

## CAMERA FEMINA

*Subjects and Spaces* is only partly successful in prompting a discussion on the imaging of women in early Indian photography, finds **Sayandeb Chowdhury**.

Portrait photography, critically speaking, is as much about the subject as it is about the *figuration* of the subject: whose portrait and why, on whose precincts and under whose patronage. The further we go back into the history of photography, the more important these questions become. Unlike today, the camera was not ubiquitous in the early years; the cumbersome technology and the high costs meant that photography was a fateful enterprise, often carrying with it, so to say, an entire visual apparatus that bordered as much on aesthetics as on the politics of choosing and omitting subjects.

This is no new claim. Critical histories of photography have looked into these issues time and again but one is provoked to think about them again when one confronts images from the past. Without doubt, there is no other theme more intrinsic to the politics of subject-formation in early photography than the body and person of women. Photography of women in earlier times has triggered two opposing responses to the art. First, was early photography a complacent collaborator of the male gaze, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes? Or, was it that moment when that gaze, hitherto surreptitiously institutionalised through wanton acts of social and cultural suppression, was finally made public? In this sense, was the camera the *continuation* of the gaze or the subversion of it? A new exhibition organised by Tasveer and Vacheron Constantin, titled *Subjects and Spaces: Women in Indian Photography, 1850s-1950s*, which travelled to Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Delhi and Bangalore and made its concluding halt at Kolkata's Seagull Foundation for the Arts between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, provides an occasion to ask these questions all over again.

In fact, one must further probe the whole inquisition of colonialism, as Malavika Karlekar and Christopher Pinney have repeatedly pointed out, as intrinsic to the arrival and gradual acceptance of photography in India. The issue of a contested modernity superimposed on entrenched patriarchy and the engagement of either with the experience of colonialism makes early photography of women an extremely complex subject. A note on the exhibition under review dwells on the framing of the female body – “lingering close-ups, seductive frontal displays, luxuriating reclining figures, women bathing or set against imaginative, romanticized, European-inspired landscapes”. Since most of the photographers are unknown, the historicity of the images and the prehistory of their figuration remain severely curtailed. Some of the images are ascribed to photographers – namely, E. Taurines,

Govindram Odeyram, S. Hormusjee, P. Mydaliar and Samuel Bourne, without whom no roster of early photography in India is complete. One should note that the photographs in the exhibition manage to move beyond the customary locations of early colonial modernity, that is Calcutta, Bombay or Madras, and find subjects as far as Kashmir, Lucknow and Jaipur. Women open to being ‘exposed’ to the gaze of colonial photography could not have been from ‘respectable’ stations. So, most of the images are of unknown women, single or in groups, nautch girls, singers and travelling performers. The comfort and the confidence with which they confront the camera is symptomatic of the consciousness of their public personas rather than their private roles as wives, daughters, sisters. There is also the pull of Orientalist exotica, a common entrapment of early colonial photography that significantly added to the dubious but powerfully influential tradition of Orientalist writing across Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It was only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that women from rich families began accompanying men to the studios, which were increasingly being owned and run by Indians. From unknown women of unknown lineage stepping out into the light of technologized modernity to the vintage glamour of Gayatri Devi and Princess Rafat Zamani Begum whose photos were proudly displayed by Vivienne Studios in London and Kinsey Brothers in Delhi, women had, as subjects of photography, virtually travelled a whole universe in three-fourths of a century. This is the most important message of this exhibition.

But what are film posters, film stills and lobby cards doing in an exhibition of this nature? This remains unexplained. These images, which make an entire section of the exhibition, may point to interesting developments in the growth of film sets, make-up strategies and the choreographed interiors of family entertainers in early cinema but they add little to the ethnography of early photography in India. However, one cannot overstate the historical importance of photography from mid-19<sup>th</sup> century India. The exhibition manages to provoke the right questions even if it does not quite add anything new to the critical discourse around colonial photography.

The Phototype Company, Bombay. *First Lady Cyclist*. Postcard. 17.7 cms x 8.9 cms. Circa 1920. Image courtesy Tasveer Foundation.

