



**Figure 1.** Woman on motorbike, unknown photographer's studio, Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh.

## Street and Studio: Popular Commercial Photography in India and Bangladesh

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1. Cox's Bazaar, a beach resort on the south east coast near the Burmese border, is where the Bangladeshi middle classes take their holidays. Established by a British army officer, Captain Harry Cox, in 1799 as an asylum for the Rakhine – Muslim refugees from Burma<sup>[1]</sup> – it is a bustling fishing port with swimming facilities and hotels in a range of prices and amenities. It also gives tourists an opportunity to have holiday photographs taken, not just *in situ*, in the town itself, but also in the imaginary – 'as if' they had taken much more exotic and expensive overseas trips. It offers, that is, pictures of holiday dreams come true in the form of tangible evidence: the photograph that cannot lie but, at the same time, always speaks of its own contrivance (Figure 1).
2. The photographer here is a Hindu in a Muslim country, a man of low social status. Unlike the strictly street-based photographers, he has a small studio, even though it's no more than twelve feet square – a cupboard at the rear acts as a darkroom while, at the front, a small window displays samples of his photographic wares. There is a variety of backdrops stacked against the wall, each representing an imaginary scene to be chosen by the client – or else the curtain can be drawn across the field for a plainer background. The backdrops are made of canvas stretched on frames, painted in bright and alluring colours. The two-dimensional motorbike, however, is the only prop that this particular photographer offers. (The Coke bottle behind the bike isn't a prop: it's insurance against the frequent power cuts when it is used to hold a candle.) Other studios offer more, so that elements can be chosen and combined to give the most remarkable effects (Figures 2 & 3).



**Figure 2.** Unknown Muslim photographer in his studio – the Royal Studio – Bombay.



**Figure 3.** Children in same studio as Figure 2.

3. The backdrop in Figure 1 is a rough-and-ready view of the Taj Mahal presumably from the North, across the Yamuna River – as opposed to the more familiar, indeed iconic, view from the South along the main causeway. In a studio in Cox's Bazaar, though, it's an exotic Indian scene. At the same time, it carries important relevances for Bangladeshi tourists as a distant but desirable destination, for the monument was originally built between 1631 and 1653 by a Muslim, Shah Jahan, in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal as a love token and a monument to Muslim women. The Taj Mahal is designed as a mosque but is largely secular – it does not face Mecca, though it is inscribed with verses from the Qur'an in Arabic.<sup>[2]</sup>
4. In the space of the imaginary, then, it is the signifier of foreignness and exoticism par excellence – a place that would be ultimately desirable as a holiday destination but which is out of reach financially; for overseas holidays are very rare commodities even for middle-class Bangladeshis. While the Taj Mahal is old, the motorbike signifies modernity and so the two may be seen to sit together incongruously, even surrealistically. But the motorbike has much in common with the historic monument: it too gives the effect of opulence in a country where most people walk, use pushbikes or public transport. (And this is quite distinct from India where there's now a substantial *nouveau riche* who routinely tour abroad.) So the photos are used in quite particular ways then: as simulacra of wealth and exotic holidays; to be sent to friends and retained as keepsakes of events that happened only in the imaginary; and they act perhaps as a form of compensation for the actual, since Cox's Bazaar itself is rather seedy and garish.
5. Street photography as such (as opposed to the inexpensive studio) is even more down market. The difference is not unlike that between seaside studio portraits in, say, Blackpool, and quick fairground shots where clients put their heads through painted bodies to look like carnivalesque characters.

Kishan, the street photographer in Figure 4, has been using the same wooden camera and the same single backdrop for thirty-three years. Both have been repaired many times and the backdrop shows obvious signs of



**Figure 4.** Kishan, a street photographer in Pushkar, Rajasthan, NW India.

wear and tear and running repairs – though Kishan also owns a plain backdrop for official portraits. The backdrop scene is imaginary, a palatial gardenscape, and, again, unrelated to the actual street location in Pushkar (NW India). The price of a finished 5x6 inch black and white photo here is between 20 and 30 rupees (under one US dollar but a considerable sum locally, representing about the cost of a basic meal). These, then, are the basic parameters of Kishan's trade which he learned as a young man from an older master photographer (his 'guru').

6. And the trade he has learned, as it turns out, is a remarkable one. The camera he uses probably stems from the turn of the century or even earlier and operates in an intriguing way. It remains a fixed distance from the object (about 6ft). Kishan loads the camera with negative paper (Kodak commercial photographic paper). He exposes the paper by taking off the lens cap (there's no shutter) and counts to guess the exposure time – 2 to 3 seconds in daylight and 15 to 20 seconds in subdued light. During the exposure of the paper, the client must stay utterly still and not blink or change facial expression or else a blur will result. To end the exposure, Kishan replaces the lens cap. To develop the print, he uses the back of the camera itself as a kind of darkroom. Inside there is a tray containing homemade developing fluid. He pulls the paper out from behind the lens and dips it in the developer while looking at it through a red glass panel (which prevents white light from reaching the negative paper). Once it is sufficiently developed, Kishan removes it from the camera and dips it in a fixative tray (held underneath the camera) for a few seconds; then he washes the paper negative in a bucket of clean fresh water. He dries this as much as he can and then mounts the negative print on the frame visible in front of the camera lens and re-exposes the print for 10 to 15 seconds, again depending on the light conditions. Because he is re-photographing the original negative on to a further sheet of negative paper, he ends up with a positive print which he develops in the same way (back through the two solutions in the rear of the camera, washed in water and dried). It is then ready for the customer to take away. The whole process is while-you-wait – about 20 minutes from start to finish, no film, no plate.[3]

7. Clearly then, Kishan's method is a form of calotype, the process first announced by William Henry Fox Talbot to the Royal Society on 31st January 1839 (six months prior to the publication of Daguerre's plate method), therefore one of the earliest photographic processes known, and the only known method of using light-sensitive paper in the camera itself. There are however several differences between Fox Talbot's original procedure and those of the traditional Indian street photographers, though the differences are minimal. Fox Talbot prepared his own paper, while the street photographers use modern Kodak photographic paper. In the original calotype process, the negative image was taken from the camera, developed, pressed against photo-sensitive paper and exposed to sunlight to achieve the positive image.[4] By contrast, the street photographers actually re-photograph the negative to get a positive. This suggests that the Indian street situation is probably unique. It's a variation on the calotype and identical with it until the point of negative-positive

conversion. The calotype involved a darkroom process, outside the camera – whereas the Indian process involves developing the negative inside the camera, re-photographing, and then re-developing the new positive (also inside the camera itself).

8. In the standard manuals and histories of photography, there is no clear exposition of this unique and incredibly economical process. To guess at the nature of the invention: it appears that the early street photographers managed to hybridise two 19th century technologies: the calotype camera and the portable darkroom into a single apparatus.<sup>[5]</sup> Perhaps because of the sheer problems of having to carry the whole apparatus and having to present the client with a finished paper print quickly, they by-passed the luxuries of both plate and film photography and the Fox Talbot calotype itself (which all require separate development locales). How they arrived at this remarkable hybrid – a kind of Polaroid *avant la lettre* – is unknown.<sup>[6]</sup> It is documented, however, that unique local variations on the calotype were being used in India before 1853, and presumably, therefore, within a decade of Fox Talbot's announcement of the process.
9. In that year Robert Hunt describes a variation used by a Mr Muller: 'This gentleman had been practising photography with great success in Patna, in the East Indies. His process is as follows... .' Hunt then describes a remarkably economical version of the calotype process that is more reliant on lead than the more usual silver compounds. This appears to have been so effective to Hunt that he writes, 'After the ordinary exposure, it may be removed to a dark room; if the image is not already developed, it will be found speedily to appear in great sharpness *without any further application*. It may then be fixed with the hyposulphite of soda in the usual manner.'<sup>[7]</sup> Possibly, then, the search was on, in India, if nowhere else, for a highly efficient and, therefore commercially useable, manner of getting positive photographs directly from cameras before 1853, while all the standard chronologies report that, elsewhere, commercial photographers were still working with one or another of the cumbersome glass- or metal-plate processes. To be sure, Muller's process still involves a darkroom, but his whole impetus is to reduce the development process to a minimum. The impulse is Polaroidal – the same impulse behind today's Indian street photographers. But this is not the only advantage of the simplified calotype. It has further aesthetic and practical virtues: its soft edges are highly conducive to flattering portraiture and it has greater durability than the albumen print which is high on the list of delicacies for the ubiquitous termite.<sup>[8]</sup>
10. Rajahstan, the state in which Kishan operates, has many of its traditional crafts intact since it was fairly untouched during the Raj by the British who had little taste or

tolerance for its hot desert conditions. And while the well-known Indian devotion to photography no doubt has its colonial aspects,<sup>[9]</sup> photography counts, still, very much as one of those traditional crafts, particularly in Rajahstan. In Figure 5, another Rajahstani street photographer – this time in Jaipur – is working in front of a backdrop borrowed from a neighbour, one of a row of some six or so street photographers located in the Ram Nivas Gardens surrounding the Ram Nivas Bhag, one of the many palaces in Jaipur. The gardens and the palace are open to the public; local people go there for a day out, to take picnics and walks and to visit the zoo. This photographer's own backdrop shows



**Figure 5.** Unknown Hindu photographer, Jaipur, Rajahstan, NW India.

the palace itself; but the one shown in Figure 5, his neighbour's backdrop, is an imaginary bridge scene unconnected with it.

In the foreground is a rear view of the same kind of camera seen in Figure 4; again made of heavy wood, it is standard equipment for traditional Indian street photographers (by contrast with the studio situation where a modern 35mm camera is invariably used). Figure 4 shows the photographer having just washed the positive print in his bucket and starting to trim the edges of the wet print, ready to dry for the customer. In this case, he is working on a series of identity photos for official documents (ID cards to travel on a train, passports, driver's licences and so on). Clearly visible here are the bench where the client sits for the pose – and the boxes of Kodak photographic paper.

11. Figure 6 shows a kind of hybrid between studio and street photography. Here another, younger, photographer's backdrop is being carried by two assistants who are standing in front of the Sayeman Hotel, once more in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh.



**Figure 6.** Babla Paul (Sigma Photographics), studio and street

The Sayeman is the most expensive in the town (\$US10-15 dollars per night) and the backdrop is very much an artist's impression of the hotel itself. The actual hotel does not look like this at all – though it does have a swimming pool. The seascape (top right) is fictional, for the hotel is actually well within the town, and 15 minutes from the beach. The backdrop has just come out of the young photographer's small studio in the hotel precincts. And this is a regular occurrence, for the photographer, Babla Paul, often removes the backdrop for outdoor shots. He also cycles down to the beach to take shots of the tourists. The trishaw shows his wares – mostly portraits. [10] The top container is full of Fuji 35mm colour film which he both uses and sells. The photographic equipment is stored

photographer with his mobile studio on a trishaw, Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh.

inside the lower box on the back of the trishaw.

The idea of this arrangement (unlike the Taj Mahal case in Figure 1) is to show customers in a very upmarket but quite local scene: though even here, the already expensive hotel with a pool is re-located to an imaginary and exotic seascape.

12. Why photograph a tourist against a stylised backdrop of the hotel when the 'real thing' is so ready to hand? Since there is no way to get the *whole* of the actual hotel in the background of a photograph, any *in situ* picture would only be able to show a small detail of the hotel; and so it could be claimed that the shot was faked. Parts and details do not furnish conclusive proof of an experience. On the other hand, a photograph taken against the whole of the hotel (which is only possible by using a backdrop as a proxy) puts the subject in a clear and definite relation to that whole. The result always looks contrived – but as it is a 'fake' taken by the official hotel photographer (the only person who owns this backdrop), it has the status of being a genuine record of the visit.
13. Babla Paul, then, is of a very different generation from the old masters shown in Figures 4 and 5. The old street-photography businesses were passed down through the generations from fathers and grandfathers, and with them came the old calotype technology. These younger men, women are never to be found in the business, [11] use the new 35mm technology. They develop and print their own black and white photographs in darkrooms, but send colour film to the local Fuji Plaza for one-hour development and printing, which makes them somewhat slower than the old hands. But, despite this, there is still a clear niche for them: while inexpensive cameras (mostly Instamatics) are starting to be more common in Bangladesh, good professional 35mm cameras are still a rare commodity. Another mark of the generational change is that many of the painted backdrops are disappearing and being replaced by photo-murals – again (as is more or less traditional) unconnected with the locality. They show such things as Alpine and tropical scenes associated with European-style holidays. By a kind of ironic global displacement, then, a western sense of the 'exotic' is brought to the Indian subcontinent as a desirable image-commodity.
14. If Babla Paul is minimalist by comparison with the old masters of street photography, then Zainal Abedin (Figure 7) is an ultra-minimalist modern studio photographer.



**Figure 7.** Zainal Abedin, aka Anis (AKS Photographers) posing in his studio with cardboard Kodak girl, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

All he uses is a plain backdrop or a floral curtain, a piece of linoleum looking like a Persian rug, a box for clients to sit on and a plaster-of-Paris plinth. Situated in Dhaka, Bangladesh, he too works with 35mm film, which he also sells. In this shot, he has brought in his 'Kodak girl' advertising sign from outside his studio – almost as a kind of pastiche of the old simulacral techniques. The studio is in a large open-air market in Dhaka. But it is by no means a simple market stall. Rather it is a fixed shop on the edge of the market proper. And while this is certainly a move upmarket, Zainal, like almost all studio photographers does not own his meagre studio but rents it. His set up is comparatively subtle, however, to add to the minimalism – for note the overhead lighting installed specifically for carefully-lit portraits.

The overall aim is to offer customers a very different imaginary from that in, say, Figure 1. Here, by contrast with that extreme and exaggerated exoticism, Zainal's clients are offered versions of themselves posed in an aristocratic interior. They purchase the look of distinctly interior opulence.



**Figure 8.** Unknown Muslim photographer in his studio – the Royal Studio – Bombay.



**Figure 9.** Children in same studio as Figure 8.

15. In the spaces, in the manifold gaps between old and new, street and studio, live interesting and locally unique hybrids. A case in point is the Royal Studio in Bombay Figures 8 and 9. Like the new upmarket concerns, this photographer (who we see here posing in his own studio) has begun to work with large elaborate murals and at least one of them Figure 9 is very northern European in design. But he has resisted the move to photo-murals and retains the artist's impression of an imaginary scene. These two backdrops are fixed on the wall and the client gets a choice between the thrill of the Bengal tiger hunt (curiously posing beside the tiger, as though it were accomplice rather than quarry) or else that of apparently roaring through an exotic town/land-landscape on a big Honda motorcycle. As is so often the case, though, there is no real worry about the illusion coming unstuck, revealing itself to the client or any other viewer of the final picture: for clearly placed on the two-dimensional backdrop are some framed verses from the Qur'an (Figure 9 top left).
16. Everyone in this business wants to sell or buy a little of a dream – usually, though not exclusively, of wealth in lands where there is almost none. But no one is bothered if there is a slight failure of perspective, if a shadow falls in a plane where it shouldn't, or if a real-worldly object – a Coke-bottle candle holder perhaps – happens to fall inside the frame. No one is bothered precisely because they know and want all this to be a clear illusion. That is what they pay and are paid for, after all.

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## Endnotes

[1] Francis Rolt, *On the Brink in Bengal*, London: John Murray, 1991, p. 62.

[2] Figure 1, along with several of the other images in this essay (esp. Figures 2 and 6) show the importance of the cypress tree in Indian and Bangladeshi photographic backdrops. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly the true cypress is native to Persia and figures in India as a kind of Mughal fetish. (The causeway leading to the Taj Mahal, for example, is lined with cypress). Secondly, this suggests a very strong Persian influence in design and painting styles generally, so that the cypress in paintings or in private gardens signifies ancient and noble Islamic origins. Thirdly, since the cypress can be shaped and pruned in a variety of ways, it can be made to echo and enhance Mughal architectural forms such as the turrets/minarets of the Taj Mahal itself. Fourthly, as the first Muslims in India were Turks, the cypress's dominant Mediterranean meanings of wealth and high social status (on the one hand) and mourning and immortality (on the other) have also been carried into India and Bangladesh where, in addition, the tree is associated with the pleasant temperate-to-subtropical climates where it flourishes. Lastly, it is also possible that cypress backdrops echo the kinds of landscapes used extensively in Indian cinema for simulating outdoor scenes – though there is no industrial connection between the production of the two kinds of images. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the cypress in street and studio photography adds something of a cinematic quality. (This note is based on information from colleagues Prof. Vijay Mishra and Dr Shamim Khan.)

[3] Cf. MacDougall for a slightly different description. David MacDougall, 'Photo Hierarchicus: Signs and Mirrors in Indian Photography,' *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1992):103-129. See p. 122.

[4] Time-Life Books, eds., *Light and Film* (Life Library of Photography), No place of publication (USA): Time Inc., 1971, pp. 66-67. George Gilbert, *Photography: The Early Years – A Historical Guide for Collectors*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 27.

[5] Brian Coe, *Cameras: From Daguerreotypes to Instant Pictures*, London: Marshall Cavendish, 1978, pp. 26-27.

[6] Michael Freeman, *Instant Film Photography*, Salem: Salem House, 1985, p. 7.

[7] Robert Hunt, *A Manual of Photography*, 3rd edn., London: John Joseph Griffin and Co., 1853, p. 236.

[8] [Harappa Web Site Project](#), Sub-site on photography in India and Pakistan, 1996.

[9] Ainslie Embree and Clark Worswick, *The Last Empire: Photography in British India 1855-1911*, Millerton, NY: Aperture Books, 1976.

[10] The signage on the trishaw (translation courtesy of Dr Shamim Khan) reads as follows:



[11] Although Indian photography is, today, a pre-dominantly masculine occupation, there has been a strong tradition of Zenana photography: of Muslim women photographing other Muslim women. The famous (male) photographer, Lala Deen Dayal (1844-1905), court photographer to the Nizam of Hyderabad, for example, advertised this service as part of his practice. His advertising read:

Our Studio is arranged to enable us to accommodate Purdah ladies and to ensure perfect privacy. Such ladies will be attended by a lady operator, and every precaution will be taken to ensure their custom being respected and also to ensure their personal convenience and comfort. Special arrangements will be made for those ladies who prefer being photographed at their own houses. No hesitation need be felt in relying on our honor in this respect. We undertake in such cases not to retain a single print or copy in our establishment of any portraits, and to deliver up or destroy every negative.

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