Two generations after the exultation of hard-won independence in 1947 and the concurrent horrors of the Partition of India into India and Pakistan, the artists represented in *Postdate: Photography and Inherited History in India* are paving the way for a new generation of Indian thinkers who are reclaiming and re-appraising the history of their country. These artists look closely and critically at the distinct history of Indian photography from the early days of the medium and at the height of the British occupation of the subcontinent in the nineteenth century to contemporary digital practices. Their sources are diverse: panorama photographs that document the development of Mumbai (then Bombay) in the mid-nineteenth century; hand-painted studio portraits from the early twentieth century; stills from Bollywood movies. The artists take history into their own hands, redefining iconic images of India and investigating the complex relationship between traditions of representation and contemporary practices of image-making. This group critically consider the nature of historical methods and whether or not the results can be trusted; the influence of the global and the draw of the local; and, through the use of digital technology, alternate ways of thinking about history and its relationship to today. Their observations are particularly germane to understanding global contemporary art practices that embrace tradition and innovation as covalent rather than competitive forces. There are artists around the world who are interested in history—addressing history in artistic practice is neither a new mode of working nor a phenomenon that exists only in India. However, the way these artists are considering the weighty issues of colonialism and its relationship to a wide span of the history of Indian photography warrants a specific look.

This increased interest in understanding and organizing the history of photography in India occurred concurrently with the rise of the contemporary art market in the country and globally. Increasingly engaged in the international market, artists are acutely aware that the representation of India is often limited to photographs of the Taj Mahal or of disconcerting poverty in urban slums. Also, as Ram Rahman noted:

*There has been a growing debate in Indian art circles on a “Biennale aesthetic” being imposed on art practice here which is leading to production of work that is slick, easily slotting into a new Orientalism, now in its consumerist global market...*
avatar. In photography circles, the previous generation was accused of being purveyors of an "exotic" fakir-filled India steeped in colourful riverside rituals, or quaint Bollywood—that was the India in demand around the world. Is it then surprising that the demand for images now is for the “new” middle class and elite young India—consumers of Chanel, Nokia, Honda, readers of Indian editions of Elle, Conde Nast Traveller or L’Officiel? Do these images provide a reassurance that the world is becoming less complex and differentiated and more comfortably mono-cultural?1

The artists in Postdate are well aware of the whip-lash-inducing debate between globalized aesthetics and images that perpetuates a one-dimensional understanding of Indian culture such as Rahman described. As a consequence, they seek to go beyond simplistic delineations and definitions such as global versus local and Western versus non-Western by including their commitment to located histories in India within their engagement in trans-national discourse.

Inherited History

Photography was invented in 1839 in Europe, and by the 1850s it was firmly established commercially and artistically. Driven by the population of British colonials in India and the desire of their compatriots at home for images of this foreign and “exotic” land, photographers (both British and Indian) focused their lenses on indigenous populations and customs, architecture and monuments, and street scenes and landscapes. Indians often worked for the British. They learned photography from them and later opened their own studios (for example, Lala Deen Dayal) or used the medium for creative expression (Umrao Singh Sher-Gil). India’s First War of Independence in 1857 was one of the earliest extensively photographed wars in the world.

Though photography was present in India since its invention, critical writing and attempts to chronicle its history have been made in earnest only within the last thirty years. Concurrently in the 1990s, the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, a collection of over ninety thousand nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs from South and Southeast Asia, began to archive its vast collection.

Photography makes history visible. It taps into our innate need to look at each other face-to-face. Likely due in large part to the burgeoning scholarship and recent attempts to categorize and collect these archival images, many of the artists in this exhibition are mining the rich tradition of photography in India in order to rethink dominant historical narratives, share hidden stories, and, ultimately, to make a personal connection with the history of their country. This human connection to history is often at the forefront of their work. However, instead of assuming that a photograph is a representation of truth, they often take to task the structure through which history is validated and question the motives underlying the image. Although all history is “inherited,” these artists seek to better understand what has been passed on and move forward with it into the future. In the case of this project, the term “postdate” refers to the artists’ marking vestiges of the past with ideas from the present. This approach is an unmooring of history that, in the artists’ movements both backward and forward in time, reveals the unsettled nature of this history.

Raqs Media Collective’s work has been very important in defining the key concepts of this exhibition. They have been at the forefront of artists working globally with photographic archives and are engaged specifically with the history of photography in India. Their considered extension of the role of the artist into archival science and historical fields of study finds expression in the multimedia and multigenre nature of their installations. They dismantle existing historical frameworks to question our understanding of past events and to suggest alternative
narratives. Hal Foster stated that this type of work “not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects (again, platforms, stations, kiosks . . .).” Raqs noted that *The Surface of Each Day is a Different Planet* (2009) (see Raqs, plates 3–5), a video piece in which they combined historic photographs from archives in London and New Delhi with contemporary imagery and animation, is purposefully antidocumentary, as well as nonnarrative. They asked, “Can there be a time made of juxtapositions, a time never experienced, but made serendipitously manifest by interpretative accidents? By the careful cultivation of chance encounters in scattered archives?” Though Raqs’s practice is grounded in historical research, the ideas, objects, photographs, or statements they choose to extract or derive from the archive are creatively combined and considered to engender new theories and histories.

Whereas Raqs Media Collective works from existing material, Madhuban Mitra and Manas Bhattacharya very intentionally label their photographs and videos of the empty National Instruments Ltd. camera factory an archive. This factory in the Jadavpur neighborhood of southern Kolkata marks a national attempt to democratize image-making in India. The National 35 was India’s first locally made, low-cost camera. It was popular throughout the 1980s, but this government-owned venture began to decline and the factory was closed in the 1990s. Mitra and Bhattacharya’s images (see Mitra and Bhattacharya, plates 1–11) of the factory tell the story of an important moment in Indian photography. Their pictures reflect upon the histories of labor, photography, and technology in India. Furthermore, they exemplify the act of photography looking at itself—in this case, specifically, digital photography looking at its analogue version. The artists are less interested in the photograph as document (though they intend their archive to be a lasting record of the factory) than in technological development within the medium. In using digital tools, they simultaneously embrace the newest developments in the medium and nostalgically mourn the failure of a camera company.

Surekha and Pushpamala N. both use old photographs to examine the photographic representation of women in India. While Pushpamala is interested in the iconic images of Indian womanhood, Surekha creates installations from vernacular studio and wedding photographs that she finds in Bangalore, the city where she currently lives. In *Fragments of a Wedding Diary* (see Surekha, plates 1–4), Surekha digitally reframed and colored fragments of found wedding photographs and negatives from the 1960s–90s in order to highlight the ritual and physical aspects of a wedding. By fragmenting these photographs (see Surehka, plate 3), she removed them from a specific personal context and created an installation that reflects upon the place of wedding photography in collective memory. Additionally, in regard to the artifice of photography, she noted that, “the common people become the lead actors during their auspicious wedding day. The marriage photographs or / and the marriage videos document a specific culture of people. It is also a document of what they essentially are not in their true life.”

Rochana Majumdar’s question about nineteenth-century wedding photography in Christopher Pinney’s *The Coming of Photography in India* strikes a similar chord: “How [are we] to understand Bengali wedding portraits, most of which show the bride and bridegroom . . . often with their limbs touching, their images frozen in a gesture of togetherness when other histories seem to suggest that these sentiments were far more contested in everyday life?” This contradiction between photographic convention and the history of married relationships in India is at the core of Surekha’s investigation into this particular vernacular photography in South India. The contrived nature of wedding and portrait photography, in this instance, is
a barrier to clearly understanding the position of women in this region. Her emphasis on the formal similarities of these photographs prompts a consideration of past and present women’s rights issues.

In her series “Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs,” Pushpamala investigated the roles of subject and photographer by enacting historical images such as Raja Ravi Varma’s nineteenth-century paintings of graceful, sari-clad women (figure 1) and 1920s film stills featuring mysterious ingénues (figure 2). In collaboration with Clare Arni, a British photographer who has spent most of her life in India, Pushpamala carefully created sets that replicated scenes from these quintessential images and cast herself as the archetypes. As Pushpamala intended, this exactness leads to a final photograph that is obviously artificial. Geeta Kapur noted in reference to this series, “An obsessive mimesis can render the repetition in mimicry a measure of calibrated difference—visual, cultural, anthropological—mocking yet enhancing representation.” In so deliberately performing these tableaus, the artist calls attention to the artificial nature of the conception and creation of the source images. For example, *The Native Types—Toda* (see Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni, plate 5)
refers to British colonial ethnographic photography from the nineteenth century, specifically a series by Maurice Vidal Portman in which he measured and photographed people of the Andaman Islands against black-and-white checkered backdrops (figure 3). One may initially assume that the hands holding the backdrop in *Toda* were an addition by Pushpamala to emphasize the artifice and demonstrate the control that the British colonial photographer would have had over the native, but hands were present in Portman’s ca. 1893 photograph. In re-enacting such a wide span of Indian photographic history in this series, Pushpamala called attention to the consistent and continued presence of colonial legacies in photographic practice.

**Beyond Global Influence and Local Perspectives**

In specifically looking back at India’s photographic past—images that reflect important moments of local history and customs while simultaneously recalling the legacy of colonialism—the artists in this exhibition assert the necessity of engaging with both the global and the local in their work. As Frederick Gross suggested in his essay “Contemporary Photography Between the Global and the Local,” “a new model of interpretation based upon [Homi K.] Bhabha’s situation of a ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ in which an artist is critically aware of the effects of globalization within the distinctive worldview of his or her own localized cultural identity” is needed. The artists presented here seek to acknowledge but deconstruct this narrow representation to create work that reflects the complex hybridity inherent to a globalized India.

With awareness of the global art world and keeping in mind the inclinations of past photographers in India toward the exotic, these artists take a personal approach to determining cultural identity from both global
and local perspectives. Gauri Gill, for example, who is based in New Delhi, is conscious of her outsider status when addressing the complicated and contradictory elements of contemporary life in India's rural Rajasthan. She explores these issues by engaging with the problematic history of representation in rural Indian portrait photography. Her approach is collaborative and activist. In 2003, she set up a makeshift studio at a Rajasthani fair for young women and girls and invited them to be photographed “as they are, or as they see themselves, or to invent new selves for the camera.”

This attitude is in striking contrast to the methods of the photographer in nineteenth-century India who, as Christopher Pinney outlined in *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, often carefully controlled the costumes, poses, and props of his subjects so as “not to capture in his negatives the complex contemporary hybrid reality he encountered, but rather to stage a vision of an authentic primitiveness salvaged from imminent extinction.”

Gill, on the other hand, in allowing the natural hybridity of Rajasthani culture to come through in her photographs, refuted historical and contemporary photographic practices that emphasize the exotic “otherness” of their subjects. Traditional *salwar kameezes* appear alongside modern t-shirts and blue jeans—indicative of the tensions of change but also co-existence. Moreover, initially Gill took only black-and-white photographs of Rajasthan with the idea that eliminating color would likewise reduce the romanticized identity of the country. Anita Dube pointed out that Gill’s photographs are a much-needed counterpoint to the visions of Rajasthan promoted by travel campaigns such as “Incredible India” (figure 4). Gill’s decision demonstrates that she (along with many other artists in this exhibition) is alert to how her photographs are interpreted both inside and outside of India. As David Batchelor argued, Western culture has long rejected color and associated it with “the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological.”

Jitish Kallat is also interested in how global culture has shaped local experience. Like Gill, he seeks to show India’s complex relationship with globalism. The changes to India’s cities—both good and bad, from better housing to air and water pollution—reflect the changes of pace and ideology of the country and Kallat’s work demonstrates these complexities. Inspired by the panoramic documentation of the development of Mumbai (figure 5) in the boom time of the 1800s, Kallat created a modern-day
panorama of Mumbai by digitally layering multiple time frames within a single image. Whereas the early panoramas sought to capture the changing skyline and the erection of colonial-style buildings, Kallat sought to capture the pace of a twenty-first-century city. The title of the photograph *Artist Making Local Call* (see Kallat, plate 1), for example, refers to the fact that the photograph’s exposure time matched that of the average local call on a pay phone—one and a half minutes—an act performed by the artist and recorded in the center of the photograph. Kallat’s phone call provides the focal point within the surrounding chaos and comments on how a global impetus affects a city. He collapses time and space in his panoramic cityscapes in order to catch a glimpse of the present before it fades speedily into the past. His digital layering offers an apt metaphor for the convergence of years passing and the changing architecture of a city. Unlike the historic “frozen” panorama, Kallat’s photograph reels forward into the future with people and rickshaws meeting and colliding across time around him.

Though she spent much of her life in India, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is the only artist in the exhibition who does not currently live there. Matthew uses performance in her photography to better understand her experience as an immigrant to the United States and to reveal the connections and similarities between the photographic histories of the two countries. In her series “An Indian from India,” she investigates the connection between the representation of native Indians and Native Americans in photography from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With a distinctively South Asian and female perspective, she reenacts iconic photographs of Native Americans—including famous examples by Edward S. Curtis (see Matthew, plate 10)—and prints them directly next to the original image on a sheet of paper. Her titles for the photographs comment further on stereotypes and bring this historic discussion into the present. For example, in *Feather/Dot*, she paired a photograph of a Native American wearing a feather headdress with an image of herself wearing a symbolic bindi dot (see Matthew, plate 5). As Matthew noted, “It seems strange that all this confusion started because Christopher Columbus thought he had found the Indies and called the native people of America collectively as Indians.” Matthew’s work reminds us that five-hundred-year-old “confusions” can still influence global identity politics. Like Pushpamala N., her mimicry points to the artificiality of photography and the heavy hand that photographers such as Curtis had in manipulating their supposedly “documentary” photographs of native people.
Digitally Connecting Past and Present

Digital technology has proved to be a strong force in the globalization of culture. India has become one of the countries most often associated with the “digital divide”—a disparity between those who have access to information and communications technologies and those who do not. Though this is a worldwide issue, the striking difference between the well-connectedness of its elite and the living conditions of its poor makes the disparity in India especially conspicuous. The artists in *Postdate* use digital technology to connect past and present concerns, as well as to consider its impact on local culture. Their work reflects the formation of a new aesthetic language that has been greatly influenced by our near constant interactions with computers and smartphones.

Organizations such as the 1947 Partition Archive, based in Berkeley, California, use digital technology and the Internet to collect and share the stories and experiences of Partition. As fewer people remain who experienced Partition first-hand, capturing their stories becomes more urgent. Digital technology has created the opportunity for these stories to be collected on a massive scale—numbering to date more than one thousand oral history interviews.14 Matthew’s recent work echoes this desire to capture these experiences, yet also, through digital technology, to connect generations. Despite having spent the majority of her childhood in India, Matthew felt vastly uninformed about the 1947 Partition. In an effort to better understand the impact of this historic moment on the citizens of India and Pakistan, in 2012, as part of a Fulbright Fellowship, she began to collect portraits from the late 1940s from families who were affected by the division. She then photographed subsequent generations of these families and digitally brought the images together into one morphing animation (see Matthew, plate 11). The animations conflate past and present and connect the personal with the political—a connection emphasized by the placement of the personal video stories in an English-language encyclopedia that discusses the geo-political impact of Partition. Matthew creates a memory that exists only in the digital world. She “re-orient[s] the viewer’s connection to time as [she] collapse[s] the presumed progression of its borders, so the past and present appear here in the same virtual space”15 and calls attention to the shifts between generations by making the family photograph into a conduit through which geo-political shifts can be observed.

Vivan Sundaram uses digital means to expand upon and create new narratives from his family’s photographic
archive. Sundaram’s family history is deeply intertwined with the history of art in India. His aunt Amrita Sher-Gil was a prominent modern artist and his grandfather Umrao Singh Sher-Gil was a great scholar and pioneer of photography. In his “Re-Take of Amrita” series, Sundaram collaborates posthumously with his grandfather by digitally layering family images taken at different times and places into single photographs. He creates new narratives for the family, chiefly around Amrita Sher-Gil. Nicolas Bourriaud applied the term “postproduction” to artwork that has been created from already existing pieces, noting that, “This art of postproduction seems to respond to the proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age...” He likened the artist to a DJ—remixing parts and pieces to create a new work of art. Certainly this is true for Sundaram’s series, albeit filtered through a much more personal lens. As he warps time and space, Sundaram also disrupts the notion that a photograph is a fixed, and thus truthful, document. In fact, he calls these photographs “future” works of art—perhaps because they cannot be anchored to a specific time or place. The artist pushes even further, calling into question the entire narrative by purposefully leaving footprints of his digital tools—blurring or color variation—to show that changes have been made (see Sundaram, plate 7).

Nandan Ghiya similarly emphasizes the traces of his tools. He paints nineteenth-century studio portraits to make them look as if they have been digitally manipulated, then groups them in salon-style installations. For example, his Chairmen (see Ghiya, plate 1) brings together photographs of Indian men in business attire posing in front of commercial studio backdrops. Like Surekha’s installations of found photographs, Ghiya’s groupings sort specific categories of vernacular photographs and thereby call attention to cultural connections, as well as stylistics related to studio portraiture. Ghiya, however, uses the now global language of digital technology to further separate the viewer from the people in the portraits. For example, by painting pixels on the faces of the individuals, he obscures their identity and creates a sense of anonymity. In doing so, he intentionally frustrates the viewer and calls attention to the unknown or unreachable aspects of history. Given our access today to unlimited information thanks to the Internet, such frustration feels particularly acute. Ghiya’s barriers of pixels and download errors raise questions about the idea that one can fully understand the world through digital means.

Taking on the Future

India’s history of photography has proved to be a bountiful source for artistic investigation. The artists represented in this exhibition take a multidisciplinary approach to exploring cultural representation, methods of chronicling history, and the effects of globalism on their country. In old photographs and archives they find stylistic similarities that reveal larger questions about Indian society and make surprising, thoughtful, juxtapositions that call into question the authority of historical structures. By engaging with both local history and the larger world, they reveal complex intersections between the past and present; rural and urban; and Western and Indian cultures. Using new digital tools, they find ways to suggest narratives that offer alternatives to dominant historical perspectives and stereotypes.

Pushpamala N. succinctly summarized the demanding roles of contemporary artists in India: “In a postcolonial country like India, artists have seen their role as developmental and have worked to build institutions and the infrastructure for creative life to flourish. The artists I admire are scholar-writer-teacher-artists. I believe the creative subjectivity and the anarchic individualism of the artist resist the homogenous culture demanded by both a feudal society and by a globalizing world.” Ultimately, the artists in Postdate exemplify this model: they are researchers,
collectors, activists, genealogists, performers, and documentarians. They engage with the history of photography in their country in order to better understand the lasting legacy of colonialism on contemporary culture. Engaged globally and locally, they have a large role and considerable responsibility in defining and developing the post-colonial artistic culture in India and representing the history of their country to the world.


7 Geeta Kapur, “Gender Mobility: Through the Lens of Five Women Artists in India,” in Global Feminisms (Brooklyn, New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2007), 85.


10 Christopher Pinney, Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 46.

11 Anita Dube, “The Desert Mirror.” ARTIndia 15, 1 (Quarter 1, 2010).


