

## Digital Archives

### *Teaching Indian Colonial History Through Photographs*

By Rachel M. Ball-Phillips

#### Digital Photography in the Classroom

We often use photographs in a history classroom to illustrate a point rather than as a foundation for our courses. I coteach an interdisciplinary course that integrates visual culture and history into an undergraduate class titled *On the Edges of Empire: India and Mexico/American Southwest* at Southern Methodist University. I was surprised to stumble upon a unique digital collection at the SMU DeGolyer Special Collections Library, which is known for its archives related to the US west, borderlands, and transportation. Despite their array of digitized photographs, I did not expect to find one of the most extensive collections of William Johnson's photographs of India from the mid-nineteenth century. And the best part: all these photographs were digitized, allowing students access to them beyond the walls of the DeGolyer Library.<sup>1</sup>

This digital archive created a world of opportunity for new approaches to integrate visual culture analysis into the classroom. Not only can projects be designed using these digital photographs, they provide lecturers great opportunities to integrate them in classes through experiential learning.

The objective of this essay is to suggest possibilities for utilizing photographs in a history classroom through drawing upon the digital collection of Johnson's photographs, titled *Photographs of Western India*, circa 1855 to 1862 (Image 1). Johnson was a member of the Bombay Civil Service, and his photographs are most well-known from a volume he published in 1863 titled *The Oriental Race and Tribes: Residents and Visitors of Bombay*.<sup>2</sup> The three volumes of Johnson's photographs at DeGolyer Library,



Image 1: "Nagar Brahmin Women," William Johnson  
*Photographs of Western India*, Vol. 1. *Costumes and Characters*  
DeGolyer Library, SMU  
<http://tinyurl.com/ofnuwm>

#### William Johnson's Photographs Available Digitally

A copy of William Johnson's *The Oriental Race and Tribes: Residents and Visitors of Bombay* is available digitally through Hathi Trust at <http://tinyurl.com/oneqjq5>. The finding aid for DeGolyer's three volumes of William Johnson's photographs is available at <http://tinyurl.com/nap8qtg>.

however, contain the most extensive collection of Johnson's photographs in the world. All three volumes are digitized and include photographs of people, buildings, and scenery.

#### Context Matters: Visual Culture Analysis in the Classroom

Photography came to India shortly after its introduction in Europe in 1839,<sup>3</sup> though the new technology did not become popular in the subcontinent until the 1850s.<sup>4</sup> The advent of this new technology coincides with the 1857 Indian Rebellion, the most important event in nineteenth-century India. Indian soldiers rose up in a rebellion that spread throughout north India and were brutally suppressed by the British in 1858. The rebellion resulted in the dissolution of the East India Company, which had ruled India since the Battle of Plassey in 1757, and India became a British Crown colony. A less discussed consequence of the rebellion was the British government's new demand for ethnographic photographs in order to categorize people as a means for effective colonial rule.<sup>5</sup>

In 1858, after the rebellion was suppressed and the mutineers severely punished, the new British colonial authorities commissioned their officers to take photographs of their Indian subjects in "the first state-sanctioned archival photographic practice in India."<sup>6</sup> Photography provided colonial rulers with a new technology to categorize people by religion and caste, which helped contribute to long-lasting caste and religious tensions in India. Johnson was in the Bombay Civil Service, but he was not commissioned to take the photographs in this collection. Instead, photography was his hobby, and he was able to successfully publish his photographs in the years following the Rebellion of 1857.

Johnson was a leader in the field of ethnological work that used photography, and his photographs document the various castes and religions of Indians of western India. His first album, *Photographs of Western India, Volume I: Costumes and Characters*, contains eighty-seven photographs of different groups from western India classified by religion, caste, occupation, and gender. Before students begin an in-depth analysis of individual photographs, it is important for students to look at each album as a whole to trace trends in colonial history. For example, students and instructors will note trends in the differences in costumes for men and women in the

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Image 2: "Coombhars or Potters," William Johnson  
*Photographs of Western India, Vol. 1. Costumes and Characters*  
 DeGolyer Library, SMU  
<http://tinyurl.com/pju69oo>

first volume titled *Costumes and Characters*. Men's costumes included some Western variances, while women's costumes remained distinctly Indian.

The photographs in the first album demonstrate the great diversity of people in western India. Religious diversity spans from Hindus and Parsis to Christians and Jews, while caste groups range from the high-caste Brahmins to untouchables that fall outside the caste system. This photograph of Khumbars, for example, uses clothing as one means to distinguish them from higher-caste Indians (Image 2). Particularly noteworthy is the use of costumes on women in the photographs. Students can flip through the photographs of Brahmin women and find that their *saris* have more detail and decoration, indicating a higher social class.

While looking at the photographs in the first album, students should think about the following questions: What are the visual markers the photographer uses to indicate difference? What is the value for British colonial rulers to classify people in this way? And what are some of the long-term impacts of this kind of classification system? Discussions about how colonial British rulers classified their subjects can easily segue into discussions about colonial ideas of race. Most importantly, these photographs tell us a significant amount about how the British imagined India in the mid- to late nineteenth century. In the British view, Indians could be categorized

by caste, occupation, and religion, all of which are highlighted in Johnson's photographs. This system of categorization was reinforced in the later nineteenth century with the advent of the all-India census.

Photographs were not simply a reflection of the reality in this period, but instead were a lens through which the British saw India and Indians. They also played an important role in shaping British ideas about Indian society. Photographs such as these pair well with other primary sources, such as Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," which further documents imperialist ideas of race at the height of the British Empire in India.<sup>7</sup>

Not only does this collection have a wide range of ethnographic portraits that categorize people based on caste, religion, and occupation through costumes and artifacts, but it also includes landscape shots of Bombay, Pune, and Ahmedabad.<sup>8</sup> The last two albums in the Johnson collection document landscapes, scenery, and public buildings. Like the previous album, it is a worthwhile endeavor to look through these two albums together. The photographs of Bombay are particularly useful. Before colonial rule, Bombay was a series of sparsely populated islands. After the Maratha Empire was defeated in 1818, Bombay became the seat of British rule in western India and was a city largely built on capital from the opium trade.<sup>9</sup> Looking through this album, teachers can engage students in questions about the types of buildings primarily featured in this collection. What types of architecture are photographed? Students may note that religious buildings of both Indians and the British are part of the collection, pointing to the religious diversity of Bombay. Others may note that there are some buildings, particularly religious spaces that predate British rule and by extension are clearly Indian architecture. Students may

also explore how elements of Indian and British architecture combined to create a specific type of architecture found only in Bombay.

In the second album, a set of eight panorama photographs can spark a class conversation about urban space and race in colonial India. Like most colonial Indian cities, Bombay was divided into European sections, notably the fort area and native towns. If students examine the panorama photographs that span from the peninsula of Malabar Point to Colaba at the southernmost point in the city, they will find one photograph titled "The Native Town towards Mazagaon" (Image 3). By looking at this collection of images, students can begin discussions about why Indians were not allowed to live in European areas of the city. How did this reinforce positions of power? What does this tell us about British perceptions of Indians? When we look at these albums as collections, we can see patterns in the establishment and perpetuation of colonial rule. British colonial rulers were able to establish and maintain power by creating differences and separating the ruled from the rulers. These albums also tell the story of a religiously and ethnically diverse space through an array of photographs that spans from portraits to landscapes.

After we address some of the broader trends that are evident by looking at the albums, I use a handout on "Visual Culture Analysis" (available in the online supplements of this issue) to walk students through the steps of analyzing an individual photograph. Students begin by making observations. They are asked to note the people, objects/artifacts, and activities. Once they make these observations, students draw conclusions based on them. Students follow that with the questions that come to mind based on

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their observations and conclusions. This allows the class to not only work with visual primary sources in much the same way they would analyze a textual source, but the questions can lead to fruitful discussions inside the classroom and research topics for individual or group projects.

For example, in the next photograph, “The Chowpattee of Former Days Bombay” (Image 4), students will observe a beach, fishing boats, bullocks carts, laborers, and significant tree cover in the background. They may deduce that Bombay was a bustling port city or that it was not heavily inhabited. This may leave them with questions such as “What does Chowpattee look like today?” A quick Google search will supply them with a number of photographs on the same beach, and in place of trees, students will see a city full of skyscrapers. This is a useful jumping-off point for research about urban development and, possibly, environmental history. Alternatively, students could pursue a question such as “What are these laborers doing?” From here, students can explore questions of labor and industry in the city during the mid-nineteenth century. A photograph, when viewed within its proper historical context, can provide students multiple paths through which they can pursue meaningful research and projects.

#### **Integrating Photographs through Experiential Learning and Project-Based Learning**

Though there are many ways to integrate digital photographs in a classroom, I integrate visual culture into my course using both experiential and project-based learning. Because the photographs are available digitally, I am able to use them inside and outside my classroom. I like to turn my classroom into a museum of sorts by using an approach usually referred to as a “gallery walk.” In this exercise, I take twelve photographs from the Johnson collection and blow them up to the size of posters. Beside each poster, I hang a large sheet of paper for students to write their observations and deductions. I ask students to take a walk around the classroom and write their immediate reactions and observations of the photographs. During this process, each student is required to fill out visual culture worksheets for at least two of the photographs. After they walk around once, students take a second lap around the classroom to observe the comments their fellow students have



Image 3: “Panorama from the Cathedral, Bombay. No. 3. The Native Town towards Mazagaon,” William Johnson  
*Photographs of Western India, Vol. II. Scenery, Public Buildings*  
DeGolyer Library, SMU  
<http://tinyurl.com/ouar356>



Image 4: “The Chowpattee of Former Days Bombay,” William Johnson  
*Photographs of Western India, Vol. II. Scenery, Public Buildings*  
DeGolyer Library, SMU  
<http://tinyurl.com/py3uqkw>

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made about the photographs. By the end of the exercise, students are able to draw conclusions and make connections to colonial Indian history beyond their initial observations of the image. This experience generates a class discussion about the photographs, their context, and their purpose.

I used a project-based learning approach to create a class website because students had access to this photograph collection digitally. Students were involved with the organization/structure of the website (people.smu.edu/edgesofempire). The project was structured as described below:

Students began by choosing two photographs from the collection, completing the Visual Culture Analysis worksheet, and uploading the photographs and their analyses of the photographs on the class website. As a class, we discussed and decided the structure of the website. This included themes and the organization of the website. Themes included gender, labor, and infrastructure. Students submitted a thesis for their final project

and a short bibliography. Then, as a class, we created a cumulative bibliography that we posted on our website. Students then created documentary films based on the photographs they selected. Most used video editing programs such as Apple's iMovie and by the time of submission were familiar enough with the blogging service WordPress to organize, tag, and upload their final projects to the class website.

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### Conclusion

Digital archives of photographs, such as the William Johnson collection at the DeGolyer Library, provide new opportunities for educators to integrate experiential learning and project-based learning techniques into their classrooms. Not only does this introduce students to one aspect of the digital humanities, it also introduces new methods of assessment. These methods of assessment ask students to engage with the materials rather than memorize the class material. Perhaps the best part of this digital archive is that the photographs can be accessed from anywhere, and this module (or a revised version of this module) could be recreated in high school and undergraduate classrooms alike.

A note on the course and this article: The projects described in this article used photograph collections from both India and Mexico since the course examines both areas of the world. Since the focus of this issue is India, however, I limited my description of this module to the India portion of the course. A copy of the course syllabus, along with the Visual Culture Analysis handout, is available in the online supplements at <http://www.asian-studies.org/Publications/EAA/Supplements>. ■

### NOTES

1. The finding aid is available at *The Texas Archival Resources Online*, "Photographs of Western India," accessed August 25, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/nap8qtg>.
2. Clark Worswick and Ainslie Embree, *The Last Empire: Photography in British India, 1855-1911* (New York: Aperture Inc., 1976), 5.
3. Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17.
4. Pinney, "The Material and Visual Culture of British India," in *India and the British Empire*, ed. Douglas M. Peers et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 254.
5. For more on the 1857 Rebellion and ethnographic photographs in India, see Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 34-35.
6. Zahid R. Chaudhary, *Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 4.
7. A copy of this poem is available in Fordham University's *Modern History Sourcebook* at <http://tinyurl.com/mbphzre>.
8. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117.
9. For more on the opium trade and Bombay, see Amar Farooqui, *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006).

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