

**Spatializing the Visual:  
Re-locating Women's Photographs in Bengal, 1880s-1970s**

**Synopsis of the Dissertation submitted to Jadavpur University, Kolkata for  
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# Spatializing the Visual: Re-locating Women's Photographs in Bengal, 1880s-1970s

## Background

Photographic practices as these emerged since the nineteenth century has been largely posited inside constructs of colonial modernity and governmentality in India. Post-Industrial Revolution (1760s-1830s) redefinition of families led to the emergence of visual representations of women in the light of newly constituted, smaller families and a re-formulated sexual division of labour. It was justified by a hegemonic male agency through generalized binaries between home / world, private / public and female / male.

Modernity, taken as a rupture with traditions, acquires a position of continuity that usher in new modes of knowledge and experience. With the advent of modernity in Europe, soon to travel to colonies, systems of visual representation underwent radical changes in technical and aesthetic arenas of visual, primary among which is photography. The rise of modernity in various spheres of life conditionally redesigned existing norms of representation in which the visual appeared as a prime category where shifts began to happen. The development of photography, its skyrocketing popularity, the emergence of compact families and changing roles of women are interlinked in a mesh of macro and micro changes in the realm of the social and the technical. The camera and

the dominant modes of representation pertaining to it were controlled by a patriarchy more hegemonic than overtly repressive such as other changes in the process of production and labour, women's education and social reforms in India since the nineteenth century.

Modernity in the visual domain was inseparable from a massive reorganization of empirical and epistemological praxis that modified the productive, cognitive and desiring capacities of the 'human' subject. The photograph appeared not only as a new element in the commodity economy but also as a reason in the restructuring of an entire territory in which signs and images, each effectually detached from a referent, circulate and multiply. Nineteenth-century stress on historical reality depending upon temporally and spatially constructed knowledge led to uses of photography as an important contributor to the call for truthfulness and exactitude in knowledge. As a distinctive technology of capturing the factual and pressurizing towards 'objective' formations of knowledge, photography as a mode of production and technological reproduction customized various formations of 'realities'. From the second half of nineteenth century, the pattern of use of photography in the hands of governmental apparatuses, colonial-governmental enterprises and the public witnessed a shift from the obsessive emphasis on 'objectivity' towards ideologically appropriated contexts of the social and gender. This specificity of photographic consumption is formulated by Judith Mara Gutman as an Indian

conception of reality.<sup>1</sup> Even if elusive and refractory, photography, as a representational technique, helps in understanding social cultural milieus, multiple spaces of gender economies and different ideological contexts.

Within the context of colonialism photography was one of the technologies of memory that supplemented the nostalgic remembrance of the individual by the reproduction of her/his own past as a sign of difference. The colonized body and the desire to possess a new individuality and an unconscious obsession with tradition signify the new social formation of colonial modernity (Parayil 2003). While governmental and official archives of photographs were being put together in a process of ‘textualization’, it was underpinned by a ‘citationality’ that led to newer contextualization beyond the colonies.

Roughly from the 1880s, photography played a significant role in construction of the social and family history of the region of the undivided Bengal<sup>2</sup>. The *bhadra samaj*<sup>3</sup> in Bengal accepted photography as a useful innovation. This acceptance fractured the public / private dichotomy without too much dislocation. It portrayed the emergence of the conjugal unit, the child and the woman. Structural categories such as the evolution of the family, progress of

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Mara Gutman. *Through Indian Eyes : 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Photography from India*. New York : Oxford University Press and International Center of Photography, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Later in 1947 to be divided as West Bengal (in India) and East Pakistan which turned into Bangladesh in 1971 after the war of liberation from Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> Genteel society mostly constituted by the middle-class in Bengal.

girl's education, women's emerging roles were to a large extent helped by the dynamics of the new visual space. Sections of *bhadra samaj*, which were increasingly moving away from land-based occupations to professions such as government service, law, medicine and teaching, were simultaneously redefining their lifestyles. The foregrounding of the 'rational' outlook was important to such changes in this process of refiguring in which the woman emerged as a primary exhibit. With the selective coalescing of the public and the private, a colonial hybrid emerged and in this transformation questions of originality and mimicry were subtly merged. With the coming of colonial modernity, conceiving the nation was a major historical project that re-shaped real and representational spaces within indigenous societies. With the introduction of the public and private divide in the wake of nationalism, as Partha Chatterjee<sup>4</sup> and others have shown, the family emerged as the inner domain of national culture to be located and dislocated by a sovereign patriarchy (Karlekar 2005 & 2006).

Public viewing through photographs of mothers, wives and sisters, was integral to the affirmation of emerging identities and an engagement with gender relations in late nineteenth-century Bengal. Similar to other forms of

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Nation and its Fragments* in Partha Chatterjee. *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2006. Also see, Dipesh Chakrabarty's arguments in *Provincializing Europe* and *The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal* (Subaltern Studies VIII). I am using Partha Chatterjee's formations with an awareness that many feminist scholars differ from his arguments regarding the woman's question (and its resolution) in colonial Bengal.

representation, photography (and photographs of women) exhibited multiple fissures where the binary logic of gendered social spaces falls apart. While a definite economy of photographs emerged that posited Bengali women cast in stereotypes, it simultaneously produced images that slipped out of the moulds of the historically overdetermined representations of Bengali women. Therefore, the thesis will be an intervention in mapping such territories of visual practices in Bengal pertaining to the lives of women since the nineteenth century stretching to the first seven decades of twentieth century (Karlekar 2005 & 2006).

With the interiorization of photography from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, simultaneous with the emergence of women in the national pictorial imagination, a different trend of domestic photography began to develop. Women became one of the prime objects/subjects of focus. The process of consumption, appreciation and retrieval of memories and signification are often incompatible with dominant modes of representation in the public domain. Exploring ruptures in and possibilities of countering dominant representational modes in women's photographs will be a part of the thesis.

## Scope of the Study

The scope of this dissertation lies in the intersections of the fields of visual studies and gender studies. Meant to be a qualitative study, the dissertation looks into the reception of Bengali middle-class women's photographs in the family albums and photographs from the 1880s to the 1970s. The dissertation deals with the historical and ideological dynamics of photographs in exhibiting Bengali middle-class women through the photographic medium. The time period of the dissertation—1880s to the 1970s—witnessed the thoroughgoing popularity of the family album and family photographs to the extent that it became one of the pointers of the identity of the family and women in the region. On one hand the family album and family photographs became one of the cultural apparatuses through which the continuity of the Bengali middle-class family, gendered representations and the cultural nationalist tendencies of exhibiting the woman as the moral anchor of the family was kept alive. To some extent this remained unchanged in the ninety years that I have reviewed. On the other hand, I point out in this dissertation two ways in which women's representation in family albums and photographs can be possibly relocated. Firstly I read the notion of the archive—the family album as an archive and the digital archive of photographs through which this dissertation has been produced—as fundamentally informed with deficiencies of a generalized meaning making processes. I have made use of Derridian reading of the archive in situating the move.

Secondly, while critiquing simplistic and analogous ways of doing women's history through her visual depiction, I argue that the space and place of the family album and family photography opens up scopes of representation of women from the Bengali middle-class background. Hitherto almost impossible ways of representations of women from the middle-class families become possible through the photographic medium. The photographic album could be one way to look at the woman in the family without permanently reducing her to accepted stereotypes of mother, daughter, girl child, wife, widow and caregiver. The photograph, in the album, remains as a singular moment to be remembered in absence and presence of the subject/object through the works of the memory. These issues have been dealt with in this dissertation in bringing out the specificities of the photographic representation of women.

I was drawn to this area of research from my interests in the realm of visual studies generally and more specifically when I started collecting women's photographs from Bengali middle-class families in Kolkata and other districts of West Bengal from 2008 to 2011 as part of a digital archive building. This dissertation, in a way, is a response to scholarly works dealing specifically in women's photographic representations in the region. I can cite Malavika Karlekar's (2005, 2006, 2013) detailed and pioneering work on early photography in India and especially her focus on the Indian woman as the subject/object of the modern camera in Bengal and India.

My dissertation, while borrowing from her work also moves away from it. Pinney's (1997 and 2008) work has been another important contribution in mapping the colonial anthropological and postcolonial social dynamics of the photograph in the contexts of its usage and exchange in India. To the best of my knowledge, there is a lack in academic research on visualizing photographic representations of Indian middle-class women from Bengal and its possibilities with regard to the family album. This dissertation tries to address this gap in viewing/reading common middle-class women's photographic representations in the genre of the family album. On a more general level it became more evident that more often than not photographs in the family albums have been *forgotten*. The forgetting and remembering, as it happens in the place of the album, happens through discourse and ideologies at work. To formulate from what remains for the ordinary viewer (*as the researcher here, often with no definite knowledge of the family or of the woman*), I have moved from the diachronic to the synchronic study of photographs.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters which have been further divided into subsections. The order of the Chapters is the following:

Chapter I.      Grounds of Representation: Shifting Terrains in the Modern

Chapter II.      Interactions around the Photographic Image

Chapter III.      Situating the Archive, Locating Bengali Women in Photography

Chapter IV.      Image, History, and Memory: A Space of Her Own?

## Chapter V. Re-Locating Photographs of Bengali Women

Through these five Chapters I have surveyed the photographic realm of Bengali middle-class women as found in the genre of family photography and family albums.

In Chapter One I have begun with the review and survey of the word ‘representation’ and its complex enunciations in twentieth century critical thought. The problematic nature of the complexities of representation which is always in general terms tied up with the simple cognitive/historical moment of interpretation/description/fact. The survey forms the critical backdrop of the reading into the structures of the family album and photographs from the perspectives of post-structuralist conceptualizations on the meaning and its displacements.

Chapter Two deals with the scope and place of the photographic image in the age of technological reproducibility. The conceptual scope of photography in modernity has also been reviewed through a reading of the ocularcentric notions of the Cartesian schema of perspectivalism and truth through critiques by Georg Lukacs and Walter Benjamin dwelling upon the photograph as an object of cognizance. In continuation, the Chapter reviews the developments of photography in India and Bengal with reference to representations of the marginal in the popular and the governmental efforts at photography toward the notions of textualization and citationality.

Chapter Three begins with a detailed introduction of the digital archive on which this dissertation is based. The survey maps the scope of the collection and the notion of middle-class that has been used here. The Chapter moves on to a conceptual analysis of archive as a place of storage, knowledge production and epistemological intervention. The Chapter critiques the inferential production of knowledge from the archive that presupposes a kind of knowledge that the archive already exists.

Chapter Four traces the interplay of the image, history and memory with regard to the family photographs and the representation of Bengali middle-class women in them. The argument begins with questioning the possible tracing of the continuity of the family that is assumed and transferences of the family album in the region. The problematization of the representation of women in family albums is done through the ideation of contradictory meanings in photographs, remembering that the work of the memory marks an area of recognition beyond the presence or absence of the written word or the verbal cue.

Chapter Five, the concluding chapter of the dissertation, after the review of the familial turn of Bengali middle-class women's representation in photography, attempts to move away from the linear production of visual histories from family photographs of women. The Chapter looks into this with regard to the work of memory, romantic couples and death in the place and space of the family albums which can be thought of as specific and enabling spaces of Bengali middle-class women's representation. Based on three specific moments of the dislocation of the representation of the Bengali woman in family albums and

photographs I continue the argument. Firstly through couple photography and secondly dressing up photographs of women. Thirdly through death photographs showcasing women either as deceased or with their deceased spouse in family albums.

Although a significant part of the photographic representations reiterate existing stereotypes of middle-class Bengali women, my argument in the dissertation is that the album and the genre of family photography provides more possibilities of representations of women which have been traditionally overlooked in the visual exchange economies of family photography. The woman and her representation in the family albums form an arena of aporetic knowledge which cannot be subsumed under neat categories of stereotypical classification. Categories of representation of Bengali middle-class women that I have cited and discussed in the dissertation are only provisional. I have argued in the dissertation that photographic representation of Bengali middle-class women have remained limited to being aid to histories already available. I have consulted more than 10,000 photographic images ranging across two and half years of fieldwork in various places in West Bengal and especially in and around Kolkata. To me, a history of representation of Bengali middle-class women for about ninety years, needs layered scholarly attention and the perspectives of feminist critical thinking in trying to conceptualise the relocations of the visual economy necessary to grasp a history, if possible, of the subject woman that I have been surveying. This dissertation have tried to locate the researcher delving into photographic

representations of women more often than not finding herself grappling with silences and dead ends vis-à-vis information about photographs of women.

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