation as artistic genres through careful analysis of examples beyond the Euro-American context.

Methodologically, this work is based on sustained interdisciplinary engagement in the fields of anthropology, South Asian studies, and modern and contemporary art. For my B.A. at Stanford University, I double majored in art history and anthropology, and

began my engagement with the Indian contemporary art scene by writing a senior thesis on the dynamics of the Bombay art market. For my M.A. in anthropology at Columbia University, I worked with post-colonial theorists Partha Chhatterjee and Sudipto Kaviraj to complete a thesis on the early 20th century Bengal Art School. My grounding in anthropology prepared me to understand art production in ethnographic terms while my attention to the post-colonial questions central to South Asian studies provided the foundation for my continuing scholarly engagement with the complexity of power dynamics and social hierarchy in the South Asian context.

Building on this background, this dissertation is based on personal interviews, studio visits, and museum and private collection visits in India, the U.K., and the United States. The bulk of my research was conducted over a ten-month period based in New Delhi in 2014-2015, where I viewed dozens of exhibitions and conducted extended interviews with artists and curators. During this time, I also traveled extensively outside of Delhi in order to broaden my understanding of the social context of collective and participatory practices across India, spending time in the rural district of Bastar, Chhattisgarh with Navjot Altaf and the Dialogue Collective as well as in Guwahati, Assam where I spoke with artists Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukaillya of Desire Machine Collective. In Bombay, I met with Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina Anand of the CAMP collective, and experienced the lively alternative art scene in Bangalore, including the work of collectives No. 1 Shanthi Road, Jaaga and Maraa. While the bulk of my research was conducted in 2014-2015, this extended stay was preceded by four preliminary 1 – 3 month research trips over the course of my graduate studies and a follow-up visit in 2016.

Research at sites beyond India were central to narrating the global scope of the projects explored in this dissertation, including work with the Tate Modern in London and private collections in New York City. Finally, this work has benefitted tremendously from feedback received at numerous invited symposia and conferences where I have presented portions of the dissertation at various stages, including the University of Hong Kong (2017), The Annual Conference on South Asia at Madison (2017, 2016, 2015), The College Art Association's Annual Conference (2016), the American Anthropological Association's Annual Conference (2015), and the American Council for Southern Asian Art bi-annual Conference (2015).

In closing, I would like to suggest that the relationship between the photographer and her subjects offers an alternative mode of artistic production—one in which intimacy developed over a long period of time lies at the heart of artistic expression. Classic conceptions of the avant-garde from around the globe often assume the artist adopts a stance of heroic individualism from which he or she can offer a unique perspective on the world. These three photographic practices do not comport themselves to this conception, but offer a very different, fundamentally relational vision of what it means to do artistic work.

Chapter 1.

The Curious Temporality of Performance in the Photographic Practice of Sheba Chhachhi

Sheba Chhachhi never intended to be known for the photographs she began to shoot as a member of the women's movement. It was the end of the 1970s, and waves of political demonstrations were gaining powerful momentum across India. In Delhi, activists were galvanized around the persistent problem of "dowry deaths," or the murder of young brides by their husbands or in-laws in retaliation for not providing the desired (illegal) dowry. Chhachhi was among the most active demonstrators for this cause. She simultaneously began to document the movement in which she was involved. As she later explained "I was pointing the camera one moment, and shouting slogans the next."[45] Although she intended the images to be used for internal documentation, she was troubled to find many of her compositions mimicked by mainstream journalists, which she felt undermined the authenticity of the original image and led her to question the practice of "straight" documentary photography. Inspired by the studio portrait tradition in South Asia, and aiming to provide richer depictions of a handful of the protagonists of the women's movement, Chhachhi worked with her subjects to create a series of what she called "staged portraits."

This series, in turn, intensified her interest in indigenous forms of feminism and the role of performativity, two themes which she explored through a new body of work. Thus began her intensive photographic engagement with female *sadhus*—groups of largely itinerant mendicants that live across South Asia in substantial numbers but had

[45] Chhachhi, interview by Vandana Shukla.

rarely been captured on film. Between 1979 and 2004, Chhachhi produced three bodies of work that explored contrasting modes of embodied feminine agency: documentary images of the women's movement, staged portraits with major members of the movement, and a series of images of female *sadhus*.

This chapter offers a close reading of these projects with special attention to the issues of temporality they perform and encode. What are the multiple ways the photographs index the time required of their creation, both in the sense of the literal moment the shutter was open as well as the duration of the relationships that culminated in the photographic image? How is the encoding of time central to the photograph's ability to act as a document, or to bear witness? How does the temporally extended engagement characteristic of an aesthetic of intersubjectivity enable the artist to convey the complex self-conception of her subjects? In what follows, I demonstrate Chhachhi's sophisticated exploitation of photography's ability to collapse the passage of time on the one hand, and emphasize time's passing on the other. I argue that Chhachhi's photographic practice both depends upon, and powerfully expresses, modes of alternative temporality that are distinct from the journalistic paradigms within which her practice was first developed. Self-performance on the part of Chhachhi's subjects are key to these powerfully distinctive temporalities and evince a mode of "indigenous feminism" that Chhachhi's practice makes visually manifest.

Recently, scholars have begun to take note of these temporal dimensions of Chhachhi's oeuvre. Temporality was among the guiding themes in the three leading essays featured in *Arc, Slit, Dive*, a recent major monograph of Chhachhi's work.[46] In her introduction to the volume, Kumkum Sangari described how Chhachhi's "installations weave contemporaneity, the still historical longue durée and intimacies of deep prehistoric time—multiple durations that open a space for reflecting on temporality and on disparate modes of disclosure."[47] As the essay develops, Sangari proceeds to focus this argument around the temporal logics of late capitalism, on the one hand, and the concept of the anthropocene, on the other. Thus her reading of Chhachhi's work is invested in how the artist's oeuvre relates to modes of history that exceed the relatively restricted time frame crystalized in or at least most directly evoked by the works themselves. Sangari seeks to leverage Chhachhi's work in her broader metaphysical musings about the nature of historical epochs at the precipice of environmental catastrophe.

This chapter, by contrast, attends to the more limited temporalities that are indexed in the photographs themselves, and argues that Chhachhi's practice represents the women in her photographs as complex historical subjects whose individual relationships to the linear progression of time is not fixed or immutable. As I will explain, Chhachhi's female subjects cannot be definitively captured in a single "decisive

---

[46] See Kumkum Sangari, ed., *Arc Silt Dive: The Work of Sheba Chhachhi* (Mumbai: Volte Gallery, 2016).

[47] Sheba Chhachhi and Kumkum Sangari, "Cracks and Luminosities: Through the Anthropocene and Capital Matters," in *Arc Silt Dive: The Work of Sheba Chhachhi,* ed. Kumkum Sangari (Mumbai: Volte Gallery, 2016), unpaginated.

moment," the heroic vision offered by Henri Cartier-Bresson in the 1950s that had a lasting impact on post-Independence photography. Rather, Chhachhi's self-described goal of "opening up the complexity of who they were"[48] requires a mode of photographic practice that invokes and mobilizes temporal registers that are in some sense beyond the frame.

The Decisive Moment in Indian Journalism

Photojournalism in India was a well-established tradition by the time Chhachhi took up her camera in the late 1970s. Perhaps the best-known early image is the Italian-British photographer Felice Beato's 1858 photograph of the aftermath of the Sepoy Revolt, taken in Lucknow five months after the event.[49] This image, titled *Interior of the Secundrabagh After the Massacre*, (figure 1.1), illustrates the half-standing ruins of a neo-classical palace with four figures and a horse posed in the middle ground for scale. Upon further contemplation, an arresting detail asserts itself in the foreground: the earth is strewn with broken skeletons and human skulls. Most contemporary viewers were unaware of the five-month time lag between the event and Beato's arrival at the scene. Even fewer would have imagined that the photographer's belated arrival would be the impetus for one of photography's most disturbing events of retro-active staging: Beato ordered the half-buried corpses to be fully exhumed from their graves and scattered across the field he intended to photograph.[50]

---

[48] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

[49] Zahid Chaudhary suggests that this was perhaps the first documentary image taken in India "of its kind," and "photographic projects were commissioned on an unprecedented scale in India only after the Sepoy Revolt of 1857," Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire*, 84.

[50] Ibid., 77.

Beato's now infamous image represented a significant departure from earlier colonial photography's treatment of temporality. It was explicitly focused on depicting an historical event: the 1857 uprising in Lucknow, and the image was thus anchored in historical time. This is markedly different than the other prevalent genres of colonial photography such as portraits of royalty or ethnographic types, both of which were designed to highlight relatively timeless subjects in terms of their group affiliation or aristocratic status. Photographs within the "ethnographic" genre were often choreographed to emphasize or even manufacture the sense that their subjects existed outside of historical time; such images, as anthropologist Johannes Fabian has famously stated, to "deny coevalness."[51] Royal subjects had other reasons for wishing to largely represent themselves as exceeding the frame of specific historical moments. Often, they desired to pictorially emphasize the transcendence of their political authority.

There is irony in the relatively new relationship to temporality evident in the Beato picture. In his effort to communicate a highly specific temporal index, the photographer staged a picture meant to convince viewers of his relationship to the event that was in fact misleading (he arrived five months late).[52] What is of particular interest, then, is not the picture's *success* at capturing a particular historical moment, but rather the photographer's investment in his audiences' *belief* that they were witnessing such an

---

[51] Fabian's work critiqued anthropological and ethnographic attitudes and writing at large, rather than focusing specifically on the medium of ethnographic photography. See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[52] Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire*, 77.

image. Truly capturing the world on film at the "decisive moment" that indexed a specific historical event was yet to come.

Just over a century after Beato's arrival, another celebrated foreigner came to take pictures in India: the French photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908 – 2004). In the case of his unparalleled success, timing was everything. He traveled to the newly independent nation of India in 1948 to photograph Gandhi breaking his hunger strike for the Magnum photo agency, which he had co-founded just one year before. Hours after he took pictures of Gandhi, the *Mahatma* was assassinated, and Cartier-Bresson found himself poised, camera in hand, at the epicenter of one of the 20th century's most iconic moments.

Cartier-Bresson laid out his philosophy in the aptly titled book *The Decisive Moment* published in both English and French editions in 1952.[53] He wrote:

> Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant. We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory.[54]

The book's French title, "*Images à la sauvette*" or "Images taken furtively/in haste" offers insight into Cartier-Bresson's strategy for capturing the "precise and transitory instant." He attempted always to blend into his environment. He preferred to work alone with a small 35 mm camera and dressed in drab shades. This was not because

[53] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 1952.

[54] Ibid., unpaginated.

Cartier-Bresson hoped to go entirely undetected, but rather because he preferred to be unobtrusively "caught up in the event."[55]

Photojournalism in India had important female pioneers as well, who each took different tacks to capturing the "decisive moment." The enterprising *Life* reporter and Magnum Agency photographer Margaret Bourke-White photographed Gandhi's funeral alongside Cartier-Bresson, and their images were combined in the major *Life* feature story that broke the news in the United States. As professor of journalism Claude Cookman has pointed out, however, there were significant differences in the two photographers' formal approach to their subject matter.[56] Bourke-White was a great champion of artificial lighting and especially flash photography. While this approach did allow the photographer greater visibility and thus better access to her subject's fleeting moods and expressions, it also eliminated the possibility that a subject could forget about the camera altogether and thus be caught in a relatively spontaneous reaction. Hence, Vicki Goldberg, Bourke-White's biographer characterized her photographic approach as the "posed candid picture."[57]

Yet Bourke-White desired that her pictures strike the viewer as candid shots—at least at first glance. One of her most iconic partition images shows a procession of migrants, young and old, one barefoot, striding across an arid landscape with bundles on

---

[55] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The World of Henri Cartier-Bresson* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 17.

[56] See Claude Cookman, "Margaret Bourke-White and Henri Cartier-Bresson: Gandhi's Funeral," *History of Photography* 22, no. 2 (1998): 199-209.

[57] Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 189.

their heads and in their arms, (figure 1.2). An elderly Sikh man carries his wife on his shoulders. There is nothing in the frame to suggest that this picture was staged. Yet as *Time* reporter Lee Eitingon later recalled: "We were there for hours…she told them to go back again and again. They were too frightened to say no."[58] An army vehicle lingered nearby, but was carefully cropped out of the final image. Thus hours of planning and editing were devoted to creating a picture that appeared utterly spontaneous—a decisive moment. This approach shares something with Beato's infamous exhumation stunt: painstaking planning and artifice were used to promote a viewer's belief in a picture's spontaneity.

Along with Bourke-White and Cartier-Bresson, Indian-born press photographer Homai Vyarawalla also contributed a trove of iconic images to the national imaginary, as historian of Indian photography Sabeena Gadihoke has shown.[59] Vyarawalla learned photography from her husband in the 1930s, and soon gained renown as a journalist in her own right after moving to Delhi. Compared with Bourke-White, Vyarawalla privileged a more truly candid approach, eschewing the complex lighting and scenography of contemporary studio portraits.[60] Her attitude closely mirrored the position Cartier-Bresson expressed in *The Decisive Moment*. She explained:

> "I have never asked anyone to pose for me. I don't like it, because the moment the subjects know that they are being photographed, a change comes over their countenance. The whole atmosphere changes. The body becomes stiff and the eyes open up a bit, which is not natural. When you

[58] Ibid., 311.

[59] Gadihoke, *India in Focus*.

[60] Ibid., 94.

> take a picture, it's always in a split second. You either take it or miss it and that must be the right moment."[61]

Yet unlike Cartier-Bresson, Vyarawalla did not seek to meld seamlessly into the backdrop. She leveraged her unique profile as a female photographer to attract attention at just that "right moment," and benefitted from the rapport she developed over many years in the press core with major political figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru.[62] Vyarawalla's distinctly embodied practice, social embedded in her milieu, was thus critical to her success.

This brief overview of photojournalism in India has been rehearsed not only to give a sense of the photographic landscape within which Chhachhi first took up her camera, but more importantly to illustrate a primary temporal paradigm that had been established as an implicit precedent for journalistic practice. Indeed, many of Chhachhi's first pictures evince a real talent for capturing her protagonists in the tradition of the "decisive moment." As her practice progressed and her relationships with her subjects developed, however, she moves increasingly away from this modernist mode of photographic representation forged in India in the middle of the previous century.

Picturing Protest: The Women's Movement, 1980 – 1991

As noted earlier, Chhachhi's practice began in the late 1970, a period of political unrest in India. Indira Gandhi had just returned to power following the crumbling of the

---

[61] Homi Vyarawalla, interview in Sabeena Gadihoke, director, *Three Women and a Camera*, video, (New Delhi: Doordarshan, 1998).

[62] Ibid.

Janata coalition that had emerged following the turmoil of the Emergency.[63] The country was still reeling from economic instability, and yet not quite on the cusp of the economic liberalization that would usher in major cultural change throughout the early years of the 1990s. The atmosphere was fraught with social tensions, and change was imminent. The women's movement in India, in which Sheba Chhachhi took part, was a significant development in this era of cultural anxiety and transformation.[64]

Over the course of her political involvement, Chhachhi took hundreds of photographs. The impetus for the powerful oeuvre that emerged from this commitment was not the desire to engage a broader public. The photographs were not, for instance, intended for circulation in the mainstream press. Rather, Chhachhi was driven by two interwoven agendas internal to the political movement in which she was a participant. The first was to create documentation for herself and for the other participants of the movement. The second was to build a body of images that could be shown to other women as an alternative model for visualizing themselves. As Chhachhi explained:

> It was internal documentation, it was really for ourselves…Circulation was not at all in the press or mainstream media…A lot of the work of the movement was not simply protesting and taking up issues and campaigns, it was also consciousness raising in communities, or meeting groups of women and sharing these images with them, as a kind of alternative initiative. [65]

---

[63] The Emergency refers to the deeply fraught period in Indian history following Indira Gandhi's 1975 silencing of political opposition through the declaration of a state of emergency. For a narrative ethnographic account of the period in Delhi, see Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003).

[64] Nancy Adajania, "Obey the Little Laws and Break the Great Ones: A Life in Feminism," in *Arc Silt Dive: The Works of Sheba Chhachhi*, ed. Kumkum Sangari (New Delhi: Tulika, 2016), unpaginated.

[65] Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

Notably, these pictures continued to serve a documentary purpose within the women's movement even after Chhachhi became known internationally as a fine art photographer. Chhachhi's photograph *Shardabehn – Public Testimony, Police Station, Delhi*, (figure 1.3), taken in 1980 and acquired by the Tate in 2014, was also featured in the book *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800 – 1990*,[66] with the caption: *A member of the audience telling her story, Delhi, 1980*.[67] And yet, tellingly, the photographer was not named, a fact that further confirms their evidentiary status.

This reprint thus signals the extent to which Chhachhi's photographs were valued as evidentiary, in the classic sense that so many early commentators on photography have described. As Susan Sontag stated in the opening pages of her now classic text *On Photography*: "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it."[68] The subject matter was considered more important than the photographer, and tended to preempt formal concerns such as composition or lighting.

This evidentiary value of the photographic image is manifest even *within* the very first images Chhachhi took. The protests she captured often centered on the use of photographs of the murder victims for whom the protests were seeking justice. Consider

---

[66] See Radha Kumar's *The History of Doing*. It is worth noting that the book's author, Radha Kumar, is one of the seven activists who is featured in Chhachhi's series *Seven Lives and a Dream.*

[67] Ibid., 118.

[68] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA, 1977), 3.

Sathyarani – Anti-Dowry Demonstration, Delhi, (figure 1.4), taken in 1980. Two figures dominate the frame. The first is Sathyarani, an anti-dowry activist whose life was devastated by the discovery that her pregnant twenty-four-year-old daughter had been burned to death by her in-laws for her inability to provide "ample" dowry.[69] Chhachhi's image captures her shouting with an arm raised, amidst a dense crowd of impassioned protesters. The second figure, Sathyarani's daughter, Shashi Bala—sometimes called Lakshmi, is present at the protest in the form of a formal photograph taken on her graduation day that is held aloft in her mother's left hand. This image offers an oasis of tranquility in the sea of agitation and anger. Yet she is clearly the cynosure of these women's rage.

As her photographic practice progressed, however, Chhachhi was struck by a troubling phenomenon she observed with increasing frequency at the site of the women's movement protests. Mainstream journalists were staging photographs to mimic the images she had captured. As Chhachhi explained in an interview:

> I began to really question documentation itself, and several things happened. One was that this sort of militant woman, that I was very invested in, had been in a really important and significant image…That image had itself turned into a stereotype. It became a sort of ready vocabulary. I remember turning up at a demonstration and finding the press photographers there, all of them making the women pose—it was like mirroring my photographs. It was a very bizarre moment.[70]

Chhachhi was describing her now iconic photograph of Sathyarani with her fist raised beyond the frame, (figure 1.4). A gesture that Chhachhi believed she had caught

---

[69] Mahila Dakshanta Samiti, "Burning of the Brides," *New Internationalist*, November 2, 1979, http://newint.org/features/1979/11/01/burning-brides/.

[70] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

spontaneously in the midst of a rally was now being reenacted at the prompting of photo-journalists. This fundamentally undermined her confidence in the authenticity of the moment her shot conveyed.

Chhachhi became terrified that her images would turn against themselves—that rather than aid the movement they were created in service of, they would instead undermine its authenticity and urgency. This potentiality of the photographic image is also something Sontag addressed repeatedly in *On Photography*. As she stated at one point in her text: "The aestheticizing tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it. Cameras miniaturize experience, transform history into spectacle."[71] It is not altogether surprising that seeing different moments, people, and events represented again and again in the same formal language would slowly erode a viewer's sensitivity to difference. This transformation of "history into spectacle" serves to fundamentally desensitize the viewer.

It was precisely Chhachhi's discomfort with the possibility that the aura of the photograph could come to outweigh the specific reality of the moment it portrayed that led her to revisit the protagonists of the women's movement in a latter project *Seven Lives and a Dream*. It is not simply that the images misled, it was that they flattened. As she later remarked of her early images, "While these were friends, fellow travelers, sisters in the movement, the images I had of them actually didn't, I felt, open up the complexity of who they were. And I knew them so much more intimately than what the images spoke

[71] Sontag, *On Photography*, 85.

of."[72] So Chhachhi conceived of a way to explore the complexity of these subjectivities through collaboratively staged portraits.

Seven Lives and a Dream: Staged Portraits, 1990 - 1991

For this series, completed between 1990 and 1991, Chhachhi approached eight of the activists she had become particularly close to over the course of the previous decade and proposed staging individual collaborative portraits in response to how each woman wished to be portrayed. Seven of the women agreed to participate, and the eighth declined. The mention of "the dream" in the project's title refers both to the women's collective "dream" of emancipation as well as the "shadow" woman whose portrait was not included. Chhachhi worked with each woman for nearly three months to understand what aspects of their personal experience they most wanted to express in their portrait, as well as how they could best be communicated.[73]

The broad range of class backgrounds that the women represent is striking, and made evident by their dress and home environments. Chhachhi reported that she worked with three middle-class women, and four working-class women, and had substantially different experiences creating the portraits with each. Perhaps surprisingly, she found it more difficult to collaborate with the middle-class women whose backgrounds were more similar to her own. This was largely due to different levels of comfort with self-performance, on the one hand, and different expectations regarding the nature of photographic representation, on the other. As Chhachhi explained:

---

[72] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

[73] Sheba Chhachhi, "Khoj Marathon: Sheba Chhachhi," interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, YouTube, January 22, 2011, video, 01.02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-KLgEdQfpc.

> "Middle class women have much more difficulty with accepting the performative invitation. To perform oneself was something that the working class women understood immediately and responded to. It's also part of the vernacular vocabulary of photography—to go into a studio where you actually perform yourself…Middle-class women, and this was an older woman… she wanted to be revealed, she wanted to be, somehow, revealed through the camera, and she expected my intimate knowledge of her to sort of manifest without her having to perform. She was very reluctant to perform. For her, that would become false or fake, so she was as if imbued with some of the cannon, as a subject, and with that tradition of photography that you're revealed, sort of, unknown to yourself. The candid image, that kind of thing. So it was curious, we worked and worked, and it just never came together. It was very interesting."[74]

This quote reveals Chhachhi's explicit interest in performance on the part of her subject as well as her careful attention to how class dynamics were reflected in her subjects' varying relationships to photographic traditions within the South Asian context. On the one hand, she wanted to move away from a photographic tradition that celebrated the "decisive moment" or the "candid image," as she stated. On the other, she was interested in something that her working-class subjects intuitively understood as integral to the photographic medium much more easily than her middle-class subjects.

The shift from candid to staged imagery evolved out of Chhachhi's experience of seeing her iconic image reproduced or staged by mainstream journalists. She had captured a "decisive moment," which was then transformed into a performance insofar as the women were being asked to restage her compositions. Paradoxically, this didn't cause her to redouble her insistence on the authenticity of the candid shot, but rather to pursue another kind of truth anchored in her subjects' performativity.

Although Chhachhi has described the staged portrait project as a reaction against mainstream journalists' appropriation of her photographic vocabulary on the one hand,

[74] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

and her images own flattening of their subjects' personality on the other, one can't help speculating about a third motivation as well: her own growing sense of artistic agency. The mark of a good photojournalist, as Sontag notes, is a lack of clear authorial style.[75] The focus should be the subject matter, rather than the photographer's unique sensibility. Although Chhachhi was not a journalist, her documentary method aligns her with their straightforward style and objectives. Of course, we know that the objectivity of the documentary form is its own particular kind of fiction. Yet there is something ironic about the fact that as "an artist" Chhachhi was freed precisely through collaboration. By initiating a scenario designed to give other women authorial control over their own image, Chhachhi almost paradoxically cemented her own artistic agency.[76]

Let us turn our attention to the staged portraits themselves. The use of props was ubiquitous within the photographs. Consider the proliferating typewriters in one of the most striking pictures: *Urvashi – Staged Portrait, Gulmohar Park, Delhi, 1990*, (figure 1.5). At the center of the composition, a striking woman sits cross-legged amidst a small army of six typewriters. Her chin is resting on her arm, and her *khol*-laden eyes are fixed on the viewer above pursed lips. The composition is arresting and deceptively simple in

[75] Sontag, *On Photography*, 104.

[76] This increased sense of artistic agency was itself tied back to the performative impulse. I once asked Chhachhi if she had ever been tempted to make her own photographic self-portrait. She chuckled, and replied that one of her subjects had actually turned the camera on her—insisting that Chhachhi inhabit the world they had created for her (the subject's) staged portrait. Chhachhi went on: "She put me in her theater, and photographed me. Because we were working on the tripod, she said show me how it works and go sit there, and do this and you do that. That's right!" (Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015). Although these images were not included in the final selection for the series, this anecdote reveals the ways that the performative initiative of her subjects clearly opened new avenues of expressive freedom for Chhachhi as an artist.

its impression of symmetry. The typewriters fan out around Urvashi—those with black keys to her right, and those with white keys to her left. A mysterious bundle of textile breaks up the plane of machines. There is a computer monitor behind her right shoulder, and a traditional Tanjore painting propped up with books by her left. It is easy to miss the bureau on the right edge of the picture plane with clothes cascading out haphazardly. One wonders at the choice of such disarray in the midst of such an orderly composition. It does infuse a jolt of dynamism into what is otherwise a strong if static image, and yet it is tempting to venture a psychological reading as well: this is a woman who simply has much better things to do than pick up laundry.

Other portraits also feature writing accoutrements, albeit of a low-tech variety. Shanti's staged portrait, (figure 1.6), shows the subject seated on the floor with a notebook and pen at her feet. The other objects in the frame suggest a humbler mode of life than Urvashi's tableaux: a bundle of cloth, a farming tool, a few large bangles, and most distinctively, a sea of grain strewn across the foreground and caught in the crease of the notebook. The significance of writing is even further highlighted in the portrait of Devikripa, (figure 1.7), which actually shows her in the act, pen raised. She is seated cross-legged on a broad bed, and meets the viewer's gaze with an almost imploring sincerity as she writes in the notebook cradled in her lap. Such an emphasis on literacy and literary agency would have been exceedingly rare in the gendered context of these women's milieu, and there were virtually no contemporary precedents for its visual manifestation—photographic or otherwise.

Another prop jumps out in Devikripa's portrait as well: a family photograph. Indeed, photographs are arguably the single most conspicuous objects chosen for

inclusion in Chhachhi's staged portraits. Sometimes these appear to be images of family members, as in Devikripa or Radha's portraits. The majority of the featured photographs, however, specifically call attention to the subjects' involvement in the protest movement. Both of Sathyarani's staged portraits include the photograph of her slayed daughter's graduation day that was earlier memorialized in Chhachhi's "iconic" protest image taken ten years before (figure 1.4). This obviously has the effect of emphasizing the centrality of Shashi Bala in her mother's identity, but it also recursively invokes Sathyarani's leadership role in the activist movement galvanized by her daughter's murder.

The staged image of Shahjahan Apa, (figure 1.8) goes a step further to include earlier protest images Chhachhi had shot nearly a decade before. This image features a gaunt and solemn figure seated cross-legged on a bed. Her right hand holds a length of dark fabric that drapes across her knees and over the left hand which is positioned in a sort of *mudra*, or iconic hand gesture. A shelf behind her displays neatly stacked cups and *tiffins*, a radio, a sewing machine, and a calendar print of a young boy reading the Koran. But the most striking aspect of the image besides the piercing gaze of Shahjahan Apa seated on the bed are the three photographs prominently centered at the bottom of the frame at her feet. The image in the center is Chhachhi's earlier protest shot taken in 1986.

The vernacular display of iconic-type portraits such as these are ubiquitous in Indian homes, yet their subjects are typically gods, deities, or ancestors, with the odd politician and film star thrown in. Thus, such images of an ordinary woman, especially pictured beyond the realm of her family or marriage, would have immediately struck contemporary viewers as contrary to convention.

Sathyarani's staged portraits also foreground her identity as an activist, albeit

through the inclusion of her daughter's graduation day portrait taken more than a decade before. This obviously has the effect of emphasizing the centrality of Shashi Bala in her mother's identity, but it also recursively invokes her leadership role in the activist movement galvanized by her daughter's murder. The reams of documents splayed out before Sathyarani in her staged portraits represent just a fraction of the court proceedings she has spearheaded seeking justice for her daughter's death, (figure 1.9 and figure 1.10). At the time these pictures were taken in 1990, she had still found no legal resolution. She finally won her case in 2013, but in an uncommonly bitter twist of events, her daughter's husband had disappeared and has yet to be located or brought to justice.

Strikingly, Sathyarani seems hardly to have aged in the decade separating her staged portraits and the image of her leading the women's movement. Despite the contrast in her pose—extremely animated in the first image and markedly still in the two posed portraits, her silver hair, plump face and body remain virtually unchanged. The protest image and the staged portraits might well have been taken just a day apart. This observation seems to run against the grain of Susan Sontag's claim that:

> Through photographs we follow in the most intimate, troubling way the reality of how people age. To look at an old photograph of oneself, of anyone one has known, or of a much photographed public person is to feel, first of all: how much *younger* I (she, he) was then. Photography is the inventory of mortality.[77]

Rather, these images appear to evince the seemingly contradictory capacity to collapse time. This quality was perhaps most strikingly observed by Walter Benjamin, who wrote with a near mystical obscurity: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past

[77] Sontag, *On Photography*, 54.

can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."[78] This is one of Benjamin's first formulations of what he would later call "the dialectical image" which evolves as an enigmatic theory about the elliptical nature of history and time.[79]

The effect these photographs have of collapsing time extends beyond the inconspicuous aging of their subjects, however. Consider once again the photograph of Shashi Bala on her graduation day. The power of Sathyarani's daughter's image surely derives in part from what Benjamin identifies as "that tiny spark" that connects the present to the past in the photographic image. As he writes:

> The spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it.[80]

It's true that it is difficult not to look into Shashi Bala's face and wonder if there's any premonition of the tragic end that will befall her. While this may not have been the effect of the graduation photograph when she was still alive, her fate is irrevocably imprinted onto the past in the eyes of the knowing viewer through the medium of this image.

As newspaper coverage from 1979 reveals, there were other images of

---

[78] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Random House, 1955), 255.

[79] The complex and obtuse notion of the "dialectical image" has been examined at length in the work of many scholars, most notably Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), and Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[80] Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13, no. 1 (March 1972): 7, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5.

Sathyarani's daughter that could have been used. An article devoted to coverage of the case features the juxtaposition of two pictures, both close-ups of the girl's face. The first, *Lakshmi soon after marriage* (top, figure 1.11) is a formal portrait of a young girl with full lips and tender eyes. A second picture was printed below, (bottom, figure 1.11), "*Burned because her parents could not afford 'enough' dowry.*" This chilling image shows what we can only know from the caption to be the same young woman, charred beyond recognition. The picture is also a close-up of Lakshmi's face, and the compositional resonance between the two images serves to reinforce the shocking disparity between her pale countenance in life and the blackened mask of her death. The article quotes her mother who explained: "I had never seen anything like it...there were no eyes, no mouth... it was just a twisted black bundle lying in a corner."[81]

Neither the image of Shashi Bala soon after marriage nor that of her charred corpse, however, were chosen by Sathyarani to hold up at the rally. Instead, she wished to show her daughter on her graduation day. This is notable because one might assume that the graphic image of her daughter's burnt face would more effectively insight the anger of the crowd and serve the evidentiary purpose that photography excels in conveying. Instead, Sathyarani desired that her daughter be "present" in the rally— almost as if she were a participant rather than merely an icon or effigy. In the moment that Chhachhi takes the photograph of Sathyarani with her arm raised, she is solidifying a future past, as it were. She is thrusting Sathyarani into the same temporal limbo as her daughter, both petrified in a moment of power emblemized by a mother's fist, and a daughter's degree,

[81] Samiti, "Burning of the Brides."

that collapses the time that divides them.

One gets a similar sense of "presence" in the use of earlier photographs within the staged portraits. Consider once again the staged portrait of Shahjahan Apa, (figure 1.8). The image by her feet is Chhachhi's earlier shot taken during the "anti-dowry public testimonies" in 1986, five years before, (figure 1.12). It is a tight shot taken from a low angle of Shahjahan Apa's slender form swathed in a *duputta*, holding out a picture of what looks to be a young woman on her wedding day. Her mouth is open, her brow is furrowed, and although the background is primarily tree and sky, she looks to be surrounded by a crowd.

Despite the reference to an earlier moment, these staged portraits do not operate primarily in a nostalgic register. Rather, they demonstrate something powerful about who Shahjahan and Sathyarani are at the moment their staged portraits are taken. They are tenacious and resolute woman committed to social change. What is technically their past is an essential characteristic of their present. The photographs do not register temporal divide but rather enact the non-linear disorientation of temporal collapse.

Perhaps this effect can be explained by the very content of the staged portraits. They convey the spirit of women whose lives have, along a profound dimension, truly reached a standstill. Their struggle for justice persists. The viewer senses in the images that these women refuse to move on, and this resolve is captured as a sort of agelessness that flies in the face of the logic of mortality that Sontag identifies as essential to so many photographic portraits. The staged portraits reify the immediacy and eminence of the past.

It is in *Seven Lives and a Dream* that Chhachhi first demonstrates the alternate

temporal orientation that I argue lies at the heart of this series' pictorial power—an orientation that refuses to remain fixed in a single historical instant but rather loops back on itself, refracting meaning across temporal gaps. These are not images that present the spectacle of history framed through a single decisive moment, in the tradition of Beato or Cartier-Bresson. Rather, Chhachhi produces a picture that draws together disparate temporal registers and emphasizes the instability of our teleological imaginary.

The idea that cultural and historical development may not have progressed according to the same temporal logic everywhere in the world has been recently developed in the work of prominent post-colonial theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty. He counters the Western enlightenment presupposition that modernity is tied inexorably to technological innovation, the spread of capitalism, or the evolution of particular social or political institutions.[82] Time does not proceed necessarily according to a linear logic of teleological progress. Rather, Chakrabarty articulates the concept of "time-knots" which straighten in some places and thicken and turn back on themselves in others like "the complex formation of knuckles on our fingers to the joints on a bamboo-stick."[83] Such knots are not unique to post-colonial temporalities, and yet teleological assumptions about history have been used to relegate places like India to the "not-yet" of modernity.[84]

Other post-colonial theorists have articulated an analysis of alternative temporalities in the case of more specific realms of life. Partha Chatterjee, for instance,

---

[82] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

[83] Ibid., 112.

[84] Ibid. 9.

posits the populist category of "political society" as a modern formation in India that arose in opposition to the Western bourgeois category of "civil society."[85] In the realm of biopolitics, Gyan Prakash argues that elite nationalists in the Indian context leveraged the opposing temporal orientations assumed by Western and traditional medicine in their play for colonial power.[86] Finally, in the aesthetic realm, Veena Das explores how Indian cinema enacts a range of often contradictory expressions of tradition which foreclose the possibility of linear historical explanation.[87]

South Asian art historians have begun to build productively on these formulations. In her analysis of early 19th century paintings in the "ethnographic genre" attributed to the so-called Company School, Rebecca Brown analyzed temporality as a rhythmic concept. She writes: "I argue that colonial polyrhythms of repeated processes, shared moments of remembrance, pauses of differing duration, endless travel on sea and river—these rhythms form the modern much more fundamentally and constitutively than narratives of acceleration propose."[88] In shifting the conceptual focus from the actor to the action in these works, Brown works to destabilize a discourse of "speed" and acceleration" through attention to rhythms of daily life. Although this framework was

---

[85] Partha Chatterjee, "On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies," in *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, eds. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 165 – 178.

[86] Gyan Prakash, "Body Politic in Colonial India," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 189-223.

[87] Veena Das, "The Making of Modernity: Gender and Time in Indian Cinema," in *Questions of Modernity,* ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 166-189.

[88] Rebecca M. Brown, "Colonial Polyrhythm: Imaging Action in the Early 19th Century," *Visual Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2013), 270.

conceived around instances of colonial art production, her analysis provides a generative model to think through alternate temporalities in the post-colonial present and their inexorable imbrication in the past.

Arguably the most renowned and influential Indian art critic, Geeta Kapur, has consistently promoted rigorous re-readings of South Asian art practices that highlights their "strange temporality, recursive procedures, and anachronistic ruptures."[89] The significance of temporality as a problematic is suggested by the title of Kapur's seminal book *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, in which she writes "It may be worth mentioning that modernism as it develops in postcolonial cultures has the oddest retroactive trajectories, and that these make up a parallel aesthetics."[90] Her articulation of this "parallel aesthetic" and the alternative temporal registers in which it operates, have become foundational to the field of contemporary South Asian art.

My work builds on this scholarly discourse, yet rather than focusing on how artworks occupy unfixed and non-standard positions within a broader arc of art historical development—that is to say, a critical reassessment of periodization— my argument focuses on how alternative temporalities are embodied within the works themselves. Galvanized by the insights of post-colonial theorists my reading further argues that the temporal sensibility that Chhachhi's photographs exhibit are grounded in a progressive politics of gender and alterity. This commitment led her to a very different project, in

[89] Saloni Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

[90] Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 297.

which she sought to investigate the "indigenous feminism" embodied by the lives of female *sadhus* or Hindu religious renunciates. In this later work, as we will see, complex representations of temporality retain a central role in the portrayal of Chhachhi's subjects.

***Women of the Cloth*: Ganga's Daughters, 1979 & 1994 - 2004**

In the early 1990's Chhachhi began to explore a radically different model of femininity—the world of India's female *sadhus*. *Sadhus* are wandering ascetics who have taken vows of religious renunciation. In order to become a *sadhu*, a woman must relinquish all ties with her family and "conventional society." During the initiation ritual she is stripped naked, her head is shaved, and she must give up the name she was born with. She then performs a set of complex "death rites" for herself and her ancestors from seven generations back. Finally, she is submerged in a river—usually the Ganges, and when she emerges she takes on a new name. Henceforth she wanders from place to place surviving off alms, sometimes alone and sometimes in groups of other *sadhus*. Chhachhi's sustained photographic practice bears witness to this ritualistic transformation and offers a series of portraits of individuals who have chosen to live thus radically transformed.

Chhachhi was drawn to the female *sadhu* community because of the complex alternative model of performative femininity that these women embodied. As Chhachhi described later in an interview, they represented a kind of "indigenous feminism."[91] Their social identity was not something they were born into, but rather something that they

[91] Sheba Chhachhi, "Artists Talk," (presentation, India Habitat Centre and Nazar Foundation, Delhi Photo Festival, Delhi, September 28, 2013). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXQsgQBErlU.

chose. Of course, women might elect to relinquish society for all sorts of reasons beyond devotion alone. A woman might be attracted to a life of chastity or seek an escape from domestic drudgery. Some women elect a life of renunciation after they have been abandoned by their husbands and cast out by their family.[92] Even in these instances, however, leaving the conventional social sphere always represents a radical resolution.

Chhachhi's interest in the female *sadhu* community began as a student, when she took a series of portraits of the *sadhu* Subhadra in 1979. After a decade of close involvement with the women's movement and her staged portrait series with some of the movement's leaders, Chhachhi once again turned her lens on female ascetics. This time, however, her engagement was far more sustained than a one-off portrait session. In the decade between 1994 – 2004, Chhachhi lived intermittently within female *sadhu* communities. As she described: "It was really a question of just being there, hanging out and making friends and if they allowed it, photographing them."[93]

The result of this engagement was a large body of multi-media work that was displayed in a range of contexts over the course of the following two decades. Initially, a selection of Chhachhi's photographs were shown in the exhibition *Ganga's Daughters* at her gallery Nature Morte, in New Delhi, accompanied by a substantial catalogue titled *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations*.[94] Soon after, Chhachhi experimented

---

[92] Sheba Chhachhi, "The Householder, the Ascetic and the Politician: Women *Sadhus* at the Kumbh Mela," *India International Centre Quarterly* 29, no. ¾, (2009): 224.

[93] Chitra Padmanabhan, "Wild Mothers," *Tehelka*, October 1, 2008, http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_naturemorte_com/e8ab22dc.pdf

[94] Sheba Chhachhi, *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007).

with different ways to animate the portraits beyond the traditional book or gallery context. Her exhibitions *Wild Mothers I*, (figure 1.13), and *Wild Mothers II* incorporated a selection of her images into a broader set of sculptural installations, and included animated still photographs—a formal innovation that she would continue to explore for the next two decades of her career. As she explained, "One of my difficulties is that people tend to receive the still image as a kind of bit of information."[95] She goes on to describe how she observed people walking through a gallery as if they were flipping through the pages of a magazine. Her intention in the new mode of display was simply to "slow people down."[96] While these innovative modes of display are worthy of discussion in their own right, especially as manifestations of Chhachhi's evolving and temporally inflected dynamic with her audience, this essay will limit discussion to the images as they are presented in Chhachhi's major photographic publication *Women of the Cloth*.

The book is divided into four sections of photographs—three black and white, and the final in color, each prefaced by a brief text. The first, *Subhadra* features nine portraits of a single ascetic that is introduced by a poetic quote offered by the subject. The second section, *Initiation Chronicle*, is introduced by a narration of the story of Karaikal Ammaiyar, a Shivite poet-saint who is believed to have lived between the 4th and 6th centuries. This set of images—the most substantial in the book, portrays the complex rites of initiation required on the part of women who wish to make the transition into a life of asceticism. Section three, *Mahant Mira Puri*,"retrains Chhachhi's lens on a single figure, yet this time explores her highly visible social and political role within the female

[95] Sheba Chhachhi, interview by Vandana Shukla.

[96] Ibid.

sadhu community. This section is prefaced by a 16th century Sanskrit text known as "Dialogue at Kalyan, Sunyasampadane." Finally, the last section, "Rogue's Gallery," is made up of staged color portraits of individual female ascetics. This project is prefaced with Chhachhi's own words, and is the most clearly related in terms of composition to the staged portraits Chhachhi took in her earlier project with protagonists from the women's movement.

The first section *Subhadra*, is comprised of a series of portraits taken in 1979, and serves as a sort of preface to the larger sections that were shot between 1992 and 2002. As gallerist Peter Nagy describes in the book's post-script, these pictures were taken when Chhachhi was still a student, long before she conceived of beginning a more sustained engagement with the *sadhu* community. The subject of this first section is the female ascetic Subhadra, as the title suggests. Chhachhi presents us with nine magnetic portraits of the silver-haired woman, beginning with a shot of her asleep on a thin mattress, (figure 1.14). This is the only image in the series that establishes Subhadra within a social context. Her large body is supine across the bottom half of the picture plane, bare chested with a white cloth wrapped around her thighs and belly. A silver necklace at her throat catches the light. Behind her we can see four people, a young boy and girl, a middle-aged man with a wristwatch, and another unidentifiable figure lying on a mat. Who are these figures, and what is their relationship to Subhadra? Why is she surrounded by men and children when she has given up the trappings of conventional society or family life? It is impossible to answer these questions as the rest of the series features only Subhadra alone. Yet the fact that this opening image is at once a portrait

and a group shot establishes Chhachhi's keen interest throughout the book in capturing individual charisma within a broader social context.

The *Subhadra* series also brings out the tension between anonymity and personal charisma that animates many of the ascetics' portraits. The renunciation embraced by female *sadhus* is traditionally conceived of as cutting all ties with secular modes of living which one might expect to include relinquishing traditional emblems of material adornment such as jewelry or more general pride in one's appearance. Yet Subhadra appears quite invested in her physical presentation. One image shows her grinning as she fastens a heavy silver necklace around her throat, (figure 1.15), and the final four images show that she has donned a second necklace in addition—this time adorned with two thin silver ornaments. She also wears her hair in a rather ornate braid atop her head. One image—the only one that portrays her with her breasts covered-- shows her carefully applying pigment to her forehead, (figure 1.16). Even those pictures that show her bare-breasted index a sort of defiance in Subhadra's powerful bearing.[97]

Subhadra's own text specifically addresses the relationship of her nudity to her piety. Chhachhi quotes her poetic explanation:

> One day I came to the river.
> As I looked at it tears began to run down my dry cracked cheeks, smarting, hurting.
> The water poured out of my eyes and into the river.
> I took off my clothes and entered her.
> She swelled with my tears, rose, engulfed me.
> I was submerged.
> Once, twice, three times.
> The river was inside me, I was inside her.
> Much later I came out, into the sand where I had left my clothes.

[97] Such "defiance" was noted in Peter Nagy's postscript to *Women of the Cloth*. Peter Nagy, "Postscript," in Sheba Chhachhi's *Women of the Cloth* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated.

They were gone!
Krishna had stolen them.
I can only cover my body when he gives them back to me.[98]

This passage hints at the almost erotic implications of Subhadra's nudity in relation to her spiritual dedication to the female goddess Ganga and the male god Krishna. She is no blushing echo of Parvati or Draupadi—both female goddesses renowned for their modesty. Rather, both the passage and images imply that she embodies her bodily femininity without shame. This, we will see, is common among the female *sadhus* that Chhachhi features.

The second and most substantial section of the book, *Initiation Chronicle* offers a series of group portraits taken across the various stages of the process of initiation undergone by women in order to become *sadhus*. The pictures were taken over four years, from 1998 to 2001. Although these images are characterized by acute psychological intensity, Chhachhi is much more focused on the relationships between the women than the focus on individual interiority that we saw in the section on Subhadra or the final section of color portraits included in the book, entitled *Rogues' Gallery*. The final image of the *Chronicle* series, for instance, shows two women holding hands, (figure 1.17). The shot is closely framed around a tight group of plump bodies wrapped in identical white linen, their backs to us. The only distinguishing characteristic among the group is one woman's long thick hair and a thin thread tied above her elbow. Otherwise, all the figures are alike. Their physical proximity is striking, and even Chhachhi's closeness behind and among them signals an unusual intimacy, as I will draw out by the

[98] Sheba Chhachhi, *Women of the Cloth*, unpaginated.

chapter's end. Individuality is dissolved by the picture's frame into an abstract composition of comingled bodies.

Let us start with the beginning of the section titled *Initiation Chronicle*. Although there is nothing concrete in the book to indicate that the sequence of photographs is arranged chronologically as the initiation proceeds, it seems the viewer is led through the transformation much as it is experienced by the initiates. The first image takes place at night, around a campfire, (figure 1.18). By the next image it is daytime, (figure 1.19). A group of women sit huddled on the sand—their heads shaved—wrapped in coarse blankets. The blankets are not uniform, but are mostly dark and sport an array of geometric patterns. Indeed, these thick bulky coverings are far more prevalent in the picture then the mostly middle-aged women who crouch beneath them. They are set against the backdrop of what looks to be a billowing canvas tent, completing an image that ends up more "cloth" than "women."

From this image, the photographer leads the viewer along with the bundled women down to the banks of the sacred river. One picture shows the group hurrying past the camera with the mayhem of the major Hindu religious festival, the *Kumbh Mela* in the background, (figure 1.20).[99] The sky is peppered with loudspeakers and rectangular flags, and threaded with power lines. The sandy ground is a carpet of footprints and wheel tracks. In the following image, (figure 1.21), Chhachhi has reversed the direction of her gaze and now we see the women and their shadows walking away from the lens, lured by the silver line of the *Ganga* in the distance. Then they are captured as a close

[99] There are, in fact, four different fairs that are all referred to by the name "Kumbh Mela," that occur in Hariwar, Allahabad, Ujjain, and the Nashik district. Each occur every twelve years and are characterized by a massive assemblage of pilgrims.

cluster of bodies right at the water's edge, (figure 1.22). The sun is bright, but the women's closely hunched forms suggest a coolness in the air, or perhaps a tense anticipation of what awaits them. The composition of the photograph divides the picture plane almost perfectly in half across at a diagonal—the bottom half a mass of bundled bodies and anxious eyes, while the top half is milky white sky. This formal choice echoes the spiritual and psychological threshold we can only imagine the photographic subjects are grappling with at the moment the shutter snapped. The following two images show the women undressing on the broad beach and submerging themselves en masse into the shimmering water. Chhachhi photographs them drying their bodies, and then captures their figures transformed through the ritual of donning snow-white cloth. Their old dark garments lie abandoned in a large bundle in the midst of the dressing women. The most striking image of the dressing sequence disarms the viewer with a piercing glance on the part of one of the subjects, (figure 1.23). She gazes down straight into Chhachhi's lens as she adjusts her white garment behind her back. Chhachhi has clearly taken the photograph from a crouching position—low to the ground—gazing up at her subjects dress against the backdrop of a clear sky. The look is neither friendly nor hostile, but decidedly direct and unflinching. What lay behind this visual address?

This gaze is particularly arresting because it is a powerful reminder of both the photographer, on the one hand, and the (secondary) viewer of the photograph, on the other. Althusser's concept of interpellation is useful here. The philosopher explains: "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects."[100] He offers

[100] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Verso, 1971), 11.

various hypothetical examples to ground this abstract claim. In one scenario, a man knocks on his friend's door. The person inside asks "who's there?" and only when his friend answers "it's me," and the man inside recognizes his voice does he open the door. Recognition from behind the closed door has transformed the "individual" into a "subject." For Althusser, this is especially significant because it opens the possibility—indeed it necessitates—that the individual is not only transformed into a subject in and of himself, but always a subject of ideology. We are not here particularly concerned with ideology in the sense that Althusser conceived of it within a post-Marxist framework. However, the question of a more personal form of subjectivity is at the heart of the significance of the look that passes between the photographer, (mediated by a lens), and her subject. It is difficult to deny that this gaze creates a fundamentally different sense of self-awareness in the viewers that return it.

Although the direct gaze leveled at Chhachhi in this image appears to be at odds with most of the other pictures in the *Initiation* series, the photographer later revealed that it was hardly exceptional. She stated: "in all the work, the women are looking at you."[101] While this doesn't appear to be the case from the images themselves, (many of the images do not show their subjects' faces), it is significant that this was how Chhachhi remembered the experience of taking the photographs. Indeed, it was quite an unusual set up. As she recounted:

> "No outsiders are supposed to be present. So I was hidden in a bundle of blankets and could only photograph from one place, and then someone from another group came along to conduct their initiation a little further

[101] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

> down the riverbank and discovered me and I got one big whack with a stick."[102]

Chhachhi's explanation emphasizes the collaborative aspect of all of the images, despite their "documentary" feel. From a viewer's perspective, however, only a couple of shots hint at this almost conspiratorial context. Often the subjects do not directly acknowledge the presence of the camera.

Following the sequence of photographs picturing the new initiates at the water's edge, Chhachhi shows us groups of veteran *sadhus*, evidently enjoying their reunion on the occasion of the *Kumbh Mela*. We can tell these women were initiated many years previously due to the length of their hair. The most striking image among this set of pictures shows about a dozen of the older women in a close cluster, together confronting Chhachhi's lens, (figure 1.24). A central figure holds both hands up at the photographer in a powerful if ambiguous gesture. Though it is impossible to tell, it is as if she were expressing something in between "stop" and "behold." Her mouth is a bit open as if she were making a pronouncement. Althusser's concept of interpellation is manifest again, this time directed squarely at the photographer; Chhachhi's own presence is the "event" animating the image. By extension, the viewer cannot help but feel implicated by the confrontational affect of the encounter, and the range of expressions on the faces of the surrounding figures do little to clarify the interaction. One woman offers an almost supercilious smile, while another picks her teeth with a small stick absentmindedly. Many simply appear curious. If the earlier picture dramatized the interaction between the

[102] Ibid.

photographer and a single subject, this image illustrates the broader social context of this exchange.

The evocative power of her subjects faces, however, are almost secondary to the strength of the bodily presence of Chhachhi's subjects which arrest the viewer again and again. Like Subhadra, most of the *sadhus* are not slight of frame. They are powerful, fleshy, and indeed quite feminine in their curves. The explicit femininity in their physicality is notable because it sets them apart from many of their most commonly pictured male *sadhu* counterparts. The body of the visually iconic male *sadhu* often tends toward emaciation. Such slender bodies are often the result of real poverty and reduced access to food on account of an itinerant mendicant lifestyle. Yet the visual embodiment of this physical renunciation also gives way to the physical form of an androgynous body.

The androgyny of female *sadhus* has often been remarked upon. Consider, for instance, a review of Chhachhi's gallery show, which included images from *Women of the Cloth*. Journalist Chitra Padmanabhan writes: "Among the most compelling images are those of women ascetics from the powerful sect, the *Juna akhada*, at the *Kumbh Mela* in Allahabad, 2002…What is striking is the androgynous aspect of the ascetics."[103] It's true that a major event in the initiation ceremony is the ritual head shaving—an act that undoubtedly marks a transition away from traditional femininity. However, many veteran *sadhus* allow their hair to grow back, as Chhachhi's images also show us. Some cultivate sculptural cascades of matted dreadlocks, much like the majority of male *sadhus*. Others, like Subhadra, comb their hair and arrange it with care, much like she may have before renouncing the duties of a householder.

[103] Padmanabhan, "Wild Mothers."

What is notable upon reflection, then, is how the experience of being a renunciate may indeed be more physically androgynous for men than for women. Both genders may keep their hair long or short. In tending to assume an emaciated frame, however, male *sadhus* come closer to obscuring their biological gender than female *sadhus* who Chhachhi's images show as embracing the fleshy contours of their "natural" bodies.

This powerful sense of feminine physicality illuminates much of Chhachhi's oeuvre. Following the completion of *Women of the Cloth*, Chhachhi continued her practice with an even more explicit exploration of alternate models of female physicality in her nude portraits of older women. It is easy to imagine how this project grew out of Chhachhi's sustained engagement with female *sadhus* and their bodies over the course of their decade-long photographic collaboration. What emerges from the series of photographs in *Women of the Cloth*, however, is an alternative model of powerful femininity that is premised somewhat ironically, on a renunciation of gender identity.

The significance of hierarchy and social authority is at the heart of the book's third section: *Mahant Mira Puri*. This selection of five photographs chronicles the life of a powerful ascetic who came to be known for her religious authority and charismatic appeal. Unlike the majority of women who elect an ascetic life, Mira Puri was college educated and English speaking. Before her renunciation, she had performed in the theater and sung on All India Radio.[104] Despite relinquishing many of the privileges and opportunities of the secular world, she clearly continued to make use of her performative talents.

[104] Ibid.

Beyond the surface of frenzied devotion, the *Kumbh Mela* is a highly political event, in which Mira Puri came to play a starring role. She spoke publically and was carried in procession. Chhachhi's images foreground the very public form of power that she came to embody. One image shows her sitting in a lotus position, heavily garlanded, speaking into a microphone, (figure 1.25). There is a large Hindi banner behind her, and a woman at her side leafs through an English publication—indexing the broad appeal of her address. Another image shows the same reception hall from further back, behind a densely-packed audience with hands raised into the air, (figure 1.26). In one picture Chhachhi depicts Mira Puri in what looks to be a private reception tent—an intimate space lavishly decorated with ritual objects and religious prints, (figure 1.27). She is being greeted by a new initiate, with two attendants in the background, their eyes calmly fixed on her smiling face. As Chhachhi remarked, "Mahant Mira's *lila* is rich and varied. She moves seamlessly from the warm, caring mother with the new initiates, to the playful 'master' with her closest disciples, to the powerful mediator with awestruck visitors."[105] Even Chhachhi's small selection of images demonstrates this range of roles, and attest to the power of social hierarchy, even in a milieu of renunciation.

The most interesting of the Mira Puri photographs, however, shows the ascetic alone, (figure 1.28). She sits cross-legged in a tent, gazing into Chhachhi's lens with no-nonsense candor. For all the performative theatricality of the other pictures, here we are confronted with what feels to be a resolute confidence in merely being present. There is not a hint of a smile—no attempt to seduce or beguile the viewer. Yet she clearly puts

[105] Chhachhi. "The Householder, the Ascetic and the Politician," 225.

real stock in the representational power of this image as evinced by the range of other photographs she displays as props in the foreground.

The format of this staged portrait—and the significance of photography within the mise-en-scène-- calls immediately to mind the portraits of Chhachhi's earlier collaboration with the leaders of the women's movement. There is an album of photographs laid open at Mira Puri's knees, but the figures are too indistinct to make out. Beside it is a newspaper clipping with a photo feature—perhaps a story about Mira Puri? Below this is another image of a group of female *sadhus*. Given its resemblance to many of the other images in Chhachhi's selection for the book, it looks as if it might very well be one of her prints. Yet the most striking photograph is the one Mira Puri cradles in her lotus-style lap. It is an image of herself as a young initiate, clearly taken many years ago. As Chhachhi described the contrast between the visage of the younger woman and her present-day subject:

> Shri Shri Mahant Mira Puri had shown me photographs of herself as a young initiate: shaven, austere, withdrawn into *sadhana*.[106] Today that fragile androgyny has retreated behind the pomp and circumstance of *mahanthood*,[107] the now long hair concealed beneath a large, assertive turban.[108]

The contrast is all the more acute because of the formal mimesis that binds the two images. Mira Puri adopts the same lotus pose as an older woman as she had in the image of herself as a young initiate. The primary difference beyond her changed physical

[106] A Sanskrit word denoting a state of discipline directed at spiritual aims.

[107] A Sanskrit term denoting religious leadership.

[108] Chhachhi, "The Householder, the Ascetic and the Politician," 225.

appearance, however, is the small photograph she displays—the postcard from the past which pictures her younger self—held up in both hands at the center of her body.

If the recursive eruption of old photographic images in Chhachhi's earlier series *Seven Lives and a Dream* illustrates photography's capacity to collapse time, Mira Puri's staged portrait trades on the medium's other great temporality trick: the ability to magnify time's passage. Indeed, Mira Puri's intention seems to be to present the arc of her own growth. She began her journey as an ascetic with a modest anonymity, and now she has transformed herself into a formidable spiritual leader. In the case of the women activists, on the other hand, the photographic reference to their earlier selves serve most powerfully to reify who they are in the present.

The final selection of photographs in *Women of the Cloth*, *The Rogues' Gallery*, extends Chhachhi's practice of the staged photograph. Ten images—this time in color—focus on ten individual female *sadhus* that Chhachhi came to know intimately over her time living among their communities. Mira Puri is the first, transitioning us from her own section of the book into the now Technicolor world, (figure 1.29). Chhachhi has captured her in the act of gazing intently at her own reflection in a small hand-held mirror. Heavy strands of beads hang from her neck, and she is in the midst of applying a geometric pattern of red and yellow to her forehead.

Perhaps Chhachhi decided to depict her subjects in color for the first time because color is so central to their own self-presentation. The photographs illustrate this power. Given her subjects' relative asceticism, the mode of dress—and more specifically the shade of their (customarily simple) garments—would be one of the primary avenues through which they might express both individual identity and group affiliation. It should

come as no surprise that the most prominent shades: brilliant reds and especially saffron, have long been considered auspicious, (and increasingly contentious), within the Hindu tradition.[109]

Visual performativity lies at the heart of these images. Chhachhi acknowledges the significance she attaches to the performative nature of her subjects' self-expression:

> In the grand spectacle of the *Kumbh*, power is constructed by and through performance. Performance has always been an integral part of the culture of religion in India. But today women are increasingly emerging as significant protagonists in this arena whether manifesting in the humble tent from which an ageing *mai*[110] graciously accepts offerings for the display of her young disciple's swollen feet (a testimony to her vow of remaining standing for a year), or the attractive *mai* on the huge television screens sermonizing in mellifluous Sanskritised Hindi.[111]

The images in *Rogue's Gallery* demonstrate their subjects' performativity in more subtle ways, namely, the attention to adornment they display. Elaborate face paint is common among Chhachhi's subjects, as is nail polish and jewelry. Consider the portrait of Shanti Giri, one of the few *sadhus* who keeps her hair relatively short, (figure 1.30). She wears three sparkling rings, a necklace of beads, and even a silver watch. Perhaps most surprising is the small bundle of rupee notes clutched in her left hand. These conspicuous ties to the secular/material world characterize many of Chhachhi's images, and raise the larger issue of the tension between the assertion of one's individual character, and its renunciation.

---

[109] Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013), 116.

[110] As Chhachhi explains, a female *sadhu* is more commonly called a *mai*. Chhachhi, "The Householder, the Ascetic and the Politician," 225.

[111] Ibid.

Yet the most interesting aspect of the picture is not the worldly possessions Shanti Giri displays, but rather the small image of Shiva's handsome young face that she holds up almost as if in place of her own. Her head is tilted slightly downwards as if out of respect while he gazes up beyond the picture frame. This image brings us full circle in Chhachhi's oeuvre, calling to mind the iconic protest image of Sathyarani holding up her own daughters' graduation picture in the midst of an impassioned crowd.

Both pictures within pictures establish a strong presence within Chhachhi's frame: Shashi Bala in the first instance, and Shiva in the second. Shashi Bala's visage lies at the heart of the demonstration because her presence induces the crowd to act. Although it is not a photograph, Shiva's image presented by Shanti Giri is similarly imbued with agential power through the phenomenon of *darshan*. Sometimes translated as "auspicious seeing" the concept of *darshan* refers to a central practice within Hindu tradition whereby worshipers behold a visual representation of a deity and are seen, in turn, by the deity herself.[112] Christopher Pinney has written extensively on this phenomenon, arguing that images of Hindu deities often operate as "compressed performances" which animate the relationship between the viewer and the viewed.[113]

Thus multiple registers of performance animate Chhachhi's portrait of Shanti Giri. Shiva animates the frame through the active presence of his image—he performs himself through his likeness. Shanti Giri also transforms herself through the proxy of his

---

[112] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3.

[113] Christopher Pinney, *"Photos of the Gods": The Printed Image and the Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

image. By putting forward his face in place of her own, the photograph evinces her personal renunciation in the name of Shiva. She performs a visualization of her own social death.

The issue of temporality that has been motivating the analysis of these photographs has now arrived at its ultimate conclusion— the end of subjective time, the specter of death. Many theorists of photography have noted the medium's complex relationship with death. Sontag is struck by the powerful, even mysterious evocation of death in photographic portraits, writing: "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people."[114] Barthes famously seizes this thread, and offers his own rather hypothetical link between photography and the evocation of death. He is concerned with how photography's power is not anchored in its relationship to painting, but rather in its relationship with theater. Theater, he points out, was in the first instance in many places around the world, an art form devoted to the mysterious liminality of that passage from life to death. He cites the whitened face of actors in the Indian Kathikali and Japanese No mask tradition. He demurs, "perhaps I am the only one who sees it," but concludes that: "Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."[115] While Barthes may be on rather speculative historical ground with regards to world theater traditions, there does seem to be something in the relationship

[114] Sontag, *On Photography*, 55.

[115] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 32.

between theater, death, and photography that helps us contend with the force of Chhachhi's images.

If death for both Barthes and Sontag is always lurking at the edge of the photograph—necessarily implied by the medium itself-- it is undoubtedly a more concrete presence in Chhachhi's photographic projects. Her iconic image of the women's movement offers up the face of the dead in the form of Sathyarani's daughter on her graduation day. In this case, we are faced not only with someone we know will die (Sathyarani), but more poignantly by someone who we know is already dead. The contrast of her bright young face and this knowledge of her fate electrifies the image.

Barthes calls such a spark the "punctum" of the image—a neologism that lies at the heart of *Camera Lucida*. He identifies two fundamental components of what gives a photograph meaning in the mind of the beholder: the "studium" and the "punctum." The studium is composed of the general aspects of the photograph that are legible to a culturally literate "reader" of the image—an ability to grasp more or less what the photograph is "of," or "what's going on." Naturally, with no context at all this would be difficult. The other aspect of successful photographs according to Barthes—and this is the end of the dichotomy that holds his real interest-- he calls the "punctum" because it is a somehow incongruous detail that "punctures" the otherwise fairly tranquil legibility of the picture. It may simply be an off-putting shadow or gesture, but it may also be the uncanny incursion of time into the viewer's reading of the static image.

For Barthes, this is no more apparent than in the image of Lewis Payne, an inmate who is condemned to death. We are struck by how this picture sutures time in an uncanny fashion. Barthes captions the photograph, "*He is dead and he is going to die…*" The

shock lies in the realization that you are looking at someone who is both before and after death, an impossibly petrified state of liminality. What we see in Chhachhi's iconic image is not merely a picture of a picture which has this effect, but also the dramatization of this reaction—the *theatrical* playing out of this effect on viewers of the photograph.

As Shanti Giri's portrait demonstrates, the specter of death is no less present in Chhachhi's images of women ascetics. The photographer herself explained: "Because in the kind of initiation rites that a woman ascetic goes through, she essentially dies to her social self. So you're stripped of hair, clothes, name, family name, village name, and ancestors up to seven generations. And you actually perform your own death rites."[116] This death is fundamentally theatrical. It should perhaps come as little surprise that the women *sadhus* that Chhachhi had become close to insisted that they smuggle her into their "secret" initiation rites. It was at their urging that she hid in a blanket, and later received "one big whack" from a group whose rites she did not document. She had reified death with her camera, cementing through an image the traversal of a threshold that fundamentally defined the re-birth of her *sadhu* subjects.

Toward a Conclusion

This essay has argued that Chhachhi's images are animated by an alternative mode of temporality, one which evokes the recursive flow, multiplicity, and simultaneity of time rather than an emphasis on the "decisive moment" that defines so much of the preceding tradition of documentary photography. My analysis begins with the iconic image of Sathyarani leading an anti-dowry protest with a photograph of her murdered daughter pictured on her graduation day. Chhachhi's image demonstrates how this earlier

[116] Sheba Chhachhi, interview with the author, March 18, 2015.

photograph incited action on the part of the protesters. It was, in a sense, evidence of the evidentiary value of photography. However, an unintended effect of the power of Chhachhi's photograph was that it became popular among mainstream journalists who then attempted to re-stage the image. Chhachhi feared this sapped authenticity had undermined the power of the original photograph. And yet, it also underscored the performative potentialities of the photographic medium, and thus inspired Chhachhi to embark upon a new project that would more explicitly exploit the potential for self-performance on the part of her subjects. The staged portrait series, *Seven Lives and a Dream*, was the result. This project provided a platform for leading figures in the women's movement to express their own personal histories through staged tableaus. Older photographs of the subjects themselves featured prominently in many activists' mise-en-scène, often collapsing time to present an image of women engaged in an ongoing struggle for social justice.

Chhachhi's visualization of indigenous feminism in its many avatars suggests that securing a future may well be a matter of re-writing the past. Chhachhi expanded on her interest in how feminine selfhood is performed through her ongoing collaborative documentation of female *sadhu* communities. Her images establish the tension between anonymity and individual identity, and bear witness to the ways in which renouncing classic forms of social presentation can open up new modes of embodied feminine selfhood.

I close with the portrait of Shanti Giri. Like Sathyarani, she holds the image of another whose visage is fundamental to her own identity. Sathyarani lives for her daughter just as Shanti Giri lives for Shiva. Or we might say Sathyarani lives for the

memory of her daughter's death and Shanti Giri enacted her own social death in order to live for Shiva. Chhachhi's photographs dramatize the high stakes of this social performance, which photography as a medium captures with such vivid intensity.

Chapter 2.

Recognition and Hierarchy in the Work of Dayanita Singh

It began with photographic negatives thrown into the dustbin. This is how Dayanita Singh recounts the start of what she has called her deepest friendship. She had been commissioned by the *London Times* to photograph Mona Ahmed, a subject who identifies as a *hijra* or a member of a group of eunuchs or transgendered people who form tight-knit and often insular communities across South Asia.[117] As she was wrapping up a surprisingly cooperative photo session, she thanked Ahmed again, stating that the newspaper would be very happy with the prints.

"I thought you said you were on assignment for the *New York Times*," Ahmed replied.[118]

The misunderstanding was serious, Ahmed further explained, because she had relatives in London who did not know that she had become a *hijra*, and she didn't want to risk them finding out by opening the paper. Ahmed was insistent, and the somewhat intimidated photographer finally surrendered the roll of film to the trash. Singh's capitulation paved the way for an unusually intimate photographic collaboration.

Over the next decade, from 1989 to 2001, Singh took thousands of photographs of Mona Ahmed and the two became close personal friends. Because *hijra* communities in

---

[117] There is a vast literature on the complexity of *hijra* identity within the South Asian context. See M. D. Vyas and Yogesh Shingala, *The Life Style of the Eunuchs* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1987); S. K. Sharma, *Hijras: The Labeled Deviants* (New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1989); Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (New York: Wadsworth, 1990); Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[118] Dayanita Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scalo, 2001), 6.

South Asia are often intensely private, the access Singh gained to Ahmed's life was highly unusual. As she explained on the basis of her early experience in photojournalism:

> When you work for the media, which tend to see India only as either exotic or a disaster, a story on eunuchs is a must, along with a story on prostitution, child labor, dowry deaths, and child marriage…Every few months, the 'true story' of a eunuch is published somewhere, yet eunuchs are very media-savvy and will allow journalists and researchers only limited access, if any—always strictly controlled by the eunuchs themselves.[119]

In 2001, a selection of Singh's images was edited and transformed into the book *Myself Mona Ahmed*. The text was provided by Ahmed, culled from a series of lengthy e-mails she composed to the book publisher for the purpose of narrating her own life. She was clear from the start that she would stand for no editing and yet clarity of communication was a primary goal. As she wrote with characteristic candor: "Perhaps with your book people will understand me better. Please make the book fast, I am waiting."[120]

Following the completion of this project, Singh decided to turn the camera back on her own social milieu. In 2002, she began to photograph India's elites in their homes, along with images of house museums and a few shots of outdoor monuments. These images were brought together in a project Singh called *Privacy*. If Singh's collaboration with Ahmed exemplified an exploration of "alterity" through a figure whose gender identity relegates her to the fringe of mainstream society, this latter project represented a dramatic reorientation of the lens.

---

[119] Ibid., 9.

[120] Ibid., 86.

Yet relations of "alterity," and distinctions of hierarchy are no less evident within the images of the *Privacy* series. Both sets of images evince the significance of their subjects' assertion of identity in relation to those around them—especially the reification of selfhood in relation to those considered to be socially inferior in some sense, such as servants, animals, or the mentally ill. Such tensions extend to the negotiation of power between the photographer and her subjects, as some images demonstrate a subtle struggle for artistic control over the final form of the pictures.

The Drive for Recognition

I will argue that both of Singh's projects are animated by a drive for recognition, or a struggle for personal and cultural comprehension, negotiated within the complex hierarchy of Indian social life. Not only is this desire operative in the social dynamics that Singh records with unique subtly and insight, it also motivates the relationship between the photographer and her subjects. This mutual drive is a fundamental aspect of the intersubjective aesthetic embodied by Singh's work. Through the combination of text and photographs, *Myself Mona Ahmed* chronicles an intimate artistic collaboration of over ten years, while *Privacy* offers Singh the opportunity to engage her own elite Indian milieu in a unique project of self-representation.

My analysis of Singh's work draws on the complex discourse that has developed around notions of a subject's "desire for recognition" in the Western philosophical tradition. European philosophers have long been invested in theorizing how subjects are mutually constituted through relationships of power and recognition. Hegel's master-slave dialectic is a major early example of this mode of thought. The idea that individual identity can only be understood through encounters with an "other," that indeed the self is

produced essentially through its contact with an "other," has been central to the work of a range of major philosophers such as Jacques Lacan,[121] Judith Butler,[122] Alexander Kojève,[123] and Emmanuel Levinas,[124] to name a few, and has fundamentally shaped the development of fields ranging from psychoanalysis to gender studies.

The issue of "recognition" has also played a major role in post-colonial debates—often analyzed as an aspect of the colonized population's fraught understanding of their own identity (at a personal, racial, or ethnic level) as dialectically dependent upon the colonizers' gaze. Among the earliest writer to explore this theme was Frantz Fanon, who argued that the construction of Blackness within contexts of colonial domination was dependent upon the (deprecating) gaze of the (white) colonizer.[125] In adopting a psychoanalytic approach, Fannan argued that Black colonial subjects could not understand themselves outside of the context of (white) colonial recognition.[126] Building on these insights, Ashish Nandy brought a similarly psychanalytic approach to the

---

[121] See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

[122] See in particular Butler's doctoral dissertation, which was published as: Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[123] Alexander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[124] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[125] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

[126] Ibid., 3.

question of post-colonial subjectivity in the Indian context.[127] He emphasized how the drive for recognition is mutual—not only constituting the subjectivity of the (Indian) colonial subject, but also the (British) colonial authority. My own claim about the *mutual* desire for recognition on the part of both Singh and Ahmed echoes Nandy's argument. More broadly, such theorizations of the fraught significance of the drive for recognition are germane to my reading of Singh's photographs not only on account of their shared post-colonial context, but also because they are fundamentally animated by an anxiety over social hierarchy. Yet both Singh and Ahmed are post-colonial subjects, and the power differentials that divide them run along the subtler lines of class, caste and gender that cleave post-liberalization India.

From an early age, Singh strove for self-realization as an artist through her recognition and representation of others in the form of photography. Her first serious project began when the renowned *tabla* player Zakir Hussain invited her to travel with him over the course of what turned out to be six winters and photograph his performances. He became her artistic guru. In considering his invitation, she later explained in an interview:

> In that moment I decided: this was my ticket to freedom. I could become a photographer, I could say to people 'oh I would love to get married, but I'm a photographer.' 'I would love to have children, but I'm a photographer.' So this is my ticket to freedom. You know, this was 1986. Girls went to school, college, married, had hobbies, had children. I didn't want to do that. So this was my way out.[128]

---

[127] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[128] Dayanita Singh, interview by Jujhar Singh.

Singh's artistic relationship with Hussain presaged the future collaborations that would define her career. Following this project, Singh supported herself as a documentary photographer for newspapers and magazines. Yet she quickly became disillusioned with the routine nature of the assignments and their superficial coverage of the same tired themes. Echoing a dissatisfaction similar to that of Chhachhi's when confronted with the limits of documentary photojournalism, Singh explained in the same television interview:

> It was very difficult to photograph people who had no say in their image making. So I was photographing children of prostitutes with AIDS. *Newsweek* does a two-page story, and half a page is about India's AIDS photographer. It was so wrong. I felt I was becoming a pimp in the process. Like, everybody started to call me when they wanted to photograph prostitutes or child labor. And I myself began to feel that my photography wasn't changing anything.[129]

It was through Singh's rejection of such potentially exploitative images that what she describes as her greatest friendship—and most powerful photographic collaboration—was born.

Myself Mona Ahmed

Throughout the photographs and prose that compose Singh and Ahmed's collaboration, Ahmed's desire for recognition emerges as a dominant theme. Ahmed first describes how, as a child (who did not yet identify as a *hijra*), she was accepted neither by her father nor by her classmates at school. By the fifth sentence of Ahmed's life story the reader is introduced to the theme of frustrated recognition: "I was naturally his (my father's) favorite child, but once I started to grow, he started to feel that I was not a boy

[129] Ibid.

and started to distance himself because I had very female mannerisms."[130] After many precarious years of experimentation and uncertainty, however, Ahmed was "adopted" by a *hijra* community after being disowned by her birth family, and assimilated to an immersive social universe that burned brightly at the margins of mainstream Indian society. Later, she was even presented with the unusual opportunity to adopt a child, which she describes embracing with great joy.

The first half of the book vividly documents what appears to be the happiest period in Mona Ahmed's life— a handful of years marked by sociality and acceptance that followed her embrace by a close-knit, albeit hierarchical, eunuch community. In all the photographs taken between 1990 and 1994, Ahmed is never pictured alone. The first sequence of images features the epic celebration for Ahmed's adopted daughter Ayesha's first birthday, (figures 2.1 – 2.4). As Ahmed wrote, "Ayesha fulfilled my dream of becoming a mother, so I celebrated her first birthday for 3 days and 3 nights and invited over 2000 eunuchs from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh."[131] These years represent a surfeit of recognition for Ahmed-- not only from her "adoptive" family, but from the world at large.

Singh's images document this sense of jubilation and excess. Lavish brocades blur across the camera's lens as Singh captures nights of dancing, shouting, hugging, giggling, and the occasional suspicious scowl that lurks now and then at the periphery of the party. Ayesha is even presented with a stupendously whimsical cake in the form of a ship, much to the guests' delight, (figure 2.1). So many people moving so freely in so

[130] Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, 46.

[131] Ibid., 18.

little space suggests an easy intimacy rather than the claustrophobia such crowding might induce in a bourgeois Western context. Rarely are the *hijras* captured next to each other without some gesture of physical affection passing between them: a hand on the forearm, an arm around the neck, a chin-chuck.

Amid these party scenes, Singh allows us a glimpse into small moments of intimacy and even interiority between mother and daughter. Ahmed leans in to kiss Ayesha tenderly amidst a constellation of sparkling jewelry, gestures and smiles, (figure 2.2). Two *hijras* repose behind small towers of paper plates and packaged sweets—each regarding the camera with a quiet candor—one resting her head on the other's shoulder, (figure 2.3). Another shot frames a pensive Ahmed leaning against a friend, who gazes in the other direction, (figure 2.4). Only after looking at the picture for some time does the third presence reveal itself— a tiny but clearly visible two-year old Ayesha staring intently at the two *hijras* in a mirror from across the room, transfixed by their relationship.

Although the bond between mother and child is apparent amidst the bustle of the birthday party pictures, it is portrayed with even greater depth in the series of images taken of the two alone in Ahmed's house at Turkman Gate in Old Delhi, (figures 2.5 – 2.9). These are also among the most formally complex images in the book, on account of the strangely evocative mirroring/doubling of both mother and daughter that occurs throughout. There are eight photographs in this series, taken in 1992 over two or three sessions judging from the shifting outfits of the subjects.

The first picture, *Ayesha, a part of me, my heart, my life*, is the simplest in terms of its composition (figure 2.5). Ahmed reclines on her side, while her daughter leans

toward her, a shiny dress billowing around her in uncanny resemblance to the bold crenelated flowers covering the bedspread beneath them. Ahmed passes a pacifier from her own lips to Ayesha's. So much like a kiss, this tender photograph was taken close up at floor level. The title suggests candidly the tension animating all of these images: where are the bounds of the individual? How to draw the line between Ahmed and her daughter, "a part of me"? How does Singh's presence alter the performance of these extremely intimate moments?

Another picture, *Doll in my doll's lap*, (figure 2.6), introduces the trope of Ayesha's doll, a double for the girl herself as Ahmed's title suggests. Once again, Ahmed reclines on the floor and her daughter stands in front of her folded legs holding a large doll supine in her arms. Mother and daughter both eye the camera a bit wearily from opposite corners of the frame. Just above Ahmed's head there is a blown-up photograph of Ayesha in a cutesy studio pose, which appears to have been taken just weeks or months before. Ahmed's hand rests on her chin in unconscious imitation of the posture of her daughter's photograph pose. This correspondence in the gesture of Ahmed and her daughter's photograph is mirrored again in the symmetry between her horizontal posture and that of the doll her daughter cradles.

Ayesha's large studio portrait features prominently in the next two photographs as well, (figures 2.7 and 2.8). Both feature a striking four-way symmetry of figuration around a central axis. In the first, *We lie around like a normal mother and daughter*, (figure 2.7), the four bodies divide the picture plane diagonally, Ahmed and the doll stretched out head to head along one axis, and Ayesha, lying her head on her mother's

belly, continues at a perpendicular angle into the top right corner in the form of Ayesha's studio portrait. Ahmed chats into a phone, as her daughter gazes up dreamily.

The photograph on the facing page of Singh and Ahmed's book, (figure 2.8), presents a view of the same scene from about a 90° shift in perspective. The juxtaposition of these two shots alone reveal the remarkable degree of comfort that Singh's subjects experience in her presence, as we can see that the photographer had to clamber over the bed for the shift in perspective without upsetting the scene of repose. From this new, more intimate vantage point, the bodily division of the picture plane is repeated, this time along a horizontal and vertical axis dividing the image at the middle. Ayesha sits up straight, mirrored by the erect pose in her studio portrait on the other side of her mother's body. Ahmed reclines horizontally, smiling into the telephone receiver. Her open mouth is echoed on the right side of the picture with a three-quarter view profile of a pop star's face singing into a mike at close range on the TV set behind her.

Finally, a very strange photograph indeed: *My love among her photos*, (figure 2.9). This image shows three-year-old Ayesha posed atop a tall shelf against the backdrop of her own studio portraits completely covering the wall behind her. Thirty-two tiny faces gaze out behind the living Ayesha, and the edges of more continue beyond the frame or are obscured by toys cluttered on the shelf. The young model dons an array of costumes: a Hindu bridal gown, a Hijab, a white Western dress, and poses with a myriad of props such as a telephone and a small drum set. Studio portraits like these are common in India. Yet their volume and density— covering the wall without a centimeter of open space, is unusual. There is a shrine-like quality about the display—especially with Ayesha herself posed before them, both arms slightly outstretched, hand open as if the central deity

within a shrine of avatars. On the far right sits the doll, sculptural and uncanny at the frame's edge.

Singh also pictures Ahmed out in public with her daughter in pictures such as *Taking Ayesha to school*, (figure 2.10), an everyday image of a mother and daughter moving through the Delhi streets. No one crowded within Singh's frame even glances in Ahmed's direction. Little Ayesha's frilly white dress anchors the eye on the right side of the image. On the left a cycle rickshaw carries a figure of stark contrast dressed in a full black burka. Both appear nearly anonymous in the bustle of the old city.

Such inconspicuousness in the public realm is something Ahmed had long craved. Her narrative is peppered with grievances about how she is always an object of curiosity in the public realm, explaining "because eunuchs have a different face and people look at us strangely."[132] This desire not to be singled out on account of her difference may well be one of the primary reasons that Ahmed consistently maintains her distain for one of the most common means by which *hijras* traditionally earn income: dancing for blessings in public space. While she admits having resorted to this practice from time to time when her finances dwindled, throughout the book she articulates how her identity as a working *hijra* is grounded in her training as a dancer invited to exclusive events.

We know from Ahmed's text that broader social acceptance beyond the *hijra* community was tremendously important. Upon adopting Ayesha, Ahmed became a mother in the eyes of the world, opening an avenue of social legitimacy beyond the insular *hijra* community. As she writes: "The happiest day in my whole life was when

[132] Ibid., 111.

Ayesha came into my life, because then I felt that I belonged to this society."[133] By her own admission, then, it was the public face of her private intimacy that gave her most solace. Ahmed goes on to describe the lengths to which she went to cement her daughter's own social standing in the world, shaving her head "as is the custom here," educating her in three languages, and acknowledging her aspiration for her daughter to become an IAS officer or enter "any other respectable profession."[134]

In 1996, Ahmed's world fell apart in a set of circumstances that remain somewhat elusive to the reader/viewer.[135] As she explains rather mysteriously, she began drinking and "running to the graveyard"[136] around the time Ayesha was about four, and she felt her daughter was becoming closer with the other *hijras* in the house. Soon thereafter, Ahmed's guru Chaman shifted domiciles, taking Ayesha with her, and refused to let Ahmed follow. Being homeless, she felt she had little choice but to move onto the grounds of a family graveyard in Old Delhi and live alone, (figure 2.11). She became, as Singh called her "an outcast among outcasts."[137]

This turning point is marked by one of the book's most dramatic images: *I look like a sad Muslim woman after fighting with my guru Chaman. We went on a visit to the*

---

[133] Ibid., 83.

[134] Ibid., 84.

[135] A supplementary account of Mona Ahmed's life, which sheds light on this period, has subsequently been published by Urvashi Butalia, a well-known writer, publisher, and activist who was featured in Chhachhi's *Seven Lives and a Dream* series. See Urvashi Butalia, "Mona's Story," *Granta 115: The F Word, Essays & Memoir,* May 2011, London: Granta Publications.

[136] Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, 84.

[137] Ibid., 15.

graveyard to show Ayesha the ducks[138] (figure 2.12). Ahmed does indeed appear transformed. She sits in profile at the center of the frame shrouded in black, unsmiling. Ayesha stands behind her, beaming directly at the camera. The insouciant frills on her sleeves magnify the contrast in bearing and expression between the two figures, as if they were in completely different scenes shoddily photo-shopped together against the blank wall of the background.

After the traumatic loss of her daughter, Ahmed became painfully conscious of how "inferior" she considered the people with whom she was resigned to keep company. Recognition in their eyes meant very little. At first, she complained about spending time with working-class people who she considered below her social status. As she wrote, after her move to the graveyard: "Labor class people come and sit with me. This I do not like, but if they are not there, I am completely alone. So in my desperation I have to talk to them. I feel like a pigeon among so many crows."[139] One cannot help but be struck by how Ahmed's disparaging judgments along class lines mirror the logic of mainstream Indian society's distain for *hijra* culture.

And yet, the pictures Singh captures of Ahmed with such so-called "inferior" people are images of joy. One picture features Ahmed pinching the cheek of a young man in an undershirt working in what appears to be a kitchen, (figure 2.13). She tosses a mischievous sidelong smile at Singh's camera. This is among the only photograph in the book that shows Ahmed happy without the company of her daughter. The title offers

[138] Ibid., 87.

[139] Ibid., 86.

bittersweet insight into the moment: *Finally, I became so depressed that I had to eat food from cheap roadside hotels, something I had never done in my life. I lost all my glory. Meeting people who are not even of my standard, just to have moments of happiness*.[140]

Ahmed also found companionship in the form of animals she adopted in the graveyard. At its zenith, her menagerie included dogs, cats, goats, rabbits, over two dozen ducks and even a monkey. Figure 2.14 shows her embracing her Doberman, with the title: *I started to dislike humans so much that I started to adore animals and made my family of animals*.[141] Ahmed seemed to accept a relationship with her pets more easily than one formed with people she viewed as social inferiors such as the young man at the "roadside stall." Perhaps this is not surprising given Ahmed's constant anxiety about her own social acceptance and her fear that her class standing might be tainted by her association with people "not even of (her) standard." Rapport with animals did not merit such apprehension. Yet these companions were also eventually a source of sadness in Ahmed's life as they passed away or were stolen in the case of her Doberman, or poisoned in the case of her monkey.

Once her animals had disappeared, Ahmed was reduced to associating with women who came to visit her in the graveyard whom she claimed to be mentally ill, (figure 2.15). As she later explained: "When all my animals had left, I adopted these half-minded women to remove my loneliness."[142] She went on to say how she was not able to

[140] Ibid., 154.

[141] Ibid., 115.

[142] Ibid., 139.

"have much of a rapport with them,"[143] or "create a family with them"[144] on account of their mental illness. It is perhaps no surprise that Ahmed did not feel fulfilled by her association with people whom she did not consider to be themselves fully self-realized. For recognition to be valuable, it must be conferred by someone of at least an equal social standing. Hence, neither animals nor the mentally ill were fit to offer the recognition that Ahmed desired.

Through the publication of the book, however, Ahmed hoped to gain recognition on the part of a broader public beyond her immediate milieu.[145] Such a desire in Ahmed's case was manifest in her writing to the Scalo publisher, Mr. Walter, whom she had never met. The primary text of the book was structured around Ahmed's e-mails addressed to Mr. Walter. Although his replies were not reprinted, there is no indication from Ahmed's side of the correspondence that he shared details about his own life. This did not stop Ahmed from taking a touchingly personal interest in his affairs, asking: "May I know how many children you have? May I know if you have ever suffered loss in your life?" Of course, these questions were not simply driven by curiosity—they reflected the intensity of Ahmed's own drive to be understood. She followed up: "I ask this because only if you have known loss, you will understand my pain. Please don't mind."[146]

---

[143] Ibid., 138.

[144] Ibid., 138.

[145] Ibid., 11. As Kojève notes of desire: "he must be recognized by the others (in the ideal, extreme case, by all others)." Aleander Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 7.

[146] Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, 85.

Ahmed's desire for recognition by Mr. Walter was not at its heart about an individual behind a computer in Switzerland, but rather a personification of her desire to be recognized by the world at large. This desire went beyond her experience of society around her. It was not only the aspiration no longer to be gawked at in the street, but the desire for people all over the world—people she would never meet, to gain some compassion for her personal experience. As she explained:

> I want this to be the only book about my life. Then there are journalists who are always writing made-up stories about eunuchs, because everyone is so curious about us. But the eunuchs do not like to tell their story to anyone outside the community. Till today no journalist has written the truth about eunuchs. All the world wants to know about is our castration, but not how we feel, our emotions.[147]

While the second half of *Myself Mona Ahmed* chronicles Ahmed's rejection on the part of her family, her daughter, and society at large, there is one figure from whom she feels enduring support: Dayanita Singh. Ahmed's attitude toward Singh suggests a fantasy of pure recognition—love and loyalty from an idealized "other" who exemplifies a relative position of social and cultural eminence. As Ahmed wrote:

> It was destined that we should become friends. I am sure she never even dreamt that a eunuch could become her best friend, and I am sure people ask her what she sees in me, but she has never bothered about what people say.[148]

Although there is only one photograph of Singh and Ahmed together, it plainly reveals both the physical and emotional intimacy of its subjects. It is aptly titled: *When I feel like dying because I cannot bear the world any longer, Dayanita arrives to give me*

[147] Ibid., 66.

[148] Ibid., 7.

love and encouragement" (figure 2.16). Both figures focus the intensity of their gaze directly towards the camera's lens, as if vying for affective dominance within the frame. Hardly joyful or spontaneous in appearance, the photograph defies the conventions of its own genre. It is, after all, a "selfie."

The power of this image is buoyed by dozens of lines in Ahmed's e-mails professing her love and faith for Singh. She wrote: "From childhood, I never received such true love from anyone but her."[149] Or, on another occasion: "I have no true friends. I am always feeling alone. I pass my days waiting for Dayanita's call or visit. There is nothing more to look forward to in this world."[150]

Singh and Ahmed did indeed enter into a relationship from very different socio - cultural backgrounds. Singh was born into an upper-middle class Delhi Sikh family. She studied Visual Communication at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad followed by a degree in Documentary Photography at the International Center of Photography in New York City. Ahmed was born into what she described as a middle-class Muslim family in old Delhi where her father sold caps of different kinds, and she was raised alongside seven brothers and sisters in two rooms. Thus, while Ahmed was not born into poverty, her childhood was far removed from the elite circumstances of Singh's upbringing as is indexed by her foreign education, for example.

While friendship across such a socio-economic gulf might be surprising, it is worth considering how both Singh and Ahmed might have each been attracted to the alterity embodied in the other. Ahmed repeatedly describes her desire for recognition in

[149] Ibid., 7.

[150] Ibid, 10.

the eyes of the world. Understood in this light, Singh's status as an urban, educated artist was surely appreciated by Ahmed and may very well have made Singh's friendship especially welcome. There are a couple of indications throughout the book that Singh's status was leveraged to help her friend—albeit with mixed results. For instance, one picture is described with the title: *Dayanita helped me to make this room, but it is too hot on summer days and too cold on winter days*, (figure 2.17). In another, quite troubling shot, Ahmed explains: "When I went to meet Ayesha, the eunuchs had me tortured by the police. In my pain I ran to Dayanita's house to make a record of my pain," (figure 2.18).

This image shows not only Ahmed's trust in Singh as a figure of support, but also her faith in the power of photography to bear witness to Ahmed's abuse on behalf of the police—a government agency established to protect civilians such as Ahmed as opposed embodying be the very force of violence against them. While police brutality is an issue of mounting urgency across the globe, the problem has been particularly acute and historically engrained across South Asia. Police are commonly understood as actors within a broad network of complex hierarchical relations negotiated between local communities and individuals rather than responsible to the state alone. Ahmed did not seek to leverage the photographic evidence of her beatings against the police. It was enough that Singh made a "record of her pain." The fact that the injustice was captured through the lens of a photographer from the elite echelons of society seemed to provide some solace in itself.

Singh may also have been drawn to Ahmed for the very alterity that divided them. Despite being from a middle-class family, Singh did not harbor the traditional middle-class values of family life. Instead, she wanted to be an artist—a photographer.

For Singh, then, Ahmed represented a truly radical gender identity and mode of life. Ahmed experienced herself beyond the bounds of traditional society and became a *hijra*. Singh experienced herself beyond the bounds of traditional society and became a photographer.

Moreover, Singh's coming of age as a photographer was intimately related to the development of her friendship with Ahmed, as the *Myself Mona Ahmed* project corresponded with her decision to give up journalism in favor of fine art photography. And yet the project was, in important ways, not hers alone. One image shows Ahmed examining a box of prints, (figure 2.19). This is important visual evidence of the collaborative process so integral to the entire endeavor. Yet it is also a reminder of Singh's craft. Indeed, this image achieves something surprising in foregrounding the authorship of both the photographer and subject simultaneously: each image is a conscious production on the part of Dayanita Singh, and a conscious selection on the part of Mona Ahmed.

Through their reciprocal relationship, Ahmed also became self-realized as an artist throughout the pages of the book. She writes: "I had a deep desire to be a great artist and earn fame in the world."[151] Initially she sought such artistic recognition in more traditional art forms such as classical Indian dance and song. Despite her dedication, however, her efforts were not met with success and "this difficulty of being made fun of stuck with me."[152]

---

[151] Ibid., 48.

[152] Ibid., 48.

Only later in life through her association with Singh did Ahmed find a medium through which she could express her creativity through the telling of her own story. Singh acknowledged that Ahmed's account blends fact and fiction, admitting in the introduction: "I first assumed that a writer would have to tell her story, but after she dictated some e-mails to me, I realized that I probably underestimated her and that she could tell her own story, weaving together fact and fiction."[153]

Ahmed's penchant for the fantastical is evident in her grand and generally impractical schemes for the graveyard site where she lived after breaking with the *hijra* community. She imagined installing a fountain and swimming pool or turning it into a wedding hall, an orphanage, or even a pickle factory. As Singh described of her friend:

> I think Mona is really a great artist. You know, she builds staircases, that don't go anywhere—there's just a staircase. There's a moat, that has no water, there's a swimming pool, that never gets used. There's grills, that don't protect anything. If I was doing that, that would be my artwork, so I think it's really about Mona being a true artist, but not having the means, or no one's really been able to present that aspect for her. [154]

Although Singh was clearly supportive of her friend's creative impulses, they also had to be negotiated against the photographer's own sense of artistic agency. She could not picture her friend however she pleased, and it was clear that Ahmed vetoed many of the images Singh shot. Such occasionally fraught negotiations are inherent to any collaboration, of course, yet in this case the stakes were not merely the final artistic product, but also the more personal sense of self that was made manifest. As Singh described at length in her introduction:

---

[153] Ibid., 16.

[154] Singh, "Art Talk."

> Mona is extremely critical of her images and immediately rejects those that play, however inadvertently, on her oddness. She said, 'You photograph rich people with rich man's camera. Why do you photograph me only with a small camera?' She even went on to say that if my wealthier friends could be photographed as though they were royalty, why couldn't she. She referred to my series of family portraits in which my subjects decided where they wanted to sit and what they wanted to wear. But Mona must have known that her photographs with me were increasingly a fantasy. She would dictate, and I could never argue with her. For the first photo in the book, with her sitting on the rocks, her head covered, she took me to the place, sat down, covered her head, and said, 'Now, take my Pakeeza (heroine of an iconic Hindi film of love and longing) photo.' I tried to argue, saying it was too filmy, but she insisted, as with the one where she is standing alone among the flowers.[155]

This quote illustrates the extent to which Ahmed saw herself as an artistic agent within the collaborative process. Despite Singh's hesitance, she insisted on being the "director" of the shoot. It is no accident that the dynamism of this collaboration—especially enhanced through Ahmed's confidence in her own artistic vision—was achieved through Singh's chosen medium of photography and the rich vernacular "filmy" tradition it invoked.

Although not specifically concerned with photography in India, Kaja Silverman's recent work nonetheless offers a helpful theorization of how the magic of the photographic medium is driven by the related if not identical logic of "analogy." She argues that the analogical nature of photography reflects to us a basic metaphysical truth of the analogical nature of the world. [156] Silverman anchors her analysis in a lengthy quote by Walt Whitman, in which the poet expounds, beautifully, the interconnectedness

---

[155] Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed*, 17.

[156] Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part I* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), 2015.

of all things. She concludes: "It is only through this interlocking that we ourselves exist."[157]

Silverman asserts that acknowledging our own underlying analogous relationship to the world is extremely anxiety producing because it casts doubt on our sense of autonomy.[158] However, the key to coming to terms with this anxiety in Silverman's account is photography itself. She writes:

> Photography is the vehicle through which these profoundly enabling but unwelcome relationships are revealed to us, and through which we learn to think analogically. It is able to disclose the world, show us that it is structured by analogy, and help us assume our place within it because it, too, is analogical.[159]

Given the resonance between Silverman's theory of the underlying metaphysics of analogy and the desire for recognition, perhaps it is not surprising that it is the assertion of artistic agency that was the primary site of conflict between the photographer and her subject. Each cherished her own authorship as a validation of ego. This impulse is notable in a work that so explicitly claims to be about friendship and collaboration. Yet the very nature of this seeming contradiction lies at the heart of my analysis of *Myself Mona Ahmed.*

---

[157] Ibid., 28.

[158] Can this fear be compared with the impulse driving the "struggle to the death" that Hegel identifies as central to his articulation of the master-slave dialectic? (See Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller [New York: Oxford University Press], 1977). It seems there is a remarkable resonance between the "desire for recognition" and the underlying logic of analogy as both psychologically and metaphysically grounding principles as well as the fear that accompany them both.

[159] Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, 11.

The complex and intimate interdependence of Singh and Ahmed's lives continued until Ahmed's death in September 2017. Ahmed continued to live in the graveyard for the remainder of her life, even as her fame grew to international proportions—serving as the model, for instance, for the protagonist of Anjum in Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize nominated 2017 novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.[160] Her relationship with Singh, however, remained hugely important. As a relative reported just days after her death: "Apart from me and her caretaker Jahanara, Dayanita was on video call from Venice in her last moments. Mona loved the camera…she died on camera too."[161] Thus even at the final hour, Ahmed turned toward Singh to substantiate her life (and its passing)—through the lens, no less.

Privacy

As her photographic collaboration with Mona Ahmed was drawing to a close, Singh found inspiration in the photographic archive of another woman central to her life: her own mother, Nony Singh. The elder Singh was a passionate creator of images, and like many female photographers of her generation in the 50's and 60's, her favorite subject was her own family.[162] As anthropologist Bhrigupati Singh wrote, Nony Singh's

---

[160] Arundhati Roy, "Author Arundhati Roy on Her New Book *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*," *Mumbai Mirror*, June 6, 2017, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/jitna-bhi-gaali-doh-would-i-like-to-write-something-else-no/articleshow/58902363.cms

[161] Somya Lakhani, "Mona Ahmed, Transgender & Photographer's Muse, Dies at 81," *The Indian Express,* September 11, 2017, http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/mona-ahmed-transgender-photographers-muse-dies-at-81-4837676/.

[162] See Sabeena Gadihoke, "The Home and Beyond: Domestic and Amateur Photography by Women in India (1930 – 1960)," in *Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies (*New Delhi: The Sarai Programme, Center for the Study of Developing Societies, 2003), 62.

archive "feels like it might have been created by Dayanita herself, since it so strongly presages her way of seeing."[163] Only later did Dayanita recognize the remarkable resemblance. She described "seeing my mother's work and seeing mine and being quite shocked and horrified at the similarities."[164]

Desiring to move away from images that portrayed exotic elements of Indian culture, Singh followed her mother's lead and began experimenting with the genre of the family photograph. In this undertaking she decided to turn the camera back on her own milieu. As she wrote: "in my desperation to keep photographing, I turned to my own world and started to photograph my friends and their families."[165] One wonders whether Singh's choice of subject may owe a debt to the vulnerability that Mona Ahmed so conspicuously put on display. Perhaps bearing witness to her friend's evolving self-realization through photography emboldened Singh to turn her camera back on her own milieu.

There are, however, dramatic differences between this project and Singh's work with Mona Ahmed, stemming from the gulf that exists between the social strata exemplified by her disparate subjects. Ahmed is an outcast living in poverty; the people of *Privacy* are India's upper classes and aristocrats. Yet, despite these stark differences,

---

[163] Bhrigupati Singh, *Photography and Prana (Life Force), Thinking with Dayanita Singh*, exhibition catalogue for "Origins" curated by Rahaab Allana and Nandita Jaishanker (New Delhi: PhotoUKIndia, 2015).

[164] Gadihoke, *Three Women and a Camera*.

[165] Dayanita Singh and Britta Schmitz *Privacy* (Gottingen: Steidl: Staatiliche Museen zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 2003), 3.

both projects demonstrate a similar dedication to representing her subjects as they wish while simultaneously expressing something essential about Singh's own subjectivity.

If *Myself, Mona Ahmed* offered a portrait of the artist through a close relationship, *Privacy* suggests a different sort of intimacy with the photographer through her social class. Indian elites have rarely been pictured so candidly. Singh recounted rather incredulously in an interview:

> I took these pictures to America when I went three years ago, just to show some of the photo editors that, you know, this is my world, this is where I come from, and they were absolutely aghast, because, first, they said, this is not India. This must be Indians in London or Indians in New York, which is, of course, accusing me of dishonesty. And then they said, even if this is India, how do you have the gall to photograph this when your country is so riddled with poverty.[166]

While these images may have been surprising to American editors, there was a robust precedent for such portraits in the South Asian context. Photographic technology came to India almost immediately after having been discovered in Europe in the 1840s, and was quickly deployed in the service of the grand portrait tradition. Given the expense and expertise required, portraits tended to be extremely formal affairs and were often orchestrated to convey the power, grace, and authority of the subject. Thus, from its onset, an aesthetic of social hierarchy was cultivated.

Elaborate studio sets were often among the principle strategies by which the positive attributes of the sitter were broadcast. The most popular backdrops were modeled on Victorian drawing rooms or Italianate courtyards, desires that mirrored the vogue for all things European among colonial administrators and native elite alike. There were, however, some notable exceptions that reflected indigenous tropes of authority,

[166] Gadihoke, *Three Women and a Camera*.

such as the self-portrait of Ram Singh II, (figure 2.20). In this image, the Maharaja elected to emphasize his royal status through the visual illusion of a halo created by the juxtaposition of his head and a large backdrop behind it. Golden halos were typical of painted Rajput depictions of royal figures. The appearance of the halo was an especially rigid representational convention in the case of royalty from Jaipur (Ram Singh's kingdom), because rajas were said to be direct decedents of the sun god.

When it came to photographing his favorite *nautch* (dancing) girl, however, Ram Singh employed the more conventional drawing-room stage-set. Figure 2.21 shows a woman assumed to be Ram Sukee, the Maharaja's favorite model seated in an ornate wooden chair against the elegant painted backdrop of a curtained drawing-room. Her arms are spread away from her body somewhat imperiously, one resting on her hip in a display of a rich diaphanous sari, and the other leaning against a small decorative table. Her fingers are splayed, her bare foot is extended, and her eyes are downturned. Behind her stands an assistant who offers a study in contrast. While this woman also rests her hand on her hip, forming a triangle that echoes the primary model's own form, it appears to be a gesture of rather weary resignation rather than commanding self-possession.

To photograph a woman in this fashion was unprecedented. *Purdah,* or the custom of veiling, was strictly observed in the Maharaja's court, as it was among nearly all Rajput royalty of the time. The women featured in the photographs would generally not be seen by anyone except their servants, close relatives, and husband. Hence, to expose them not only to the eye of the camera, but potentially anyone who managed to

gain access to the resulting photograph was a radical breach of cultural and visual convention. In this respect, Ram Singh's images were the first of their kind.[167]

What were the broader political implications of the Maharaja's photographic undertaking? Art historian Laura Weinstein has argued that a primary motivation for Ram Singh's peculiar breach of convention was his desire to demonstrate that conditions for women within the *zenana* were far from what the British so strongly feared.[168] His consorts were not shut into damp, unhealthy quarters characterized merely by salacious hedonism as colonial authorities often claimed. Rather, they were elegant, modern women at home in a Victorian drawing room. Weinstein suggests that this impression was self-consciously devised in order to mitigate British interference, and retain the status they allowed him to enjoy as titular head-of-state. Establishing recognition within complex hierarchical contexts thus emerged as powerful motivation within the historical archive of early south Asian portrait photography.

As the 19th century came to a close, the desire for photographic portraits had begun to pervade elite society at large. The camera was no longer the unique purview of royal patrons. Family as well as individual portraits came to be commonplace among the upper-middle class, who typically followed the established conventions of Victorian studio photography. Consider, for instance, the portrait *Seated Parsi Lady with a Pet Dog*

---

[167] As Laura Weinstein wrote: "To photograph such women was completely without precedent. In the long history of the visual arts in Rajasthan up to about 1860, portraits of Rajput women in purdah in any medium were virtually nonexistent. Ram Singh's photographic survey was therefore a boldly modern act, breaking decisively with long-standing norms of domesticity and representation." Laura Weinstein, "Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah," *History of Photography* 34, no.1 (February 2010): 2.

[168] Ibid.

from 1900 (figure 2.22). This image bears out several similarities with the self-portrait Ram Singh II composed with his own dogs similarly arrayed on either side of his legs thirty years earlier. Yet now a "respectable" middle class lady (certainly not a *nauch* girl), takes the place of a royal dandy. While the mis-en-scene appears fairly similar to that arranged by Ram Singh, an ornamental table set against a wall in a Victorian-style drawing room, there is a considerable difference. The woman is sitting in a real room—presumably her own, as opposed to posing against a painted backdrop.

Although *Privacy* ushers us into the lavish domestic quarters of the country's turn-of-the-millennium elite, the aristocratic aesthetic of the Parsi woman's photograph frequently persists. This is a world of wide windows and high ceilings. Marble, dark wood, and silk dominate. There is never visible dirt, and rarely disorder of any kind. If photographic images of India are often known for the density of human bodies crowded into a composition, these pictures broadcast stillness and open space, the hands and shoulders of relatives touching only by choice, and never necessity. Radical socio-historical transitions including Independence and Partition separate Singh's portraits from their 19th century aristocratic forbearers, yet within these closed domestic interiors a sense of seemingly anachronistic grandiosity and aristocratic spectacle endures.

The book is divided into roughly two types of related images: homes that people live in, and historical homes that have been transformed into museums. There are also a couple of anomalous shots of deserted public monuments that open the book and introduce Singh's fixation on the power of human environments bereft of their inhabitants. Many of the domestic settings are animated by human figures—usually their residents, but just under a third of the images show the space alone, devoid of living

figures. Singh recounts how she discovered the affective potentiality of shooting such unpeopled spaces:

> One day, when Mrs. Braganza, one of the Goa residents I was photographing, left the room to answer the phone, I suddenly realized that the room was not empty. I could sense the many generations who had used this chair, and I realized that I could make a portrait without a person in it. I started to make photographs of spaces without human beings, yet peopled by the unseen generations who had lived there before.[169]

Singh had picked up on the mysterious way that people sometimes seem to imprint upon their surroundings—and how the double movement of the photographic imprint can capture this transference. As Walter Benjamin observed in his classic text *A Little History of Photography*, "The very creases in people's cloths have an air of permanence. Just consider Schelling's coat. It will surely pass into immortality along with him: the shape it has borrowed from its wearer is not unworthy of the creases in his face."[170] George Baker has extended this observation to the work of contemporary photographers like Moyra Davey, whose photographic still life compositions movingly express something about the subjectivity of the owners of the pictured objects through such a process of "borrowing."[171] Singh also has a talent for capturing some feeling of an individual through the objects that he or she owns. Her unpeopled spaces feel somehow anthropomorphic, not empty at all, but left and waiting.

---

[169] Singh, *Privacy*, 5.

[170] Walter Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. M. W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 519.

[171] George Baker, "The Absent Photograph," in *Moyra Davey: Speaker Receiver* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 2010).

Let us begin with the two images of Mrs. Braganza's house—one with her present, (figure 2.23) and the other taken in her absence, (figure 2.24)—as an entree into *Privacy*. The photographs depict the corner of an astonishingly baroque and peculiarly eclectic drawing room. There are three pieces of opulent European-style furniture: a chair, a table, and a coatrack. The coatrack is the most remarkable for its organic, undulating shape, like an uncanny tree of antelope horns which curl out from the central spiraled trunk and each terminate in a blunt white knob. Three decorative pieces of porcelain are equally spaced atop the ornately carved side table. One is Oriental in design, containing as single hollyhock stem, and another is Greek. Such conspicuous cosmopolitanism is evident in a great number of the photographs. The wall is covered by bold wallpaper bearing the image of large flowers sprouting from its bottom perimeters, camouflaging the single living flower stem. The walls are adorned with small portraits of what appear to be 17th century European aristocracy, the figures' fussy curls and opulent headgear oddly at home in the Baroque interior. There are also two decorative plates hung amongst the figures as well as what looks to be a nail for a third, though it is left bare. One of the plates is hung inordinately close to the corner of a portrait. This lends the composition of the wall display an off-kilter uneasiness, as if the two design elements—the plates and the portraits-- had each been considered independently and not adjusted to one another once they were assembled in the same space. The wall does not have the feel of being aesthetically evaluated by fresh eyes for a very long time indeed.

In one image taken of this room, (figure 2.23), we see the mature figure of Mrs. Menezes Braganza—the mistress of the house. She sits stiffly in the plush velvet backed chair, her right hand gripping its arm and her left settled in her lap. Unlike most of the

sitters in the *Privacy* series, she wears no jewelry aside from her wedding ring. Her clothing is also relatively plain—a long black day dress with short sleeves and an abstract pattern of white dots weaving across the fabric in swaying lines. This simple modern outfit stands out from its antiquated setting. What is most striking about Mrs. Menezes, however, is her face. Her mouth is set in a horizontal line that divides the drooping flesh of her cheeks. She meets the camera directly with a steely gaze. It is easy to admire Singh's discovery, prompted by a serendipitous phone call that interrupted this photo session: even the "empty" room in the photograph where Mrs. Braganza is absent feels saturated by its owners' presence.

The room Mrs. Braganza chose for her portrait is typical of those most sitters selected in so far as it is a space of explicit display. Singh makes clear that she allows her subjects to choose their setting. It is revealing, then, though perhaps not surprising, that the most popular choice of settings were the most opulent and "public" rooms in the house. Only three of the subjects chose to be represented in their bedrooms. When Singh selects the spaces herself, however, she conspicuously gravitates towards the greater intimacy of the sleeping quarters as evinced by the eleven photographs included in the book of bedrooms bereft of human subjects.

The opulent quarters most often selected for portraits are not only apt settings for showcasing their human inhabitants in the moment of the photograph, but are often already set up as exhibition areas for collections of various kinds. Accumulation and aspiration are signaled in the form of trophies, artifacts, and family photographs, which are among the most popular displays.

One image, *Koshi Kids, Bangalore, 1997*, (figure 2.25), combines all three. The focus of the photograph is the two young sitters— a boy who looks to be about eight or nine, and his sister, a few years younger. They sit side by side in two padded desk chairs, feet dangling, their hands carefully resting on their knees, formal and erect. They are well dressed for the occasion. The girl wears a prim polka dot dress but her brother steals the show with a black bowtie and tuxedo shirt. The sister looks tired though compliant while her brother stares into the camera lens with an arresting sincerity.

Though the eye is drawn immediately to the earnest young boy, it quickly begins to meander through the complex backdrop. The children are seated in front of a massive display case, and directly above their heads is a television set covered by a dark cloth embroidered around the edges. This relatively small patch of blank textile at the center of the composition is about the only respite from the material *horror vacui* that evidently gripped the decorators of the massive cabinet surrounding it. There are handfuls of family photographs, multiple layers thick, spread across three of the shelves. Hundreds of CD's sit atop a stereo system. The children are flanked by tall black speakers, atop which a pair of large ballerina sculptures gleam in baroque exuberance. Yet the most striking element of the display is the trophies. They are so dense on the top two shelves that it is impossible from the photograph to make out how many layers deep they go. Copious medals amplify the display, dangling by the dozen from the neck of a ceramic leopard. So top heavy, he appears as if one more metallic accolade might send him tumbling to the floor. One shelf lower, the trophies are larger so it is possible for the eye to distinguish the contours of single objects. Could one be related to a domino competition, as the emblem on its face suggests? Of the others, it’s impossible to say. Of course, this seems

to be the point—the visual onslaught of so much accomplishment as backdrop for the solemn portraits of the youngest Koshi generation.

If hierarchy is exhibited through the proliferation of objects brought by the sea change of economic liberalization, the photographs also index a much older marker of social prestige: the presence of domestic help. Some of the most striking images capture the figures of servants, silently performing tasks behind masters and mistresses who pose for the camera.

Consider figure 2.26, a strong composition that frames three women from the torso up. Though each woman has a strong immediate presence in the room, there is an uncanny sense of complete disconnect between them. Mrs. Devi holds the center of the picture, the queen of her domain, gazing upwards and smiling broadly. Behind her right shoulder her servant is visible carrying a tray of tea off to the right—behind her but nearly the same size within the picture's frame. At the top right, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* gazes out of a large print hung on the wall. Oddly, it is the reproduction of the famous face that attracts the viewer's attention immediately—not only on account of her iconic status, but because she makes the most direct eye contact. This immediate connection with a figure who is almost a metonym for art itself draws attention to the pictorial quality of the photograph. "This too, is a portrait" the *Mona Lisa* seems to remind us. Indeed, the impression that Mrs. Devi is clearly posing is enhanced by the echo of the iconic portrait behind her-- both models self-assured with courtly poise. The punctum of the picture, however, is certainly, the third figure of the servant. [172] Her unobtrusive

[172] The "punctum" is a neologism that lies at the heart of *Camera Lucida,* as I noted in Chapter 1. Barthes identifies two fundamental components of what gives a photograph meaning in the mind of the beholder: the "studium" and the "punctum." The studium is composed of the general

baring is a study in contrast compared to the other women in the frame. Her figure is striking precisely because she appears so comfortable fading into the background. This display of invisibility serves to powerfully reinforce the authority of her mistress in the foreground.

This dynamic is even more dramatically at play in figure 2.27. Two sisters pose languidly on a sofa in matching satin blouses and short black skirts. They stare down the camera with sultry half-smiles. Once again, however, the most surprising aspect of the picture is not the young women posed as fashion models, but rather the reaction of a domestic worker who gapes visibly at the display as he passes behind them. Once again, he appears incidental to the setup of the picture, and for that reason becomes its most gripping feature. His candid astonishment offers a subconscious model for the viewer, like the reaction shot in a film sequence.

In these pictures, servants offer striking displays of recognition. Such images suggest the drive for recognition that plays out within the complex hierarchies of Indian society beyond the purview of the lens. They also mirror the recognition of the photographer, as well as the future potential recognition on the part of an unknown public through the eventual display of the photographs.

The psychological intelligence of Singh's work is exemplified by these instances in which servants are pictured almost by chance, and yet they become inadvertent focal

---

aspects of the photograph that are legible to a culturally literate "reader" of the image—an ability to grasp what the photograph is "of," or "what's going on." Naturally, with no context at all this would be difficult. The other aspect of successful photographs according to Barthes—and this is the end of the dichotomy that holds his real interest-- he calls the "punctum" because it is a somehow incongruous detail that "punctures" the otherwise legible picture space. It may simply be an off-putting shadow or gesture, but it may also be the uncanny incursion of time into the viewer's reading of the static image.

points within the composition. Such domestic dynamics are often absent from photography of the sub-continent. When servants do appear, it is more common for them to be explicitly "displayed" like the trophies behind the Koshi kids in figure 2.25. This is the approach taken, for instance, in Ram Singh II's image of Ram Sukee, who appears like a fine accessory chosen to set off the beauty and privilege of her mistress.

This relatively straightforward mode of asserting hierarchy through the representation of servants in their masters' portraits is far less nuanced or powerful than Singh's approach. It broadcasts their inferior status without showing the invisibility such a status truly entails in daily life. By contrast, Singh's images offer a more potent demonstration of the true subjective gulf between master and servant and thereby provide a more psychologically poignant portrait of both.

The fact that the subjects of *Privacy* did not generally choose to pose with their servants is echoed in Ahmed's ambivalent attitude toward those she viewed as her social inferiors. In both cases, such relationships were fundamental to the social constellation of Singh's subject's lives—and yet these subjects did not fully embrace them as such. Their recognition was unsatisfying. Singh's pictures convey the significance of servants in the lives of India's elite just as her photographs of Ahmed illustrate the importance of Ahmed's relationship with local shopkeepers and the "half-minded" women who kept her company in the graveyard. Yet these relationships were deprecated in so far as Ahmed dismissed their value in her prose and the subjects of *Privacy* apparently did not explicitly choose to pose with household help. As Kojève suggested, satisfaction only

comes from recognition by one who is believed to be worthy of bestowing it-- one who is deemed a social equal.[173]

As we saw in the case of Ahmed, recognition appears easier to embrace in the case of animals. Towards the middle of *Privacy*, dogs begin to appear as prominent characters. Each featured dog appears to have a pedigree to match the self-conception of its owner, evoking the caricatures made popular in the Disney film *1,001 Dalmatians*. *Minni Boga, New Delhi 1997* (figure 2.28) features a tall angular woman who gazes unsmiling at the camera with two large black poodles at her feet. She is very serious, anxious even, an impression heightened by the dark Munch-like painting directly behind her head. Ms. Boga has dressed in an unusual kimono-style gown with a dappled pattern that matches the dark ruffled coat of her pets almost exactly. She tilts her head slightly to her right in order to hold the paw of one of the dogs, which is perched on its hind legs, and yet she appears completely unaffected by her canine companion.

Certainly the most striking among the images that include dogs, however, is *Gary and Anita Lawyer, Bombay 2002* (figure 2.29). Indeed, this may be the strongest, and strangest picture of the entire book. The image shows a middle-aged man enthroned in a wide cushioned chair with his wife standing behind him and a large mastiff at his feet. Mrs. Lawyer rests her hand on her husband's shoulder, and the dog extends its paw out to be held by its master and rested on his knee, forming a rather disconcerting symmetry of domestic deference and support. Anita gazes glassy-eyed not quite at the camera, as do so many of Singh's subjects. Her husband gazes imperiously upwards, chin aloft, as if confronted by a vision of a future blessed with health, prosperity, and riches. Only the

[173] Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 19.

dog meets the eye of the camera. This fact engenders the uncanny sensation that he is somehow the most connected of the three, almost the most human.

These impressions are heightened by Singh's remarkably low camera angle. Although there is considerable variation in the composition of the images that make up *Privacy*, most of the shots tend to center their subjects at about eye-level. The composition tends not to draw attention to itself. "Gary and Anita Lawyer, Bombay 2002," is a clear exception. Singh must have been sitting or even laying on the floor to capture her image, and hence the viewer gains a heightened awareness of the photographer's (nearly prostrated) presence in the physical space. Singh adopted a similarly low position while photographing Mona Ahmed at home with her daughter Ayesha. Yet this strategy in the case of Ahmed enhances the intimacy of the final image, while in the case of Gary and Anita Lawyer, Singh's position served to emphasize a social and emotional remove from her subjects. Notably, this is the only image in the book to rely on such a pronounced compositional strategy.

The result borders on a farce. The man appears haughty in his formal suit with his eyes aloft, enveloped in the material luxury of his house, his wife, and even his thoroughbred dog. And yet he approved this picture. As Singh made clear in the book's written introduction, all the photographs were included with the permission of their subjects. Indeed, many of the images became their subjects' prized possessions: "Most of the families that I photograph hang the images on their walls."[174] On many occasions

[174] Singh, *Myself, Mona Ahmed*, 4.

Singh made a point to describe how her subjects had the final word on which photographs were printed. As she explained in an interview:

> The families have a lot of power. They will turn around to me and say, Dayanita, this is not a picture of us. This is your coldness coming into the photographs. You are not married, so you have problems with marriage, why are you imposing that on us? And fine, even if you say it's there in the photographs, it's something—you know we had a bad day! We had a fight last night. Do it again, don't use this picture.[175]

It is curious, then, to consider what in the photograph appealed to Gary and Anita. Perhaps it is helpful to consider what the American photographer Diane Arbus famously described as the "gap between intention and effect." As she explained:

> There's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you. And that has to do with what I've always called the gap between intention and effect…You know it really is totally fantastic that we look like this and you sometimes see that very clearly in a photograph. Something is ironic in the world and it has to do with the fact that what you intend never comes out like you intend it.[176]

Upon first encounter, this image appears to exemplify this gap insofar as Gary and Anita Lawyer do not appear particularly sympathetic. Yet perhaps the picture conveys their intention perfectly. Hierarchy is precisely what is meant to be recognized.

I would like to suggest that all of these photographic representations can be profitably read as relating back to the desire for recognition that we first explored in the case of *Myself Mona Ahmed*. Yet the conditions for recognition are somewhat particular within the dynamic of the subject/artist relationship. What may appear as a form of recognition is in reality the much more assertive act of representation. No matter how

---

[175] Gadihoke, *Three Women and a Camera*.

[176] Diane Arbus, *Diane Arbus* (Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972), 2.

faithfully a subject is translated into a work of art, there is an unbridgeable gap between the person and their portrait. Hence, to "recognize" them in their representation, the viewer is not only recognizing the subject, but also recognizing the agency of the artist. The artist imposes herself as a veil through which the subject is apprehended, hence inserting herself into the process of recognition. Although it may seem that the subject is fundamentally opened up for recognition, it is also the artist as artist who is recognized through the display of her work.

Thus we see the potentially antagonistic side of the constitution of the subject through the struggle for artistic control over the final form of the images. Singh is clear she allows her sitters to suggest their own poses. They may choose their costumes and their settings. Yet, of course, they do not do so in a vacuum, and Singh is ultimately responsible for setting up the shot. As the photographer, Singh takes on the difficult task of allowing her subjects both agency, and just as significantly, a sense of agency, in a product that is ultimately authored by her. The element of collaboration is real, but the two collaborators can also struggle to exert their own control.

Towards a Conclusion

In closing, let us return to Dayanita Singh's unique method of distribution for many of the photographs taken in the *Privacy* series: they were given away as gifts. At the conclusion of the series, she insisted on showing the final prints of the photographs that would make up the book in the respective cities where they were taken, so that their subjects could appreciate them first hand. In the case of these exhibitions in both Kolkata and Goa, Singh allowed her subjects to physically remove their own portraits from the

gallery walls in the shows' closing week.[177] By the conclusion of the exhibition, the walls were nearly bare. As Aveek Sen described the scene:

> Dayanita photographed the carrying away of the photographs throughout the week in the gallery, making pictures of pictures with frames within frames. They are now as much part of the story of "Ladies of Calcutta" as the original portraits. They make up a closing chapter, which completes, almost ritually, the cycle of receiving and giving that the 'taking' of a picture begins in the photographer's relationship with her subjects. Taken out of the world of buying and selling, the photographer's ambiguous relationship with the market becomes part of her creative play. What would have been the 'price' of her art turns into another kind of 'value,' as her art re-enters the lives of the people from whom it had drawn its substance.[178]

Indeed, the theme of gifting resonates at many levels in Singh's practice. Not only were the final photographs gifted to their subjects, but Singh's investment in working with the families to compose the careful shots in the first place were invariably acts of generosity. Such gestures of largess go both ways, of course. The families also gave freely of their time and their trust to the photographer. Hence this mutual giving becomes part of a process of reciprocal exchange.

Myself, Mona Ahmed can similarly be viewed through the perspective of mutual gifting. Ahmed "gives" her life experiences up to both Singh and Walter, the Scalo publisher, who in turn give her the opportunity to speak for herself and seek sympathy

---

[177] "At the time, for Singh, images were most valued as documents, as part of an archive that is far more important than any of the single images considered as artwork. Thus, in this event—a participatory performance—the artist reflects upon the natural diaspora of the image." Carlos Gollonte and Carlos Marin Garcia, "Dayanita Singh: The Poetry of the Invisible," ed. Avek Sen, *Dayanita Singh* (Madrid: Fundación MAPFRE, 2010), 13.

[178] Aveek Sen, "Ladies of Calcutta," in *Dayanita Singh*, ed. Avek Sen (Madrid: T.F. Editores, 2010), 84.

and recognition in the eyes of the world. There is even a sense in which the process of photography itself "gives." As Singh wrote in the book's introduction:

> Mona is one of the most precious gifts photography has given me. In this class-ridden society of ours, there would be no meeting point for Mona and me, were it not for photography. Photography led me to her, but it was not photography that sustained our relationship for more than 12 years.[179]

There is a long history to the theorization of "the gift" as constitutive of relationships and even selfhood, beginning most famously with Marcel Mauss's speculative 1925 ethnography: *An Essay on the Gift: The Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies*.[180] In that work, Mauss argues how gift giving—which is often assumed to be voluntary--may indeed be obligatory. Furthermore, such obligatory exchange has significance far beyond the actual goods and services that pass from one party to another. Rather, such exchange is part of a much larger web of meaning and signification that Mauss calls the "system of total services."[181]

Mauss' essay examines the power gifts exert over their recipients. In presenting a gift, the giver is actually giving a part of oneself, and thus there is a powerful need to reciprocate. As Mauss described in the context of the Maori people of New Zealand: "Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary just as, being its owner, through it he has a hold over the thief."[182] What may appear to be an innocent act of benevolence, then, is in Mauss' view a struggle for domination.

---

[179] Dayanita Singh, *Myself, Mona Ahmed*, 16.

[180] Marcel Mauss, *An Essay on the Gift: The Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2000.)

[181] Ibid., 7.

[182] Ibid., 15.

This essay has undertaken a close reading of two projects of Dayanita Singh's as each motivated in different ways by the mutual desire for recognition on the part of both the subjects and the photographer. The collaborations embodied by these relationships of reciprocity are not unlike the gift-giving practices that Marcel Mauss made famous nearly a century ago. What appears to be merely generous—be it a gift of material goods or merely recognition, may indeed be a more complex negotiation of social standing within an intricate hierarchical matrix.

A brief consideration of the projects' titles resonates with my reading. *Privacy* represents anything but a private impulse on the part of its subjects. Rather, the photographs offer a crystalized vision of the aspirations each sitter desires to present to the world at large. These images capture how people are transformed through public recognition. Even more suggestive of my theme is the title *Myself, Mona Ahmed*, selected for a book of photography by Dayanita Singh.[183] Singh comes to experience herself fundamentally both as an artist and a person through Ahmed, as Ahmed does through Singh. Such fraught interdependence is at the heart of these collaborative artistic endeavors.

[183] Both Singh and Ahmed hold the copyright for the text, while Singh holds sole copyright for the photographs.

Chapter 3.

Absence in the Desert: The Quiet Ethics of Gauri Gill

For more than eighteen years, Gauri Gill has been returning to the desert. Located in the Western half of Rajasthan, the Thar Desert—known as the Great Indian Desert—is home to dozens of diverse communities that often survive on remarkably meager resources. Gill has made scores of friends across the region, often staying for weeks on end at a single location. Friends quickly become artistic subjects, and over the course of dozens of journeys, she documented the transformation of dozens of lives, creating an ongoing archive of thousands of images called collectively *Notes from the Desert*.

Gill's devotion to the region could be traced back to New Years Day in 1999, when she was on holiday with friends.[184] They were staying in an old *haveli*[185] adjacent to a village girls' school where some young students were studying outside in the winter sun. The Arcadian tableau was suddenly interrupted when a teacher began to violently beat one of the girls for some mistake she had made. Gill was outraged at the severity of the teacher's treatment. Upon returning to Delhi, she decided to investigate the state of rural girl's education in Rajasthan more broadly, and proposed shooting a story on the topic for the Indian political weekly *Outlook* magazine, where she was currently working as a photojournalist. Her editor declined the pitch, saying that there was no "hook" for the story—nothing about the project that was particularly timely. Gill decided to pursue the

[184] Gauri Gill, interview with the author, April 22, 2015.

[185] A *haveli* is the term used for a large historical house or mansion in northern India. Some have subsequently been transformed into luxury hotels and guesthouses.

issue without the backing of the magazine, embarking on a series that would proliferate for more than a decade and lie at the heart of her oeuvre as a fine arts photographer.

This chapter explores the ethical dimensions of this extended photographic engagement with rural communities across Rajasthan. In particular, I examine two specific series within the *Notes from the Desert* project, which is the broader name Gill has used to designate the archive of images she has taken over her extended engagement with Rajasthani communities. Ultimately, Gill hopes to publish many of these images in a series of books, each organized as a distinct "note" in order to accommodate the range of distinct narratives that have characterized her engagement.[186] The first series I will focus on, *Jannat*, focuses on the daily life of a single family—Izmat and her two daughters, Jannat and Hooran. This group of images has been exhibited as a set of relatively small black and white prints that must be viewed intimately, from up close.[187] The second project, *Balika Mela*, evolved at the site of a rural "fair for girls" organized by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), where Gill set up a makeshift studio for portraits. Working with just a few simple props, the girls decided how they wanted to be photographed, producing a series of portraits that were at once charismatic and enigmatic. The images of *Balika Mela* were collected in a book published under the same title, and have subsequently been shown in a range of contexts, such as the outside walls of the International Center of Photography Museum in New York.[188]

---

[186] Gauri Gill, e-mail correspondence with the author on November 29, 2017.

[187] The exhibition "*Notes from the Desert*: Photographs by Gauri Gill" was recently on view at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. from September 17 – February 12, 2017.

[188] Images from Gill's *Balika Mela* series were projected onto the windows of the International Center of Photography Museum from February 27 – March 19, 2017.

Both series also include text as a substantial component. In the case of *Jannat*, Gill included letters written by Izmat and a poem by her younger daughter Hooran, alongside the photographs in identical frames and matting. The publication *Balika Mela* combined Gill's photographs with writing by one of the subjects, Manju Saran, along with Gill's own introduction. Thus, both series pair the voice of the subjects alongside their images.

Grounded in a close reading of these two projects, I argue that Gill's practice embodies a distinct mode of ethical engagement characterized by attention to absence as well as presence, and motivated in part by the desire to offer her subjects a bridge to the broader world through the powerful medium of photography. In *Jannat*, we see Gill's intimate imbrication into the life of a single family who invited her to bear witness to their survival. This project, I contend, is as much about what is not shown as that which is explicitly visible. There are virtually no adult men in the images; when men do appear, they do so in scenarios of strife and trauma. The written text included in the projects help to reinforce the sense of absence that the images manifest—and also help to clarify its significance. Because the political sphere in Rajasthan is overwhelmingly dominated by men, the absence of men can be read as emblematic of the absence of both organized authority and of the state.[189] Government presence is fraught in the lives of Izmat and her

[189] The severity of the gender imbalance in Rajasthani politics was somewhat altered by the Panchayati Raj Act of 1993 (73rd Constitutional Amendment), which introduced a quota system across the state mandating that a third of seats be reserved for women at local levels of government. However, many elected officials remain in merely titular positions of power (acting on behalf of male relatives). See Praveen Rai, "Women's Participation in Electoral Politics in India," *South Asia Research* 37, no. 1 (2017): 58 – 77; Kishwar Madhu, "Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 43 (1996): 2867-74.

family, but also something on which her survival depends as she expresses in her letters. The *Jannat* series visualizes this complex dynamic of anxiety and desire central to the lives of the family it pictures.

Through photography, however, Gill offers a quiet reprieve from the isolation incurred by state negligence. The suggestion that photography can fill this void in some small way is present in *Jannat*, and Gill develops and extends this strategy in *Balika Mela*. The camera offers a connection to the world beyond the domestic sphere in which many of Rajasthan's girls and women are confined. As the master of the camera, Gill takes on some of the authority that is absent in the form of men or bureaucrats. In passing on the art of photography—encouraging girls to direct their own portraits and later to use the camera and to print their own negatives, Gill is extending this power to Rajasthan's most disenfranchised citizens, young women.

This chapter constructs this narrative of ethical practice through formal attention to both the photographs and the accompanying texts, along with a contextual reading of previous photographic representations of Rajasthan and accounts of ethical practices in fine art contexts and the broader history of photography. My goal is not simply to articulate a precise account of the ethical valence of Gill's oeuvre, but also to show how it is distinguished from the practice of other artists working in Rajasthan and India more broadly. To this end, I argue that Gill's aesthetic is distinct in its attention to revealing as well as concealing. Previous photographers in the region—including Henri Cartier-Bresson, Raghubir Singh, and Jyothi Bhatt, have focused on the spectacle of Rajasthan, emphasizing performance as opposed to presence (and its lack).

I also explore Gill's work within broader discussions of the place of ethics within artistic practice. My argument calls for a comparison with the explicit humanitarian objectives of early social documentary photography as exemplified by Jacob Riis or the Farm Security Administration photographers in America. Significantly, these photographers composed images based on generalizations of social types and societal ills, creating not so much pictures of individuals but portraits of systemic social problems at large. Gill's work, by contrast, operates in a far more sustained personal register that undermines didactic social interpretation.

Remarking on this ethical quality of Gill's photographic practice, Gayatri Sinha has stated: "I would like to posit that Gauri works from a moral position, one that seeks in the making of the photo document, the position of 'truth.'"[190] The truth-telling that has historically been associated with much of photography's classical role as witness does indeed carry moral weight. And yet this function could be attributed to a broad range of photographic practices in the documentary-inspired tradition well beyond the specifics of Gill's project. Taking a different approach, Bakirathi Mani remarks: "Although Gill also demurs at being named an activist, in my view her exhibition performs distinctly political work."[191] My own argument seeks to make an even stronger claim. Gill's work not only documents the nuanced "truth" of life in Rajasthan, but also provides, through the power and authority of photography as a medium, a bridge to the broader world and a modest if invaluable reprieve from the harshness of its subjects' circumstances. Gill set out to

---

[190] Gayatri Sinha, *Gauri Gill—The Americans* (Delhi, India: EIH Printing Press, 2008), 13.

[191] Bakirathi Mani, "Viewing South Asia, Seeing America: Gauri Gill's *The Americans*." *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 137.

ameliorate the harsh conditions of girls' education and life more broadly in the Rajasthani desert. This chapter argues how, through photography, she has done so.

Jannat

Jannat is a shy series of photographs that developed out of a bold appeal. Gill described her first meeting with Jannat's mother, Izmat, as follows:

> In Barmer district, lost, I came upon a group of women fully covered in large dark *ajrak*[192] shawls standing around the corpse of a little girl. They looked intimidating, but when I ventured to ask for directions to the school, I was interrupted by one of the women, Izmat, who grasped me by the hands and told me what was wrong with her life. With great conviction she impressed upon me that on my return to Delhi, I should tell people of the troubles of people in Barmer.[193]

This initial encounter set in motion a generative relationship between Gill, Izmat, and her family that would last many years. While the pictures sometimes suggest the force of Izmat's early supplication, they are often quiet, enigmatic, and intimate in their appeal.

Izmat's oldest daughter Jannat, a young adolescent, seems always to be revealing and concealing herself—as if flirting with Gill's camera. In many images, her face is simply not shown, hidden behind a curtain of hair, covered in cloth, nestled in her mother's garments, or simply averted from the camera's gaze. Yet it is only in the images where she does show her face that the viewer becomes aware of the rarity of the revelation. One of the most powerful images points to this tension, (figure 3.1). It is a deceptively simple composition: Jannat crouched against a dry mud wall holding a small

[192] A type of block printed shawl common in northwest India.

[193] Gauri Gill, Wall text, *Notes from the Desert*, Exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum, Washington D.C., September 17 2017 – February 12, 2017.

rectangular mirror up to her face. Her neck is turned so we see the perfect profile of a pretty girl on the edge of adolescence. The mirror pressed to her cheek reflects the front of her face in her hand like a pear, held up to her slightly parted lips. The picture has an intimate, eerie quality, like so many of Gill's images from the series.

The focal point of the photograph is undeniably Jannat's gaze. As curator Jodi Throckmorton describes, the girl: "stares intently at herself as her breath, evidence of life itself, fogs the mirror. The image preserves a rare moment of self-discovery and fleeting girlhood amid the extremes of a desert existence."[194] Throckmorton's reading persuasively articulates the photograph's function as a sort of imagistic *bildungsroman.* Yet after gazing at the picture for some time it becomes apparent that Jannat is not, in fact, looking at herself. She is neither looking at us via Gill's lens, nor meeting her own eyes in the mirror. Her gaze drifts elsewhere, as if she is lost in thought, oblivious to both the camera on one side, and the mirror on the other.

A young girl or woman regarding herself in a mirror is, of course, a privileged subject in the history of art. Within 16th – 19th century Mughal and Rajput painting, this motif is often deployed in the common depiction of a woman awaiting her lover.[195] She is typically adorned with opulent jewels and the painter spares no effort in depicting the opulence of her private chamber. Throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Europe, the trope of the woman with a mirror was also connected with romantic love, as

---

[194] Jodi Throckmorton, Atreyee Gupta, Latika Gupta, Raqs Media Collective, and Susan Krane, *Postdate: Photography and Inherited History in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 48.

[195] Harsha V. Dehejia, ed., *A Celebration of Love: The Romantic Heroine in the Indian Arts* (New Delhi, India: Lustre Press, Roli Books, 2005).

the goddess Venus was frequently depicted as a beautiful nude gazing at her own reflection, often attended by cupid or chubby-cheeked *putti*.[196] While these images were intended for voyeuristically inclined viewing pleasure, they were also sometimes composed in order to communicate the sinful earthly nature of their subject. Venus was a pagan goddess, after all. By the 16th and 17th centuries, the theme of worldly indulgence had evolved into a unique genre, the *Vanitas*[197], in which women admiring their own reflections often played a staring role. As with Mughal and Rajasthani images, such pictures generally featured women adorned in lavish clothing and jewelry, surrounded by objects of luxury. In the European context, the genre was intended to convey the moral superficiality of worldly beauty (while simultaneously providing an excellent excuse to portray it in all its titillating opulence).

If the trope of a woman with a mirror has historically been deployed to suggest decadence and vanity, in the instance of *Jannat*, this motif suggests precisely the opposite. The mis-en-scène is stark, and Jannat's dress is unremarkable. The consummate simplicity of the subject is thus highlighted by the expectation of excess that traditionally marks the pictorial theme. The most significant deviation of the *vanitas* genre, however, lies in the fact that Jannat is not actually admiring her own appearance. She is not even directly looking at her own reflection in the mirror. Jannat does seem to be reflecting on herself in some abstract rather than merely visual sense, but also appears lost to herself,

[196] Among the most famous examples are works by Titian's *Venus with a Mirror* (1555), Rubens' *Venus in Front of the Mirror* (1616), and Velázquez's *Venus at her Mirror* (1649-51).

[197] *Vanitas* is the Latin word for "emptiness."

as her vacant expression conveys. The intimacy of the seemingly unselfconscious self-revelation this picture suggests has an almost visceral effect on the viewer.

The subject of a woman and mirror has also been associated with a far bleaker motif than that of worldly extravagance: the specter of death. The premonition of earthly demise was key to Erwin Panofsky's reading of Titian's famous *Woman with a Mirror*, (figure 3.2). He writes: "The woman seems to be alone with her thoughts; and the direction of these thoughts is revealed by the apparently unmotivated sadness of her glance. What we have before us is beauty looking at herself and suddenly seeing there transience and death."[198] Jannat does indeed seem to be alone with her thoughts, and her glance might well be described in Panofsky's terms as one of "unmotivated sadness."

Interestingly, Panofsky's claim about the genre of the *vanitas* and the representation of the mirror echoes the connection between photography and death explored by a plethora of critics beginning with the classic triumvirate of Benjamin, Sontag, and Barthes. The mirror and the camera may not be so far apart as reflective technologies go. Panofsky's reading suggests there is something intuitive about the connection between mortality and confronting one's own appearance objectified in the world. The theme of death will reoccur throughout this chapter. For instance, it should be disclosed at the outset that by the time Gill finished the series in 2007, Jannat (the real-life subject) had died tragically at the age of 23.

Although surprising for a 13-year-old girl, the serious, distant gaze reflected in the mirror is not unusual for Jannat. She wears this expression in many of Gill's photographs. It is most striking in a handful of images that show her with her mother, notable because

[198] Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (London: Phaidon, 1969), 93.

the pictures portray both intimacy and distance delivered in the strange package of Jannat's glazed eyes and slightly parted lips. In figure 3.3, for example, Jannat and her mother crouch on the ground—their bodies close, both shrouded in dark blankets. Izmat appears to look down directly into her daughter's face, but the viewer cannot be sure. Jannat, whose gaze is more distinctly revealed, averts her eyes from her mother's gaze, staring down below her mother's chin with a vacant intensity. A second picture, figure 3.4, harnesses a similarly distant yet intense intimacy between mother and daughter. In this case, Izmat is sitting with her knees drawn up toward her chest while her daughter caresses her face and cradles her body from a standing position behind her. Their postures portray extreme physical intimacy even as each gazes with distracted intensity in separate directions. Gill captures a relationship between Jannat and her mother that is marked at once by closeness and distance, intimacy and isolation, connection and separation. The viewer feels the limits of understanding between these two bodies that mirror each other, crouched alone in the desert.

The emotional impact of the image can be explored through a comparison with a remarkably parallel composition: Dorothea Lange's iconic Depression-era portrait *Migrant Mother*, (figure 3.5). This picture, commissioned by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), shows the young mother Florence Owens Thompson gazing anxiously out of the frame with her hand at her mouth. Two young children nestle into her body on either side and rest their turned heads on either shoulder. She cradles a baby in her lap. The vexed, distant intensity of Thompson's stare powerfully prefigures Izmat's gaze. Their eyes even wander out of the frame in the same direction. Jannat's hand at her mother's cheek echoes Thompson's troubled gesture.

The juxtaposition of these two images also highlights the differences between Gill's contemporary project and the social documentary photography of the early 20th century United States. The parallels transcend composition alone. This photographic tradition is often traced back to Jacob Riis, the Danish-American photographic pioneer and social reformer who helped to expose the impoverished living conditions of New York's Lower East Side tenement residents in the late 19th century. Like Gill, Riis also began as a photo-journalist and was moved by the social injustice he perceived around him. He gained widespread recognition from his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*,[199] which inspired concrete social reforms in turn of the century New York.[200] Others followed in his wake, such as Lewis Hine, who documented child labor for the National Child Labor Committee in the early 20th century, and the New Deal photographers employed by the FSA in the Great Depression, from which Lang's image emerged as an icon of the movement.

While there is a decidedly ethical dimension to both Gill's work and that of social reform photography, their approaches differ to a remarkable degree. While photographs in the social documentary tradition are often aesthetically sophisticated, they are specifically intended to engender social awareness and galvanize reform. They are in this sense, didactic. In many cases, extended captions or longer texts are paired with the images in order to direct and circumscribe the viewers' interpretation. Such projects also

---

[199] Jacob August Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Penguin, 1901).

[200] For instance, in 1895, The New York Tenement Housing Act prohibited tenements in the back of buildings and used photographic as well as written evidence in its condemnation of the practice.

tended to anonymize the subject, featuring a range of shots that each focus on different individuals who are all meant to stand in for broader social conditions of exploitation or neglect. In the case of the *Migrant Mother*, for instance, Lang did not record her subject's name or accurately recall the circumstances of her situation. She later claimed that the woman had "just sold the tires from her car to buy food."[201] However, when the subject was identified decades later she said Lang's account was surely fictitious given that the family did not have any tires to sell. Thompson remarked that she did not think that Lang was lying, but rather "I just think she had one story mixed up with another. Or she was borrowing to fill in what she didn't have."[202] While Lang's fabrication might not have been malicious, it underlined the ethos of generality with which she encountered her subjects.

Gill's images, by contrast, operate in a far more personal register that undermines an explicit or exclusively didactic social interpretation. While her work does indeed draw attention to the extremely harsh conditions of life in the Thar Desert, it does so through sustained engagement with a single family. The long duration of Gill's friendship with Izmat and her family allow an intimacy of portrayal that captures joy as well as hardship in a manner that recalls the structure of intimacy between Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, discussed in the previous chapter.

---

[201] Sarah Stone, "Who was the Woman in the Famous Great Depression Photograph?" *Daily Knowledge Newsletter*, Accessed May 10, 2017. http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2014/08/woman-famous-great-depression-photograph/.

[202] Ibid.

A number of post-independence Indian artists have responded with similar exigency and alarm at the social conditions of their era. Such explicitly political and activist practices are too numerous to name, but a few stand out for their scale and influence. The artists' collective Sahmat was founded in 1989 in response to the brutal politically-motivated murder of the Marxist street performer Safdar Hashmi. This group is responsible for a wide range of projects across India, most of which are explicit in their didactic political intent. Often, their strategies are collaborative and participatory in nature.[203]

Indian filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan adopted didactic documentary styles that bear even more explicit parallels with early American documentary photography. Patwardhan's films explore fraught issues such as the violent Hindu right-wing campaign to build a temple at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the complexities of *Dalit* social activism following police violence in the infamous 1997 Ramabai killings, in which police opened fire on Dalits protesters seeking justice for the desecration of a local statue of B. R. Ambedkar. As critic and curator Geeta Kapur has noted:

> One definition of the political 'artist' of our time, at least in India, has become the radical documentarist, and the contradiction in the terms artist

[203] Sahmat's 1992 project "Slogans for Communal Harmony" is a good example of such participatory collaboration in the public sphere. In this initiative, Sahmat members invited local auto-rickshaw drivers to invent slogans against communal violence to display on the backs of their vehicles as they took passengers around Delhi. For a discussion of this project, as well as a critical overview of Sahmat's broader practice, see Jessica Moss and Ram Rahman, *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Notably, the exhibition for which the catalogue was written traveled from Chicago's Smart Museum of Art in 2013 to the Akland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, the Art Gallery of Mississauga in Ontario, and ended at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles in 2015.

> and documentarist may actually be the point from where to speak dialectically about the nature of art's radicality.[204]

Kapur has devoted much of her career to exploring and explicating the complex relationship between art and politics in South Asia. Her formulation has coalesced around the category of "citizen-artist," writing that "citizenship is a contestatory site involving struggles for civil rights and forms of political empowerment in relation to the state."[205] The citizen-artist, thus, takes on the mantel of engaging with power in its explicitly political or state-based manifestations. However, she also suggests that the political power of art exceeds the formal strategies of contestation that traditional political frameworks allow.

Kapur's analysis builds on the distinction between civil and political society developed by historian and Subaltern studies theorist Partha Chatterjee. First developed in his book *The Politics of the Governed*,[206] Chatterjee distinguishes between the realm of "civil society" which is governed by rational debate and organized procedures of law-making, vs. a realm of what he dubs "political society" in which actors cannot advance their political demands through established channels because they are unrecognized as legitimate actors. For instance, illegal squatters may not legally obtain permits for electricity, so they may be forced to obtain access illegally. This radical action—which Chatterjee calls "political" action, can sometimes give way to the agent populations

---

[204] Geeta Kapur, "Secular Artist, Citizen Artist," *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, ed. Will Bradley and Charles Esche (London: Tate, 2007), 422.

[205] Ibid., 438.

[206] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

achieving legitimacy in the eyes of the state. In the case above, for instance, this might mean gaining legal land titles through continued habituation and thus securing legal access to electricity. Thus, political society can sometimes give way to civil society.

Kapur champions artistic work that she interprets as taking radical action insofar as it goes beyond the realm of civil society to both reflect and inspire political society in Chatterjee's sense. She calls such work "avant-garde." For her, it seems that the category of the avant-garde is a *form* of address that is dependent upon reaction to a unique political juncture in history. Kapur distinguishes the "avant-garde" from the "modern," once again allying formal strategies with the artists' response to the shifting historical context to which they are responding. (She writes at length about the specificity of these historical shifts, such as the rise of neoliberalism and right-wing extremist politics).[207] Thus, a formal language that includes strategies as diverse as documentary photography and installation takes on an avant-garde status that allows such work to achieve radical political significance.[208]

While Kapur clearly champions Gill's work within a political-activist framework as is suggested by the photographer's inclusion in Kapur's substantial exhibition *Aesthetic Bind, Citizen Artist: Forms of Address*, the poetics of Gill's practice also seems

---

[207] Geeta Kapur, "A Cultural Conjuncture in India: Art into Documentary," *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 33 – 36.

[208] As Kapur writes: "Visual artists, foremost among them Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, N. N. Rimzon, Rummana Hussain, and Navjot Altaf, articulated the rupture in the democratic equation between the state and the polity by changing the course of what was until then a largely classical/modernist art scene. By incorporating documentary photography, by switching over to sculptural and video installations, the language-in-use, and, more important, the subject position of the artist, were made intentionally unstable, volatile, radical." Ibid., 37.

to resist Kapur's specific definition of the "avant-garde." This is in part because Gill's work depicts a violence of the state (paradoxically, through absence of the state), that is not primarily anchored in the historical upheaval of the last few decades—a period of transition that Kapur identifies as central to the conditions of avant-garde artistic resistance. Rather, Gill photographs a place that has been largely left behind by the historical developments at the heart of Kapur's analysis.[209]

Gill draws attention to the absence of the state (the absence of civil society) but invokes empathy rather than evoking anger. Her work is thus not explicitly "radical" in Kapur's sense of promoting a politics beyond "civil society." Rather, it is a mode of witnessing that suggests representation itself may offer a form of quiet redemption insofar as her subjects are not left to remain entirely out "in the desert." As Izmat's letters demonstrate, there is a sense that Gill's presence—though not standing in for the presence of the state—offers some life-giving contact beyond the "private" realm of her isolated life with her daughters. This may not be a form of direct politics in any conventional sense, but it is an essentially ethical gesture nonetheless.

Returning to the images at hand, among all the pictures, there are only two where Jannat looks directly into the camera. The rarity of these images reinforces the

[209] While Kapur does not explicitly address Gill's practice vis-à-vis the historically situated nature of the "avant-garde" as she defines it, she does reflect on how Gill's subjects live largely beyond the sphere of the modern Indian state. She writes: "Gauri Gill takes us back along the same route to those who migrate from country to city; her photographs allow us to glimpse the lives of palpably individual, seemingly eccentric characters in the deserts of northern Rajasthan. Unrecorded even by BPL ("below the poverty line") logistics, the photographed characters offer prankster poses to a friend-photographer. What is transmitted is the punctum of the photo image; it unsettles middle class protocols with unsolicited gestures of equality by young players in the wilderness." Geeta Kapur, *Aesthetic Bind: Citizen Artist: Forms of Address* (New Delhi: Chemould Prescott Road Gallery Press Release, 2013), unpaginated.

deliberateness of her gaze. One image shows Jannat's body all but completely concealed by the contours of a blanket, curled up on the edge of a *charpoy*[210] set outside the family house with goats tied up against a fence in the background, (figure 3.6). Only one eye is visible from within the folds. In another image, Jannat offers viewers her only direct gaze in the entire series, (figure 3.7). Gill has framed her in the center of the composition, perched over her mother's body laid supine on the *charpoy* outside of their home. Izmat's eyes are downcast. She looks incredibly tired and somewhat sad, as if resigned to the daily suffering of her circumstances. Jannat rests her chin on an arm that is laid across her mother's torso, staring unflinchingly into Gill's lens, as if holding the photographer responsible for what she witnesses and records.

Another image shows Izmat in front of her house looking off into the desert; a fine photograph but most remarkable because the right third of the image is completely blocked by Jannat's face in extreme close-up, just a blurry eye and forehead registering the camera's presence, (Figure 3.8). The composition produces an initial shock, as when someone unexpected jumps in front of your line of vision, too close for comfort; as if Jannat had caught Gill the voyeur encroaching on the family's domestic domain. But as one looks at the photograph longer, the physical space between Jannat and Izmat seems to pull apart, so that they appear to hardly inhabit the same physical plane. The features of Jannat's face start to lose their definition and her presence becomes ghostlike, as opposed to confrontational. It is as if this image is from not only a different place, but a different time: Jannat's specter, staring back from beyond the grave.

[210] "Charpoy" is the Hindi and Urdu term used for a type of bed made by interlacing rope or fabric over a wooden frame that is commonly found across South Asia.

Remarkably, Jannat is the only subject within the series to return the photographer's gaze. Neither her sister Hooran nor her mother are ever pictured looking into the camera. The exceptionalism of Jannat's recognition, though rare within the series, has the effect of casting her as a sort of accomplice to the project. She alone acknowledges Gill's intervention in their lives. The fact that so many photographs could be taken of a family in so intimate a space as they go about their daily lives without attending to a photographer in their midst is also a testament to the unobtrusiveness of Gill's presence. Judging by the photographs, it is clear that she was no stranger.

Her comfort with her subjects is perhaps even more notable when the series expands beyond the sphere of Izmat's nuclear family. About half of the pictures show Jannat in the presence of other children, either studying in the small one-room school house, cooperating on household chores, or simply exploring their environment, (figure 3.9). Although many of these pictures feature a number of children, they all seem inured to Gill's presence, happy to go about their routine as if they had forgotten she was even there.

The schoolhouse scenes reveal the "public half" of Jannat's otherwise domestic life, and offer a remarkable glimpse into the broader circumstances of her childhood. Three pictures look as if they may have been taken within the school. The first shows six students sitting cross-legged in a line facing a young teacher sitting on a folded chair, (figure 3.10). Jannat stands behind the teacher's right shoulder. Each pupil has a lesson book and is looking down at it attentively, some with their mouths open as if they are reading along. The school room is remarkably minimal, with no furniture save for the teacher's chair and a single small poster tacked up on the wall.

Despite the austerity of the setting, both the teacher and the students appear to take seriously the relative formality of the situation. All the girls are neatly dressed, with their hair tied back in ponytails at the nape of their necks. Jannat—whose hair is often left loose and wild at home—dons a diaphanous ribbon. Many of the students wear bangles and earrings, and the teacher has pinned her carefully pleated sari onto her blouse.

Another picture set within the schoolhouse, however, suggests a more informal relationship between the students and the space, (figure 3.11). Jannat crouches in the foreground concentrating on a Hindi primer. A small group of boys stand aimlessly behind her, one about to rush off the frame to the left. Two girls, also on the floor, lean against a column, one reading, the other staring wistfully out towards (but not at) the camera. There are two folding chairs in the background, but as they sit unused, they appear more like stage props than utilitarian objects essential to the habitus of the children in the room (who seem to be more comfortable on the floor). The subjects appear somewhat disassociated from one another, each lost in their own tasks or reverie, much as Jannat and her mother are pictured in their shared moments.

A final schoolhouse image distills the interplay between distance and connection in Jannat's small community, (figure 3.12). Four students sit on the hardened dirt floor of a nearly featureless room. Three are huddled on the right side of the picture while Jannat sits several paces to their left watching them, all alone. The pale mud room recalls the rough austerity of the desert itself—an environment that pervades the pictures with its isolation and solitude.

Yet moments of exuberance and play do emerge within the series, especially in images that capture the interaction between Jannat and the village boys. They may live in

the harsh conditions of rural Rajasthan, but they are young teenagers nonetheless. The presence of boys in the village, however, is made more conspicuous by the absence of men. In one picture Jannat and a girlfriend both lean in close on either side of a young man showing them an open book, (figure 3.13). All three are smiling broadly. Their casual postures suggest an easy familiarity that Gill has framed with a touch of romance in the soft dappled light of a courtyard. Another image shows the same young man leaning in toward a crouching Jannat through the open front window of a jeep, (figure 3.14). Her body twists away from him, but her wide toothy grin is visible just inside the truck's canvas-covered window. A third picture shows the same boy striking a jaunty pose for Jannat, who squints at him from behind a camera tripod, (figure 3.15). The camera rests on the *charpoy* behind them, and in the background Izmat folds cloth in front of the entrance of her home, ignoring or oblivious to their antics. This playful performance puts the young man squarely on display, and this time he's the one to offer up a smile.

The presence of the tripod stands out because it is one of the few indications of modern technology in the series, as well as the only visible trace of the presence of the photographer herself. Gill largely conceals her own presence within the *Jannat* series. Shadows are central to the composition of many of the images, registering the blazing sun of the Rajasthani desert. Yet Gill is careful never to allow her own shadow into the frame. Aside from the unique appearance of this photographic technology, the only other evidence of the photographer is the rare gaze of Jannat. Like the men who have left the village to look for work elsewhere, or the juggernaut of development which has

transformed much of India but left Izmat's world largely untouched, Gauri Gill the woman is a void within her own pictures.

There is a rich literature within art history that theorizes absence within photography. For Sontag, a photograph embodies both presence and absence, insofar as the viewer is at once aware of the subject in a remarkable way and simultaneously aware of the subject not "really" being there.[211] Contemporary theorists and curators have explored the implications of this claim along several dimensions. A 2010 Guggenheim exhibition, *Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance,* probed the power of the suggested trace of invisible presence in the work of contemporary film and video practice.[212] In her 2014 book *Uncertain Histories*, photography historian Kate Albers explores the productive ambiguities and absences of knowledge inherent to the photographic medium. She argues that rather than undermine the communicative potential of photography, "these apparent impasses to knowledge can generate a space for a productive uncertainty that is as culturally valuable as information and clarity."[213] Often, Albers continues, an awareness of the element that "remains out of view" is "supplanted by text."[214] As this chapter later examines, absence in the *Jannat* series is fundamentally aided by the pairing of text alongside the photographs.

---

[211] Sontag, *On Photography,* 16.

[212] Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman, eds., *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2010).

[213] Kate Palmer Albers, *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 7.

[214] Ibid., 14.

For many artist-photographers, absence evokes loss and longing. Such nostalgic absence is often at the heart of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torrez, for instance.[215] His *Untitled* billboard from 1991 features a photograph of an empty unmade bed with the impression of two heads left on white pillows side by side. His lover Ross had recently passed away, and the enigmatic image suggests the monumentality of the artists' private loss.[216] Within the South Asian context, Zahid Chaudhary has written deftly about how photographic absence has been used to index both nostalgia and history. He asks, "what does it mean to capture absence indexically?"[217] His argument is molded around a careful analysis of Felice Beato's 19th century photographs commemorating the Sepoy Revolt. Because the event itself could not be captured on film, photographers signified the event through documenting the empty space where battles occurred or loved ones were killed.[218] Thus absence was deployed to signify both historical events and the emotion evoked by their past occurrence.

In each of these cases, absence is primarily about longing and loss—looking backwards—whereas for Gill, absence does not signify something lost, but something that is simply—and starkly—absent. Absence in Gill's work does not foreground the

---

[215] Kwon refers to this aspect of Gonzalez-Torrez's work as a "presence-absence dialectic." See Miwon Kwon, "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres,* ed., Julie Ault, (New York: Steidldangin, 2006), 283.

[216] This aesthetic strategy is extended in Gonzalez-Torrez "Candy Spills" series, in which he installs a mound of candy into the gallery space calculated to equal the exact weight of the body of his dead lover. Gallery patrons are invited to take away the candies, thus participating in the ebbing of the sculpture and gently enacting a ritual of loss.

[217] Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire*, 39.

[218] Ibid., 39

instability of the photographic index with regards to history. Nor does she use absence to mark presence. Rather, her photographs highlight a literal absence in the world of her subjects: the absence of the state.

I argue that the absence of the Indian state represents an ethically significant theme animating Gill's images just beneath the surface. Her pictures show the life of a single family, surviving in a harsh and beautiful landscape. In offering up the scope of three lives, however, the viewer slowly becomes aware that what is not shown is as important as what is. Their world is largely hermetic, devoid of the markers of civil society or a broader public sphere that now characterize the lives lived by most people across the world. This is not a presence that has been lost, rather this is a presence that has never quite held the desert under its domain. Thus, absence in *Jannat* is not about the nostalgia of looking back at memory or history. Rather absence, as I will argue, is ultimately about the potential to look forward, and imagine a different future for Jannat's community.

If the tension between revealing and concealing emerges as a dominant trope in the *Jannat* series, the viewer slowly becomes aware of another palpable absence in most of the photographs: the absence of men. Gill shows us a world seemingly bereft of adult men. Both the domestic sphere, and the more public spaces such as the village school, are peopled only with women and children. Indeed, it is the impact of the few images with adult men that render this general absence conspicuous. Men appear in two of Gill's images, both deeply troubling in their content and affect.

One shows Izmat and Jannat standing with a group of four turbaned men on a dusty path with huts and brambles in the background, (figure 3.16). Jannat, in the center,

has downcast eyes and holds the corner of her shawl up to her lips. Her mother appears to be wiping tears away from her eyes. Both mother and daughter are slightly stooped in their dark clothing, arms held close to their bodies. The four men, in contrast, wear mostly pale garments and bright white turbans. Each stands erect, even an older gentleman holding a cane. One of the men is smiling, or perhaps laughing.

There is a predatory feeling about the four men encircling Jannat and her tearful mother. What could be at the heart of this exchange? What is the relationship between these six figures? It seems clear that there is no family connection. Rather, it appears Izmat may be interacting with these men in some sort of quasi-official or bureaucratic capacity. The image is thus strikingly at odds with the majority of Gill's pictures, which present a tender if harsh world, hermetic in its humble contours.

The second image with men is perhaps even more troubling, (figure 3.17). The setting appears to be a room in some sort of hospital—an interior space that stands out in the context of the series for its connotation of urban modernity. Jannat is laid out on a plank at the center of the room on her back with Izmat leaning anxiously over her body—one hand splayed out on her daughters' chest, and the other resting over her daughter's face. Jannat's eyes are closed. She looks as if she could be dead. There are two men behind her supine body; the first appears to take her pulse, and the second gazes down at her with evident concern. Although the viewer naturally assumes these men are medical professionals, the photograph hardly suggests they have been successful in improving the lives of Jannat and her mother.

In both photographs, I suggest that the presence of men may also represent a larger presence: the presence of the state. Both photographs show a disturbance, or

rupture in the lives of Izmat and her daughter. Their domestic rhythms appear to be arrested by the logic of bureaucracy that operates at a largely impersonal scale. While Izmat's initial appeal to Gauri to tell of the "troubles of people in Barmer" illustrates her desire for recognition and perhaps even political representation or at least acknowledgement, the moments where men appear in Gill's photographs suggest such intervention is not without tumult and anxiety.

The Significance of Text

Both the absence and the presence of the state and the realm of "official" culture is thrown into stark relief by an essential element of the *Jannat* series that I have left until now to discuss: The inclusion of writing by both Izmat and her daughter. Interspersed among the photographs, Gill has included seven letters written by Izmat over a period of three years, and an English poem in a pretty if naïve sloping script by her younger daughter Hooran. Each piece of writing is mounted in the same style of frame as the photographs, which are printed to be approximately the same size as the pages of prose. Text and image are thus established in a relationship of equivalence.

Let us first consider the Hooran's poem, (figure 3.18). It is written in careful cursive with a blue ink pen on a small sheet of ruled paper. At the top right of the page, the words "Read For Enjoyment" are written. This is the poem that follows:

good Habits

Every night my prayers i say.
And gat my dinner every day
Ans every day that i've been good
i gat an ~~or~~ orage[219] *after food.*

[219] Here "orange" is missing the "n."

the child that is not clean and neat
With lots of toys and things to eat
he is naughty Child, I'm sure.
Or else his habits are poor.

Except for the final line, this poem is a copy of Robert Lewis Stevenson's "System" published in 1899 in his popular volume *A Child's Garden of Verses*.[220] The book is a compilation of poems for young children by the Scottish author best known for *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In Stevenson's original poem, however, the final line is: "Or else his dear papa is poor." The substitution of two words make all the difference.

By substituting "habits" for "dear papa," Hooran has transferred all the responsibility for the good fortune of an orange from the family circumstances of the child in the poem to the actions of the child herself. Stevenson clearly meant his poem to suggest that the reward of luxuries may have much more to do with a child's economic background then whether they were good or bad. Until the final line it reads like a classically didactic Victorian parable, entreating children to behave well with the promise of treats and toys. But the last line contradicts this assumption bluntly. What really matters in the conferral of rewards is the economic status of the child's family: this is the "system" to which the poem's original title refers.

The handwritten revision of Stevenson's poem resonates with my reading of the *Jannat* series. At a literal level, the figure of the grown male authority/father figure has been eliminated. Just as the absence of men is felt in Gill's photographs, the presence of men is erased in the child's version of the poem. The weight of this authority is shifted to

[220] Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1899).

the poor child herself—poor now on account of having to bear such responsibility for her actions. In essence, the moral of the poem is reversed in the revised version. There is no social "system" to blame for the unequal distribution of treats or luxuries. Rather, an unfortunate child without toys or oranges has only her "poor habits" to blame.

This revision may well not have been Hooran's. More likely, it represents a decision on the part of her teacher or even perhaps a revision made by someone at a more distant remove, such as an editor of an Indian copy of the primer from which the poem was taken. Regardless, it is an unsettling artifact of a social "system" that shifts the burden of misfortune from structural inequality to the poor habits of an individual child. The lack of a rich father (not to mention no father at all), is effaced as the possible origin of a child's material misfortune.

The remaining six letters in *Jannat* are all typed or hand written in Hindi, dictated by Izmat to a local scribe, (figure 3.19). Gill has overlaid each letter with a faint but legible English translation. Sometimes the lines of text run over and across one another, forcing the viewer to lean in close and spend time deciphering the letters. Already, this challenge to easy legibility, this troubled translation, evokes some of the frustration that the bureaucratic system is famous for inducing in Indian citizens.[221]

Gill's choice to overlay the English translation also opens the text to non Hindi-speaking viewers without allowing them to disengage with the materiality of the letters and the graphic richness of their original format. The documents retain a sense of authenticity as objects—suggesting a physical connection with Izmat's world. Indeed,

[221] See Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012).

they are viscerally evocative in quite a different manner than the photographs (printed in Delhi) insofar as they bear the trace of Izmat's hand. While art history has made much of the gesture of the artist,[222] here it is the gesture of the subject that marks the surface of the work, and underlines the significance of Izmat's collaboration.

Two of the typed letters are petitions that air an array of legal grievances directed at government officials. The first, addressed to a local police inspector on September 9, 2000, offers a harrowing picture of Izmat's desperate circumstances, describing how she was abandoned by her husband and left without any means to care for her two daughters. She was often ill, she continued, and shunned by her relatives, who prevented her from seeking work. She was even attacked by six members of her village, who "beat me with their fists" and "tried to kill me with a hatchet" when she resisted.

The purpose of the letter is to request legal action against the six accused of such violence. Izmat also asks in her postscript that her husband "should be instructed to look after me and my daughters." Her straightforward tone and language convey her conviction that justice will be done. Her faith in the legal system appears unshaken by the fact that her concerns had not previously been addressed despite the earlier complaints she mentions.

Further along, we are presented with a letter that follows up on Izmat's grievances two years later, from July 23rd, 2002. It seems her troubles have increased. Immediately after introducing herself, Izmat explains "the *Sarpanch* is against me." *Sarpanch* is the Hindi term used to describe the elected head of a village. The *sarpanch* typically wields

[222] The significance of gesture and the artists' hand was, for instance, central to the account of Abstract Expressionism developed by Harold Rosenberg in the mid 20th century.

tremendous control over local matters, and is often the primary liaison to more senior local officials. Thus, Izmat's complaint is truly cause for concern.

As Izmat's letter continues, it becomes clear that she no longer has quite so much faith that the government will justly respond to her grievances. Rather, she adopts a somewhat reprimanding tone for its failure to deliver on its promises. She remarks that people were owed a certain amount of land as the result of the closing of a center where she worked, and also criticized the government for not providing educational expenses and funds for clothing and food. With thinly veiled cynicism she writes "At the time of elections, they give poor people false promises and take their votes; afterwards, no one listens to their woes." She goes on to state "Sonia Gandhi is the Congress President. Therefore I should be provided with all sorts of help from government." Izmat also becomes more explicit in her requests, asking to be granted permission to farm on a particular plot of land that her husband co-owns with his brother. Her tone vacillates between conviction in her rights and pleading for sympathy on the basis of her "poor and powerless" condition.

Her third and final letter to the government, hand-written four months later, on September 7th, is increasingly frantic and abstract. The first half jumps from topic to topic, bordering on incoherence. She begins: "my Lord, the Government, to my parents, brothers and sisters, young and old, I have a small application to make. So please listen to it. The answer to this application is our Mother Earth. She is mother to all." Later in the letter, she writes:

> A book came for me from Delhi. I read the book myself.
> My eyes spun when I read the book…My Lord, the
> Government, my parents and others pressurize me. Quickly

> take out a picture of my country. …Photo of B.J.P. came to me; a photo from Russia also came to me. Central Government, Great King, if there is any mistake in my application please forgive me.

By this point, Izmat seems to have confabulated a number of sources of authority, invoking the government, her family, Mother Earth, and God, sometimes in the same sentence. She addresses the central government as "great king," and also calls the government "her Lord." The letter raises many questions. What is the photo that came to her from Russia? What is the book that came for her from Delhi? Given that we know from the letters that they are dictated and Izmat does not know how to even sign her name, it is somewhat surprising that she "read the book with her own eyes."[223] Yet this statement is in keeping with the disassociated almost prophetic scope of the letter. What does seem clear is that she blames the Indian government, at least in part, for her woes, and is eager to escape her situation both physically and spiritually.

In one of the letter's most unusual lines, however, Izmat writes: "Quickly take out a picture of my country." Perhaps this enigmatic appeal hints at the power she attributes to photography. It certainly suggests that she connects the act of photography with the potential to somehow better her situation or that of her country, although the precise nature of this connection remains vague. It also provides a notable if tenuous connection with Gauri Gill, the recipient of the other four letters included in the exhibition.

Izmat's letters to Gill adopt a much more intimate tone than her official petitions. Three of the letters were written in 2001, and one is left undated. It is clear from the

[223] Not only is this apparent from the letters themselves, but also reinforced by Gill's statement that Izmat "dictated to literate acquaintances." Wall text, *Notes from the Desert*, Exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum, Washington D.C., September 17 2017 – February 12, 2017.

context of the letters that Gill had gone away to America (to complete her MFA in photography at Stanford). Izmat often begins by giving news of her life in the village. In the first letter, for instance, she describes how she has "slowly learned to read like you told her to," and describes taking lessons from a village teacher. In the second letter, she reports the good news that "there is not much damage here from the earthquake that came on 26/1/2001," and asks if Gill experienced any damage "over there."

Yet Izmat's news is often filled with anxiety. In the first letter, for instance, she describes her work with a small aid organization called the Jan Chetna Kendra center in favorable terms, but also dictates (in the third person) "she is worried she is not that highly qualified and so someone may take away her job at the center. She is always worried about this." Her second letter expresses her ongoing trouble securing access to water. She explains: "We have a crisis of water here. The people who have money get water tanks installed, but it's a big problem for those who are poor." In the next letter, she follows up by explaining: "The work of my (water) tank has been abandoned halfway once again. When you had come, we had started to build the tank and now again it has been halted." It is interesting that she does not mention the personal problems she has with the *Sarpanch* or her relatives that she expressed in her government petitions, suggesting a somewhat surprising division between private and public complaints.

Although Gill does not include any of her responses to Izmat's letters, it is interesting to consider what can be gleaned about her own life from Izmat's prose. The letters express their author's palpable desire to connect with Gills life in the United States. Sometimes this is expressed rather naïvely, as when Izmat implores Gill to "please write how the rains are there." But we also learn from Izmat's questions that Gill has a

sister named Kaveri and is not married. Izmat writes: "You went back to Delhi, when will you come back? It's been two months, you have not come back. What is the reason for this? Have you got married?" This imploring tone asking when Gill will return is one of the letters' most constant and moving refrains.

Izmat's letters express a real attachment to Gill. In one letter she refers to herself in the third person, describing: "Izmat remembers you a lot and is sometimes lost in your thought. Most of the time, she talks about you. She talks about her meetings and conversations with you." It is clear that Gill's friendship is among the most important elements in Izmat's life. She also describes her daughters' attachment to Gill, explaining: "We look at the road to see when you will come." Yet there are also moments where distance is registered, as when Izmat writes: "Oh foreigner, if I have made any mistake, please forgive me." And yet the final, undated letter, ends with the lyrical sentiments:

> Whom shall I cook hot *khichri*[224] and milk for?
> Gauri Bai, in your absence how shall I sleep?

Although there is a clear distinction between both the tone and content of Izmat's official letters and those addressed to Gauri Gill, I argue that both sets of correspondences represent a fundamental gesture of outreach on Izmat's part. While the letters do not explicitly beseech Gill for help, we know from Gill's anecdote about their first meeting that Izmat initially viewed Gill as a potential source of aid and relief. She was recognized as an agent of authority. Even Jannat initially viewed her with fear, thinking, as Gill recounted "in my jeans and short hair with my camera…I must be a

[224] *Khichri* is a popular dish across South Asia that is prepared from a combination of rice and lentils.

boy." The anxiety Jannat experienced as a result of misapprehending Gill's gender echoes the fraught relationships with agents of authority suggested by Gill's images. Yet such fraught relationships might also be indispensable, as Izmat's initial plea evinced. It was not just Gill's clothing or haircut that lent her the powerful air of an outsider's authority. It was also her camera.

The narrative of state neglect that emerges from Izmat's letters is mirrored in the contemporary social science data that has emerged from the region. In his recent ethnography, *Poverty and the Quest for Life*,[225] anthropologist Bhrigupati Singh investigates the living conditions of extreme poverty that characterize the Sahariya tribe in the southwestern corner of Rajasthan. While the village in which he was based, Shahabad, is more than seven hundred kilometers east of the Barmar district where Izmat and her family live, many of Singh's central concerns shed light on extreme poverty across the state, and in particular, how bureaucracy is experienced in people's everyday lives. One of his key observations is that figures of the state often represent both a standing force for violence as well as the hope or promise of welfare. While these aspects appear polarized, Singh's ethnography unveils instances where such forces were co-mingled. In other words, Singh uncovered the fallibility of the caregiving responsibility of the state.[226]

---

[225] Bhrigupati Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[226] For instance, in his chapter "Who Ate up the Forest," Singh demonstrates how many plots of land in Rajasthan were distributed as assets by the revenue department as part of a major Land Reform Act, but were simultaneously classified by the Forest Department as forest land and thus ineligible to be used for private gains. Ibid., 61- 82.

Together, the text and the images of the *Jannat* series reflect the complexity of this unfortunate dynamic. While Izmat's letters express the consistent desire for state aid, the few images that include men—and the presence of bureaucratic power they stand for—are images of violence. And yet, even as ethnographic research can illuminate the dynamics at work in the *Jannat* series, it is important to be clear that Gill is not conducting anthropological work in any conventional sense. Indeed, there is a long tradition of ethnographic photography from which her oeuvre must be clearly distinguished. In order to draw out this distinction, we turn toward other photographic representations of Rajasthan that contrast significantly with Gill's approach. While not all the images are strictly ethnographic, they each draw from anthropological tradition, especially in their tendency to showcase or *exhibit* their "exotic" subjects rather than allow the images to vacillate between revealing and concealing, presence and absence, as I argue is characteristic of Gill's work.

Photographic Precedents in Rajasthan

Photographers love Rajasthan. As Gill herself described, she grew up with beautiful *National Geographic*-style photographs of the desert region and local people decked out in traditional clothing.[227] A kaleidoscope of color was often a hallmark of such images—a stereotype Gill self-consciously eschewed through her use of black and white.

One of the most celebrated photographers of the region was Raghubir Singh, a pioneer of color photography who worked regularly for *National Geographic* but also

[227] Interview with the author, April 22, 2015.

achieved renown in the world of fine art. Singh was a native of Rajasthan, born in Jaipur in 1942. At the peak of his career, he published a book of images of his native state, titled *Rajasthan: India's Enchanted Land*,[228] for which he wrote an introduction and Satyajit Ray contributed a forward. The images of the book offer a lavish visual mosaic compiled from the artist's extensive travels through Rajasthan's varied terrains. His preferred composition features multiple figures in a picturesque setting. Both urban and rural subjects are framed with considerable romance.

The sumptuous exotic appeal of Singh's images is perhaps surprising for a native of the region. Indeed, such pictures evoke the gaze of an outsider, at least insofar as they are classic exemplars of the documentary *National Geographic* style. Considered more carefully, however, this insider/outsider dichotomy collapses.

Singh's extended introduction establishes the unique circumstances of his upbringing, and illustrates the extremely diverse and hierarchical nature of Rajasthani society. The photographer was born to a wealthy family of landowners with a royal Rajput lineage. He describes his family's antique guns and ceremonial swords with relish, and laments the changing times for heralding the loss of his family's aristocratic ways. His words could almost be lifted from a Victorian storybook as he describes his father's international travels with the Maharaja and passion for scotch, bridge, and polo. This era came to a close, however, with the introduction of land reforms following independence. Singh describes how his father's "world had radically altered. Even though he tried his

[228] Raghubir Singh, *Rajasthan: India's Enchanted Land* (Verona: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

best, I suspect he was not fully reconciled to the new order. His death, for us six brothers and one sister, was the passing of an age."[229]

This anachronistic romance is unabashedly celebrated in Singh's photographic images, extending to his pictures of workers and peasants as well as India's elite. Like British colonial administrators, Singh was enthralled by the diversity of local occupations. He writes: "Udaipur mirrors the simpler life of the early Ranas of Mewar. Its betel-nut vendors, the peasants selling wood, the cloth merchants, the ivory carvers and other artisans go about their work with a sense of modesty."[230] As aristocrats are often prone to do, he reads "modesty" into the lives of the working-class. His images offer up this panoply of professional persuasions in compositions that tend toward the ambitious and theatrical as opposed to the intimate. Often, he prefers to photograph actual performances, such as dance or festivals. Yet even quiet moments appear relatively "staged."

Consider *A Village Well*, taken in the Barmer District—the very same area where Izmat will raise her family a few decades later, (figure 3.20). This picture shows three women gathering water from a primitive desert well. A barren brush-speckled plain tapers into the far distance, and the well area is enclosed with the same tumbleweed filigree fence that surrounds Jannat's home. Like choreographed dancers, the women don nearly identical crimson dresses, and their arms are encased in white bangles that extend from the wrist to the elbow. Two women raise a jug of water above their heads—a practical action that Singh's lens transforms into theatrical gesture. He shoots from

[229] Ibid., 12.

[230] Ibid., 22.

above, gazing down at the anonymous women. The genre scene unfurls in full for the viewer's pleasure.

Raghubir Singh claimed his greatest early influence was none other than Henri Cartier-Bresson, the French photographic pioneer who immortalized India over the course of his many journeys to the country beginning in 1947. Singh first came across Cartier-Bresson's work in the form of a slim volume, *Beautiful Jaipur*, published by the *Times of India Press* in Bombay in 1948.[231] As the book's dust jacket describes, the photographer and his wife were invited to the marriage of the Princess Remkumari Sahiba and stayed for more than two weeks taking pictures for various news journals. A selection of the photographs was later compiled in the slim (now very rare) album with a brief if exuberant introduction penned by the Delhi-based French journalist Max J. Oliver, who also provided captions for each image.

The volume epitomizes a plethora of Orientalist clichés, many of which remain hallmarks of Indian tourist campaign advertising even to this day.[232] The first images show the royal wedding as an extravaganza of unparalleled splendor, (figure 3.21). Elephants, feathers, rich fabrics, and jubilant crowds abound. Indeed, these pictures are hardly indistinguishable from the *darbar* photographs commissioned from British studios such as Bourne & Shepherd on behalf of Rajasthani royalty in the 19th century.[233] One

---

[231] Henri Cartier-Bresson and Max J. Oliver, *Beautiful Jaipur* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1948).

[232] The "Incredible India" campaign being one of the more ambitious creations within this genre. Remarkably, the emphasis on India's vibrant colors is evident even in this volume of black and white albums, as is evident captions such as "Red and gold are splashed all over in the streets." Ibid., 31.

[233] See Julie F. Codell, ed., *Power and Resistance*.

wonders whether Cartier-Bresson would have been aware of these pictures before he arrived in Jaipur. It seems there was more than enough to captivate Cartier-Bresson just by photographing the spectacle his hosts had laid before him.

As the album proceeds, Cartier-Bresson leads the viewer away from the nucleus of royal pomp and circumstance, dallying with the details of the city's unique architecture and offering dynamic views of activity on the street, but ultimately falls short of opening any particularly intimate glimpses into the nuanced lives that pass behind Jaipur's city walls. Craftsmen at work are among his favorite subjects. In his depiction of men and women pursuing their livelihood, his photographs echo another prominent 19th century photographic precedent: the ethnographic genre exemplified by the *People of India* album.[234] Compared with these staged and staid early precedents, however, Cartier-Bresson's images bustle with activity. He prefers to show a number of figures at work rather than just one or two posed with the instruments of their trades. Most often, he also shoots from a high angle. The oeuvre conveys the somewhat bland if cheerful colonial conceit of simple people content in their traditional livelihood, an impression heightened almost to the point of parody by Oliver's captions.[235] Whether Cartier-Bresson trains his lens on the city's royalty, their palaces, or the diverse multitudes beneath their parapets, everything is exhibition.

---

[234] J. Watson and Sir John William Kaye, ed. *The People of India*, (London: India Museum, 1875).

[235] Although Cartier-Bresson is not responsible for the images' captions, they none the less tint the images' effect. Among the more anachronistic and risible are "The happy young girls of Jaipur in their princely attire" (33), "In the by-lanes, the children are busy playing with sand and water" (35), and "The magnificence of feminine grace in all simplicity" (57).

Among the best-known Indian artists to memorialize India in black and white was Jyoti Bhatt, a modernist of considerable renown who came of age in Baroda in the 1950's and worked across the genres of painting, printmaking, and photography. Starting from his childhood in Gujarat, Bhatt displayed an interest in Indian folk art forms. Under the influence of his teacher and later colleague, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Bhatt began to photograph folk art and craft traditions around Gujarat. Although this work was initially intended for pedagogical purposes, Bhatt continued the project for years and increasingly identified the work as central to his artistic oeuvre.[236]

If Gill's photographs emphasize absence, Bhatt's Rajasthani images are all about revelation. His aim is to display folk art traditions and their practitioners, and his subjects seem eager to comply with this agenda. In many cases, practitioners are shown creating work—painting on walls, faces, or cows, for instance. Bhatt also enjoyed posing children in the midst of their work. In some cases, these young subjects gaze back with what looks to be surprise or apprehension, but in other pictures, his subjects clearly revel in the invitation to perform, (figure 3.22).

Even Bhatt's unpeopled images feel performative in comparison with the unsettled "in-between" quality of Gill's prints. Consider figure 3.23. This simple composition features a dark adolescent calf posed demurely in the corner of a domestic space. A boldly painted tiger with its teeth bared is suspended mid-stride on the wall behind, fierce and menacing above the unsuspecting calf. It is a clever picture, formally implying a natural mini-drama that underlies Bhatt's desire to express the "living" quality

[236] Jyoti Bhatt, "Experiencing Photography," *Domus* 40 (May 2015): 57 – 59.

of Rajasthani folk art. As Bhatt later explained: "There was nothing I could do about my concern for preservation, but I continued making photographic records of the art forms and the art traditions that were still alive. [237] This was in keeping with the ideas of his professor, the renowned artist and educator K. G. Subramanyan.

Subramanyan expressed his philosophy in an influential 1987 book *Living Traditions*,[238] which advocated that modern Indian artists more actively draw on paradigms of South Asian folk art. He argued that the formal choices made by the artist were only as small part of the broader "work-circuit" within which the objects were produced and accrued meaning. If the artists were appropriately attentive to these contextual conditions, they would naturally produce good work that was firmly anchored in traditional practice. This decidedly process-oriented approach would prevent the alienation that Subramanyan identified as so commonly plaguing the Indian modern artist in his milieu.

Bhatt's project was obviously aligned with Subramanyan's emphasis on folk traditions insofar as they provided documentation of rural art practice that could be circulated among aspiring modernists. Perhaps ironically, however, Bhatt's photographic style was not particularly indebted to indigenous photographic practice. Rather, his formative exploration of photography took place in New York, when he was studying printmaking at Pratt from 1964 to 1966. He later wrote: "Without hesitation, I would name 'Family of Man' as the most important and influential show of photographs that I

---

[237] Ibid., 52.

[238] K. G. Subramanyan, *The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1987).

have ever seen."[239] What was it about this groundbreaking MoMA exhibition that made such a significant mark on Bhatt's practice?

The show opened in New York in January 1955, nearly a full decade before Bhatt's arrival in New York. Yet its tremendous popularity ensured that he would have been aware of the catalogue, which remained in print for the remainder of the century, selling millions of copies. Organized by Edward Steichen, the show brought together images by a number of photographers of people from around the world, aiming to show "the gamut of life from birth to death with emphasis on the daily relationship of man to himself, to his family, to the community and to the world we live in."[240] As the MoMA website attests, the exhibition: "was a forthright declaration of global solidarity in the decade following World War II."[241]

Despite its popular and critical acclaim, the triumphalist universalism promoted by the exhibition was also heavily criticized. Roland Barthes was somewhat scathing in his reproach of the "myth" of man's essential similarity, writing: "why not ask the parents of Emmet Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites what they think of the Great Family of Man?"[242] He was deeply concerned by the evacuation of history from the exhibition's sentimental message of essential human similarity.

---

[239] Bhatt, "Experiencing Photography," 54.

[240] Eric J. Sandeen. *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

[241] "The Family of Man: January 24 – May 8, 1955," Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 11, 2017, https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2429.

[242] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 101.

It is not difficult to see how Bhatt's photographs were distinctly influenced by both Subramanyan's ideology and the MoMA exhibition. The prints celebrate tradition rather than transformation. There are no markers of modernity such as plastic containers or western cloths, and the representational art that Bhatt pictures does not attempt to portray any aspect of industrial life such as cars, trains or dams. Instead, the pictures suggest a timeless present in which "living traditions" thrive.

Such concrete markers of modernity are not present in Gill's images either, however, her pictures evoke a more complex relationship to the passing of time than Bhatt's suggestion of "timeless tradition." As Gill wrote in a portion of the wall text that accompanied the recent exhibition of the *Jannat* series at the Smithsonian Museum: "Over the past seventeen years, my visits to the desert—to see essentially the same people and places—have encompassed various parts of life and changes that have occurred over time." For Gill, these changes are measured by intimate, personal experience. She remarks on: "the death of a camel in a year that is remembered as the year of the death of the camel." Gill's prose emphasizes the passage of time, yet it is not a mode of time that lends itself to conventional regulatory modes of measurement such as the watch or the calendar. Time in the desert does not pass according to the logic of administrative efficiency. Yet Gill's presentation of the *Jannat* series does subtly bring in this "official" temporal register—thus juxtaposing the personal and impersonal temporalities of her subjects' lives. The series is comprised of 52 images: one for every week of the year. Once again, Gill manages to re-present her subjects within a legibly cosmopolitan framework that is largely absent from the lived experience as they represent

it without essentializing their existence along the binaries of rural vs. urban, or traditional vs. modern that have historically typified an "ethnographic" approach.

Balika Mela

Like the images discussed above, Gill also wanted to "exhibit" India, but in her case this meant an ethically motivated collaboration with subjects to determine how they might like to be portrayed. In 2003, Gill set up a makeshift photographic portrait studio in the village of Lunkaransar, about eight hours drive northwest of Izmat's village. Since beginning her photographic engagement in Rajasthan in 1999, Gill had developed a relationship with the non-profit organization Urmul Sethu Sanshan, which was dedicated to girls' education. Every couple of years, the foundation organized what they called a "Balika Mela" or a fair for girls, that attracted young women, mostly unmarried, from across the region. A wide range of communities were represented, cutting across caste and class boundaries, brought together by food, games, and entertainment such as a puppet show, a magician's performance and a Ferris wheel. For the first time in 2003, there was also photography.

In response to the organizer's request that she "do something with photography," Gill set up a small stall where anyone could come in and have their picture taken. She provided a few simple props, a cloth backdrop, and a comb and small mirror for primping. As news of the stall spread, girls began to bring their own props such as folded newspaper crowns or a paper peacock, (figure 3.24). They would decide the poses in which they wished to be photographed, sometimes posing individually but more often with friends or siblings. Sometimes the choreography would become quite elaborate, as in figure 3.25. These arrangements tended to be the result of an extended collaboration

between the subjects, onlookers, and Gill, behind the camera. As she described, after someone summoned the courage to put their name down:

> We would start to discuss where and how the picture would be taken: which backdrop, what props to use, if any. The whole scene was co-directed by me and those in the picture as well as everyone around us—the girls would try out a few ideas, others would throw out suggestions, wisecracks and jokes, we'd all collapse with laughter, I'd yell at everyone to get serious, then suddenly someone would come up with an ingenious idea. No one asked why someone might wish to be photographed in a certain way.[243]

The nature of this collaboration represents a significant departure from the quiet practice of intimate witnessing that marked Gill's *Jannat* series. The viewer feels Izmat and her daughters' awareness of the camera's presence, even when it is not directly acknowledged. However, they are not so much performing themselves as living out life in view of a very unusual presence—one that connects them-- even tenuously, to the broader world. The collaboration occurs at the level of personal trust and mutual understanding rather than through the explicit staging of individual shots, although one imagines that Izmat and her daughters would certainly have been aware of posing in the case of particular images. In *Balika Mela*, however, the visual agency of the subjects is foregrounded by the very structure of the photographic event.

If the ethical significance of the *Jannat* project lies in part in photography's ability to provide a bridge to the broader world that is absent in the form of masculine authority or the state, then *Balika Mela* extends this impulse a step further. The cosmopolitan power of photographic technology is democratized in a sense—given over to the whims of the state's most disenfranchised subjects: young rural girls.

---

[243] Gauri Gill, *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 153.

The format of Gill's intervention was heavily indebted to South Asia's studio portrait tradition, which flourished among elites during the Colonial era and became available in its vernacular incarnation to people across the economic spectrum soon after Independence. The studios ranged from elaborate stage sets with an inventory of available costumes and props to humble tents hastily erected by itinerant cameramen. Regardless of the economic profile of the patron, however, such portraits evolved within highly formalized conventions to fulfil a range of social purposes.

Such studio portraits fell into a few major categories. As in the west, even the poorest families often felt it was essential to document major events such as holidays, births, and especially weddings. People from across the class spectrum also reveled in documenting exotic travel—real or imagined. A painted backdrop could easily substitute for a foreign *mis-en-scene*. More unique to the South Asian context was the urgently felt need for memorial photographs that commemorated an individual on the eve of their death or just after they had passed away. Finally, studio portrait photographers were responsible for producing the matrimonial photographs that present eligible brides and grooms to potential matches and their families. Not to be confused with wedding photographs, these images played a key role in the elaborate matchmaking process that precedes the nuptial climax.

Matrimonial photographs developed into arguably the most conventional genre. The potential bride or groom posed among a setting that was typically designed to convey relative wealth and sophistication. Often, special props were featured such as a television or motorbike. Wristwatches were also ubiquitous. Generally, these items were included to convey a sense of modernity, but in some cases, they were literal representations of the

dowry that a groom's family could expect to receive along with the bride. In such instances, the intention is generally indicated with a caption, such as "Now your husband won't have to get one" – a line printed beneath the image of a young woman posed beside a television set.[244] Even the prospective partner's physical attributes are subsumed to this logic of indexicality. The images were meant, in other words, to stand in for specific verbal descriptions such as "beautiful," "slim," or even the shade of the subject's skin.[245]

The most whimsical photographs within the studio portrait tradition however, were the "dress-up" pictures that were not taken for any specific practical purpose at all. These photographs are taken for fun. For a few minutes, anyone could live out his or her fantasies of being a Rajasthani villager, a bandit, a Hippie, or a "college girl," (among the most popular choices) provided the studio had the appropriate costume.[246] As visual anthropologist David MacDougall explained, the most popular fantasy genres generally fall within three major categories: the first is the regional costume meant to evoke pastoral fantasy, most often worn by women. The second major genre, generally only for men, are outlaws and bandits—common anti-heroes in popular film. The third category includes a range of personas all meant to evoke "modern" life. Along with the outfit chosen from among the fairly classic set of ensembles in the studio collection, the subject would be provided with appropriate props—such as a motorcycle (an index of modernity)

---

[244] David MacDougall, "Photo Hierarchicus: Signs and Mirrors in Indian Photography," *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 109.

[245] Ibid.

[246] Ibid., 119.

or a clay pot (an evocation of the pastoral), and be encouraged to assume a certain genre of gesture associated with their fantasy persona.

While *Balika Mela* clearly played on this familiar photographic tradition, it is important to note how significantly the images diverged from established tropes. Vernacular studio portraits were orchestrated for maximum legibility—each visual element chosen to communicate a concrete quality or scenario. In the case of the matrimonial photographs, props indexed material wealth. Even the more whimsical genre of the travel photographs was meant to index specific established fantasies (such as rural Rajasthan), (figure 3.26). *Balika Mela* images, by contrast, were far more individual.

One might say that the *Balika Mela* project allowed the girls to explore very personal fantasies of their real-life relationships and individual selfhood. Consider Sundar's self-portrait, (figure 3.27). She stands erect in front of a plain dark curtain with her eyes fixed pointedly at the viewer. Her gaze is defiant as opposed to diffident, and she makes no effort to appear pretty or docile—two qualities widely praised in young women approaching the age of marriage. Her right hand is folded over her stomach and her left hand is held open, palm out, fingers touching her temple in a gesture reminiscent of an army salute, (figure 3.28). In other cases, the girls hold up their hands in a gesture of blessing or bend their fingers to suggest a stylized flute, (figure 3.29). Both motions would have been widely recognizable within the broader traditions of vernacular visual culture as expressed in folk dance forms and popular representations of gods. Finally, a few of the girls, like Sita and Sharda, have chosen to be represented with perhaps the most agential prop of all: Gauri's camera, (figure 3.30).

After the *mela* ended, Gill set up a two-week long photography workshop in response to the girl's persisting interest in photography. Often it was a struggle for participants to convince their families to let them spend time away from their responsibilities at home, but those who came learned how to take pictures and process their own black-and-white film. "Occasionally, plaster of Paris fell into the chemicals" Gill explained, "but the girls would strain the solution and carry on." Despite such challenges, in addition to extreme heat and initial apprehension of the dark on the part of many of the young photographers, the workshop was "treated with the utmost seriousness."[247]

The workshop also provided an opportunity for Gill to engage students in discussions about the meaning and power of photography. Students were particularly interested in the medium's so-called evidentiary value. One girl described how, before the workshop, she had: "thought that the photos in the newspaper were made up," but after learning about the process she saw that "what they portray really happened." In other words, the girls appeared to grasp the potential for photography's evidential value to combat injustice and negligence on the part of institutions of authority such as the state. As one workshop participant, Amri, explained: "When necessary, we may catch certain things in our pictures, like if the food they are serving in the midday meal scheme is bad, or if they are really feeding children like they are supposed to."[248] Students came away from the workshop not only with a working knowledge of how to take and develop

[247] Gill, *Balika Mela*, 157.

[248] Ibid., 159.

pictures, but also how photography could allow them to interpret and even perhaps intervene in broader issues and scenarios beyond the bounds of their local environment.

In 2010, another iteration of "Balika Mela*"* was held, and Gill was invited to initiate a photography component once again. She used the space to exhibit the 2003 *Balika Mela* portraits, much to the delight of many of the subjects who had subsequently transitioned into married life and motherhood, (figure 3.31). She also set up a second studio for portraits, yet this time she shot in color as opposed to black and white. This choice reflected Gill's growing interest in fashion as a mode of self-expression on the part of her subject-collaborators. As she explained:

> In our cities, as elsewhere, everything is increasingly branded and starting to look fairly homogenous. Here however, I found hearts stitched onto shirts, leather jackets over traditional salwar kameezes, fiercely knotted scarves instead of dupattas, handknitted sweaters and hand embroidered jeans.[249]

The whimsical red flowers at on the bottom of Gomti's faded jeans illustrates Gill's characterization, (figure 3.32). Dressed in jeans and a white tee shirt, Gomti exhibits the most modern ensemble of any of Gill's subjects. She stands erect with a handkerchief in one hand and her right arm aloft and bent at the elbow. The center of her palm is colored with a thick stigmata-like spot of dark red henna. This distinctive hand is positioned at the center of a red abstract pinwheel motif on the backdrop of the studio tent, cleverly integrating the model with her stage. While most of the subjects' expressions are acutely serious and intense, the hint of a smile animates Gomti's face. The pose is dramatic but the expression suggests a mischievous effervescence.

[249] Ibid., 159.

In *Geeta and Mamta*, (figure 3.33), the subjects' complementary fashion choices accent the intimacy of their relationship. Both wear similarly styled salwar kameez sets in shades of blue and orange embellished with small embroidered flowers. The outfits are not identical, but are expertly matched. The girl on the left offers an earnest if timid gaze while her companion touches her forearm tenderly and rests a reassuring elbow on her shoulder despite being the shorter of the two. Real tenderness is legible in the postures, but without color, the care and forethought expressed by the girls' coordinated outfits would be lost.

This was not Gill's only experience working with color. Her first major body of work to gain international acclaim was a photo essay on South Asian diasporic culture in America that grew out of her thesis work at Stanford University. It was published in 2008 as a book titled *The Americans*.[250] Explicitly invoking the work of Robert Frank's renowned photographic book of the same title, Gill's pictures painted a fresh portrait of the American experience. "You don't see yourself on the walls of the Met." Gill remarked. As Gayatri Sinha explained: "This meant recognizing the 'other' within American towns, villages, cities, people of colour, Indian migrants who existed outside the frame of cultural recognition."[251] Even in America, then, Gill was drawn to those at the margins of mainstream culture.

Material wealth and its stratification is one of Gill's primary foci within the project. She is markedly attendant to how dress, possessions and one's physical settings

[250] Gauri Gill, *The Americans* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2008).

[251] Sinha, *Gauri Gill—The Americans*, 7.

are used to index personal status and individual charisma. She juxtaposes business men in shining suits on rooftops with smiling attendants in bright uniforms in front of donut displays and gas pumps. As Bakirathi Mani put it, the works "focus on the relationship between the immigrants and the material objects that populate their homes and places of worship."[252] Gill's dramatic use of color in the series foregrounds the specificity and flair of her subjects' materially articulated existence.

In the case of *The Americans*, the photographs are printed on glossy paper that accentuates their technicolor spectrum, but in the case of the *Balika Mela* images, Gill has made the unusual decision to print the images on semi-transparent paper. They are also inserted into the middle of the book, sandwiched between the black and white images from 2003. This presents an unusual surprise for the viewer—a flicker of lightness and color encased in the relative solidity and solemnity of the grayscale images on either side. Figure 3.34 is a scan taken from the *Balika Mela* book, giving a sense of how the transparent paper presents the diaphanous girls layered upon one another, hovering in a soft cloud of color.

Gill offered several explanations for her choice of the transparent printing.[253] She explained that their shifting quality was redolent of the slippery nature of truth in photography—the instability of the medium as evidence. She also liked how the images of each girl blended into one another, how you could see the back of one girl as you looked into the eyes of another as you flipped through the pages of *Balika Mela*.

---

[252] Mani, "Viewing South Asia, Seeing America," 136.

[253] Interview with the author, July 7, 2017.

Beyond the covers of the book, the technique of transparency allowed the photographs to function from both directions simultaneously, allowing them to take on a more three-dimensional presence within the space of the viewer. Sometimes the girls would be lined up on the side of an exhibition space, as if beckoning the viewer in.[254] In other situations, Gill would further push the conventions of photographic exhibitions by hanging the girls from the ceiling, as "if they were flying,"[255] (figure 3.35). The effect was like a forest of fairies.

This transparency creates a striking sense of community among the subjects. If the girls had desired to have their pictures taken in color as a means by which to register the individuality of their sartorial choices, Gill's decision to print the pictures on transparent paper emphasized their social cohesion. She described how she didn't anticipate coming back to photograph the same community so many years after the initial Balika Mela. Yet upon her arrival she was struck by the resonance of the return: "almost like time travel."[256] Thus the unusual mode of display foregrounds a productive tension between the girls' assertion of individual identity and Gill's recognition of the continuity of the girls' social worlds. We see a productive tension between the girls' desires for self-expression and Gill's artistic control over the project's final mode of display.

Perhaps the most poignant effect of the transparent prints is their suggestion of a recursive non-linear temporality. Gill remarked: "Lets make it circular—lets go into the

[254] The color images were projected on to the windows of the ICP Museum in New York from February to March 2017.

[255] Interview with the author, July 7, 2017.

[256] Ibid.

future."[257] She was purposeful in not putting the later pictures at the end of the book, but rather suturing them into the center of the first *Balika Mela* series like Benjamin's "flash" of history in reverse.[258] The girls are like ghosts from the future.

If photography can be used to tell a story about the future, it can also provide a concrete tool of self-invention, at least in the case of one girl, Manju Saran. Saran went on to establish a photography studio of her own. For almost five years she operated the Shiva Photo Studio in her home village of Kaalu, taking and developing photographs, managing a wide range of clients, and even employing her uncle. Although she abandoned the studio when she married, the fact that a young woman was able to successfully manage a photography studio in rural Rajasthan and even employ an elder male family member beneath her, was unprecedented.

Manju Saran's own account of her time at the *mela* and her subsequent experience developing a studio was included as a sort of epilogue to the *Balika Mela* publication. Her story begins with a glowing description of her father, who worked with the nonprofit Urmul and enabled her education despite the objections of her brothers and family elders. Even this relatively extreme manifestation of emancipation in the desert, thus, depended on the advocacy of strong men and established institutions. Indeed, Saran writes that "I call my Papa a God instead of Papa, because he led me away from chasing cows and

---

[257] Ibid.

[258] As Benjamin wrote in his enigmatic and canonical *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

buffaloes and toward studying."[259] The form of this praise echoes the phrasing of Izmat's wording of her final letter to the government requesting aid. Despite the centrality of her father in her account, Manju's experience running the studio was truly anomalous in rural Rajasthan, offering an example of true autonomy for a young woman that was embodied first, in the person of Gill herself. As another participant in the photography workshop, Maghi, remarked: "After I came here, I thought that if Gauri *didi* is a girl, and she has come from Delhi and is giving us training, then we can do it too. Since then, the fear of being a girl has left my mind, and I went to the village and took pictures."[260]

Toward a Conclusion

This chapter has mapped Gill's unique long-term ethical engagement with her subjects, arguing that her work offers a nuanced portrait of lives on the margin of the state, and provides, through photography, a quiet reprieve from the isolation incurred by state negligence. We are shown a world fraught with hierarchical tension, and animated by diverse temporal rhythms, two aspects of desert life that emerge from Gill's distinct aesthetic of intersubjective representation.

There is a long history of photography in Rajasthan. Yet it has tended to picture the spectacle of public life—even private moments are more often celebrated as a mode of ethnographic *display*. Gill's work is far more intimate, though no less engaged with questions of the public sphere. What access do her subjects have to the broader nexus of the state? How might one assert ones' dreams and desires in the shadow of its neglect?

[259] Gill, *Balika Mela*, 165.

[260] Ibid., 155.

The involvement of the Indian state does not offer clear or easy solutions for rural inhabitants like Izmat and her family. Indeed, state intervention is responsible for many of the woes that such marginalized subjects experience. There is, however, no return to some pastoral ideal where an imagined utopia functions according to the timeless logic of village tradition. The state often profits from the resources of rural regions, scarring their terrain with (often faulty) infrastructure, draining water reserves, installing corrupt bureaucrats, and much more. Given the inevitability of state presence in its many, sometimes insidious, often illusive, and even invisible forms, it is important for the most disenfranchised citizens to have what little power they can within the "official" system.

Notes from the Desert is not a form of direct action intended to channel bureaucratic aid to Izmat's family or the subjects of *Balika Mela*. Nor is it a documentary project conceived to offer data that can be assimilated into policy proposals. Such work is undeniably of great urgency and import, but of a very different kind. Indeed, Gill's sister, Kaveri Gill, mentioned by name in Izmat's letters, has made important research contributions to the understanding of poverty and the informal economy in urban India as an academic working between the fields of economics, geography, and development studies. Her book, *Of Poverty and Plastic,*[261] combines in-depth ethnographic engagement with scavenger communities with broader economic analysis to propose concrete political interventions and policy change. Thus, Gauri Gill is presumably all too aware of the significance of such work as well as the extent to which its methodology

[261] Kaveri Gill, *Of Poverty and Plastic: Scavenging and Scrap Trading Entrepreneurs in India's Urban Informal Economy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012).

diverges from her own. Her photographs are operative on a wholly different register of signification.

Fellow artist Anita Dube offers a decidedly poetic reading of Gill's practice. She writes:

> Let me risk speculation here. The mirror inside a 35-mm analog viewfinder camera (2/3rd of this show is shot on this format) is this uncanny stand-in for 'water' through which the desert is seen and for which the desert longs! This surreal two-way meditation of desire through the invisible mirror/water is what binds the photographer and the photographed. I am reminded of lines from Paul Eluard which speak of the liquidity of the eye that make us dream.[262]

I would build on Dube's metaphor by suggesting the longing of the desert for Gill's lens is not simply a longing for water—an acutely scarce and life-giving resource on which life depends and through which life can be reflected, but also a longing for the sustenance of the broader sphere of Indian public life.

[262] Anita Dube, "Notes on Gauri Gill's *Notes from the Desert*," *Art India Magazine*, 2010, http://gaurigill.com/reviews.html, unpaginated pdf.

Epilogue: The Extended Practice of
Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh, and Gauri Gill

Global excitement over Indian contemporary art was at a fever pitch by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. In 2007, *The New York Times* proclaimed the field "booming and shaking," and by some estimates, the market for Indian contemporary art grew from $2 million in 2001 to $400 million in 2008.[263] This period also witnessed the explosion of international exhibitions focused on recent Indian art.[264]

Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh, and Gauri Gill, who each experienced mounting recognition as the market exploded, may be seen to be critically negotiating the international success of Indian contemporary art, even as their individual careers have benefited from these conditions of heightened visibility. The work explored in this dissertation had largely been completed by the heyday of this boom.[265] Chhachhi's *Women of the Cloth* was published in 2007, Singh's *Privacy* was published in 2004, and Gill's *Balika Mela* was published in 2010. Yet the careers of all three artists continued to thrive well after these seminal works. While each artist's practice expanded in unique ways, I argue that these new directions represented an extension of the essential concerns that anchored their early photographic work.

---

[263] Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930 – 1990* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 6.

[264] Prominent examples include: *Horn Please: Narratives in Contemporary Indian Art* (Bern, 2007), *Indian Highway* (London, 2008, restaged in Oslo, Lyons, Rome, and Beijing), *New Narratives: Contemporary Art from India* (Chicago, 2008), and *Chalo! India: A New Era of Indian Art* (Tokyo, 2008).

[265] Susan Bean, *Midnight to the Boom: Painting in India After Independence* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013).

One major development within Indian contemporary art as the 21st century progressed was an expansion of the field of artistic practice and exhibition contexts. Three-dimensions replaced two-dimensions as performance, video, and installation overtook painting as the dominant medium.[266] Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill similarly began to expand their practice beyond the bounds of conventional photographic formats. Singh and Gill each began increasingly to explore alternate modes of photographic display to include sculptural installations and cheaply reproducible pamphlets. For Chhachhi, the transformation was even more extreme, leading her to construct large-scale, site-specific public installations that combined photographic images with sculpture, video, and text.

These shifts in medium were related to the broader trend of artists' increasing investment in processes of collective art-making, participatory art practices, and public display beyond institutional contexts. A relatively early example of such work is Shilpa Gupta's piece *Blame* (2000), (figure 4.1), in which the artist passed out bottles of simulated blood on a working-class commuter train in Mumbai. Elements of the project along with photographic documentation were subsequently shown at a range of international art venues such as the Singapore Art Museum, Singapore (2011), and the Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, Herning, Denmark (2010). Such public participatory concerns were frequently at the heart of projects initiated by a growing number of artists' collectives founded in the 2000s such as CAMP (Mumbai, 2007 – present), Thukral and Tagra (New Delhi, 2004 – present), Desire Machine Collective (Guwahati, Assam, 2004 – present), and Dialogue (Kondagaon District, Chhattisgarh, 2003 – present). These collectives were preceded by two highly influential organizations,

[266] Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 229.

Sahmat (1989 – present), and Khoj (1997 – present), both established in order to facilitate socially and politically engaged aesthetic practice throughout the 1990s. While the significance of platforms such as Sahmat and Khoj should not be underestimated, this dissertation argues that the photographic work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill anticipates in important and underexamined ways this "social turn" in artistic practice that has come to prominence in 21st century India.

In what follows, I will briefly outline the key developments in the artistic careers of Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh, and Gauri Gill, noting the ways their practice became increasingly experimental and yet remained true to their earliest commitment to ethical engagement with their subjects. The "opening out" of each of their practices—expanding the field of display through alternative modes of circulation and public exhibition beyond the gallery context, echoed broader trends in the contemporary Indian art world at large. The persistence of their engagement also resonates with the bourgeoning of socially-inclined artwork in contemporary India, and yet this mounting tendency was anticipated by the seriousness and complexity of the nature of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill's earliest collaborations with their subjects. In this epilogue, I draw attention to the extension and transformation of these commitments over the last decade as expressed in each artists' career.

Sheba Chhachhi

Sheba Chhachhi's transition away from traditional photographic methods was largely motivated by temporal concerns. This dissertation has argued for the power and poignancy of alternative temporalities that Chhachhi's work brings out in the representation of her subjects. As her practice progressed, however, she became

increasingly invested in the relationship between time and the viewer. She wanted, as she stated, to "slow people down."[267]

Chhachhi's concern for slowing time was notably enacted through a manipulation of space. Her earliest installations, *Wild Mother I: The Wound is The Eye* (1993), (figure 4.2), and *Wild Mother II: The Mirror is the Witness* (1994), combined her photographic images with sculptural installations so that viewers were compelled to walk around the space rather than consuming the images as if they were "flipping through the pages of a magazine."[268] The photographs were hung from the ceiling as opposed to framed on the wall, emphasizing their bodily three-dimensional potential as objects rather than simply images. This exhibition strategy also emphasized the relationship of the images to one another, as the viewers' shifting line of vision enforced an ever-changing dynamic juxtaposition between individual photographs. Within this exhibition, Chhachhi combined images from her *Seven Lives and a Dream* series, as well as the pictures that emerged through her collaboration with female *sadhus*. Combining these two projects in a single exhibition without distinguishing one body of work from another established the works' shared ethical, feminist commitment in no uncertain terms.

This first foray into installation gave way to Chhachhi's extended engagement with the experimental form of the photographic light box, (figure 4.3). These light boxes combined versions of Chhachhi's photographs with semi-transparent images taken from a range of traditions across Asia including Mughal miniatures and Chinese ink painting, often featuring flying creatures such as birds, deities, and robed women. Sets of images

[267] Chhachhi, interview by Vandana Shukla.

[268] Ibid.

would pass over one another at varying (slow) speeds. This array of levitated figures was brought together to evoke narratives of migration as well as environmental precarity. While it was clear that the quasi-cinematic installation was programed in a continuous loop, the ever-changing appearance of the screen mesmerized the viewer, furthering Chhachhi's goal of entrancing her audience for an extended duration. Originally created for the Singapore Biennale in 2006, these boxes were subsequently exhibited around the world, mimicking the narratives of migration they illuminate.

Themes of urban transformation and environmental consciousness took on increasing urgency as Chhachhi's practice progressed in the 21st century, exemplified by her public projects such as *The Water Diviner* (2008), a site-specific video installation in an abandoned swimming pool-cum-library in Old Delhi, and *Black Waters Will Burn* (2011), (figure 4.4), displayed on the banks of the Yamuna River. The first project emerged out of Chhachhi's serendipitous discovery of a dilapidated swimming pool in the basement of a library that was filled with discarded books and papers. The strangeness of the space moved her to create a complex installation that drew on the cultural histories of water in the city. For the second project, Chhachhi created an enigmatic sculptural form to float at the edge of the extremely polluted urban Yamuna River and illuminated it, at dusk, with a projection of flames that rippled in reflection across the surface of the water. In order to see the work, viewers walked along a path upon which the sacred text of the *Yamunashtak* hymn had been stenciled, which described the river as a beautiful female goddess. As Chhachhi explained: "You have to walk across this sacred text describing the river as a beautiful, sensual woman, and then

you see it in actuality, a wounded female form."[269] Thus, the environmental thrust of her work continued to remain connected to her ongoing commitment to feminist concerns.

These later projects represent two enmeshed developments in Chhachhi's practice: her broadened concern with the (ecological) fate of the world at large, and the expansion of her exhibition practice into the public sphere. This opening out of Chhachhi's work brings her practice full circle to her earliest documentary photographs of the women's movement—images that sought to capture and galvanize social change in the most public of venues—the street. Her *Seven Lives and a Dream* series offered a far more private treatment of her activist subjects, and her focus on female *sadhus* intensified her interest in images of renunciation as opposed to public engagement. As semi-private objects of contemplation, her light boxes extended Chhachhi's intimate language of encounter. Starting with *The Water Diviner*, however, the artist's focus returned to the broader engagement made possible by public projects beyond the gallery context. In response to this lifetime of activism through art, and commitment to the intersecting concerns of environmental preservation and feminism, Chhachhi was recently awarded the 2017 Prix Thun award for Art and Ethics.

Dayanita Singh

Dayanita Singh's career also diverged from that of a traditional photographer as the artist became increasingly invested in alternative modes of photographic distribution and display. Such experimental impetus was evident in her decision to invite viewers to take their portraits away by removing them directly off the walls of her 2008 exhibition,

---

[269] Sheba Chhachhi, "A River of Memories: Sheba Chhachhi profiled by Jyoti Dhar," *Art Asia Pacific*, Mar/Apr 2012, http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/77/ARiverOfMemoriesShebaChhachhi.

Ladies of Calcutta. As Aveek Sen described: "Dayanita photographed the carrying away of the photographs throughout the week in the gallery, making pictures of pictures with frames within frames."[270] Indeed, this drive to build complex worlds of images within images that drew the viewer into an active engagement with the photographs' physical space would be a defining hallmark of Singh's later career.

Since her first project with Zakir Hussain, Singh was committed to the photographic book as her primary medium, calling herself "a bookmaker working with photography."[271] however, the practice became more intimate as her career evolved. She began creating small books of photographs specifically for friends with whom she associated the images, and in 2007, Steidl published seven of these photo-diaries in a clothbound box as a piece called *Sent a Letter* (figure 4.5). The pictures were printed on paper that could be folded out—accordion style—to create portable exhibitions, or what Singh nicknamed her "kitchen museums." This was the start of Singh's transition from creating books to building "museums," and signaled the seriousness with which she approached the issue of scale.

Singh continued to draw her photographic subject matter from the relationships around her. She not only based her images on travels with friends, but continued to re-photograph the subjects of *Privacy* year after year, creating new bodies of work around friends of friends. Even her focus on inanimate objects was typically tied to a personal connection, or, given Singh's propensity for deeply entwined associations, a web of

[270] Aveek Sen, "Ladies of Calcutta," in *Dayanita Singh*, ed. Aveek Sen (Madrid: T.F. Editores, 2010), 84.

[271] Art Institute of Chicago, "Dayanita Singh."

interpersonal relationships. She described, for instance, how her *Museum of Machines* (2013), came about after her friend's husband asked her to go to his father's factory to photograph the machines. The man who showed her around the factory happened to be the father-in-law of one of the "little ladies" who appeared in one of her most famous images—that of a girl lying face down on a bed, (figure 4.6). Singh called him the "keeper of the machines," and included him in a number of the images, (figure 4.7). Perhaps the most enduring presence, however, was Mona Ahmed, whom Singh continued to photograph repeatedly until Ahmed's death in September 2017.

Since her 2013 exhibition, *Museum of Chance,* Singh has been showing her photographs in large-scale movable displays that she refers to as her "museums." These museums are often organized by subject matter, such as *Little Ladies Museum* (1961 - present, 2013), which combined dozens of Singh's images of young women, or her *Museum of Furniture* (2013), which showcased her acute sensitivity to the formal expressivity of furniture. Individual photographs would appear repeatedly in Singh's projects, drawing their meaning from fresh juxtapositions with other images. As she described in an interview:

> They are a kind of photo-architecture, if I could dare to say that. I would hesitate to use the word 'sculpture', but they are three-dimensional forms that you have to come to and engage with. What is key to my Museums is that they have storage built into them, with the possibility of changing them.[272]

Singh's insistence on her museums' storage capability is partly an expression of her obsession with the archive, another defining characteristic of her mature oeuvre. Singh's

[272] Dayanita Singh, interview by Stephanie Rosenthal in *Dayanita Singh: Go Away Closer*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Hayward Publishing, 2014), 41.

practice powerfully engages the archive both as form (images-as-archive) and as subject matter (images of archives). Her *Museum of Files* (2013), (figure 4.8), combines both approaches to offer the viewer a sort of archive of archives—a movable display of images taken from bureaucratic repositories across India. The form of these movable museums also allows for audience engagement on a different level than her earlier projects. As she explained with characteristic resolve:

> You put an exhibition together, you've spent two years working on something, and then people come to look at the work on the wall in the most passive way. If you don't have the time to engage with me than I have nothing to offer you either.[273]

Much of the power of the project, according to Singh, is not the images themselves, but their sequence—something she invites the viewer to take charge of. The range of possibilities, however, is limited by her own selection, and therefore the particular juxtaposition of images within her museums represents a collaborative effort between artist and viewer. Thus, in the last decade, Singh has not only continued to collaborate with her subjects, but also worked to encourage audience agency through the shifting formats of her work.

Gauri Gill

As Gill's career progressed, she too began to experiment with alternative exhibition modes for her photographic work. *Balika Mela* featured semi-transparent printings of the color images from her 2010 visit to the girl's fair sandwiched between the black and white pictures from her 2003 visit to the fair, establishing an enigmatic link between the present and past of the tight rural community she pictured. The color images

[273] Ibid., 42.

were later exhibited hanging from the gallery ceiling "as if they were flying,"[274] (figure 4.9). Not only did this emphasize the community cohesion of the subjects as opposed to their independent identities, but like Chhachhi's display strategy in *Wild Mothers*, it elicited a more interactive bodily reception on the part of the audience.

In 2014, Gill completed a very different kind of project, which she had been working on for almost a decade alongside her desert photographs: the "notebook" entitled *1984*, (figure 4.10). This 84-page work was comprised, once again, of a combination of text and images that probed the tragedy and violence of the anti-Sikh pogrom that swept Delhi in the year 1984. Gill combined photographs she had taken in 2005, 2009, and 2014, many initially for print journalism, along with text provided by the photographic subjects as well as writers and artists reacting to the images and reflecting on their own experience of the associated riots. The dynamics of collaboration that characterized this work were even more complex than in Gill's previous projects, as she worked with both her photographic subjects along with more than thirty additional contributors, many of whom she had known personally for decades. The project also heightened the interplay between the image and text that she had begun to develop in *Balika Mela*.

1984 was Gill's most straightforwardly political project, intensifying the artist's commitment to shedding light on the ethically consequential silence/absence of the State. Like *Jannat*, it relied on a logic of both revealing and concealing, rather than addressing the trauma of the massacre in any straightforward manner. As Gill wrote toward the end of the book:

> There is a kind of silence around 1984, which may follow from an impossibility of comprehension of violence, and the terrors of reliving it.

[274] Interview with the author, July 7, 2017.

> Perhaps the stone-deaf silence that has been the State's response to witness accounts makes the futility of summoning a voice stark.[275]

It is clear that Gill intended *1984* as a deeply personal mode of moral redress for one of India's recent historical traumas rather than a strictly fine art endeavor. This intention was highlighted by the project's highly unusual manner of distribution: it was printed on cheap paper and given away throughout Delhi as well as made available online as "free to download, print out, staple and distribute." Not only did this strategy allow for dramatically increased accessibility, but also registered resistance to the market imperatives of the commercial gallery system.

Gill further expanded the nature of her artistic collaboration in the series *Field of Sights* (2013 – ongoing), in which she worked with the third-generation *Whirli* painter Rajesh Vangad to create painted photographs that inscribed mythical geographies onto contemporary landscapes, (figure 4.11). As Gill described in an interview, Vangad was her host for several weeks in 2013 when she came to stay in his native village of Ganjad, in western Maharashtra. As she photographed the area, Vangad would tell her anecdotes of personally significant places within the landscape—especially those places that had been transformed through industrialization over the course of his lifetime. Although she had not originally intended to initiate a collaboration, Gill increasingly came to feel that Vangad's memory of the landscape was central to the location's significance and that these deeply embedded personal narratives could not be fully captured by her photographic images alone. So she invited him to paint over her pictures using the "traditional" visual language of which he was a master. Through their collaboration, Gill

[275] Gauri Gill, *1984* (published online at http://www.gaurigill.com/works.html, 2014), 82.

and Vangad were able to powerfully assert an equivalence between the photographic medium—often understood as a technology of "modernity" and the medium of "traditional" painting, which is too often relegated to the "timeless" past of the pre-modern world. These two expressive modes were not at odds in *Fields of Site*, but rather served to ground each other fundamentally in two very differently embodied narratives of place.

These collaborative projects were carried out alongside somewhat more private explorations Gill pursued with her camera, such as *Traces* and *The Mark on the Wall*, both of which she began in 1999, and like many engagements in Gill's oeuvre, remain ongoing. In *Traces*, Gill memorialized the unmarked graves she found scattered across the Thar desert. *The Mark on the Wall* documents paintings and drawings Gill found on the walls of classrooms across Rajasthan. Some of these images are whimsical and ephemeral, like the lightly scratched outline of a young girl in a skirt with a satchel striding stiffly up to a building with a half-drawn man in a Nehru cap behind her, (figure 4.12). Other images are diagrammatic such as a human figure with body parts labeled in English or a map of India with place names in Hindi. These latter works—at once didactic and idiosyncratic—were part of the now defunct *Leher Kaksha* government initiative intended to help school children learn through pictures.

Both of these projects, along with images from Gill's *Birth Series* (2005), were most recently displayed as part of documenta 2017, both in Kassel, Germany and in the Athens Epigraphical Museum in Greece (figure 4.13). In the latter display, the photographs were installed around the museum's collection of ancient stone inscriptions, many of which were more than two millennia old. The juxtaposition between the Greek

artifacts and Gill's images—writing on the wall, traces in the earth—suggested a suturing of time and place, establishing a surprising aesthetic rapport between contemporary India and the ancient Hellenic world.

Looking Forward, Together

In 2017, Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh, and Gauri Gill are at the height of their careers as mature artists. Each developed a complex practice based on long-term collaborations that emerged from their encounters with the limits of journalistic photographic paradigms. Building on the unique colonial and vernacular history of photography in South Asia, these artists combined text with image to offer representation and recognition to people who existed, in some sense, on the margins of Indian society. Over the last decade, each artist has expanded her practice to explore alternate modes of photographic distribution and display, often aiming to attract viewership beyond the elite confines of museum and gallery venues and at times resisting the forces of the international art market. This opening up of "traditional" genres to include more diverse audiences and experimental interventions in space is self-consciously in dialogue with broader developments in the Indian art world as its global reach has expanded dramatically in recent years.

However, the development of each woman's career over the last decade also represents a fundamental continuation of their earliest concerns: an ethical and sustained engagement with their subjects. In each case, their earlier projects remain fundamentally unfinished, as they continue to photograph the same subjects year after year—often incorporating the more recent images into new books, installations, and other modes of public display. The nature of this commitment anticipated the broader turn toward

participatory engagement with marginal subjects in the public sphere that has now come to characterize the Indian art world at large. Yet, as this dissertation has argued, the work of Chhachhi, Singh, and Gill remain exemplary within this trajectory for the intimacy, depth, and duration of their engagement.

Figures

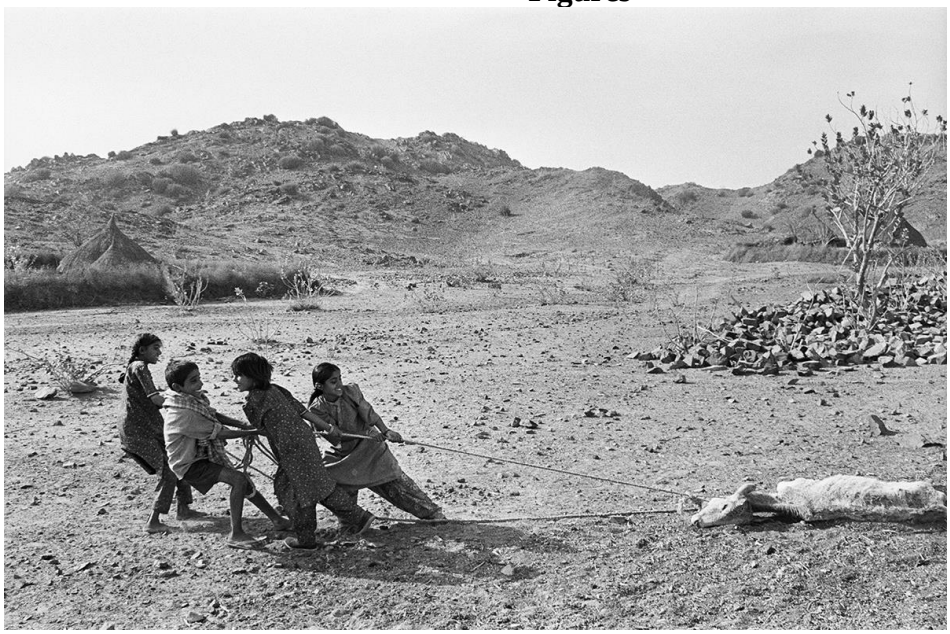


Figure 0.1 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999-2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 0.2 Dayanita Singh, *I started to dislike humans so much that I started to adore animals and made my family of animals. I had one Doberman, one monkey, four rabbits, two dozen ducks. 1999.* Photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 115



Figure 0.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled.* Photograph reproduced from: Sheba Chhachhi, *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.1 Felice Beato, *Interior of the Secundrabagh After the Massacre*, 1958, albumen silver print, 9 7/16 x 11 5/16 in. (24 x 28.7 cm.). J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Figure 1.2 Margaret Bourke-White, *Spindly but determined old Sikh, carrying ailing wife, sets out on the dangerous journey to India's border* (original caption from LIFE in 1947). The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images, 1947



Figure 1.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shardabehn – Public Testimony, Police Station, Delhi*, 1988, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 776 x 519 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.4 Sheba Chhachhi, *Sathyarani – Anti Dowry Demonstration, Delhi, 1980*, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 386 x 567 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.5 Sheba Chhachhi, *Urvashi—Staged Portrait, Gulmohar Park, Delhi*, 1980, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 522 x 783 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.6 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shanti—Staged Portrait, Dakshinpuri, Delhi, 1991*, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 777 x 517 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.7 Sheba Chhachhi, *Devikripa—Staged Portrait, Seemapuri, Delhi*, 1990, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 769 x 515 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.8 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shahjahan Apa—Staged Portrait, Nangloi, Delhi*, 1991, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 785 x 521 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.9 Sheba Chhachhi, *Sathyarani—Staged Portrait, Supreme Court, Delhi*, 1990, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 772 x 516 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.10 Sheba Chhachhi, *Sathyarani – Staged Portrait, Punjabi Bagh Residence*, Delhi, 1990, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 382 x 568 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.11 Top: *Lakshmi soon after marriage*, bottom: *Burned because her parents could not afford 'enough' dowry*. Photograph reproduced from: Mahila D. Samiti, "Burning of the Brides," *New Internationalist Magazine*, November 1979, Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Limited



Figure 1.12 Sheba Chhachhi, *Shahjahan Apa—Anti Dowry Public Testimonies, India Gate, Delhi*, 1986, printed 2014, gelatin silver print on paper, 381 x 568 mm. *Seven Lives and a Dream*, Tate Collection, London (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)

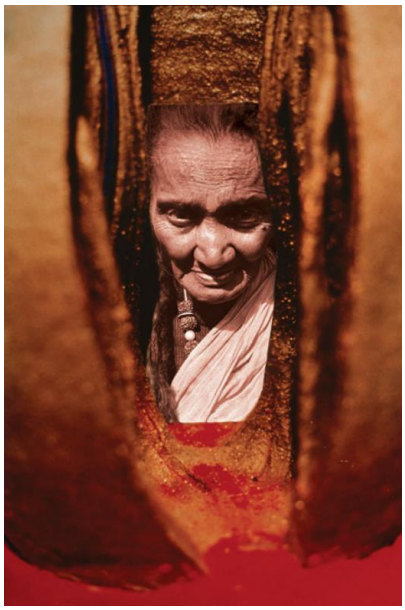


Figure 1.13 Sheba Chhachhi, *Wild Mother I: The Wound is The Eye*, 1993, 3 terracotta sculptures; 9 terracotta tablets; hand-tinted silver gelatin prints; found images; turmeric; pigment; sand, 3.5 x 2.1 x 2.5 m

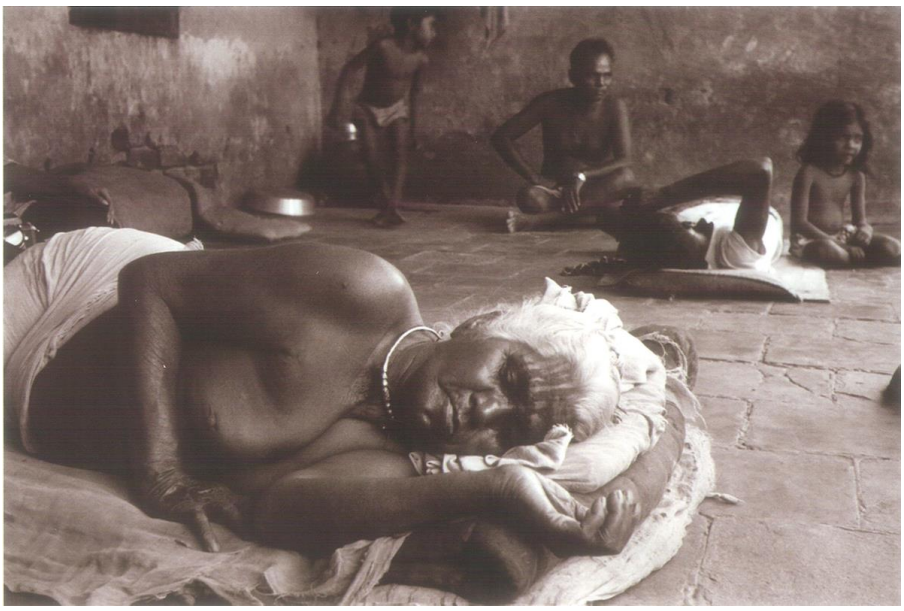


Figure 1.14 Sheba Chhachhi, *Subhadra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)

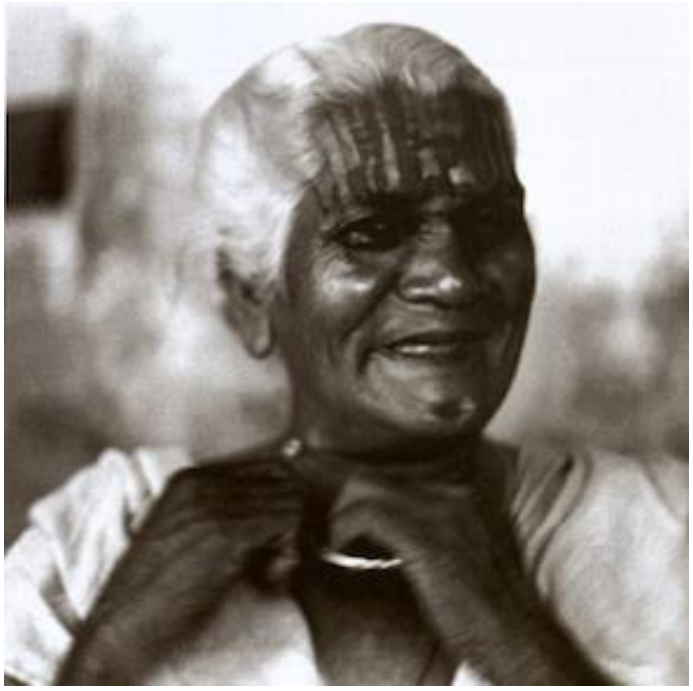


Figure 1.15 Sheba Chhachhi, *Subhadra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.16 Sheba Chhachhi, *Subhadra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.17 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.18 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.19 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.20 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.21 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.22 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.23 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.24 Sheba Chhachhi, *Untitled*, from *Initiation Chronicle* section. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.25 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.26 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.27 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 1.28 Sheba Chhachhi, *Mahant Mira Puri*. Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)

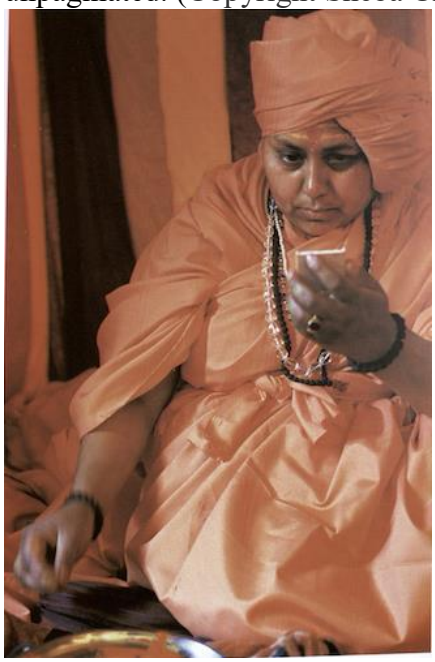


Figure 1.29 Sheba Chhachhi, *Rouge's Gallery.* Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)

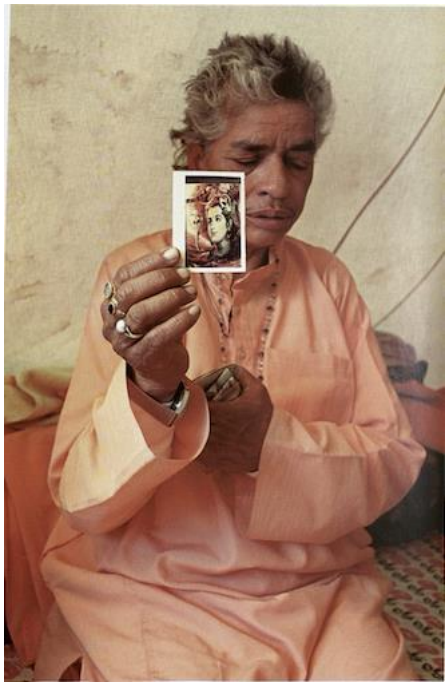


Figure 1.30 Sheba Chhachhi, *Rouge's Gallery.* Photograph reproduced from: *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007), unpaginated. (Copyright Sheba Chhachhi)



Figure 2.1 Dayanita Singh, *I chose this cake for Ayesha because I love to sit on a ship, and water all around makes me feel good. 1991*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 31



Figure 2.2 Dayanita Singh, *My first year of happiness in my life was with Ayesha. Never before had I been so happy. 1990*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 20



Figure 2.3 Dayanita Singh, *My eunuch brothers overseeing feast arrangements. 1990*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001) 24



My disciple Baby came from Lahore for Ayesha's second birthday. 1991

Figure 2.4 Dayanita Singh, *My disciple Baby came from Lahore for Ayesha's second birthday. 1991*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001) 33



Ayesha, a part of me, my heart, my life. 1992

Figure 2.5 Dayanita Singh, *Ayesha, a part of me, my heart, my life. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 54



Figure 2.6 Dayanita Singh, *Doll in my doll's lap. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 55



Figure 2.7 Dayanita Singh, *We lie around like a normal mother and daughter. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 56



Figure 2.8 Dayanita Singh, *Those few moments of happiness that came only for a little while. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 57



Figure 2.9 Dayanita Singh, *My love among her photos. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers,

2001), 58



Taking Ayesha to school. 1992

Figure 2.10 Dayanita Singh, *Taking Ayesha to school. 1992*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 61



When I started to live in the graveyard, my own blood family thought I was crazy and admitted me to the mental asylum. I came here because I could not bear the false glamour of city life. I hated the pretense that people put on. 1998

Figure 2.11 Dayanita Singh, *When I started to live in the graveyard, my own blood family thought I was crazy and admitted me to the mental asylum. I came here because I*

could not bear the false glamour of city life. I hated the pretense that people put on. 1998, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 100



Figure 2.12 Dayanita Singh, *I look like a sad Muslim woman after fighting with my guru Chaman. We went on a visit to the graveyard to show Ayesha the ducks. 1996*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 87



Figure 2.13 Dayanita Singh, *Finally, I became so depressed that I had to eat food from*

cheap roadside hotels, something I had never done in my life. I lost all my glory. Meeting people who are not even of my standard, just to have moments of happiness. 2000, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 154



Figure 2.14 Dayanita Singh, *I started to dislike humans so much that I started to adore animals and made my family of animals. I had one Doberman, one monkey, four rabbits, two dozen ducks. 1999*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 115

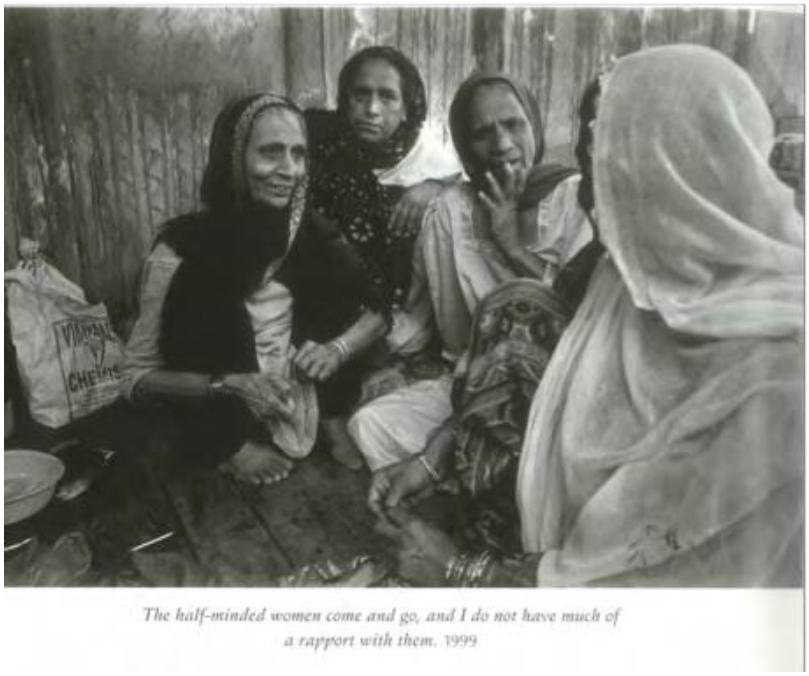


Figure 2.15 Dayanita Singh, *The half-minded women come and go, and I do not have*

much of a rapport with them. 1999, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 138

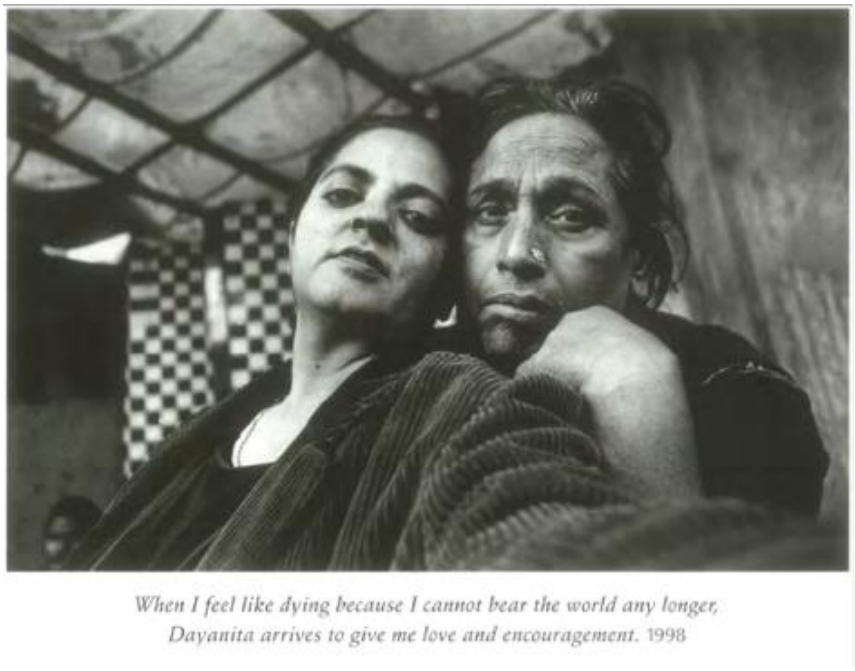


Figure 2.16 Dayanita Singh, *When I feel like dying because I cannot bear the world any longer, Dayanita arrives to give me love and encouragement. 1998*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 14



Figure 2.17 Dayanita Singh, *Dayanita helped me to make this room, but it is too hot on summer days and too cold on winter days. 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 143



When I went to meet Ayesha, the eunuchs had me tortured by the police. In my pain I ran to Dayanita's house to make a record of my pain. 1998.

Figure 2.18 Dayanita Singh, *When I went to meet Ayesha, the eunuchs had me tortured by the police. In my pain I ran to Dayanita's house to make a record of my pain. 1998*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 106



Looking at photos of myself. Sad memories, happy memories, but only memories. 2001

Figure 2.19 Dayanita Singh, *Looking at photos of myself. Sad memories, happy memories, but only memories. 2001*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh and Mona Ahmed, *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scallo Publishers, 2001), 10

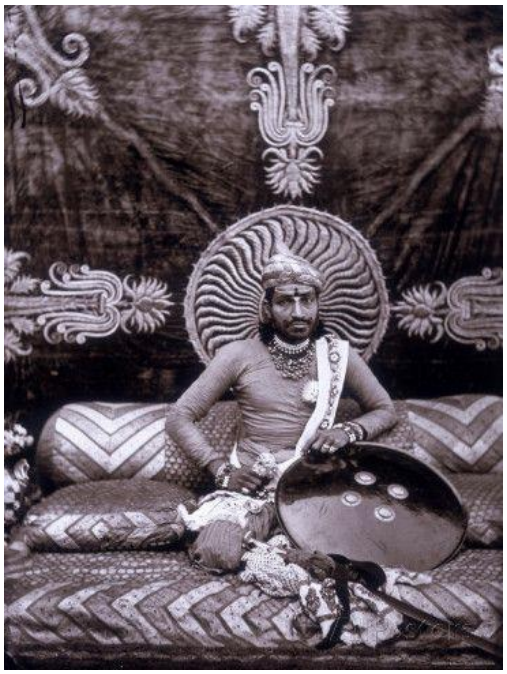


Figure 2.20 Ram Singh II, *Self-portrait I*, photograph reproduced from: Vikramaditya Prakash, "Between Objectivity and Illusion: Architectural Photography in the Colonial Frame," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 1, (September 2001): 14



Figure 2.21 Maharaja Ram Singh II, *Untitled portrait of a 'paswan' and her 'sakhi'*, modern print from collodion negative, ca 1860 – 80. City Palace Museum, Jaipur, Negative No. 1458. Courtesy Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum Trust, The City Palace, Jaipur, photograph reproduced from: Laura Weinstein, "Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah," *History of Photography* 34, no.1 (February 2010): 10



Figure 2.22 Unknown Photographer, *Seated Parsi Lady with a Pet Dog*, digitally reproduced positive from glass plate negative, c. 1900, photograph reproduced from: Christopher Pinney, "Stirred by Photography," in *Allegory and Illusion: Early Portrait Photography from South Asia*, eds., Christopher Pinney, Beth Citron, and Rahaab Allana (New Delhi: Mapin Publishing, 2013), 25



Figure 2.23 Dayanita Singh, *Mrs Menezes Braganza, Goa 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated



Figure 2.24 Dayanita Singh, *Braganza House, Goa 2000*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated



Figure 2.25 Dayanita Singh, *Koshi Kids, Bangalore 1997*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated



Figure 2.26 Dayanita Singh, *Sharbari Dutta, Calcutta 1999*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated



Figure 2.27 Dayanita Singh, *Samra Chopra, Pooa Mudheree, Deen Dayal, New Delhi 1996*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated



Figure 2.28 Dayanita Singh, *Minni Boga, New Delhi 1997*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated



Figure 2.29 Dayanita Singh, *Gary and Anita Lawyer, Bombay 2002*, photograph reproduced from: Dayanita Singh, *Privacy* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2003), unpaginated

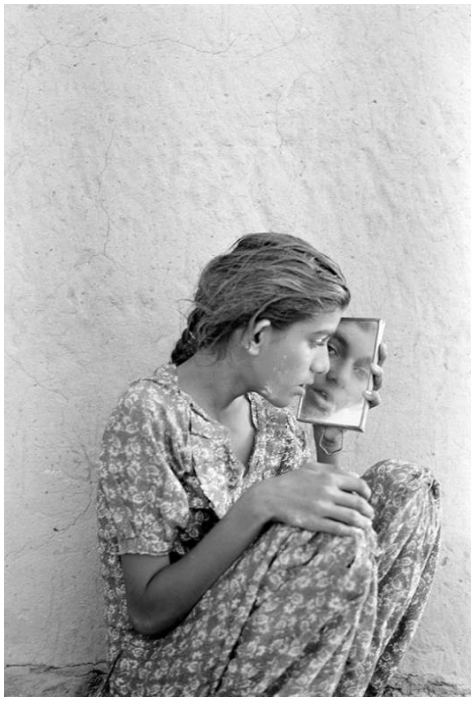


Figure 3.1 Gauri Gill, *Jannat*, from the series *Notes from the Desert*, 1999 – 2010, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.2 Titian, *Woman with a Mirror*, 1515, oil on canvas, 39 x 30 in. (99 x 76 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 3.3 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

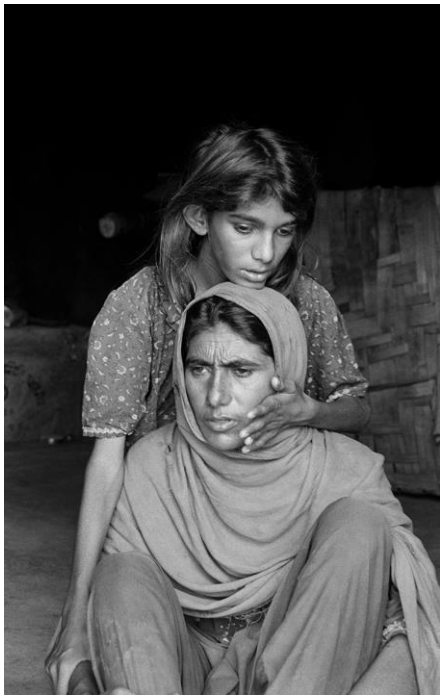


Figure 3.4 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

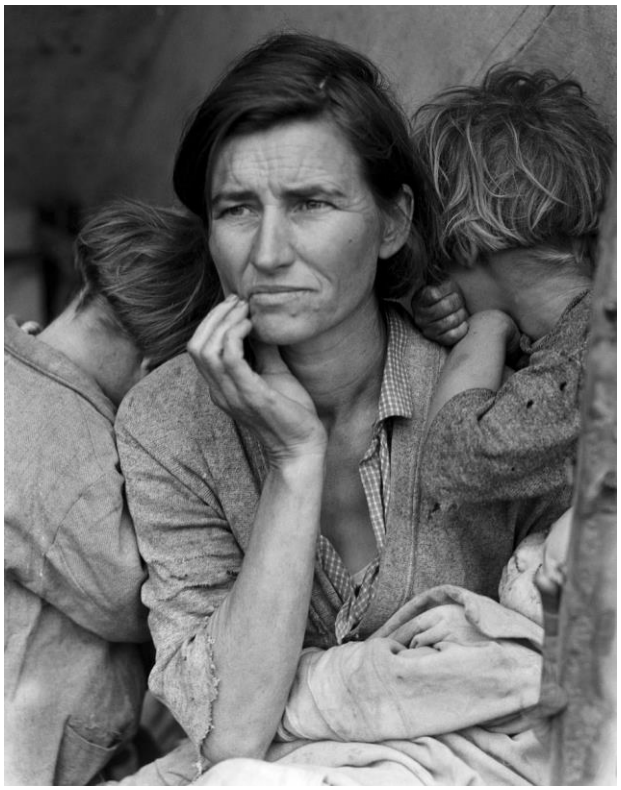


Figure 3.5 Dorothea Lang, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1935, silver gelatin print, 11 1/8 x 8 9/16 in. (28.3 x 21.8 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York



Figure 3.6 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

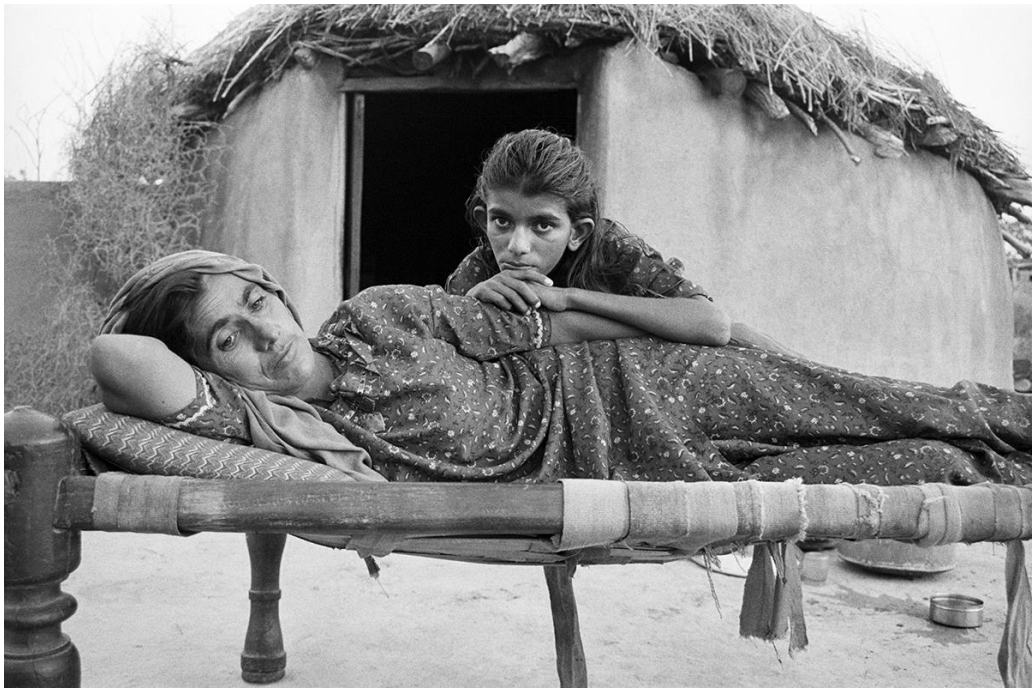


Figure 3.7 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.8 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

.



Figure 3.9 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

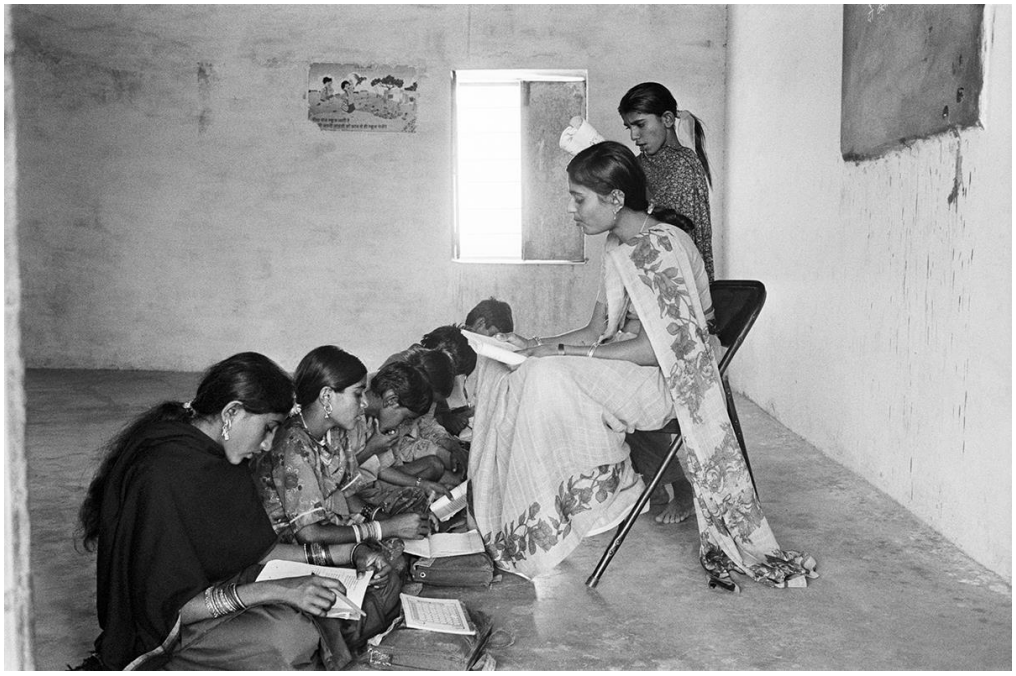


Figure 3.10 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

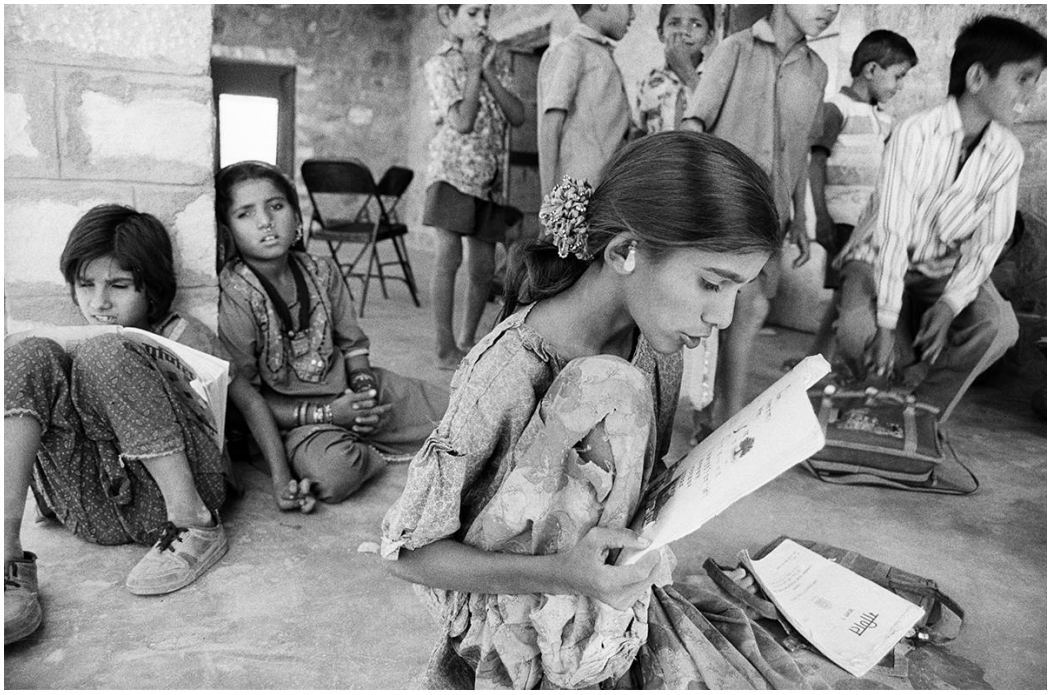


Figure 3.11 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

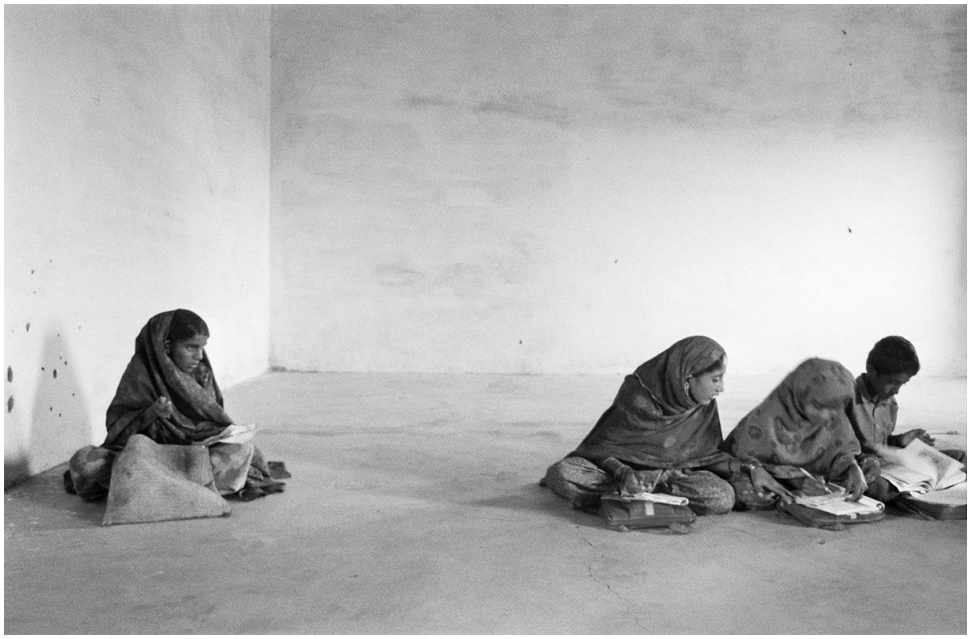


Figure 3.12 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

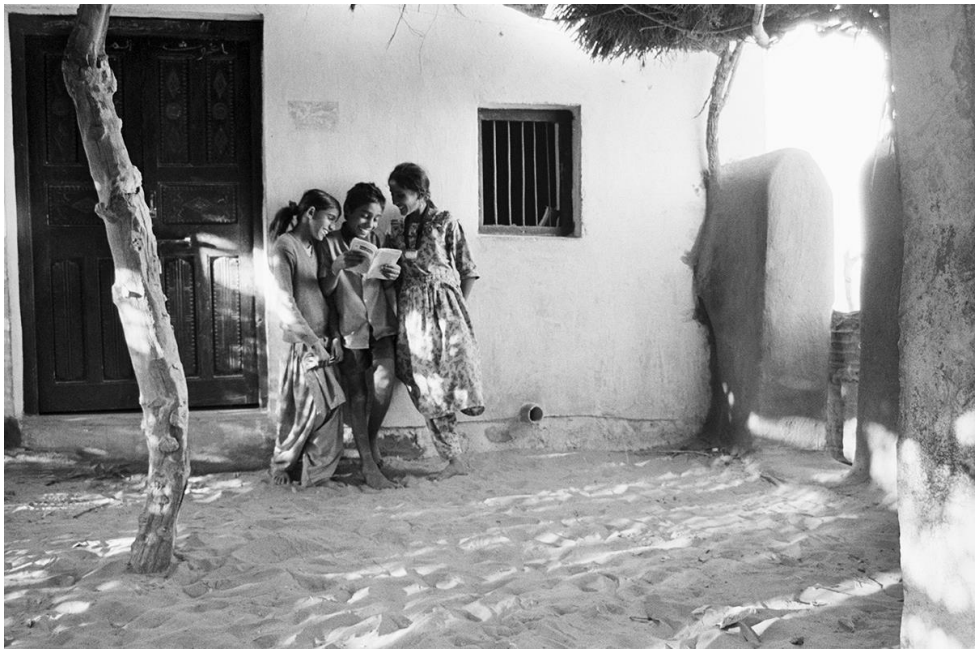


Figure 3.13 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.14 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.15 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.16 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

FIGURE NOT AVAILABLE.

Figure 3.17 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007, silver gelatin print. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

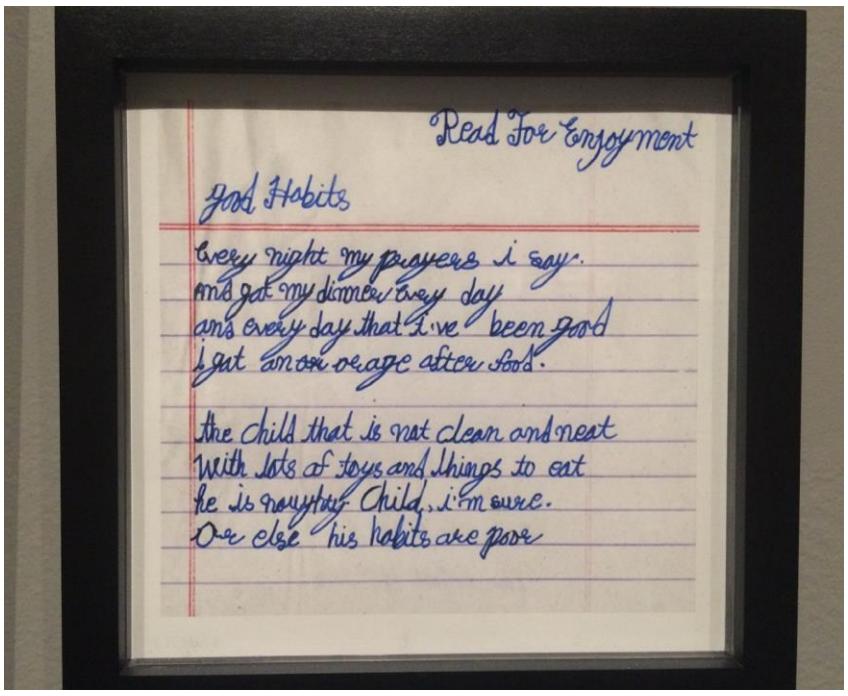
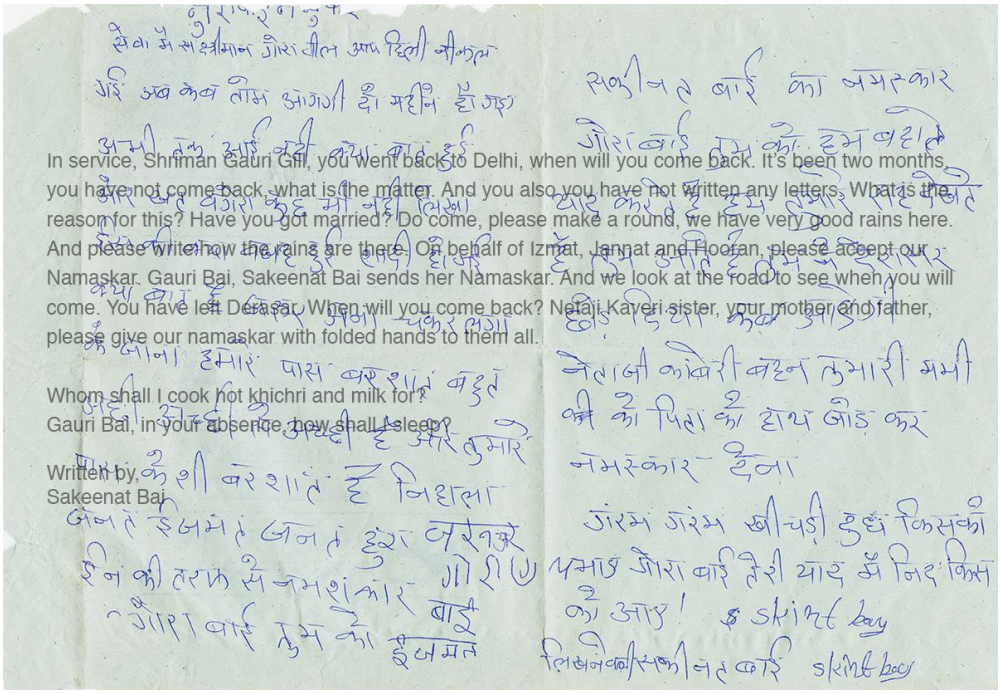


Figure 3.18 Gauri Gill, *Untitled text (Hooran's poem)*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



In service, Shriman Gauri Gill, you went back to Delhi, when will you come back. It's been two months, you have not come back, what is the matter. And you also you have not written any letters. What is the reason for this? Have you got married? Do come, please make a round, we have very good rains here. And please write how the rains are there. On behalf of Izmat, Jannat and Hooran, please accept our Namaskar. Gauri Bai, Sakeenat Bai sends her Namaskar. And we look at the road to see when you will come. You have left Derasar. When will you come back? Netaji Kaveri sister, your mother and father, please give our namaskar with folded hands to them all.

Whom shall I cook hot khichri and milk for?
Gauri Bai, in your absence, how shall I sleep?

Written by,
Sakeenat Bai

Figure 3.19 Gauri Gill, *Untitled (text 7- Izmat letter to Gauri)*, from the series *Jannat*, 1999 – 2007. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.20 Raghubir Singh, *A Village Well, Barmer District*. Photograph reproduced from: Raghubir Singh, *Rajasthan: India's Enchanted Land* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 75



Figure 3.21 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Untitled*. Photograph reproduced from: Henri Cartier-Bresson and Max J. Oliver, *Beautiful Jaipur* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1948), unpaginated

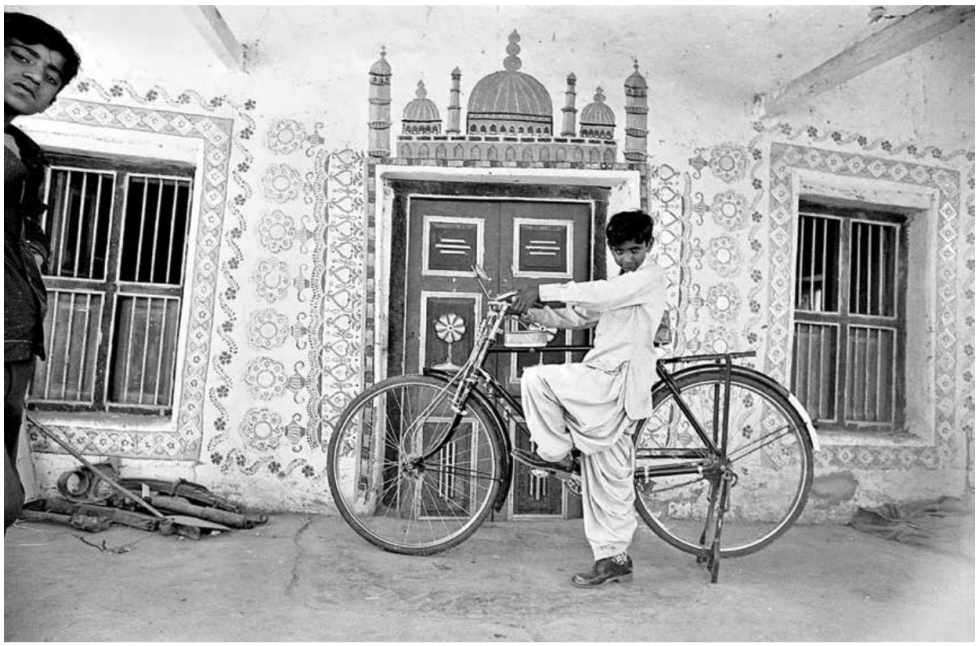


Figure 3.22 Jyoti Bhatt, *A Boy with a Bicycle in Dhordo, Gujarat*, 1973. Photograph reproduced from: *Domus* 40 (May 2015): 52



Figure 3.23 Jyoti Bhatt, *A Tiger and Calf, Rajasthan*, 1973. Photograph reproduced from: *Domus* 40 (May 2015): 53



Figure 3.24 Gauri Gill, *Santosh, Chhotri and Sakina*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 24 – 25. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

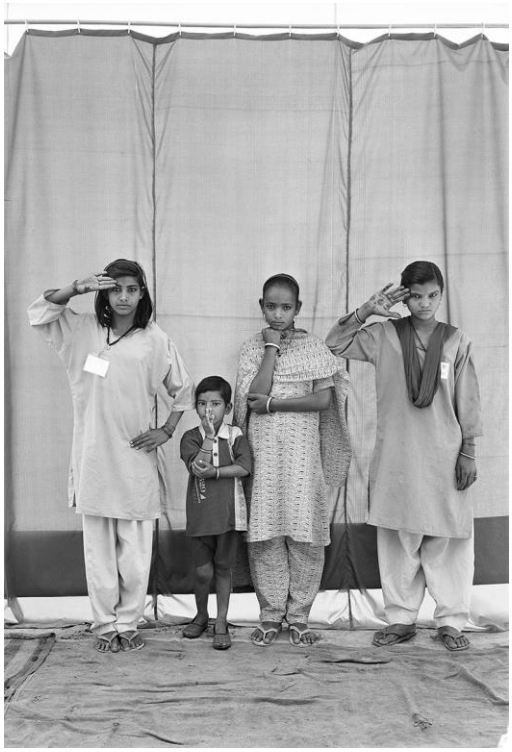


Figure 3.25 Gauri Gill, *Bimla, Ansi, Ropli and Chandra*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 135. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.26 Photographer unknown. Photograph reproduced from: Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12

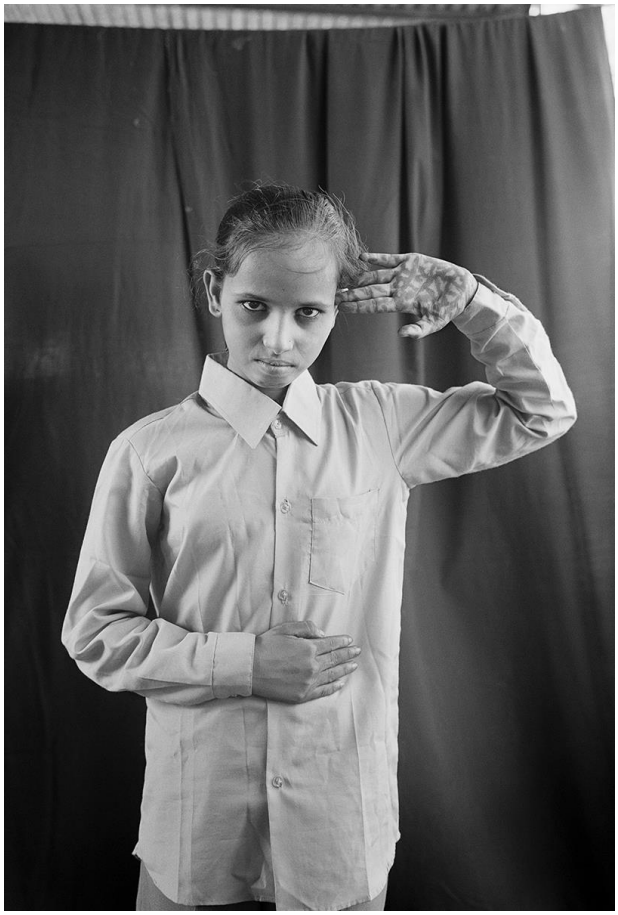


Figure 3.27 Gauri Gill, *Sundar*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 139. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.28 Youth Ki Awaaz, *Untitled*, accessed May June 5, 2017, https://www.scoopwhoop.com/Army-Navy-Air-Force-Different-Salutes/#.xkgof6czc



Figure 3.29 Gauri Gill, *Gomti*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 124. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.30 Gauri Gill, *Sita and Sharda*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 18. (Copyright Gauri Gill)

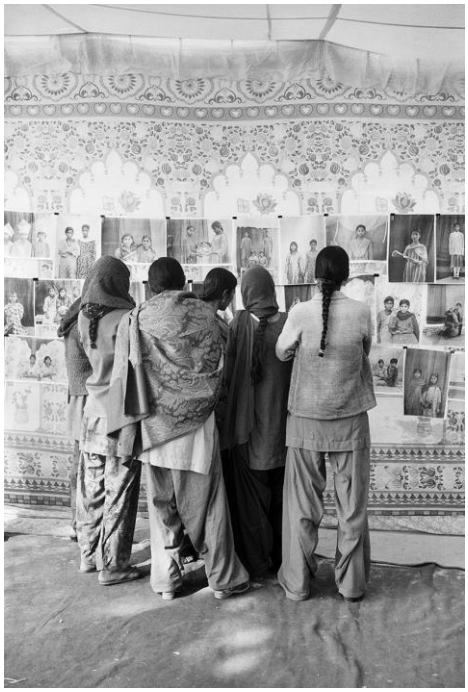


Figure 3.31 Gauri Gill, *Exhibition of the 2003 Images at Balika Mela in Urmal Setu*, 2010. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), 164. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.32 Gauri Gill, *Gomti*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), unpaginated section. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.33 Gauri Gill, *Geeta and Mamta*. Photograph reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), unpaginated section. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.34 Gauri Gill, *Geeta and Mamta*. Digital scan of multiple photos placed one on top of the other, reproduced from: *Balika Mela* (Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003), unpaginated section. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 3.35 Installation view, Charles Correa Foundation, Goa Photo Festival, Goa, 2016. (Copyright Gauri Gill)



Figure 4.1 Shilpa Gupta, *Blame*, *2002–04*, interactive installation with Blame bottles that contain simulated blood, posters, stickers, video, interactive performance, 1 min 49 sec loop, 300 x 130 x 340 cm (118 x 51 x 134 in)

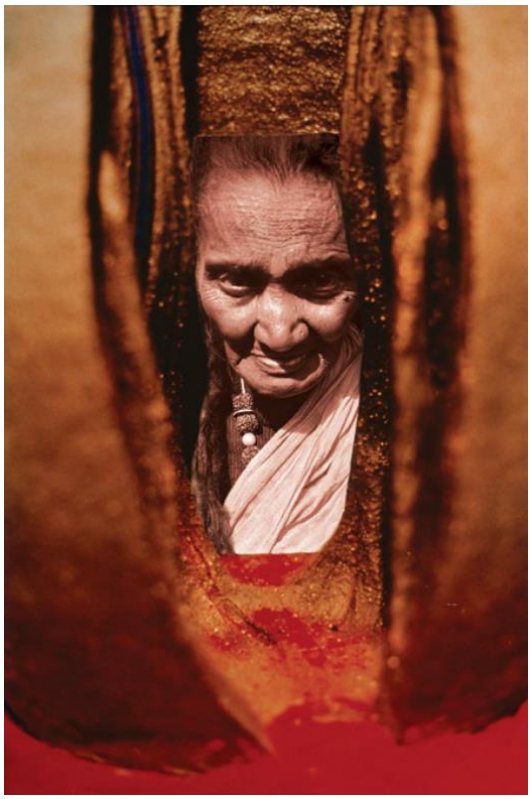


Figure 4.2 Sheba Chhachhi, *Wild Mother I: The Wound is The Eye*, 1993, 3 terracotta sculptures; 9 terracotta tablets; hand-tinted silver gelatin prints; found images; turmeric; pigment; sand (3.5 x 2.1 x 2.5 m)



Figure 4.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *Winged Pilgrims: A Chronicle from Asia*, 2006/2008, installation with 8 animated duratrans lightboxes, two layers: 120 x 65 x 10 cm each; 2 animated duratrans lightboxes, three layers: 180 x 65 x 10 cm each; 5 silk-and-fiberglass objects; 5 motion lamps; sound: 4', looped/ Darkened room (6 x 9 x 2.5 m)



Figure 4.4 Chhachhi, *Black Waters Will Burn,* 2011, public art project: 'Project Y'; Yamuna riverbank, Delhi, site-specific installation with gunny bags; sand; text; video projection: 3', looped; termocol, iron-and-gauze object (9.75 x 4.6 x 3 m)

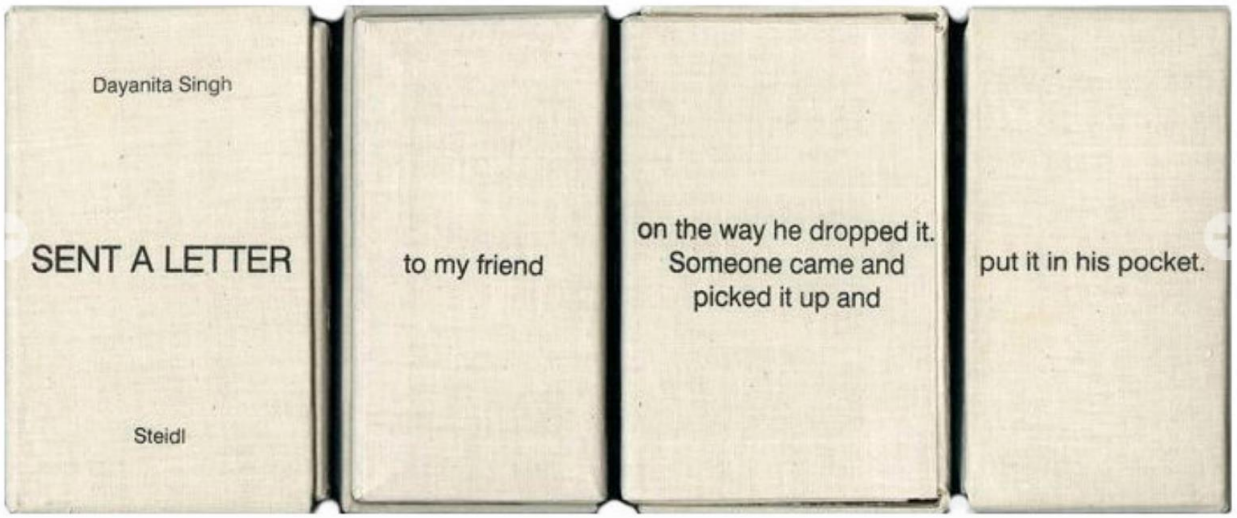


Figure 4.5 Dayanita Singh, *Sent a Letter*, 2008, 7 volumes, 126 pages, 9 cm x 15.5 cm, 7 softcovers, housed in a handmade cloth box (Göttingen: Steidl)



Figure 4.6 Dayanita Singh, *Untitled*, from *Museum of Chance*, 2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London).



Figure 4.7 Dayanita Singh, *Untitled*, from *Museum of Machines*, 2013.



Figure 4.8 Dayanita Singh, *File Museum*, 2012, 1 large and 3 small Burma teak structures, 140 archival pigment prints, 188 x 110 x 47.5 cm (large structure), 33.5 x 33.5 x 10.5 (each small structure), 31 x 31 cm (each print framed)



Figure 4.9 Gauri Gill, *Balika Mela*, 2003/2010, installation view, Charles Correa Foundation, Goa Photo Festival, Goa, 2016

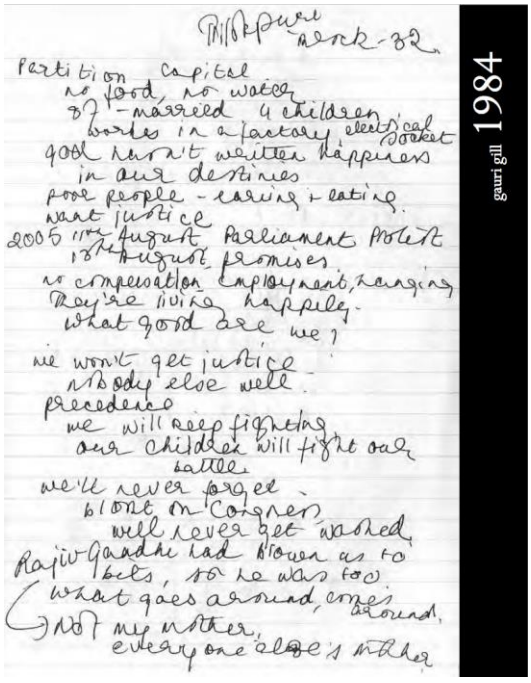


Figure 4.10 Gauri Gill, *1984*, released on Kafila.org in April 2013, re-released in November 2014 (22.86 x 17.78 cms) 84 pages, 42 black and white reproductions; free to download, print out, staple and distribute



Figure 4.11 Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad, *Memories Come to Rajesh*, from the series *Fields of Sight*, 2014, ink on archival pigment



Figure 4.12 Gauri Gill, *Untitled*, from the series *Mark on the Wall*, silver gelatin print, 11 in. x 14 in.



Figure 4.13 Gauri Gill, *Traces*, silver gelatin print, installation view at documenta 14, Epigraphic Museum

Works Cited

Adajania, Nancy. "Obey the Little Laws and Break the Great Ones: A Life in Feminism," in *Arc Silt Dive: The Works of Sheba Chhachhi*, edited by Kumkum Sangari, unpaginated. New Delhi: Tulika, 2016.

Albers, Kate Palmer. *Uncertain Histories: Accumulation, Inaccessibility, and Doubt in Contemporary Photography*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Verso, 1971.

Arbus, Diane. *Diane Arbus*. Millerton, New York: Aperture, 1972.

Art Institute of Chicago. "Dayanita Singh," Accessed May 20, 2017. http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/dayanita-singh.

Baker, George. "The Absent Photograph." In *Moyra Davey: Speaker Receiver*. Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 2010.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

Bean, Susan. *Midnight to the Boom: Painting in India After Independence*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*. New York: Random House, 1955.

Benjamin, Walter. "A Short History of Photography." *Screen* 13, no. 1 (March 1972): 5-26. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5.

Benjamin, Walter. "A Little History of Photography." Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited by M. W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008: 274 – 298.

Bhatt, Jyoti. "Experiencing Photography." *Domus* 40 (May 2015): 52-63.

Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51-79

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012.

Blessing, Jennifer and Nat Trotman. Editors, *Haunted: Contemporary Photography, Video, Performance*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2010.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics.* Translated by Simon Pleassace and Fronza Woods. Dijon-Quetigny: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

Brown, Rebecca M. "Colonial Polyrhythm: Imaging Action in the Early 19th Century." *Visual Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2013): 269 – 297.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.

Butalia, Urvashi. "Mona's Story." *Granta 115: The F Word, Essays & Memoir*, May 2011. London: Granta Publications.

Butler, Judith. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Cartier-Bresson, Henri. *The Decisive Moment*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952.

Cartier-Bresson, Henri. *The World of Henri Cartier-Bresson.* New York: The Viking Press, 1968.

Cartier-Bresson, Henri. *Henri Cartier-Bresson in India*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987.

Cartier-Bresson, Henri and Max J. Oliver. *Beautiful Jaipur*. Bombay: Times of India Press, 1948.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Chatterjee, Partha. "On Civil and Political Society in Postcolonial Democracies." In *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*, edited by Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, 165 – 178. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Chaudhary, Zahid R. *Afterimage of Empire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Chhachhi, Sheba. *Women of the Cloth: Photographic Conversations* (New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007).

Chhachhi, Sheba. "The Householder, the Ascetic and the Politician: Women *Sadhus* at the Kumbh Mela." *India International Centre Quarterly* 29, no. ¾, (2009): 224 – 234.

Chhachhi, Sheba. "Khoj Marathon: Sheba Chhachhi." Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist. YouTube, January 22, 2011. Video, 01:02. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-KLgEdQfpc.

Chhachhi, Sheba. "A River of Memories: Sheba Chhachhi profiled by Jyoti Dhar." *Art Asia Pacific*, Mar/Apr 2012. http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/77/ARiverOfMemoriesShebaChhachhi.

Chhachhi, Sheba. Interview by Vandana Shukla at Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademi. YouTube, July 7, 2013. Video, 39:14. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSDIhbfpIGs.

Chhachhi, Sheba. "Artists Talk." Presentation at the India Habitat Centre and Nazar Foundation, Delhi Photo Festival, Delhi, September 28, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXQsgQBErlU.

Chhachhi, Sheba and Kumkum Sangari, "Cracks and Luminosities: Through the Anthropocene and Capital Matters," in *Arc Silt Dive: The Work of Sheba Chhachhi,* edited by Kumkum Sangari, unpaginated, Mumbai: Volte Gallery, 2016.

Codell, Julie F., ed. *Power and Resistance: The Delhi Coronation Durbars, 1877, 1903, 1911*. New Delhi: Mapin Publishing Pvt. and The Alkazi Collection of Photography, 2012.

Cookman, Claude. "Margaret Bourke-White and Henri Cartier-Bresson: Gandhi's Funeral," *History of Photography* 22, no. 2 (1998): 199-209.

Das, Veena. "The Making of Modernity: Gender and Time in Indian Cinema." In *Questions of Modernity,* edited by Timothy Mitchell, 166-189. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Dehejia, Harsha V. Editor, *A Celebration of Love: The Romantic Heroine in the Indian Arts*. New Delhi, India: Lustre Press, Roli Books, 2005.

Dehejia, Vidya. *India Through the Lens*. Washington DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur Sackler Gallery, 2000.

Dewan, Deepali and Deborah Hutton. *Raja Deen Dayal: An Artist Photographer in 19th-Century India* (New Delhi: The Alkazi Collection of Photography, 2013.

Dube, Anita. "Notes on Gauri Gill's *Notes from the Desert*." *Art India Magazine*, 2010, http://gaurigill.com/reviews.html, pdf unpaginated.

Eaton, Natasha. *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation.* London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2013.

Eck, Diana L. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008.

Finkelpearl, Tom. *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2013.

Foster, Hal. "The Artist as Ethnographer" in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 171 – 204. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

Gadihoke, Sabeena. *Three Women and a Camera*. Video. 1998. New Delhi: Doordarshan.

Gadihoke, Sabeena. "The Home and Beyond: Domestic and Amateur Photography by Women in India (1930 – 1960)." In *Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies,* 61-69. New Delhi: The Sarai Programme, Center for the Study of Developing Societies, 2003.

Gadihoke, Sabeena. *India in Focus: The Camera Chronicles of Homai Vyarawalla*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2006.

Gill, Gauri. *1984.* Published online at http://www.gaurigill.com/works.html, 2014.

Gill, Gauri. *Balika Mela*. Zurich: Patrick Frey, 2003.

Gill, Gauri. *The Americans*. New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2008.

Gill, Kaveri. *Of Poverty and Plastic: Scavenging and Scrap Trading Entrepreneurs in India's Urban Informal Economy*. London: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Goldberg, Vicki. *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Gollonte, Carlos and Carlos Marin Garcia. "Dayanita Singh: The Poetry of the Invisible." Edited by Aveek Sen., *Dayanita Singh*. Madrid: Fundación MAPFRE, 2010.

Gupta, Akhil. *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012.

Gupta, Sunil. *Queer*. New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery, 2011.

Hegel, Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Jennings, Michael. *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

Kabir, Parvez. "Place for People': An Introduction," *Take on Art* Issue 05, Curation, (August 2011). https://takeonart.wordpress.com/2011/08/05/place-for-people-an-introduction-parvez-kabir/

Kapur, Geeta. *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi: Manohar Books, 2000.

Kapur, Geeta. "Gender Mobility: Through the Lens of Five Women Artists in India," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*. New York: Merrell, 2007.

Kapur, Geeta. "Secular Artist, Citizen Artist." *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*. Edited by Will Bradley and Charles Esche. London: Tate, 2007, 422-439.

Kapur, Geeta. "A Cultural Conjuncture in India: Art into Documentary." *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Edited byTerry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 30-59.

Kapur, Geeta. *Aesthetic Bind: Citizen Artist: Forms of Address*. New Delhi: Chemould Prescott Road Gallery Press Release, 2013, unpaginated.

Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Kester, Grant H, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011.

Khullar, Sonal. *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930 – 1990*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015.

Kojève, Alexander. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. New York: Basic Books, 1969.

Kojève, Alexander. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Edited by Allan Bloom. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

Kumar, Radha. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800 – 1990*. New Delhi: Zubann, 1993.

Kwon, Miwon. "Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tauzon and Nikki S. Lee." In *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, edited byAlex Coles, 74-93. London: Black Dog Press, 2000.

Kwon, Miwon. "The Becoming of a Work of Art: FGT and a Possibility of Renewal, a Chance to Share, a Fragile Truce," In *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*. Edited by Julie Ault, 281-314. New York: Steidldangin, 2006.

Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Lakhani, Somya. "Mona Ahmed, Transgender & Photographer's Muse, Dies at 81." *The Indian Express*, September 11, 2017. http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/mona-ahmed-transgender-photographers-muse-dies-at-81-4837676/.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous: Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other*. Translated by Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

MacDougal, David. *Photo Wallahs: An Encounter with Photography in Mussoorie, a North Indian Hill Station*. Oxnard Film Productions, 1991.

MacDougall, David. "'Photo Wallahs:' An Encounter with Photography" *Visual Anthropological Review* no. 8.2 (1999): 96 - 100.

MacDougall, David. "Photo Hierarchicus: Signs and Mirrors in Indian Photography." *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Madhu, Kishwar. "Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 43 (1996): 2867-74.

Mathur, Saloni. "Partition and the Visual Arts." *Third Text* (October 2017): unpaginated. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1381409

Mathur, Saloni. *A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art.* Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming.

Mani, Bakirathi. "Viewing South Asia, Seeing America: Gauri Gill's *The Americans*." *American Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (March 2010): 135 – 150.

Mauss, Marcel. *An Essay on the Gift: The Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies.* New York: WW Norton & Co., 2000.

Moss, Jessica and Ram Rahman. *The Sahmat Collective: Art and Activism in India since 1989*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Museum of Modern Art. "The Family of Man: January 24 – May 8, 1955." Accessed April 11, 2017. https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2429.

Nagy, Peter. "Post-script." In Sheba Chhachhi's *Women of the Cloth*. New Delhi: Nature Morte, 2007, unpaginated.

Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. New York: Wadsworth, 1990.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Padmanabhan, Chitra. "Wild Mothers." *Tehelka*, October 1, 2008. http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_naturemorte_com/e8ab22dc.pdf.

Panofsky, Erwin. *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*. London: Phaidon, 1969.

Pinney, Christopher. *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Pinney, Christopher. *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and the Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.

Pinney, Christopher. "Stirred by Photography," in *Allegory and Illusion: Early Portrait Photography from South Asia*, eds., Christopher Pinney, Beth Citron, and Rahaab Allana (New Delhi: Mapin Publishing, 2013), 12-29.

Pinney, Christopher and Suresh Punjabi. *Artisan Camera: Studio Photography from Central India*. Chennai: Tara Books, 2016.

Prakash, Gyan. “Body Politic in Colonial India.” In *Questions of Modernity*, edited by Timothy Mitchell, 189-223. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Prakash, Vikramaditya. “Between Objectivity and Illusion: Architectural Photography in the Colonial Frame.” *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 1, (September 2001): 13-20.

Rai, Praveen. “Women’s Participation in Electoral Politics in India.” *South Asia Research* 37, no. 1 (2017): 58 – 77.

Rai, Raghu. *Raghu Rai’s India: Reflections in Colour*. London: Haus Publishing, 2008.

Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Riis, Jacob August. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*. New York: Penguin, 1901.

Roy, Arundhati. “Author Arundhati Roy on Her New Book *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*” *Mumbai Mirror*, June 6, 2017. https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/jitna-bhi-gaali-doh-would-i-like-to-write-something-else-no/articleshow/58902363.cms.

Rutten, Kris, An van. Dienderen and Ronald Soetaert, “Revisiting the Ethnographic Turn in Contemporary Art.” *Critical Arts*, 27, no. 5, (2013): 459-473.

Samiti, Mahila D. “Burning of the Brides.” *New Internationalist*, November, 1979. http://newint.org/features/1979/11/01/burning-brides/.

Sandeen. Eric J. *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

Sangari, Kumkum, ed. *Arc Silt Dive: The Work of Sheba Chhachhi*. Mumbai: Volte Gallery, 2016.

Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Sen, Aveek. “Ladies of Calcutta.” In *Dayanita Singh*. Edited by Avek Sen, Madrid: T.F. Editores, 2010, 81-148.

Sharma, S. K. *Hijras: The Labeled Deviants*. New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1989.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part I.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015.

Singh, Bhrigupati. *Photography and Prana (Life Force), Thinking with Dayanita Singh*. Exhibition catalogue for "Origins" curated by Rahaab Allana and Nandita Jaishanker. New Delhi: PhotoUKIndia, 2015.

Singh, Bhrigupati. *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Singh, Dayanita. *Myself Mona Ahmed*. Zurich: Scalo, 2001.

Singh, Dayanita and Britta Schmitz. *Privacy*. Gottingen: Steidl: Staatiliche Museen zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 2003.

Singh, Dayanita. Interview by Stephanie Rosenthal. In *Dayanita Singh: Go Away Closer*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Hayward Publishing, 2014).

Singh, Dayanita. "Art Talk – Dayanita Singh (Photographer / Artist)," Interview by Jujhar Singh, *Art Talk*, NewsX channel, October 13, 2014. Video, 25.58. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBCI5KvrFx4.

Singh, Raghubir. *Rajasthan: India's Enchanted Land*. Verona: Thames and Hudson, 1981.

Sinha, Gayatri. *Gauri Gill—The Americans*. Delhi, India: EIH Printing Press, 2008.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Picador USA, 1977.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses*. Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1899.

Stone, Sarah. "Who was the Woman in the Famous Great Depression Photograph?" *Daily Knowledge Newsletter*. Accessed May 10, 2017. http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2014/08/woman-famous-great-depression-photograph/.

Subramanyan, K. G. *The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1987.

Tarlo, Emma. *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

Throckmorton, Jodi, Atreyee Gupta, Latika Gupta, Raqs Media Collective, and Susan Krane. *Postdate: Photography and Inherited History in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

Vyas, M. D. and Yogesh Shingala. *The Life Style of the Eunuchs*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1987.

Watson, J. and Sir John William Kaye. Editors, *The People of India*. London: India Museum, 1875.

Weinstein, Laura. "Exposing the Zenana: Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II's Photographs of Women in Purdah." *History of Photography* 34, no. 1, (February 2010): 2-16.