

## 19th-century Photography and Royal Representation in South Asia

~ K-14 Lesson Plan ~

### Suggested Age Groups

- ◆ Grades 6 - 12

### General Themes

- ◆ Visual analysis of images: How to "read" or analyze a picture
- ◆ Modes of visual representation in India
- ◆ History and technology of early photography in India
- ◆ Photography as part of the imperial project in India

### Goals

- ◆ Allow students to develop analytical skills using primary sources
- ◆ Include the study of images as a way for students to understand history, geography, and society in South Asia
- ◆ Encourage a discussion of colonialism in India and how images were used as part of the imperial project.

### Activities

#### **SLIDE PRESENTATION: Picturing Indian Kingship through Darbar Portraits**

Since at least the 16th century Indian rulers have commissioned painted portraits to depict various aspects of their lives and reign. Very often composed on paper and occasionally included in large-format albums, these images were intended to display a ruler's material wealth and royal power. In Mughal and Rajput courts painted portraits were placed on display in a palace to be seen by royal envoys or visitors. An important form of Indian royal portraiture are depictions of formal court assemblies known as darbars. During a royal darbar, a ruler placed himself on public display within his palace during which time his subjects could see his physical body (and his many trappings of kingship) and approach the ruler with disputes or grievances. Painted depictions of darbars extend the experience of seeing the ruler's body and wealth beyond the moment of a single darbar ceremony.

SLIDE ONE: Some of the earliest paintings of darbars portray the Mughal emperors enthroned beneath an elaborate canopy and surrounded by dozens of courtiers, attendants, and subjects. This image of a darbar of Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) portrays the bustle of activity as people vie to get a closer look at the emperor. How has the artist distinguished Emperor Jahangir from other figures in the painting? How does the painting suggest the emperor's wealth? What is notable about the composition (arrangement of figures, forms, and architecture) within the painting?

SLIDE TWO:

Compare these two darbar paintings of Mughal emperors (left: Emperor Jahangir, right: Emperor Shah Jahan, r. 1628-1658). How does the artist portray the emperor in each image? What is similar and different about the composition of figures in each image?

Immediately after the invention of photography (specifically calotype and daguerreotype processes) in 1839 and 1840, Indian rulers began to commission photographic portraits. In some cases the darbar genre of portraiture continued in photographic depictions.

SLIDE THREE:

The image on the left is a darbar photograph of a very young Maharaja Jaswant Singh, ruler of the kingdom of Bharatpur (r. 1853 to 1893) in present-day Rajasthan from. In what ways does this image depart from and adhere to compositional features of darbar paintings made under the Mughal emperors? The image on the right is a darbar photograph of Sir Anand Rao III, ruler of Dhar in present-day Madhya Pradesh. What are the similarities and differences between these two darbar photographs?

Both Indian and European photographers were working in India during the second half of the 19th century, and several of them established photography studios in major urban centers such as Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay. (SLIDE FOUR: 19th century map of India highlighting each presidency of the British Raj).

SLIDE FIVE:

Beyond darbar images, Indian rulers also commissioned European-style portraits of themselves. Compare and contrast each image: How do these portraits differ from or adhere to visual features found within the darbar images we have already seen? What do these portraits convey symbolic information about a ruler (e.g. signs of material wealth and military power)?

Unlike painted portraits of rulers, these photographic portraits were easily duplicatable and very often circulated outside of a kingdom. In many cases European travelers and soldiers of the British East India Company collected photographic portraits of Indian rulers along with other depictions of India's landscape and people to bring home as souvenirs, oftentimes housed in personal photo albums. As part of the British imperial project in India, these images functioned as visual tools for the British to "know" India.

SLIDE SIX:

During colonial rule the British ruling elite borrowed the darbar format for their own imperial displays. Defending Governor General Richard Wellesley's decision to build an opulent governor's mansion in Calcutta, Lord Valentia famously exclaimed that India should be ruled "from a palace not from a counting-house with the ideas of a Prince not with those of a retail dealer in muslins and indigo." Along the same lines, the British government in India staged spectacular imperial darbars as a way to align themselves with Indian symbols of kingship and

project to a wide public audience their political authority. This image depicts a 1903 durbar held in Delhi to celebrate the coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra as Emperor and Empress of colonial India. What is “on display” in this image? How has the focus on the ruler’s body shifted in this 1903 image in comparison to earlier depictions of darbars that we have already seen?

**IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENT / HANDS-ON ACTIVITY:** Select a range of photographs from *India Through the Lens* and make one photocopy of each. Mount the photocopies on board for easier handling and display. Divide students into several small groups. Give each group 1-2 photograph(s). Working as a group ask students to closely examine their photograph(s) using either the Photo Analysis Worksheet or the Photo Comparison Worksheet. Each group should then present their image and findings to the class. The class can engage in a discussion on similarities or differences between the groups of images and how these images present people, places, and ideas of India

### Suggested Reading

Select chapters from *India Through the Lens: Photography, 1840-1911*, edited by Vidya Dehejia. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 2000.

- Charles Allen, “India of the Princes and Maharajas,” pp 199-225.
- Vidya Dehejia, “Fixing a Shadow,” and “Maharajas as Photographers,” 11-34 and 226-230.
- Gary D. Sampson, “Lala Deen Dayal: Between Two Worlds,” 259-291.
- Cristin R. McKnight, “‘Rajah of Bhurtpore in Durbar:’ Image-Making and Royal Practice in Colonial India. MA Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2008.

### Suggested Video

*Photo Wallahs: An Encounter with Photography*

[http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/arts\\_humanities/photo\\_wallahs](http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/arts_humanities/photo_wallahs)

Following a screening of the video, ask students to write a short response paper about the video (as possible homework assignment). Possible questions / themes for discussion include:

- What are some of the different kinds of photographic images that the video presents? (printed posters, moving pictures / films, black and white portraits, etc.)
- What are some of the differences between the photo studios presented in the video?
- How do costumes change a person's portrait?
- Do you consider these photographs to be "real" or "staged"? Why?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

## Photo Analysis Worksheet

### Part One. **Observation**

1. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Write a general description of the photograph. Describe *everything* you see in the photograph. Think about the following characteristics:

**People** (gender, age, clothing, facial expressions, posture, etc.)

**Place** (indoor/outdoor, urban/rural, time of day, time of year, background, architecture, landscape, plants, etc.)

**Action** (What activity / event is shown? If there are people in your photograph, what are those people doing?

How are people or objects positioned in relation to each other?)

**Other Clues** (What other details do you see in the photo? Think about: objects, animals, tools, vehicles, signs)

Is there a title? What information does it give you?

Is there a caption? What information does it give you?

**Part Two. Inference**

1. What year do you think this photo was taken?
2. Who or what do you think is the subject of this photograph?
3. Where might you expect to find this photograph?
4. Based on what you have observed (people, place, action, other clues), list three things you might infer from this photograph. In particular, think about what kinds of ideas about India are presented in this photograph.

**Part Three. Questions**

1. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?
2. Where could you find answers to them?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

## Photo Analysis Worksheet: Comparison

### Part One. **Observation**

1. Study the two photographs for 2 minutes each. Write a general description of each photograph. Describe *everything* you see in the photograph. Think about the following characteristics:

**People** (gender, age, clothing, facial expressions, posture, etc.)

**Place** (indoor/outdoor, urban/rural, time of day, time of year, background, architecture, landscape, plants, etc.)

**Action** (What activity / event is shown? If there are people in your photograph, what are those people doing? How are people or objects positioned in relation to each other?)

**Other Clues** (What other details do you see in the photo? Think about: objects, animals, tools, vehicles, signs)

Photograph #1	Photograph #2

Is there a title for either of the photographs? What information does it give you?

Is there a caption for either of the photographs? What information does it give you?

Part Two. **Inference**

1. What year do you think each photograph was taken?
2. Who or what do you think is the subject of each photograph?
3. Where might you expect to find each photograph?
4. Based on what you have observed (people, place, action, other clues), what kinds of ideas about India are presented in each of these photographs. Compare and contrast the different ways India is depicted in each image.

Part Three. **Questions**

1. What questions do these photographs raise in your mind?
2. Where could you find answers to them?