

Grant Impact Study

A Report on the Impact of the Grants made by IFA in the Field of Photography (1995-96 to 2021-2022)

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Photography's presence in the subcontinent was critically analysed only several decades after its widespread practice and circulation. Even though the camera was in use in India since the mid-19th century, scholarly attention to it only came in the post-colonial period, more so in the global moment leading up to the millennium. The India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) commenced its grant giving activities to the domain of photographic practices in the 1990s, as one of the early cultural bodies to support activities in the medium. IFA's grants to the field of photography in fact coincides with the time that the camera truly became accessible as a medium of representation to the Indian public. While the worldwide 'democratisation' of the camera was believed to be in the early decades of the 20th century when the Kodak box brownie became available to the masses, scholars have pointed out how this only happened for South Asia after the digital revolution of the 1990s. The fusion of the digital camera with the mobile phone further incremented the possibilities of photography, making it a medium that cuts across social, cultural and economic barriers in the production of every day visual culture. As such, IFA intercepted the potentials of photography as a visual form at the time that it was burgeoning in the Indian context, and it has since mapped a historiographical trajectory of research in the field ever since.

Studies on photography have often been regarded as being very medium specific. IFA's projects have challenged the medium specificity of the camera, noting technological limitations and possibilities, but more importantly the larger social, cultural, political and ecological reasons for images making. Projects have spanned older technologies of photography, reviving media such as gum bichromate and cyanotypes, while exploring the latest advantages of digital photography as well. Not surprisingly, a central theme of the projects covered by the grants has been about the paradoxical idea of 'invisibility' within photography. As much as our world is suffused with the hyper visible image, there are significant communities that remain unseen, located on the margins of society. IFA has consciously sought out work that brings these figures into focus, with their narratives visualising photography in alternative languages from the mainstream discourse. Photography becomes a tool for subverting majoritarian narratives, dominated by gendered, caste or class positions.

Sensitivities to Identity and Gender

Sabeena Gadihoke's project (1998), resulting in a film 'Three Woman and a Camera', portraying the work of the photographers Sheba Chhachhi, Dayanita Singh and Homai Vyarawalla, concerns the minority of professional women operators of the camera, even though they have been its subjects for nearly two centuries. Contrary to the scholarly or artistic position that regards women and men as not photographing differently, Gadihoke's research foregrounds gendered contexts of production. Gadihoke's introduction to Vyarawalla's work for this project culminated in a long term engagement with the photographer's archive, now with the Alkazi Foundation, curated by her as the exhibition "Inner and Outer Lives: The Many Worlds of Homai Vyarawalla" in Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi, in February 2015. An accompanying book titled 'India in Focus: Camera Chronicles of Homai Vyarawalla' was also published by the Alkazi Foundation and Mapin. Chhachhi has worked with the widows, ascetics, and protesting women of the city, directly addressing their marginalisation. On the other hand, Vyarawalla and Singh did not entirely identify with feminine subjectivity for their works. As an early film on these photographers who have become stalwarts in the field, the project explored ideas that have impacted Gadihoke's later work with gender and lens based practices. Her most recent co-curated exhibition with Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Mallika Leuzenger was on two women photographers from the mid-20th century, Debolina Mazumder and Monobina Roy, shown in Kolkata and Delhi this year (https://photosouthasia.org/portfolio_page/twin-sisters-with-cameras/).

The intermediality between film and photography explored by Gadihoke's work is also seen in Nishtha Jain's 2004 project, culminating in the remarkable film 'City of Photos'. In the film, the studio appears as an intersectional space where people of diverse backgrounds find photographic opportunities for their realities and fantasies to play out in equal measure. As such, Jain's film continues to be one of the very few visual studies of popular photography, an exploration of "more than meets the eye", in her own words. It is an unearthing of visual technologies and spaces where photography operates at an everyday level for urban India, but also a deep engagement with the articulation of fantasy, desire and memory through personal portraiture. Nishtha's focus from portraiture and studio photography shifts to the intimate spaces of the family album in a 2005-08 project, where she examines the memories and personal attempts at archival practices in Kolkata's homes. Her own agency as a director in narrativising the film, something that she had been critiqued for in 'City of Photos', becomes secondary to the first person voices of the owners of photos and memories in 'Family Album' (2011). As a differently paced and deeper engagement into personal histories, the film is also

an experiment in documentary strategies of investigating the interocular relationship between the filmic and the still camera's lenses, a mutual exploration of archival possibilities (<https://www.academia.edu/37759045>).

Counterbalancing the support to projects that look at the margins is Malavika Karlekar's book, on photography among the *bhadralok* in Bengal between 1860-1920 (2000). Tracing the early origins of photography in India, her book that resulted from this grant is a pioneering study of the field, foregrounding the private domain of middle class and elite Bengali life, mainly through the feminine subject of the lens. As a counter narrative to officially supported colonial photography, Karlekar's discoveries are illustrative of a local or 'native' agency in self-representation, an 'intricate process of redefining themselves'. A subsequent 2003 grant by IFA helped to subsidise the publication costs of this research that turned into the book 'Re-Visioning the Past: Early Photography in Bengal 1875-1915' (Oxford University Press, Feb. 2005). This book became key to future studies on Indian photography, keeping Bengal as the area where the operations of the camera first came into play during colonial times, and where photography's regional history was richly developed in the local language. This book also emerged during the decade that saw other important publications on photography from India, namely 'Camera Indica: the Social Life of Indian Photographs' (Christopher Pinney, 1997), 'India Through the Lens: Photography 1840-1911' (Ed. Vidya Dehejia, 2000), 'Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation' (Ed. Maria Antonella Pelizzari, 2003), and 'The Coming of Photography in India' (Christopher Pinney, 2008). This spate of publications on photographic practices in India followed from, and made references to, early contributions by Siddhartha Ghosh ('Chhobi Tola', 1984) and V George (c. 1980s-90s), which although rich in historical value, remain out of print and circulation. Karlekar's book is also an example of publishing image heavy texts without the burden of the cost falling upon the buyer, which is usually the case with photography based publications. As such, the grant from IFA helped define a domain for academic work on popular photography, setting publications such as Karlekar's apart from other texts produced amidst photography's flourishing status as a fine art practice in India. In the wake of photography becoming a mainstream contemporary practice, shown and collected by galleries and museums, texts such as Karlekar's continue to look at the larger social fabric within which photography dwells at a more public level, making it an anthropological phenomenon to understand living reality through historical and sociological approaches rather than critical ones.

Further exploring Bengal and especially Kolkata's important role in the sub continent's regional photographic practices was also Alakananda Nag's 2017 project on the shrinking Armenian community in the city. Evoking the community's deep rooted presence

the city from the colonial period, Nag used older methods of photography to make images for a book and an exhibition, adding to them her own archival material from previous years. The book 'Armenians of Calcutta' was launched in 2022 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOldgrYjabc>). This kind of effort reflects the 'salvage paradigm' that Pinney identifies in his book 'Camera Indica' (1997), where images step in to document a culture that would otherwise disappear in the face of time and dominant politics. The play between the photographer as outsider and her effort towards genuine community work has been reflected in the manner in which the project took final shape, recalling larger issues in creative production. IFA grantee Sharbendu De faced similar insider-outsider issues, while others such as Zubeni Lotha, Soumya Sankar Bose, Abul Kalam Azad and KP Jayakumar have had a different, reflexive relationship as members of the communities they study.

The Colonial and the Contemporary

Historicising colonial and early modern photography, IFA has supported contemporary artistic responses such as the one by Pushpamala N and Claire Arni (2000), now well known as a landmark body of work, exhibited widely as 'Native Women of South India' (2000-2004), 'Dard - e - dil' (2002) and 'Bombay Photo Studio' (2003). The project opens the realm of imagination possible within the photo studio, locating Pushpamala in various well known tropes within Indian art, such as the paintings of Ravi Varma and Mughal miniatures, as well as wider categories of Hindu mythology and cinema. This extensive body of work has been known to address stereotypes of feminine representation, and the politics of the 'original' and the 'copy' from within the visual domain, looking through practice rather than theory. The project is also an experiment in photographic techniques, citing inter-medial intervention in image making as much as the idea of the damaged image, text and the manipulated image. Subsequently, Pushpamala went on to work in the same mode in her series 'Return of the Phantom Lady' and 'Avega - the Passion' (both 2012) and the ongoing 'Mother India Project' (2005 onwards).

Zubeni Lotha's 2015 project also challenged the colonial prototype in the shape of Naga identity, as understood by the colonial ethnographer Christoph Von Fuhrer-Haimendorf, specifically his book 'The Naked Nagas' (1939). Through this project, Lotha challenges photography's problematic internal histories. As a contemporary photographer, she wished to draw the cover from the exoticism surrounding Naga identity through archival work, interviews and current interpretations of visual representation, and through her own practice by taking photographs in the contemporary context. The project was a negotiation between the deconstruction of colonial stereotypes in framing marginalised identities,

and a reconstruction or restoration of agency of the same, for the concerned community. Lotha was also self-reflexive about her own placement in this project, as a member of the Naga community that was concerned about this self-representation. Lotha has since then, gone on to look at the intersectionality between Naga and feminine identity, through the photographic series 'how do I look?' (2018-19). A photograph from the series was published in the edited volume 'Centrepiece' by Parismita Singh, for Zubaan in 2018 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/from-india-today-magazine/story/20180212-art-parismita-singh-zubeni-lotha-naga-culture-1160802-2018-02-02>). Sharbendu De's 2017 project with the Lisu community of the Namdapha National Park and Tiger Reserve on the Indo-Myanmar border of Arunachal Pradesh further reimagines the idea of the creative representation of a marginalised tribal community. Titled 'Imagined Homeland', this project has been highly visible in spaces such as the Serendipity Arts Festival and the Indian Photo Festival (2018), with De traveling to several universities in India and abroad to show and speak about his work. The use of the artistic mode here for a re-imagined representation of the troubled Lisu people was both impactful and controversial, and continues to inform narratives around marginalised identities in art practice (<https://www.desharbendu.com/imagined-homeland>). Yet another project that addresses the ethnographic portrait was Abul Kalam Azad's 2016 project 'Men of Pukar', located in the fishing hamlet of Poompuhar or Pukar in Tamil Nadu. Like Lotha, Azad was first inspired to undertake a photographic project based on older literary sources. He indexes the ancient Sangam literary reference to the region, then a commercially flourishing and politically central zone under the Chola dynasty, chiefly through Ilango's *Silappadikaram*. The use of ordinary men as 'models' for his project echo another grantee, Soumya Shankar Bose's work with Jatra performers who were given the freedom to dress the way they wished, representing archetypes from history as well as important deviations from them (<https://soumyasankarbose.in/let-s-sing-an-old-song/>). Kalam's project was displayed in Calicut, Muchiri and Thrissur in Tamil Nadu and Kerala under the title 'Linking Lineages', with a second dissemination grant from IFA in 2018. Muchiri is Muziris where the important Kochi Muziris Biennale takes place as a major event for contemporary Indian art practice, and where the final exhibition of Azad's work took place receiving much attention. The work remains in the online repository Google Arts and Culture (https://artsandculture.google.com/story/men-of-pukar-ekalokam-trust-for-photography/MAUh_eITcPTmLQ?hl=en), where images are conversant with quotes from well-known early theoretical texts on photography, such as those by Allan Sekula (1986), Roland Barthes (1980), John Tagg (1988) and others.

Three more projects, by KP Jayakumar (2018), Mridu Rai with Dipti Tamang (2020)

and Tarun Bhartiya (2021), are sensitive to colonial histories of photography in regionally specific domains. Jayakumar looks at the photographs displayed in colonial buildings in Kerala's High Ranges, while Rai and Tamang explored archives and collections in the Darjeeling Hills. For Jayakumar, from the erstwhile colonial buildings that housed photographs of the so called 'native' populations, emanated powers of surveillance and control in pre independent India, over not only people but also their ecology. Rai and Tamang are looking to retell the history of Darjeeling Himalayas through contemporary photographs and oral narratives, undermined and unknown to mainstream sub continental history. Their work emanates from a larger purpose of documentation in the region, by the body 'Confluence Collective' that they are members of (<https://www.theconfluencecollective.com/about>). Bhartiya photographically explores the religious heterogeneity of the Khasi people who have experienced much instability and conflict over several decades. Such projects have held exhibitions in local regions, expanding viewership beyond urban centres of high art practice, involving publics diversified by language and regional identity, as they directly engage with the versatility of representational methods and technologies of the camera for these projects. Jayakumar's exhibition was titled 'Portraits of Invasion' in 2019, aptly exhibited in a colonial building in Kochi for the evocations that such a display could have with the past (<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/090619/exposing-colonial-pictures-on-uncivilised-natives.html>).

The Camera and Living Practices

A counter imaginary to the ethnographic portraits of marginalised communities is presented in Soumya Shankar Bose's 2018 project titled 'Where the Birds Never Sing' (<http://soumyasankarbose.in/where-the-birds-never-sing/>). Working with the displaced community of Marichjhapi island, Bose's work was a timely investigation of state atrocity towards Bangladeshi refugees from 1979, which echoed with the ongoing imposition of CAA and its protests in Delhi. Bose used an amalgamation of fact and fiction to tell a photographic narrative of the victims of violent displacement, one that has otherwise been erased from public memory. Culminating in a book, the project was remarkable for its methodology as well as challenges that Bose faced in his research. Bose had also examined other marginal identities on the borders of performative culture (*Jatra*), sexuality (2018) and the family (2020), using the same method of the photo book and staged scenes intermeshed with actual ones.

Continuing with their patronage to inter artistic practices between photography and performance, IFA supported CF John/Visthar in 2001, 2002 and 2003 for a conceptual installation of a performing body with a well and a quilt. This inquiry into the project allowed

a deeper investigation into the notion of site specific art practice, experientially variable for the project's participants - the dancer, the photographer, the local community and the natural habitat in which the work was located. If the studio has been looked at in Pushpamala's project, this looks at art in "alternative, non-urban, non-elitist spaces, provoking audiences to see art outside conventional contexts, such as the gallery and the proscenium stage." (report). Along with the artists Tripura Kashyap and Azis TM, this project culminated in a site specific event in and around an open well using installations, dance and photography in February, 2003, at Visthar, Bangalore. The well was explored as a paradoxical site of remembrance and forgetting, choking with garbage, but also triggering community memories of the people of Narayanpura; fear, mystery, playfulness and dreaming that manifested physically and visually for the audience.

IFA has also engaged with photography as an archival tool, supporting the visual documentation of living cultural practices. Dev Nayak's documentation of Kumartuli's potters (2000) as they work to make Durga idols for the annual Puja uses photography for fieldwork, resulting in a visual account of the backstory of Bengal's most important annual cultural event. Issues of artistic legacy, ritual process and labour in production can be read from such an archive. As such, this is an exploration of photography's potential as a tool for research, an area that is rich with its own debates on methodology and disciplinary location. Such archives are important for future research in the concerned domain, and one can imagine that a book such as Tapati Guha-Thakurta's 'In the Name of the Goddess: the Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata' (2015) having shared interest with Nayak's work.

Pradip Kumar Kar's 2019 project similarly used photography for the documentary purpose of mapping the names and related information on artisans who had worked on the terracotta temples of Bengal. Kar's findings speak to the widespread yet undermined practice of craft practices that have not had adequate critical inquiries. Going against the grain of the hierarchies of patronage, where only donor names would be known, this project traces the marginality of cultural labour to colonial times, looking for trace evidence of identity and authorship in sacred temple architecture.

Another documentary initiative by Sandesh Bhandare that photographically captured the performance repertoire of Tamasha in more than 7000 photographs and audio recordings from across Maharashtra (Konkan, Marathwada and Vidarbha), was supported by IFA in 2002, 2006, and again in 2016. Apart from generating this archive of a living tradition, the work explored unseen aspects of nearly 50 troops - their economic distress, their everyday nomadic lives and aspirations. It located the cultural position of a performative art form that has historically been a regional practice, but also a means of social reform and education. The outcomes of this project were multiple exhibitions in Goa and Maharashtra, and the Marathi

language book '*Tamasha - Ek Rangadi Gamat*' by Bhandare. He in fact received another IFA grant in 2006 towards supporting publication costs of the book, enabling it to be sold at a subsidised price. Bhandare received another IFA grant in 2016 to revisit his earlier field, in order to examine the state of Tamasha in a post global, rapidly urbanising world. As such, this kind of long term support to Bhandare's field work, resulting in a large corpus of photographs and field notes based on extensive travels and time spent with the Tamasha troops, has brought forward a most comprehensive understanding of a performance art form.

Again, within the domain of documenting performance traditions, was the project by Soumya Shankar Bose titled '*Gems of Jatra*' that photographically looked at the human realities behind the lives of *Jatra* performers (2015, 2016). The project, however, retains a performative element that exceeds the documentary, with the subjects dressing as their favourite *Jatra* characters as they share their life stories with Bose. These 'staged portraits' also has an expanded materiality complementing the photographs, of costumes, props and decor that fill out oral narratives by nearly 50 *Jatra* performers. Bose's project successfully culminated in a multimedia exhibition using portraits he had made, as well as archival images he received from his participants, and set a precedent for other grantees who wish to look at arts practices that lie between forms, such as photography and performance. Projects such as the ones by Bhandare, Bose and Nayak reveal the truth behind the phenomenon of cultural labour, and the unseen aspects of artistic production mired in problems. These speak to recent publications, such as the book by Brahma Prakash titled '*Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the Folk Performance in India*' (2019). There is some alleviation to the conditions of struggle for these cultural communities through photographic interventions that bring to them a sense of pride and acknowledgement through publications, exhibitions and the development of a local, vernacular discourse.

Photography's Internal Histories: Alternative Methods

Exploring an intersectional space for experimentation, photography has been combined with other activities in the grant awarded to ALTlab managed by Goa Centre for Alternative Photography (Goa-CAP) in 2010. The residency enabled four photographers to experiment with various visual techniques and media in their response to the immediate environment of Goa, including alternative photographic methods such as cyanotypes and daguerreotypes. The focus of this residency was on the processes of photography, instigated by walking and undertaking primary tactile research in Goa's environs, expanding artistic thought and practice beyond the visual. The final projects were understood and shared differently through a blog by each of the four residents: Uzma Mohsin, Poornabodh Nadavati, Tashi Norden Lepcha and Tanima Das, under the mentorship of Apurva Kulkarni. A more

enhanced form of the residency was once again supported by IFA in 2013, based on learnings from the first residency, for instance, there was the addition of an art writer in the later version. Mohsin (<https://www.uzmamohsin.com/>) has gone onto other projects since then, having won the Alkazi Foundation Grant for Documentary Photography in 2017 to work on family photographs emerging from Aligarh's Muslim population. She has exhibited widely, nationally and internationally using alternative methods in photography including silver gelatin prints (Songkeepers, 2018), community inclusion and engagement with material cultures (Love and Other Hurts, 2018), and the use of obsolete photo technologies such as the minute camera (A Minute of Make-Believe, 2016). Tashi Norden Lepcha has worked on political disruption around the demand for Bodoland, uncovering the human aspects of the lives of soldiers in army camps (<https://www.galli.in/2013/07/here-is-gone-tashi-norden-lepcha.html?189db0&189db0>).

Exploring the potential of reviving older analogue practices of photography was another project by Tushar Joshi and K Balamurugan, who documented the changing village of Daniya through dry plate collodion photography in 2014. Having previously worked with Goa CAP's residency programme, the two artists ventured to extend their learnings in a project of their own, with uneven results. However, this initiative shows the increasing interest in a return to older photographic methods for their aesthetic value as also their more political implications, possibly giving a new way to understand colonial visual culture through the medium itself. In retrospect, Goa CAP itself came to an end, but its short lived existence did much to encourage alternative methods of photography in the country. These methods now exist in select pockets, often being pursued by individuals such as Arpan Mukherjee at Kala Bhavan (<https://www.studiogoppo.org/arpan-mukherjee>), or institutions such as Museo Camera, Gurgaon (<https://www.museocamera.org/>).

Some ongoing projects importantly address current issues within the digital domain, including Joe Paul Cyriac's tricolour gum bichromate images and performance responding to Google Street images uploaded by individual users, from across the country (2020). The project will investigate the intention of surveillance built into the use of the camera during colonial times when gum bichromate was a regular practice of developing images, while also looking at the nature of digitally empowered surveillance in today's context. The camera hence again appears as an interrogative device. The tricolour, one can imagine, is a comment on the state of governance, which on the one hand wishes to protect the nation from being scrutinised by the world, while subjecting its own public to an intensely penetrative gaze.

The Camera and the City

Pushing experiments with form and process, IFA funded Nevin Thomas' book project on 'Bangalore Photo City: Lost and Found' in 2013. This project envisaged the idea of accidental histories, discovered in chance places, for building comprehensive urban archives. The idea of the photo negative as a remnant from the analogue age, a rich archival source in itself is novel and important, however, the fact that the grantee did not fulfil the aims of the project leaves this inquiry at a loose end. Also exploring the city of Bangalore through the lens of transgenders was Poornima Sukumaran's Aravani Art Project in 2018. Collectively titled 'Naavu Idhivi' (We Exist), this programme had seven events at various locations in the city, hitherto unseen or unknown for their use and occupation by transgender individuals. The project was multi-sensorially impactful for the participants from the community as well as the general attendees at performances, exhibitions and curated walks that had extensions into other cities afterwards. As a body that began with its first public art project in Bangalore in 2016, Sukumar's engagement with IFA was well located in the city. Photography being only one form that the group used under the grant, Aravani Art Project made its presence felt through mural on several building facades across the country before and after this time.

Buildings again have been the theme for a 2020 project by Mahesh S. that looked at the biography of Building no. 37 in Bangalore, through the visual media of film and photography (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcYQbY2mMq8>). This kind of exploration brings to life the experiences of a site, with complex bureaucratic and commercial histories, and the human interaction it has had with users and inhabitants. It is notable that the idea of an exhibition was suspended in favour of a book and a short film, as the site is sensitive to surveillance. What comes forth is the 'detective paradigm' of the camera, as it has been explained by Pinney (1997), one that investigates the subject through the lens for its potential meaning and identity. Uncovering Bangalore's forgotten histories, Shruti Chamaria undertook an urban ethnography of the city's dying cyber-cafes, producing a body of photographs under the title 'Cyberia' (<https://networkcultures.org/blog/2021/05/26/cyberia/>). The images, made with a certain degree of curiosity, also bear clever visual angles and humour, evidencing the negotiations that ordinary users of cybercafes make between a highly private moment in a public setting. Like Mahesh S, Chamaria's work brings to light a blind spot in the city, and evidences the uneven media archeology of a country where older technologies linger even as new ones rapidly take over.

In contrast to Thomas' efforts towards archival retrieval and the focus on urban built environment by other grantees, another regionally specific project conceived by Sanjay Kak in 2015 became highly successful in retrieving images from Kashmir's photojournalists,

compiled in the book ‘Witness: Kashmir 1986-2016: 9 Photographers’ (2017). Following the floods of 2014, Kak’s project of scanning and preserving negatives, as well as retrieving images from the damaged hard drives of photojournalists situated in Kashmir has been brave and productive. Projects such as these face considerable risks and are contingent upon political circumstances, yet photography is given central importance for what it might historically inscribe as the truth, a fraught question when it comes to the case of Kashmir. Kak was already established as a widely published, senior photographer and used his experience and resources to make this a very successful project, as noted by the number of well attended events around the book, in India and abroad (<https://thewire.in/books/review-witnessing-kashmir-through-images>).

Further exploring urban identity through photographs, Bhavin Shukla, Koyna Tomar and Vaibhavi Kowshik were awarded the Archival and Museum Fellowship in 2017, to collect and digitise photographs and material artefacts from Delhi for the Delhi Visual Archive at the Centre for Community Knowledge, Ambedkar University. Like several other projects supported by IFA, this one experimented with practices in exhibition making, display and mobility in new and productive ways, as it narrativised the multiple life-worlds within Delhi. The discovery, collection, and display of the city’s photographs, like the projects before this by Kak and Thomas, presented opportunities for the emergence of marginalised and micro historical accounts about otherwise well-known places and publics. Based on interviews, Shukla’s works draw out personal narratives that are flattened out in dominant discourses, bringing to life an unknown side to Delhi’s own past. Tomar’s work with making a digital visual archive upheld the idea of multiple access points into the history of Delhi, through thematic online exhibitions and a comprehensive search mechanism (<https://www.delhimemories.in/index.php>). A freely accessible online archive such as this sets an important precedent in the domain of Indian photography, which is unevenly dealing with ideas of public memory in a shared digital space. Commercial interests, quality standards and controlled usage are some of the reasons for archives to remain private, or surrounded with protocols of use. Projects such as CCK’s and Anusha Yadav’s India Memory Project (<https://www.indianmemoryproject.com/>) become important repositories for public access to historical photographs in the digital domain.

Photography during the Pandemic

The more recent projects supported by IFA have variously had to respond to the COVID 19 pandemic, some coming to a standstill till they could find a way to circumvent it, while others actively engaging with the transformed circumstances they have had to face. The recently concluded project titled ‘Take a Picture’ by Kaamna Patel responds to the digital turn

that permeated the world during the pandemic, opening the realm of the imagined mobility and spatial encounters to otherwise static lives. Imagining her mother's foiled travels to Fiji and Japan became a visual reality for Kaamna who worked with digital backgrounds on Zoom, tourism brochure images and family photographs to transpose and transport her mother to these destinations. Other grantees reworking their projects, such as the one by Shilpi Goswami and Suryanandini Narain, aimed at having a conference of 24 researchers working on family photographs. The conference was broken down into three preparatory workshops with experts in the field, and concluded in a closed door, two day, online conference for 22 participants. The final outcome of the project entails the publication of these conference papers with Zubaan books in 2024, in a volume titled 'Framing Portraits, Binding Albums: Family Photographs in India'. In both Patel, and Goswami and Narain's works, the private photograph is given importance in an unprecedented manner, as it becomes a key image-object for the study of society, ranging from tropes of gender and caste to class and ethnicity.

The support given by IFA to projects that involve photographs are of substantial archival and critical potential. This repository of image based information and creative analysis that looks at a wide range of issues, ranging from urbanity and colonialism, to marginality of social status, to aspects of performance and the invisibility of entire communities can generate substantial future research. Several publications, exhibitions, films and archives, both physical and digital, have emanated from these projects, ranging from the global moment of the 1990s to the contemporary scenario. The projects collectively question the boundaries between photography as fine art, documentary practice, ethnographic method and personal chronicle, indicating that there are alternative trajectories to the medium from the way it has been so far theoretically understood and historicised. Positions of surveillance and curiosity, journaling and interrogation are not always distinct for their ethical or academic standpoints, folding into one another in the same image practice. This domain remains an important one for IFA to support in the future, as photography is an act of image production that is nearly universal. One can look forward to the IFA archives to generate much future research and critical writing on these projects, and those that are to come.

Critical Analysis

The IFA grants for photography are indeed wide ranging, and cover an array of subjects within the medium. In order to identify gaps in subject areas, it is first important to look at the recurrent themes within photographic projects. These are:

- the colonial ethnographic bind and artistic explorations beyond the stereotypes projected by earlier lens based practices. This has led to a rich post-colonial discourse on the

reinterpretation of the camera's potential in portraying the indigenous subject.

- an inter visual relationship with performance practices: dance, theatre and performance art. These projects are also sensitive to the social conditions of cultural labour and the erosion of performance traditions in the face of modernity. Photography here is a documentary as well as an artistic practice.
- looking at intersectional narratives of photography and gender, IFA has supported explorations of feminine production and representation within photography.
- themes of urbanity and the city that are recurrently explored by multiple projects.
- alternative photographic methods that revive forgotten technologies for their aesthetic potential

Importantly, IFA has allowed for a certain welcome fluidity between photography as document and/or art, and we don't need to try and make hard lines between the two as categories. The anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901 - 1978) is known to have recognised the potentials of an ethnographic photo document to bear aesthetic and artistic value as well. In fact, the nature of truth is revealed differently but legitimately through the photo as both art and document, with a free exchange of ideas, technologies, and aesthetics. The IFA has supported both kinds of projects, along with hybrid ones. This is also the case when a cultural practice has been photographed, such as *Tamasha* or *Jatra*, where the nature of the subject is already within the domain of the arts, inviting for photography to respond beyond the documentary lens.

I would identify the following as 'gaps' in the field which IFA can tap for future potential grants:

- Collaborative photographic initiatives, where the trained photographer works with communities and individuals who are co-producers of images. This is a nuanced relationship, the processes and terms of which will need to be understood in the beginning of the project. Although collaborative works have indeed featured among some of the grantees, this is a domain that can be encouraged as the camera's 'democratic' role in picture production addresses ethical concerns of unequal producer-subject relations.
- IFA can perhaps look at the present and future of digital technologies of photography in a deeper way. If there has been a focus on the revival of older methods from the analogue world, experiments in the digital too deserve attention for the aesthetic and medium specific artistic interventions they are making in current practices. This opens up to different kinds of authorship with the camera, making it more of a prosthetic of the body than it ever was, the excess of images from camera phones needing laborious sifting, editing, revisiting

and organising before any project can be culled.

- Supporting initiatives in training in photography and writing on photography: all too often, the specificities of photographic history, critical writing and of training in photography are taken for granted, or dissolved into the larger existent visual discourse. While acknowledging overlaps with other fields, education and writing on photography need to be separately encouraged.
- With IFA's focus on the vernacular and regional, photography's regional histories in popular print and digital cultures need to be identified and documentary initiatives towards the same need to be made. This is a massive long term project, but is deserving of support from IFA given the organisation's own inclination towards vernacular cultures.
- IFA has begun to support archival projects on photography (STARS Archive, Tamil Nadu), and it would be wonderful to see more work on this. Projects don't have to begin with new images, and can delve into existing archival collections of public or private nature to find new narratives.

There are a few problems and concerns with regard to the medium specificity and the field of photography itself which can be highlighted, in order to advise IFA's future decisions:

- While technology is an enabler, it is also a stumbling block. As an equipment-based practice, photography requires the anticipation of training, costs and environmental concerns as the grantee tries to sustain the project in its aims. Several project reports have demonstrated issues on this front.
- There is also the issue of access and archiving methods which have varied for every practitioner, which IFA may wish to standardise. What is the citation practice or the necessary details that a future archive of the project must absolutely contain?
- There is an overall absence of theoretical reading on photography and its histories by practitioners, including most grantees. Given that this literature is still developing in India, there needs to be an awareness of globally available texts which have spanned more than a century, and are critically important to understanding the medium, its operations and its politics. Photography always bears the risk of premature closure of meaning, but a wider and deeper reading around the medium and its history will prevent that.