#12

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Identity & Altentity in Central India

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The Transculturating Image

Images and representational practices occupy a notably liminal space in Bhatisuda, often acting as agents of transculturation. This is an aspect of the much broader quality of the visual that Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui describes in her 'sociology of the image' in which she contrasts the 'peculiar function of words' with the way that images 'elude the censorship of official language' (2020:14). Cusicanqui celebrates the power of Guaman Poma's 17th -century illustrated chronicle to articulate pre-Hispanic lifeworlds, but her observation, when combined with Mary Louise Pratt's notion of transculturation [Pratt 1992]), helps illuminate the complex 'contact zone' in which images and representational practices often cut across identities in central India.

Consider, in this light, the pilgrimage centre of Husain Tekri, a therapeutic healing destination focused on a group of Muslim saints' shrines near Jaora, about 40kms distant from Nagda. Notionally Shi'a it has recently been described by Carla Bellamy in an insightful ethnography as 'ambiguously Islamic' and attracts both Shi'a and Sunni and large numbers of Hindu pilgrims. Probably most villagers -who are overwhelmingly Hindu - have visited Husain Tekri at least

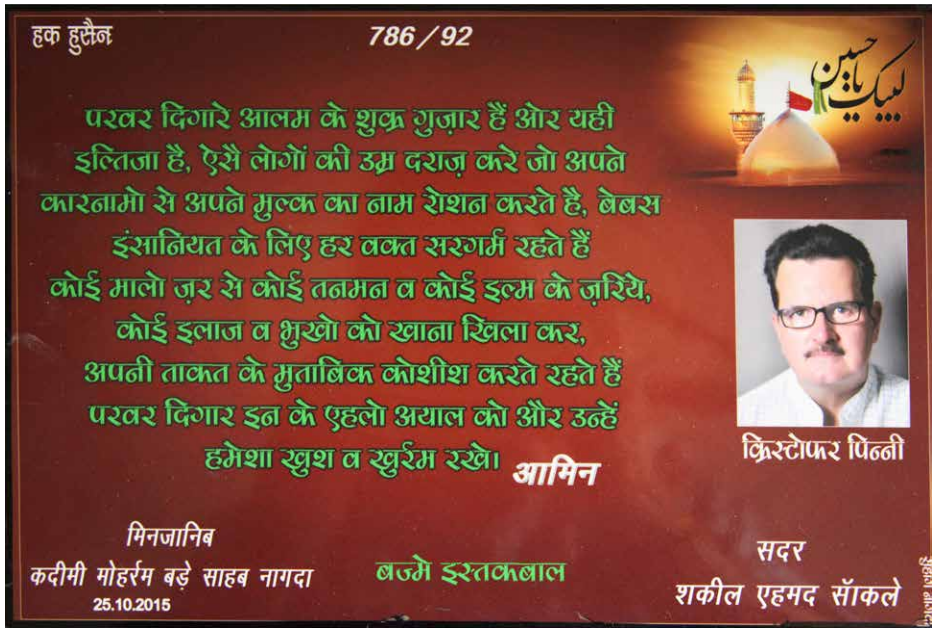
once. Bellamy argues, intriguingly, that many non-Muslims are attracted precisely by the sense of Husain Tekri as 'unambiguously Islamic' and its distance from a conventional Hindu lifeworld with its conventional obligations (2011:187). Husain Tekri's 'identity as Islamic is a significant part of [its] appeal to non-Muslims' (2011:189): it is its very alterity that renders it so powerful.

Every year in Nagda there is an elaborate Muhurram in which numerous finely crafted *tazias* are paraded to commemorate the martyrdom of Hussain in the battle of Karbala. Yousuf Saeed observes that 'In India the memorials to the events of Karbala are primarily collective experiences of devotional gazing' (2012:49). Nagda's Muslim population is entirely Sunni, and Muharram is observed as a remembrance rather than lament and mourning, as among Shi'a. The *jelus* (procession) is inaugurated by a Shi'a representative who travels from Husain Tekri to Nagda for the event. That Bhatisuda *Sunnis* also attend this Muharram procession is attested by the presence of photographs- taken by itinerant photographers- in the possession of villagers. In 2010 Shehnaaz, a middle-aged Pinjara[1] Muslim posed for a photograph, choosing to balance a commemorative photograph (showing her and her family in front of a white *tazia*) above a framed image (quite likely purchased from Husain Tekri[2]) of Zuljinah, the horse that Imam Hussain rode into the battle of Karbala.

There are several matters worth commenting on. Firstly Shehnaaz, a Sunni, provides powerful affirmation of Saeed's observation that 'most Muslim users of Islamic [imagery] do not discriminate between Shi'a and Sunni iconography - the images of Karbala and Zuljinah are routinely used by many Sunnis' (2012:105). As Bellamy notes, those who mourn Hussain's death at Karbala are all *Husaini* (2011:206) rather than necessarily Shi'a. Secondly, Shehnaaz performs 'intermediality' through her alignment of a recent photograph of an event of which she was also a part, with a non-photographic image of an icon that symbolizes an event in CE680. Her physical positioning of the two images performs an argument about their equivalence, and about the vitality of this 'chip of messianic time' (to recall Benjamin [1969:263]) in lived history. The *illud tempus* of Karbala is connected to the present not only through its re-enactment through Muharram, but also through the friction between a recent photograph depicting living people and the non-photographic image of Zuljinah.

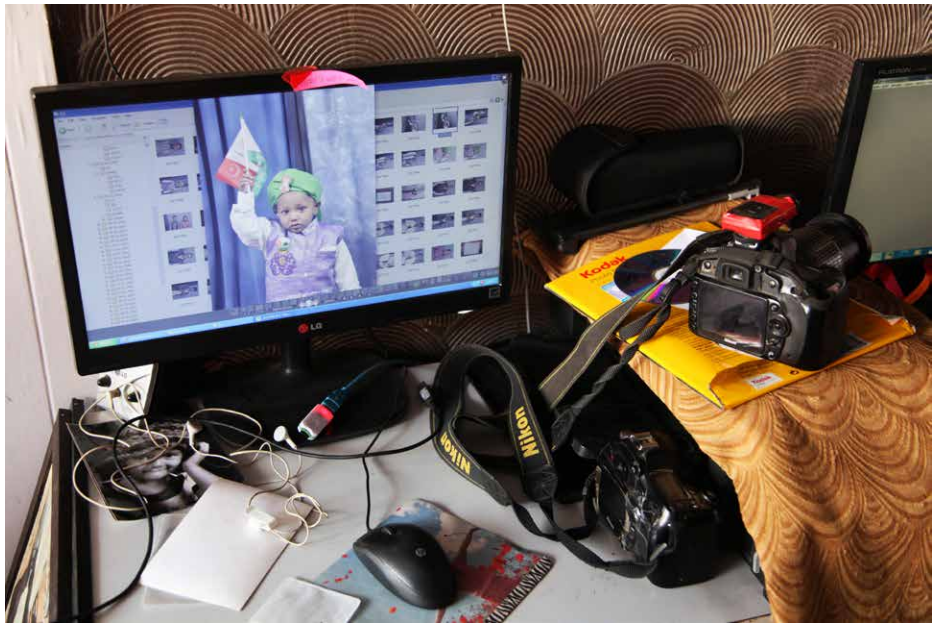
[1] Cotton-carding, also known as Chudigar or Chikligar

[2] Bellamy notes the 'brilliant mirror-art depictions of dargahs and the much-venerated Horse of Karbala Zuljenah (aka Dum-Dum)' for sale at Husain Tekri (2011:212)



The visual makes itself felt as a zone of transculturation in other ways too. Consider a 'flex' banner encountered during Muharram in Guna, also in Madhya Pradesh, in 2012. At first sight it looks thoroughly 'Muslim': the top slogan reads 'Yade-i-Husain' (remember Husain). Closer inspection reveals it to be a sponsoring and advertising device for two Hindu businesses, 'New Rajput D. J. Sounds and Rohan Video Shooting'. The 'Muslim' identity of the banner is further complicated by the names below the three figures, at least two of whom are attired in dress coded as Muslim (Pathan tunic and skull cap). The names under the three figures (long with their mobile numbers) are 'Dampy Bhai', 'Jitendra Singh Rajput' and 'Atul'. While 'Dampy' is a nickname used by both Muslims and Hindus, Jitendra and Atul are unmistakenly Hindu. The banner points to a history of changing relations: the former Guna resident (who I had been visiting in 2012) with whom I discussed this in 2022 saw this in retrospect as a golden period of intercommunal relations, an interlude in which cross-religious friendships were possible and could be publicly celebrated. He doubted very much whether such a banner could be displayed in the current climate of ethnopreneurially-stoked inter-religious antagonism. But beyond the historical moment towards which the banner points is a different question

concerning the translational potential and limits of different media and modes of signification. As Cusicanqui suggests, language denotes, whereas images connote: the visual amplifies the possibilities of transculturation. The flex banner reveals itself to be a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997:192).



The Purifying Image

The process also works in reverse so that the visual becomes a site for 'purification' rather than 'transculturation'. In one studio in 2015 (one year after Modi had swept to power) Photoshop was deployed to transform an image of a small boy from a 'Muslim' into a 'national' subject. The original image, was taken at a celebration for the Prophet's Birthday and depicted the boy in a lilac jacket, a green turban and holding a Milad-un Nabi flag, and wearing a badge, featuring the dome of Medina. His turban is decorated with the Na'layn symbolizing the Prophet's sandal.[3] These are standard markers of a good-natured Muslim enthusiasm but in the context of an increasingly aggressive Hindu majoritarianism they are deleted in favour of a nationally-approved iconography: the Milad-un Nabi flag is replaced by the national *tiranga* (the saffron, white, and green of the Indian flag) and the badge and turban ornament replaced by the Ashoka *charkha*, the 'wheel of dharma' that lies at the heart of the Indian national flag. To be Muslim, this transformation reveals, is to inhabit a minoritarian identity that is required to literally re-dress itself as a national subject if is to appear in public.

A few years later, in 2019, I would meet Muslim photographers in Lucknow who described how they themselves felt required to modify their behaviours in public – eating only vegetarian food while travelling on trains for instance, lest the brooding violence of their fellow passenger be sparked through misrecognition.

'Transculturation' is derived from its usage by Mary Louise Pratt and. James Clifford to signify a 'contact zone' characterized by co-presence and interaction (Pratt 1992:6; Clifford 1997:192). 'Purification', conversely, takes its character from Bruno Latour's use of the term. This is purification in the sense of 'titration': the creation of two putatively 'entirely distinct ontological zones' (Latour 1993:10), in this case of an abject Muslim-ness and an increasingly explicitly Hindu national subject.

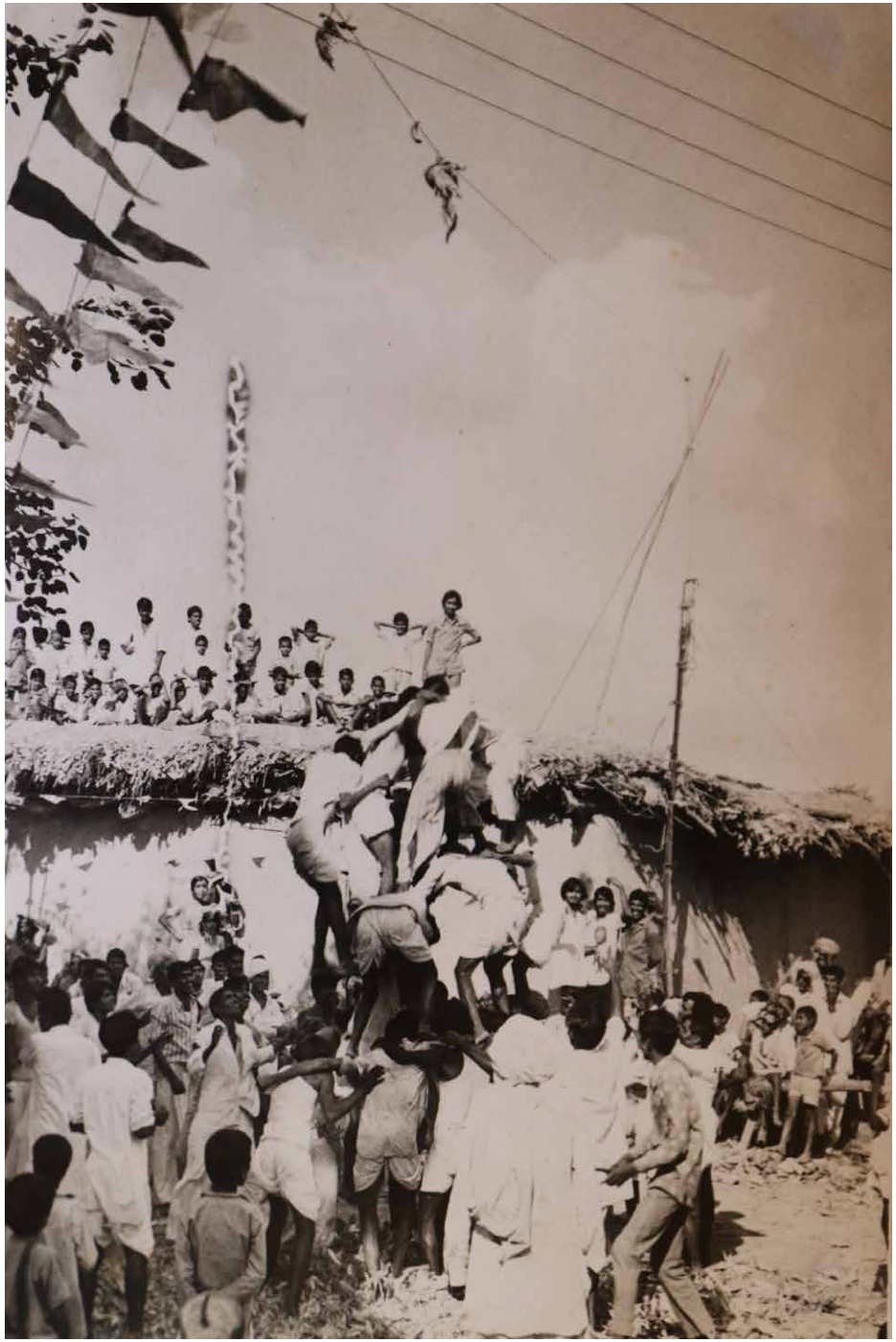
[3] Thanks to Yousuf Saeed for help identifying this.

From Divination to the Public Sphere

When I first lived in Bhatisuda in 1982-83, I was lucky enough to be housed by my Jain patrons in a small mud-built (*kachcha*) dwelling in the central *chowk*. A small two room dwelling with a single light bulb run on a wire from a neighbour's connection, one of its many benefits was its view of the Tejaji shrine which was the focal point of clean caste activities in the village. The double wooden doors at the front of the house opened onto a view of the shrine which in the 1980s was a simple open blue-washed construction under a peepal tree.

Tejaji's story is known to everyone in the village. He is identified as a brave (*vir*) truthteller (*satyavadi*) whose narrative is located within the present *Kaliyuga*. He is also understood to be a high caste figure who is often positioned in opposition to Baba Ramdev who has a mainly Dalit following. Tejaji was travelling to avenge the theft of cattle by Minas (now a Scheduled Tribe in Rajasthan and classified as Other Backward Classes in Madhya Pradesh) when he encountered a cobra who was intent on biting and killing him. Tejaji persuaded the cobra to defer his fate until he had avenged the theft of cattle, giving his word, despite living in an age of dishonesty (hence the significance of his being named *satyavadi*). Tejaji then defeated the Minas in a vicious battle and rescued the stolen cattle. Keeping his word he returned to the cobra but his body was so covered in wounds from the battle that there was nowhere for the cobra to bite. To fulfil his vow Tejaji offered his tongue whereupon the cobra bit him there, and then bestowed a boon of protection from snake bites upon all who worshipped him. All this is shown in popular prints such as Brijbasi Art Print's *Shri Satyavadi Vir Tejaji Maharaj*. Tejaji is always depicted mounted on a white horse and his identity is visually fused with the cobra whose protective hood looms over the central figure. The battle with the Minas is shown in the vignette at bottom right, and as in all images of Tejaji, a large spear (*bhala*) is held diagonally, drawing attention to the weapon with which Tejaji defended his caste honour.

As with other figures in the Indian visual mediascape, Tejaji inhabits a thick field of interocular citationality. The Brijbasi chomolithograph serves as the exact model for a large mural on the external walls of a Tejaji temple on the Nagda -Bhatisuda road and this iconography is repeated in the carved stone reliefs present in the village shrine. A Photoshopped five-headed cobra was displayed in the temple in 2011 and this in turn formed the prototype for a



30 feet long cotton and hessian *murti* paraded as part of the village circumambulation. Over the years I would come to learn that this shrine and the square in which it sat would provide the *mise-en-scene* for a history of photography characterized by changing apparatus, practices, and attitudes.

In 2019 I would be shown a series of images that dated from 1977. That it took 40 years for the images to be disclosed seemed to confirm, at the time, the virtues of long-term fieldwork. The images, photographed by Krishna Studio in Nagda, recorded activities on Tejas Dasmi ('bright tenth [lunar day]'). At the core the ritual involves a circumambulation by males around the village during which participants join with tall coloured paper umbrellas adorned with cobra logos which are then placed above the Tejaji shrine. This is all accompanied by ecstatic dancing, and as the procession progresses, by increasing possession events focused on the shrine in the central square which is observed by large numbers of village female spectators. In 1977, at least, the festival also involved a *matki phod*, a human tower associated with mythology concerning Krishna in his guise as the *makhan chor* (butter thief).

Photographs carefully preserved in a village album document male villagers congregating around the shrine after the procession. Later images in the series show the *matki phod*, a human tower, being constructed by thirty or perhaps forty individual males in three tiers. It was while this living pyramid struggled to take form that the participants became aware of a mysterious presence, a 'divine magic', a zone of energy of the kind that someone fifteen to twenty feet high might exert. Everyone was aware of something helping them as they clambered upward, and the same force came to their rescue when the tower collapsed onto hard stony ground (this happened two or three times), for they were all magically cushioned as they fell. The final image in the series delivers the denouement, placing the tower at the centre of the image and showing some of the many small coloured flags suspended from the shrine, which remains out of frame. Parallel to the tower on the left side a large, mottled, snakelike stripe sears the image. For the participants in the *matki phod* and the many excited spectators whose presence the image also documents, the photograph affirmed what they had experienced: the King Cobra whom the festival remembers had been the mysterious presence assisting in its own effervescent celebration.

Professional photographers in the nearby town are highly skeptical of the rural ontology of photography that prizes it as a medium in which the world of *sagas* and *jujhar* (spirits of the deceased) becomes visible. Suresh Punjabi, of Suhag Studio,

श्री सत्यवादी वीर तेजाजी महाराज
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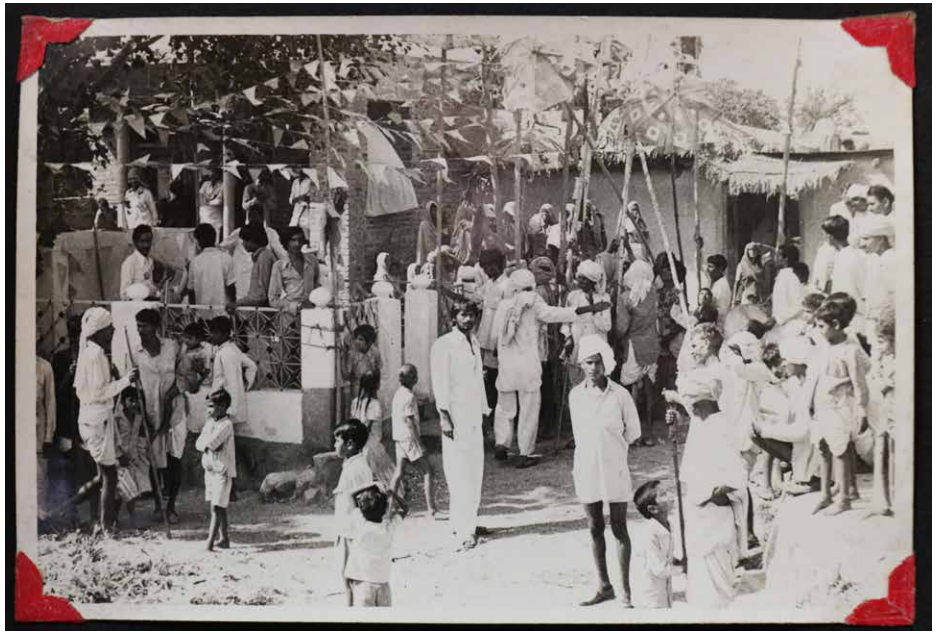
observed that when developing 120 film, the negative can easily get scratched, producing confusing noise on the surface of the image. Deep scratches can also start to 'melt' at high temperatures, and for this reason many photographers would add a little ice (if they could obtain it) to the developer. Split negatives often produced a mottled pattern on the final printed image. For photographers the presence was the result of an event in the dark room: for villagers the presence was evidence of an event in the vicinity of the Tejaji shrine.

Mobile phones arrived slowly in the village, largely due to poor network coverage. By 2015 they were a common sight. During that year's Tejas Dasmi the village-wide procession was extensively filmed and photographed especially by the huge crowd of female spectators who were not part of the male performative excess (involving dancing and gymnastics) that unfolds as the growing number of cobra-adorned umbrellas congregate around the central Tejaji shrine.

Three years later in 2018 the division was one of caste, with mobile phone video clips being deposited with the Sub-Divisonal Magistrate following the lodging of an FIR (First Incident Report) after an explosive altercation at that year's ritual. The incident had involved an attempt by a Dalit to access the interior space of the shrine. Depending on one's reading of the events, the Dalit was thrashing with the spirit of a *sagas* and was denied rightful entry to the shrine, or was drunk and was correctly barred from entering the shrine by those (clean caste) participants who were inside the shrine. A spear (*bhala*) associated with the shrine (it is deemed to be Tejaji's) played a central role. In one version of the events one of the clean caste protagonists attempted to determine whether the Dalit was *sacch* ('true', ie truly possessed by a *sagas*) or as he suspected, drunk, by demanding that the Dalit grasp the spear, which he refused to do. In the other version, the spear was simply deployed as a weapon of high caste aggression and exclusion: it literally embodied but also visually symbolized an illegal high caste refusal to permit a Dalit to enter a temple as a constituent part of public space.

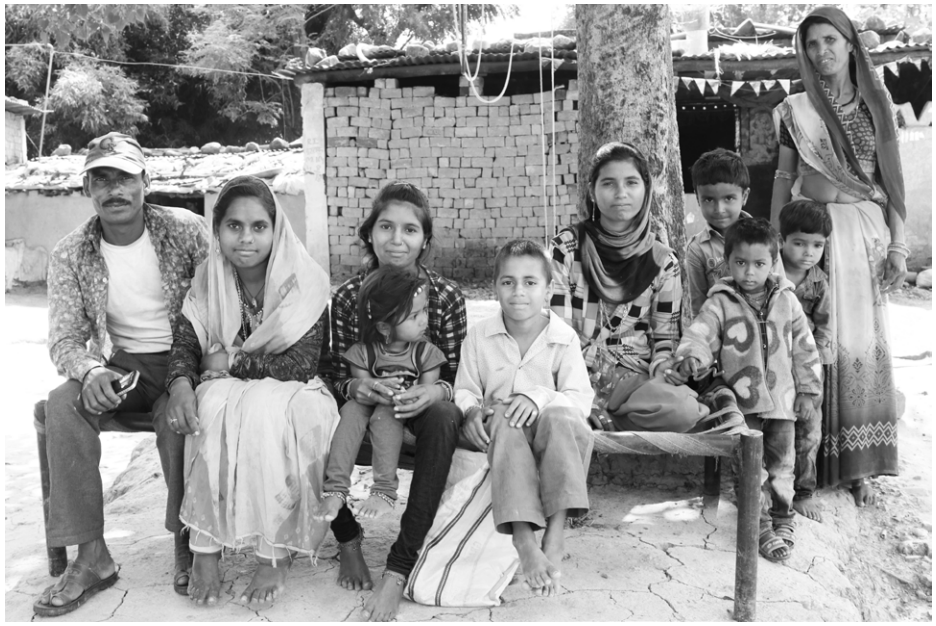
Immediately after this, and apparently also captured on smartphone footage (although I was never able to see this particular evidence) four or five other Dalits voiced complaints that the high castes were illegally obstructing access to the shrine. Matters became increasingly heated, there was much shouting and the *kurta* of the chief clean caste protagonist was badly torn. The aggrieved Dalits then retreated and filed an online FIR. Once this became general knowledge, the clean castes (*swarn*, ie both



twice born ‘General’ and OBCs) met that evening in the adjacent Ganesh temple and vented their intense sense of grievance about what they saw as a drunken transgression and a profane threat to the sacrality of the shrine. In these discussions it was agreed to gather phone footage from those present in order to counter the claims in the FIR. In some instances the same individuals who 40 years earlier had scrutinized photographs of Tejas Dasmi for the visible presence of Naga Maharaj, were now examining phone footage to see if they could read into the position of a spear whether it was being offered as a test, or thrust aggressively. In both cases photography was operating partly within a field of mythotechnical possibility, informed by an established mythic narrative and a settled and pervasive iconography.

Although photography never reached its final ‘judgement seat’ (the FIR stalled because the police said they couldn’t investigate an incident where there were so many conflicting versions of events) we can still wonder whether photography’s truths were subordinated to truths already established elsewhere, and through different media? Or did the multiple viewpoints open up a cubist sense of multi-perspectival positions – of ‘photographic events’ - that held within it the promise of a new sense of the ‘public’? (Recall Hariman and Lucaities’ suggestion that ‘public life is a way of seeing’ [2007:302]). That question remains unresolved. But it suggests the validity of Mahadevan’s embrace (following Tsivian) of ‘medium agnosticism’ rather than an over-deterministic ‘medium specificity’. However, following Mahadevan’s affirmation of Gunning’s notion of cinema as a ‘switching point’ between different media (2018:9) we can see images of Tejaji here jumping tracks. In the first analogue images discussed here (the ones dating from 1977), photography conforms to ontological expectations that have been established and configured through a mythopoetics: through spoken, sung and written narratives, through folk performance, and iconographic traditions that saturate the lived experience of space. A formulaic iconism predominates so that, for instance, Tejaji’s spear always traces a diagonal that contrasts with the undulation of the cobra biting his tongue. As a scarce and still novel medium, photography shows itself to be highly indebted to and overshadowed by preceding media and schemata. But as the velocity and circulation of media increases so does its volatility and open-ness to the new. In the 2018 images – in contrast to the earlier images - we see a mythotechnics: a hybrid space of the contingent event in which an audience attempts to impose a mythopoetic expectation that is bound to be frustrated by the technics of the event. The inconvenient fact of the contingent photographic image is

that it declines to fully reproduce the mythopoetic archetype: its evidence is bound to be ‘noisier’, and to tell us more about the complicated, and at times unreadable, actions of humans in 2018 than those of Tejaji many centuries previously.



Subaltern Photographic Circuits: ‘colportage’ in central India

18th October 2019: Gathabai, who today is clad in a yellow sari, lives in the Bagdi *mohalla* on the south side of the village. Exclusively housing Dalits the neighbourhood, which is strung along a track leading to the River Chambal, is quite markedly the most impoverished part of the whole village. She emerges from her small *jhompri* bearing a large laminated photograph of her late father in law, Budaji Chandravamsi. She prefers the Sanskritizing nomenclature: Chandravamsi (‘lunar dynasty’) rather than the everyday and increasingly pejorative Bagdi. Budaji’s portrait is an enlargement of an old ID photo and is adorned with a plastic garland and a tinsel flower. *Matasiri* (the goddess) comes regularly out of photos kept by the Chandravamsi community, Gathabai assures me. If I give her my phone number then the next time anyone ‘thrashes’ they can give me a call and then I can get the information about this directly from the Goddess. Gathabai also shows me the other photographs in her family’s possession: a strip of ten ID photos of herself and six recent 6 x 4 photos. Two of these were taken by the temple photographer at Shri Fanarji Babji, an old fort on the Khachrod-Jaora road that houses the powerful liquor-drinking folk deity Dev Narayan, one was shot by an itinerant photographer in the village, two were taken at travelling *melas*, and one taken in front of the twin towers of the Harsiddhi Temple in Ujjain.

Next door, Tanwar shared his family’s photographs in the same way: first the large *shraddha* portrait of his parents Unjibai and Mangu Singh. His father had died only six weeks ago and the framed image was still brand new and in perfect condition. The blurred images testify to the scarcity of photographic images of the older generation: as was commonly the case in the village the only photographs had to be extracted from group images. Then after this, the most important image, an inch thick pile of images, containing some very recent, some 15 years old, was produced. These included two beautiful images from 2017 of his daughter and son-in-law (Anita and Sitaram) photographed in a studio at Ramdevra in Rajasthan, the site of the *samadhi* or burial of Ramdev Pir. Among the others were more images taken at pilgrimage sites – local ones such as the Chamunda Goddess shrine on the banks of the Chambal near Nagda, and more distant destinations such as Haridwar. Others were the products of travelling studios which are still to be found in seasonal *melas* (fairs). Among this diversity certain patterns are worth remarking on: portraits of females

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tend to be groups (there are several trios of females obviously posed in *mela* studios) whereas males were much more likely to be photographed individually (there is one dated 2006 of Tanwar's son Lakhan doing obeisance to a flex banner image of Durga at the Chambal river shrine, and another male pictured singly in front of the blue drapes of a travelling *mela* studio). The Dalit gender 'jointness' that features in much of the anthropological literature is not at first sight obviously visible through photography. All the images clearly demonstrate the importance attached to capturing full bodies rather than quarter length studies of 'character', the images collectively presenting a revealing sense of what constitutes the ideal subject of portraiture.[4] Colour and vivacity is strikingly present: it is difficult to avoid seeing this as resilience in the presence of cruel precarity: female apparel and floral backdrops make for kinetic textures and visual energies. Religion is visibly of central importance and, alongside pilgrimage, travel is also clearly focused on the regional and seasonal *melas* which still configure the regional rhythms of a central Indian rural lifeworld. Finally it is striking how the photographs in these two Chandravamsi families, with the exception of the *shraddha* images, do not originate in any of the numerous Nagda studios. The precarity of these two subaltern families seem to derive their self-representations from subaltern networks of itinerant photographic production, in temples, shrines, and fairs. These subaltern circuits bring to mind Ernst Bloch's recuring pre-occupation with fairs, *colportage*,[5] and fairy tales (1991:341). Subalternism here derives not from mere precarity but through circuits of travel, enchantment, and representation. Almost everything in Tanwar's images reflects itineracy and aspiration, rather than the settled life cycle events that feature in much other village and town photography. Bloch was fascinated by the closeness of colportage to the fair (1991:341), both being rooted in itineracy, 'Long journeys […] are essential to colportage; it by no means earns its living honestly at home' (1991:341). Further the dream of colportage is 'never again to be trapped by the routine of daily life' (1988:183) colportage allows 'proletarians to dream lustre in advance' (1991:341). Perhaps this provides a fitting caption

[4] ie. a full body, frontally displayed, and with eyes staring at the camera.

[5] Ernst Bloch never clearly defines 'colportage' but he uses the term to connote unofficial culture, an agent of unregulated 'barefoot' (Ramaswamy 2010:35) publication and unregulated distribution. Moving far beyond the dictionary definition of the *colporteur* as the itinerant seller of chapbooks, broadsheets, popular religious works and pictures, for Bloch the *colporteur* symbolizes the tenacity of wild fairy tales, extravagant travel narratives and an aesthetics disparaged by the bourgeoisie, a space of contradiction and incipient messianism captured in his memorable section heading in *Heritage of Our Times*, 'jugglers' fair beneath the gallows' (1991:75).

स्व.श्री उन्जी बाई
स्व.श्री मांगू सिंह
प्रथमिलन 29.08.2019

to one of Tanwar's images: It records his visit to a *mela* in Mehidpur City in 2014. Its backdrop featuring a palatial mansion and alluring Bollywood starlet is not simply 'bazaar art' (Jain 2010) but more like the underbelly of bazaar art, something akin to Ashis Nandy's 'slum's eye view', for which Bloch's idiosyncratic usage of 'colportage' -translated across history and geography - seems an unexpectedly apposite term.

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Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between "representation" through everyday images and "representation" through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

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More information on https://citizensofphotography.org

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