

THESIS SYNOPSIS

Doctoral Candidate
Sayandeb Chowdhury

Title of Thesis

**VISUALIZING THE CITY: PHOTOGRAPHY, MODERNITY,
CALCUTTA (1850-1950)**

Supervisor
Professor Moinak Biswas
Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

The project interrogates the ways in which colonial Calcutta was visualized in photography. This straightforward premise has been divided into two discursive debates. First, taking Calcutta as the locus of enquiry, the project offers a critique of the methods of reproducing an archetypal colonial city. This reproduction is not any form of cultural viewing but a specific act of seeing *through* the camera. Second, the project argues that photography not only brought the emergent city-space of Calcutta under a scopic template but also empowered that space with the possibility of (re)producing a spatial modernity of its own. The key term in this project is hence *encounter*- encounter between the camera and the city, between the optics of seeing and the architectonics of modernity; and between photography as surveillance and photography as witness.

Photography travelled to India in the first year of its European announcement and since then has not only remained a key cultural apparatus but like most modern democracies, had mirrored the nation-state's coming into its own. The fact of its early arrival meant that the history of photography in the region is as old as that of Europe. But there is a skewed curiosity in the perception of that history dominated as it by family and studio photography; or racialized portraits of ethnic groups; or princely congresses in their diamond-studded exotica. The resultant body of scholarship, mostly anthropological, is assiduous and foregrounds the following observation: that photography in India sits comfortably with techniques of colonial governance, driven as it were by an ethnographic desire to collect India's great diversity under the instrumentalist colonial lens. This would be par for the course for the post-colonial project, under whose influential critical framework most existing scholars make their case.

The current project does not forcefully support or critique this position. Rather, it pushes for other, competing viewpoints by shifting the primary material of representation beyond what has been the purview of scholarly investment in India's photographic history. It rather argues that considering all kinds of colonial photography to be part of a grand imperial deployment — which strengthens the postcolonial eye, but weakens a historiography of the visible — risks foreclosure of various possibilities, any or all of which could be at play in the constitution of colonial image-aesthetics in the decades after the unveiling of the daguerreotype in 1839. To that end, the project is indebted to what visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney said half a decade ago. He said that “A century and half on, the study of photography in South Asia remains in its infancy... Photography in South Asia has largely been approached with a view to understanding what is “Indian” about it, and this has entailed a marginalization of historical complexity and process in order to make the cultural category of India more visible. One consequence of this is that the majority of writing on photography in India follows a one-way trajectory from the general case of photography to its specific (belated) iteration in India”. [Christopher Pinney, ‘Photography in South Asia’, *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2014].

This project takes up one, comparatively under-researched genre and method of photography: *photography of the city*. This is because picturesque and documentary images of topography, the streets and new, secular architecture in the colonies often lacked the aura of distant, unchanging pasts that images of ethnic groups, diamond-studded royalty and religious architecture could project to the colonial consumer. No wonder, the former have often been lost to the persistent eye, looking for a more predictable and persistent colonial ‘image-regime’ which aligns itself with the postcolonial programme. By moving away from this critical trope, this project hopes to situate photography in colonial India as tied to the global circuit of technology and wonder of photography in the mid-19th century. The project claims that unless situated within the global logic of technological transference, the essential nature of colonial urban imagery cannot be satisfactorily revealed. Moreover, for a city like Calcutta, at the forefront of a planetary locomotion of goods and people in the mid-19th century, it is only natural that photography would find a rich station in the city. Birthed and administered for over two and half centuries as an archetypal ‘colonial’ assembly, Calcutta was born *into* colonial modernity, was without a prehistory and was sustained by a colonial logic of governance. It grew faster than any other Indian city before or after, sustained by commercial energy, immigrant aspiration and colonial instrumentality, ushering in every mark of the *modern* Indian state first within confines: the modern judiciary, civil services,

postal service, railways and transportation, electricity, science and invention, telegraph and telecommunication, printing, radio and broadcasting to setting trends in social reform, modern letters, photography, the stage and cinema. No wonder it came to be known as a seat of both technocratic power and intellectual ambition, of local enterprise and global trade, of mighty architectural monuments and modern institutions of education and knowledge. In many ways hence Calcutta was a spectacular re-imagination of a European city. Calcutta's unique position as an early progenitor and inheritor of modernity has registered itself in widely-known debates. However, the politics and practice of photographic projection of its sites and spaces as a reimagined *metropole* remains under-addressed.

Moreover, in the representational discourse of the city in the nineteenth century, the metropole-colony hegemony was a relationship of global continuity, encounter and capital rather than conquest and expansion. It would hence be instructive to rethink colonial urban photography as somewhere between a technologized commodity and a cultural form of seeing; between one kind of emerging urban consciousness and another kind of imaginary urbanism. To that end, the (in) famous (un)containability of the city in South Asia and the mobilisation of images around its emergent metropolitanism is a potentially rich vantage to understand its engagement with temporal and transcultural ontologies. One such trans-cultural ontology is to be able to see photographic 'moments' or archives as a continuous exploration of the city's multiple selves and the equivocation of the idea of image itself. Hence to enquire visually into the colonial city is to invoke the optical unconscious of its modernity itself.

This project, then, is *not* a history of photography in Calcutta. Neither it is a history of Calcutta through photography. This project takes the arrival of photography in the subcontinent as a starting point while offering a critique of the existing scholarship. Then, through a series of comparative illustrations, it would offer a new reading of Calcutta's visual urbanity, bringing it closer to not only a transnational history of the nineteenth century but also to contemporary concerns in visual theory.

Chapters

Chapter 1 | The Calcutta Camera

This chapter states the central research inquiry, undertakes the survey of existing literature and state of scholarship; and also maps the research material. It also provides a short history of the arrival and early reception of photography in this part of the world; then shifts to the

methodology of seeing photographic practice as central to an emergent modernist visual aesthetic. Bringing these concerns together, the chapter ends by foregrounding why the thesis aims at re-imagining Calcutta as *a photographic city*.

Chapter 2 | The Calcutta Panorama

This chapter looks at how early photography of and in Calcutta (with a brief reference to ‘Company Paintings’) reveal a distinct fascination *for* and programmatic appeal *of* the *panorama style*, to the extent that it assumed an autotelic image regime, reflecting a city’s perpetually changing skyline. This regime can only be understood if contextualized within the global panoramic discourse - both as form *and* method – and as part of the spatial and temporal arc of modernity itself. This chapter is hence mounted on a scale of comparison with the global history and fascination with panorama from late 18th century onwards.

Chapter 3 | Calcutta, Open City

This chapter is a close study of Calcutta’s everyday colonial imagery. Concentrated largely on Samuel Bourne’s *city views* and that of the studio of Bourne and Charles Shepherd, this chapter is a comprehensive assessment of the city as lensed by commercial photographers. It divides the archive of colonial urban Calcutta into spaces of movement and spaces of stasis, because that is how most cities of photographic interest had developed their relation with the newfound visual language of the camera. There is also a separate section on the hand-painted salt prints of Frederick Fiebig, offering a pair of hypotheses about the little-known pioneer’s purported *chromophilia*.

Chapter 4 | The Liquescent City

This chapter traces the life of the river Hooghly in the arc of colonial imagination - from its early days of being a fabled frontier to the taming of its expanse in the late colonial period. As much as the river incited early accounts of fascination, every effort was consequently made to make the river a part of the city’s commercial (trade), administrative (port) and spatial prospect. In doing so, the chapter reveals a historical and continuous visual imagination of the river that not only parallels the city but also projects on to the river the city’s coming into being from proto-colonial period to that of late coloniality.

Chapter 5 | The City from Above

This chapter deals with a rare set of images that record Calcutta from the air, which could be seen either as an extension of the desire for an ever-higher altitude (to transcend the limits of panorama); or as an image-practice that was new in its conceptualization of urban space.

Drawing from pre-modern and early modern cartographic practice and a history of *aeriality* in the west, this chapter tries to theorize the captive and perspectival gaze of photographing a colonial city from the air and how it figures in the competition for aerial gaze among rival European powers since early 20th century

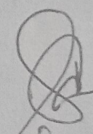
Chapter 6 (Conclusion) | Towards an Aesthetics of Ugliness

This chapter is about a crisis of *perception* in late colonial Calcutta and the emergence of a new visual rhetoric of radical exigency of urban public space and the liminal nature of postcoloniality. In raising these issues, the chapter highlights the provocative possibility that Calcutta's visual nemesis in the 1940s is in actuality a political anti-aesthetic, provoking the possibility that for a city like Calcutta – an archetypal colonial assembly – a transition to *postcoloniality* is fraught with enduring complexities of perception.

Moinak

25 September, 2021

MOINAK BISWAS
Professor
Department of Film Studies
Coordinator
The Media Lab
Jadavpur University


Sayandeep Choudhury
Doctoral Candidate
Sept 25, 2021.